

Kashmir and Scarcity in Historical Perspective with Special Reference to the 19th and 1st Half of the 20th Century

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ABSTRACT

Food scarcities were an inseparable part of Kashmir's past and not a novel feature of the period under reference. However, the food scarcities were more because of the nature and the policies of the state, particularly during 19th and the 1st half of the 20th century. There is no wonder in seeing the lack of initiative from the side of the state and its agencies towards the amelioration of the conditions of the cultivators and the artisans (*shawl-bafs*) during the period of crises. It was only when the food scarcities had spiralled out of control on account of certain natural disasters and translated or seemed to translate into famines that the state took some half-hearted measures to quell the crisis. However, the state instead of formulating any concrete policy for banishing the famines forever provided only a cosmetic treatment to the problem. Also it is pertinent to bring to light the fact that the scarcities in Kashmir were not only mostly ignored by the indigenous chroniclers who busied themselves with writing the political narratives but official documents also didn't accord any special treatment to famines. In this paper, therefore, an effort has been made to understand the interventionist role of the state during the food crises by analysing and interpreting the information gathered from a variety of sources both conventional and non-conventional, in light of different theoretical perspectives.

Key Words : Scarcities, Productivity, Embankments, Relief, Dearth

INTRODUCTION

Before discussing the role of the state vis-a-vis food scarcities in Kashmir during the period under reference it is worth mentioning here that famine relief has a very long history in the Indian sub-continent. One of the very first treatises on government, written more than two thousand years ago and commonly attributed to Kautilya, pronounces that when famine threatens, a good king should "institute the building of forts or water-works with the grant of food, or share (his) provisions (with them), or entrust the country (to another king)".¹ According to Srivastava, "the chief methods of famine relief adopted by Indian rulers included free distribution of raw grains, opening of free kitchens, opening of public grain stores to the people, remission of revenue, payment of advances, remission of other taxes, construction of public works,

canals and embankments, sinking of wells, encouragement of migration and increase in the pay of soldiers".² Even sold children in the time of Shah-Jahan are reported to have been ransomed by the Government and restored to their parents.³ Also interventions on behalf of the state or any other institution of authority during food scarcities were also not uncommon in the other parts of the world. While as China had the most extensive granary system of the pre-modern world⁴ to deal with food scarcities, in Medieval Europe the Catholic Church demanded a moral economy⁵ and condemned merchants who over-charged consumers for basic food.⁶ Thus, without any exaggeration it can be said that the state and other authoritative institutions indulged in paternalistic actions to provide relief to the distressed people long before the coming into being of a modern state which derived its power directly from the people.

Likewise, since antiquity Kashmiri rulers had devised schemes which were long lasting in nature and also provided some sort of famine relief to the affected people to help them to withstand the crisis. As back as 8th century A.D., *Lalitaditya*, the most celebrated king of Karkota dynasty, is reported to have constructed water-wheels across several villages settled on the alluvial plateaus along the banks of river Jhelum to control and distribute its water.⁷ Canal construction and reclamation by drainage of swampy lands was accorded high priority. *Lalitaditya* is also said to have constructed a large cauldron from which one lakh people could be feed daily probably for the famine victims.⁸ For enhancing cultivation which had declined due to waterlogged condition of the valley, *Avantivarman* is reported to have kept his treasury at the disposal of his able engineer *Suyya*, to regulate the course of the river and drain the valley of the excessive water.⁹ Prior to his reign only a few canals had been constructed but he made the optimum use of the available water resources and founded a number of canals. *Kalhana* has beautifully metaphorised this process and writes, “*He made different streams with their waves which are (like) the quivering tongues (of snakes), move about according to his will, just as a conjurer (does with) the snakes*”.¹⁰ Moreover, *Suyya* had embankments raised to a height sufficient to resist a normal flood. He also constructed stone embankments for the river at strategic spots susceptible to inundation – breaches and to lower high pressure on the river the supply of water was procured for the irrigation of the villages’ earlier dependent on rainfall.¹¹ The Sultanate period, especially during the reign of *Zain-ul-Abidin* (1420-1470 A.D), witnessed tremendous development of the state on account of the construction of canals which brought additional land under cultivation and also helped in fighting floods which were frequent and caused great damage to the crops.¹² The cumulative effect of this extensive canalization was manifest in the increase of productivity.¹³ Granaries were built to store the grain (revenue) realized in kind.¹⁴ *Jonaraja* the court chronicler of *Zain-ul-Abidin* says, “*The granaries are indeed like the breasts of the earth from which the people derive their nourishment*”.¹⁵ As a part of his famine policy, *Zain-ul-Abidin* provided tax rebate in times of famines. During the great famine of 1460, he reduced the state share in the affected areas to one-seventh and in less affected areas to one-fourth of the gross produce from the normal rate of one-third.¹⁶ The Sultan also “remitted

all the loans which the poor cultivators had borrowed from the money-lenders during the famine crisis. So on humanitarian grounds, the king cancelled the deeds on *bujra* (brick-bark leaves) drawn up between the creditors and debtors”.¹⁷ However, the developmental policies of the state came to a halt when Kashmir came under the rule of the Mughals who concerned themselves more with the beautification of the valley than its agricultural development. The large numbers of canals built/ constructed during the Mughal times were to supply water to the Mughal gardens built for the amusement of the rulers and not to irrigate to paddy fields.¹⁸ Unlike their predecessors, the Mughals took no long term measures; there are apparently no references to dredging operations – manual or otherwise, in the Jhelum. No funds were allocated for the clearance of its beds; nor were alternate channels provided and nor were either of its banks repaired or constructed. One single reference points to their having erected enormous embankments to reclaim land from *Wular Lake*. These embankments still preserve the memory of *Jahangir* and *Shahjahan*.¹⁹ Highlighting the relief measures introduced by *Akbar*, at the time of the famine of 1597, *Abul-Fazl* reports, “By his orders twelve places were prepared in the city for the feeding of the great and the small (i.e. young and the old). Every Sunday, a general proclamation was made in the *Idgah* and some went from the palace and bestowed food and presents on the applicants. Eighty thousand necessitous persons received their heart’s desires”.²⁰ The Mughal state also allocated cash grants for distribution among the famine hit-people and provided labour to famine stricken people, however, while as the benefits of the grants were generally reaped by the corrupt officials, the relief measures could provide labour only for a fraction of the society. Also there is no evidence of remission of the land tax, in full or in part, on the crop damaged by flood. Thus, although there is no denying the fact that it was during the Mughal days that food grains were imported into the valley during extreme food scarcities²¹ but unlike their predecessors the Mughals wrongly perceived that famines could be ended by temporary relief measures and therefore did not seek a more lasting solution to the problem of famines. The Afghans also did not take any concrete measure to prevent the famines in the valley. In fact the governors during this period were much colder towards developmental work and welfare measures during famines than the Mughals were. The only references of

famine relief during their rule were those of the distribution of food to some few in the cities, remission of a part of revenues which however, benefitted only some few owing to the corrupt nature of the revenue officials. Thus over all it was a period of negligence in developmental activities and irrigation was no exception. Kashmir during this period was occupied rather than governed. The sole aim of the rulers was to extract money and fleece the peasantry. It is therefore, no wonder to find vast proportions of paddy fields idle for want of labour and irrigation²² and consequently considerable fall in rice production.²³

During the 19th and 1st half of the 20th century, no doubt, Kashmir witnessed two major political transformations – from the Afghans it was taken over by the Sikhs in 1819 and the Sikh rule came to an end with the installation of the Dogra dynasty by the British in 1846 – however, the response of the state towards the food scarcities prior to the direct colonial intervention after 1880s remained quite akin to what it was during the Mughal rule. This was so because the political transformations simply replaced the rulers at the top without bringing any considerable change in the nature of its polity which continued to be feudal-like upto the very end of the Dogra Raj in 1947.²⁴ The exploitative policies continued unabated²⁵ and it would not be an exaggeration to say that during the period under reference Kashmir was treated like a colony – the wealth of Kashmir was drained to Lahore under the Sikh rule²⁶, while as Jammu nearly acted as a metropolis during the Dogra rule²⁷ – and its people were stereotyped as the ‘Other’²⁸ to be least cared about. Therefore, it is not surprising to see that the rulers were almost apathetic towards the development of economic and social overheads and accorded least priority to the welfare of the people. Besides the colonial mindset of the rulers, the other key factors which structured the response of the state towards food scarcities were – the physical geography of the region,²⁹ rulers and overwhelming majority of collaborators belonging to an altogether different social matrix³⁰ and the followers of a religion which was not only different from that of the subject population but was seen as a rival one as well.³¹ Whereas religious bias killed the spirit or motivation of doing any good to the paupering masses, the mountainous nature of the state made it virtually impossible for the state to import food without investing a huge amount as transportation cost. Societal pressures on the rulers,

especially that of the majority community, too were virtually absent upto as late as 30s of the 20th century giving them enough latitude to spent the state exchequer on unproductive things.

During the course of 19th century and prior to the direct colonial intervention Kashmir faced two great famines, one during the Sikh rule in 1832 popular or infamous by the name Sher Singh,³² the then Sikh governor of Kashmir and another in 1877-78 during the Dogra rule under the reign of Maharaja Ranbir Singh.³³ Notwithstanding the responsibilities of the state in translating the situation of food scarcity, which of course were induced by climatic disasters,³⁴ into famine, however, the state’s stance reflected by its approach of inaction was that the famines were largely a result of a series of natural disasters compounded by some administrative errors.³⁵ The rulers hardly considered institutional and infrastructural bottlenecks as the key factors in the famines and thus resorted to cosmetic measures to remedy the crisis.³⁶ Not only was there absence of investments on construction of new irrigation canals but the condition of the existing canals also deteriorated for the want of attention from the state. However, during the time of Maharaja Pratap Singh and Maharaja Hari Singh the contemporary literature does mention the repairing and remolding of few canals.³⁷

However, once the situation took a high toll of life³⁸ and the famine threatened to depopulate the region that certain relief measures were initiated by the rulers to help the peasants to tide over situations of exceptional distress. Here it would not be out of place to mention that the state did not act out of any paternalistic concern but was dragged into action by the compulsions of political economy. Until the end of the 19th century Kashmir was only sparsely populated, agricultural density was low and therefore the relative importance of ‘man’, the cultivator and generator of wealth, in its agrarian economy was considerably more than the ‘land’ itself. Depopulation therefore, was bound to leave the land uncultivated; substantially decreasing the land revenue to the state in future and it was for this reason more than anything else that the rulers jumped into action and initiated certain relief measures. During the famine of 1832, the Sikh governor under instruction from the Lahore *darbar*³⁹ initiated certain relief measures which included remission of revenues in part, distribution of food grain to the victims and making grain available to the cultivators. Even loans were provided to the distressed people to start the

cultivation once again. However, not only was the relief work impeded by the hilly geography of the state, crippling the state's desire of importing food, but the collaborators of the state also acted in a way to cash the maximum benefits as they embezzled much public money and hoarded grain.⁴⁰

The famine of 1878 survived in popular memory for a long time.⁴¹ Depopulation, migration⁴² and the abandonment of cultivated land, along with exactions by several social groups certainly had a substantial adverse effect on the economy of Kashmir.⁴³ From the available evidence it appears that the valley continued to display signs of depopulation and shrinkage in agricultural production during the decades following that famine.⁴⁴ Lawrence, in the course of his settlement in the state witnessed/observed extensive waste lands and tracts of lands lying uncultivated. A large portion of the industrious inhabitants- the *shawl bafs* also left the country to the neighbouring state of Punjab.⁴⁵ Yet, the Dogra state remained unmoved and the corrupt bureaucracy⁴⁶ was asked to frustrate every attempt to diminish revenue as the pretext of crop failure. Even worse was the lack of positive intervention from the state- though the export of food grains was prohibited, the imports into the famine affected areas were only marginal and there was near apathy from the state to control the prices. Nevertheless the state has objectified the population and virtually dissecting itself from the general well being of its subjects remained nearly unaffected from paradigm shifts in British states policy to counter scarcities and famines. While as the administrative measures of the British govt. had the explicit purpose of buying, storing and selling grain to combat price rises and scarcities and to prevent profiteering and hoarding, monopolizing grain trade in the valley needs to be understood in a proper perspective and should not be mistaken as a benevolent measure of the state to keep the prices in check. It was purely because of the political economy expediency and not the result or concern of moral economy. The state acted as a sole grain trader⁴⁷ for apparently 2 reasons. Ist, the Kashmiri Pandit citizenry of Srinagar had to be feed at cheap rates⁴⁸ as they composed the vocal and the only official community of the whole population and second, the industrious workers had to be provided grain at cheap rates.⁴⁹ This system, more specifically, had been intended primarily to maintain the shawl weavers of Srinagar whose product had brought an annual revenue of between Rs. six lakh and seven lakh to the state.⁵⁰ However, with

the decline in the demand for Kashmiri shawls after the outbreak of the Franco-Prussian war of 1870, the financial rationale for the system disappeared. Nevertheless it was continued at the behest of the large and influential Kashmiri Pandits grown used to obtaining cheap rice. Even among the urban beneficiaries of this system, the Kashmiri Pandits were among the few who did in fact obtain *shali* (rice) at the state rate, while most of the poorer classes in Srinagar often paid twice as much.⁵¹

British and the need for Intervention:

Moreover, while as the famines provided an opportunity to the British for ideological consolidation of the Raj who believed that superiority of the British rule needed to be established on the basis of 'the humane and enlightened policy of the British government which would have the effect of demonstrating to the people that British rule was different and not based on a mere coercion but on a fixed and known system of laws, giving equal security of property', the Dogras hardly bothered to use the philanthropic and relief measures as a tool to legitimize their rule or devise an ideology based on certain principles to sustain its rule. It always relied on a repressive-coercive apparatus, a strong police-military network, so that the suppressed people could not raise their voice against hoarders and make grain available to the people. The government was never driven by the idea that it was right to interfere in the grain market to prevent a 'fictitious scarcity'.⁵² The response of the state to the situation of dearth opened up a number of issues viz. the question of regulation of grain supplies, and more crucially the conflict between the legitimacy of indigenous law and the principles of political economy. No doubt the interventionist role of the state at least in the grain market and rural credit market had been the most effective traditional check on vulnerabilities in pre-colonial India which the company also continued for some time, however, the interventionist role played by the Dogra state was but an effort to keep its grip tight on the masses. Notwithstanding that the non-interventionist role of the British state particularly in grain market eroded some traditional checks on the vulnerability without providing dependable alternatives, the intervention of the state in the market was in itself the chief reason of victimizing the peasant. Therefore, consequences of politico-economic decisions were situational and to a considerable degree shaped by the conditions prevailing in the concerned region.

Up to the late 19th century there was hardly any influence of British imperial ideologies on Kashmir and the administrative policies were highly personnel. The main motivation in fighting the famine was not humanitarianism or religious sanction but financial expediency of the state. This was so agriculture was the back bone of the economy and the cultivator the engine of surplus production. The famine threatened the state's viability. However after 1880's there had been a paradigm shift with regard to the policy of the state regarding food scarcities. This was so because the Dogra rule was contemporary to the most formative phase of British colonialism, worked more as an appendage of British Empire than an independent state and witnessed direct colonial intervention in its political economy after 1880s.⁵³ Therefore, it would not be inappropriate to say that Dogra state's response to food scarcities particularly after the introduction of the Resident was considerably structured by the famine policy of the British colonial state.⁵⁴ For example, it is towards the late 19th century that the famous agrarian settlement known as Lawrence's Settlement was carried out which considerably reduced the burden on peasantry. It was during the time of Maharaja Hari Singh that the land revenue was reduced to one-fourth.⁵⁵ And in 1933, the peasants were made owner of land.⁵⁶ Moreover, many irrigation canals were remolded by Maharaja Hari Singh which proved effective in increasing agriculture, among them the most important are Zainagir canal, Dadi canal and Nandi canal.⁵⁷ No less significant was the construction of Jehlum Valley Cart Road which gave a tremendous flip to internal and external trade in giving birth to additional sources of wealth as for want of wheeled traffic many commercial crops and products did not figure in external trade of Kashmir prior to the construction of Jehlum Valley Cart Road. Many cash crops namely, walnuts, almonds, apples and many other fruits could be now exported in appreciable quantities. The developmental projects and a number of offices and schools opened after 1880's provided additional sources of livelihood to various categories of people. Money economy which was only skin deep until 1880, started making significant progress. As a result some sections of peasantry, if not all, could now afford to make payment of land revenue in cash, and were thus saved from *sudhkhar*s and *waeddars* (money-lenders). Last but not least from 1880, modern medicines were introduced with the opening of modern dispensaries to fight epidemic diseases. It was on account of these various reasons

that the deaths on account of food shortages were arrested after 1890 and the population of Kashmir started registering growth. For example, in 1891 the population increased to nine and a half lakh, in 1901 to eleven and a half lakh, in 1911 to thirteen lakh, in 1921 to fourteen lakh and in 1931 it raised to fifteen lakh and seventy thousand.⁵⁸ The 20th century thus gradually paved way for some relieved conditions for the peasantry due to the mass consciousness but more because of the British pressure. But in real sense the peasantry actually got a sigh of relief only after the termination of Dogra period when acts like Big Landed Estates Abolition Act of 1950 and the Distressed Debtors Relief Act of 1949 were passed along with the programme of Land to the tiller⁵⁹ which undoubtedly bettered the lot of the peasant community and increased the cultivation and agricultural production. Prior to 1949, there was no marked increase in agriculture which can be borne by the fact that in 1901-02, the land revenue collection was Rs. 1526691⁶⁰ which hardly increased to Rs. 2078358 in 1915-16⁶¹ and Rs. 3001000 in 1939-40.⁶²

Conclusion:

Thus we find that the period that preceded the revolution in institutional and technological structures of Kashmir's agricultural sector in particular and other sectors in general, is underlined by perpetual food shortages on account of both natural and man-made factors. While on the one hand untimely snows and excessive rains damaged the staple crop of Kashmir causing acute shortage of the staple food rice, the failure of the state and the society to anticipate the inevitable and thus equip itself with buffer stocks to meet the forcible eventualities was no less a factor in causing food famines especially when the valley was surrounded by the ring of inaccessible mountains and there were no modern means of transport and the prices of the imported grain were cost prohibitive to be borne by the pauperized masses.

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