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"Agrarian Crisis in Kashmir During the Sikh Rule (1819-1846)"

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Abstract

The conquest of Kashmir by Maharaja Ranjit Singh in 1819 had a profound impact on the economy of Kashmir especially on agriculture which was the backbone of the economy. During the twenty-seven years of Sikh rule, Kashmir was governed through a chain of ten governors. To fill the coffers of the Lahore treasury and to fill their own pockets, these governors not only continued the oppressive taxation of their predecessors but also devised new mechanisms of exploitation and oppression. As a corollary, Kashmiri people in general and peasantry, in particular, witnessed unparalleled economic repression which caused an agrarian crisis. The present paper is, therefore, aimed to unravel those causes which led to this crisis. Moreover, how the State suffered in terms of revenue due to this crisis has also been explored in the paper.

Introduction

The Sikh rule (1819-1846) is a remarkable landmark in the history of Kashmir and witnessed vital political, economic, social and cultural changes which had an indelible impact on the future course of Kashmir history. Kashmir passed into the hands of Maharaja Ranjit Singh in 1819, after a long period of five centuries of Muslim rule.ⁱ The incorporation of Kashmir in the Sikh Kingdom not only increased the territorial limits of Ranjit Singh but also increased his revenues considerably. It is important to mention here that the territorial limit of Kashmir that was brought under the control of Sikhs stretched from Verinag in the south to Baramulla in the north and from the mountain chain in the east to Pir Panjal in the west.ⁱⁱ Since Lahore was located far away from Kashmir, it was difficult to directly govern Kashmir; therefore, it was thought prudent to administer it through governors. Given the fact that the Sikh State was militaristic and above all Kashmir had been conquered with very great difficulty most of the governors who were chosen to run

the Kashmir affairs were military men.ⁱⁱⁱ However, much to the dismay of the people of Kashmir, the absence of direct supervision from Lahore over Kashmir affairs enabled the governors to govern according to their vision and fleece the people with “more than the usual impunity.”^{iv} As the Sikhs had faced bitter opposition from Muslims in the Punjab and Frontier District, they looked upon the Kashmiris in the same light and promulgated innumerable orders intending to check the Muslim opposition in the Valley. A contemporary traveler Victor Jacquemont cogently puts it that under the “brutal Sikhs”, Kashmiris were treated like a “flock of sheep.”^v As a part of this policy, one of the first acts of Diwan Moti Ram was the closure of the Jamia Masjid at Srinagar to public prayers to prevent the meeting together of Muslim leaders and their followers who might plot against the Sikhs. The Muslims were forbidden to say *azan* or the call to prayer.^{vi} Similarly, several other mosques, like Pathar Masjid were declared as the property of the State. Cow slaughter was declared a crime punishable by death and many people accused of killing cows were publicly hanged.^{vii} During the twenty-seven years of their rule in Kashmir, the Sikh rulers failed to ameliorate the sad condition of the people. They were “interested only in reaping the advantages of their conquest. A policy of settled government or administration with the welfare of the people as the main object was something foreign to their outlook.”^{viii} As a result, Kashmir presented a very dismal picture towards the end of the Sikh rule. Baron von Schonberg writes that “I have been in many lands, but nowhere did the condition of the human being present a more saddening spectacle than in Kashmir.”^{ix} Keeping all these things in view, the “overwhelming majority of the Kashmiris” consider this period as the “darkest period in the history of Kashmir.”^x

The genesis of the Agrarian Crisis

Bereft of mineral wealth and locked within inhospitable terrain, agriculture has been the principal source of livelihood to the majority of the Kashmiris from the hoary past. The fertile soil and abundance of the water supply have made agriculture remunerative and an easy means of sustenance. Both *rabi* and *kharif* crops were grown. The *rabi* or spring crops mainly consisted of the grains such as wheat, barley, pea, opium, poppy, rape, flax (linseed) and fennel. The *kharif* or autumn crop consisted of paddy, maize, cotton, saffron, tobacco, Italian millet, amaranth, buckwheat, mah, moth, bean and sesame.^{xi} As a result of this prodigious and varied type of agricultural production, agriculture provided not only ample food but also large quantities of raw material on which the traditional crafts and commerce of the valley heavily depended. It can thus easily be deduced that agriculture has been the backbone of the Kashmir economy from ancient times. Owing to this vital importance, the rulers paid high attention to the promotion of agriculture and the role of Avantivarman and Sultan Zain-ul-Abidin (1420-1470) is well known in this direction.^{xii} However, during the Sikh rule (1819-1846) Kashmir owing to the short-sighted policy of the rulers Kashmir witnessed an acute agrarian crisis. In the succeeding pages, therefore, we will explore the pros and cons of this crisis. Since Kashmiri Muslims had big and numerous jagirs than other communities, the Sikh rulers feared that Kashmiri Muslims might connive to overthrow their rule in Kashmir. So as a part of their larger policy to weaken the Muslim community and bring them under sway, the Sikh rulers snatched their *jagirs* which were granted to

them by the Mughals and Afghans.^{xiii} As a result, a large number of *jagirdars*, who were formerly living a luxurious life, were reduced to a “State of absolute destitution.”^{xiv} The *jagirs* of Muslim divines were also confiscated and the case of Shah Niaz Naqashbandi is a glaring example. However, it was only due to the intervention of Moorcroft that few *jagirs* of Shah Niaz Naqashbandi were restored.^{xv} Everyone had not the fortune to be treated like Shah Niaz Naqashbandi and all those Muslims who could not comply with these circumstances preferred to migrate from Kashmir.

Motivated by the desire to extract from peasantry as much revenue as possible to fill the coffers of Lahore, the Sikh rulers imposed very heavy taxation. Generally, the Sikh rulers realized one half of the paddy production as a share of the government.^{xvi} In addition to this, the Sikhs rulers fleeced the people through the system of *trake*. Although the *trake* system was in existence even during the time of Afghans the Sikh rulers further increased its magnitude. It is important to mention here that during the Afghan rule two more *traks* of paddy were charged but the Sikh rulers realized at the rate of four *traks* per kharwar. Moreover, the peasant had to pay *Nazarana* and *Tambol*.^{xvii} A large number of officials mainly *Qanungus*, *Shaqdar*, *Sazawal*, *Muqaddam*, *Patwari* and *Tehwildar* were employed by the state for revenue collection but much to the chagrin of peasantry their salaries were borne by the beleaguered peasantry. The cumulative outcome of this oppressive taxation was that the peasant was left with merely one-fourth of his produce.^{xviii} Moorcroft, who visited Kashmir in the early years of Sikh rule, has graphically highlighted the disastrous consequences of heavy taxation. He writes that,

“Everywhere, however, the people are in the most abject condition; exorbitantly taxed by the Sikh government, and subjected to every kind of extortion and oppression by its officers. The consequences of this system are, the gradual depopulation of the country: not more than about one-sixteenth of the cultivable surface is in cultivation, and the inhabitants starving at home, are driven in great numbers to the plains of Hindustan.”^{xix}

The oppressive taxation and brutal policy of the state officials forced the peasants to give up cultivation and flee to neighbouring areas as aptly recorded by G.T. Vigne. He says that “The first consequence of the oppressive nature of Runjit [*sic*] Singh’s government is, that the inhabitants have been constantly leaving the valley for many years back.”^{xx} The detrimental impact of this short-sighted policy can easily be deduced from the fact that the total out-put of shali was nearly sixty lakh kharwars during the time of Mughals,^{xxi} and it decreased to twenty lakh kharwars in the early phase of Sikh rule.^{xxii} As a corollary, not only the revenue of the State declined but the level of peasant poverty considerably increased. Victor Jacquemont while taking note of the poverty of Kashmir says that under the “despotic and capricious” rule of Ranjit Singh Kashmir surpassed all “imaginable poverty.”^{xxiii} Thus, the Sikh rulers in their greed to squeeze the maximum revenue from the peasantry were killing “the goose that laid the golden egg.”^{xxiv}

Another key aspect that facilitated agrarian stagnation during this phase was the traditional agrarian technology. The agrarian technology was simple and outdated and hardly any innovation was introduced in this sector by the Sikh rulers. Not surprisingly, tools and implements were few and manufactured by the local artisans

from different kinds of indigenous wood. The plough was generally made from dry mulberry wood and its “wooden ploughshare” was “kept tight by movable wedge.”^{xxv} Spade, wicker basket, hand hoe, thrashing sticks and pestle and mortar were other notable tools.^{xxvi} To increase the fertility of the soil, manure was used in the fields. Generally, manuring of fields was the duty of women folk that carried it in wicker baskets.^{xxvii} The apathetic attitude of the state can easily be discerned from the fact that it neither constructed new canals nor renovated the old ones. It seems more likely that due to this absence of irrigation facilities thousands of acres of fertile land might have remained out of cultivation.

What plagued the peasantry more than anything else was the pernicious system of beggar (forced labour). This ancient practice of forced labor was continued by the Sikhs with such a great rigor that even an ordinary soldier could command the Kashmiri to do any work for him. A large number of peasants were employed in the transport of military supplies, luggage of high officials, etc, from one part of Kashmir to another. Such was the level of misuse of this practice that even an ordinary Sikh soldier could command a native to do any work for him.^{xxviii} Contemporary travelers like Moorcroft and Hugel have given a very horrific account of how the local people were compelled to do unpaid labor for their Sikh masters. The dread of this obnoxious practice compelled a large number of peasants to migrate to neighbouring areas and thereby created an acute shortage of labor force. As a result, the fields were “tended by the old men and old women.”^{xxix} The frequent occurrence of natural calamities such as famines, floods, epidemics, droughts and earthquakes had a detrimental impact on agriculture. These calamities in the absence of an effective and responsible government took a heavy toll on human lives. G.T. Vigne in this regard writes that,

“I found afterwards that not a day passed whilst I was on the path to Kashmir, and even when travelling in the Valley, that I did not see the bleached remains of some unfortunate wretch who had fallen a victim either to sickness or starvation; and principally, as I had afterwards reason to believe, to the consequences of the dreadful scarcity with which Kashmir was afflicted, after the earthquake and cholera had done their worst.”^{xxx}

A large number of people also migrated to the neighbouring world. It is worth mentioning here that the population of Kashmir which was estimated by Moorcroft in 1822-23 at 800000,^{xxxi} decreased up to 120000 in 1835.^{xxxii} This depopulation of Kashmir was the outcome of the oppressive policies of Sikh rulers and natural calamities. In such gloomy days, it was no wonder to see that in 1835 a large area of cultivable land remained out of cultivation primarily due to a shortage of “labor and irrigation.”^{xxxiii}

In the backdrop of this gloomy scenario, it was quite natural to see the decrease in the revenue of the State. It is interesting to mention here that Kashmir which was once declared by Ranjit Singh in 1827 as “the most productive of all his provinces” was considerably sinking from the revenue point of view with each passing year.^{xxxiv} Although it is difficult to exactly determine the total amount of land revenue realized annually from Kashmir by the Sikh rulers, the contemporary travelers provide us with some cues to form an idea about the total revenue. According to the estimates of G. T. Vigne, Sikh rulers collected 3500000 to 4200000 rupees annually from Kashmir.^{xxxv} However, it is believed that towards the

closing years of Sikh rule revenue considerably declined. It was not only that revenue of State was shrinking but the condition of peasantry was extremely deplorable as well. They did not receive enough to feed their families and a contemporary traveller has captured this picture and argues that “All that is required of him, is to subscribe to the ordinary condition, that is, he must give three fourths of the revenue (produce) of the farm to the government. Even the remaining fourth is not wholly his own. It is taxed in various ways. The seed for the ground is supplied by the government but at usurious prices, so that the position of the zamindars is most distressing.”^{xxxvi} Owing to this fleecing, the peasantry experienced untold miseries which can only be imagined.

Conclusion

Agriculture has been the backbone of the economy of Kashmir and the chief source of revenue to the government from the remote past. However, owing to the short-sighted policy of the rulers' agriculture was in the most abject condition during the twenty-seven years rule of Sikhs. The ten governors who ruled Kashmir during this period did not show any zest to promote agriculture. They imposed horrendous taxes upon people and snatched a major portion of everything produced from soil. Moreover, there was no regular settlement and the method of collecting revenue was very unjust and oppressive. As a corollary, peasants were left with a very small share insufficient to keep their body and soul together. Moreover, the beleaguered peasantry was subjected to many illegal cesses and *beggar* (forced labor). In such circumstances, it was obvious that the peasantry lost all interest to cultivate the land and migrated in large numbers to neighbouring states to get succor from the oppression of Sikhs. It was not surprising to see that not only the population of the Kashmir valley decreased but a large area remained out of cultivation due to a shortage of labor. Consequently, there was a constant decrease in the revenue of the State.

Notes and References

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ⁱⁱIbid., p.636.

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^{iv}P.N.K. Bamzai, *Culture and Political History of Kashmir*, Vol.,3, p. 623.

^vVictor Jacquemont, *Letters from India*, Vol., II, Edward Churton, London,1835, Vol., ii, p.101.

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- ^{xvii} Ibid.
- ^{xviii}Godfrey Thomas Vigne, *Travels in Kashmir, Ladak, Iskardo*, Vol., I, pp.310, 311.
- ^{xix}William Moorcroft and George Trebeck, *Travels in the Himalayan Provinces of Hindustan and the Punjab; Ladakh and Kashmir; In Peshawar, Kabul, Kunduz, and Bokhara*, Volume, II, pp.123-24.
- ^{xx}Godfrey Thomas Vigne, *Travels in Kashmir, Ladak, Iskardo*, Vol., II, p.118.
- ^{xxi}Godfrey Thomas Vigne, *Travels in Kashmir, Ladak, Iskardo*, Vol., I, p.308.
- ^{xxii}William Moorcroft and George Trebeck, *Travels in the Himalayan Provinces of Hindustan and the Punjab; Ladakh and Kashmir; In Peshawar, Kabul, Kunduz, and Bokhara*, Volume, II, p.135.
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