



Begar: A Bonded Labour during the Dogra Era in Kashmir and its Impact

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(Received 09 September, 2017, Accepted 14 November, 2017)

(Published by Research Trend, Website: www.researchtrend.net)

ABSTRACT: The Dogra rulers imposed forced-cum-unpaid labor in Kashmir which was one of the most dishonourable systems of oppression. In Kashmir due to the absence of any special laboring class, demand for *begar* fell naturally on the villagers and it existed in many forms. The most obvious form of it was the Gilgit *begar*, named so because the peasants were used as porters for carrying goods and supplies for the Kashmir troops stationed in Gilgit. *Begar* was so harshly enforced that the very word was a constant terror in Kashmir. The officials exploited *begar* to meet their personal gains. The system of *begar* was horrid both from humanitarian and economic points of view. Considered from the humanitarian angle, the system was an outrage against the dignity of the peasant as a human being. The paper is an attempt to highlight the atrocities faced by the peasants during Dogra rule in Kashmir.

Key words: Begar, peasants, Dogra rule, economic impact

I. INTRODUCTION

The Dogra Raj in Kashmir during 1846 brought different policies and practices that were unfavorable to the interests of the masses, in general, and the producing class, in particular. Apart from a regressive taxation policy, *begar* or forced-cum-unpaid labour was one of the most notorious systems of oppression that the Dogra rulers imposed on Kashmiris [1]. They were compelled to work under extreme conditions for longer periods of time without basic facilities. Accumulated debt, retention of identity papers or threats of denunciation to immigration were the means to impose the bonded labor to the people with alarming situations that were forced on them [2]. This system was introduced by Sikhs and was taken to its extreme by the Dogras as the system of forced labor known as “*begar*” and has been defined by foreign visitors as “forced labor”. The situation was even worse as it was free forced labor. The system assumed extremely dreadful proportions in Kashmir valley under the early Dogras mainly because of the frontier wars for conquest and the consequent necessity of providing the troops on the move as well as the huge military establishments in the subjugated territories with ample supplies [3]. The paper is an attempt to highlight the atrocities faced by the peasants during Dogra rule in Kashmir.

II. DOLDRUMS OF BEGAR DURING DOGRA RULE

The system of *begar* introduced by the Afghans was revived by the Sikhs, and during the Dogra rule [4], the peasants were not only robbed of the major portion of his produce, but he was also subjected to another inhuman tyranny called *begar* (forced labor). Though the horror of Gilgit *begar* [5] was no more thereafter the construction of Gilgit road, although *begar* was partially abolished by the Government in 1891 and fully in 1920 [6] but were not stopped completely but it took different forms. Because of medieval means of communication, overall technological underdevelopment, the prevalence of feudal expenditure pattern of the State [7] and the consequent meager resources at the disposal of the Government, the problem of raising labor power for carriage and construction purposes on nominal wages formed a critical feature of the Dogra administration [8]. Besides, the Government order that the remuneration should be paid to the forced laborers, applied only to laborers requisitioned *Forkar-i-Sarkar* (Government work) [9]. So far as the exaction of *begar* for personal services of the officials were concerned the order made no mention of it. At the same time, the position of a peasant working on *Chak*, *Jagir* and *Mauafi* lands was like those of the serfs [10]. Therefore, the exaction of *begar* was a necessary feature of the *Malik-Kashtker* relationship. The abolition of *begar* was frequently demanded by the Kashmiri Muslims in their memorandums

submitted to the Government in the twenties of the twentieth century. During, 1932 Glancy Commission found that Government order for the abolition of *begar* as a dead letter [11].

His Highness issued orders that adequate payment should be made to those who would be forced to do some labor under Government orders. Complaints have been received that Government officials who disobey the orders of His Highness and force the villagers to carry loads of the officials to far-off places without any remuneration will be treated severally. The indiscriminate and ruthless manner in which the peasant masses were requisitioned to do *Kar-I-Sarkar* was reported in Guru Ganthal, in its issue of 1 March 1927 [12].

Once the Nawab of Malirkotla desired to visit all hill stations in Kashmir, the Government had placed at his disposal a large number of laborers to carry his camp without any wages. One morning while riding a horse he saw a group of miserable laborers sitting in the immediate neighborhood. The Nawab felt very sorry during his conversation with these people as he learnt that they are the members of a *barat* (marriage party) who had been seized along with bridegroom while on their way back to attend his camp. He was not allowed to accompany his bride to his new home.

The upper-class quest for adventure, holidaying and undertaking pilgrimages was a bolt from the blue for the Kashmiri peasant, as no such action of the pleasure-seekers and pilgrims could be fulfilled without imposing forced labor from him. In this context, it is interesting to quote Shaikh Atta Muhammad, an Advocate, and one time President of Muslim Kashmiri Conference Lahore, who had made an on spot study of the conditions of Kashmiri Muslims [13]. *The natural beauty of Kashmir, its meadows, its villages and forests are the bounties of nature. Alas! This paradise on earth is a hell for the sons of the soil. The Kashmiris have been ruthlessly crushed. Every year thousands of Hindus go to Amarnath cave on religious pilgrimage but it is strange that the cave is being visited by riding on the backs of hundreds of Kashmiri Muslims who are requisitioned for begar.*

It may also be noted that the orders of 1891 and 1920 regarding the abolition of *begar* did not apply to the construction of canals, embankments and the like. As a matter of fact, till 1947, it was obligatory upon the villagers to construct and repair the canals and embankments beside helping the rulers and high officials in their hunting pursuits and to peddle the boats of the royal river processions without any remuneration. The negligence by the people resulted in harsh punishment and fine to them. It may also be recorded that though the construction of Gilgit menace still haunted the mental peace of many villagers, particularly those living near the road and those who were in possession of horses, mules and asses as they were often forced to carry the loads known as *ras*.

It is to mention that the whole burden of *begar* fell exclusively upon the common Muslim peasantry as the Hindus, Sayyids, Thakurs, Rajputs and Sikhs were exempted from it. This was no less a source of resentment among the Muslims of Kashmir. That is why the Glancy Commission recommended that when a requisition for laborers for *Kar-I-Sarkar* would arrive in a village, the burden should be uniformly imposed upon all sections of the agricultural community [14]. Abdul Ahad Azad has abruptly versified the pathetic condition of the peasantry of the period:

*Pakun chum kar-i-begaras
Barun chum genissarkaras
Yeyamvograibapari
Ba nazarehiskehbemari*

Means I cannot escape from *begar* and paying revenue in kind. I shall have to face the merchant who would come to recover the debt I owe to him. How can I afford romance [15].

III. BEGAR AND STATE ECONOMY

The state economy was highly disturbed during the Dogra rule due to many reasons. Firstly, during the peasants' absence from their villages, the land remained uncultivated as a result of which the land revenue could not be paid. So the village was enrolled in the list of Bakiadars. Secondly, the practice of purchasing exemption from *abegar* on payment of *abrike* to corrupt and dishonest officials often resulted in the emergence of "big *estaimis*". Those who could not purchase their exemption for want of money were, however, exempted if they surrendered their land to the exemption-granting authorities. Thus, the peasants who surrendered the land to the officials were automatically evicted, the officials themselves becoming the owners. This process of transfer of land from the cultivator to the officials, through foul means, gave rise to the creation of "big *estaimis*". Thirdly, *begar* indirectly helped the emergence of a rich middle-class stratum in the society. The exemption was granted, at times, on the recommendation of the rich in the cities and urban areas, on the condition that the exempted persons would cultivate their wasteland, build their houses, and render domestic services without any remunerations. Fourthly, the *begar* had a disastrous effect on the developmental schemes and to the work of State. Many construction works, public and private remained in the state of stand until the return of professionals, carpenters, masons, bricklayers from Gilgit

and Auster[16]. Fifthly and finally, the exploitative character of forced labour was also evident in the ruthless extortion of milk, poultry, pulses, ghee, butter, cow, ponies, sheep, eggs, walnut, and blankets, free of cost from the villages.

Any sensible British visitor to Kashmir amidst such scenes of ugly human drudgery had to admit that among the Princes of India, the Maharaja of Kashmir was a great slave-holder who owned not a gang but national bonds-men who were the Muslims of Kashmir. According to Lucullus, “we decorate him (the ruler) and point him out to our peers as the ruler whom England delights to honour. It cannot be concealed that Kashmiri is one vast slave-worked population.” The same writer goes on to say:

“It is true that we sold Kashmir to Late Goolab Singh, but we surely did not float its people into slavery. And we have no doubt that in the worst days of slave trade, the conditions of the Negroes of the West India Sugar and Cotton plantations, and of the southern states of America, were very much better than a lot of Kashmir has been and still seems to be. But, be this as it may, the Maharaja is our feudatory and we are morally, if not politically, responsible for the grave evils arising from the barbarous system of misgovernment (in Kashmir)” [17].

IV. CONCLUSION

Though the peasant was the backbone of society and a source of strength and prosperity for the country, the Government paid no attention towards providing him basic necessities of life. The worst feature of social life in Kashmir was the prevalence of forced labor (*begar*). During Dogra rule, the *begar* was so harshly enforced that the very word was a constant terror in Kashmir. When there was a call for it, the villagers would reluctantly leave their homes for “two or three months with the prospect of death from cold or starvation”. It not only introduced the migratory character and depopulated the valley but gave birth to innumerable social evils. The system of *begar* was horrid both from humanitarian and economic points of view. The *begar* had a disastrous effect on the developmental schemes and works of the State.

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- [5]. For details about Gilgitbegar see Walter Lawrence, *The Valley of Kashmir*, p.413; E.F. Knight, *Where three Empires Meet*. Pp.67-68.
- [6]. State Council Resolution, dated, April 18, 1891. No doubt the State abolished *begar* fully in 1920, (JKA, File No: C – 57 of 1920) but according to the information gathered from the contemporary peasants, the *begar* of various types continued for a long time.
- [7]. By feudal expenditure, we mean exhausting State exchequer by spending on unproductive sectors like giving away gifts and distributing alms at the time of the birth of princes, birth anniversaries of the members of the royal family, marriage ceremonies and construction of temples etc.
- [8]. For details see Walter Lawrence, *The Valley of Kashmir*, pp.413-414.
- [9]. As late as 1932 Glancy Commission found the order about the abolition of *begar* as a dead letter and laid a stress on its proper implementation. See Dastawaizat, pp.141-142.
- [10]. To quote Prem Nath Bazaz, “I shuddered when I heard the condition of the people living in the Jagirs. The depredations of the jagirdars are monstrous. There is no law but the will of the jagirdars in these parts of the State. I was told that people may not marry even their daughters against the wishes of the jagirdars” See *Inside Kashmir*, p.232.
- [11]. Glancy Commission Report vide Dastawaizat, pp. 140-141.
- [12]. Guru Ganthal. Lahore, January 3, 1927.
- [13]. Statement of Shaikh Atta Muhammad vide Malik Fazel Hussain, *Kashmir Aur Dogra Raj*, pp.37-38.
- [14]. Ganai M. Yusuf, *Kashmir's struggle for independence 1931-1939*, Mohsin Publications Srinagar, 2003, pp. 52-53.
- [15]. *Abdul Ahad Azad, Kulyat-i-Azad*, p.277.
- [16]. Dagshali was the department under whose supervision the shawl production was conducted. It also regulated the labour employed by every proprietor of a factory.
- [17]. Bazaz, *A History of Kashmir*, (Delhi Metropolitan Book Co., 1973), p.668.