

## 19<sup>th</sup> CENTURY KASHMIR VALLEY UNDER LAHORE DARBAR A THOROUGH ANALYSIS

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### **ABSTRACT**

*The history of Kashmir is greatly influenced by its geography. The valley appears a little world of its own which in the past assured her a distinct geographical, historical and cultural existence. The Afghan rule, prior to Lahore Darbar's conquest and administration, proved to be the cruelest for Kashmiris. They, despite religious affinity, felt constrained to throw off the Pathan yoke. Fortunately the then policy of Maharaja Ranjit Singh's territorial expansion proved a surprise boon on Valley's conquest and annexation by Lahore Darbar in 1819. Ranjit Singh Administered Kashmir through Nazims (Governors) and Revenue Farmers. A significant development in respect of agriculture and industry took place. Though, still in the middle ages, seeds of tourism in the Valley started appearing. Reforms on socio-economic and religious fronts were visible. Government grants were extended to Hindu and Muslim shrines unbiasedly. Lahore Darbar provided huge financial help and allied facilities to the valley during natural calamities after 1828 and especially the horrible famine of 1833 which shattered Kashmir economy. The Kashmiris greatly welcomed the rule of Ranjit Singh as it freed them from the chain of slavery in addition to putting a complete halt to 'wealth Drain'. Lahore Darbar brought, on the whole, mental and financial relief to the natives. Indeed, under the secular and benevolent despotic Lahore Darbar rule, their prospectus appeared quite positive, satisfying and encouraging.*

**KEY WORDS:** *Geographical Influence; Decline of Afghans; Slavery; Ranjit Singh; Lahore Darbar; Birbal Dhar; Administration; Natural Calamity; Benevolence; Development.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

In no parts of India, has geography so much influenced its history as in the case of Kashmir, the largest family enclosed in the womb of Himalayas. The valley appears a little world of its own, which in the past, assured her a distinct geographical, historical and cultural existence. It is truly called a sub-Alpine region of Asia's Italy<sup>1</sup>. Apart from its acknowledged claim to picturesque beauty, Kashmir valley has other no less important and equally interesting, alike to the scholar and antiquary for its claim, will be conceded by any one who has studied its history and have seen or heard of ruins, relics of past days standing yet in various parts of the valley, testifying alike to its former greatness and prosperity<sup>2</sup>. Babur writes that the name 'Kashmir' may be derived from the hill tribe 'Kas'<sup>3</sup>. Earlier Hieun Tsang, Chinese traveller visited Kashmir in 631 A.D. and narrates the legend in the Buddhist manner.<sup>4</sup> Under Afghan rule, 28 Governors or Deputy Governors ruled over Kashmir. These Pathan rulers proved to be the cruelest masters of the valley. They thought no more of cutting off heads than of plucking flowers.<sup>5</sup> The residents of the valley, irrespective of the religion they professed, were constrained to throw off the Pathan yoke.<sup>6</sup> But without the external aid of a powerful army, it was not possible to achieve that objective.

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### **AFGHANS ON DECLINE**

The early years of the 19<sup>th</sup> century saw the power of the Afghans on decline. The Sikhs were encroaching on their Cis-Indus territories. Kashmir valley was still a part of the Afghan Kingdom and Maharaja Ranjit Singh, the ruler at Lahore Darbar, was eager to avail himself of an opportunity to snatch that fine province from the infidels. But then arrived an opportunity when Pandit Birbal Dhar, Revenue Collector of Kashmir, himself escaped to Lahore and urged the Maharaja to drive away the Afghans from Kashmir. The Sikh forces led by Missar Dewan Chand and properly guided by Birbal Dhar successfully invaded the valley in 1819. The conquest of Kashmir was significant addition to the united Sikh kingdom. The Governor Azam Khan alone had collected Rs. 2 crores from Kashmir within six years. It, therefore, soon became the richest province in terms of revenue receipts of the Sikh Kingdom, next only to Multan.<sup>7</sup>

### **SIKH ADMINISTRATION**

#### **(Industry and Revenue)**

The Sikhs administered Kashmir through their Nazims (Governors) and Revenue Farmers. The revenue of Kashmir was farmed out to the Revenue Farmers normally on yearly basis. Between 1819-1846, nine Governors were appointed by the Lahore Darbar and, one of them, Dewan Moti Ram, occupied the office twice. Many European travellers and adventurers visited Kashmir during the Sikh rule and left the accounts of their travels, which shed light on the political and socio-economic conditions of the Kashmiris, under the Sikhs.

The Valley, under the Sikhs, was still in the middle ages in respect of economic and social conditions, behavior and attitudes. The land was fertile with plenty of water, and its agricultural output was in abundance in normal years<sup>8</sup>. Kashmiris were hard working and were well known for high skill in various arts and crafts. Nearly 37 per cent of the valley population was dependant on industry. The figure appears larger when compared with any other province of Sikh Kingdom. Annual Shawl goods production alone was nearly Rs. 55,00,000. Despite above facts, the industry workers and the cultivators led life below poverty line. For nearly three months a year, during winter, the poor Kashmiris had to live on wild fruit and vegetables. The Government hardly granted permission to the residents of the valley to leave their territory, especially after the great famine of 1833, which reduced its population, by 25 per cent. Migration of tillers and the industry labour would severely affect the State revenues. Natural calamities after 1828 and especially the horrible famine of 1833 completely shattered valley's economy.

As regards the land tenure and the revenue collection, the entire confusing and defective system was inherited from the Afghans. Traditionally, the proprietary rights of the land vested in the Government. The cultivator, like a servant, employed on contract, could be removed and evicted, at any time, without assigning any reasons whatsoever<sup>9</sup>. Above all, the Government gave the contract of collection of entire revenue to an individual normally on yearly basis. Such Revenue Farmers and Contractors were obviously always in a much hurry to amass as much wealth as possible during the short period of collection granted by the State Chief. The system appears unscientific and full of glaring lapses.

The trade in paddy, the main food of the Kashmiris, was a State monopoly. The revenue authorities collected land revenue not in cash but in kind i.e. grain. To benefit the urban population in Srinagar, the Governor fixed the prices of the grains and ordered rationing. This food policy did keep the prices of the foodgrains low and also

financially helped the city population only while the majority of the rural population continued to be in the grip of poverty, year after year. Such a system was not in vogue anywhere in India. The unjust system caused havoc to the poor Kashmiris during famine and other calamities and hit the trade adversely.<sup>10</sup> The production and distribution of saffron<sup>11</sup> and silk, like paddy, being state monopoly, would breed corruption among State officials while Lahore Darbar felt satisfied on receiving its share of Kashmir revenue, after paying necessary recurring and non-recurring expenses. Means of communications being poor and ruled from Lahore, the Central Capital, and Maharaja's inability to pay even single visit to Kashmir, due to his pre-occupations at Lahore, the Valley continued to be a colony firstly of the Afghans and then of the Sikhs.

The Kashmiris welcomed the rule of Ranjit Singh as it freed them from the chain of slavery in addition to putting a complete halt to the 'wealth drain'. New rule brought, on the whole, mental and financial relief to the natives.

### **NATURAL CALAMITY**

#### **(State help)**

During each natural calamity and distress, the Sikh Government rose to the occasion, checked migration of poor Kashmiris and took effective steps regularly to improve the economic conditions of the population. Foodgrains were distributed either free of costs or on nominal rates. To encourage agricultural production, the State started new benevolent schemes such as distributing seeds of high quality foodgrains and vegetables direct to the tillers etc. Saffron, being a costly item, and in much demand, received more attention. The authorities planned its cultivation beyond Pampur town. Small scale industries and self-employed Kashmiris received special consideration from the ruler. Small Shawl weavers and petty shawl loom proprietors were helped with state loans to run their business independently and without any oppression from big employers and industrialists. In an unprecedented move, the last Sikh Governor helped the oppressed employees engaged in the Shawl industry by ordering higher wages and also a bonus of one rupee per worker despite not having any appreciable increase in paddy during these years. Opening of trade centres in major towns of India by Kashmiri traders not only made them economically sound but also motivated them for voluntary, peaceful and gradual integration with the rest of the country.

The centuries old practices of 'Begar' (free and forced labour) did continue but, in certain cases, the State authorities did pay for the forced labour. It is on official record that some crafts-men, royal saddle makers, lamp men, tailors etc. were exempted from poll tax in lieu of their services to the State.<sup>12</sup>

The main sources of income to the Government were land revenue which amounted to  $\frac{3}{4}$  of the land produce, taxes on imports and exports, on crafts and industries and other minor fees and taxes. Receipts from various sources, such as land, customs and excise, trades, mines, minerals, mint and fees from administrative posts in different years varied considerably. For instance the revenue during 1819-1820 (1st year of Sikh rule in Kashmir) was Rs. 48,00,000; during 1821-1822 Rs. 41,00,000; and during 1836-37 Rs. 31,92,823/8-.<sup>13</sup>

It is clear that revenue receipts of Rs. 48 lakhs for the year 1819-1820 were less than that of the year 1809 by Rs. 17 Lakhs (when Afghan Government collected Rs. 65 lakhs). The additional taxes on Shawl industry compelled shawl loom owners to close nearly 10,000 shops during 1820 and 1821. This brought decrease in the stamp duty and as a whole the revenue receipts for the year 1821-1822 recorded decrease of

seven lakhs. The figures for the year 1822-1823 again rose to Rs. 45,00,000 but these figures again receded by five lakhs in 1826-1827. Earthquake of 1828 followed by cholera epidemic took more than 1,00,000 lives. This was further followed by famine, due to out of season, heavy snow-fall. Huge number of people including 13,000 Shawl weavers died out of hunger. All these factors threw the revenue system out of gear and thus revenue receipts for these years fell considerably. In 1835, scarcely any revenue could be collected while Lahore Darbar demanded Rs. 23 lakhs as revenue but it could not be collected and ultimately the Darbar demanded Rs. 18 lakhs. But even this could not be deposited in the Central treasury. The Governor Mian Singh took keen interest in the agricultural and industrial growth. Consequently, the revenue of Kashmir, for the year 1836-1837, was farmed to him for Rs. 33,53,989 and 10 annas and he was able to collect Rs. 31,92,823 and 8 annas.

Next to land revenue, the most important source of income to the State was the stamp duty on shawls.<sup>14</sup> It was charged on shawls before they were taken out of the factory. The net income from it during 1818-1819 was Rs. 9 lakhs while in 1839 it was just Rs. 5,70,000. Custom duties were levied on all incoming and out-going commodities. In the year 1834, the Valley was dotted with 27 such customs check posts and the number was raised to 42 within next 3 years. In most of the cases, these posts were located on the main Trade routes and were called 'Guzarrat'. The mode of collection was regulated by 'Ain Guzarrat'. The duties levied at internal customs houses were less than those levied at the frontier. Goods meant for European countries were charged even higher than those for the rest of India.

Articles such as Wine, Charas, Bhang and Tobacco were subjected to 'Abkari' (Excise duties). Poll tax, Mines, Mint and Zaraqazaia (tax on marriage and divorce) also contributed to the State exchequer. Other articles of revenue were Mahal Shingaras (water nuts), Fisheries, Saffron, Vegetables grown on Dull lake, House tax, Land under direct cultivation of the Government and also tax on sale and purchase of horses and other beasts of burden.

As regards the financial involvement of the Government, it appears that the estimated expenditure of Rs. 5,00,000 on Army and Forts, as worked out by Hugal and Cunningham, was nearly correct. The total financial involvement of the Government might have been Rs. 10 lakhs (Rs. 5 lakhs on army, Rs. 1 lakh as salary of the Governor, Rs. 2 lakhs on religious establishment and Rs. 2 lakhs as non-recurring)<sup>15</sup>.

### **REVENUE RECEIPTS**

The sources of revenue, both major and minor with the taxation system, under reference, may appear crude to a modern observer but allowing a due concession for the conditions in which it had been worked out, there is hardly any justification for such an impression. The secular Government of Maharaja Ranjit Singh, being truly a national Government, money merely changed hands. If it was taken in one hand, it was returned with the other, so that the wealth of the country remained with the people of the State themselves. It was, in fact, not exported abroad unlike earlier Afghan or latter British arrangements. And, therefore, the revenue system, even if it appears strict and harsh, was quite tolerable and benevolent, in the real sense.

Since the state was militaristic in character, most of the Governors were military men. It was Maharaja Ranjit Singh's policy to tamper as little as possible with the existing laws and usages. The form of punishment viz., imprisonment, mutilation, so frequently practiced by the Afghans, was being rarely resorted to. Crime, in any form, was normally absent among the Kashmiris themselves.

### **STATE EDUCATION AND ECONOMY**

The system of education was traditional<sup>16</sup>. Land grants and stipends were provided to the educational institutions and their managements, from the especially created 'Dharamarth' Department. Maharaja's rule, as per contemporary authentic writings and historical facts, was fairly impartial in dealing with different communities. They never discriminated against any group on religious grounds nor unlike Muslim predecessors, did they try to convert the Muslim population. Hazrat Bal was repaired at Government expenses and furthermore its entire staff was on the pay roll of the State 'Dharamarth' Department. Free religious gathering and independent worship, except for a few early years, when banned for security reasons, was granted and treated as fundamental right of every person. Restriction on 'Satee', banned by the Muslim rulers, was lifted. Hindu holymen who visited the holy shrine of Amar Nath were provided with free ration and cash advances by the State to meet their journey expenses.

During this period, when Medieval age was bidding farewell, the Sikh administrators encouraged travellers to visit the valley. Consequently, many Europeans visited the valley and made detailed study of her people, its agriculture and industry. They provide useful data for research scholars. It was during this very period when Capt. C. Wade prepared the first historical map of Kashmir and presented it to the Emperor Ranjit Singh. With positive economic development, in sight, during the years under study, the Kashmiris appeared gradually coming above 'poverty line'. Leaving behind the age old superstitions, feelings of generations old slavery and inferiority complex, and especially the set isolation, on their part, the people and their picturesque valley came closer to the modern world providing attraction to the outside visitors and businessmen, in general, and the tourists, in particular; thus laying the firm foundation for the present full fledged Department of Tourism which, being a major source of revenue, truly forms the backbone of Kashmir's economy.

### **CONCLUSION**

It is a historical fact that Afghan administrative system was a depressing catalogue of tyrannies. The simple satisfaction that the Afghans were also Muslims, ruling the Muslim-majority valley, could not be a panacea for hunger and fright with which the Kashmiris had been seized.<sup>17</sup> As a matter of fact, in the valley, what the public needed most was freedom of movement, recognition of talent and merit, human touch in State administration, end of religious persecution and economic exploitation, opening large avenues of employment, trade and finally provision of necessities of life. The labour, the majority of Kashmir's population, chiefly required warm places to move and earn livelihood during some bitter winter months, in a year. Indeed, under the secular and benevolent despotic Lahore Darbar rule, their prospects appeared quite positive and encouraging.

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