

Catalysts of Change: Role of Socio-Religious Reform Organisations in the Kashmiri Landscape during Dogra Rule

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Abstract

The dynamic forces of culture, tradition, politics, and technology constantly shape and change society. Socio-religious reform organizations have played a crucial role in changing and influencing the characteristics of numerous societies throughout history. These organizations have been instrumental in challenging ingrained norms, promoting change, and sparking paradigmatic upheavals in society. Their motives range from spiritual enlightenment to social justice to cultural rebirth. This study examines the crucial impact that groups dedicated to social and religious reform played in influencing Kashmir's sociopolitical climate under the Dogra Rule. The paper explores the essential role played by these groups in questioning ingrained societal conventions, promoting progressive social change, and encouraging a sense of cultural and religious revival among Kashmiris. The study sheds insight on these reform-oriented organizations' multiple operations, beliefs, and effects by examining how they have affected Kashmiri society, politics, and religious viewpoint.

Keywords: Reform movements, Kashmir, Dogra Rule, Social change, Political awakening.

Introduction

Socio-religious reform movements have a distinctive place in the historical narrative of every region, which is often molded by a variety of elements at the same time as other historical events.¹ These movements, which are distinguished by their pursuits of alteration and advancement, have played essential roles in the process of altering societies and affecting the flow of history. The age of Dogra Rule coincided with a pivotal turning point in the history of Kashmir, a territory that is well-known for the intricate cultural, religious, and political fabric it possesses.² During this time period, socio-religious reform organizations arose as powerful agents of change, permanently imprinting themselves on the socio-political environment. During the Dogra Rule, which lasted from the middle of the 19th century until the beginning of the 20th century, there was a complicated interaction of power dynamics, society standards, and religious rituals.³ In this milieu, a number of socio-religious reform organizations rose to the forefront, challenging established paradigms and advocating for progressive changes across a wide range

¹ P. Anagol, *The emergence of feminism in India, 1850-1920*. (New York: Routledge, 2017), pp. 123-125.

² C. Zutshi, (Ed.), *Kashmir: history, politics, representation* (New Delhi: Cambridge University Press, 2018), pp. 26, 38.

³ G.H. Khan, *Freedom Movement in Kashmir, 1931-1940*, (New Delhi: Light & Life Publishers, 1980), p. 49.

of aspects of Kashmiri culture. These organizations were concerned with a wide variety of topics, ranging from discrimination based on caste to religious customs to the rights of women in the school system. Their acts, ideologies, and interactions with the existing sociopolitical environment all interacted with one another to produce a landscape that was subject to continuous transformation.

To begin with, Christian Missionaries were the ones who initiated the process of social reform in Kashmir.⁴ Despite the fact that the purpose of Christian Missionaries appears to be to convert the people of Kashmir to Christianity, it appears that they did so with the expectation that Kashmir would become an important hub of Christianity and would spread Christian ideas to the surrounding areas.⁵ Therefore, in order to win over converts, they focused on numerous failings of the culture that was already in place, such as a lack of education, early marriage, ban on widow remarriage, and other similar evil practices. The work of Missionaries made a positive impact on the lives of the people they served. As a direct response to these criticisms, the people of Kashmir began to develop a desire for change and reform their society. As a result, Anjumanas and Sabhas were established in order to combat the religious propaganda promoted by Christian Missionaries. A series of meetings were held, and resolutions were taken in order to safeguard the particular community's interests. A series of concerns, including widow remarriage, girls' education, marriage age, and the costs associated with weddings and funerals, were brought forward for discussion. It was in this environment that socio-religious reform and political movements witnessed in the last decade of the 19th century, which brought about a revolution in the thoughts and society of the state. Both the Hindu community and the Muslim community independently undertook reform initiatives in an effort to better themselves, which ultimately prepared the way for political awakening and in other way another force of modernization in the state.

The first group to launch a socio-religious reform campaign in the princely state of Jammu and Kashmir was the Arya Samaj. The majority of the Arya Samajists were either state officials from Punjab or people who had settled in Srinagar city for business purposes.⁶ Through its political actions, the Samaj's political nature soon became apparent. Local Kashmiri Pandits and clergy class initially resisted it, but eventually came to accept the Samaj's social endeavors. They made a concerted effort to override the traditional limitations imposed on Kashmiri Pandit women, which were condemned by the religious establishment. They want to raise the marriage age, highlighting the negative repercussions of child marriage.⁷ The Samaj supported widow weddings, which was consistent with the Arya Samaj's primary ideals.⁸ The socio-religious reform efforts launched by Kashmiri Pandits at the turn of the twentieth century were primarily aimed at combating social problems among Kashmiri Pandits, spreading female education,

⁴ M. I. Khan, *History of Srinagar, 1846-1947, A Study in Socio-Cultural Change*, (Srinagar: Aamir Publications, 1978), pp 123-125.

⁵ Robert Clark, *The Missions of the C.M.S & C.E.Z.M.S. in the Punjab and Sindh*, (London: C.M.S Salisbury Square, 1904), p.167.

⁶ Khan, *History of Srinagar*, p. 114.

⁷ Census of India, *Jammu and Kashmir*, 1911, Part 1, pp. 148, 211.

⁸ Khan, *Freedom Movement in Kashmir*, p.52.

promoting widow remarriage, and indirectly supporting inter-caste marriages.⁹ The organization supported women's education, widow remarriage, and opposed the exorbitant cost of marriages and the dowry system. The fall in marriage expenses naturally resulted in a reduction in the amount paid to priests and others.

Furthermore, the pandit community's wealthy aristocrats were opposed to such a reform because they feared that reducing expenditure on their children's marriages would reduce their social position. However, it remained primarily restricted to non-Muslims of the state.¹⁰ Aside from socio-economic improvements, Samaj attempted to bring the people into line with the mainstream of the Indian National Movement in its political role. However, the Maharaja takes strict measures to prevent the Samaj from holding meetings and gatherings.¹¹ With the passage of time, some Kashmiri pandits began to assist the Samaj in its humanitarian activity. They worked hard to end the disadvantages of Kashmiri pundit women, but were assailed by the conservative section of society.¹² They are attempting to raise the marriage age restriction, and have launched propaganda in favor of widow remarriage.¹³ Arya Samajists celebrated half a dozen widow marriages in Srinagar. Arya Samaj was also involved in educational propaganda. It retained a middle standard school for girls, with a student body of around 100 in 1931.¹⁴ Dharma Sabha is another socio-religious movement founded in the early twentieth century by Kashmiri Pandits. The foundation was laid by two Pandits, Pandit Hari Krishen Kaul and Pandit Vedlal Dhar.¹⁵ Its goals were to fight for the abolition of social evils prevalent among Kashmiri Pandits, the promotion of widow remarriage, and the expansion of female education. The Sabha attempted to spread Hindu Dharma by propagating it. Its leadership was mainly consisted of the orthodox Hindus

Socio-religious reform movement among Muslims started at the beginning of the 20th century in an effort to educate the Muslim masses about the causes of their stagnation and to raise their awareness of the state of backwardness they had been living in for years due to autocracies and despotic rule. Anjuman Nusratul Islam was the first and most significant organization Mirwaiz Molvi Rasool Shah ever founded.¹⁶ It is significant to state-affiliated Muslims and was founded by one of the most well-known and influential individuals in the Kashmir Valley. This organization advocated for Muslim modernization, believing that the fundamental reason for Muslims' backwardness was a lack of modern education. In 1905, Mirwaiz started a Maktab primary school in Srinagar, which grew into Islamia High School. They persuaded Muslims to pursue an education. In this age, the Muslim leadership's aim for the Kashmiri Muslim community is reminiscent of the European Enlightenment concept of progress via moral upliftment of society. The job of reforming society included not only educating

⁹ Khan, *Freedom Movement in Kashmir*, p. 52.

¹⁰ Khan, *Freedom Movement in Kashmir*, pp. 52-53.

¹¹ File No. 43/C-m/ (semi-official), Jammu and Kashmir State Archive.

¹² Khan, *History of Srinagar*, p. 117.

¹³ Census of India, *Jammu and Kashmir* part, 1911, I, pp. 148, 211.

¹⁴ Census of India, part *Jammu and Kashmir*, year 1931, I, p. 297.

¹⁵ Khan, *Freedom Movement in Kashmir*, p. 56.

¹⁶ Molvi Mohd Sadat, *Tareekh-e-Kashmir*, p. 625.

Kashmiri Muslims about their shortcomings, but also introducing them to the benefits of modern education, which was an indispensable component of a truly Islamic cohesive society.¹⁷ The Anjuman's educational program includes education for both boys and girls.

Muslim organizations have started submitting petitions to the administration of the time, to look into their educational backwardness. Muslim leaders sent representatives to Maharaja to talk about the rights of Muslims, problems with Muslim education, a lack of Muslim teachers, primary and compulsory education, and the underrepresentation of Muslims in various governmental bodies. As a direct consequence of this, the state council provided funding for two girls' schools in Srinagar—one for Hindus and one for Muslims—for the first time in 1904. Later, the Maharaja was forced to invite Mr. Sharp, the Government of India's Educational Commissioner, who provided numerous strategies for educating Muslims, with a focus on female education in particular.¹⁸ An essential aspect of the Anjuman-i-Islam's goal was the fight to protect the civil and semi-political rights of the state's Muslim inhabitants.¹⁹ Beginning in the early 1920s, the leaders of the Anjuman remained busy bringing up with the government issues relating to Kashmiri Muslims' access to educational opportunities, representation in government positions, conflicts over religious sites, participation in the state's legislative branch, eradication of poverty, etc. The leaders' approach to resolving these concerns with the government was always rigorous, legal, and reasonable. Delegations, resolutions, public meetings, and teaching in mosques and other religious settings were all ways to bring about the demands and rights.²⁰ Anjuman's leaders were aware that Muslims in Kashmir faced numerous challenges--educational, social, cultural, and commercial.²¹ Besides they were also trying to reform the society by eradicating social evils such as trying to stop the evil customs concerned with marriages.²² Thus, the Anjuman leaders played a crucial role in reforming the Muslim populace to meet the needs of the day.

In addition to this, numerous other Anjumans were founded in Kashmir that advocated for the eradication of social ills that were pervasive in society, the dissemination of religious education among Kashmiris, the familiarization of Muslims with Islamic tenets, and a shift in the perspectives and beliefs of Kashmiri Muslims. These organizations were undoubtedly primarily religious institutions, but their major goal was to provide Muslims with both religious and secular education, whether through preaching or specially created schools. The authorities believed that the lack of education was to blame for the state of backwardness, which was brought on by a variety of societal ills and several social, economic, cultural, and commercial impediments.²³ The community needed to be modernized in order for them to function properly.

¹⁷ Chitralekha Zutshi, *Languages of Belonging: Islam, Regional Identity, and the Making of Kashmir*, (New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2003).

¹⁸ Prem Nath Bazaz, *Inside Kashmir*, (Srinagar: The Kashmir Publishing Co. 1941), p. 83.

¹⁹ Khan, *Freedom Movement in Kashmir*, p. 65.

²⁰ Khan, *Freedom Movement in Kashmir*, pp. 65-66.

²¹ Khan, *Freedom Movement in Kashmir*, p. 62.

²² P. N. Bazaz, *The History of Struggle Freedom in Kashmir*, (New Delhi: Kashmir Publishing Company, 1954), p. 126.

²³ Khan, *History of Freedom Struggle in Kashmir*, p. 62.

In Srinagar, Anjuman-i-Humardard Islam was founded as a non-political organization. Its primary goal was to improve the lot of Kashmir's Muslims, whose situation was terribly pitiful. The emphasis was placed on obtaining technical and commercial education in order to support Muslims in their quest of an education.²⁴ Its main goal was to alter the Muslim population of Kashmir's way of thinking and vision so that they could coexist peacefully and cooperatively. Along with its position as a reformatory, Anjuman eventually became involved in the political or semi-political activities of Kashmir's Muslim population. By participating in public events like political processions, it showed support for the state's Muslim subjects as a whole.

In 1923, Anjuman-i-Tahaffuz-i-Namaz-Wa-Satri-Masturat was founded. The Anjuman was a wholly religious organization that had no interest in politics.²⁵ The major goals of the Anjuman were to eradicate social ills that were common among Muslims and to familiarize Muslims in general, and Muslims living in villages in particular, with the tenets of Islam.²⁶ They said that residents of the villages lacked proper knowledge of Islam, wore no pyjamas, and continued to practice poor hygiene.²⁷ They agreed that marriage contracts should be fully registered in a court of law and wanted to halt the trafficking of women. The clergy class had a significant social and theological impact on Kashmir's Muslim society. The majority of the population, the Muslim villages, were Mullah-ridden, and the Mullahs did not want to lose control over these uneducated, illiterate people.²⁸ The Anjuman believed that these Mullahs were the major impediment to advancement.

Under the leadership of Prem Nath Bazaz, a group of Kashmiri pundits influenced by Arya Samaj formed the Fraternity Society in 1930 with the goal of social change. They opposed not only the social evil of needless wedding extravagance, but also the spread of education among girls and widow remarriage.²⁹ In order to organize public opinion, the Fraternity initiated campaigns in various regions of Srinagar to explain the movement's goals and demands, and for the first time, Pandit women began to attend public meetings and assemblies. The Fraternity society, despite its progressive attitude and sophisticated views, was unable to fulfill its goals and objectives. It was met with opposition from the orthodox pandits of society, who formed the Sanatan Dharam Sabha and were opposed to any social reform, including widow remarriage. According to Bazaz, the reformers, who were in favour of widow remarriage and women education, were dubbed Munda Kath (widow's progeny), and it became difficult for the young reformers, who were always looked down upon, to move freely.³⁰

Yuvak Sabha was a significant sociopolitical organization created in Srinagar by Kashmiri Pandits. The political campaign launched by Muslims in July 1931 resulted in a significant shift in the mindset of Kashmiri pandits, resulting in vigorous social reform among

²⁴ Newspaper, *The Zamindar*, 3 August, 1928.

²⁵ Newspaper, *Akhbar-i-Kashmir*, 25 July, 1925.

²⁶ Khan, *Freedom Movement in Kashmir*, p 75.

²⁷ Khan, *Freedom Movement in Kashmir*, p 75.

²⁸ Bazaz, *Inside Kashmir*, pp. 409-10.

²⁹ Bazaz, *Daughters of Vitasta*, pp. 232-233.

³⁰ Bazaz, *Daughters of vitasta*, p. 240.

Kashmiri pandits.³¹ In this new atmosphere, the Fraternity group also joined the Young Men's Association (or yuvak sabha), with the sole objective of protecting the pandit community's interests, and limited its efforts to current political problems.³² As a result, it became a political forum for all Kashmiri Pandits. It was in charge of defending and advocating for the cause and rights of Kashmiri Pandits.³³ It was trying to improve the lot of Kashmiri pandits. Yuvak Sabah's work caused a multitude of reforms in Hindu society, leading to women's freedom. Women's participation in Kashmiri pandit meetings in the city was substantial. Not only did they push for women's liberation and education, but they were also successful in popularizing widow remarriages among Kashmiri pandits. With time, the validity of widow remarriage was recognized even by the purohits of Sanatan Dharma.³⁴ Pandit reformers also spoke out against the high amounts requested by the bridegroom's family from the father of the bride. Many cases of destitute families were made public.³⁵ There were staged Kashmiri dramas highlighting the problems prevalent in society. The young picketed those families, where money was lavishly spent on weddings and other events. However, initially none of these efforts were fruitful.³⁶ With time, the legislation of widow remarriage 1933 was passed as a result of reformers' attempts to allow widow marriages among Hindus. By passing the Widow Remarriage Act in 1933, Maharaja Hari Singh undoubtedly authorized widow remarriage. However, the movement of social reform was limited to the non-Muslim Community, since they made considerable progress in education and gained some political power in the administration by taking subordinate jobs.

Conclusion

The study of how socio-religious reform groups influenced the landscape of Kashmir under the Dogra Rule highlights their enormous influence as catalysts of change. This study has shed light on how these groups challenged social conventions, promoted progressive reforms, and sparked cultural and religious revival through their varied activities and ideological aspirations. These socio-religious reform organizations are significant because of both their immediate and long-term effects on Kashmiri society. The appeal for social change, spiritual reflection, and political awareness struck a chord with many people, generating a wave of change that went beyond the Dogra Rule. The numerous socio-religious groups served as change agents by fostering community engagement, igniting critical discourse, and challenging the status quo. Their efforts went beyond enacting merely cosmetic changes; rather, they deeply impacted society's collective consciousness. These change agents had an effect that lasted far longer than their brief presence and permanently altered Kashmir's sociopolitical destiny. These reform initiatives also provided a platform for the Kashmiri people to strengthen their sense of community, identity, and purpose. Within these groups, the social and religious ambitions came

³¹ Newspaper, *The Tribune*, Sept, 25, 1931.

³² Newspaper, *The Tribune*, Nov, 21, 1931.

³³ Khan, *Freedom Movement in Kashmir*, p. 58.

³⁴ Bazaz, *Daughters of Vitasta*, op.cit, p. 252.

³⁵ Bazaz, *Daughters of Vitasta*, op.cit, p. 253.

³⁶ Bazaz, *Daughters of Vitasta*, p. 253.

together to create a dynamic environment for discussion and cooperation, which aided in the progress of society as a whole.

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