

# Before there were borders

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In colonial Punjab, many Hindu, Sikh and Muslim traders quietly turned profit into public good



*Government High School Neela built by Sardar Mota Singh in 1916. — Photos by the author*

Not much has been written about the role of Muslim, Hindu and Sikh philanthropists in developing educational and healthcare infrastructure in the Punjab's Pothohar region during the pre-Partition era. During my over two decades of fieldwork in Pothohar, I learned about various merchants and landlords who were also known for their philanthropy, a topic that warrants a thorough study. Many of these individuals came

from the landed elites and business communities that played a significant role in establishing educational institutions in various villages and towns.



*View of former Arya High School building in Chakwal.*

The business community of Chakwal played a particularly vital role in various projects aimed at improving the community. Their names, preserved on donor plaques, demonstrate their dedication to establishing such institutions within their communities. These merchants in Chakwal not only established marketplaces in villages and towns, but also played a central role in the socio-economic fabric of their communities. Their economic expertise established them as generators of wealth and leaders within their societies. Notably, philanthropy constituted an integral aspect of their identity and social responsibility.

In this article, I will focus solely on the merchants from Chakwal district who initiated various welfare projects during the pre-Partition era. It is a long list but here I will briefly discuss four schools: two located in Munday

village and Neela village and two others in Chakwal town. These schools were established through the donations of merchants, most of whom belonged to the Hindu and Sikh communities. Additionally, the landed elite of Chakwal contributed significantly to the construction of schools and colleges, with substantial financial support from individuals such as Raja Sarfaraz Khan. I will write about Raja Sarfraz Khan, Qazi Ghulam Nabi and his nephew Qazi Ghulam Rabbani's philanthropic contributions in another article.



*Inscription in Gurmukhi, Urdu and English on the entrance wall of the school.*

The Sikh and Hindu philanthropists from Chakwal, who built schools and hospitals and commissioned the digging of waterwells, included Sardar Chet Singh Kohli of Munday village, Sardar Mota Singh Bhasin of Neela village, Sardar Harbans Singh Sistani of Chakwal, Bir Chand and Gyan Prakash from Chakwal town.

Sardar Chet Singh Kohli, the son of Sardar Hira Singh Kohli, was a prominent merchant in the Dhan area of Chakwal, then part of the

Jhelum district. He expanded his business beyond the Dhan area, his home region, to places and as far as Iran. Apart from expanding his business in Dhan and Iran, he made financial contributions to the construction of schools in Chakwal town and his native village, Munday.

Sardar Harbans Singh Sistani, a wealthy merchant from Chakwal, along with four other students known as the Panch Piayare (Five Loved Ones) of Munshi Sant Singh, laid the foundation of a school in honour of their teacher in 1910. The school was named SS (Sant Singh) Khalsa High School. The Gurmukhi script on the main entrance of the school, which is now known as Government High School I, bears the names of the five students who established it.

In addition to the five students of Munshi Sant Singh, several other individuals made donations to support the school. When the old school building was demolished in 2015 and replaced with a new structure, the foundation stone and a few donor plaques were reinstalled on the walls of the main entrance. These plaques provide valuable information about the donors.

Like other students of Munshi Sant Singh, Sardar Chet Singh Kohli played an admirable role in funding and identifying potential donors to ensure the school's sustainability. Apart from the Government High School.<sup>1</sup> (formerly SS Khalsa High School), he also laid the foundation of a school in his village, Munday, in memory of his father, Sardar Hira Singh, in 1910. I have written a detailed article titled "Monuments of Munday, that was published in The Friday Times-Naya Daur on April 21, 2021. I discussed not only the school but also some other monuments, including a dispensary established by Sardar Chet Singh in memory of his wife.

*The merchants of Chakwal not only created marketplaces in their villages and towns but also a legacy that transformed Chakwal into a centre of learning.*



Two plaques on the façade display the name and foundation year of the school. The plaque further reads that S Hira Singh AV School, Munday, in memory of S Hira Singh, was started by his humble son S Chet Singh on 9th June 1918.” Another inscription is in Gurmukhi with two Urdu words that read Peritam Dehri. This is also fixed on the façade of the main gate to the school hall.

One learns from the plaques that the school was established by Sardar Chet Singh in 1918. Later, using his considerable social capital, he helped expand it. His family, friends and relatives generously contributed to the school’s expansion. One of his relatives, Sardar Labh Singh, built a hall in memory of his father, Sant Singh, in 1923. This donor plaque is fixed on the wall at the main entrance of the school hall. The entrance walls feature two inscriptions, one of which reads, “Hira Singh Khalsa School Munde foundation stone laid by Panch Piaras (five loved ones) on 7th April 1923.” Sardar Chet Singh Kohli also constructed a boarding house for students from distant villages and towns to attend Sardar Hira Singh AV School in Munday village.

There are other donor plaques on the corridor walls that recognise contributions to expand school rooms. Gopal Singh is noted for building two rooms in memory of his father, Sardar Rai Sahib Mahal Singh, and in honour of Sardar Hira Singh. Moreover, there are plaques showing the names of donors Ram Singh and Ishar Singh. In 1927, the primary school Munday was upgraded to a middle school as more rooms were built. In 1946, with the efforts and influence of Sardar Chet Singh, it was upgraded to a high school.

Another well-known merchant from the Dhan area of Chakwal was Sardar Mota Singh Bhasin from Neela village. Nabeel Anwar Dhakku, a noted journalist from Dawn, has written several articles on the cultural heritage of Chakwal. He believes that Sardar Mota Singh Bhasin expanded his business from Chakwal to establish branches in various cities of Iran. His main base was at Zahedan. He also had companies in

Gujar Khan, Lahore, Karachi and Amritsar. Dhakku believe that the school was established in 1916. This school also had a hostel where students from far-off areas would stay.

Apart from Sikhs, the Hindu community of Chakwal built several schools and hospitals. One of the most prominent is the former Arya High School, where the Law Department of the University of Chakwal is now run. This school was built in 1933. Many wealthy merchants of Chakwal town and villages in the then Jhelum district provided financial assistance. A hostel for students was also built with donations from Hindu and Sikh merchants and landlords of Chakwal.

The school had 13 classrooms and 12 rooms in an adjacent hostel. Students from distant areas of the then Jhelum district used to stay in the hostel. There were also rooms on the upper storey that no longer exist.

There are eight donor plaques, written in Urdu, Hindi and English, on the walls of the school's verandas and four on the walls of the hostel building. These provide valuable information about the donors' surnames and native places in the then-Jhelum district (now part of Chakwal district). Most of the donors were the residents of Chakwal town. Three of them were from Chawli and Vahali villages. The main donor plaque states that timber merchants Bir Chand and Gyan Prakash, sons of Bakhshi Prab Dyal Jaggi, built the school in memory of their grandfather, Bakhshi Kesar Mal Jaggi, in April 1933. They were later joined by other Hindu residents of Chakwal in its expansion. The second plaque honours Uggar Sain Sabharwal, a former student who died in the Quetta earthquake on May 31, 1935. It was built by his father, Kishan Chand Sabharwal.

The third donor plaque, in Hindi and Urdu, commemorates Munshi Bhagwan Dass Ji, who died on March 25, 1930, and was built by his wife, Shrimati Bhagwanti, and sons. The fourth plaque, in English and Urdu,

notes that in 1933, Lala Ram Chand and Dr Sita Ram built a classroom in memory of their father, Lala Ishar Dass Sethi of Chakwal. The fifth plaque, in Urdu, honours Buta Mal Behal and his wife, Ameer Devi, built by their sons: Lala Kanshi Ram, Ishar Dass, Shri Ram and Roshan Lal. These plaques are fixed on the classroom walls.

Residents of Chakwal town, along with notables from Chawli and Vahali villages, contributed to Arya High School. One plaque honours Lt Kirpa Ram, who built a room in memory of his father, Sardar Thakur Dass Jauhar from Vahali. Another plaque recognises Sardar Anokh Rai Seth of Chawli, who constructed a room in memory of his son, B Yag Datta, who passed away on January 20, 1931.

The merchants of Chakwal not only created marketplaces in their villages and towns but have also left a legacy that transformed Chakwal into a centre of learning. Their philanthropic contributions exemplify how the intersection of commerce and compassion can lead to significant societal change.

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