



# Canals, colonies and class

British policy in the Punjab  
1880-1940

FAREEHA ZAFAR



Lahore School of Economics

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Lahore School of Economics  
Intersection of Main Boulevard, Phase VI, DHA, and  
Burki Road, Lahore 53200, Pakistan  
[www.lahoreschoolofeconomics.edu.pk](http://www.lahoreschoolofeconomics.edu.pk)

## Preface

This book is based on research conducted during 1977–80 for my doctoral thesis. It examines the impact of perennial canals on the rural structures of the Punjab between 1890 and 1940. The objective was to seek evidence in the changing policies of the colonial government towards colonisation and their impact on the landscape, production patterns, tenancy relations and class structure.

Some of the questions raised in this work have been studied in the past, but with few attempts to synthesise these issues. Where such a synthesis exists, the supporting historical evidence lacks depth. This study demonstrates a close link between the change in rural structures – in particular, the formation of classes – and the development of the irrigation system, based on a detailed investigation of the historical material. With the advent of the new technology, the role of environment in determining the land tenure system declined in importance. This aspect is analysed by comparing the colonised and the old proprietary village lands within the canal colony districts.

Guided by the needs of revenue and export demand, the colonial government extended the cultivated area and used local power structures to direct the production and related activities of the small cultivator. To achieve these objectives, the administration relied on large landowners, whose formation it encouraged. The commercialisation of agriculture, high land prices and an increasing tendency towards wage labour in the canal-irrigated areas benefitted the richer sections of rural society. Canal construction within a

colonial framework did not reduce the dependence of the small cultivator on local institutions, while the burgeoning class of agricultural labourer not only faced a changing agrarian environment, but also rising prices and declining living standards. The accepted view that the British government was an advocate of the Punjab peasant is, therefore, questioned.

