

Agrarian Crisis in Kashmir during the Early Dogra Period (1846-1885)

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Abstract - Agriculture has been the mainstay of the Kashmir Valley since its hoary past. The abundance of fertile soils throughout the Kashmir Valley and moist and warm temperature and abundant water resources facilitated the Kashmiris to practice rich and profitable agriculture. As a result, a huge quantity of both food and cash crops was cultivated not only to fulfil the local needs but also to export to neighbouring States. However, with the transfer of Kashmir to Maharaja Gulab Singh and the subsequent phase of unparallel oppression of masses, Kashmir witnessed a severe agrarian crisis. The present paper, therefore, aims to highlight the main factors responsible for shaping this agrarian crisis during the period under study.

Index Terms - Agriculture, Peasant, Dogra State, Taxation, Begar, Agrarian Crisis.

INTRODUCTION

The Princely State of Jammu and Kashmir came into existence by virtue of the Treaty of Amritsar signed between the East India Company and Gulab Singh on 16 March 1846. The Treaty transferred the area situated to the east of the river Indus and west of the river Ravi into Gulab Singh's independent possession and of his male heirs. Gulab Singh in return was required to pay the British Indian government a mere sum of seventy-five lakhs of rupees and acknowledge the supremacy of the British Indian government. The natural outcome of this Treaty was that three distinct territories-Jammu, Kashmir and Ladakh were clubbed together to form this new State. As the State of Jammu and Kashmir was empowered with a greater degree of autonomy in the internal affairs of the State, it had a very detrimental impact on the economy of Kashmir. Maharaja Gulab Singh immediately after ascending the throne and later on his successors declared Kashmir as their private property on the plea that they had paid a hefty amount to purchase it from the Britishers. As a result, each and everything valuable in

State was declared as State property owing to which people faced untold miseries during the whole Dogra period especially in early Dogra Period.

THE GENESIS OF THE AGRARIAN CRISIS IN KASHMIR (1846-1885)

Nature has embellished Kashmir with bountiful resources hardly surpassed by any neighbouring region. However, the most significant factor which distinguishes Kashmir from others is its unique topography. Owing to this, Kashmir has fertile soils, moist and warm temperature and abundant water resources which have helped the Kashmiris for ages to practice agriculture as the chief source of employment. Moreover, surrounded by all sides by massive mountain ramparts restricted the free movement of goods and people and thereby forced the people to opt for agriculture. Consequently, agriculture has always been the main occupation of the people. It was, therefore, not surprising that in the second half of the nineteenth century that more than 75% population of Kashmir province was entirely dependent on agriculture. Not only this, even those who earned their livelihood from secondary occupations took great interest in agriculture for food and raw materials. Keeping in view all these facts, it can safely be assumed that agriculture was the main sector around which the whole economy revolved during this period. However, what puzzles a curious mind is that why a land full of promises witnessed an agrarian crisis during this period? Why this crisis merely due to natural factors or was it aided and abetted by the callousness of the State? The answer to these vexed questions is not difficult to seek and can easily be discerned by looking at the various aspects of the agrarian economy of this period.

The agriculture in Kashmir during this period was dominated by the cultivation of food crops and there

were only a few commercial crops that were cultivated. Although a large variety of Kharif crops (Rice, Maize, Ganhar, Millet, Buckwheat, Pulses, Chillies), Rabi crops (Wheat, Tibet Barly Opium Rape Flax Beans Peas) and Krimiti crops (Cotton, Saffron, Tobacco, Poppy, Tilgogal, Sarson) were cultivated in Kashmir. However, it was rice that had a vital significance in the Kashmir economy as it not only the staple food of local people but also the main source of revenue to the State. As a natural result, peasants devoted their all energy and resources to rice cultivation. A contemporary official Walter Lawrence has therefore rightly remarked that “the cultivator devotes all his energy to this crop. For rice he will terrace his fields, expend great labour in digging out irrigation channels, spend his nights out in the fields watching the flow of water, and will pass laborious days moving about like an amphibious animal in the wet deep mud.” Owing to the great commercial value of rice, Maharaja Gulab Singh abolished the private sale of rice and made its sale a State monopoly. To procure a large and regular supply of rice to feed the urban people, peasants were forced to pay their revenue in terms of rice. This large supply of rice was stored in Shali stores which were established in Srinagar and other towns and accordingly sold at exorbitant rates. This had a detrimental impact on the peasantry as in absence of a private market they had to sell it solely to the State at the price fixed by the State. Keeping in view the importance of land revenue for the smooth functioning of the State economy, Maharaja extracted a large proportion of everything produced by soil. The state was so much brazen in taxing the peasantry that except for water and air everything was taxed. A contemporary says “that at one swoop half of every man's produce goes into the Government treasury. Half of everything, not merely of his grain, but even of the produce of his cattle, or whatever he has; so that from each cow he must give every second year a calf to Government, and from every half dozen of his chickens three go to the all-devouring sirkar. More than this even, his very fruit trees are watched by Government and half taken for the Maharajah. A poor Kashmiri can call nothing his own. But, in reality, it is not only half a man loses, for at least another quarter is taken by the rapacious government officials who have to collect the nominal half. Shakdars, Kardars, Ziladars, soldiers, and others, all come in for their share. The wonder is how the

people exist at all.” Not satisfied with this, various types of perquisites commonly known as rasum were exacted from the hapless peasantry. Therefore, a peasant was forced not only to surrender a portion of land produce with various ruthless officials, but he was also supposed to share his poultry, cattle, wealth, domestic-made blankets, ghee, fodder especially grass, wood and timber, and almost everything which he produced. Therefore, by surrendering a major portion of produce to the State and its officials, the peasant was left with a very small portion of his produce. Moreover, the revenue collecting machinery employed by the State was dominated by Kashmiri Pandits. This revenue collecting machinery was corrupt and cruel and not only employed violent methods but also collected more than what a peasant was required to pay to State. In such gloomy circumstances, it was not surprising that a peasant had to live on vegetables, wild fruit and other sub-standard kinds of diet and often became an easy prey of devastating famines and epidemics.

The importance of irrigation for a State heavily dependent on the agrarian sector can easily be imagined but the Dogra State by brazenly displaying its reckless nature showed a very cold response to expand the facilities of irrigation. As a result, the crops grown were largely dependent on natural sources of irrigation. The water of Jhelum, Sandran, Lidar, Vishau, Rambiarah, Dood Ganga and Pohru rivers was used by the peasants to irrigate their fields. Moreover, Streams, dams, canals and springs were also used throughout the length and breadth of Kashmir Valley. However, in the areas dotted with Karewa lands as well as areas where these sources of irrigation were absent, lift irrigation system (Toulsag) was employed to irrigate the fields. Moreover, the tools and implements used by the peasants for agricultural operations were outdated and simple. The tools were manufactured in tune with the landforms, crops cultivated and the raw material available. However, the major raw material for the manufacture of agricultural tools was the use of local wood of various kinds. It was a common practice amongst the peasantry to use dry wood for the manufacture of tools and implements to avoid the shrinking of tools. To make the tools strong and viable for various agricultural practices, different parts of the same tool were made out of different plant types. The sole of the plough was made of tul (mulberry), the handle of kiker

(acacia), the yoke of brimji (*Celtis australis*), the pole of poshu (yew) or cheeru (apricot), and the pegs of kiker wood. These traditional tools were manufactured by local carpenters (chhan) and iron smiths (ahangar) with great skill and dexterity. Added to this, low-quality seeds and manures were used. No State assistance in the form of loans was given to them. This traditional agrarian technology was the outcome of the lack of State patronage and the utter ignorance of the peasants.

The most obnoxious practice that heavily plagued the agrarian sector of Kashmir was begar (forced labour). The absence of roads and modern means of communication in Kashmir and the meagre resources at the disposal of the government forced it to employ local people on forced labour for carriage and construction purposes. Although begar was not an innovation of the Dogra Period, however, this period witnessed an unprecedented increase in the magnitude and misuse of begar. The burden of this practice was mainly borne by the rural people as a large section of the population especially urban artisan classes, cultivators working on the lands of Kashmiri Pandits, Sikh jagirdars, Dharmarth Department, enjoyed exemption from begar. This practice had such a detrimental impact on Kashmir that there was hardly a family in Kashmir particularly in rural Kashmir which did not face the tragic disappearance of some male member deployed on begar. However, what was more devastating was the deployment of peasants on the begar during the peak season of agriculture. Owing to the absence of peasants from their villages, the land remained either uncultivated or the peasants failed to harvest their crops on time. As a result, not only the peasantry suffered but the land revenue of the State also dwindled. According to Walter Lawrence, “nothing has done more to ruin Kashmir” than begar. Hardly surprising Walter Lawrence strongly advocated the abolition of begar in all objectionable forms.

Keeping in view such firm State control over the resources of Kashmir and the oppressive attitude of State machinery, it was natural to have a discontented peasantry that always wanted to migrate to neighbouring States to get redemption from such a hostile and oppressive environment. However, the State government had appointed guards at all important entry and exit points of Kashmir to stop the migration of people. As a result, people often had to

trudge unknown and very tortuous and tough routes to reach the neighbouring States. But this is not to suggest that the local peasantry did not raise their voice against such a harsh scenario. Since it was difficult if not impossible to organize the violent forms of protest against the Dogra State, therefore, they expressed their anguish in non-violent forms. The Kashmiri folk literature is replete with instances which transparently reflect the agonies and anxieties of the peasantry of Kashmir. It is important to mention here that apart from migration to neighbouring States, peasants also submitted petitions before Maharaja and his officials to get their grievances redressed. However, much to the chagrin of peasantry their petitions were hardly heeded and fulfilled.

CONCLUSION

Agriculture, as it is clear from the above discussion, was the mainstay of the economy and naturally it was not only the main source of revenue to the State but also engaged the major portion of the population during the period under study. The agrarian economy was predominantly subsisting in nature, therefore, the major portion of land was under the cultivation of food crops to meet the demands of local people. Although some cash crops were also cultivated keeping in view their profitability, however, the land under its cultivation was much lesser than food crops. Much to one's surprise and disappointment, the agrarian economy of Kashmir witnessed crisis during this period as the production was inadequate and meagre due to lack of State initiatives, corrupt officials, exorbitant taxation, lack of adequate irrigation facilities, outdated technology, begar, and absence of chemical fertilizers and pesticides. Above all, the peasant who was the main force behind the whole agricultural process was left with a meagre portion of the produce which was not even sufficient enough to fulfil his food requirement till the next harvest and thereby forced him to opt for wild products for survival. In such a grim scenario, the peasant was less interested in agricultural activities or to improve them. He was often deserting his lands and migrated to the neighbouring States.

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- [10] Walter Lawrence, The India We Served, p.134; He says that "The land revenue was, as a rule, extorted from the villagers by violent methods. I once caught a revenue officer using the thumbscrew on an unfortunate peasant who had paid his land revenue in full, but declined to pay an equal amount as a bribe to the officer. But the revenue thus collected did not reach the State treasury. Fully a half was intercepted by the officials, and this was debited against the helpless cultivator as arrears of revenue." Ibid.
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