

## Kashmir's Political Culture Change and Continuity

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The scenario of Kashmir's political culture during the last four hundred years has undergone tremendous changes and transformations .

The occupation of the Kashmir by the Mughals, Sikhs and Pathans left indelible marks on the minds of Kashmiri nation forced to submit to their suppressive measures inflicting deep wounds on their psyche.

It was then in the midst of 19<sup>th</sup> century that Kashmir had to witness silently an unsavory turning point in their political life when the British Colonisers sold out this Paradise of Earth for a paltry sum of Rs 75 lakh to a Dogra soldier Gulab Singh in 1846.

The 100-Year long Dogra rule did not concede to the subjugated people their basic rights of freedom of speech and expression of their grievances.

In 1947, when the Indian sub continent was divided and two free nations, Bharat and Pakistan came into being, the most unfortunate part of this region, Kashmir, got entangled in a dispute between these two neighbors without it being resolved for the last 62 years now.

Dogra Maharajas proved no better than earlier foreign occupiers of Kashmir. The 15 March 1846 sale deed of Kashmir was nicknamed as "*Treaty of Amritsar*," In the words of Prem Nath Bazaz, "The British authorities in India did not consult even one of the



leaders of Kashmiris. It was altogether a sordid and shameful affair devoid of all sense of fairness, justice and equity. Two million of people in the Valley and Gilgit were sold like sheep and cattle to an alien adventurer along with the rights, interests of people." (*Freedom Struggle*, p123) The shameful act of selling out a nation invited vehement condemnation from Mahatma Gandhi, Allama Iqbal and Jawaharlal Nehru down to Maulana Ghulam Rasool Mehr and Hafeez Jalandhari. It was during the Dogra rule that hapless Kashmiris were herded out to far off mountainous regions of Gilgit, Astoor and Yarkand in extreme north as forced labourers.

In the words of Robert Thorp, "They were sent without the slightest provision for their shelter, clothing, or food beyond the loads of rice which they carried on their backs. How many died, it is of course impossible to say! Thorp adds, "Picture to your self, oh reader! Those desolate scenes where the Cashmere *zamindars* had to lay down their lives! None, save those who have seen such, can fully realise them; the waste, hopeless aspect of the unbounded stretch of snow; the intensely keen blast of the wind, which strikes you with the force of an eagle's wing as it sweeps down upon you through the ravines; above and around you, are snowy peaks and summits, and precipitous slopes of rock, upon whose edges sits the avalanche for his prey." (*Kashmir Misgovernment*, P100)

Tens of thousands of these labourers would then perish in the cold, dark and rugged terrains during this dreaded journey and their scattered corpses were fed on by leopards, wild dogs and mountain vultures.

Robert Thorp had to pay the price of his life for speaking out this bitter truth when he was poisoned by the soldiers of the maharaja and his body was found on the Sulaiman hill in Srinagar on 22 November 1868 AD.

There is a dust laden grave in the Christian cemetery in Sheikh Bagh, south of Srinagar, the epitaph of which reads as under:



**Robert Thorp**

**Age: 30 years**

**Died on 22 November 1868**

**Who sacrificed his life for Kashmir.**

In his book, *Kashmir under Shade and Sunlight*, C E Tyndale Biscoe writes, "whenever I pass by this grave, I cannot but take my hat off in respect of the person buried here."

An independent and sovereign Kashmir had been enslaved for more than 400 years by aggressors from the east and the west. Their living condition had been turned into a pitiful life of animals; all struck dumb under the repression of autocratic and brutal undemocratic governance.

The shameful *Treaty of Amritsar* gave an impetus to a simmering discontent against Dogra rule among the people of Kashmir. This spark of anger and urge for freedom surfaced earlier than 1931, but the 13 July 1931 proved a watershed for a drastic and epoch making change in the political culture of Kashmir.

The political leadership was taken in hand by the towering Sheikh Mohammad Abdullah who emerged as the tallest of the tall to lead the oppressed Kashmiris out of slavery into a world of freedom.

After a tragic division of the sub continent on the basis of two nation theory, the Kashmiri nation continued with their democratic institutions being demolished one by one as the consequences of an unresolved Kashmir dispute.

Elected governments were dismissed. Gradually the legislature, the judiciary and the administration were made to play second fiddle to their masters and patrons giving commands from outside.

The most stunning event took place when the State's first Prime Minister, Sheikh Abdullah about whom Jawaharlal Nehru had said that "Sheikh Abdullah is Kashmir and Kashmir is Sheikh



Abdullah," was unceremoniously dismissed and arrested on the morning of 9<sup>th</sup> August 1953. Josef Korbel writes, "In the early hours of the morning of August 9 a Shakespearian-styled drama developed in the legendary Maharaja's palace. The Head of the State, the son of the Maharaja who had been exiled by Sheikh Abdullah in 1947, now avenged his father. He dismissed Abdullah and nominated Bakhshi as prime minister. Abdullah, resting at Gulmarg, was arrested and taken to prison. Thus ended, at least temporarily, the meteoric political career of the man who began as a national revolutionary, acted as a dictator, maneuvered as a petty Machiavellist, and finally succumbed at the hands of his lifelong associates by the arms which he had often used himself."

The shocking step taken against the State government by New Delhi, once again plunged the people of Kashmir into the darkness of uncertainty and confusion. They were genuinely compelled to ponder over the shaping of their political future, the wounded culture of which had been further bruised with the sudden removal of Abdullah.

The people, inhabitants of the most peaceful region called the Paradise on Earth, had imbibed the philosophy of Lalla Arifa and Sheikhul Aalam which had turned the Kashmir Valley into an abode of godly saints, spiritual ascetics and scholars propagating these ideals of human essence and its grandeur. This was then the cultural aspect of their life including its political aspect.

The advent of Islam in Kashmir during the 14th century AD completely changed the entire political ethos and cultural traditions in the Valley when Hazrat Mir Syed Ali Hamadani converted local Hindus to the most humane religion of the Islam. Tens of thousands of Hindus had been living a caste ridden life where the upper class Brahmin was there to exploit them in each and every sphere of their miserable life. They were made to do the menial work of cobblers, scavengers, labourers, sweepers, and outcaste people



having no right to aspire for a dignified life. Some so called historians with a subjective mindset have termed this change as a forced conversion which a renowned Kashmir researcher and historian, Sir Aurel Stein dismisses when he says, "Islam made its way into Kashmir not by forcible conquest, but by gradual conversion. The influx of foreign adventurers, both from the south and from Central Asia, had prepared the ground. (*Rajatarangini, Vol, 1, p, 130*).

Another noted Kashmiri Hindu historian, Prem Nath Bazaz himself states, "Had Kashmir not adopted Islam and the Muslim rule in the fourteenth century, it is difficult to say what would have happened to it. It might have perished. Surely the powers that were generated among the people in various branches of creative life, such as learning art and architecture, would not have come to play. By coming in contact with a new culture and civilisation as a result of the Muslim rule, Kashmiris extricated themselves from the *morass* in which they had fallen and in which they were sinking deeper and deeper (*Struggle for Freedom, p50*)

The conversion of a Hindu Kashmir into an Islamic region was the most significant and epoch making historical change in the world of Kashmir's political culture

Even after that, the persecution and perpetration of the Kashmiri people at the hands of the alien Mughals, the Pathans, the Sikhs and the Dogras did not stop and one after another, the occupiers of the Valley continued with their heinous acts of unprecedented atrocities in almost all the fields of their life. The Mughals imposed and disseminated the Persian language at the cost of our own popular Kashmiri language. The ruthless periods of rule by Pathans, Sikhs and also the Dogras are among the darkest chapters of the Kashmir history.

Even now, efforts are on to undermine the concept of the rich history of the Kashmiri people, by way of creating newly or-



chestrated concept of Kashmiriyat, a laboured term not found anywhere in the chronicles or historical documents for centuries together.

Kashmiri people have proved to be a tolerant, but a tough nation, and that's why they are still struggling hard for their better life and the sustenance of those cherished values in their political culture which are acclaimed the world wide as good, noble and dignified.

During the last 20 years of turmoil and armed resistance, a dark spell was cast undoubtedly on the high moral standards of Kashmiri society. The peace loving, God-fearing and brotherly living masses, though not all of them, turned into butchers slaughtering human beings and devastating whatever good and magnificent they wanted to eliminate with the use of gun given into their hands. There began a class struggle between those who had become *opulent* prior to 1990 through unfair or fair means. In the beginning, it was like a revolution by the exploited against the exploiters. The militants mostly hailing from lower class uneducated rural areas became envious of all this exuberance of wealth and they gradually began misusing of their weapons to kidnap for ransom, extortion, and indiscriminate killings of their opponents or those who refused to give them money. It was like a proletarian revolution by the downtrodden against the social and political bourgeoisies. People as well as tens of thousands of forces also behaved ruthlessly even with the respectful members of the civil society including doctors, lawyers, teachers, journalists, politicians, ministers and many more unable to be testified exactly as to who killed whom?

The forces deployed to combat militancy also followed the same path and went berserk time and again along with their killing machines without being put to any legal inquiry or genuine punishment.

Thus, the soil of a pious Kashmir was transformed into a

centre stage of horrifying ancient Greek tragedies.

Despite gaping holes having appeared in our cemented social system, the political culture of Kashmir now needs catharsis for its purgation and purification in numerous spheres of this part of our life.

In the end, I can say with all my optimism that Kashmir has not lost, in the world of its political culture, all that what it has inherited from great religious teachers and propagators of humanity, sincerity and dignity. It is Kashmir; Kalhan's Kashmir who has said about it, "Such is Kashmir, the country which may be conquered by the forces of spiritual merit but not by the armed forces."

I conclude with this couplet of Hafiz Shirazi reciting it as a prayer for the future of our bleeding Kashmir:

*Nafas-e-baad-e-saba mushk fushaan khwaahad shud,  
Aalam-e-peer digar baarah jawaan khwaahad shud.*