

Dogra Raj and Forms of Silent Protest in Kashmir (1846-1932)

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ABSTRACT

Silent protest is non-confrontationist, anonymous and subtle, this is the way the oppressed resist the forces of domination. James Scott in his “weapons of weak: Everyday forms of Resistance” refutes the Marxist concept of false consciousness and Gramscian idea of hegemony where oppressed give consent to dominance. Scott argues that the oppressed resist the forces of dominance but in silent forms which are non-confrontationist. Some of the weapons which peasants use are, foot dragging, dissimulation, desertion, false compliance, pilfering, feigned ignorance, slander, arson and sabotage. These techniques are suited to scattered nature of peasantry and difficulty in organizing any collective political action. Scott’s position is that peasant and worker resistance rarely occur in the form of violence and revolution. His argument hinges on the common sense position that violence erupts when forms of survival becomes impossible. In the light of this theory the present paper analyzes the forms of silent protest by the peasants and workers of Kashmir under the autocratic Dogra Raj.

Keywords: James Scott, Peasant, Resistance, Survival, Kashmir.

I. INTRODUCTION

The state of Jammu and Kashmir came into existence by virtue of the treaty of Amritsar (1846) Signed between East India Company and Maharaja Gulab Singh. According to the treaty the State of Jammu and Kashmir was handed over to Maharaja Gulab Singh in lieu of seventy five lakh rupees. The significant change that followed the treaty of Amritsar was Maharaja claimed the state as his purchased property and confiscated all rights in land. Thus transfer of land from peasants to Dogra aristocracy forms the chief feature of Dogra rule in Kashmir. As a result of autocratic and sectarian rule perpetuated by Maharajah the majority of the population constituted of peasantry and artisans suffered miserably. They became worst hit of state exploitation and were seething with discontent. In the absence of any open channel of the expression of grievances during first fifty years of Dogra rule they resisted in silent forms. It was after 1932, with the formation of Muslim conference that an organized struggle was launched against oppressive Dogra State consequent upon government

was forced to concede to the demands of Kashmiri Muslims from time to time and hence led to the relative amelioration of the condition of Kashmiri in general and peasants and artisans in particular. In the preceding pages we shall discuss the oppressive condition of Kashmiri under Dogra rule and forms of silent protest during the first fifty years of Dogra rule owing to the ban on formation of political organizations

II. CONDITION OF PEASANTRY

Maharaja for the purpose of maximizing land adopted regressive taxation policy. State appropriated 75% of peasants produce in the form of multifarious taxes. The taxes levied on the cattle, marriage, houses etc. were very disappointing. The revenue collected in kind for which sepoys were dispatched to villages in advance was creating havoc in the villages. The revenue was collected with such severity and harshness that the cultivators had to sell up even the cattle and sheep. No less, oppressive than the State, were revenue intermediaries mostly the Kashmir Pandits. European

writers hold these intermediaries responsible for the miserable condition of Kashmiri peasants. They were fraudulent people who robbed the peasant and defrauded the State. They levied their own exaction upon the poor peasants. Apart from the revenue demand of State the peasant was supposed to pay to the revenue officials a share of their produce in the form of blankets, ghee and eggs etc. The most destructive methods of oppression which broke the cultivators back was the system of Beggar or forced labour. Poor people were dragged like slaves out of their houses against their will to carry loads etc and were never paid for their labour. The villagers were driven off to toil as carriers of burden on the Gilgit road which was a name of terror throughout the state. Mostly, the Beggar was carried out during the summer months when the villagers are needed in their fields, thus adversely affecting production.

III. CONDITION OF ARTISANS

Next to the peasant class, the shawl weavers were the worst victims of the autocratic rule and obnoxious taxation of Dogras. Heavy taxes were charged on them. The weaver has to pay 5 Rs as tax out of his monthly wage of Rs.7. Apart from this, the other huge segment of population comprised of unskilled and skilled labourers coming mainly from urban centers were also discontented from Dogra rule. Their condition was woeful and there was resultant unrest among them. In such a state of despondency the oppressed masses of Kashmiri's could not express their grievances openly. The Dogra government was so cruel and harsh that the peasant class could not agitate against the corrupt officials, forced labour, and the excessive taxation system. The press and public opinion was strictly banned in Maharaja's government. No one was allowed to establish press in Kashmir or issue any publication during the earlier period of Dogra rule. Even in late twenties of the twentieth century Mahammad-ud-din Fauq, an eminent journalist of Punjab expressed a desire to bring out a daily in Kashmir. But instead of permitting him to do so, the Maharaja returned his application to prime minister with the remark that such applications should not be entertained at all. There was a great resentment in the hearts of poor and miserable peasants as well as the labours or working sections of population. There was a strong hatred in their hearts against the government in general and the bureaucracy

or corrupt officials in particular. The peasantry developed acute grudge and hatred against the influential class who had a close proximity with the raj. This is evident from the assertions like; "*Bate-go-great*"; "means that Kashmir Pundit is just like a stone grinder"; and also "*Pira s-Che-Ponsech-Zir*" "Means that pir Knows nothing but to earn money". So due to the restrictions and pressure of government, the helpless population of Kashmir in general and Muslims in particular avoid direct confrontation with the state during the first five decades of Dogra regime and were compelled to express their discontent silently.

IV. MAJOR FORMS OF SILENT PROTEST IN KASHMIR

A. Desertion of lands and villages

In Kashmir people responded to the oppression of government by deserting the cultivatable lands. The peasants opted for the desertion of cultivable lands of the enemy or oppressor rather than to be annihilated. On the one hand desertion of land was the only safeguard and at the same time was aimed at bringing the economic downfall of the state as the agriculture was the mainstay of economy. This deserting of land was the common form of peasant protest against oppression. Shawl weavers also left their looms, because of highhandedness of government and made their march to Punjab where they worked as labourers, even some died on these snowy mountains during their march. The villagers also responded the oppressive *Begar* by deserting villages. Lawrence says that the "*Begar to Gilgit is to the every Kashmir a constant terror and when it was rumored that transport was wanted to carry the baggage of the troops going or coming from Gilgit there was a general stampede among the villagers.*" Kashmir expressions like "*Tual palvevoth-techelav*" take your clothes and let us runaway and "*Pushuk-ti-ne-te-techekukh-ti-na*" "if you not overcome the enemy then why doesn't you. Ran away" are enough to ascertain assertions and arguments.

B. Folklore

The rural and poor population of Kashmir was also expressing their resentment and discontent in the folklores. The folklore includes *Lardishah*, *Luke beth*

(folk songs), wanjun, proverbs, etc. As already mentioned the payment of land revenue which was known as “*Mujwaza*” caused havoc in the lives of Kashmir peasant by draining the resources of peasantry and virtually left them starved. This grief was expressed in the “*Mujwaza Name*” composed in Lardishah, as a form of oral poetry of protest: e.g. *Heev Kodrath Parvardigaaran Yeli Mujwaza Khot Zamindaaran Paath Tarphe voth hut halei, Zayad Mujwaza Khol Sharn Yeli Mujwaza Khot Zamindaaran Kath kerhey yemev chakg vaalev Vunis taamath napha Khavyu haa. Tawai Phalwuk nisi KashKaaran Yeli Mujwaza Khot Zamindaaran. “Nekhy Mujwaza Shahar taam voolukh Hekiman nish Trakri peth Khoolukh Yas chonn oos tas eesy maaran. Yeli Mujwaza Khot Zamindaaram. Haali bad gou kus Kari sheedii. Geji Luukan be etimeedi. Pathwaarev loze Kari dyaaran. Yeli Mujwaza Khot Zamindaaran”*. Translation: - Yet again God has turned against us; the share of our produce-tax had been increased. Everywhere it has created hue and cry. Srinagar played an active role in this matter, People even petitioned to the higher authorities, the share of our produce-tax has increased, the *chakdars* made a secret alliance with the authorities. They pleaded that the locusts destroyed the crops collected so far. And their burden too was passed on the suffering tillers. The share of our produce- tax has been increased. Tillers were forced to carry produce-tax to the city. Every grain was weighed in front of the authorities. Anyone having a little less was mercilessly beaten. Conditions become very bad, no wedding, no happiness. Poor people were utterly disappointed. The tax collector made wads and their ill earned currency. The share of our produce-tax has been increased.

C. Folk Songs

The women of Kashmir also expressed their misery and loneliness when their loved ones migrated to distant lands of Punjab, to escape from the oppression of time. e.g *Kam gander Punjab ander Kashir taran na. Kam gander sowander sowander kashir tran na*: Translation: - See what a young and handsome lot of Kashmir men are languishing across the mountains in the provinces of Punjab would they endure to come back? They might be feeling homesick in the absence of their family; would they endure to come back? Separated, fallen and miserable, when will they cross over to Kashmir.

D. Poetry

Poetry was also an important means of expressing resentment. Abdul Ahad Azad has tersely expressed the pathetic condition of the peasantry of the period as: *Pakum chum Kar-i-Begaras. Barum Chum genus sarkaaras yeyam vograi Bapari. Be na Zareh ishkeh Bemari* Translation: - I cannot escape from Begaar and paying revenue in Kind. I shall have to face the merchant who would come to recover the debt, I owe to him. How can I afford romance? Another contemporary poet also expressed the horrible dimension of the situation that when Muslims could not even affect marriages as they were to pay marriage tax on every marriage that: *Zamanus manz Musliman Keriyeli yenvol. Seryse! Veryyes Pareshan os asan gobre mol. Quest queste; os horan Zelimas cheti dayar. Os der shedi Muqarar her akis tefsilwar*. Translation: - During that time if any Muslim wished to effect marriage, the parents of the bridegroom would be seen in great tension all along the year. He would pay off the debts in recurring installments to the profiteer. There was a marriage tax without paying that no marriage could be solemnized.

E. Anti-state attitude of People

The form of silent protest by the local population of Kashmir against the Dogra state was that the people developed an anti-state attitude. They developed a strong hatred against state and government. The peasantry resorted to a unique style of protest by which they avenged their oppression by acting as the mute spectators of their downfall. A common saying of Kashmir testifies this: “*Akis Dezan Derte Byakh washenavan athei*”. Means a main beard is burning and another is warning his hands upon it.

The *Bande Pather* (folk plays) of Kashmir also suggest that peasants might have exhibited their resentment and silent protest against the official tyranny and oppression. This is why one often can find satirical expression and agitating dramatic situations, which indirectly aimed at the ridiculing the different cadres of revenue administration. The Muqdam, the Patwari, the Shiqdar, the Sazowoul, the Domb, the Tehsildar and their officials associated with revenue administration are often made the subject of peasant sarcasm and

indignation. Under such system of cruel government, It would have been impossible to arrange an organized protest, which involved no less than death.

F. Submitting of Secret Memorandums

The memorandums were secretly submitted to viceroy-against the mal administration and Misrule of Dogra rule. In 1877 a secret memorandum was submitted to viceroy who contain very grave allegation against Dogra rule. According to P.N. Bazaz, the memorandum contained allegations of mis-government and mull-administration: One of the allegations was that boatloads of starving people were drowned in Wular lake to relieve the shortage, during the famine of 1877 because during the feminine 8-10 lakh people were died of starvation as the State does not take necessary steps for the relief of victims so there was the anger and resentment among people which made them to submit these allegations. In 1924 another memorandum was secretly submitted to Lord Reading for redressal of public grievances. Apart from the grievances of Kashmiri Muslim middle class it contained the grievances peasants like forced labour corruption, Dogra interference in religious matter of Muslims etc.

V. CONCLUSION

The oppressed working class during Dogra rule in Kashmir protested against the tyranny of autocratic rulers in silent forms owing to their weakness to take direct confrontation against the State. Their form of resistance remained non-confrontationist and subtle during first fifty years of Dogra rule. it was a young batch of Kashmiri Muslims who in order to attain modern education in Punjab presented in an impressive manner the true picture of the object poverty of Kashmiri people to the conscious and sensible press persons of Punjab. Moved by the Painful tales of official-vandalism and mechanism of autocratic governance, Punjabi press offered every possible help to give wide coverage to the sad plight of poor Kashmiries. In spite of all official restrictions which Dogra Maharajas imposed, Punjabi dailies and weeklies brought out special numbers which featured the variegated dimension of socio-political and economic unrest. It may be remembered that the papers published from Punjab which reached the Maharaja's dominion

covered a great deal of information with regard to Kashmir affairs. The circulation of these papers though made limited by official restriction provided a string for unheard Kashmir's to express their genuine grievances and distress. These papers gave an inspiration to young educated Kashmir's to venture into this field of public opinion and there started a strong political movement which among other things demanded freedom of press and expression.

VI. ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

We are thankful to all the researchers and authors from whom we have benefited up to the final draft of this paper.

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