

Growth and Development of Political Awareness among Muslims during Dogra Regime in Kashmir - An overview

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ABSTRACT

The valley of Kashmir witnessed oppressive rule since Mughals occupied valley first time under Emperor Akbar in 1586. It continued during Afghans, Sikhs and then it was handed over to Dogra's of Jammu by the British East India Company through ill-famed transaction which came to be known as Treaty of Amritsar. The rule of Dogra's started with the declaration that they will treat Kashmir as their purchased property and this prerogative was exercised with impunity by their male descendants in letter and spirit. They never permitted public opinion to get evolved among people and put breaks on all forms of rights, whatsoever, on the people of Kashmir. The paper will highlight most of such restrictions which they imposed on the people of Kashmir. It will also bring forth how these factors prepared a ground for creating a viable atmosphere in awakening the people of Kashmir against tyrannical rule. Moreover, paper will highlight the pivotal role played by non Kashmiri political associations and different newspapers published by non Kashmiri activists mainly from the soil of Punjab. Last but not least, paper will point out several other reasons which triggered the political conscience among the people of Kashmir.

1. Introduction

The valley of Kashmir in 1846 was brought under the control of Dogra's of Jammu under gloomy terms of Treaty of Amritsar signed between Maharaja Gulab Singh and British India company whereby the, 'British transfer and makes over, forever, in independent possession to Maharaja Gulab Singh and the heirs male of his body all the hilly and mountainous country, with its dependencies situated to the east ward of the river Ravi including the Chamba and excluding Lahol, being part of the territories ceded to the British government by the Lahore State according to the provisions of article four of the Treaty of Lahore dated 9th of March, 1846.'^[1] Maharaja Gulab Singh, in return, had to dole out an amount of seventy five lakhs of rupees (Nanakshai) for this solicited deal to British government. It is important to mention here that it was another heartbreaking chapter in the annals of Kashmir history when Kashmir through this treaty was passed over from one master to another. Nevertheless, it was solely based on the fact that the British government was responsible for forcibly thrusting Dogra imperialism on the people of Kashmir. It added another twist to the ill-fate of the people who perpetually saw changing masters since Mughals occupied Kashmir in 1586. Thus, people inhabiting the valley were brought under the imperialism of Maharaja Gulab Singh and his male descendants who themselves were working and functioning as a vassal under the super-imperialism of British Indian government.^[2] After the conclusion of this Treaty, Maharaja Gulab Singh declared entire land in the valley as his purchased property. On the other hand, the people in the valley expected that these new masters would bring constructive change in all spheres of life but soon it was clear to them that these new masters were no less cruel and tyrants than the previous ones like Afghans and Sikhs. They curbed with iron hand every single form of reformation in the State. Each and every facility was practically denied to the people living in the valley predominantly

populated by the Muslims. Moreover, Dogra rulers put restrictions and curbed all rights of the people of Kashmir. These rights included political, economic, religious and many other civil rights. Under these headings, an attempt will be made to identify how these factors played a significant part in developing political consciousness among the people of Kashmir against autocratic Dogra regime.

2. Purpose of the Study

The present research paper will highlight the various causes which kept people apolitical almost for eight decades during the period under preview. Besides, paper will bring to light different associations and news papers which pleaded the case of oppressed people. Moreover, an attempt will be made to identify various other immediate factors which helped the people to shun the centuries of decadency, stagnation and servitude.

3. Growth of Political Consciousness among the Muslims of Kashmir

The people in the valley suffered terribly under foreign dynasties like Mughals Afghans, Sikhs and Dogra's. Once Kashmir was handed over to Dogra's of Jammu, they treated them as beasts of burden. Peasantry in the valley under Dogra's was not only deprived of property rights on the land but also very little of agricultural produce was left with it for sustenance. The Muslim population in the vale was groaning under several disabilities which include lack of political liberty, religious persecution, and discrimination in education and government services. All these factors played a pivotal part in the growth and development of political consciousness among the people of Kashmir against oppressive regime.

I. Political Restrictions

No doubt, whole Muslim population in the valley was getting groaned under the repressive rule of the Dogra's but at the same time it is beyond any doubt that these hapless masses failed to start systematized struggle against despotic regime upto 1931. It was overtly due to autocratic regime which imposed complete ban on the establishment of any form of association whether it was political or socio- religious in nature. Moreover, it was partly due to unawareness caused by mass illiteracy prevalent among them. It was contrary to what we saw in British India where, under colonial rule, there emerged innumerable political and many other associations in the 19th century. There was, so to say, no representation of Muslims in the law making body of the state. In Kashmir, Majlis Kashmiri Mussalman was the first political association founded by non resident Kashmiris (NRK'S) in Lahore in 1896. The founding fathers of this association had close relation with the people of Kashmir as their forefathers migrated from Kashmir due to oppression. They include Sheikh Mohammad Iqbal, Khawaja Rahim Bakish, and Mian Karim Bakish.^[3] It was this association which highlighted and pleaded the cause of Kashmiris who suffered many disabilities due to autocratic regime. Besides, Muslim Kashmiri Conference was another political association founded in 1901 and it was later renamed as All India Muslim Conference in 1911^[4] when it assumed all India character. More importantly, this association became driving force in spearheading revolution in Kashmir.

Moreover, there was no freedom of expression and the Dogra kings imposed complete ban on the formation of press. They disallowed and suppressed public opinion and freedom of press. It is necessary to pin point here that in the sixties of the twentieth century, it happened first time that Robert Thorp wrote numerous articles in British newspapers against atrocities perpetrated on the people living in the valley during Maharaja Ranbir Singh's period. Thereof, the work of exposing the true nature of Dogra rule in the valley continued and shouldered by the non residents of Kashmir especially people from the soil of Punjab. They highlighted and exposed the misgovernance of the Maharaja's government through their newspapers. In this regard, the first news paper '*Chowdeen Sadi*',^[5] issued from Rawalpindi reported its first news on Kashmir in which atrocities committed on the people of Kashmir by the Dogra administration was published on 23rd of July, 1885. Similarly, *Gulshan-e-Kashmir* established in 1901 by Taj-ud-Din was another weekly newspaper published from Punjab dedicated its activities for the cause of Kashmiri people.^[6] Besides, there were other newspapers which took up the job of highlighting the cause of people. These include *Inqilab*, *Siyasat*, *Sunrise* and many more issued from Punjab. These news papers gave due place to the news related to the sufferings of the people caused by the Maharaja and his supporters because State government had imposed ban on the publication of any kind of newspapers in the valley.

II. Economic Distress

The economy of Kashmir province like other princely States of British India was primarily based on Agriculture. Almost eighty percent population in the valley was practicing agriculture which formed largest section of the population. With the onset of Dogra rule in Kashmir, the first two Dogra rulers

hardly took any interest in the development of agriculture. They declared entire land as their private property. So, it happened first time in the history of Kashmir when peasants lost their property rights on the land which they continued to enjoy under previous regimes like Afghans and Sikhs. More importantly, it was in contrary to the Jammu province where people received generous treatment from the rulers of the State. As a result, there was no such kind of restriction on the peasantry who enjoyed property rights on the land.^[7] It was primarily owing to the fact that these Dogra masters every time treated Jammu as their ancestral land and Kashmir as its purchased property. During the period under preview agriculture was in a state of deterioration as their prime purpose was to amass wealth from the Muslim peasantry in the valley. The method of collection and assessment of revenue was oppressive. Henceforth, two-third was charged by the Dogra State from the peasantry as its share and left only one third with the peasantry.^[8] Moreover, they introduced several land revenue systems in the valley but it is important to note here that each system proved to be destructive and exploitative than the previous ones. The causes of their discontentment were many, but the most vital were the impounding of propriety rights on the land and the oppression they faced on the part of Dogra State on the one hand and administrative machinery on the other hand. The oppressors also included-----Jagirdars, Chakdars and Maufidars.^[9] Moreover, the valley of Kashmir was under the clutch of a tire of hierarchy of officials which was dishonest and deceitful in nature for the most part of it. In the revenue administration, Tehsildar was positioned at uppermost place in the administration and there were numerous other officials under his control which includes Naib-Tehsildar, Thanedar, Kardar, Sozwal, Patwari, Tehvildar, Muqaddam, Shikdar, Lambardar, Harkara and Tarazudar.^[10] Thus, while on the one hand, peasantry was oppressed by the State by charging high rates of land revenue demand and on the other hand, it was also defrauded by the officials dealing with the task of collection of revenue from them. Besides, normal land revenue demand these officials charged perquisites from them to fill their pockets. It ultimately resulted in the starvation of peasant families in the valley. Thereof, due to heavy taxation system and the loot of the corrupt officials, cultivators were compelled to give up their lands and abandon the cultivation on the agricultural fields.^[11] Thus, it was done to mark and register their discontent and dissatisfaction with the prevailing system that sucked their udders until these were completely dry.

Not only this, the utmost reviled system among Kashmir peasantry was the institution of *begar* or forced labour. This system assumed and touched its new dimensions and heights under the rule of Dogra's. The peasants in the valley were frequently pushed into *begar* at the time of peak season of either sowing or reaping of crops. It had adverse effect not only on the economy of the country (Kashmir) but it also affected the life of peasantry in the valley. The worst drawback of this system was that it was disproportionately distributed. It is important to note here that the only common Muslim peasant was subjected to this inhuman practice of *begar* while as Sayid's among Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs were exclusively exempted.^[12] As a result, whole brunt fell upon the Muslim peasantry. Moreover, the prevailing system encouraged corruption on a large scale among officials who frequently

demanding and obtained 'firewood, grass, poultry, blankets, sheep, ghee, various kinds of grains and sometimes even cows and ponies'^[13] without paying single rupee to them. Besides, it encouraged migration among the people towards nearby State of Punjab primarily to evade the burden of *begar* inflicted on them.

III. Discrimination in Education

The Muslims in the valley were not accorded adequate opportunities in education. The State government turned indifferent to the recommendations made by Sharp Commission in 1916 and no concrete step was taken in this regard. For instance Mr. Sharp recommended that the number of primary schools should be increased from 311 to 1100 within ten years but it reached only to eight hundred and forty two in 1932.^[14] Moreover, it recommended that number of Arabic teachers should increase from eighty to eight hundred by 1926 but only seventeen were added to it by 1932.^[15] Further, Commission recommended that more schools should be established in Kashmir but State government instead established these schools in Jammu province. According to Galancy Commission which portrayed a glaring picture in 1932 when it reported that there were 59 middle schools out of which 32 were established in Jammu whereas in Kashmir province their number was 27.^[16] Besides, at college level restrictions were imposed by the concerned authorities on the entry of Muslim students in the S.P. College Srinagar. As a result, it further negatively impacted educational upliftment of the Muslim population of the State in general and Kashmir province in particular.

IV. Lack of Share in Government Services

Before 1931, the Muslims in the valley had effectively no share in the government services. It is to be noted here that only a miniscule number of them either worked as class IV employees or lower cadre clerks and one could hardly find any Muslim gazetted officer in the government departments. Notwithstanding the fact that, there was considerable number of educated Muslims available but their share in the government sector was very small than what they deserved. So, Muslims in the valley had long pending demand and complaint that they were not given sufficient share in the government established departments. It caused frustration and resentment among Muslim population in the valley. For instance, there were one hundred and forty eight employees employed in the revenue department, out of which only thirty-five posts were occupied by the Muslims and rest were in possession of Hindu officials. Similarly, in the health department, there were 188 Hindu officials whereas only thirty-two were Muslims.^[17]

Besides, Diwans, Minsters (wazirs), and military personals were appointed from non Muslims from the province of Punjab, Jammu and also from Kashmir which include Kashmiri pandits.^[18] It is to be borne in mind that Kashmiri Muslims were kept away from the State administrative posts. Moreover, autocratic rulers ensured that the injunction on non entry of Muslims in the armed services was followed in letter and in spirit.

V. Religious Persecution

The Muslim subjects in the entire State suffered from religious persecution. The autocratic rule of Dogra's locked down several religious places of Muslims in Kashmir as well as in Jammu provinces. They used them as grain storage for Dogra Army and stables. Moreover, in Jammu province ban was imposed on 'Azan'.^[19] Additionally, Dogra Maharajas of the State impounded rent free jagirs given to Muslim religious institutes and clerics, whereas, on the other hand they endowed huge amount of revenue to the Dharmarth Trust established by them for the promotion of Hinduism.^[20] Besides, *Mundri* and *Ashghal* taxes were taken from the Muslim subjects by the State government-----former was meant for the maintenance of temples and latter for the support of Hindu Priests.^[21]

Additionally, if a Muslim converted to Hinduism he was not deprived of inheritance of ancestral property and guardianship over his children whereas in contrast, if a Hindu converted to Islam he would lose both aforementioned rights. Thus, it was regarded by Muslims as a discrimination and direct interference in their religious matters by the Dogra regime. They considered it as an unpleasant assault on all sense of religious liberty. Besides, by Royal order a ban was imposed on the slaughter of cows and declared it as criminal offence. For instance if any Muslim was found guilty of killing a cow, he was meted with capital punishment which was later reduced to life imprisonment and then to seven years.^[22] It was constant demand of Muslims who believed that punishment was rigorous and it required to be softened.

VI. Rise of Middle Class

The credit goes to Anjuman Nusrat-ul-Islam which established numerous schools all across the Kashmir valley. By 1920, it started to produce considerably a good number of educated youth among the Muslim population who frolicked their part in the expansion of political realization among the people of Kashmir. Moreover, by 1930 Kashmir valley recorded incredible increase of educated and energetic young youth among the Muslim population in the valley. Most among them came from middle class families and Sheikh Abdullah was one important leader among them. During their long stay in British India for the purpose of studies, they got familiarize with and inclined to the political movements carried and directed against foreign yoke. Once they returned to valley, they had to face unemployment problems. Likewise, extremist leaders of India National Congress got frustrated by the indifferent attitude of British imperialism. Similarly, they got frustrated when State government introduced Civil Service Recruitment Board in 1930 and prescribed rules that were just framed for keeping Muslim applicants far away from the recruitment process. Besides other eligibility criteria, it included that the applicants need to produce good health certificate, pass competitive examination, and should be belonging to noble family.^[23] These rules were irrelevant and irrational. As a result, during their unemployment period, they started 'Reading Room Party' where they used to discuss matters pertaining to day today life of people in general. Finally, it was this Reading Room Party which later on got converted in 1931 into one of the important political and secular organization which came to be known as All Jammu and Kashmir Muslim Conference. It played yeoman's role from 1931-1939 in developing political

consciousness among the people of Kashmir and launched an organized struggle against tyrannical rule of Dogra's.

VII. Episode of 13th July, 1931

With the formation of Reading Room Party by some young educated men where they used to discuss the problems faced by the Muslim population of State in general and Kashmiri Muslims in particular opened a new chapter in political awareness of people was ushered in. Luckily few episodes which took place in Jammu including interfering in Eid Khutba of an Imam, Tauheen-e-Quran (desecration of holy Quran) and another episode which took place in the village Digore when Muslims were refused permission to offer on a certain piece of land ^[24] provided ignition to the fuel of religious hatred employed by the Dogra rulers. All these events created wide spread resentment among the Muslim population all across the State and Muslim leadership wished to cash these opportunities to mobilize the people against Dogra regime. Moreover, the episode of 13th, July, 1931 shook the foundation of Dogra regime in Kashmir in which seventeen Kashmiris laid down their life outside the central prison in the Srinagar city on the spot and rest of five died in the compound of Jamia Masjid who also sustained bullet injuries. ^[25] Thus, it was after this

tragic event that a well organized freedom movement was started by Muslims of the State against oppressive rule of Dogra's under the banner of All Jammu and Kashmir Muslim Conference until it got converted into Jammu and Kashmir National Conference in 1939.

4. Conclusion

Thus, it is inferred from the aforementioned reasons that the autocratic rule didn't grant any kind of rights, whatsoever, to the Muslim population of the State. They were not only deprived of their political, civil, economic rights but at the same time they were debarred from the performance of their religious duties. All these issues not only aggravated their lot but these contributed in shaping the public opinion against oppressive regime and also played their part in developing political consciousness among the people. Finally, these factors were held responsible for the formation of Muslim Conference which turned to be a landmark development in the annals of Kashmir history. It was this organization which highlighted and raised voice against atrocities inflicted by Dogra Maharaja and its supporters on the people of Kashmir.

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