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### **Till Debt Do We Part: Colonial Vows and Peasant Woes in the Punjab?**

This paper examines the development and impact of formal and informal institutions of credit in the province of Punjab in colonial India in the period 1900-47. It uses both quantitative and qualitative sources to critically evaluate the contemporary and long-term impacts of these institutions on the economic and material lives of Punjabi peasants. The paper builds on existing work on the relationship between colonial credit and large-scale indebtedness, and challenges the centrality of secure, individual property rights and availability of cheap credit as cornerstones of a strategy of sustained economic development.

The first fifty years of colonial rule in the Punjab (1849-1899) witnessed the emergence of large-scale indebtedness and landlessness among the peasantry despite an ambitious, panoramic vision of the economic development of the region by the British. The vision entailed the virtual overhaul of the administrative machinery, the monetization of the economy and the commissioning of several large-scale development projects. As rival ideological schools within the civil service debated the need for remedial legislation to combat the indebtedness, the number and acuteness of land alienations grew, culminating in the passage of the Punjab Alienation of Land Act in 1900. This paper analyses the period after the passage of this landmark legislation when several new formal and informal mechanisms of providing credit to the peasant emerged. It uses quantitative data, official publications and non-official sources from 1900-47 to critically evaluate the relative merits and demerits of these various institutions, grounding the study in an appreciation of the ideological aims of the British in promoting certain initiatives over others. It also employs quantitative evidence collected in the late nineteenth century on indebtedness in individual villages in an attempt to evaluate the economic impact of the ameliorative efforts. The paper presents a filigree account of the economic lives of Punjabi peasants as they mediated a century of economic reform, and questions the validity of both the concurrent colonial discourse and contemporary theories of economic development in the process.