

KASHMIR UNDER SIKHS - AN ANALYTICAL STUDY

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Abstract: Kashmir, one of the most blessed spots upon the earth, remained under the auspices of different dynasties from BC to AD 1947. The valley remained under the Sikh Rule (1819-1846). The territory stretched over a vast area, with Tibet, Kashgar and Ladakh in the east, Punjab in the north, Badakshan and Khorasan in the south and Afghanistan in the west. The occupation of the valley by the Sikhs shifted the bridle of reigns from Kabul to Lahore, which affected the destinies of the people badly. The valley during the period experienced the rule of Maharaja Ranjit Singh and his successors. The sources revealed that though they ruled with the prevalent administrative system, yet the people passed through sufferings and pain. The peasants left the land uncultivated, beggar (forced labour) increased, revenue exactions were multiplied, trade declined, industries doomed and economic resources of the valley were drained. His representatives in Kashmir also pursued the policy of unbounded repression and corruption with the active support of him.

Keywords: Yaqoob Shah Chak, Mughal Empire, Afghans, Muslim, The British, Ranjit Singh.

The history of rebellion in Kashmir is not new and dates back to sixteenth century when the last indigenous ruler was overthrown in Kashmir.

On the night of November 19th 1586, Yaqoob Shah Chak, the last independent king of Kashmir after being defeated by the Mughals, mounted the first Guerrilla attack on Mughal army. It was highly successful raid in which dozens of Mughal army men were chopped to death, entire treasury was looted and magnificent palace of Yusuf Shah, wherefrom Mughals ruled Kashmir, was burnt. After returning to his hideout along with his elated army, Yaqoob Shah Chak told his official army turned ragtag Guerrillas, "Independence is just a day away, as we will soon finish off the Mughals from Kashmir."

Unfortunately that tomorrow never came and 431 years have passed since that fateful attack, which started the culmination of armed struggle against foreign rule in Kashmir. Mughals were succeeded by Afghans, Sikhs, and Dogras etc.

Kashmir fate was sealed on October 16th 1586, exactly 431 years from today, when Mughal army invaded the independent country of Kashmir. Kashmir's last independent ruler Yaqoob Shah Chak couldn't hold back the onslaught of Mughals under the command of Qasim Khan. However, it was not because of Kashmiris being cowards, as they have thwarted many attempts of warriors like Mahmud of Ghaznavi, but due to the cunning internal conflicts, which still makes this battle go on indecisively.

Those who couldn't bear their motherland under foreign rule took up arms as that there was no scope of political solution. Mughals came down heavily against these insurgents. Yaqoob Shah Chak was arrested and finished off in exile, just like his father Yusuf Shah Chak. Not to be cowed down by the arrests, the insurgency moved on the next line of leadership, which included Malik Hassan, Mohammad Naji, Yusuf Khan and Abdul Khan. These were eliminated too but this armed struggle still continues and has evolved into the world's longest freedom struggle.

To quell the rebellion of this nation and diminish their fighting spirit, Mughals denied the entry of any Kashmiri into the army and encouraged the use of long cloak and Kangri (firepot). They further divided the Kashmiris into seven groups, to propagate their divide and rule policy. The same policy was later continued by Afghans banned wearing of arms by Kashmiris. Dogra ruler Ghulab Singh stopped a game like mimic warfare played with the help of slings and stones as he thought it encouraged fighting spirit in the Kashmiris.

Mughals ruled Kashmir for one hundred sixty seven long years, with the help of thirty five governors under rulers ranging from Akbar through Aurangzeb up to Ahmad Shah. These governors used to come, loot, plunder & go. There was no end to tyranny and any whimper of rebellion was crushed mercilessly. Numerous souls laid their life in the process for the sake of independence. Guru Tegh Bahadur, the ninth guru was so moved upon hearing the plight of these people that he too jumped in the arena. His protest unnerved the then ruler Aurangzeb who got the holy man beheaded on November 27, 1675 AD. Thus one of the greatest luminaries of its time entered the long list of martyrs of Kashmir.

Mughals used to call Kashmir as Baag I Khasa, (Garden of Elites), where they used to come for recreation and enjoyment. They built seven hundred gardens for this purpose, alongside continuous repression of Kashmiris.

Nevertheless, this monstrous Mughal rule came to an end in 1753 AD. People would have never wished the end of this rule if they had foreseen what was in store for them. Their simultaneous capture by Afghans proved to be a worst nightmare-coming-true. It was like jumping from frying pan into fire. Afghans crossed all boundaries of civilization—Killing, rape, plunder, loot, eyes gouging out, ears, noses been cut off, whipping was the order of the day. As goes the saying not even a damsel was safe in her house during this brutal Afghan rule. Amir Khan, one of the governors, even plundered seven hundred Mughal gardens. During this era too, the rebellion raised its head. One Sukh Jiwan tried to give respite to their brethren but he was defeated by Afghan governor Nur-u-Din Khan.

Nothing not even a simple stare in their eyes was tolerated by these Afghans. If Mughals invented Pheran (long cloak), then these Afghans made it mandatory for having two pockets on either side. It was for Afghan soldiers to mount on their shoulders and keep their feet in these pockets for ease particularly during crossing rivers.

Afghan governor Khuram Khan (1770-1777) during his second term quelled a rebellion raised by Kashmiris. Haji Karim Dad Khan (1776-1783) destroyed whole Kant family for intriguing against him with Raja Ranjit Dev, the ruler of Jammu. If Mughals indulged in suppression, Afghans employed violent suppression. Kashmiris were so much crushed and subjugated that Afghans needed only three thousand soldiers to control these meek souls, instead of minimum requirement of twenty thousand.

Mass migration of people particularly Kashmiri Pandits also took place in this era. The Afghan behavior was beautifully summarized in a Persian couplet which read as “**Sar Buridan Pesh in Sangin Dilan Qul Chidan Ast**” (These stone hearted people thought no more of cuttings of heads than of plucking a flower.

The reign of terror broke the patience of the peace loving people, and a deputation of Kashmiris led by Pandit Birbal Dhar & his son Pandit Raja Kak Dhar left for Lahore and fervently requested Maharaja Ranjit Singh to conquer Kashmir. Three prominent Muslims helped Birbal Dhar in his escape from the valley. They were Abdul Qadoos Gojwari, Malik Zulfiqar & Malik Kamran. In 1819 AD thirty thousand soldiers of Maharaja Ranjit Singh attacked Kashmir, defeated the Pathans, and the state became a part of Ranjit Singh's empire. On receipt of the news, Maharaja Ranjit Singh bestowed honours in Dhar family and Lahore was eliminated for three days, Sikh rule lasted for only twenty seven years and during this period ten governors administered the country one after another, out of whom the last two were Muslims.

The Sikh period of Kashmir history has been generally painted black by the chroniclers, who have definite sectarian overtones in their assessment of the period. But, the fact remains that the Sikhs gave Kashmir a better government than the Afghans. Records Young Husband, "The Sikhs who succeeded the Afghans were not so barbarically cruel, but they were hard and tough masters."

Invested with Hindu set of beliefs & credos, they in their objective actions were not religious bigots and intolerant the same way as the Sayyids and other Muslim rulers were. Sikhs were aware of the plight or the Kashmirian Hindus, who all through the beginnings of Muslim rule in Kashmir, were subjected to atrocious barbarities and cruelties. They were equally acquainted with the circumstances leading to the martyrdom of Guru Tegh Bahadur, who had fallen a prey to the forces of hate and fanaticism. The Sikhs have been in the vanguard of the glorious battle against religious tyrants and hate-mongers. They have a revealing history of tolerance, good sense and accommodation. Had Sikhs not been tolerant, they would have demolished the mosques built over the temple plinths and structures and also outrageously looted, plundered and killed men of other religions. But there are sufficient historical records available which establish that the Sikhs were more humane than the holiest of other religions and were far from inflicting afflictions and agonies on people of other faiths. They, no doubt, were harsh, but were not cruel; they were tough, but were not merciless; they were religious, but were not bigots.

That Dewan Moti Ram, the Sikh governor, closed the Jama Masjid for prayers has been exploited to the hilt by the Hindu and Sikh baiters. But they assiduously hide the fact that the Sikh Governor was forced to undertake the measure only when the reports poured in that the Muslims and their religious leaders in complicity with some outside Muslim elements were conspiring against the Sikh rule. It was not an act of bigotry on part of Sikhs, but only a measure to stop the use of a religious place for unholy activities. Had the Sikhs been bigots, they would have demolished the mosque actually built on the debris of a vandalized Buddhist church the same way as the Muslims in their frenzy dismantled numerous temples of the Hindus in Kashmir.

Phula Singh, a Sikh commander, is to have trained his guns on the Mir Ali Hamadani Mosque to destroy it. Be it said that the Sikh commander was within his rights to demolish the mosque as it was built only after destroying the temple of Kali Shree. As is well known tolerance has been the guiding star of the Hindus and their cultural model. Alarmed at the sight of the guns trained at the said mosque, the Muslim notables knocked at the doors of Birbal Dhar, who interceded on their behalf with the Sikh rulers to save the mosque from destruction. This Hindu endowed with generations of education, imbued with an ample fund of understanding and invested with a tolerant view of men & their affairs set a masterly precedent of establishing social & religious cohesion and harmony, which otherwise was torn to shreds by the Muslim zealots. Could it be asked who among the Sayyids interceded with Sikandar, the iconoclast, to stop the genocide of the Kashmirian Hindus? Could it again be asked who among the Muslims made even a slight attempt to deter the proselytizers from inflicting woes, miseries and privations on the Hindus only to convert them or decimate them? Could it be asked why the Hindus of Kashmir marched out of their land of genesis four times till the Afghan rule suffered a decline?

Did the Muslims forming the majority segment of total population ever rally for saving them from the traumatic experiences of leaving their homes & hearths under pressures from the religious bigots? Sikhs and many Hindus in corridors of power proved highly tolerant by not persecuting and torturing Muslims for re-conversion and also by not demolishing a single mosque.

Highly appreciative of Birbal Dhar's role in saving the mosque from getting vandalized, Sufi records, "It is to the lasting credit of Birbal Dhar that when a deputation of Muslims headed by Sayyid Hassan Shah Qadri Khanyari approached him to dissuade the Sikhs from destruction of the Khanaqah, He moved in the matter, used his influence and saved this historic structure from vandalism."

That the Sikh commander declared Pathar Masjid as the property of the state has been blown out of proportion only to discredit the Sikh rule. It was just a mild retaliatory step to remind the Muslims zealots that they also could be made to suffer religious persecution. The crimes of the Muslims in terms of destroying and vandalizing the historic structures of the Hindus are far greater in dimension than the declaration of Pathar Masjid as the property of the state. Sikandar established a government department to burn and destroy The Temple of Martand, a marvel of Hindu architecture. Shahab-ud-din looted and destroyed The Temple of Vijayesvara and with its material erected a hospice. Ali Shah & Malik Saif-ud-din were the criminals responsible for destroying all temple structures in every town and village, city and hamlet. The Muslim fanatics engaged in the unholy task of extirpating infidelity from Kashmir have been & are even now vandalizing and destroying the temple of the Hindus with impunity.

It is a fact of Kashmir history that the Sikhs continued with the practice of begaar or forced labour. But it does not make them tyrants. Begaar in absence of modern means of transport had been in vogue in Kashmir from the times of Shankarverman, who employed villagers for carrying various supplies to his army. It continued even under Sultans, who obviously were followers of Islam. They not only continued with the practice, but developed it into a full-fledged institution. Sultan Zain-ul-Abdeen continued the practice of Begaar. The Mughal rulers in their visits to Kashmir had a huge retinue of unpaid labourers only to carry their goods and other supplies for the journey. The Afghans were highly unscrupulous in the employment of forced labour. The Sikhs, no doubt, did not abolish the practice, but made it continued the same way as all Muslim rulers continued with it. Begaar was certainly an evil and it should have been done away with. To malign Sikhs it is trumpeted quite loudly that they employed forced labour for purposes of carriage of goods and materials from one place to another. If the Sikhs were tyrants, Zain-ul-Abdeen and all other Muslim rulers and Sayyids who continued with the practice did equally tyrants deserving all condemnation and castigation.

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