

Kashmiri Women through the History

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Abstract

The prosperity and growth of a family, community, ethnic group or nation largely depend upon the status of females in the respective society, the respect given to them, and the liberty they enjoy in playing their roles in developmental processes. It is not only that women constitute about half of the total world population but they also mould the habits, attitudes of males and determine the finer values and cultural ethos of the people in which they live. Thus women are the cardinal stone on which the main structure of the society rests. Kashmir is a developing region with enormous biotic and abiotic resources. Unfortunately, the utilization of these resources is more of an exploitative nature. The natural endowment in general and human resources in particular have not been used judiciously for the welfare of the people. In the tradition-bound society of Kashmir, women are denied their due and are not considered equals still. Female subordination is an essential feature of human life in all contemporary societies, although the degree and expression of male domination vary. The structural subordination of women to men becomes more manifested when the phenomenon is considered in the context of rural women. Similarly, Kashmiri rural women do not enjoy the same position as compared to their urban counterparts. They work in scorching heat, pouring rain and snowfall.

Keywords: Ethnic group, cultural ethos, cardinal stone, exploitative, subordination.

Introduction

During the ancient Vedic period (2500-1500 B.C.), women in Kashmir had considerable freedom to move about in the family and they were active members of society. In public affairs, they were educated like boys. Marriages used to take place at a certain age of 16 or 17. They had an effective voice in the selection of their lifepartners. In the Age of Brahmins (1500-2500 B.C.), gradual changes in the situation of women had started. According to Altekar, girls who went through a course of education were commonly from the higher sections of society. The age of girls continued to be 16 at marriage and they had some choice in the selection of their life partners. Divorce was permitted to the wife though it was not a common phenomenon (Altekar, A.S., 1958).

It was in the age of Suras and Epics (500 B.C. to A.D. 500) that the condition of women changed considerably. Certain forces in society began to clamour for early marriage at 9 to 10 years of age. The procreation of a son became a religious necessity for he alone could discharge certain ritual obligations to the ancestors. Girls Education was ignored and as such young brides ceased to have any voice in the marriage partners' selection. Widow marriage was opposed. The practice of 'sati' was gradually established by 700 AD (Kapddia, K.M., 1958) The theory of perpetual tutelage

of women was clearly formulated by MANU- the lawgiver of Hindu society, according to which a woman was to depend on his father in the childhood, on husband/ brothers in the young age and on her sons in the old age (Indra,1955).

In the ancient period, Kashmiri women had a lot of independence, a lot of authority, and a lot of responsibility which earned them a high social rank. Both members shared life's joys and sorrows equally. Sometimes, women were worshiped. During a festival in the bright half of *Phalguna*(Phagun), the NilmataPurana prescribed that “ None should be made ill-disposed on that day. Happy women, well-fed, well-dressed, well-scented, well-anointed, and decorated with ornaments should play in the company of men(Kapoor, M.L., 1983).

The Rajatarangini speaks of a number of women belonging to the higher sections of society playing prominent and sometimes decisive roles in politics. Instances of women of lesser status taking part in the country's politics are not lacking. They'd made their appearance from the domestic into the political stage, were free, possessed land and other immovable property. They used to run their own estates and even fought as generals and commanders in command of troops on the battlefield. Kashmiri women of early times possessed lovely interests. They loved to be gaily attired and had invented styles in dress and in the makeup of hair which indicated a high level of culture. In sculpture and literature, they are often depicted wearing jackets to safeguard themselves against severe cold, which serves as evidence that during those days the art of sewing was not unknown. The lower parts of the body including legs were wrapped up either in a piece of long cloth which was tied to the waist or in a sewn garment not very different from which is used by rustic womenfolk in India today (Kapoor, M.L., 1983).

R.S. Pandit, a well-known Pandit in the courtroom of Kalyan (11th Century), quotes in his book, ‘River of Kings’ while describing the Kashmiri women, their beauty, and accomplishments. The poet tells that they spoke Sanskrit fluently. But in later periods Hindu society became less liberal and denied higher education to women based on the fact that education was not conducive to the general welfare of the community. By the very beginning of the Christian Era, Vedic knowledge was closed to women. Though they enjoyed freedom but were not without the exploitation of society and man (Pandit, R.S., 1935).

According to Rajataranagini, child marriages, and unequal marriages were in practice. The practice of moral degradation was prevalent. Queens and concubines from all grades flocked to the kings' seraglios, and aristocrats followed their lead. Polygamy was extremely common at that time among the rich and carried the stamp of social approval. Usually, the ruling princes and the men of the upper classes had a plurality of wives. Widows and other women's remarriage was strictly prohibited. *Purdah* was uncommon in the society, especially among the women of the ruling class. *Purdah* had no place in that society in which women had achieved a substantial measure of freedom. But despite this, there was some sort of seclusion of women in the Hindu society. In the middle ages at least in Northern India, the seclusion of women had become the accepted norm among the higher classes. Such seclusion at least, among kings and nobles, was practiced even in the earlier times (Stein, M.A., 1900)

The heinous custom of ‘Sati’ was common. In fact, the death of a women’s husband meant social ruin. On the position of women, Alberuni remarks, “If a wife loses her husband by death, she cannot marry another man as long as she lives or to burn herself and eventually the latter is considered preferable because as a widow she is ill-treated as long as she lives” (Alberuni, 1910). Thus, all our evidence agrees on the point that it was the degraded and miserable plight of women in

Hindu society which encouraged this practice widely in India. There is also a reference in Rajataranginito the mother becoming a 'Sati' following the death of her only son. She had not perhaps committed it at the time of the death of her husband because her child was very small (Alberuni, 1910).

The custom of dedicating maidens for service in temples was another social feature. In Kashmir we find another reference to dancing girls (Nartakis) attached since ancient times. People have been flocking to the temples. On the causes of prostitution in India, Alberuni wrote, "The Hindus are not very severe in punishing whoredom. The fault, however, in this lies with the Kings, not with the nation. But for this, no Brahmin or a priest would suffer in their idol temples but the women who sing, dance, and play. The kings made them an attraction for their cities, a bait of pleasure for their subjects, for no other but financial reasons. They wanted to recover the expenses which their treasury had to spend on the army. These temple girls were taken as secondary wives or concubines (Stein, M.A, 1900).

Under Buddhism, the women of the Valley became freer and received better intellectual nourishment. Amid the 8th century, a new eclectic school of philosophy-Trika or Triad was brought into existence by Kashmiri thinkers. The two outstanding features of this were the worship of feminine divinities and the institution of the orders of female ascetics. With the spread of these doctrines, Kashmiri women gained importance and achieved a higher status. But as a rule, only upper-class women were allowed to vote and they were benefited. Thus in the ancient and early middle ages though, the Kashmiri women enjoyed sufficient freedom, also suffered certain drastic and unbearable disabilities.

Women under Muslim Rule

With the spread of Islam in Kashmir, the whole society underwent a great transformation. Islam gave women equal rights with men. Widowhood, 'Sati' and dedication of girls to temples ceased. Girls and married women claimed their rights to property. Women traffic was reduced. Purdah was introduced. During the entire Muslim rule, only women belonging to upper classes, Sayyads, Molvi, etc., and upper classes of the Shia community were able to afford the luxury of staying within the four walls of the house. The rest of them used to rub their shoulders with their husbands in farms, fields, orchards, or on rivers. Education was widely distributed among the well-to-do girls and ladies of the upper and middle class. The education of religious nature was imparted by the Molvis in Maktabas established in all the corners of the Valley. The cultured ladies like Sura, Hyat Khatun, Gul Khatun, and Habba Khatun took an active interest in establishing schools, monasteries, and mosques. Hindu girls were taught education in Pathshalas by the Pandits. Women from the lower socio-economic classes were illiterate for they could neither afford tuition and time to attend Maktabas, nor the society tolerate their creative literary talents. Early marriage for both boys and girls was favoured and it was a family matter rather than the choice of a boy or girl (Mohibul Hassan, 1969).

Women under Sikh Rule

The Muslim rule ended and Sikhs came in. They proved the worst masters. The economic condition became worst. Women took part in every economic activity with men to strengthen their economic status. They collaborated with their husbands or independently in agriculture and craft like Shansaz (comb making), weaving, Prazdozi (shoemaking), Boria-Bafi (mat making), poultry, pottery, fishing, and fish-drying, water-nuts collecting, river transport, shawl-making, bakery, wood-industries, corn

roasting, etc. They tended milk, sold milk and fruits, and worked as Khak-Kashan (clay-digger). They acted as midwives and professional singers. Whenever their husbands were put to doing forced labour (*Begar*) for months far off from their homes, they had to manage the affairs of their households. About 100,000 women were engaged in spinning during that rule (Sharma, D.C., 1983).

Women under Dogra Rule

The Sikhs who ruled for about 27 years were followed by Dogras. The Dogra rule was established and consolidated under the fostering care of British Imperialism. Dogras obtained Kashmir in 1846 AD as a gift from the advancing British in lieu of a paltry sum of Rupees seventy-five lakhs. The new masters could not prove better. They bent their energies partly to terrorize the harassed Kashmiris and partly to annex the frontier areas lying in the North. They took no interest in the moral and social upliftment of their subjects for many decades after their occupation of the Valley (Bazaz, P.N., 1959)

At the advent of Maharaja Ranbir Singh in 1858 AD Kashmiri women had lost everything due to the oppression and tyranny of their oppressors, who had stripped them of their physical and intellectual attractiveness refinements. In the long and unrelieved period of slavery, the Kashmiri majority of women forgot all about their past. During the Dogra regime, most of the Muslims became landless labourers working as serfs of the absentee landlords. Hard manual labour, squalor, early marriage, severe poverty, malnutrition, and low status in society gave birth to manifold diseases among women. They lost the bloom, the elegance, and the vigour that had previously made them conspicuous among the women of the East and for which world travelers had celebrated them (Bazaz, P.N., 1959).

Every misfortune and misery though long had an end. Throughout the reign of Partap Singh, when British Residency took over the charge of the entire administration they introduced new reforms in every sphere, administration, education, economy, etc. They took a keen interest in the welfare of women. The honour of pioneering a movement for rehabilitating Kashmiri women, for initiating them into the arts of civilization, and for rekindling in them the desire to live, must go to foreign Christian missionaries. In the teeth of ferocious opposition from both the Government of the Dogras and the superstitious elders of the Hindu and Muslim communities, the noble missionaries, with amazing fortitude, forbearance and patience undertook this most arduous task.

Christian missionaries succeeded in establishing the first Girl's school in Srinagar, regardless of the opposition of the people and authorities. Thence after the work made smooth advance year after year. The mission societies extended their sphere to towns like Baramula and Anantnag also. By virtue of various acts and statutes, discrimination among citizens on the ground of sex was abolished. Economic betterment occurred and special attention was paid to literacy, education, and health of women folk. The decade-1990 was celebrated as Women's Decade and various efforts were made to improve the situation of the women. Women entered higher educations and held official positions in various types of salaried jobs and occupations. The administrative and foreign services became open to them also. They were chosen for Legislative Assembly, Legislative Council, and Lok Sabha. They rubbed their shoulders with their menfolk in every walk of life. Today we see a bulk of Kashmiri women as physicians, surgeons, specialists in advanced fields of medical education, as engineers, architects, lecturers in colleges and universities, as teachers working in far-flung and remote areas, lawyers, magistrates, I.A.S. (Indian Administrative Service) and K.A.S. (Kashmir Administrative Service) officers. They are working zealously in every office (state as well as central), bank, etc.

They have distinguished themselves as Head of the Department of State, divisional and tehsil level, Principals of degree colleges and other professional colleges, in physical education as brilliant sportswomen, athletes, etc. In politics, Kashmiri women are working side by side with their menfolk. A good number of Kashmiri women are working in different parts of India and outside too in Gulf countries, European countries, U.S.A. and Canada, etc. In the field of handicrafts, cottage industries, etc. also women of Kashmir have won considerable fame.

To conclude, though their long history-Kashmiri women have had a variety of fortunes. They have reached to the pinnacles of splendor at times, establishing themselves as independent rulers and powerful queens-consort, as diplomats in peace and war, as commanders of armies, as thrifty landladies, as builders and reformers, and as preceptors of religious lore. In singing and dancing, they had earned fame in keeping homes. But progress did not have a continuous flow, the glory did not prove everlasting and they had to suffer many buffets at the hands of ill-fate. Times came when they fell on evil days and were gradually deprived of the rights previously enjoyed by them. In still darker days, they were enslaved both intellectually and physically. Finally, they regained respect and power again in this long journey.

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