



Research Paper

## Interface of Kashmiri Identity during Political Regimes.

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**ABSTRACT:** This paper examines the status of Kashmiri identity during different phases of history, specifically under Mughals, Afghans, Sikhs and Dogras. This helped in the process of formation and assertion of the collective political consciousness among Kashmiris. The Dogra period was an apex of the political consciousness among Kashmiris. During this period, the early assertion of the Muslim identity in Kashmir was a consequence of the pitiable socio-economic situation in which the community was placed at the time under the Dogra rule. In early 1930s, it was the common Islamic identity that played a major role in the earliest expression of the mass discontent against the oppressive Dogra rule. Later, this uprising assumed a political and economic form that helped the people in rising above the Muslim consciousness in the subsequent years.

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### I. INTRODUCTION:

The identity of Jammu and Kashmir described as the crown of India has evolved through history. It was abode of the Naga people in all periods of history. During the colonial period Dogras brought together five eco-linguistic and cultural regions to form their kingdom that lasted almost a hundred years. The state of Jammu and Kashmir which was left with the three regions after independence is still the most diverse regions in India, a melting ground of religions and cultures, languages and ethnic types. The Kashmir valley through history remained the nerve centre of power and politics, culture and civilization. Kashmiriyat, which is a unique blend of Hindu, Buddhist and Islamic traditions of the interaction, interdependence, understanding and tolerance, is the ethos shaped by ecology and history is now regarded as the substitute or substance for Kashmiri identity. The articulation and the flowering of the Kashmiri identity in course of Sultanate period has been vividly described through the composite cultural mainstream that revealed the dynamics of Kashmiri behaviour. The cult of Buddha, the teachings of the Vedantas and mysticism of Islam through Persian sources have after the other, found a congenial home in Kashmir.<sup>1</sup> All the three strands of the three religious philosophies had already produced a confluence of culture at the advent of Mughal occupation of Kashmir.

### Kashmiri Identity vis-à-vis Political Authority

During ancient times, an individual's loyalty in Kashmir was primarily to the tribe, clan or caste group and the relationship with the political authority was limited to paying taxes. Under traditional conditions, the political allegiance to territorial states was a tenuous affair. Political rulers changed frequently and kingdoms and empires constantly collided and expanded at each other's expense so that a group of people inhabiting a particular space could be part of different kingdoms in a short space of time. Within a kingdom the king exercised political authority. The relationship between a collective identity and the state was structured within the framework of a layered sovereignty. Political authority and control tended to be dispersed and distributed between various levels of authority. Even when Jammu and Kashmir was integrated as a single unit in the sub continental Mauryan and Mughal empires, the regional kingdoms coexisted alongside the symbols of a central, all-Indian power. On the one hand it created a fluid and malleable political system with constantly changing political status and loyalties of kingdoms and on the other hand the state or its upper layers had little direct interaction or control over the collective identities at the grass-root levels. While the state enjoyed great ceremonial eminence in fact it had limited powers to interfere with the internal organization of the social segments. The conceptual language of acting on behalf of the society as a whole was unavailable to Kashmir. Furthermore, rulers patronized religious traditions other than their own.<sup>2</sup>

### **Mughals and the Kashmiri Identity**

By the middle of the 16th century, Islam faced a great crisis due to the Shia-Sunni discords, feudal and tribal rivalries and conflicts, leading to a chaos in the country. As a result Akbar got an opportunity to conquer Kashmir and annex it to his empire. Akbar's interest in the affairs of Kashmir became more pronounced in the time of Sultan Hussain Shah Chak (1563-1570 A.D.) when there were acute dissensions between the Shias and Sunnis. In 1586, Akbar's troops occupied Kashmir and the region passed under the Mughal rule. Akbar made Kashmir a separate province of the Mughal Empire. The conquest of the valley by the Mughals is generally regarded as marking the beginning of the Kashmir's modern history. For nearly two centuries, Kashmir was the northern-most point of an empire whose power base was situated in Delhi. Once master of Kashmir, Akbar adopted a policy of conciliation and entered into marriage alliances with the Kashmiri nobility. His rule was known for his liberalism. Mughal rule in Kashmir brought peace, law and order which had earlier been torn by internal dimensions. Mughal treated Shias, Sunnis and Hindus on an equal basis.

Eventually with Akbar's invasion, Kashmir lost its separate identity and became one of the Subas or part of the Mughal Empire. The Mughal rule crushed the very soul of the people and they lost their freedom as well. The Kashmir's culture, which had progressed under independent Sultans, was destroyed because of the absence of the local patronage. Poets, painters and scholars, who were the pride of the valley now left the valley and adorned the courts of the Mughal Empire. Akbar's son, Jahangir had special liking for Kashmir. He described it as heaven on earth and embellished it with the famous Mughal gardens. The vilification of the Kashmiris started from the establishment of the Mughal rule in Kashmir. The Mughal forbade recruitment of the Kashmiris in the armed forces. The Mughals arbitrarily deprived the Kashmiris of the ownership of their land, the emperor was declared as sole proprietor of all cultivable land in the valley and the Kashmiri landlords were entered in the revenue registers as tenants. Yousuf Shah Chak is described as the national hero of Kashmir who fought the Mughal imperialism in order to save the honour, integrity and independence of Kashmir.<sup>3</sup> The beginning of the end of Mughal rule took place in 1739 when Nadir Shah sacked Delhi and gave a body blow to the decadent Mughal Empire. Formally Mughal rule ended in 1752 when Ahmed Shah Abdali annexed Kashmir to his kingdom of Kabul.

Akbar brought peace and order to the land as Jazia was abolished and Hindus were appointed to prominent positions. However, it ended Kashmir's independence and commenced the impoverishment of its cultural heritage. The Srinagar city was turned into a cantonment and Hari Parbat Fort was constructed which is still part of the Kashmiri folk lore. Mughal soldiers tortured and suppressed the population by destroying their marital status. The great Mughal road across Pir Panjal was made with forced labour and a famine during this rule resulted in large scale deaths because of starvation. This worked on the psyche of the Kashmiris and apart from a feeling of subjugation and repression; it dealt a damaging blow to their self respect. Akbar was succeeded by his son Jahangir in 1605, and is best remembered for his love of the valley. During his reign, Jahangir beautified Kashmir with over 700 gardens as he was a great lover of the natural beauties of Kashmir. It is because of him that Kashmir owes the cherished memories of the Mughal rule. On his death bed, he was reportedly asked about his last wish which he replied from his heart, Kashmir and nothing else.

The Mughal conquest was a turning point in the cultural history of Kashmir. The mass scale contacts enriched the already copious cultural heritage and cultural life attained a new dimension. Persian became the popular language. The Sanskrit language was eliminated because it lost the state patronage and had no firm ground among the people. Art, architecture and garden culture entered into a new phase of development. Though the Mughal occupation had hampered the growth of the Kashmiris to their full stature yet the socio-economic order ushered in by the Mughal conquest in 1586 led to the attainment of many tangible results in the overall development in the field of administrative, social, economic and cultural institutions. Despite this, by and large Mughal rule was a period of internal feuds, misery and impoverishment.

### **Afghans and the Kashmir Identity**

During the later Mughal period the administrative efficiency decayed and chaos and confusion was rampant which ultimately led to the disintegration of the Mughal Empire and Kashmir passed into the hands of Afghans. With the decline of Mughals, Kashmir came under the direct control of Kabul. Hence Kashmir once again became a hot bed of intrigues and conspiracies. Some local Kashmiri Muslim leaders decided to invite foreign intervention, Ahmad Shah Abdali, the Afghan ruler to invade Kashmir. In 1753, he sent a strong force under Abdul Khan Isk Aqasi who established direct Afghan rule over Kashmir. In this way Kashmir got absorbed within the Afghan state and Kabul replaced Delhi as the central authority for Kashmir. Afghans did not give a good account of themselves but extremely intolerant and wicked. For about three quarters of a century while the Afghans occupied Kashmir the people had to suffer harshest government. The Afghan rule was like a nightmare for the people of Kashmir in which both Hindus and Muslims suffered from the harshness and misgovernment of the Afghan government. The Afghans did not take any interest in the welfare of the people. Oppression took the form of extortion of money from the local people and brutality in the face of opposition.

Both Kashmiri men and women lived in fear of their lives. Many were captured and sent as slaves to Afghanistan.

The Afghan rule lasted for sixty seven years. There were eight governors of Kashmir in succession during this period. Only one of them was a Khatri Hindu while others were Afghans. Most of these governors indulged in robbing Kashmir of its wealth, torture and killings because of their uncertain future. Jazia, a poll tax on Hindus, was imposed and many either fled or converted to Islam. This period was marked by a total breakdown of law and order. The extent of looting was so high which can be imagined by the fact that Abdullah Khan, the first Afghan Governor, carried a wealth of over one crore in only six months of his rule. This period is full of harrowing tales of oppression. It were not the Muslims who cooperated with the Mughals and Afghans but Kashmiri Brahmans got entry into their courts and played a key role in the affairs of the state. At the same time more Kashmiri Pandits were elevated to the highest parts and most business and occupation were held by them.

The Sikh rule was a period of cruel reign and anarchy. Flagrant tyranny was common everywhere which gave a big blow to Kashmiri identity. The Afghan Kings were only interested in exacting tribute from the governors. As long as it was remitted punctually and regularly, the kings left the governors with full powers, and would take no notice how they ruled, ably or tyrannically. The victims of the Pathan ruthlessness were Kashmiris without distinction of religion or caste but the particular objects of torture were the Pandits, the Shias and Muslim Bombas of the Jhelum Valley. Governor Asad Khan used to tie up the Pandits, two and two, with rope in grass sacks and sink them in the Dal Lake. Another feud, Mir Hazar used leather bags instead grass sacks for the drowning. He drowned Shais as well as Brahmins.<sup>4</sup> As a result, the people of Kashmir valley forgot their glorious martial tradition and became timid and coward. Lawrence recounts that the Pathan rulers were being remembered even in his days in Kashmir for their brutality. Lawrence describes that this was a period of brutal tyranny, unrelieved by good work, chivalry and honour. These stone hearted people thought no more of cutting heads than of plucking flowers. Afghans, though Muslims became a symbol of tyranny. This was a step further in the building up of Kashmir's national consciousness. Although Kashmir still remained closely tied to its Muslim identity, but the distinctiveness of being Kashmiris (victims) as against Afghans (perpetrators) became sharp. Instead of Islam becoming the source of identity and clash nationality became the dominant sub-consciousness theme.

### **Sikhs vis-à-vis Kashmir Identity**

From 1819 to 1846 Kashmir remained under the Sikhs. During this period, the Kashmiris got new masters from the Punjab and the change did not improve the condition of the people in any way. The Sikh rulers had neither time nor inclination to look into the internal administration of the country. The Sikhs were no less cruel, intolerant and rapacious than the Afghans. With the establishment of Sikh rule began the martyrdom of the Muslims of the valley which continued down to 1947. Islam was in danger owing to the intolerant practices of the Sikh governors who banned the call to prayers (azan), closed down the historical Jamia Masjid of Srinagar and other mosques order that the Khanqah-i-Maula should be closed up, and declared the slaughter of cows a capital punishment. Muslims were deprived of their land, which was distributed to non-Muslims. During this rule, there was a Shia-Sunni trouble and the two densely populated localities of Shias, Hasan Abad and Zadibal, were burnt. Oppression appears to have taken the simple form of communal revenge on Kashmiri Muslims for the sufferings previously endured by the Sikhs in India at the hands of Aurangzeb. The shawl trade was no doubt in flourishing state during the Sikh rule out in the ultimate analysis it was heavily taxed which contributed to the decay of the famous industry.

During the Sikh rule, the province was administered by the governors appointed by the Lahore Darbar. The governors were frequently changed and during this short period of twenty years, as many as ten governors were appointed in succession. According to Sir Walter Lawrence, "it must have been an intense relief to all classes in Kashmir to see the downfall of the evil rule of the Pathans, and to none was the relief greater than to the peasants, who had been cruelly fleeced by the rapacious Sirdars of Kabul. I do not mean to suggest that the Sikh rule was benign or good, but it was at any rate better than that of the Pathans".<sup>5</sup> But the distress, misery and agony of the people continued ruler after ruler. Several famines during the governorship of Sher Singh took a huge toll of life due to miss-government by Jamadar Khushal Singh. In 1835, three European visitors, Hugel, Vigne and Henderson vividly recorded the divide between the affluent aristocracy living in palatial places and the abject poverty of the common man.<sup>6</sup> Sikh rule was a continuation of the degeneration, poverty and deprivation of the people of Kashmir, worse than the Afghans.

The Muslims became the main target of Sikh rulers and they looked at the Kashmiri Muslims with suspicion. The Sikh rulers promulgated such orders which aimed at checking the emergence of a Muslim opposition in the valley. Agriculture and the shawl and the carpet industry had been ruined by a confiscatory rate of taxation. Fields were left untended because most of the production was taken away. A succession of famines, floods, fires and the plague made things worse & valley's economy also got ruined. The death of Ranjit

Singh in 1839 was the beginning of the end of this rule. His successors inherited neither his guile nor his valour and were defeated in the battle of Sabraon after which the British captured Lahore. Kashmir awaited another change of masters. The British found a convenient tool in an ambitious, wily local ruler. The well being of the Kashmiri people was irrelevant, their feelings were ignored.

### **Dogra Rule: A Phase of Transition**

With the acquisition of the Kashmir by the Dogras in 1846, the people of Kashmir entered a new era of their history. Now the political domination was not only that of foreigners but of non-Muslims. This brought the two elements, national identity and religious identity, together in conflict with the dominant power of the times. Now it was not just the Kashmiri who was up against a foreign rule but a Muslim trying to break open the shackles of non-Muslim power. The fact of Kashmiri Hindus sharing a comfortable relation with the rulers emphasized the religious identity. The Dogra Rajputs were no doubt autocrats who vainly treated the valley as a conquered territory, its people deserving no mercy and no higher status than those of serfs.

Gulab Singh, a Dogra from the Jammu region, was made raja of Jammu by the Sikh ruler Maharaja Ranjit Singh in 1820. Within the next two decades, Gulab Singh conquered Ladakh and Baltistan. By the Treaty of Amritsar which was signed on March 15, 1846, Gulab Singh was recognized as the Maharaja of Jammu and Kashmir both by the powerless Sikh durbar and the British government. The Valley of Kashmir, sacred in Hindu mythology and famous all over the world, became once again subject to Hindu rulers, who were non-Kashmiris. Dogra rule under Gulab Singh for ten years was a sad story of greed, repression and exploitation by a feudalistic regime. People were deprived of their hereditary rights of ownership and occupancy over the land and king became the owner of all lands, forests and even mountains. People became tenants and paid revenue to king and their resentment was ruthlessly suppressed. Maharaja's greed, corrupt officials and rule of money lenders squeezed the population. Kashmir valley's Muslim population faced religion-based discrimination. Their mosques and shrines were taken over by the government and they were treated as a subject race. The peasants of Kashmir valley were not allowed proprietary rights over land and had to provide forced labour (beggar) without any payment. This not only hurt the people of Kashmir but it took human toll while carrying load to the frontier in inclement weather and due to inhuman treatment. Taxes on the peasantry were high and the oppressive bureaucracy was named by outsiders particularly Dogras and Panjabis. Muslims were excluded from the military and state services, and commerce was dominated by Dogras. Low level jobs went to the indigenous Brahmins, known as Kashmiri Pandits.

Sir Walter Lawrence described the condition of Kashmiris very miserable during hated Dogra rule and writes, "I found the people sullen, desperate and suspicious. They had been taught for many years that they were serfs without any rights but with many disabilities. They were forced by soldiers to plough and the same soldiers attended at harvest time. They were dragged from their houses to carry Gilgit and every official had a right to their labour and property. The great Urdu poet Dr. Sir Mohammad Iqbal<sup>RA</sup> later expressed their sentiments in verse:

"Their fields, their crops, their streams,  
Even the peasants in the vale;  
They sold, they sold all, alas!  
How cheap was the sale."<sup>7</sup>

The Dogra rule lasted for more than hundred years with Gulab Singh (1846-1857), Ranbir Singh (1857-1885), Pratap Singh (1885-1925) and Hari Singh (1925-1952). Pratap Singh's reign is remembered for bringing Kashmir into the modern era. He died in 1925 and was succeeded by his nephew, Hari Singh, who began his career with a substantial law suit in London. At home he permitted court favourites to pack senior appointments in the administration with Dogra Rajputs, thereby further antagonizing the Muslims of the valley. Hari Singh, who was considered to be an enlightened ruler in comparison to his forefathers, was also not free from religion bias. It is recorded that right from the coronation of Maharaja Hari Singh up to November 1931, twenty Kashmiris were deprived of their Jagirs which valued from 5,000 to 10,000 each. These jagirs were offered to other twenty persons among whom 18 were Hindu Rajputs and the rest two belonged to Muslim community. While the Maharajas confiscated the rent-free grants enjoyed by the Muslim religious persons and institutions but they established the Dharmarath trust to which they endowed high amount of revenue for the promotion of Hinduism. Furthermore Muslims were subjected to pay taxes known as Mandri and Ashgal, Mandri was meant for the maintenance of temples and Ashgal for the support of Hindu priests.<sup>8</sup>

### **Political Awakening and Kashmiri Identity (Kashmiriyat)**

Being a Muslim –majority state ruled by the Hindu Dogra Hari Singh, the religion could not become the passport of identity of people of Jammu and Kashmir. The oppressive rule of king created a conducive environment for blurring the boundaries among the different linguistic and ethnic communities in the state and

thereby constructed the secular and plural identity of the state. Despite the fact that there was potential for communal and ethnic conflict, neither religion nor ethnicity was given much space in the politics of Jammu and Kashmir. The identity of the state at that time was neither communal nor ethnic rather it was secular, shared and inclusive. It was multiple, multi-layered, plural, open and flexible.<sup>12</sup> In the state of Jammu and Kashmir, the identities were generated through historical processes. The appropriation of regulating social relationships by the state forced social groups to seek means and ways to control state power. The history of the invasions, tyranny and oppression was bound to create in the minds of the people of the state an intense desire for self-government and democracy. Ever since the Mughal conquest, the Kashmiris had not participated in any way in the government of the state and this failed to create among the population any sense of identity of interests with the ruling group. This sense of discrimination resulted in the re-assertion of the Kashmiris.<sup>13</sup> The parochial policies of the Dogra rulers aroused within Muslims political consciousness and awareness of their majority status. This impelled the early construction of identities along ethno-religious alignments, Dogra versus Kashmiris and Muslim versus Hindus. However, this does not mean other identities were not in the making. There were several and the criteria mostly depended upon who were the perceived beneficiaries of the state patronage.<sup>14</sup>

The dawn of political awakening in Kashmir can be traced back to the 1930s. For the first time in its long history, the people began to realize their rights and put pressure on the Dogra regime. Muslim awakening began with the objectives to improve their standard of life and to overcome discrimination. The Lord Viceroy, Lord Reading visited the state in 1924. Muslims organized a demonstration on this occasion and submitted a memorandum signed by many prominent members of the Kashmiris Muslim community, including the Mirwaiz Kashmir which outlined the grievances not only in the context of the state silk factory but in all aspects of their life. It called for an increase in the number of Muslim share in the state services, improvement in Muslim education, land reform, protection of the Muslim religious establishments from Hindu encroachments, the abolitions of all forms of forced labour, equitable distribution of government contracts to all communities and a state constitution providing for a Legislative Assembly in which the Muslims were properly represented. The memorandum provided an outline programme of reform which any effective organized opposition to the Maharaja's autocracy could hardly fail to follow. The struggle for India's freedom influenced the Kashmiris who staged, in 1931, a rebellion to liberate themselves from ancient slavery by demanding basic human and political rights and removal of innumerable grievances in political and economic fields. It was an upheaval unknown in contemporary history and like a terrific storm carried everything before it. It was led by a group of Muslim nobles led by a religious preacher, Mirwaiz Mohammad Yusuf Shah, which the Muslim community respected as a holy man and a hereditary leader. Men and women of all classes and ages were involved in the movement and youths and zealots were conspicuous among them. The plight of Kashmiri Muslims found its expression in newspapers of Lahore (Punjab), Zamindar and Chatan, two prominent papers became the voice of Kashmir. The popular uprising of 1931 was a manifestation of the self-assertion of Kashmiri identity (Kashmiriyat).<sup>15</sup>

While the process of politicization of the Muslim community of Kashmir was a result of the consciousness of their deprived situation and utter powerlessness, the politicization of the Hindu community was a step towards maintenance of their position of dominance. That is why the political movement that took shape in Kashmir in 1930's was not much enthusiastic participation of Kashmiri Hindus. The early assertion of the Muslim identity in Kashmir was a consequence of the socio-economic situation in which the community was placed during this Dogra rule. The condition of the Kashmiris during this rule was quite pitiable. There was widespread poverty, and the people particularly peasants and the artisans faced a lot of hardships. The objective situation, in which Kashmiri Muslims were placed, in comparison to the dominant classes which were mainly Hindus both from Kashmir as well as from Jammu, led Kashmiris to perceive their deprivation in terms of their religious identity. In the early thirties, a linkage was established between the backwardness and deprivation of Kashmiris as a community and their religious identity. The prejudice in the attitude of the rulers towards the Kashmiris was interpreted in terms of difference in Kashmiris religious identity as compared to that of the rulers and the dominant classes. Sheikh Abdullah referred to early perceptions of Kashmiris including his own, as regards the religious identity of Kashmiris vis-à-vis the rulers as, "I started to question why the Muslims were singled out for such treatment? We constituted the majority and contributed the most towards the state; still we were continuously oppressed why? How long would we put up with it? Was it because majority of government servants were non-Muslims or because most of the lower grade officers who dealt with the public were Kashmir Pandits? I concluded that the ill-treatment of Muslims was an outcome of the religious prejudice."<sup>16</sup>

It was with respect to the Muslim identity of the people only that the first expression of the mass discontent could be perceived in Kashmir. On July 13, 1931, the mass expression of the people of Kashmir manifested a politicized Muslim identity. The spontaneous political response was the manifestation of the deep-rooted discontent of the masse against the Dogra administration. Furthermore the revolt of 1931 was an authentic revolt of the people of the state against the political, social and economic oppression by the ruling

class and their henchmen. The rebellious elements were the Muslim intelligentsia, the trading class and the peasantry who were groaning under the feudal rule. Latter this revolt took a substantiative political and economic form and had to help Kashmiris rise above their Muslim consciousness. In sharpening the Muslim consciousness of Kashmir, the role of Muslims outside the valley was quite significant. Kashmiri émigrés living in the Punjab had established a forum called the All-India Kashmir Muslim Conference, based in Lahore, started mobilizing Muslims of Punjab and with their help had initiated an organized campaign in support of the Muslims of Kashmir. The organization was actively involved not only in campaigning for the Muslims of Kashmir but also in providing them material and emotional support.

## II. CONCLUSION

From the preceding discussion, what is clear is that the people of Kashmir were exploited discriminately during different periods of rule. The Mughal period started with the vilification of the Kashmiris. During this period, Kashmiris were deprived of the ownership of their land, the emperor was declared as sole proprietor of all cultivable land in the valley and the Kashmiri landlords were entered in the revenue registers as tenants. During the Afghans period, Kashmir again became the hotbed of intrigues and conspiracies. Both Muslims & Pandits suffered a lot. Sikhs rule was also a period of cruel reign and anarchy. Flagrant tyranny was common everywhere which gave a severe blow to Kashmiri identity. This helped in the building up of national consciousness among Kashmiris. Although Kashmir still remained closely tied to its Muslim identity but the distinctiveness of being Kashmiris as victims as against Afghans as perpetrators became sharp. Instead of Islam becoming the source of identity and clash nationality became the dominant sub-consciousness theme. Due to discriminative policies of Dogra rulers with Kashmiris especially Muslims, created in the minds of the people of the state an intense desire for self government and democracy. Ever since the Mughal conquest, the Kashmiris had not participated in any way in the government of the state and this failed to create among the population any sense of identity of interests with the ruling group. This sense of discrimination resulted in the reassertion of Kashmiri identity.

## END NOTES

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