

## Book Review

Sultan, Atiyab. *A Broken Record: Institutions, Community, and Development in Pakistan*. 229pp. Cambridge University Press 2022.

**Prof Imran Ali<sup>1</sup>**

<sup>1</sup> Former Professor, Lahore University of Management Sciences (LUMS) and Karachi School of Business and Leadership (KSBL)

E-mail: [driali50@gmail.com](mailto:driali50@gmail.com)

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In this book Atiyab Sultan argues that there exists an imbalance in the history of economic development in the Punjab during the latter half of British rule. She contends that the dominant analyses focus more on macroeconomic changes, such as the emergence of the canal colonies, and on the impact of major infrastructural investments like the railways. She discusses the two established but contrasting analyses of the impact of British rule. The more 'positive' interpretation, emanating from a Cambridge intellectual background, is that of Clive Dewey, who highlights the physical and human benefits accruing from state interventions in what he regards as this success story of British rule in India. By contrast, this reviewer, while also focusing on economic growth and change, discerns an essential malignity that reinforced inequalities and further embedded the military, the civil bureaucracy and the upper agrarian hierarchy, thereby impacting negatively on democratic institutions and redistributive policies in post-colonial Pakistan.

Not only do these two major analyses come to contradictory conclusions, but Sultan also believes that they neglect an important dimension in understanding colonial Punjab. This is constituted by the microeconomic reforms, rural reconstruction programmes, efforts at instituting cooperative movements, and the ongoing attempts to counter the deleterious impact of rural indebtedness. Sultan shows how these more focused efforts at reform and development were as significant an influence on colonial strategies and the lives of the rural population as the larger scale and much more visible infrastructure projects. The most significant initiatives were aimed at addressing the seemingly pernicious and widespread incidence of peasant indebtedness. She draws generously from the emerging narrative among British officials, and especially M.L. Darling, on the role of the moneylender in trapping farmers with usurious debts, leading to consequent control of harvests and manipulation of the agricultural value chain.

It was the incipient introduction of the term 'Hindu' to the credit function that led to growing communal psychosis and communalised politics, and indeed eventually to the pathway to Pakistan. Though they played a pivotal role in the financing of localised agricultural operations, the 'blameworthy' moneylenders became even greater targets of official animus with the global depression of the 1930s, when it was actually collapsing agricultural markets that created further economic dislocations. Sultan would have done well to explain that it was the entry of peasant agriculture into cash cropping during the colonial period, rather than simply the evils of usury, that embroiled the producer with forces that he could hardly control or even understand.

Sultan goes on to analyse the institutional responses assiduously proposed by certain British officials, chiefly Darling, F.L. Brayne and H.H. Calvert. These proposals took the form primarily of the cooperative movement in the Punjab, which Sultan illustrates as having had success in Europe and elsewhere in producing a sound institutional basis for sustainable peasant agriculture. British officials involved in setting up cooperatives preferred to limit their functions to debt alleviation by arranging for the provision of credit on a more affordable and humane basis, preferably from within the resources of the village itself. Even achieving these constrained goals was considered a sufficient achievement, especially since the mainstream British bureaucracy, comprising district and secretariat civil officials, remained indifferent and even sceptical towards the aims and prospects of the cooperative movement. Therefore, these initiatives in the Punjab fell well short of the deeper aspects of rural cooperation, such as the sharing of inputs, sowing and harvesting operations, and produce marketing.

In a society where vision and work were either individualistic or caste based, and closely bound by service caste

transactional relations, developing and pursuing a more ambitious alternative operational paradigm might not have proved either wise or practical. Even the more modest debt relief function on which the cooperatives focused faced recurring vicissitudes. While a large number of cooperative societies were established in Punjab villages, and many continued for some years, Sultan deems the experiment more of a failure than a success. Much depended on the commitment and integrity of the leadership of individual organisations. While there were notable examples of good management, it remained difficult to guarantee, or even monitor, ethical standards and organisational capacities. With the body blows of the depression and then war, and Britain's own end game in India appearing increasingly untidy, the ageing of the passionate champions of debt relief and rural reconstruction led to a period of neglect and apathy, before all this was overtaken by the disjunctions of partition and independence.

The empirical base of Sultan's study, apart from academic works, comprises essentially three types of sources. The first are the writings of the officials already mentioned, and of these the most extensive and well known are the studies by Darling. A good part of the value of the book is indeed that the significant features of these works have been freshly represented, not only in supplementing Sultan's thesis of the importance of microeconomic thought and action in the British Punjab, but also as an example to contemporary *babus* who have disdained the tradition of putting pen to paper. Second, Sultan has consulted several annual provincial report series, and most exhaustively those on the workings of the cooperative credit societies. These, however, are not backed up by more local sources, if there are any, which could have provided case studies and a richer flavour to her analysis. This gap has to some degree been met by the third type of source material consulted, which are the village surveys and analyses conducted during British rule by the Punjab Board of Economic Inquiry.

A major caveat is that the subtitle of the book states that it relates to Pakistan, whereas it is actually entirely focused on colonial Punjab. As such, examples from the current Indian part of Punjab are also freely used, though there is more discussion pertaining to the western or Pakistani part. One feels that the Cambridge University Press editors have lapsed in allowing this erroneous titling of the book. Also, the indexing is quite inconsistent, with some authors cited in the text not mentioned while others are. In conclusion, while the book does not contain an analysis of the subject matter specifically for Pakistan, it does lay out very effectively the fortunes of the cooperative movement and rural reconstruction efforts in the colonial period, with important insights into the problems involved in managing microeconomic initiatives.

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