

Reinterpreting Afghan Rule in Kashmir

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Abstract:

In 1753, Afghans established their political authority in Kashmir. Afghan rule has been painted with dark colours by a section of Pandit chroniclers. These Pandit chroniclers wrote in the beginning of Sikh rule and projected Afghans as religious fanatics and ruthless masters who persecuted Hindu community by subjecting them to heavy taxation and other humiliating practices. Sikh rule on the other hand was hailed as rule of deliverance by these chroniclers. This was done for the purpose of gaining sympathy of new establishment. True, Afghans were tough masters who ruthlessly exploited the people of Kashmir but we argue that Afghan governors in Kashmir were more guided by lust for power and tribal codes than their religion. Besides, Afghan state was not different than medieval imperial states which aimed at ruthless exploitation of peripheries and awarded exemplary punishments to rebels. The sufferings during the period under reference should be viewed as inclusive experience of all sections of society instead of a particular community.

Key words: Afghan, Pandit, Kashmiri, Medieval, community

Introduction:

Punjab was invaded by Ahmad Shah Abdali third time in 1752. He defeated governor Muin-ul-Muluk, and spread terror over the whole of Northern India. At this time Kashmir was governed by Abdul Qasim Khan. He usurped the throne by displacing Mir Muqim Kanth. There upon disgruntled Kashmiri leaders, Mir Muqim Kanth and Khawaja Zahir u Din Didamiri sent their agents to Ahmad Shah Abdali and invited him to invade Kashmir. This provided an opportunity to the Afghan ruler who had already included Kashmir in his scheme of conquest (Parmu, 1969: 348) He deputed Abdullah Khan Ishaq Aqasi at the head of 15000 army men to conquer Kashmir. The Afghan army was opposed by army of Abdul Qasim Khan at Shupiyan in 1753. Abdul Qasim Khan was defeated and sent as prisoner to Kabul. Abdullah Khan Ishaq Aqasi entered Nagar Nagar (Hari Parbat) and laid foundation of Afghan rule in Kashmir (Ibid: 349).

Afghan Governors

Kashmir remained under Afghan rule for 66 years. Like Mughal rulers Afghans ruled Kashmir through their governors. In all 28 Pathan governors and deputy governors ruled over Kashmir (Ibid. 351-52). Abdullah Khan Ishaq Aqasi was the first Afghan governor of Kashmir. He remained in Kashmir for the period of six months. He ushered the era of tyranny in Kashmir. He subjected Kashmiris to ruthless exploitation. He killed many Kashmiris for extracting money from them. In one case he collected the huge money of one lakh rupees by torture. He carried away huge booty to Kabul. He has disrupted the economy of country and financial position extremely became tight. He deprived Kashmir of its rich cultural heritage. He vandalized the famous Mughal gardens. Abudullah Khan Ishaq Aqasi was responsible for woes and tears of people both high and low. They were imbued with discontent. The simmering discontent of masses compelled Ishaq Aqasi to quit the country after entrusting its government to Khawaja Abdullah Khan, his deputy, and Lala Sukhjewanmal the secretary (Ibid. 354).

Sukhjewanmal took the reins of government in his own hands. He was supported by Abul Hassan Khan Banday, one of the popular nobles of Kashmir. He was the first Hindu to be the ruler of Kashmir after over four hundred years. He appointed Abul Hassan Khan Banday as his Prime minister and minister for revenue and law. Meanwhile Ahmad Shah Abdali considered the activities of Raja Sukhjewanmal as an act of revolt. But due his engagement in Iran he confirmed Sukhjewanmal as the governor of Kashmir and deputed Khawja Kijak as the deputy governor for the purpose of keeping check on the activities of Sukhjewanmal. Ahmad Shah Abdali began to make preposterous demands which Sukhjewanmal found difficult to meet and raised the banner of revolt.

Ahmad Shah Abdali due his engagements elsewhere did not actively pursue the Kashmir policy till 1761. After returning from triumphant victory against the Maratha confederacy in the third battle of Panipat he took a very serious view of happenings in Kashmir. Accordingly in June 1762, he commissioned his general Nur-u-din Khan Bamzai against the Raja. The Pathan and Sukhjewanmal's army met at Udar, a large plateau below the Tosamaidan pass. Raja Sukhjewanmal met an ignominious defeat. He was captured, blinded and taken to Lahore before Ahmad Shah Abdali in wretched condition. The later ordered him to be trampled to death by an elephant.

After the death of Raja Sukh Jewan Mal, Nuruddin Khan Bamzai succeeded him as governor of Kashmir. It took him three months to consolidate his victory. Then he left for Kabul and was succeeded by Buland Khan Bamzai. His reign saw the resurrection of Shia-sunni conflict. The zadibal area was set on fire and shias were looted. Buland Khan was displaced by Nuruddin Bamzai. Kashmir was placed under the charge of Mir Muqim Kanth and Pandit Kilash Dhar. Soom internal feuds between these two nobles led to the state of political instability which promoted Nuruddin to himself assume governorship. This time he acted as a tyrant. He looted and pillaged the people. The entire Afghan rule under different governors and deputy governors was guided by imperialist consideration. The imperial power at Kabul focused of importing more and more wealth from Kashmir without taking any care for their upliftment. They exploited the people of Kashmir with heavy hand. The afghan governors and their officers caused harassment to the people of Kashmir by various devices. The people were not allowed to wear arms. They were put under the vigil of spies. The local chiefs were strongly suppressed. It is worthwhile to mention that during the governorship of Azad Khan (1783-85) the local population under the leadership of Maluk Khan rose in against him, but they could not succeed in overthrowing him.(Khan :1983, p.49)

Economic Conditions:

Like Mughals Afghans also ruled through governors. The emperors at Kabul put a heavy demand on their governors to finance their campaigns against Iran and Punjab. The governors in order to appease the rulers at centre by meeting their heavy demands subjected the people to heavy taxation. The land was leased to the highest bidder who collected the revenue and produce. As the lessee (*Ijaradar*) was mainly interested in filling their coffers which badly affected both land and people. Among the Afghan governors Haji Karimdad Khan was known for rapacious taxation. He imposed heavy taxes on all sections of population. The rich Jagirdars and nobles had to pay taxes called *Nazrana* which amounted to four and six times to their income. Traders and shopkeepers had to pay *Zara-i-Ashkhas*, a sort of levy on imports and exports (Parmu: 398). This shattered the economy of the country. The peasants had to pay heavy huge amount in the form of multifarious taxes. In order to evade taxation the peasants cut down all the fruit growing trees in

villages and selling them as firewood. The valley was denuded of its fruit wealth in the period of one month. Brahman chroniclers record that Karim Dad Khan had devised a novel method of tax collection. He collected the leading members of Pandit community kept them in close confinement and subjected them to suffocating fumes from cow dung. They implored, they importunate but KarimDad would not release them until they agreed to pay annual tax of rupees 5000 called *Zara-i-Dudak* (Bazaz.156). Another governor Mir Hazar Khan is said have drowned so many Kashmiri Brahmans to Dal Lake. (Kaul: 1924, p.58) The lucrative shawl trade during this period could not escape KarimDad Khan's rapacity. He created a new department *Daag-i-Shawl* to regulate shawl trade. Under this department the shawl weavers were heavily taxed. After the death of Karim Dad Khan he was succeeded by his son Azad Khan. It is interesting to note that despite misrule and tyranny the shawl trade flourished due heavy demand of Kashmiri Shawls in Europe, Iran, Afghanistan and Turkistan. But the state oppression on Shawl weavers gradually set in motion the process of decline of this lucrative trade which accelerated under Sikhs and ended up in its complete collapse under Dogras.

Azad Khan outdid his father Karim Dad Khan in oppressing Kashmiri population. At the age of 18 he started his cruel reign and instilled such a terror into his courtiers that they used to tremble before him. Given to epicurean habits he took pleasure in the grandeur of his court. With shining and rich swords and wearing gorgeous dresses the officials, ministers and slaves would stand mute and motionless when held in his court. (Bamzai: 1994, p. 157). The rapacity and tyranny of Afghans resulted in recurrent famines which forced the people to migratory conditions. It is pertinent to mention these migrations were an inclusive experience of Kashmiri's rather a catastrophe of a particular community as made out to be by some chroniclers and historians who argue that Hindus were discriminated for administrative positions. (Kachru,ff.171-72ab, Parmu, 341-42).Not only Hindus the poor Kashmiris were also forced to migratory conditions because of the famines caused by vagaries of climate and rapacity of Afghan rule (Sender : 1988, pp.45-46). Though presented more rapacious and tyrant by the contemporary chroniclers the Afghan governors also undertook some development measures in the capital city of Srinagar. Amir Khan Jawansher(1770-76) reconstructed the Sona Lank and raised seven storied mansion over it. He rebuilt Amira Kadal Bridge which had been washed by the flood of 1772. The Amirabad garden was also built by him. The most beautiful building of Amir Khan Jawansher was Shergari fort. Another governor Atta Mohammad Khan built a massive fort on the Hari Parbat Hillock (Khan 1983:50)

Both Hindus and Muslims were tyrannized by Afghan governors. It is worthwhile to note that the period under reference witnessed rise of some Pandits to highest positions in administration. For example, Kalash Dhar, Dila Ram, Pandit Sukh Ram, Pandit Sukhram, Pandit Sahaz Ram Sapru, Pandit Birbal Dhar , Vaskak Dhar rose to the position of Peshkars and Sahibkars. Nand Ram Tikku became Diwan at Kabul. (Parmu, 353,454). Azad Khan projected as tyrant governor than Karim Dad Khan by P.N.K. Bamzia appointed Pandit Dila Ram as his chief minister. European traveler Baron Hugal mentions that the administration of High offices during Afghan rule was conducted by Kashmiri Pandits (Hugel: 1845, p.220).

Social Impact

Afghan rule influenced the demography of Kashmir. New elements came to be added to the society. The Afghan subedars and Naib Sudedars, Sahibkars, Peshkars etc. constituted the elite section of population they maintained distance with the local populace. Next to the Afghans

royalty was rural gentry. This class acted as intermediary between peasants and state. Besides, Shaiks Sayyids, Sufis constituted the influential religious class. Peasantry and village professionals constituted the lowest ladder of social hierarchy.

The position of women deteriorated further during this period. Women became targets of the licentious behavior of Afghan officials. They molested young pretty women. Therefore, the remedy was found in marrying them at young age. As a result early marriages of girls came in vogue during this period. (Koul: p.33). Kashmiri women irrespective their caste and creed became victims of Afghan tyranny. Their presence in social activities diminished (Bazaz p.16).

Daastangoi (story telling) received impetus during Afghan rule. The common Kashmiris developed *Bacha Nagma* to entertain themselves. Kashmiri poets translated number of epics and love ballads of Persian classics into Kashmiri language. The people in rural Kashmir during winter nights arranged story telling parties to relieve themselves of state oppression.

Throughout Afghan period different classes of people vied with each other for political control. Thus it was the conflict of interests which ultimately led to the establishment of Sikh rule in Kashmir. Birbal Dhar a very high official during the period of Afghans invited Maharaja Ranjeet Singh of Punjab to invade Kashmir when he feared punishment at the hands of Afghan ruler for embezzling public money.

Conclusion: Afghan rule in Kashmir was not different from other monarchical imperial powers of medieval political structure. In medieval political system the imperial powers extracted revenues ruthlessly from peripheries and awarded exemplary punishments to rebels. Afghan rule in Kashmir was more guided by tribal codes and lust for power than religion. They were brutally repressive with all Kashmiris, regardless of class or religion. All sections of local population were placed under heavy taxation. The state policies of Afghan rulers were not shaped by religion which is attested by the fact that governors deputed from Kabul always tried to show disconnect from the centre. The rapacity of Afghan governors led to recurrent famines which forced migrations to the plains of Punjab. The state oppression during the period under reference is inclusive experience of Kashmiri population than a particular community as made out to be by a section of Brahman chroniclers and historians albeit the Kashmiri Pandits enjoyed lucrative positions in the administration. Apart from its oppressive character the Afghan rule reflects some developmental works such as construction of Sona Lank, Amira Kadal, Shergari and Hariparbat fort. Besides, Afghan rule enriched the social fabric by adding new social groups to the society.

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