

An Overview of Social and Economic Condition of Kashmir During Dogra Period

Dr. Rais Ul Gulzar

PhD History from Career Point University, Kota, Rajasthan.

Department Arts and Humanities.

Email id.: raisgulzar838@gmail.com

Abstract:

A society is a group of people involved in doing social interaction, or a large social grouping sharing the same geographical or social territory, subject to the same political authority and dominant cultural expectations. The society in Kashmir, as in the rest of India, was hierarchical and fragmented into many rigid traditional groups which cannot be strictly called classes. The hierarchy was determined largely by factors like heredity and past associations, and occupational cleanliness remained sacrosanct over the centuries. The economic conditions of people were equally depressing. Muslims were discriminated not only on economic front but also the rulers interfered with their religious liberties. Numbers of Muslim religious places were turned into store houses for food grains and ammunition centers. Proprietary rights of land were confiscated. Newer unknown and unjustified taxes were imposed on subjects. Each and every appointed officer used to oppress the people as much as he can. Skilled workers in normal days were not in a position to take two time square meals. Whatever was earned was snatched forcibly from them. While realizing the attitude of rulers number of movements came into existence to fight against the autocratic rule to save the people from sufferings.

Key Words:

Social distinctions, Economy, Land Rights, Industry, Exploitation, Taxation, Beggar, Agrarian Crisis.

Introduction:

Kashmir is noted for its beauties and bounties. It has been for centuries the object of attention of poets, painters, and philosophers. All these beauties of Kashmir have also been the cause of its outside intervention in course of her history. The Tartars, Hindu Princess, Mughals, Durrannies of Kabul, Ranjit Singh, the Sikh and finally Gulab Singh the Dogra have successively subjugated this beautiful land. On 16 March 1846, a treaty of Amritsar conjured into existence the princely state of Jammu and Kashmir in the northern reaches of the Indian subcontinent. The only fully consenting parties in this act of creation were the East India Company and Gulab Singh, Raja of Jammu. Disparate territories stripped by the Company from the Sikh kingdom of Punjab were cobbled together to bring into being the state of Jammu and Kashmir (hereafter referred to as the State) came into existence in 1846, with Maharaja Gulab Singh as its first ruler.ⁱ The state was not a personal creation of Gulab Singh but was rather the outcome of an agreement between him and the representatives of the British East India Company.ⁱⁱ

Social Structure:

At the time of its incorporation into the State, Kashmir had evolved a plural society. There existed at that time three socio- religious segments in the population of the region. The large majority of the population was Muslim comprising of those who had adopted Islam during the long span of about five hundred years of the successive reigns of different

Muslim rulers (1320-1819). The second segment consisted of those who had resisted conversion and had continued to remain within the Brahmanical Hindu fold. The third section was that of the Sikhs. They were supposed to have settled in Kashmir during the tenure of the first Afghan Sirdar, and later during the reigns of Sikh ruler. They have retained their Punjabi origin and culture up to this date.ⁱⁱⁱ Before an attempt is made to portray the elaborate degree of segmentation of Kashmiri society, it would be desirable to have a general view of the geographical distribution of the members of the three socio-religious segments and the occupations pursued by the majority of their members.

Of the three socio-religious segments of the population, the Muslims, preponderant in number, were scattered all over the region. However, the Shia Muslims, according to a rough estimate formed about five per cent of the total population.^{iv} Of the, 52,576 Hindus of Kashmir, 28,695 reside in Srinagar and the small towns, and the rural Hindus, who number 23,881, are scattered far and wide in the valley. The Sikhs were found in the rural areas of Tral, Hawal, Biroh and Ranbir Singh pura.^v

Like any medieval society, the society in Kashmir was feudal. The major portion of the peasant produce was appropriated by the State and its collaborators. As the Dogras took over as the rulers of Kashmir, they declared the whole land of Kashmir as the state property. By this declaration, they aimed at legitimization of land revenue and other demands. The new props were mainly recruited from the Hindu community who were considered the only faithful subjects to rely upon.^{vi}

The Dogras were educationally backward and had to depend on local talent. The Muslims could not be considered trust worthy. The alternative was to choose the Kashmiri pandits as their ally. They enjoyed position and authority in higher departments. The society under the Dogras went under a dynamic change with the introduction of various developmental schemes. On the

other hand, there were many peasants and artisans, suffering from hunger and poverty stricken. The society was divided into two clear-cut divisions of the haves and the have-nots.^{vii}

The system of *Begar* introduced by the Afghans was revived by the Sikhs, and during the Dogra rule, it assumed alarming dimensions. All non-Muslims stood exempted on account of being co-religionists of the ruling family. The system assumed extremely dreadful proportions in Kashmir valley under the early Dogras for providing the troops on the move as well as for the huge military establishments in the conquered territories with adequate supplies.^{viii} According to Lawrence: "*Begar* was so ruthlessly enforced that the very word was a constant terror in Kashmir. When there was a call for it, the villagers would unwillingly leave their homes for two or three months with the prospect of death from cold or starvation."^{ix} Due to the system of forced labour (*begar*) in the Valley, the agriculturists often preferred to become shawl weavers or household servants in the city of Srinagar because the city population was exempted from *begar*.

In every aspect of the State's life, there was discrimination against the Muslim majority and the application of legislation expressly designed to favour Hindus. Until 1934, for example, the slaughter of cow was a capital offence; and it continued to be forbidden under lesser penalty after that date. The administration of the state was dominated at all levels by the pandits, (Kashmiri Brahmins), who were notoriously corrupt and avaricious. The Muslims were in practice severely disadvantaged by the education system which began to develop in the state in the first years of the 20th century. The Muslim troops in the Jammu and Kashmir state force (usually with Dogra officers) were mainly recruited from the Sudhans of Poonch, a military clan which the Maharaja believed could

be relied upon to suppress any disorder in the Vale. The state did not hesitate to interfere with many aspects of Muslim religious life including the administration of Islamic shrines.^x

In addition to discrimination based upon religious differences, there was evidence of a strong regional bias in the attitude and actions of Dogras administration. An example of the latter was the former Maharaja Ranbir Singh's land reform programme introduced in 1877 which extended benefits of land ownership to tenants in the province of Jammu but not to those in the valley of Kashmir and the frontier regions. A second illustration was the exclusion of all Kashmiris Hindus as well as Muslims, from the military service.

ECONOMIC CONDITIONS:

From ancient times, Land Revenue remained major source of income to every dynasty. This income was utilized to maintain the administration, to pay the salaries to the officials of the State, to maintain army and to construct roads and other public works. Yet little attention was paid towards the welfare of peasantry. During every dynastic rule, peasantry suffered. The peasantry was forced to pay large number of taxes other than state share. The economic life of Kashmir, like the other parts of India mostly depended upon agriculture. Agriculture was the main stay of the people of Kashmir valley. In view of the geographical location of the valley, agriculture played dominant role in its socio-economic transformation as the region is very poor in terms of industrial setup mainly due to non-availability of raw materials and highly difficult terrain.^{xi}

In the valley, the ruler was the owner of land, and the cultivators were his servants. During the reign of old Hindu rulers, the state took no more than 1/6th of the gross produce, which was enough for their wants as well as of the Court and officials. The system of collection of revenue by the Sultans was identical to that prevailing under the Hindu rulers. Each village was assessed by *Kharwars*^{xii} of rice, and the grain could not be removed from the threshing floor by the cultivator till he paid the share of the state. The state's share was removed to the city and sold to the citizens at fixed prices. This naturally resulted in keeping the prices steady, and prevented the anti-social elements from cornering the grain in times of scarcity. Though one third had been for a long time past the nominal share of the state, yet more than two shares were actually taken.^{xiii}

At the outset of Maharaja Gulab Singh's reign, all matters involving the general administration, the land revenue system and internal and external trade were submitted to him for his consideration but he did not propose any structural changes in the revenue administration. He appears to have more or less adhered to the Sikh system.^{xiv} As the conditions prevailing in Kashmir when Gulab Singh took over it was deplorable, the economic chaos prevailed to the utmost. The tiller of the soil paid heavily in taxes. The artisans and weavers of shawls were in an equally miserable condition. The Sikh soldiery whose pay was always in arrears added to the annoyance of the Kashmiris. Gulab Singh "brought the principle of personal rule to perfection" and showed the people that he could stand by himself. He spent much of his time in Kashmir, and was an able active ruler, and a fairly wise landlord, the condition of the people improved. But the great difficulty that the Maharaja experienced was with regard to Jagir grants. There were no less than 3,115 Jagirs most of which were unregistered.^{xv}

Gulab Singh confiscated all the jagirs and declared that all lands in his subjugated territories of Kashmir and frontier *illaqas* belonged to him and the owners or the tillers of land were simply his tenants-at-will. This was the first time in the history of Kashmir that Kashmiris and people of frontier *illaqas* lost ownership of their own lands.^{xvi}

Gulab Singh tried to rule the country justly according to his own lights, but partly owing to the exigencies of the unsettled and unprogressive times and partly to his own avarice and greed, he could not improve the economic condition of the people. It continued to be most dilapidated, verging on starvation. As such, Kashmir became “the scene of vile oppression and abominable misrule and it remained trodden down and tramped”. “This last state was worse than the first”, wrote Lieutenant Colonel Torrens^{xvii}, “for Gulab Singh went beyond his predecessors in the gently acts of undue taxation and extortion. They had taxed heavily it is true, but he sucked the very lifeblood of the people. They had laid violent hands on a large proportion of the fruits of the earth, the profits of the loom and the work of men’s hands, but he skinned the very flints to fill his coffers”^{xviii}

The fact that a large area of land was under the possession of different categories of landlords can be inferred from the fact that immediately after the end of Dogra rule, 55 lakh canals were transferred to the tillers by passing the famous Abolition of Big Landed Estates Act (1950). Though this act was only a beginning towards the abolition of landlordism in Kashmir, by virtue of it 396 big Jagirs were revoked and 2 lakh and 50 thousand tillers became proprietors of land.^{xix}

The most critical feature of Landlordism of our period was that the dominant majority of landlords belonged to Hindu community who constituted only 20 per cent of total population of Jammu And Kashmir State and not more than 5^{1/2} per cent of Kashmir valley. However, all the contemporary sources are unanimous that the landed aristocracy mainly belonged to Hindu community.^{xx} The abolition of landlordism was the main slogan of Muslim Conference and it is also understandable as to why the abolition of Big landed Estates Act (1950) evoked stiff resentment among the Kashmiri pandits and their sympathiser Sardar Patel.

The Dogra rule was ushered in, by many retrograde policies. But the most backward step taken by it was the confiscation of proprietary rights in land which the Kashmiri peasant was enjoying without any interruption since the earliest times. The new law did not apply to Jammu peasant. He continued to enjoy the proprietary rights in land, obviously because the Dogra rulers always considered Jammu as their home and Kashmir as the conquered territory.^{xxi}

The manufacture of Shawl, for which Kashmir is celebrated throughout the world, is that of the light, warm, and elegant articles of dress which from its native appellation, is known as shawl. It had been in existence, in variety of forms, from the most ancient times, serving as a staple and productive garment not only for the rich and noble but also for the common people. The shawl industry is stated to have flourished in the days of the *Kurwas* and *Pandus*. It was a prosperous industry in the days of the Roman Empire, when Kashmiri shawls, were worn by the proudest beauties at the court of the Caesar. In Asoka’s time, we find the shawl mentioned in Buddhistic works as Kashmiri shawl. But thereafter for a long period this art was dead.^{xxii}

When Maharaja Gulab Singh became the ruler in 1846 A.D, the shawl trade began to revive. There was again a great demand for shawls in France and other European countries. The commonly used shawls were of two kinds, viz., *Kani* and *Amlī*. The Kani, or the loom-woven, shawl was made in small pieces which were subsequently joined together with an almost imperceptible stitch. It usually took a weaver over three years of patient labour and hard work to manufacture this kind of shawl in rich patterns. Quite often, he developed a permanent squint or some other eye trouble and sometimes even lost his eye sight in the process.^{xxiii}

The Kashmiris, however complained that the Government of the Maharaja took no interest in patronising the arts and craft in Kashmir, nor has it any interest in its development and progress. The reason being, that all the artisans and workers were Muslims. The Government had imposed taxes on shawls which practically ruined this trade. The annual tax levied by the Maharaja on each shawl weaver was Rs. 47.8.^{xxiv} The old arts and crafts were wiped out but the Government did nothing to develop these ancient traditions.^{xxv}

The first ever labour of its kind was organized in, 1865. A. D, by the shawlbafts (shawl- weavers) in the city of Srinagar. The motive forces behind this rising were the miserable economic condition of the weavers. The immediate cause of the labour rising was an oppressive measure adopted by the contractor of the Daghshawl , Pandit Rajkak Dhar, who was supposed to recover and pay to the state twelve lakh rupees. On the historic day of 29 April, 1865, the workers joined the struggle to obtain their demands. It was perhaps the first organised demands day in the history of class struggle in India. The workers from all parts of the city marched in a procession towards Zaldagar. They raised slogans and burnt effigy of Raj Kak Dhar, the Daroga of the shawl Department. Kripa Ram, who was the Governor of Kashmir at that time, decided to crush the uprising with a strong hand. The Dogra forces at Srinagar were sent under the command of Bajay Singh to deal with the procession. All the workers were surrounded and then charged with guns and spears. After some deaths, the agitators fled away towards the bridge of Haji Rather but most of them fell into a marshy canal and got drowned. Hundreds of workers suffered minor and major injuries and at least 28 dead bodies were collected by the people.^{xxvi}

A Silk factory, exclusively owned by the Government, had been established in Srinagar during the last years of Ranbir Singh. In 1924, the labourers were paid a daily wage of $4\frac{1}{2}$ annas per head which was obviously too inadequate, especially in view of the rising cost of living and the huge profit it earned.^{xxvii} The corruption was so rampant, that a part of the wage was shamelessly pocketed by the officials. On persistent demand from labourers, an inquiry was at last instituted. The allegations of corruption were found to be true but instead of taking any action against the guilty persons, they were mutually transferred from one block of the factory to the other. This resulted in a lightening strike by thousands of workers.^{xxviii} The despotic regime, determined to suppress the resentment, used the oppressive methods and arrested their important leaders including a dashing young man, popularly known as 'King'. To protest against the arrest of their leaders and to demonstrate their solidarity, the entire labour force marched in a procession in the city and finally halted at Hazuri Bagh. The procession was joined by women, children and other sympathisers in the city and after covering important parts of the city, halted in front of the Government Hospital. The processionists who were entirely peaceful, were raising slogans demanding the release of their leaders, the punishment of the corrupt officials and a reasonable raise in their wages. The Maharaja's nephew, Hari Singh who was the commander-in-chief used brute force to disperse the procession. Scores of women and children were trampled upon and hundreds of workers sustained injuries. The workers were arrested and sentenced to various terms of imprisonment. The entire city of Srinagar was steeped in great sorrow. 'King' was tried for rioting and treason. He was imprisoned and tortured. He died a premature death.^{xxix}

Despite the reforms imposed upon the state of Jammu and Kashmir by the British during those years after 1889 when they were in effective control of its affairs, Maharaja Hari Singh in 1925 inherited a regime in which the Muslim majority of the population endured considerable hardships in their daily lives. The system of *begar*, the conscription of the local people for various works including service as porters, was deemed particularly

objectionable by the Government of India even though many a British traveller, unofficially had found it extremely convenient and had not hesitated to exploit it to the full.^{xxx} In theory *begar* had abolished in 1893, but in practice it persisted, particularly in remote districts, right up to 1947. In Jammu and the Vale of Kashmir, the revenue demand of the cultivators was such that they were only able to retain sufficient for the barest margin of subsistence in a good year. In practice, however, rapacious State officials and landlords, or Jagirdars, steadily eroded the peasants entitlement. The result was a marked increase in rural indebtedness and a proliferation of money lenders. Trade and industry, too, were subjected to extortionate demands from the Maharaja. An *ad valorem* duty of 85 per cent was levied on the textile industry. All traders, even prostitutes, were taxed at comparable rates.

On the surface, at the time of Maharaja Hari Singh's accession Hindu- Muslim relations, particularly in the Vale of Kashmir, seemed amicable. The Kashmiri Muslims were generally described by outside observers as docile and subservient. They were certainly impressed by the power of Maharaja's Government which, particularly in the early days of Gulab Singh's rule of the vale, had ruthlessly suppressed all vestiges of opposition. Beneath the calm exterior of Kashmiri life, however, there undoubtedly persisted a bitter resentment which by late 1920s was beginning to take political shape. Even the Kashmiri Pandit community, which had benefited greatly from Dogra administration, was not immune from a growing disenchantment with the injustices of the Maharaja's administration when it was compared with conditions to be found in territory under British control.^{xxxii}

The Pandit community, containing the best educated people in the State and with extensive contacts outside in British India, particularly in Lahore and Lucknow, was affected to some degree by various intellectual and political reform movements which arose during the course of the latter part of the 19th century and the first decades of the 20th. The result of modernism, through the spread of education and the economic development, brought about a change in the thinking and outlook of the Hindus and Muslims. The saner elements among both the communities began to start movements to bring about change in their customs and values.^{xxxii}

The labour force was available in valley, the unemployment problems agitated the workers and their grievances were highlighted by Sheikh Muhammad Abdullah in the second annual session of Muslim Conference, 1933.A.D. The economic emancipation of masses was the most fundamental feature of the programmes and activities of the Muslim Conference and later on of National Conference. It always struggled for the welfare of the working classes like peasants, artisans and labourers who were the worst hit of imperial exploitation. The conference demanded the reduction of the land revenue and to provide latest technology and hybrid seeds to the peasantry. It was because of the efforts of the conference that number of concession was provided to working class and to all people as well. Thus, the conference played a commendable role towards the upliftment of the peasantry.

Conclusion:

Although under the predecessors of the Dogras the Kashmiri Muslims were suffering from social, economic and political disempowerment, yet it was the Dogras who took this exploitation to unprecedented levels. The entire Dogra regime was considered as extremely greedy and cruel. If all classes of people in the valley were discontented with the Dogras in 1930 A.D., the Muslims had added reasons for becoming sullen. Firstly, they formed the large majority (nearly 78 per cent) of the population in the State and the 93 per

cent in the valley. They were treated more unfairly in every sphere of life than the Kashmiri Hindus. There were laws that hit a Muslim very hard. The marriage tax, which only a Muslim had to pay on marriage that took place in his family. However, there were other taxes, which continued to remain on the statute book as the cow- slaughter law and the law of inheritance. The poverty of the Muslim masses was appalling. Dressed in rags which could hardly hide his body and barefooted, a Muslim peasant presented the appearance rather of a starving beggar than of one who filled the coffers of the state. He worked laboriously in the fields during the six months of the summer to pay the state its revenue and taxes, the officials their *Rasum* and the moneylender his interest. So, the period of the 19th century experienced intense social and economic exploitation than the political turmoil. The social and economic exploitation were so intense that the majority of the Muslims migrated to the affluent areas, like Punjab, for working opportunities and less religious oppression. Although it was difficult to say whether the political turmoil was intense or the social and economic exploitation, yet from the majority of the writers' accounts, it can be stated that the Muslims suffered from poverty, hunger and other miseries due to the exercise of inhuman practices by the Dogra rulers.

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