

Famine in Kashmir: Its causes and effects

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Abstract

This paper aims at explaining the historical causes leading to food famines because historical approach, like any other scientific approach, does not attach any importance to those causes which are beyond the control of humans. In such matters, the historical cause is the failure of the state and the society to over-come the impact of the natural cause. In our specific case the historical cause is the inability of the state to visualize that in the peculiar geographical condition of Kashmir crops can fail any time on account of the natural disasters. In this situation it was necessary to have buffer stocks at least for one year to survive any disaster. It required more production than needed for one year. It also demanded many other measures to avert the crisis arising out of famines. Aside from the cultural implications of its social responses, the other way in which the famines have had a lasting impact upon Kashmiri society is by making its population more susceptible to disease and high mortality rates. While the hunger straight away lead to deaths, the eating of unripe or overripe fruits caused epidemic diseases.

Keywords: famines, food, crisis, poor-health, epidemic-diseases, deaths, de-population

Introduction

Significantly, the description of famines finds a satisfactory place in the otherwise dry as dust political chronicles of the period. But these chroniclers, being the true representatives of the contemporaneous historical approach, have attributed the food famines to an accidental or immediate cause viz. the failure of crops due to untimely snowfall or heavy rains. Curiously enough the modern historians have also accepted this, what may be called the 'accidental view of history' as they have also ascribed the subsistence crisis to the natural calamities ^[1]. One point needs clarification: that we should not give credence to those factors over which man has got no control. A historian has to bring to focus those factors which may help to successfully fight the situation arising out of these natural events. He has to probe into those weaknesses of the state policy and social system which led to the failure to overcome the situation, these natural calamities created. Or he has to explore why the occasional failure of crops was immediately followed by famines-a fact which is almost uncommon in present times. Once such investigation is made, it may not be difficult to disagree with those who opined that the famines were natural. This eventually necessitates a thorough understanding of the whole system of the society which is the only key for knowing the inner logic of the event. Leaving its detailed discussion to the following pages:

Hemmed in by massive ridges, Kashmir had been a land locked country. There were no doubt, many passes which enabled people's movement to and from the country, but these routes through the steep and snow clad mountains were not suited to the passage of any heavy traffic. The scope for this method of transit was, thus, limited to the goods of high value in proportion to their bulk, promising a very large proportionate profit at their destination. Grain trade obviously possessed none of these two advantages. That is why it does not totally figure in the imports and exports of our period. Not even during the time when the country was faced by the death trap food crisis. Under these circumstances the people of the region had to subsist exclusively on whatever was locally produced. And in

the event of local failure of crops- the failure which could be expected at any time in view of the highly invariable weather of the valley-the people could not look beyond their national frontiers to make up the deficiency in their food supply. These circumstances ultimately demanded an enormous increase in the food production to ensure not only the self-sufficiency for a year in times of successful harvest but also the national surplus to meet at least the demands of the following year. This was either beyond the comprehension of the state or points to a deliberate negligence on its part, as it necessitated drastic changes in the existing social setup.

The tillers of the soil, though forming a large population, had to fend for a huge non-farming community comprising jagirdars, revenue officials, Ulama, Saiyids, Sufis, Brahmins, mendicants, village landless servants, and the whole population living in cities and towns. The peasantry constituted about 83% of the total population ^[2], but it was not a homogenous class. The lambardars, patwaris, religious class-cum-peasants and also those who acted as usurers (Wadars), who were collectively called as *Safed-Posh* class of villagers ^[3], were not involved with cultivation of land ^[4]. The consequences of the extortion and oppression were the gradual de-population of the country thereby adversely affecting the total cultivable area of land. About one-sixteenth of the cultivable surface was in cultivation during the Sikh Period ^[5]. Also the rapid urban growth which led to a sharp increase in the population of the city as well as a growth of towns would have increased the burden on the produce of the rather decreasing population of the peasants due to epidemics, famines, etc. In the decade between 1921 and 1931, the city of Srinagar registered a record 22.5% increase in population ^[6]. There was a significant internal migration of population from rural to urban areas, further swelling numbers in the cities. In 1931, for instance, the average population residing in each town of the Jehlum Valley was 15,510, while the average population for every village was a mere 377 ^[7]. Thus the percentage of the peasants who used to till the land would have been lower than the above given percentage and probably the population of those sections of the society who did

not till the land but depended on the production of the tillers of the soil would border on the population strength of the latter. This exorbitant pressure on the peasant produce did not give rise to any severe problem at the time of successful harvests, but no sooner did the crops fail, than the country witnessed a death warranted famine^[8] as the surplus stock of the peasant produce was consumed by his exploiters and parasites during the year and no surplus stock was left to meet the demands of the following year if a scarcity of food was faced. The point is that the population of the tillers was less than what the then prevailing conditions demanded.

The peasant produce witnessed a further exhaustion on account of decrease in the peasant population instead of registering any increase, owing to large scale mortalities caused by the famines, epidemics and other natural calamities, as in such circumstances it were generally the peasants whose mortalities we come across in our sources^[9]. The efforts of the rulers to increase the food production of the country by bringing the new lands under cultivation could not be fully realized since it needed additional manpower which could be made available only by involving the non-agricultural population who, understandably, in the given exploitative nature of the state, could not be attracted by cultivation. Thus the whole burden fell upon the traditional but decreasing peasant class whose numerical strength was too small to bring all virgin land under cultivation especially in the absence of the modern means of cultivating the land which undermined the need of labour power as the sole means of cultivating the land. The need for bringing all virgin land under cultivation and the consequent need for increasing manpower was all the more urgent, when we consider that in the absence of modern fertilizers and agricultural seeds the food production of the land was hopelessly low; and the medieval Kashmir had a single crop economy as compared to a two-crop-a-year economy of Medieval India-which had rendered it obligatory to double the produce in one crop. There is thus little doubt that the fundamental cause of the food famines was the medieval social system and the highly exploitative nature of the state which, on the one hand, bred and patronized the class of parasites and, on the other, limited the agricultural growth by making this profession restricted to the peasant class, when the other sections of the society, while finding no social dignity or economic benefit in its adoption, showed a total reluctance to its adoption.

Secondly the famines also stemmed from the then prevailing nature of the agrarian relations which aimed at to sustain the "feudal" order of the society and which ultimately worked in favour of the total unequal distribution of the country's agricultural production. It is interesting to note that the food famines were not experienced by all strata of the society. Strangely enough it was the peasant class which was the worst hit^[10]. The ostentatious life of the upper class went on undisturbed. The landed aristocracy and grain dealers used to bring their huge stocks of grain in the market to profit from the situation.

Thus when we have to explain the causes of the famines we have, in other words, to investigate why mainly the peasant class faced the food crisis. This ultimately necessitates the exposition of the nature of agrarian relations of the period. Without going into details, it is suffice to say here that the peasant was merely a tiller of the soil who had to till the land

whereas the harvest fell directly either in the hands of the state, if cultivating the *Khalsa* land, or Jagir if cultivating the land earmarked as Jagir, or *mada-i-ma'ash* holder, if cultivating the land reserved for this category of benefactors. Whether enjoying merely the occupancy rights or ownership of land in the strict judicial sense or none of the two, it hardly made any difference to a peasant since it in no way affected the snatching away of the maximum produce from him^[11]. In this way two-third of the gross produce of the country was appropriated by a small section of the population comprising the royalty, the nobles and the religious class, which was apt to create a society with a starving class on the one hand and an ostentatious class on the other. Peasants had not only to pay land revenue and other taxes like *baj*, *tamgha*, cesses on cattle^[12], etc., but their produce got further terribly exhausted in meeting several other demands. Among these the most urgent was the one to provide for his village servants like the blacksmith, carpenter, barber, cowherd and a host of others- a practice which still holds good in the village of Kashmir. Moreover, because of the extreme scarcity of money and because of the absence of the present day sources of income, the peasant was compelled to dispose off a part of his produce to meet some of his basic necessities of life^[13]. Thus the produce of land particularly rice- the principal crop of Kashmir, was, both the staple food of the peasants and the only currency at their disposal. Under these circumstances it may not be rash to conclude that even a small peasant family, with the maximum area of land under cultivation (in relation to family strength), could not have been able to live even for a few months on whatever was left with it after paying land revenue and other exactions^[14]. This has to be viewed in the context of the single-crop-economy of medieval Kashmir and a very low yield of land. The state as such did not adopt the policy of leaving with the peasant as much produce as was absolutely necessary for his precarious existence over a year, let alone him to reserve the stocks of food grains to provide sustenance to him and his family in times of the failure of crops. Eventually whenever the crops failed the peasants became the target of sufferings since they did not have means to purchase the high priced rice cornered by the royalty, nobles, jagirdars and other recipients of land grants besides the grain merchants. Nor did the state have any well designed food policy to militate against the food crisis faced by the common masses. Thus famine was not a natural calamity. It was a social problem of poverty and dearth. It did not affect richer sections of the society, but became peculiarly a problem of the poor strata. A direct relation has thus to be established between poverty and the incidence of famine, which is itself rooted in the production relations.

The state was hardly concerned about the village population or the peasant population in terms of any food policy or rationing. Since the peasants were robbed of the maximum produce^[15], the remaining part was not sufficient for more than 3 to 4 months. For the rest they had to live on vegetables, as no food policy was being followed in the villages to provide food to the famished population during the times of scarcity or famines. However, grain depots of the state were located in Srinagar for meeting the food demand of the city population^[16]. It was because of the over concern of the government to feed the vocal city population on cheap *shali*^[17], that it realized a part of revenue in kind from the village population even if a peasant could produce only as much of paddy as could suffice his food necessities only for a few months. Lawrence remarked^[18],

If the harvest is too little for both, the city must be supplied, and is supplied, with any force that may be necessary, and the cultivator and his children must go without...the cultivator is considered to have rights neither to his land nor to his crops. The Pandits and the city population have a right to be well fed whether there is a famine or not at two chilk rupees per kharwar.

The state policy to fix the land revenue in cash and then convert it into *shali* whose prices were fixed deliberately at very cheap rates was a politically motivated policy to feed the pressure-group living in the city no matter whether the village population sustained or perished. In this context it is worth quoting Wingate ^[19]:

He (peasant) is a machine to produce shali for a very large and mostly idle city population. The secret of the cheap shali is because if the price were allowed to rise to its proper level, the whole body of pundits would compel the palace to yield to their demands.

Lawrence was also shocked at the partisan attitude of the state which pampered the city dwellers and hardly paid any heed towards providing food to the famished peasantry, whom indeed were subjected to unceasing exactions ^[20]:

What the eye does not see the heart does not grieve—and the authorities saw and heard the city, but the villagers were out of sight and out of mind.

This policy of feeding the city population at the cost of poor peasantry proved quite detrimental both for their economic development and the population growth. After squeezing the “idle-man’s” share, the remaining part, too, was not left with the wretched peasant. The state paid least attention towards this, even during the great famine of 1877-79. Regarding such callous attitude of the government, M.Y. Saraf writes ^[21]:

The government made no effort to alleviate the sufferings of the people by the import of grain, from the Punjab, perhaps it thought that since the victims of famine were Muslims who formed the great majority of the population and had also been reduced to extreme poverty and want by a ruthless and extortionist rule of nearly half a century, it was welcome opportunity to get their (Muslim) majority substantially reduced, if not desirably converted into a minority. In fact the callousness of its approach and the extreme condemnable methods it adopted to meet the situation were such which would put any man to shame.

Since maximum produce was snatched away from the peasants, who lived only for a few months on what little was left with them, the peasant faced a critical shortage of food even in normal times, which forced them to take the rotten fruits and vegetables causing epidemics. The situation became much worse when crops failed owing to any natural calamity. In those circumstances food became nectar for the peasants. They had hardly any purchasing power and also the state followed no food policy or rationing in the villages wherefrom they could purchase it, although state food depots were situated in Srinagar. Inevitably the peasants became the main targets of famine and that too in large numbers ^[22].

At the same time the people’s fancy for rice as their staple food and the resultant diversion of their whole attention towards its cultivation contributed no less to the famines of our period.

Rice, needless to repeat, was the staple food ^[23] of the people of our period which as a matter of fact, was a matter of life and death for them. Consequently while almost ignoring other crops; they paid their whole attention towards the cultivation of paddy ^[24]. During the Sikh Period, The rice cultivation accounted for seventy five percent of the cultivable area during the Sikh Period ^[25]. It is interesting to note that the rest one-fourth, as already noted, was not a part of ‘*abi*’ land- land used for cultivating paddy, but it formed a part of ‘*kandi*’ area or ‘*udar*’ land where irrigation facilities were not available, thus making this portion of land unsuitable for rice cultivation ^[26]. The craze for cultivating only rice is so deep-rooted among the Kashmiris that even in the presence of the present day comparatively profitable crops for which the land of the valley is conducive, the farmers show total reluctance in sowing any other crop in their ‘*abi*’ land other than rice ^[27]. Consequently, when the paddy crops, which easily fall victim to the natural calamities even today, failed, the valley eventually reeled under the famines in view of the absence of any substitute food to live on. The precarious dependence of the people on a single crop for their food supply, which in turn depended upon the crucial role of the favourable weather, was thus among other human and institutional factors that were becoming more important than the natural scarcity in causing distress and starvation.

Thus the food famines were not really ‘natural’ as postulated by the contemporary and modern historians. They were not natural in the sense because the outcome of the natural events which caused food crisis were predictable and subjected to human control. It was predictable that the crops would fail anytime. Therefore, grain stocks sufficient to cope with any such natural eventuality were to be stored by the state. The state failed to do so because on the one hand, it needed a thorough overhauling of the existing social structure to lessen the number of parasites and on the other it required the monopoly of grain trade by the state. Both these steps were evidently contrary to what may be called ‘Big Matters’ attitude of the rulers. As the steps mentioned were bound to incur the wrath of the ‘Big’ who benefitted from the human miseries, the undertaking of these warranted steps was left unnoticed. Again if these famines would have been really ‘Natural’ then their affects would have been the same for the rich and the poor. But from the picture presented by the contemporaries about the class composition of the victims of starvation, it becomes quite clear that it was only the poor section and particularly the peasants who became the worst hit. In sum, the food famines of our period were the result of the social and administrative structure of the contemporaneous society together with the ‘cultural’ failure of the people who failed to adopt and design their agricultural products according to the given circumstance, so that the affect of the natural events could have been averted or at least considerably minimized.

Impact of Food Shortages

The food shortage was followed by a trail of devastating consequences affecting the poor sections of the society in particular and the overall conditions of the society in general. The consequences that flowed from food crisis are discussed below:

1. Depopulation

For a long time we see the Kashmiri society failing to register any worthwhile population growth; instead we sometimes find

breathtaking decline in population. For example, in 1823, the population of the valley was estimated at eight lakh ^[28]. After the famine of 1832 it got reduced to two lakh ^[29]. By 1873 ^[30], it increased to six lakhs, but the devastating famine of 1877 reduced the population to as low as two and a half lakh. It again started picking up reaching to nine and a half lakh by 1891 ^[31]. In fact each famine was a signal for a crescendo of death. People died for want of food. They had hardly any purchasing power and, therefore, could not afford to purchase the costly rice either from the *waddars*, *galladars* or from the state which occasionally imported to stave off the crisis. Though the people tried to appease hunger by taking all types of foods, fruits, vegetables, but when they too exhausted people had nothing to live upon. During the famine of 1877-79, when the vegetables were finished, the hungry people took to oil-cakes and rice-chaff ^[32] and saffron bulbs ^[33]. The hunger even forced the people to eat carcass and even sometimes resort to cannibalism ^[34]. The mass death was caused by two factors namely hunger and the sub-standard foods eaten by the people to satisfy the hunger. While the hunger straight away lead to deaths, the eating of unripe or overripe fruits caused epidemic diseases such as cholera leading to mass deaths in the absence of effective treatment. It is interesting to note that during the famines it were the peasants who generally perished and that too in large numbers. In this regard J.C.M. Ansley writes ^[35]:

During the summer of 1878, the famine seemed almost daily to increase, and a newspaper of 13th Aug states that ‘the skeletons of all the inhabitants of a pretty little village nestling at the foot of Gulmarg had lately been discovered in a gorge above, where they had retreated in their endeavor to escape the Maharaja’s Chapraseses (or policemen), whose business it was to prevent emigration’, and also adds that “the Lolab Valley was depopulate and a large extent of the district beyond that became a desert...

It was only from the beginning of twentieth century that the population of Kashmir started registering growth. For example, in 1891 the population increased to nine and a half lakh, in 1901 to eleven and a half lakh, in 1911 to thirteen lakh, in 1921 to fourteen lakh and in 1931 it raised to 15.7 lakh ^[36]. The reasons for this remarkable change are many which followed the intervention of the British Government in the affairs of Kashmir and the resultant modernization of different sectors of Kashmir which appreciably reduced the over exploitation of the working classes by the state and opening up of various avenues of earning. For example, it is towards the late 19th century that the famous agrarian settlement known as Lawrence’s Settlement was carried out which considerably reduced the burden on peasantry. It was during the time of Maharaja Hari Singh that the land revenue was reduced to 1/4th ^[37] and in 1933, the peasants were made owner of land. Moreover, many irrigation canals were remolded by Maharaja Hari Singh which proved effective in increasing agriculture, among them the most important are Zainagir canal, Dadi canal and Nandi canal ^[38]. No less significant was the construction of Jehlum Valley Cart Road which gave a tremendous flip to internal and external trade in giving birth to additional sources of wealth as for want of wheeled traffic many commercial crops and products did not figure in external trade of Kashmir prior to the construction of Jehlum Valley Cart Road. Many cash crops namely, walnuts, almonds, apples and many other fruits could be now exported in appreciable quantities. The developmental projects and a

number of offices and schools opened after 1880’s provided additional sources of livelihood to various categories of people. Money economy which was only skin deep until 1880, started making significant progress. As a result some sections of peasantry, if not all, could now afford to make payment of land revenue in cash, and were thus saved from *waddars* and *sudhkhars*. Last but not least from 1880, modern medicines were introduced with the opening of modern dispensaries to fight epidemic diseases. It was on account of these various reasons that the deaths on account of food shortages were arrested after 1890.

2. Forcible Flights

The effect of these exactions is not only the impoverishment of the people, but their banishment from the country, and they were emigrating in considerable numbers ^[39].

To escape from deaths during famines and to meet the demands of food shortages there emerged the phenomenon of forced migrations (both internal and external) to eke out livelihood ^[40]. The issue of migratory peasantry was a striking issue when Walter Lawrence was appointed as the settlement officer in Kashmir. He says that one of the most difficult problems he had to face was to persuade the migratory peasantry to settle down permanently at any place of their choice ^[41].

The horrible tales of 1832 famine is contained in one of the most touching *musnavis* written by Khazir Shah, *nom de plume*, “*Muqbil*” ^[42]:

Owing to the famine cereals became scarce having been secreted by the ‘godless’ hoarders. The prices of eatables went up 10-15 times their normal prices...all were bundled in one shroud of hunger. To survive, therefore, they started hunger-marches to the Punjab, many having died on the way, unwept, unburied and unsung.

Another eyewitness, Khalil Mirjanpuri, adds ^[43]:

Whatever has been stated above (by Muqbil) actually many times worse was the condition. Parents even sold their children for food.

The problem of forcible flights had assumed such an alarming proportion that the government had to impose a ban on leaving the land or to leave the country. The passes were guarded by the police and strict orders were issued by the state government even as late as in 1926-27, prohibiting the migration; and those who disobeyed were fined and even their private property, if any, was auctioned ^[44]. The Tehsildars were empowered to tie the peasants to the land and bring back the runaways ^[45]. The borders of Kashmir were closed for free movement of people especially the working classes because almost everyone wanted to leave the valley either temporarily or permanently. When Kashmir was turned into graveyard in the wake of deadly famine of 1877, sweeping off three-fifths of Kashmir population ^[46], the government of the day was forced to lift the ban on “*rahdari*” system ^[47]:

The lifting of the ban witnessed a stampede, it appeared as if a bund had suddenly collapsed, for a sea of humanity, drawn from every town and village, was moving towards the snow clad passes, on their way to the land of hope – the British India ^[48]”, and therefore, “the migration was so extensive that according to the 1891 census Report of Punjab, 1,11,775 Muslims born in Kashmir were counted as having settled in the Punjab.

The tens of thousands of Kashmiris which we find having taken permanent abode in Punjab is the result of oppression and recurrent food shortages witnessed by Kashmir during the period. Moorcraft, who visited Kashmir during the early Sikh period, found many villages deserted ^[49]. The phenomenon of seasonal migrations to Punjab which continued up to very recent times was also the result of inability of the people to fend for themselves by the little produce of the land that was left with them by the oppressive state. The failure of the crops and the resultant famines led to mass exodus of seasonal labourers. Lawrence remarks,

when winter comes on many of the able-bodied men carry down apples and other loads to the Punjab, and work as potters in Lahore and elsewhere, returning to Kashmir in the spring ^[50].

The forced migrations led to a variety of adverse consequences. It accounted for decline in population and agriculture, unsettled life, separation of family members and mental agony of a large section of the society. No less was the fact that the Kashmiris lost the respect and confidence as they appeared to be belonging to a nation of labourers. They were so much mal-treated and cajoled that it hurt the sensibilities of the educated Kashmiri youth who began to join the Indian Universities towards the beginning of 20th century. In this regard it is worth to quote S.M. Abdullah ^[51], one of the founders of organized Freedom Struggle in Kashmir;

My stay at Lahore, for other reasons, awakened me from the slumber and made me familiar with new spirits. I saw Kashmiri Muslims in big bands leaving their beautiful land for the hard plains of Punjab in search of livelihood. These labourers had to cross on foot the snowy mountains of Mari and Banihall and had to face thousands of odds in their way. Sometimes, while crossing the mountains, these people were perishing as a result of difficult passes, snowstorms, etc. these unfortunate people were dying unwept and unsung. It was not easy once reaching the plains; there they had to face numerous odds and worries. During the day they wandered through the streets in search of work. Some worked as wood cutters, some as helpers to the shopkeepers, some carried heavy loads on their backs while some of them did grinding. After doing hard work during the day, they earned very little money of which maximum was spent on their meals. They passed their nights either in any inn or mosque, where they were harassed like dumb driven cattle. Many a time I found some Kashmiris begging for meals. I felt ashamed and asked one of them.

3. Decline in Cultivation

As discussed above the famines and state oppression forced a sizable number of agriculturists and shawl weavers to quite their homes. The net result caused by the diminishing man power was the decline in agricultural production. The peasant who was fleeced of almost all the produce, had neither sufficient resources to make a proper use of his land, nor on account of famine and epidemic mortalities the number of the peasants was never sufficient to cope with the available land. The situation became grave when the peasants deserted their lands to seek more tolerable mode of existence either in other parts of India or in city and towns of Kashmir ^[52]. Consequent upon this a considerable area of land fell out of cultivation. No

wonder, therefore, the once agricultural prosperity of Kashmir became a thing of the past. For example, in the time of Zain-ul-Abdin the annual produce of the rice crop had been seventy-seven lakhs of ass-loads (kharwars) which as a result of the above reasons dwindled in 1823 to twenty lakh kharwars ^[53]. In 1835, to quote Vigne ^[54],

It has now in successive years gradually dwindled down to fourteen or fifteen lakhs nominally, although in fact, Ranjit Singh who always took care to ask for a much larger sum from the government was obliged to be contended with something less than ten.

With a declining trend till the end off Sikh Rule, the land revenue amounted to Rs. 12,00,000 in 1846, according to Ganeshi Lal's study ^[55].

With the coming of Dogras to the power, agriculture was again to suffer due to high-handedness of the State. A considerable decrease can be seen in the revenue which is attested to by the following figures ^[56]:

Years	Actual Demand (252 Villages)	Actual Collection (252 Villages)
1880-87	34,61,904	23,81,962

Wingate gives a picture how the bad administration led to the forcible flight of the peasantry causing tremendous havoc in the agrarian economy of the state ^[57]:

These 252 villages are scattered over 15 tehsils, and as a specimen of how they have broken down I give an instance. The khewat of the village of ashram was fixed at Rs. 1,275/- . The collections for 1880 and 81 were Rs. 1271/- and Rs. 1411/-. In 1882 the village was sold by auction to a contractor for Rs. 2,095/-. I believe he lasted one or two years and then fled. For 1886 and 87, the collections were Rs. 553/- and Rs. 782/-. When I saw the village, its fine lands were mostly lying unsown and its houses empty. If it is enquired why the old cultivators do not now return it is because the outstanding balance against the village is enormous, and last year I found the Tehsildar trying to secure the entire crops of the miserable few who were left in a vain attempt to reach a sum equal to about one-third of the demand, but with the more likely result of the ensuring the complete desertion of the place.

The high oppression naturally forced the people to abandon land, resulting into the decline of cultivation and agriculture. Out of 17.78 lakhs of acres of land measured by the settlement department, only a small portion of 9.49 lakhs of acres was then, due to abandonment, under cultivation and the greater part of it, too, was held by the absentee landlords ^[58]. The decline in cultivation is testified by the fact that the total land revenue of Kashmir in 1871 was Rs. 27,75,990/- ^[59] which went on dwindling to Rs. 14,79,839/- in 1893-94 ^[60].

The over taxation and illegal exactions also took heart of the peasants out of cultivation. Realizing that they would be robbed of what they would produce ^[61], the peasants adopted a very lukewarm attitude towards cultivation and that too under force. Consequently it proved very inimical to good cultivation. This is also borne out by the following account ^[62]:

It is necessary to explain the deeply rooted hatred and distrust which the Musalman cultivator feels for the Pandits

before it is impossible to understand and why the cultivating classes make so little of the fertile, easily irrigated land of Kashmir. At the present movement the people are adopting a system of rice cultivation which is inferior to that practiced two years ago. Their reason is that they can pay their revenue and obtain rice enough to feed themselves for seven months, and beyond this they are careless, for any surplus would be seized by the officials. They have rooted up orchards of apple trees and other fruit trees, because their orchards attracted the notice of the Pandits. They can graft and bud, but it is rare to find grafted varieties of the apple and pear. They admit that white rice commands the higher price, and that broadcast sowing gives the better results in Kashmir, but they sow red rice, and are giving up broadcast for transplanted rice. They object to trying a better kind of seed for barley and wheat, and the reason they give is that if they produce anything good the Pandits will seize it.

The 20th century gradually paved way for some relieved conditions for the peasantry due to the mass consciousness but more because of the British pressure ^[63]. After the conferment of occupancy rights in 1895-96 which fixed the land tenure system and then conferment of proprietary rights in 1933, some betterment in cultivation took place. The government also took some measures to better the lot of the peasants. But actually the peasantry got a sigh of relief only after the termination of our period when acts like Big Landed Estates Abolition Act of 1950 and the Distressed Debtors Relief Act of 1949 were passed along with the programme of Land to the tiller ^[64] which undoubtedly bettered the lot of the peasant community and increased the cultivation and agricultural production. Prior to 1949, there was no marked increase in agriculture which can be borne by the fact that in 1901-02, the land revenue collection was Rs. 15,26,691/- ^[65], which hardly increased to Rs. 20,78,358/- in 1915-16 ^[66] and Rs. 30,01,000/- in 1939-40 ^[67].

4. Exacerbation of the Class Ridden Character of the Society

On account of feudal like character of the state system, the Kashmiri society was already class ridden with jagirdars, maufidars, bureaucracy, rich traders and karkhandars on one hand and poor masses on the other. No discrimination was made on the basis of income variations of the producer as even a small producer who could hardly produce to make his both ends meet, was taxed and that too with no difference in the incidence. The food crisis which was faced by the common masses only further widened this gulf. As we know the rich sections of the society were always having surplus food for being the land assignees, grantees and owners of large holdings. Therefore, the food crisis was a boon for them as they sold their surplus stock on high rates to *galladars* (grain dealers) who further sky-rocketed the prices ^[68]. Hence the common masses had no other alternative but to sell whatever little property they used to have to keep their body and soul together. While the prices of grains used to be exorbitant, the property of the masses would lose value during the crisis as the rich people would invariably exploit the situation. It is therefore no wonder to see the peasant exchanging a *kanal* of land for a few seers of rice or buying the land in nominal rates. The *mujwaza* system according to which half of the assessed revenue was to be paid in cash would still further increase such differentiation. The cash payment gave rise to a notorious class of money lenders known as

“*Waeddars*”, who exploited the helpless conditions of peasantry ^[69] as the *waeddar* charged high interest rates on the money borrowed by the despondent masses. Besides, those who had sufficient resources to raise cash crops would find it much easier to pay revenue upon selling the produce than those smaller peasants who grow the coarser food grains. Thus the food crisis made rich, richer and poor, poorer.

5. Poor Health

Moorcraft wrote about the poor health of the valley population ^[70]:

I had at one time no fewer than six thousand eight hundred patients on my list, a large proportion of whom were suffering from the most loathsome diseases, brought on by scant and unwholesome food, dark, damp, and ill ventilated lodgings, excessive dirtiness and gross immorality.

Further he writes:

The people of the city are rapidly thinning, though less from emigration than poverty and disease: the prevalence of the latter in its most aggravated forms was fearlessly extensive ^[71].

William Elmslie, a young Scottish Doctor, was the first to be sent to valley in 1865 by the Christian Missionary Society in London, he wrote home to Scotland ^[72]:

Poor perishing Kashmir, for whom I could weep all day.

Miss Parbury was an English visitor to Kashmir in 1902, wrote that the *Chinar Bagh* (Garden), information she got from the guide books, was reserved exclusively for bachelors and the ladies were not expected to tie up their boats there, which shows that the bachelors were both selfish and unsociable. One day her boat passed quite close to the bachelors' camp and she seized the opportunity to have a good look at them. Half relieved and half disappointed, she wrote ^[73]:

I don't know what we expected to see, but we imagined it would be very gay; instead of which we saw dismal-looking bachelors sitting in gloomy solitude in their boats looking bored to death.

For a good health a balanced diet is a pre-requisite. The people who did not have even rice and knoll-khol (*hakh*), balanced diet was a distant dream for them. It should be mentioned that in pre-modern Kashmir a family was fortunate to have two times meals of rice and knoll-khol, that was considered a sign of prosperity. Thus the common quote *tim che hakh bata khaneh wa'l* (they are able to eat the meal of rice and knoll-khol). Indeed, during the period of our study the masses were not having rice and knoll-khol from harvest to harvest. Lawrence says ^[74],

...he (Kashmiri cultivator) is left with barely enough to get along on till next harvest.

As a result they were forced to eat sub-human food to appease hunger with harmful consequences. Besides producing a population with weak health, the un-ripe or over-ripe fruits which were generally taken during food crisis caused epidemic diseases and resultantly a heavy toll of life in the absence of effective medical intervention. The worst hit of the food crisis used to be women, who especially during the pregnancy require

a good food with required calories. In the absence of even a full belly poor diet it is vain to expect women possessing a health when we also consider that the common women did more physical labour than men in an area when everything was done manually. Same was the fate of the children of the poor masses who could expect at the most a very poor and insufficient diet.

Conclusion

Thus it was the failure of the state and society to keep themselves ready to face these challenges which briefly speaking needed a buffer stock to fulfil the food needs of at least one year. Surely this response was missing. After examining the sources we learnt that there was no dearth of land nor was their scarcity of water to produce surplus food which would suffice more than one year consumption needs. What was the problem then? The problem was the oppressive taxation leading to depopulation on account of diseases and forcible flights caused by famines. The oppressive taxation also took the peasants' heart out of cultivation. In fact while on the one hand the population of the working classes decreased or stagnated, the population of the parasite class increased on account of the immigration of favourites of the rulers who were given land grants and high positions to form a strong supporting structure. Nor was there any serious effort to irrigate the land which was either out of cultivation or raised only rain-fed crops. The landlordism was also a no less factor as the crops produced by the peasants were snatched away from them by a small but powerful landlord class. This is the reason that we find only the peasants suffering during famines whereas the landlords sold their surplus food stock to grain dealers on exorbitant rates. The excessive dependence on one-crop namely rice was no-less a factor in causing famines as when the rice crop failed for any of the natural causes it was followed by a famine in the absence of a substitute food to live on. Also the food shortages accounted for devastating socio-economic disruptions and demographic reversals creating deep scars on the bruised psyche of the common people who suffered the most, the creative mind tersely summed up the heart rending impact of the famines:

Drag Tsalih Teh Daag Tsalihneh

The famine would go, but the deep scars it left will remain forever.

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