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Rebellion, Desolation, and Pestilence: Unravelling Kashmir's Late 19th-Century Odyssey

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ABSTRACT:

The second half of the 19th century was a period of significant social, political, and technological change. This period was also marked by several economic depressions and recessions, witnessing the long economic depression which lasted from 1873-1896. The same period is also crucial as far as the history of Kashmir is concerned. Against the backdrop of a changing geopolitical landscape fuelled by the Treaty of Amritsar in 1846, Kashmir found itself at the crossroads of transformation. This pivotal treaty, while securing Gulab Singh's princely rule, set in motion a series of events that would reverberate through time. In the annals of Kashmir history, the second half of the 19th century stands out as a period characterized by the indelible imprints of historical events. Kashmir has witnessed political disturbances along with natural calamities and disasters since the remote past and it continued during this period as well. The echoes of the Zaldagar uprising, and the hushed embrace of famine followed by the haunting dance of cholera cast a shadow over the picturesque valley during this turbulent period. This paper explores the complex mosaic these pivotal events have created, taking the reader on an engrossing trip through the corridors of time.

Keywords: Economic Depression, Political Disturbances, Natural Calamities, Famine and Cholera

Introduction:

Kashmir is known all over the world for its unique topography and natural beauty right from ancient times which has attracted not only the greatest rulers of history but great scholars and travellers as well. However, this paradise on earth has also witnessed many political disturbances from time to time which caused tremendous trouble to the people, leading to disruption in the society and shattering of the economy. Nature too has not been kind enough and has added to the miseries of people, often bringing scarcity and death to their doorsteps.

The history of the region is a tale of changes not solely defined by political or social events but is intricately interwoven with the recurring influence of natural calamities. The changes in the political structure along with the frequent visits of natural forces have a great bearing on the history of Kashmir and Kashmiris. That is why it is said that "the Kashmiris owe much of their character and disposition to their environment and especially to a long history of tyranny and oppression" (Neve 1915, p. 18). Earthquakes and fires have frequently occurred and, together with floods and other disasters, have contributed to the destruction wrought by famines (Jalali, 1931, p. 58). Various other incidents have happened in the history of Kashmir, which had an adverse bearing on the life and property of the people. The Kashmiri remained in fright, always referring to a curse under which people have fallen and daily expecting some great disaster would befall him (Lawrence, 1895, p. 204).

With the conclusion of the treaty of Amritsar, in which Kashmir was sold to Maharaja Gulab Singh, the erstwhile state of Jammu and Kashmir was formed. Considering it as their personal property, the Dogra rulers left no stone unturned to extract as much as they could from the distressed and depressed people of Kashmir and this period witnessed absolute brutality and vandalism on the part of the state officials (Ahad, 1987, p. 64). Schonberg (1853, p. 73) writes that,

I have been to many lands, but nowhere did the human being present a more saddening spectacle than in Kashmir. It vividly recalled the history of the Israelites under Egyptian rule when they were flagged at their regular labour and deprived of their daily bread by their pitiless taskmasters.

People started to desert their villages and moved to the neighbouring parts for their survival. Extreme poverty, exacerbated by a series of famines in the second half of the 19th Century, had seen many Kashmiris fleeing to Punjab (Jalal, 2000, p. 351). The people of Kashmir were not free from other

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misfortunes as well and natural calamities like earthquakes, fires, epidemics, etc. used to visit Kashmir from times immemorial and caused a great loss of life and property of the people. In 1885 the valley was rocked by a severe earthquake and the shocks lasted more than three months. Houses at Baramulla and Sopore were completely destroyed. In some places green water and green sand came out of the cracks - the earthquake developed. The damages from the earthquake were enormous as some 35,000 living creatures were killed including 2,500 human lives. Kashmir has been home to various outbreaks and epidemics right from earlier times. Earthquakes shook the valley in 1863, 1878, and 1884. Famine caused starvation in 1864 and 1877. Cholera killed people in 1857-58, 1867, 1872, 1875-76, and 1879. Fires devastated life and property in 1875 and 1878 (Sufi, 1996, p. 800). Smallpox was also a major concern which used to appear almost every year killing not only Kashmiris but many Europeans as well (Neve, 82). Vaccination against this disease started only after 1892 (Bamzai, 1987, p. 266).

It was during this period that direct colonial intervention started in Kashmir with the establishment of the British residency ushering a new era in Kashmir history. Although the British policies did not always have a positive impact, they created the environment for the development of the region. They transformed the agricultural sector and promoted the growth of industries. They improved the connectivity of the region with the rest of India. They introduced modern education and healthcare facilities. The Britishers came to the rescue of people during these harsh pandemic times by providing relief and modern medical facilities people. So, the second half of the 19th century witnessed so many incidents in Kashmir's history which are of great historical significance. Starting from keeping the officer on special duty by the Britishers up to making him a resident, from agitations and protests to uprisings and from the destruction caused by the famine to the devastation resulting from the epidemics, this period had all in it. Three such incidents have been discussed in this paper which had a great bearing on political, social, and economic aspects of Kashmir's history.

Zaldagar Uprising or Shawl-Baf Tehreek:

This event of 1865 popularly known as the Zaldagar uprising and *Shawl-Baf Tehreek* holds an important position in the history of Kashmir in general and the freedom struggle of Kashmir history in particular. It was for the first time that an open demonstration was held in Kashmir against the autocratic rule of the Dogras. It had elements of revolutionary agitation in it and it proved to be an eye-opener for the rulers (Ahad, 1987, p. 78). It was, as the historian F.M. Hassnain (2002, p. 440) has recorded, "perhaps the first organized demands-day in the history of class struggle in India".

The Dogra maharajas ruled over one of British India's largest but poorest princely realms, where they imposed upon the populace a despotism unequalled in the subcontinent (Weeks, 1969, p.225). Shawl being an important source of revenue for the Dogras was subjected to heavy taxation. A shawl maker was supposed to pay five taxes; as a shopkeeper; on the import of wool and Pashmina from Ladakh; custom duty when taken out for sale; duty on finished goods; and special duty on worked borders (Saraf, 1977, p. 280) They were getting miserable wages, and neither allowed to leave Kashmir nor change their employment. They were nearly in the position of slaves and their average wage was only about three-half-pence a day (Wilson, 1876, p. 309). Faced with tyranny, exploitation, and oppression, the *Shawl-Bafs* at first petitioned Dewan Kripa Ram, the Governor designate of Kashmir, but that proved unfruitful. Then having failed to get their grievances redressed they assembled at Zaldagar in the city to consider their wrongs and grievances (Khan, 1978, p. 60). It was on April 29, 1865, when shawl weavers protested against the Dagh Shawl department of the Dogras rulers. The weavers from all parts of the city marched in a procession toward Zaldagar. They raised slogans and burnt the effigy of Pandit Raj Kak Dhar, who was the commanding officer of the Shawl department (Pampori, 1992, p. 51). Raj Kak Dhar in turn made the best of the opportunity and deceived the governor by conveying to him that the crowd was there to kill him. Many processionists were killed and many others injured while crossing the Zaldagar Bridge (Ahad, 1987, p.78). Justice Saraf (1977, p. 291) while speaking about this incident writes,

The victims were paraded in a procession with the declared intention of placing them before Ranbir Singh to seek justice. They were stopped on the way and forced to bury the dead without being provided an opportunity to represent their grievances to their ruler. The organizers were arrested, some of whom were released after whipping, torture, and fines. Among those removed to Jammu and imprisoned there, Rasool Sheikh, Ali Pal, Qoodeh Lala, and Sona Shah died in prison.

Many others who were directly or indirectly involved were sent to jails, where they were tortured physically and mentally. This all resulted in communal tensions and Shia-Sunni strife took place in various parts of the city. Robert Thorpe (1973, p. 66), who was present in Kashmir at the time of this uprising, describes the anger of people towards the administration in the following words,

In bitter and despairing mood, they made a wooden bier, such as the Mussulmen use to carry their dead to the place of internment and placing a cloth over it, they carried it to and from in procession, exclaiming; Raj Kak is dead, who will give him a grave?

The uprising happened in the backdrop of so many causes which included extremely difficult working conditions, meagre wages, excessive taxation, and a ban on leaving Kashmir valley but the distribution of *Shali* to the city dwellers became an immediate cause for it. Shawl weavers used to receive a fixed amount of *Shali* from the Dagh Shawl department, which they resisted. The demands which were put forth before the governor Kripa Ram were related to proper distribution and price of *Shali*. This uprising had significant implications for the political and social landscape of Kashmir. It highlighted the discontent and frustration of the local population with the oppressive policies of the government. It not only sowed the seeds of discontent but also the erosion of Dogra's legitimacy started with it.

The Famine of 1877-78:

Famines used to occur from time to time in this part of the world right from ancient times. Although there is a record of a few famines, the famine of

1831 and 1877-79 were disastrous and terrible, when we talk about the loss of life and property. When Dogras took over Kashmir, people were already living in miserable conditions and economic chaos was prevalent in the valley. Land farming had virtually disappeared. The famines of 1832 and 1838 had severely destroyed the population, and people continued to flee to parts of Punjab like Amritsar and Ludhiana (Bamzai, 1987, p. 3). The famine of 1877-79 was a general disaster throughout India and it did not spare Kashmir. Talking about the severity of the famine that occurred in 1877, GMD Sufi (1996, p. 800) in his book *Kashir* writes that,

No wonder that in 1877, when through excess of rain which destroyed the crops, famine came to the land; the people were unprepared to meet the emergency. The officials were incapable of mitigating its effects. Direful calamity was a natural consequence.

There was a great loss of human life as well. Both urban and rural people suffered, although the villages witnessed more deaths. It can be gauged from the fact that the population of Srinagar city was reduced to less than half of the total (Bamzai, 1987, p. 329). Even after years, the fear of this famine used to haunt Kashmiris and they were not able to recover from it. As the proverb goes, *Drag Tsalah ta dag tsalah na*, which means that the famine goes but its stains remain, is true in all senses (Lawrence, 1895, p. 213). The Great Famine of British India, which extended from South to North India in the years 1876–1878, struck Kashmir in 1877–1878. But, in Kashmir, it wasn't a lack of monsoon rains that wrecked the harvest; rather, it was an excess of showers brought on by a strict revenue system that forbade peasants from harvesting grain until a revenue official was on the scene. By the spring of 1879, no seed had been led for autumn sowing. The colonial state's relief efforts in the Punjab, where thousands of Kashmiris had relocated, were insufficient to address the needs of both the native and immigrant communities (Zutshi, 2003, pp.72-73). Speaking of 1878, Mr. Wade who was associated with the Kashmir medical mission and remained unceasingly engaged in the relief works during the great famine, Neve (1915, pp.73-74) writes that:

Today I have ridden through a great part of the city, and I saw a large number of persons, especially children, and women, whom death certainly has marked for his own very shortly. A half-dozen times I tried to buy and distribute some kulchas—small cakes made of the flour of Indian com, rice, or wheat—and was as often mobbed. Poor children crept from underneath the verandah boards of closed shops, and others from holes and comers that pariah dogs generally occupy, and surrounded my pony. Parda women, and apparently most respectable men, stopped and begged and struggled for a piece of bread. I found it impossible to keep the people from thronging me or to maintain anything like order. Directly I obtained any kulchas, the hungry pressed upon me, the stronger pushing aside the weaker, and all reaching forth their hands, and begging or screaming, they laid hold of my coat. They took the bread out of my pockets. Two men with baskets of bread, from whom I attempted to purchase some, were besieged and their bread speedily seized and eaten. After having paid for the bread, I made my escape by riding as fast as I could away from the hungry crowd.

The chief victims of this famine were the shawl wavers of the city, who were already facing trouble due to the decline of the shawl business. Neither man nor nature took kindly to the poor shawl weavers (Khan, 1978, p. 61). Almost everyone was starving and struggling for his own life. The starving people enthusiastically gobbled oil cake, rice, chaff, elm, and yew bark, as well as grasses and roots. They were completely demoralized and behaved like rabid creatures, everyone fighting for his or her own life. The lifeless bodies of those who had died were dumped where they lay or hastily carried to the nearest well or hole, where they remained until they were choked with the corpses. Dogs in groups prowled the area, feeding on the unburied bodies. The path of hunger was plagued, and cholera spread. Everything worked together to make the calamity worse. Many high-ranking authorities acted selfishly to maintain prices and even intercept grain that was being sent over difficult mountain roads to help the dying (Neve, 1915, p. 73). This all resulted in a shortage of food grains, which was difficult to obtain owing to bad communications, particularly in the city which even witnessed bread riots (Khan, 1978, p. 24).

The famine highlighted the limitations of the administration in providing effective governance and addressing the needs of the local population. It also contributed to the growing sense of resentment towards the rulers, who were seen out of touch with the needs and concerns of the people.

Cholera epidemics:

The devastation caused by the famine was combined with the cholera epidemic, causing great distress and misery to people. Due to insufficient diet and suppression of human liberty under the Afghans, the Sikhs, and early Dogra rulers, the vitality of the people had been sapped and they fell easy prey to cholera and other diseases (Bamzai, 1994, p. 711). These epidemics were problematic for people and an issue of concern for the State as they inflicted a huge man and material loss. Though some of the epidemics may have emerged indigenously majority have been imported from neighbouring places like Punjab and Rawalpindi. The outbreak of cholera and its diffusion in Kashmir in the 19th century was more or less considered a local epidemic with its origin in Kashmir and the neighbouring Punjab. So, lame politics and frequent famines have played their part in the spread of the diseases. Trade, pilgrimage, and movement of population across various parts of the country resulted in the influx of communicable diseases like cholera and smallpox to Kashmir.

The history of cholera in Kashmir is very imperfect, and no information can be obtained from the State records. Cholera was a great horror for the Kashmiris. It is said that cholera raged in Kashmir in 1824, 1844 and 1852. The first recorded cholera epidemic broke out in 1857 (Chohan, 1994, p. 21). However, Harvey states that in 1843, twenty thousand persons are said to have died of it in Srinagar (Harvey, 1892). This disease again entered the valley in 1867. This time it raged for about four months and thousands of people were done to death by it. In 1872 cholera again pounced upon the valley in June and continued till December decimating a large number of lives. During the years 1875-76, cholera again broke out in the valley and raged for some 13 months from the 29th of December 1874, the day the first case was detected, to January 1876 (Chohan, 1994, p. 21). Famine was

usually followed by cholera (A. Neve, 1989, 79). and it did happen in 1879, but for a short duration.

Kashmir remained free from cholera during 1880-1888, but in 1888 about 10,000 people are estimated to have died of whom 3500 were in Srinagar (Harvey, 1892). Cholera of 1888 marched along the main routes, and every infected water supply became a focus of disease and death. It was followed by another dreadful cholera epidemic in 1892 in which people starved to death in large numbers and the streets presented a dark and scary look with mourning and shrieks seen everywhere. At that time, the so-called Venice of the East was no less than a city of Dreadful Death, witnessing death and mourning everywhere, be it the city or the villages. Communication and business were almost stopped (E. Neve, 1915, p. 273). Lawrence (1895, pp. 219-220) while talking about the horrors of this epidemic writes,

Defoe's plague of London shows how even the strong English character fails in an awful pestilence and it is not to be wondered at if the less stable Orientals become unhinged in a visitation such as that of 1892. Men would not lend money, and in the villages, the people would sit all day long on the graveyards absolutely silent. In the city the people would go out at dawn to the gardens and parks in the suburbs, returning at night to hear that more of their relatives and friends had perished. The long lines of coffins borne to the graveyards resembled an endless regiment on the march, while on the river a sad procession of boats floated down to the burning ghats, and living passengers in other boats passed by with averted faces. Men telling me how they had lost all the members of their family would break into hysterical laughter and I have never seen such utter despair and helplessness as I saw in 1892.

Regarding the outbreak of Cholera in 1888, it is said that during the early spring, there was cholera was introduced at Jammu supposedly by the retinue of the Chitral chief on his return from the plains. This supposition is likely inaccurate, as there were numerous outbreaks in the Panjab, which developed independently into a severe epidemic. Jammu is in constant communication with Kashmir, and it is a tradition regarding cholera that is seldom introduced here from Murree, but usually from Jammu (A. Neve, 1989, 289). But another view regarding the outbreak of cholera in the valley holds that cholera of 1888 was imported from Jammu by Maharaja's camp and that of 1892 was prevalent in Rawalpindi in April and the first case in Kashmir was reported at Domel (where Pindi and Hazara's roads meet) on 24th April followed by the first case in Srinagar on 6th May. Within days it spread like wildfire as shown below;

Week	Cases	Deaths
1st	120	37
2nd	1105	472
3rd	2682	1455
4th	2507	1803
5th	1620	1193
6th	622	525
7th	184	218
8th	48	33

Source; R. Harvey, A Brief Sketch of the Epidemic of Cholera in Srinagar, Kashmir, May-June, 1892, p. 346

Overall, the trend suggests that the outbreak may have peaked in the 2nd and 3rd weeks, and public health measures or interventions may have contributed to the subsequent decline in cases and deaths. The data underscores the significant impact of the outbreak on the population, with a notable number of deaths relative to reported cases.

It is believed that the opening of the Jhelum Valley Cart Road in 1890 increased the possibilities of the importation and spread of cholera and other infectious diseases in Kashmir from Punjab (Mitra, 1892, pp.50-51) This statement is testified by the frequent occurrence of epidemics in the next two decades after the opening of this road. There were some other serious issues as well. Like the 1892 cholera epidemic, which was caused by the contamination of the Jhelum River, the main source of drinking water for the region. It spread rapidly and affected large parts of the population The other problem associated with the spread of such kind of diseases was the ordinary sanitary condition, which made them vulnerable to such health issues. Regarding the sanitary conditions in Kashmir, the then chief medical officer of Kashmir Dr Mitra (1892) writes;

There is a most lamentable want of ordinary sanitation in Srinagar...from ancient times it has been unswept. The Kashmiris are notoriously filthy and negligent of even personal cleanliness. They care not how impure is the water they drink, or how dirty the house they live in. Srinagar is a badly built to the narrow tortuous paths, provided with no drainage, peopled by one of the most dirty races on the face of earth. The result is that the soil is saturated with the filth of the ages, and surface cleansing is partially impossible and partially neglected. Very few householders have any water closet (privy), and the courtyard or front of the house is used for that purpose. *Barustal-gus* (filth at the door) is proverbially admitted to be a mark of affluence. Human ordure is scattered broadcast all over the town. From the roads and houses on the river bank drains carrying slush filth and sewage empty into the river, in which the washer men wash unclean clothes, the dyers wash their dyes, and the butcher's entrails of animals. The consequence is that the water of river, as it flows through the city, is little better than liquid sewage. The people have a scrupulous respect for all old and insanitary practices, and any innovation is looked upon as an oppressive measure.

It becomes evident that there was not one but many reasons responsible for the spread of cholera in Kashmir, creating havoc and killing thousands of people. Thanks to the Neve brothers (Arthur and Ernest) who tried their every bit to fight the disease and help Kashmiris in those troublesome times with all possible resources of Western medical skills. But to quote Shepherd (1926, p.52) "the native filth and superstition of Kashmir made the resistance against the disease almost impossible". This statement implies that certain cultural or hygiene practices, combined with superstitious beliefs, may have contributed to the challenges in effectively resisting or controlling the spread of the disease.

The data on cholera outbreaks in Kashmir during 1888 and 1892 provides a glimpse into the significant impact of these infectious events on the region. Cholera in 1888 lasted for two months and in 1892, it lasted for about four months. It was followed by another one, which lasted for about eighteen months.

Year	Duration	Total Mortality
1888	Two Months	10000 died.
		3500 in Srinagar
1892	Four Months	11712 died.
		5781 in Srinagar

Source: Report of Surgeon- Colonel Harvey's Deputation to Kashmir, Foreign, External. A. Sept. 1892, File Nos. 102-115, National Archives of India, New Delhi

In 1888, the outbreak lasted for two months, resulting in a total mortality of 10,000 deaths, with 3,500 occurring in Srinagar. Four years later, the 1892 outbreak extended over four months, leading to a higher total mortality of 11,712 deaths, with 5,781 in Srinagar. The longer duration of the 1892 outbreak likely contributed to the increased overall mortality. Near about twenty-two thousand people died in these two epidemics, with Srinagar alone accounting for more than forty-two per cent of the total deaths reported in the valley. It was followed by another one in 1900-02, which lasted for about 18 months and more than eleven thousand people died.

Conclusion:

The second half of the 19th century which witnessed the downfall of the traditional industries of Kashmir, was full of other misfortunes as well adding to the miseries of people. Apart from political disturbances, natural calamities like cholera, earthquakes, floods, fires, and famines were the recurrent visitors to the valley in general and the city of Srinagar in particular. The Zaldagar uprising of 1865 marked a turning point, exposing socio-economic grievances and contributing to the erosion of Dogra's legitimacy. The famine of 1877-78 underscored the vulnerabilities of Kashmir, revealing the limitations of governance in the face of natural calamities. The cholera epidemics brought devastation, exposing the interconnectedness of economic, political, and environmental factors in shaping the impact of infectious diseases. The paper highlights the complex historical challenges faced by Kashmir, with rebellions, famines, and pestilence converging to shape its late 19th-century odyssey. As the region grappled with political disturbances, natural disasters, and infectious diseases, the resilience and endurance of its people, coupled with the responses of the administration, offer valuable insights into the historical dynamics that continue to influence Kashmir's narrative.

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