

Society and Economy in Kashmir: Continuity and Change

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Kashmir is an area of great interest both to the scholar and the layman since time immemorial. The majesty and the grandeur of its physical form has a bewitching appeal that has endured over the years since the very early stages of settlements in the valley. Numerous references found in the early religious texts such as the Puranas and the literary works from Kalhana to Iqbal provide ample evidence of this eternal attraction. Kashmir can claim the distinction of being the only region in India, which possesses an uninterrupted series of written records of its history. Contemporary research suggests that the Sanskrit history of Kashmir called the Rajatarangini[1] was not one entire composition, but a series of four Chronicles, written by different authors at different periods of time; the last three being intended to serve as successive continuation of the first and the most important work of the series.

Geography and history seem to have vied with each other in assigning Kashmir the role of a crucible of cultural interaction, and the Kashmiris too have shown a proclivity for absorbing alien influences and giving them local colour[2]. The traces of such cultural overlaps have been so inextricably woven into the fabric of everyday life, that it is impossible to separate the strands of what was one imported, from what is indigenous. The history of the land has always shown the adaptability of the people to new elements, with no loss of the vital Kashmiri essence.

The Kashmir valley has been a half-closed eco-system, opening up slowly in space, across time. The natural configuration of the enveloping crust has tended to strengthen the closed character of the system and has acted as a serious constraint on the process of its opening up till the nineteenth century[3]. Kalhana, using mythological symbolism, refers to this as follows “to protect, foresooth, the Nagas (who came to seek shelter) afraid of Garuda, it stretches out its arms high above in the guise of mountain walls”[4]. Hien Tsiang and Au-Kong made special note of the impregnability of the surrounding mountains and of the difficulty off its passes[5]. Alberuni[6] referred to the fact that the Kashmiris “are particularly anxious about the natural strength of their country”.

The mountain ramparts have not only been important from the strategic point of view but have considerably imposed the sense of identity of the people and their deep involvement in the Valley’s environment. It has, on the one hand, given to the endogenous system of man-nature interactions a specific regional stamp and, on the other hand, has led to the weak induction of exogenous influences. It has strengthened homogeneity within and sharpened the gradients of both natural and socio-economic diversities from outside.

The closed character of the ecosystem should, however, not be overstated. In the sphere of social life ideas and institutions have moved bothways, across the mountains. The ideas, beliefs and

institutions thus imported, have neither been accepted nor rejected in their totality, but they have been assimilated with an ambience, which makes its culture, composite in character. The cultural journey of Kashmir has ensured its onward march through terrains and zones of history, talking over and giving away, receiving and reciprocating, transforming and transmitting and above all, diversifying unity and unifying diversity. That is the essence of cultural interaction of Kashmir[7].

The interaction of the valley of Kashmir with the surrounding territories gradually opened up across time and space, influencing its social and cultural elements. The interactions can be placed in the historical perspective in the following manner.

- i) The Kashmir Valley was an important link in the communication system, being placed at the hub of Asia, centripetally uniting all the important regions, otherwise divided by great mountain wall of the Himalayas. It lies along the once fabled Silk Route, an offshoot of the main Silk Route. For centuries, it has thus been open to influences from Persia and the countries of Central Asia. Even after the destruction of the traditional linkages, E.F. Knight could still refer to this region as the meeting point of the three empires, as the region is the zone of interaction of the three empires of the Spirit – Hinduisim, Islam and Buddhism; and the three linguistic realms – Indo-European, Dardic and Tibeto-Mongol[8]. The region continued to be an important source and destination for commodity flows. As late as the first decade of this century, some parts of the bazaar of the old city of Srinagar used to be crowded with merchants from Yarkand selling Porcelain bowls. The Pir Panjal route was till recently known as the salt route. The trade linkages between the Valley and the rest of India have increased considerably since Kashmir's accession with India. What was previously a minor appendage to the sub-continental trade system is now becoming an integral part of national domestic market. This may perhaps be considered as the most potent mechanism for the opening up of the semi-closed system. With every consignment of saffron, apples or handicrafts like; woodwork, paper machine, carpets shawls etc. going out of the valley, and of foodgrains and manufactured goods flowing into it from the rest of the country, symbiotic links of interdependence have been forged and strengthened.
- ii) The Valley's strong economy based on flourishing agriculture and handicraft invited military expeditions from the great empires surrounding, it and based in the Indo-Gangetic valley, Central Asia and Persia in the past. In the wake of military campaigns, economic and cultural interactions of far reaching, significance came in. however, the difficulties of easy access and the relative isolated attitude of the people, did not permit these interactions to seriously weaken the semi-closed character of the system. These exogenous elements were either partially assimilated in the Kashmiri culture, or were ejected out after an ephemeral existence. The historical experience of aggrandizement by great empires certainly generated a deep suspicion against "aliens", which is now being partially eroded by Indian democracy's pluralistic ethos.
- iii) In the recent past, especially during the Dogra rule, the Valley welcomed the invasion of European visitors, who spent large sums of money and gave employment to all classes of the population[9]. The influx of tourists both national and international, has increased considerably right after independence. This not only provides a significant input into Kashmir's economy but has also widened the social-cultural interaction, bringing about changes in values, habits, cultural ethos etc. However, the socio-cultural interaction and

- economic benefits are, by and large, restricted to the tourist nodes and urban centres. The Kashmiri peasant accepts the tourists, but generally does not interact with them.
- iv) The trans-Himalayan pastoral communities move across the mountains with the rhythm of seasons. They enter into economic and trade relations with the people of the Valley. Their relations are symbiotic and very rarely competitive. They have their own socio-economic structure and their own religious shrines and institutional framework. Of late, the Kothas of Gujjars and Bakerwals are settling down in the high lands in the Side Valleys, outside the realm of paddy fields on the floor of the Valley. These interactions have started gaining roots, effecting changes in their socio-cultural and economic attitudes[10].
 - v) The climatic constraints in the Valley allow a single crop economy, forcing the Kashmiri peasant to migrate to the surrounding regions in search of livelihood during the difficult winter months. Such movements across the mountains have contributed to the opening up of the semi-closed system. This seasonal interaction with the people of north-western areas has also contributed to change in the socio-cultural and economic attitudes of the people. However, this process of interaction should not be over-estimated, as these seasonal migrants generally huddle together in colonies of their own, with a high degree of intra-group interaction. The recent out-migration of the minority communities from the Valley, also reflected similar character, as the community members stick together, so as to retain their cultural identity and ethos.
 - vi) Significant changes in the socio-cultural and economic attitudes of the people of Kashmir have been brought about by opening up communication channels like; development of national highway, connecting the valley with north-western India and Ladakh. Similarly, the role of mass media viz; newspapers, radio, television and internet communication cannot be underestimated in bringing about such changes. In fact, the dynamics of change are being witnessed at a much faster rate, compared to the earlier times, after Kashmir acceded to India in 1947.

Social Life

The social life and cultural identity of the Kashmiri people has undergone several changes in the post-independence period, due to sweeping changes in the agricultural system, development of education and health facilities, development of communication network and development of trade interaction on a large scale. The changes witnessed in the sphere of social life have both positive and negative dimensions. The changes developed signs of exclusiveness driving a sharp wedge between the two communities and putting the Kashmiri identity under strain. Moreover, the religious edge, in the exclusive form, has started getting sharper, Kashmiri Pandits, who has laid the foundation of Kashmiri ethnicity and played the pivotal role in developing the identity of Kashmir, identify themselves with the larger religious majority of India[11]. On the other hand, there has been a strong temptation, among the Kashmiri Muslims, to come nearer to a non-democratic and non-secular system and fall in line with other Muslim nations, where religion is exploited to achieve certain limited objectives[12]. Therefore, ever since Kashmir's accession to India, a sharp dividing line has been drawn between the two communities, which ultimately resulted in the mass exodus of minorities from Kashmir in 1990.

Education and the health care are two areas in which Kashmir made significant progress even before independence. During the Dogra rule of Maharaja Ranbir Singh, who was extremely

hospitable to the Europeans several dispensaries and schools were started, but the major boost to develop education and health facility was given during the post-independence period.

Table No. I

Progress of Education in Kashmir Valley & J&K State

Period	No. of Boys on School roll	No. of Girls on School roll	Total
1891	1585*	--	1584
1950-51	89900	14300	104200
1960-61	231000	81000	312000
1970-71	522200	277300	799500
1985-86	663600	379600	1043200

*Only for Valley

Table No. II

Progress in Educational Levels Jammu & Kashmir

Period	Primary Level		Middle Level		High Level		College & University Level	
	I	II	I	II	I	II	I	II
1950-51	1115	64000	139	19000	55	21000	14	3003
1980-81	7406	268000	2046	257000	813	273000	40	21052
1985-86	7860	344000	2193	353000	976	347000	43	26096

I: Number of Institutions

II: Number of Student Roll

Source: Statistical Digest (J&K Government), 1985-86

In the sphere of special change, the opening of educational institutions viz; University, Medical college, Regional Engineering College etc.; played a very significant role. The most significant thing was introduction of free education from primary to university level. Such an expansion in the educational facilities provided tremendous opportunities for removing illiteracy and creating mass awareness. However, simultaneous opening of a vast network of Jamait-I-Islami darghas has diluted the prospects of secular and progressive ideology, which the institutions of higher learning were supposed to promote.

The Land Reforms Act of 1950 replaced the Jagirdari system and a ceiling was placed at 22.75 acres of land and the rest of land was distributed among the bonafide tillers without paying compensation whatsoever. Revolutionary changes in the land relations in Kashmir, had brought a qualitative change in the social organization and ushered in an era of social and cultural advancement[13]. The quantity of fertilizers distributed in the state increased from 5.42 thousand tons to 34.19 thousand tons in 1985-86[14]. The exports of commodities, especially fruits, saffron, delicate embroidery, exquisite shawls and intricate woodwork increased tremendously. It led to a thriving trade, which made thousands of families rich and prosperous. Tourism also helped to pump money into the hands of few thousand families. All the above factors contributed significantly in changing socio-cultural attitudes among the local population. The changes brought about were more pronounced in the urban areas, than in the rural areas.

Significant changes in the life style of people in terms of living standards, housing condition, dietary habits, and dress are observed in the urban areas. There has been a phenomenal rise in the construction of new residential colonies in the peripheries of the Srinagar city and other towns in Kashmir. Cement and iron material alongwith wood, has replaced the traditional old material of

half burnt bricks, mud and thatched roof. There has been an unabated urge to move to more open and clean areas, build more spacious houses with better environs and sanitary facilities. The congested areas are thinning down gradually. However, very little changes in the housing conditions and materials used for building houses were witnessed in the rural areas.

The clothes of the villagers are simple in appearance and there is very little difference between the garb of man and woman, as both wear the effeminate gown called Pheron to accommodate Kangri (local fire pot), a simple indigenous body heater used during winter months to retain the body heat and create artificial warm micro-climate inside the Pheron. In this respect modern Kashmiris live quite happily with their past, with no sense of incongruity. No jackets or blazers can compare with the comfort or convenience of the Pheron. The Pherons are worn over the latest styles of acid washed jeans in urban areas. The fashion-conscious ones add a collar here and piping there to the basic design. Women in the cities wear modified version of the Pheron, throughout the year. The nature of material of Pheron varies from velvet to cotton, according to socio-economic standings of the family. The interaction of seasonal migrating peasants seems to have very little influence on dress. However, the dress and clothing material has witnessed some changes during last two decades, as men are more free with European style of clothing like; pants, shirt, suits. Islamic influence in the dress material is a new phenomena especially; Pathani dress (long shirt and trousers) and Burkha (face covering veil) for the ladies. This attire is more common in urban areas as compared to the rural areas.

Food

The food habits of Kashmiris are similar for both Hindus and Muslims. The main food being rice and other grains cooked are porridge, saag or hak (green leafy vegetable). The Kashmiri cultivator is fond of eating, and in fact, he is often a voracious eater. Beef and pork are usually avoided. Mutton or chicken is occasionally taken once or twice a week. The food habits have shown very little impact of modernisation. Wazwan, a feast usually given on marriages and other social functions, serves as a form of entertainment. The concept of 'Wazwan' was probably imported into Kashmir from Iran. Kashmiri Hindus have their own delicacies for feast on marriages and other social gatherings. Mutton items are prepared by both the communities. However, number of mutton preparations are more for Muslims as compared to Hindus. Visiting restaurants and other eating joints are rather a new phenomenon and restricted to males only. Food habits show very little outside influence.

Social Custom

In Kashmir, wandering faqirs, saints and astrologers and palmists can predict the future exactly, and a word from a faqir can cure the incurable. People in rural areas live in constant fear of ghosts and goblins and perform all kinds of supplicatory ceremonies to placate them. Kashmiri peasants, both Hindus and Muslims, believe in Jins (Genii), Deyu (cannibal giants), and Yech (heavenly saint). All types of ceremonies are conducted to please them. These traditional ideas are still prevalent in the valley. Kashmiris are greatly influenced by Rishi cult and Sufism. The practice of honouring saints by building shrines in their name and probably started not long after the spread of Islam. This tradition is still prevalent, both among the Muslims and the Hindus.

Essentially affectionate and sentimental by nature, the Kashmiris are very fond of conversation. The Hooka, the Kangri and the Samovar are their constant companions. Kashmiris are not very fond of liquor, but they have found its substitute in salt tea.

The joy that men find in life often finds expression in songs; not always in sophisticated poetry but in folk-poetry, which, in fact, is the spontaneous, unmediated and elemental reaction of the heart. Rituals and ceremonies bind the life of both the communities, though, the Muslims have less no of these than the Hindus. Customs of Muslims and Hindus bear a great deal of resemblance; particularly those related to birth, death and marriage. Both the communities are great observants of punctilios, such as ablutions, offerings, frequent feasting and fasting.

Economic Life

The economic life in the valley has witnessed significant changes due to economic prosperity and well being generated through agricultural development, tourism activity and trade interactions. The standard of life has gone up. Service sector occupations, especially government services have increased tremendously, improving the financial condition of the people. Export of fruits, handicrafts, and carpets; have improved the economic condition of the people. However, disparities in the economic conditions are glaring between rural and urban areas, as well as among various cross-sections of people in society. Employment opportunities are getting limited, creating tensions among the masses. The Kashmiris have won a great reputation as artisans, weavers, and as experts in other skilled occupations. In terms of economic life, Kashmir can be split into two economic zones; one the modern Kashmir, with high standard of life like good housing, all modern amenities and facilities, mostly restricted to a few newly build colonies of towns as well as influential and politically active people in the rural settings, whereas the other old Kashmir perpetuates in all the rural settings, as well as selected pockets of towns, with unhygienic housing conditions, low standard of living and primitive artistry techniques. The socio-cultural mosaic of Kashmir valley has thus vigorously ensured its onward march through various terrains and zones across space and time. The cultural journey has shown strong impact of the semi closed eco-system and has thereby developed the endogenous system of man-nature interactions. The surrounding mountain ramparts and inaccessible terrains have restricted exogenous influences, thus strengthening homogeneity among various communities. The increasing interaction of the valley of Kashmir with the surrounding territories has gradually opened up new avenues in the social and cultural field and we find that Kashmiri people have shown extraordinary adaptability to new elements, with no loss of the vital Kashmir essence. Historical experiences suggest that Kashmir people will withstand the present crisis, and the ancient culture of brotherhood, peaceful co-existence and promotion of secular ideals will be restored.

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