

# Status of Women During Dogra Rule in Jammu and Kashmir As Reflected in Urdu Writings

**Rafaqat Hussain**

Research Scholar, Department of History & Punjab Historical Studies

## Abstract

The present research aims to provide a historical overview to comprehend the position of women during the Dogra rule in Kashmir, mainly through Urdu writings. Historical evidence indicates that women in Jammu and Kashmir enjoy a high social status, similar to other parts of India. However, there was a significant deterioration in the status of women in Kashmir during the Dogra rule. Women were primarily identified with silence and deprivation. From the 5th five-year plan onwards, women's role was recognized, and they also made substantial contributions to the Kashmir economy, besides performing traditional household duties like cooking, cleaning, grain grinding, and home maintenance for ages. The study focuses on the Dogra rule and highlights the atrocities committed against women in Kashmir and how Urdu writers portray these incidents in their works. The primary goal is to explore the condition of women and the exploitation they encountered during the Dogra rule, primarily through Urdu literature.

## Introduction

Studying social problems from a historical perspective can be challenging since no social issue is a product of the immediate present. Instead, each social problem has its roots in society's traditions and heritage. In Jammu and Kashmir, the people were caught in a vicious web created by religious superstitions and social obscurantism. Specific religious practices that appeared to be sound were social evils that had crept up in some societies. By the mid-19th century, the Jammu and Kashmir state was formed under the Treaty of Amritsar in 1846.<sup>i</sup> However, the Dogra state functioned in a partial, communal, and unjust manner, degrading the majority section of the population and systematically ignoring their fundamental human rights.<sup>ii</sup> Shiv ji Dhar highlighted that it was a Hindu state, and the rulers tried to broaden its Hindu nature. Maharaja Ranbir Singh even banned catching fish because of the puerile superstition that the late Maharaja's soul had transmitted into the body of a fish.<sup>iii</sup>

In the distant past of Jammu and Kashmir, women enjoyed a high status, as they did elsewhere in India. However, with the beginning of the inroads of Turko-Afghan tribes, female children were not much desired, and their sufferings became endless. Carrying away women became the prized item of booty for these tribes.<sup>iv</sup> With time, social evils started to culminate among women in Jammu and Kashmir. After Kashmir was sold for 75 lakh rupees by Lord Hardinge, the governor-general of East India Company, to Raja Gulab Singh Dogra in 1846,<sup>v</sup> the new masters showed little interest in their subjects' social and moral uplift. As a result, Kashmiri women lost everything for which they were illustrious in the past.

## Position of Women

Women play a crucial role in the socio-economic development of both developed and developing econo-

mies, yet they often find themselves in submissive and marginalized positions within society. According to Fauq, women have made significant contributions to the economy of Kashmir, traditionally undertaking tasks such as grain grinding and home maintenance for generations. They were instrumental in producing shawls, with women spinning raw wool into various grades of yarn, which was then sold to karkhandars through intermediaries.<sup>vi</sup> Narsing Das Nargis notes that boatmen's wives were involved in fishing and selling fish, highlighting another aspect of women's economic participation.<sup>vii</sup>

Additionally, historical records indicate that a considerable portion, between 15 to 25 per cent, of the state's revenue came from taxing women. Sadly, some girls in Kashmir were sold into brothels by their parents at a young age, fetching prices ranging from 100 to 200 rupees. Thakur Kanth Singh reveals that child trafficking, particularly the sale of girls to pimps and brothel keepers, was officially acknowledged by the government, with transactions even documented on stamp paper.<sup>viii</sup> These girls were often misled into believing they would be married off. Furthermore, the Dogra regime imposed heavy taxes on marriages, rendering them unaffordable for many low-income families, with fees ranging from 3 to 8 rupees.<sup>ix</sup> The taxation system categorized centres into three classes, each taxed accordingly: Class-I centres at Rs 40 per annum, Class-II centres at Rs 20 per annum, and Class-III centres at Rs 10 per annum.<sup>x</sup>

Once girls were sold, they had little hope of release and were condemned to a lifetime of servitude. Hashmatullah Khan, the author, vividly describes this practice, stating, "The classes engaged in it are owned as slaves and others who were formerly in their position."<sup>xi</sup> Similarly, Arthur Brinkmen discusses the same issue, emphasizing the authority of the Dogra Maharaja, to whom all the wealth acquired during their reprehensible lives reverts upon their death. If a bondwoman or dancing girl dared to attempt to escape from her degrading profession, she would be forcibly returned to her mistress's control, often with the use of lash and rods. These facts are incontrovertible.<sup>xii</sup>

Narsing Das describes a system of licensed purchase of dancing girls for a fee of 103 (chilkee) rupees during the rule of the Maharaja in Kashmir.<sup>xiii</sup> Poverty and backwardness were the primary factors that led to the encouragement of this system. The lack of education among the poor Kashmiris kept them from recognizing this institution as evil. Both the social reformers and the state are responsible for the illiteracy prevalent in the region. Unfortunately, the religious reform movement leaders in Srinagar ignored the plight of the innocent young girls who were sold into the houses of ill fame and immoral trafficking in women located at Tashwan and Maisuma in Srinagar.<sup>xiv</sup> The Dogra rulers did not work towards providing education to the poor and backward people of urban and rural Kashmir. The educational backwardness of Kashmiris led to their exploitation by those possessing power and high social status. Therefore, illiteracy became the driving force for the backward and poor people to throw their girls into this system.<sup>xv</sup>

During the rule of Maharajas, Rajput landlords were granted large jagirs, which were used for propagating the practice of women trafficking. According to Shamsi, a significant number of Rajput Dogras held concubines, which were acquired through purchase or capture, leading to an increase in the dangerous practice of kidnapping women and trafficking them.<sup>xvi</sup> In response to this issue, the government amended the criminal law to empower the administration to take adequate measures to curb this evil. Maharaja Hari Singh took strict action and appointed a committee to investigate the matter and make necessary recommendations. The recommendations were accepted and implemented to combat the problem.<sup>xvii</sup>

In the state of Jammu and Kashmir, the sex ratio was significantly low due to female infanticide and discrimination against female children. As a result, the girl child did not receive adequate attention and was vulnerable to various infantile diseases. The sex ratio, as observed by Walter Lawrence for Srinagar city, was 817 females per thousand males for Hindus and 916 females per thousand males for Muslims. In rural areas, the sex ratio was even lower than in urban areas, with figures of 721/1000 for Hindus and 895/1000 for Muslims in the year 1891.<sup>xviii</sup> According to Hashmatullah Khan, Maharaja Hari Singh implemented the infant marriage prevention regulation in 1928 to address this issue, which later became a law in the state.<sup>xix</sup>

Widow Remarriage was permitted among Muslims but prohibited among Hindus. The plight of Hindu widows was often dire. Fauq observes that due to the absence of restrictions on early marriage, numerous child widows were compelled to reside in their father-in-law's household and comply with their demands.<sup>xx</sup> Additionally, Fauq reveals the atrocities inflicted upon these girls, particularly by Brahman priests, who were frequently the fathers of abandoned infants. These infants were either discarded into the river or left for the pariah dogs at night, all to avoid bringing disgrace to the religion.<sup>xxi</sup>

Marriage in ancient times was considered a religious duty, and early marriage was preferred to gain religious credit. However, this led to the harmful practice of child marriage, which was prevalent among all castes, including lower castes, Kashmiri Pandits and Muslims.<sup>xxii</sup> Lower caste women had a much lower marriageable age compared to higher caste women. Having an unmarried daughter in her teens was considered an insult to parents, so early marriage of girls was desired, with the age of marriage being 12-13 years. Unfortunately, early marriage gave rise to several negative consequences, including high mortality rates, high birth rates, and a significant number of widows.<sup>xxiii</sup>

During pregnancy, women's diet was often controlled by their mothers-in-law. They were given less food, and certain foods were restricted, which sometimes led to improper development of the fetus and harmful outcomes. Deficiency of nutrients could cause diseases such as anaemia and osteomalacia in pregnant women and, in some cases, even death. Hashmatullah Khan has explained that in Jammu and Kashmir, rituals related to childbirth did not empower women.<sup>xxiv</sup> When the delivery date approached, women were sent to their husbands' houses with gifts, including new clothes and pots filled with curd. The nature and quantity of the gifts depended on the family's economic status.

During the British rule in India, Western ideas gradually permeated every corner of the subcontinent, including the state of Kashmir. In the words of Shiv Ji Dhar, when Pratap Singh became ruler, the British residency assumed control of the entire administration and implemented various administrative, educational, and economic reforms.<sup>xxv</sup> This marked the dawn of modernism in the state. The Jammu and Kashmir Women's Welfare Association was established as part of the broader movement to protect women's rights and ensure their dignity and empowerment. This association aimed to eradicate illiteracy, promote modern education, and combat misconceptions and harmful practices that degraded women's reputation in society. The association received recognition and support from GEC Wakefield, and Maharaja Pratap Singh donated one thousand rupees from his privy purse to aid its formation.<sup>xxvi</sup>

After its establishment, the association opened tutorial service schools for adult illiterate women and arranged lectures without external aid. They also published primary books in the Kashmiri language and enlisted educated volunteers. In addition, the association established a women's league aimed at fostering self-development, social service, and social reforms while binding women together.

Historical Urdu writings on Jammu and Kashmir reveal that women in the region during the Dogra rule,

their position deteriorated, and they were treated as commodities to be sold. The state's economy relied heavily on the exploitation of women, perpetuating backwardness and poverty. Kashmiri society's illiteracy and lack of education further hindered their ability to understand and address these social evils. The Hindu tradition did not permit widow remarriage, and child marriage was widely practised and deemed a religious duty. Early marriage led to various ills, such as widowhood, high mortality, and high birth rates. Women were discriminated against and considered inferior to men.

## Endnotes

1. Dr R K Parmu, *A History of Dogra Rule in Kashmir (1846-1947)*, Gulshan Books, 2023, p .21
2. Ibid, p. 42
3. Shiv Ji, Dhar, *Tareekh-i-Kishtwar*, (ed.), B. Shabir, Sheikh Mohammed Usman and Sons Kashmir, 2015, p.
4. 06
5. Muzamil Jan, *Women In Kashmir*, Arts & Science Academic Publishing, 2014, p. 42
6. Dr R K Parmu, *A History of Dogra Rule in Kashmir (1846-1947)*, p. 42
7. Mohammad-ud-din Fauq, *Tareekh-E-Aqwam-E-Kashmir*, Gulshan Publishers, Srinagar, 1996, p. 44
8. Narsingh Das Nargis, *Tareekh-i-Dogra desh*, Chand Publishing House, p. 167
9. Thakur Kanth Singh, *Tareekh-i-Rajgaan Jammu*, Chand Publishing House, p. 111
10. Muzamil Jan, *Women In Kashmir*, Arts & Science Academic Publishing, p. 91
11. Ibid.
12. Hashmatullah Khan, *Tareekh-i-Jammu-w-Futuhah-i-Maharaja Gulab Singh*, Lucknow 1936, p. 89
13. Arthur Brinckman, *Wrongs of Cashmere*, in Javid Ahmad Dar (ed.), *Plight of Kashmir—A Story of Oppression*, Srinagar: Jay Kay Books, 2013, p. 42
14. Narsingh Das Nargis, *Tareekh-i-Dogra desh*, p. 177
15. Ibid.
16. Ibid,p. 181
17. Ameer Shamsi, *Tareekh-e- Kashmir*, Gulshan Publisher, 1997, p. 22
18. Ibid, p. 34
19. Walter. R . Lawrence, *The Valley of Kashmir*, Gulshan Books, 2016, p. 121
20. Hashmatullah Khan, *Tareekh-i-Jammu-w-Futuhah-i-Maharaja Gulab Singh*, p. 231
21. Mohammad-ud-din Fauq, *Tareekh-E-Aqwam-E-Kashmir*, p. 84
22. Ibid.
23. Ibid. p. 92
24. Ibid.
25. Hashmatullah Khan, *Tareekh-i-Jammu-w-Futuhah-i-Maharaja Gulab Singh*, p. 245
26. Shiv Ji, Dhar, *Tareekh-i-Kishtwar*, p. 96
27. Ibid.