



The state response to disasters in Kashmir; 1846-1947 A.D

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Abstract

Kashmir was continuously struck by massive disasters in the shape of floods, famines, fires, earthquakes and epidemics, right from the very first decade when Dorgas gained control over the Kashmir Valley. With the exception of earthquakes all these disasters were quite recurrent. This put a tremendous impact on the Kashmir in the shape of physical and economic losses. The present paper looks into primary sources to know what steps the state and administration took from time to time to contain the outbreak of these disasters and to lessen their impact. The researcher demonstrates that most of these steps emerged out as response to the problems created by recurrent disasters. But none of these steps was a final solution and disasters continued to occur again and again.

Keywords: state, Kashmir, floods, famines, earthquakes, fires, epidemics, disasters

Introduction

Dogras gained control over Kashmir in 1846 by purchasing it from British for Rs. 75 lakh. Thus it was an exceptional case in Kashmir History where the rulers had bought the territory over which they were to rule by paying a huge sum. Dogras were Hindus by faith and they were to rule over a population which was predominantly Muslim by faith. Two significant factors emerge out of this one. First. State was purchased so automatically the job of state was revenue maximization and secondly the religious differences were to arise, which meant that there was a feeling of 'other' among the ruled.

It was quite unfortunate that at the point of history when revenue maximization was the chief aim of state and administration and along with it to create a supporting structure for the survival of making the rule to continue Kashmir was struck one after another by massive disasters which were causing immense losses not only to human capital but also to economic sector. While as the loss of human capital would not have too much impact on the state but continuous loss to state exchequer was an ever increasing headache for the State.

Kashmir in the said period witnessed different types of disasters in the shape of famines, fires, floods, earthquakes and epidemics. It was a century of continuous calamities which were often turned into massive disasters.

Famines

Kashmir in this period witnessed many occasions of food shortages like in 1864, 1877, 1892-93, 1901-02, 1903-04, 1915-16, but the calamity of 1877-78 was one of the greatest disasters in the history of Kashmir. It occurred partly because of extreme weather conditions [cold and continuous rainfall for 110 days]^[1] and partly due to the mishandling by the men on spot i.e. administrators and short sighted policy of the State^[2]. It was policy of the State to left nothing with peasant and give a very short proportion of their hard earned grain to them^[3]. State at that time did not let cultivators to harvest and even to cut or shift their crop

before it was measured and due to unnecessary delay on the part of corrupt officials who were in the pursuit to make maximum out of opportunity^[4]. This proved quite detrimental for the people as rain fell when crop was lying on ground and it continued for months rotting the crop. The state then took its share even out of nothing and when no seed corn was available officials made a house to house search^[5]. As famine raged high for years 1877-1880, population was decreasing, the production was low but even in these years the State took its share. This speaks volumes that State had no Policy *viz a viz* disasters. Not to speak of disaster policy it did not have even a food policy. The main class of the state which was involved in this business of cultivation was always the worst sufferers because it had not only to handover its share to the state, but it was also to feed the non-cultivating class as the State had engineered the system in such a way that they were compelled to sell their grain to the money lenders to pay the land revenue, a sum of which was to be paid in cash. As the rural population depended on the urban class for many day to day needed things and grain was the chief item to access these things. Then there was the barter system where in exchange of different services peasant had to surrender their grain. So peasant was left with nothing and when scarcities would arrive they were pressed hard to pump grain into city but it meant death of peasants and once the rural peasantry fell it would automatically mean the fall of city people^[6]. Thus not having a food policy meant giving a fertile chance to food scarcity to turn into famines. But here another thing is important to know that to overcome scarcity, food was to be imported from the Punjab, but there was massive transport barrier issue. Here it brings to forth that state should have made arrangement of godowns to meet the requirement at the time of scarcity but no such steps were taken.

It was the Revenue settlement that corrected some of the problems of State and the Road connectivity to India that made the import of food quite easy. Though there occurred the scarcity a number of times even after this famine but none turned into any massive disaster.

Earthquakes.

A number of earthquakes occurred in this period but the earthquake of 1885 was a disaster ^[7]. In a fraction of seconds around 3000 human and around 40,000 animals were lost and thousands of structures were raised to the ground ^[8]. But this earthquake was not an exceptional case as already many massive earthquakes had shaken Valley, the references about which were already available in sources written by historians before this period and every state which confronts such problems puts experts into the service and share the experience with the masses.

In this period of time no scientific knowledge was already known about earthquakes so in this period experience and observation would have served the purpose and such knowledge was definitely there. The Dhajji Dewari and Taq system of architecture was in use in Kashmir from the start of nineteenth century ^[9] and according to experts it is highly resistant to the earthquakes but upon seeing the devastation caused by the earthquakes especially in Baramulla and Sopore area ^[10] it looks no such knowledge was made available to the people. As it was the same year in which British Residency was made functional in Kashmir and the officials associated with it were already exposed to the latest knowledge available in the west so we see that a Scientific report was prepared on the earthquake of 1885 ^[11]. In the same way we see the establishment of scientific observatory was made and seismograph was made available to record earthquakes. No other Indian State possessed such type of Instrument ^[12]. Whereas there was a definite role of Europeans but the money would have definitely provided by the state administration. But overall sources are silent that any sort of knowledge whatsoever was made available to the Kashmiris regarding the architecture, construction material or soil classification.

Fires

Valley was vulnerable to disastrous fires owing to the use of wood as construction material, thatched roofs and use of fire pots to keep warm, similarly the haphazard construction was also a main continuing factor in the valley. Kashmir saw devastating fire in this period in 1850, 1875, 1877, 1892, and 1899, 1908, 1913, 1917, 1921 ^[13]. Even before it many devastating fires had taken place. Perhaps rulers thought that there was no way to control them. Sources mostly refer to the fires of Srinagar city. The most important step taken in this period was the establishment of fire services in the Srinagar in 1894 ^[14]. This could not perform satisfactorily and there was no stop to fires. Fires continued not only in other areas of Valley but even in city. In 1894 Srinagar municipal administration passed a law prohibiting the construction of houses with roofs made of inflammable material ^[15]. However, it was quite impracticable. A fire in 1908 in and around Zaina Kadal bridge allowed the municipal authorities to do a little plan and as area was to be rebuilt, a 24 feet road was constructed along the road side to lessen the spread and impact of fires ^[16].

Silk factory fire in 1913 provided the opportunity to take few steps and Mr. M. L McNamara, who was then the director of sericulture, devised a fire protection scheme to save the factory from further fires ^[17]. After the fire of 1921 Amira Kadal, in which 22 people including 7 from firebridge were injured put a question mark on fire brigade's work as the people whose property was destroyed made allegations against the brigade and an inquiry was

conducted by Additional District Magistrate and Police inspector, however, charges could not be proved ^[18].

In 1914, State council made some modifications in its order of 17th September 1892, which made those villagers who willfully refused to assist for putting out fire punishable by law with a fine of Rs. 1000 or six months imprisonment ^[19].

The superintendent of Central Jail Srinagar in 1915 purchased some fire equipment costing Rs. 1922 and requested Home Minister to make water reservoirs available in Jail at three places ^[20].

In order to stop fires the Srinagar Municipal Council framed certain bye laws for safety; people who wanted to make fire display on ceremonies were first to seek permission. In congested area it was declared that no one was allowed to display fire and on Diwali to light lamps in open rather than on roofs ^[21]. In the same year Municipality enacted another bye law i.e. to obtain a proper license 24 hours before, if someone wanted to let off fire arms and fireworks ^[22].

Epidemics

Various cholera outbreaks broke out in the Dogra period; 1857, 1872, 1875, 1887, 1888, 1890, 1892, 1900, 1906, 1914-1915, 1919, 1921 ^[23]. The primary sources mention that sanitation issues were the main causes responsible for this. People lived in very hygienic conditions where they would bath, wash clothes and drink from the same water ^[24]. There was absence of pure drinking water. Stagnant water present in stagnant canals was one of the main contributing factors in their outbreak. The cool environment of Kashmir proved a fertile ground for epidemics. Then dense vegetation and haphazard housing pattern would not allow sunlight to fall on streets for entire year ^[25].

Sometimes disease would travel from other parts of India into Kashmir and after the opening of Jhelum Valley route in 1892 as travel became easy thus vulnerability to epidemics too increased ^[26]. Continuous outbreaks did prompt state to take sanitation measures from 1892, pure drinking water was started to be made available to the people, roads were widened latrines were made better and efforts were started to clear the lanes and drains, however these continued to occur for decades ^[27]. From twentieth century instructions began to be circulated to public and disinfection of streets carried out. A scheme to stop spread of epidemics was framed in 1921 by Mr. Duni Chand, the then chief medical officer of Kashmir. According to this scheme Srinagar was to be divided into nine wards each under a Medical officer to be assisted by a Hakim and a compounder. All the houses were to be disinfected. All the other affected districts were to be put under an assistant Surgeon, and each tehsil was to have one Sub Assistant surgeon, two compounders and two hakims and ten disinfectants ^[28]. An important development in this issue was the passing of The Jammu and Kashmir Epidemic Diseases Act 1921 and Sanitation Act in 1933

Floods

The case of floods was the most pressing for the State; these were more frequent than any other type of disasters. They would affect more area than any other disaster and the most important thing was that they affect mostly the Capital city of State and would frequently hit the revenue base of State which meant losing in two ways first the loss inflicted by floods and second the loss in the form of revenue remission

and relief which the rulers were to make frequently in the form of sufferers to the state.

Flood problem was too complex for the state as it needed a lot of knowledge, simply on the basis of experience and observation the experts could not put forth their proposals for their containment. Thus experts were to be called from Europe and latest machinery was to be imported which put too much pressure on state.

Taking a serious note of floods too started after the British intervention, where the European travelers, Residency officials and engineers took interest in this and made a solid beginning for confronting this problem. But due credit should be given to State Council under the Pratap Singh which took keen interest in bringing an end to this age old problem. The flood policy of state evolved over decades and mostly response to the devastation created by floods.

It started with a failed project, where it was decided to make a survey of town, but financial constraints compelled state to put aside this project ^[29]. The devastating flood of 1893 made state to rethink over this issue and it decided to construct and repair the embankments on the Jhelum ^[30]. However, one important step it took was to take the services of European experts on how to save the city. After a detailed study it was decided to construct a spill channel to take some amount of water off the city before it entered the city, the result was the construction of Srinagar flood Spill channel ^[31].

The devastation continued on account of continuous floods in first decade of twentieth century and now experts decided to lower the bed of Jhelum below Baramulla and continuous dredging of the Jhelum started for which heavy equipment was acquired from Europe.

It was in 1913 that first major initiative in containing the disastrousness of floods was taken with calling Mr. R Purves to study the flood problem in Kashmir. But he could provide no concrete and ultimate solution as no hydraulic data was available in Kashmir ^[32]. So a base was laid for comprehending this problem by taking data on daily basis. The emergence of world war and temporary relief from devastating floods caused State to take less interest in this issue. But the devastation revisited Kashmir in the Shape of devastating floods in 1928 and 1929. So it again compelled state to rethink over this problem. At that time a very capable engineer was heading the engineering department in Kashmir; Er. Tulsi Das, he minutely studied this problem and put forth his proposal but before it could be implemented ^[33] the state decided to call D. G. Harris an expert to study the flood problem and to put forth proposals regarding; embankments on the Jhelum, examining the longitudinal section of the river in order to clear the obstructions, to look if it was possible to straighten the course of Jhelum and possibility of linking Dal lake and Anchar Lake ^[34]. Harris scheme was mostly based on the work of Tulsi Das. He himself observed the flood of 1929. After a detailed study he put forward his scheme which unfortunately was never fully implemented ^[35].

Conclusion

Upon analyzing the above mentioned facts we can say that regarding Earthquakes State had no policy. Same was the case with other disasters. But state did take steps from time to time after occurrence of different events. Some long term measures like the revenue settlement and road connectivity to India did help in the long run. Similarly sanitation

measures helped a lot in the containment of epidemics in the long run. The most important work was done in case of floods. Dogra rule witnessed some most devastating floods in the history of Kashmir. Whatever might be the real objectives i.e. whether they wanted to save the life and property of their subjects or just to secure their revenue base which was getting affected on account of continuous disasters. Dorgas along with Residency officials took steps from time to time to contain floods. The State took steps but these were taken mostly after a flood had hit Valley. Thus these were some sort of stimulus response steps. But calling experts and importing machinery in the face of adverse economic conditions was a no mean achievement. Unfortunately no timely solution came forward and floods continued to struck one after another and creating havoc in Kashmir.

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