

VISIBLISING LOCAL FEMINISM-A CASE STUDY OF KASHMIR VALLEY

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Abstract: *Since the early days until the 13th century A.D, Kashmiri women enjoyed exceptional independence, exerted enough influence and transparency, which earned them a high place in society. But it was during the medieval period when their ill-fate and downfall started during the reign of foreign rulers with humiliation reaching farthest limits. Under the reign of foreign barbaric rulers, the Valley witnessed the darkest period and women became special targets of the licentious behavior of these rulers. Kashmiri women were physically and mentally broken and their existence was completely eclipsed in every sphere of social life. With the dawn of Modernism in Kashmir at the end of 19th century, the Britishers took over the charge and introduced vast administrative, educational and economic reforms. It ushered the dawn of modernism in the State, the slumbering Kashmiris reawakened and women too began to open their eyes, recovered lost ground and regained their innate virtues. Thus women have slowly started re-emerging in social life to contribute towards the reconstruction of their homeland. The present paper tries to highlight the situation of women in the past, their awakening and regaining due to the impact of modern social and administrative reforms.*

Key words: Women, Downfall, Barbaric, Modernism, Innate Virtues, Social Life

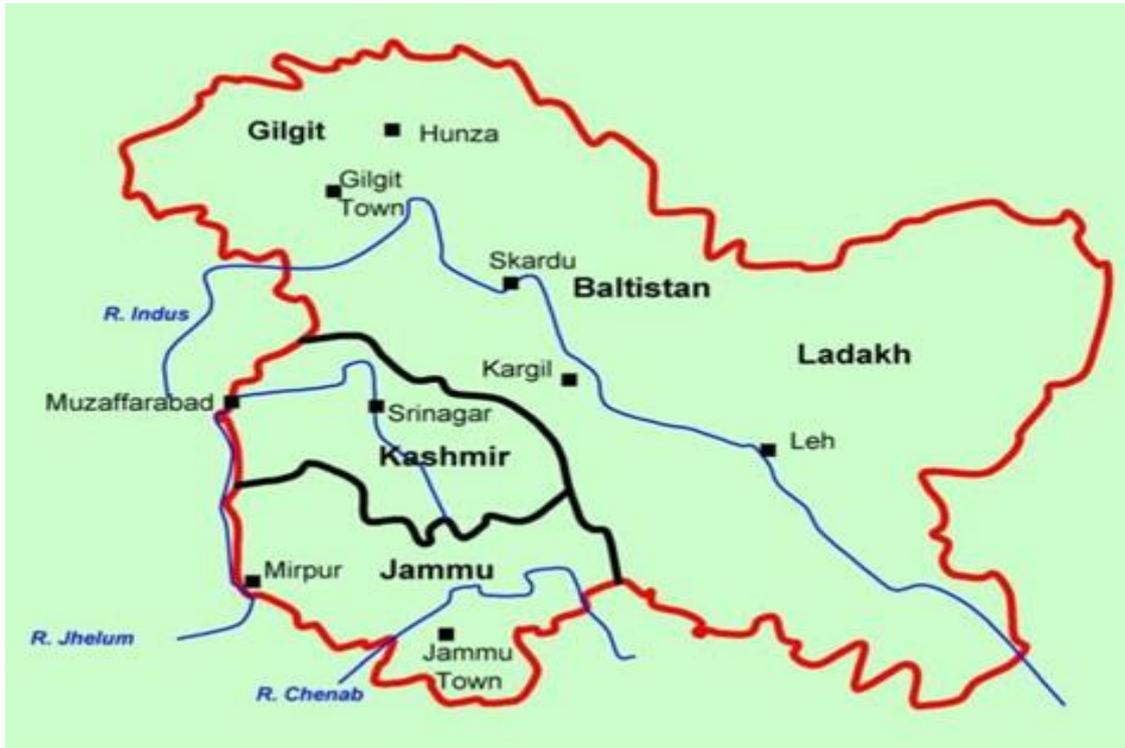
Introduction

Feminism in India is a catalogue of activities designed to identify, create and protect equitable political, economic and social rights and equal opportunity for women in India. It is the promotion of the rights of women within India's culture. Feminists in India, like their feminist counterparts around the globe, are demanding gender equality, i.e. the right to work for equal pay, the right to fair access to health and education, and equal political freedom. In Indian patriarchal culture, Indian women have also struggled against cultural problems, such as succession rules and the ritual of widow immolation known as Sati. The history of feminism in India can be divided into three stages: the first stage, which started in the mid-19th century, when the Male European Colonists started to talk against Sati's social problems. The 2nd stage, from 1915 to Indian independence, started to emerge when Gandhi integrated women's movements into the Quit India Movement and independent Women's Organizations, and finally the 3rd stage, the post-independence stage, which centered on equal treatment of females at home before and after marriage, in the workforce and the right to political equity (Chaudhuri, M. 2005).

Despite the gains achieved by feminist movements of India, there are still many problems of injustice facing women living in modern India. The patriarchal community of India has made the task of acquiring land-ownership rights and access to educational difficulties challenging. An alarming pattern of sex-selective abortions for Indian feminists has also arisen in recent decades. Jammu & Kashmir lies to the north of mainland India. It consists of two divisions- Jammu & Kashmir. The Kashmir Valley is mostly inhabited by

Muslim population. According to Census of India (2011), 97% of the population is Muslims and the remaining 3% are Hindus, Sikhs, Christians etc.

Figure 01: Map of Jammu and Kashmir



Kashmiri women have witnessed varying fortunes. At times they have acquired tremendous glory, identified themselves as rulers in their own terms. In fact, there was no field of social activity in which they had not participated with their male counterparts. But progress did not have a continuous flow, glory didn't prove everlasting. Times came when they were gradually deprived of the rights previously enjoyed by them. In such times, they struggled against injustice. With the dawn of Modernism in Kashmir at the end of 19th century, women had slowly started re-emerging in social life to contribute their share to the freedom struggle and to the reconstruction of their homeland.

Broadly speaking, since the early days until the 13th century A.D, Kashmiri women enjoyed exceptional independence, exerted enough influence and transparency, which earned them a high place in society. But it was during the medieval period when their ill-fate and downfall started during the reign of foreign rulers. The process of humiliation reached farthest limits. It is under the foreign barbaric rulers (1752-1819 A.D.) that the Valley witnessed the darkest period of national depression. Though men and women were, without any distinction, subject to these hardships but women became special targets of the licentious behavior of these rulers. No wonder that within a score of years of this rule, Kashmiri women were physically and mentally broken and their existence was completely eclipsed in every sphere of social life (Bazaz, P. N. 1959).

The Sikhs succeeded the Afghans as the rulers of the Valley for a brief period of 27 years (1819-1846 A.D.), they also could not prove better masters. Then the Valley was sold for 75 lack rupees by Lord Hardinge, the Governor General of East India Company to Raja Gulab Singh Dogra, as a reward for his perfidy against his Sikh Master and the people of Punjab. The new masters proved harsher for several decades after the occupation of the Valley. At the advent of the Maharaja Ranbir Singh's rule in 1858 A.D., Kashmiri women had lost everything for which they were admirable in the past. For centuries, continuing injustice and wicked rulers, tyranny had robbed them of their physical beauty and moral

refinement, practically degraded them to a sub-human state and existed solely by misery (Walikhanna, C. 2004). In the long and unrelieved period of slavery, Kashmiris forgot all about the past and heights that women had scaled in some periods of their history. A time had come when through force of habit, the people began to believe that degraded status which hard days had forced upon the women was natural to them. It was taken for granted that women were fit only to be domestic slaves, objects of carnal enjoyment or a best means for procreation of children. Even cleanliness among women, unless it be for religious purpose was by and large discouraged and was never rewarded or highly spoken of (Sufi, G. M. D. D. 1974).

At the end of the 19th century, Kashmiri women had sunk to a low level of destitution and ignorance. They had lost charms of body and refinements of mind; they lacked self-confidence, spirit of revolt and even a sense of righteous indignation. The sale of young girls in Kashmir to established houses of ill-fame in Srinagar and India was both protected and encouraged by the Dogra rulers. According to Robert Thorpe (1868), the license granting purchase of a girl for this purpose, cost about 100 rupees in Ranbir Singh's time. In 1880, the Maharaja received 15 to 25 % of the whole revenue of his State from the gains of his licensed prostitutes. It is also said that there were 18,715 State prostitutes in Kashmir in 1880. No attention was paid towards the prostitute's health which was clear from the fact that there were 2500 prostitutes admitted in Mission Hospital who were suffering from Sexually Transmitted Diseases(STD's). After the death of a prostitute, her property was taken by the Government.

At Tashwan & Maisuma (Srinagar), the two main centers of prostitution, girls used to stay at windows, well decorated to invite the people. Call-girls were not allowed to stop their trade, marry or change residence. Though the Maharaja derived a lot of income from the prostitutes, no amount of money was spent on their benefit. Another misery to which these prostitutes were subjected was that they could not marry and settle down as respectable women. Child marriage was prevalent among the Pandit's and Muslims, while widow remarriage was practiced by the Muslims only as it was not allowed in Hindus. The condition of these widows was very miserable. Mr. Biscoe remarks, "as there was no restriction on early marriage, there were number of child widows who were obliged to live in their in-law's house. I came to know about the cruelties practiced on these girls especially by the Brahman priests, who were the fathers of the drowned babies". The infants were thrown either in the river or to the pariah dogs at night to maintain the sanctity of Hindu religion (Pundit, R.S).

But the wave of the Western ideas which had slowly but steadily advanced in the wake of British domination to every corner of the sub-continent began to have its impact on the politics and culture of God-forsaken Kashmir as well. The British Residency took over the charge of the entire administration and introduced vast administrative, educational and economic reforms. It ushered the dawn of modernism in the State, the slumbering Kashmiris reawakened and women too began to open their eyes, recover lost ground and regain their innate virtues. The social evils that had changed the Srinagar society did not escape the notice of Christian Missionaries. In 1912, Miss Fitze started a girl's school in Srinagar. In 1914, the number of girl's school rose to 3 in the city. By 1916, the number of School going girls increased. In 1918, the School in FatehKadal (Srinagar) was raised to middle standard and it received a grant of 700 rupees from the State. This Girls School underwent a radical change during the period when Miss Mallinson was its principal (1922-61) (Biscoe, C. E. T, 1922). It can be said it was Miss Mallinson who was instrumental in bringing about enough educational and cultural advancement among the women of Srinagar.

The Mirwaiz Dynasty of Srinagar also took a keen interest in the welfare of Kashmiris, especially the great role of Molvi Rasul Shah popularly known as 'Sir Syed of

Kashmir' in the educational, social and political arenas of Kashmir cannot be ignored. He initiated a vibrant Muslim Educational Movement in the last decade of the 19th century. He was the first who like Sir Syed Ahmad Khan realized that without modern education, the Muslims will be rendered backward. He believed that good education on western lines, supported by wise religious teachings of the Holy Quran would produce young Muslims of capacity and character. He initially carried this movement for the male folk of the society only. His mission was further carried out by his successors as well (Yasin, M, et al.,1980).

Kashmiri women have faced many challenges with a great courage. They have played a very important role in the development of political, social, economic and cultural aspects of the State of Jammu & Kashmir. They have been the companions of men during the Freedom struggle and have sacrificed a lot for the given cause (Yasin, M, et al.,1980). It was the National Conference under the dynamic leadership of Sheikh Mohammad Abdullah that tried not only to address the women concerns but also provided them space to represent themselves. It was this party that enabled women to come out of the pits of darkness and ignorance, which led them to the growth of society, by creating a lively platform for them. It got women interested in the participation of ongoing freedom struggle and educated them in the decision-making processes. It was through the support from the leadership of the National Conference that women in the society eventually became conscious of their social rights and status. It was this party that helped women to come out of the darkness of ignorance and contributed to the development of the society by providing a vibrant platform to the women. It got women involved in the ongoing Freedom Struggle and trained them for participation in the decision making processes. It was through the encouragement which women received from the National Conference leadership that they gradually became aware of their rights & status in the society.

With the passing time, they progressed with their march towards empowerment and the National Conference played an important role in this direction. Throughout its functioning the National Conference passed several resolutions and legislations and formulated many schemes to ensure the overall development of women, and first movement in this direction was National Conference's – "Naya Kashmir Manifesto" adopted in 1944. This manifesto included a special Charter for empowerment of women sub-titled as Women's Charter. This Programme was one of the earliest and important political documents in the whole sub-continent which upheld equal rights of women. In fact, the Directive Principles of the State Policy with regard to the rights of women in the Constitution of Jammu & Kashmir were based on Naya Kashmir's Women Charter (Bazaz, P. N. 1959). It had several parts:

A. Political Participation

In 1934 for the first time, the people of Kashmir were enfranchised that too on a very limited scale. The right to vote was restricted to those who passed the middle standard or an equal test, so far as women are concerned. The excuse for its limited scale as given by the Franchise Commission was, "the inclusion of Women Voters would increase the administrative difficulties of the election. But with the formation of the successful government led by Sheikh Mohammad Abdullah, the Universal Franchise was the basis of the State Elections to the Constituent Assembly in 1951. It advocated the right of women to nominate and be elected in all institutions on the grounds of equality between men and women, as well as the right to extend equal rights to women in all spheres of national life, including services within the State. Furthermore, the Provision Section (47) provided that, if the Governor of the State believes that women don't have an adequate representation in the legislature, he may nominate two women as members of that legislature assembly.

B. Women's Wing

It was in 1950's when National Conference again started working for the upliftment of women folk and established the J&K National Conference Women's Wing. Since then

the Women's Wing have been working to bring women at par with men in the male dominated society (Manchanda, R. 2001), (Walikhanna, C. 2004). The efforts also included the upliftment of rural women. The Political Women's Wing created a favourable environment for women of Jammu & Kashmir by which they were entitled to vote in all elections i.e. Panchayat/ Municipality, Assembly and Parliament elections on equal terms with men without any discrimination.

The aims and objectives of the National Conference Women's Wing which would help the women of Jammu & Kashmir to improve their status and also protect their rights were as under:

- i. The level of education among women in both rural and urban areas is low. Adult education should therefore be given to women with the assistance of local leaders, especially women leaders.
- ii. To remove the cultural constraints which bind women to the four walls of the house.
- iii. To aware women about the ways by which they can protect their rights.
- iv. To involve more and more women in Political processes. This will help raising and addressing women's issues.
- v. To motivate Government for initiating maximum schemes for the welfare and empowerment of women.

Important Steps Taken

i. After assuming power in 1947, the National Conference in 1950's took a revolutionary step which changed the whole society, in general, and women, in particular. This revolutionary Step was 'Big Landed Estates Abolition Act', passed on October 17, 1950. This act transferred all land to the peasants and abolished the practice of landlords in the State. The implementation of this Act and the subsequent grant of property rights changed the socio-economic scenario of the State. The landless workers who had lived at the mercy of landlords began working in the fields as owners under the 'Land to Tiller' scheme. The peasants became the real owners of the land and consequently women began to live a dignified life. Women were the most vulnerable group as they were exploited physically and psychologically by the feudal landlords. The moment, the Act was passed and put to practice, the women achieved a freedom from the shackles of landlords forever.

ii. Education

The then Jammu & Kashmir Government did a tremendous job in spreading education in the State, in general, and among women in particular. The orthodox Society didn't allow girls to receive education. In fact, the Muslim community was highly illiterate. To end this menace, Sheikh Mohammad Abdullah started a system of compulsory education known as "Jabria Taleem" (forced education) at a place where Women's College, Srinagar is presently situated. The Government established the Women's Colleges both in Srinagar and Anantnag and established a wide net of Schools at primary, secondary & senior secondary levels in every corner of the State to disseminate knowledge and lead people from darkness to light.

iii. Legislations

Being an orthodox society, women were denied their rights at all levels. Women were highly backward and underdeveloped. It gave rise to the need of framing laws for their development. The laws and schemes were particularly for women and greatly influenced their lives (Baba, NA, 2002). In 1975, a voluntary organization known as, The J&K Markazi Behboodi Khawateen" or "Women/Children Welfare Trust" was established. This trust was meant for the welfare and upliftment of women which aimed at providing education, training in the arts and crafts, proper health care and social security to the downtrodden sections of the society (Report, 1985).

After Independence Indian Government tried to change the plight of Indians in general and those of marginalized sections of the society in particular, J&K State got maximum benefits from the various women friendly schemes and women were benefited socially, educationally, economically and politically.

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