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ARTICLE

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Article

Socio-economic roots of religious conversions: A case study of the valley of Kashmir Showkat

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The question of religious conversion has conventionally been treated either as a product of force employed from the above or the process started from below. It has also been viewed in terms of individual search for spiritual salvation according to his own understanding. At the global level, two factors are important in the religious conversions, one the place where the religion originated and second the place where it diffused and dispersed whether by assimilation, persuasion or by force. Here all these assumptions have been sidelined, and an attempt has been made to see the Islamization of Kashmir while looking at the socio-economic order of pre 14th century which contributed to the process of Islamization in varying degrees.

Key words: Brahamans, invasions, Islam, conversion.

Introduction

Islam did not enter Kashmir directly from the Arab deserts, the place of its birth place, but it makes a way by passing through the Central Asia which came under the sway of Muslims by the end of eighth century. It is now an admitted fact that the Muslims settled in Kashmir prior to the establishment of the Sultanate 1339 C.E. Their presence is understandable as the Muslim conquers first Arabs, and then Turks on many occasions directed their military expeditions towards the Kashmir.

According to the author of *Chacha-Nama* in AD 713 Muhammad Bin Qasim, the Arab general after consolidating his hold over Sindh marched towards the frontiers of Kashmir called Panj Nahiyat. But the threat to Kashmir was averted as the general was recalled back by the Caliph Walid (705 to 715) to his court. Attempts

however made after by the Arabs during the Caliphate of al- Hasham (724 to 53) and al-Mansur (754 to 75) which according to P. K. Hitti, carried their raids as far as Kashmir, but failed to conquer the rich and extensive valley of the north-west Himalaya.ⁱ

In the second decade of eleventh century, C. E Mahmud Ghaznavi while conducting the military expeditions to India, attempted to conquer Kashmir on two occasions but failed because of strong fortresses at Loharkote and of extreme weather like heavy storm and snowfall.ⁱⁱ The desire of Sultan to invade Kashmir can be felt from these Persian couplets:ⁱⁱⁱ

*Ma ra rahi Kashmir hami arzu ayad
Ma ze arzu'i khwes nitabim bayak moui*

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*Gah ast ki yakbar bakashmir kharamaim
Az dast butan pehneh kuna'im az sar but gav'i
Shah ast bakashmir agar izad khahad
Imsal nyaram ta keen nakashm zo'i*

English rendering:

We possess an aspiration to see Kashmir. We will not give up our desire. It is time that we will at once walk into Kashmir. If God wishes we will be in Kashmir this year. We will not sit idle till we will not take it.

One can safely conclude that, some Muslims might have stayed behind and settled in Kashmir after the Conquest of Kashmir by Mahmud Ghaznavi. King Harsha (1098 to 1101 C.E), a poet and a lover of fine arts whom Kalhana called epithet of 'turuska' went a step further, as he recruited Mleechas in his army, and made innovations in dress and etiquettes which according to M.A Stein was "custom from the Muhammadan west"^{iv}.

Furthermore, it was during the reign of Biksacara (1120 to 21C.E) the Muslim soldiers were recruited and sent on an expedition against Sussala in Lohara. Quite interestingly, the employment of the Muslim in the armies of the Kashmiri kings would have either brought their families along with them or married with Hindu girls and settle in separate colonies. Another well-known factor of those who married within, the parents of these girls might have also accepted Islam in order to be in touch with their daughters. As the Venetian traveller, Morco Polo reveals that at the end of the thirteenth century there was a colony of Saracens (Muslims) in Kashmir. He also says that 'the people (Brahmans and Buddhists) did not kill birds and animals, and when they want to eat meat they got the Saracens who dwell among them to play the butcher'.^v

Apart from these permanent, Muslim settlers before the establishment of Sultanate 1339 A.D, the merchants of Kashmir visited all important places for the purpose of trade or commerce. They went out with their merchandise and brought goods from distant and near places like Kabul, Yaraqand and Samarqand.^{vi} The artisans and the craftsmen from Central Asia were invited to put a gift parasol on the Kalasvara temple (Kalla, 2011). Similarly, so profound and remarkable was the influence of the Muslims that the celebrated Kashmiri writer Kalhana makes stupendous use of the Persian phraseology such as, Davira after Persian dabir, Ganjwara after Persian ganjwar (treasurer), sultan, shah, silah etc. in his writings.^{vii}

This could also be seen as a mark of the cultural diffusion received by the early Kashmiri society when they came into contact with the Muslims. It can now safely be deduced from the earlier dissuasion that the influence of the Islam was making itself felt in the Valley of Kashmir, and there was a constant cultural exchange, commercial relationship and the exchange of artisans

long before the foundation of the Sultanate. It also seems munificent that the Hindu rulers were more hospitable to these Muslim fortune seekers and adventures.

The process of Islamization was still a far cry in the valley of Kashmir, how then Islam became popular at an unprecedented pace and the large number of masses desist their aboriginal religion and opting for other. In order to understand and evaluate the process of conversion, it would be fair to start by understanding the socio-cultural and economic milieu of the pre-fourteenth Century Kashmir which contributed to the process of Islamization in varying degrees.

Socio-economic restraints and the political instability

It may be frankly recognised at the very outset that as in elsewhere the social organization among the Hindu's continued to be based on Varnashrama dharma with the Brahmans at the apex 'holding the privileged and honourable position' in the caste hierarchy. The majority among them pursued the age old ideals laid down like earning their livelihood by performing religious rites, serving as priest and teaching the sacred scriptures and a considerable number led to an ordinary life given to the enjoyment of mundane pleasures.

According to Ray, "though the conception of the population as consisting of four traditional castes was not altogether unknown", he further says "there was no such caste as Kshatriya, Vaisya and Sudra in early Kashmir". He mentions Nishadas, Kirtas, Dombas, Svapakas and Chandalas as the lower castes (Ray, 1969). Ray's view about the total absence of the intermediary castes appears to be only partly true as one of the oldest source the Nilmat Purana makes special reference to the other categories like the Kshatriyas, the Vaishyas and the chiefs of Shudras, and similarly kalhana also mentions the emergence of the rich and prosperous merchant class. It is said by Kalhana that the overland trade received unprecedented encouragement during the period of Karkotas, and the merchants were living in palatial buildings excelling the kings palace. Damodargupta's reference to the Shreshthin and vinikas also indicate the existence of the rich and prosperous trading community, belonging probably to the Vaishya caste. In addition to fourfold division, the author of Rajatarangini also makes a reference of sixty-four intermediary castes (Mohan, 1981).

It is however true there was no strict adherence to the four fold classification in Kashmir as we find lower castes occupying high positions although occasionally, high caste marrying lower castes and they were (shudras) among those who exchanged gifts with the higher varnas during the Mahimana celebrations, and also participated in the coronation ceremony of the kings.^{viii}

The fact although remains that the Brahmanas hold the great esteem in society, and were treated as "bhudeva"-

gods on earth by the other varnas. The other working classes Candalas, Dombas and Svapakas were treated as the worst creatures on earth. They are referred as impure and untouchables. Writing about the candela women who found Suyya (famous minister of Avantivarman 855 to 83) in an earthen vessel while sweeping up a dust on a road, without defiling the child by her touch, and therefore gave her up to a Sudra nurse. This shows that Krishna Mohan and Shudras were accepted in the social order along with other varnas while chandalas were treated as complete outcastes. Regarding their profession they are mentioned as yamika (watchmen) who worked as guards of state granaries.

The other outcaste group *Dombas* have been frequently mentioned by Kalhana as a caste of menials who earned their livelihood by singing and dancing. Alberuni also speaks of Dombas as lute players and singers. Sometimes they have been mentioned by Kalhana as Savapakas which indicates that they ate the flesh of dogs. The outcastes were not allowed to enter the temples however, those who were related to the kings were permitted to do so. This act has been described by Kalhana that "surely the gods of fierce might not dwell in this land, otherwise how could a svapaka woman had entered their temples."

Kalhana also mentions the story of a domba singer Ranga whose baby (Hamsi) gave a performance in royal assembly hall of king Cakravarman (936 to 37), and were included in the king's seraglio and was raised to the status of chief queen. Kalhana's Brahmanic feelings were hurt by this inter-caste marriage that he used vile and obscene language, and his belief was so strong on the impurity of dombas that he remarks "from the intercourse with those who had taken dombas and food remnants. Impurity fell upon Yasakara, just as the evil of leprosy spread through the touch of a leper", and when there was a fire during the reign of Abhimanyu (958 to 971), one of the successors of Cakravarman, Kalhana was so happy that he says:

"It purified the lands by burning the great buildings which had been defiled by the contacts of the kings, who had been touched by the dombas and chandalas".

So one must say that all was not well for the lower castes. The Pre-Sultanate society was completely weighed down by the immense social and economic deprivations. With Kashmir being an agricultural country, the amount of arable land was rather meagre. Much of the arable land that is, the productive one which according to Kalhana was divided into three categories was given in lavish grants of agrahara to Brahmans, Purohitas and the other state officials.^{ix} The non-agrahara holdings under the peasants were very small, and the pasture lands were used by the pastoralists. Thus, the agrahara based economy determines the relation

between the state and its functionaries. The Brahmans enjoying the surplus were the direct exploiters of the lands consolidated into agraharas of both religious and secular nature.^x

However, they themselves were divided into different interest groups like the Counsellors, Purohitas, Kayasthas, and the common Brahman. The counsellors bore deep resentment against the Purohitas for their political role and power; Brahmans who enjoyed agraharas (land grants) were the most powerful they were neither willing to lose a bit of it, not to pay any tax, the Kayasthas (the officials) were jealous of the power and made persistent efforts to provoke the rulers to confiscate the agraharas or to impose taxes on their owners. They were more notorious for their rapacious character.

Among themselves, however they were given by a tough competition to embezzle revenues, to resort to bribes, to stick to lucrative positions and so on. The common Brahmans suffered the powerful ones and their collaboration with the rulers in exploiting and fleecing the common people. Although, Brahmans as community or as a 'shared group' were offered complete immunity from taxation, forced labour and capital punishments but enjoyed the state privilege of non-escheatment of their property either after dying heirless the privilege which was denied to the lower sections.

Besides, the other landed ruling class, although, a heterogeneous section was divided racially into Damaras, Ekanages, Tantrians and Lavanayas, and they were also the major beneficiaries who struggled for power and chose religion as ideological base, it ultimately resulted in the civil wars, and the callous squandering and dissipation of the resources. Even the big landholding class 'the Damaras' at the end of the second Lohara dynasty had almost destabilised the country. The King had been at their mercy. Agrahara managers and Purohit corporations had threatened the very semblance of weak kings with their solemn fasts. Foot soldiers of Damaras and Tantrins had waged wars against the kings, and they were mortally afraid of them. Constant turmoil and strife had exhausted the peasants and artisans who formed the major chunk of the then population.

It is however worth noting that the addiction to power and desire to appropriate more and more agraharas corrupted the Brahmanical religion under their priesthood, and it became full of evil practices and ritualistic dogmas. The works like Kuttanimata of Damodaragupta and Kalhana's Rajatarangini gives an impression that the Brahmans were fast losing their reverence and sacredness in the society. Even some of them frequently used to visit brothels while those managing the temples are stated to have had no scruples to sell the offerings made to gods in the temples.^{xi}

It is therefore no wonder that Saiva Yogini Lalla an exponent of reformulated Saivism revolted against all the oppressive structures that stifle and kill the human spirit,

and critically interrogate the practices of inequality and injustice that were current during the time. She even rejected the ritualistic aspects of Saivistic discipline in her revolutionary poetry. From her Vaakh's, one can deduce her acknowledgement and innovation in religion rather than to stick tradition bound and deep seated abuses in religion. In the light of her own intense spiritual experiences she in her Vaakh's shows her readiness to break from tradition; even revolted against the powerful clergy, castigating Brahman's, idol worship, and animal sacrifice, fasting, visiting sacred places and reading sacred books. She says: (Kaul 1973).

Oh! Fool right action does not lie in fasting and other ceremonial rites

Oh! Fool right action does not lie in providing for bodily comfort and ease

In contemplation of the self alone is right action and right council for you

The Temple is but stone, from top to bottom, all is but stone

Whom will you worship, O stubborn Pandit?

It covers your shame, Saves you from cold,

Its food and drink, mere water and grass

Who counselled you, O Brahmin?

To slaughter a living sheep as a sacrifice

Unto a lifeless stone

Thus in such a perplex situation where the wise and gentle were governed by the rich and fools, the poor common masses only would have desire to do away with the existing order. To make things worse, while the Brahmans were exempted from the paying any taxes, even the poor Brahmans were appointed to important positions whereas, the common peasantries were burdened with oppressive taxation.

Similarly, the internal strife and the open enmity of the ruling classes for power and desire to appropriate more and more agraharas resulted in lowering the prestige of Brahmans in the eyes of kings thus was the plundering of temple property at the hands of various kings like Samkarvarman (883 to 902 A.D), Khsemagupta (950 to 59 A.D), Kalasa (1063 to 1089A.D), Vigharaja and Harsa.^{xii}

These events weakened the religious authority of the Brahmans and the priestly classes. The situation particularly after the death of Avantivarman was a sordid tale of jealousy and conflicts. Presence of a multiple claimants and their rivalry for throne created problems for smooth functioning of the government on one hand, and the economic extortions on the other resulted in abject position of peasantry. The situation has been nicely summed up by Sir Francis Younghusband as:

We may accept then as authentic that the normal state of

Kashmir for many centuries, except in the intervals when a strong, firm ruler came to the front, was a state of perpetual intrigue and assignation, of struggle with brothers, cousins, uncles before a chief even came to the throne; of fights for power with ministers, with the military, with the nobles when he was on it; of constant fear, of poisoning and assignation, of wearing petty internecine wars and of general discomfort, uncertainty and unrest.

Economically, the hastened administrative practices and the extravagant habits of the rulers like Lalitaditya, and subsequently by Padma and his brothers squandered the treasury of the state.^{xiii} According to S. C. Ray, "they carried off the revenue of the country, feasted in mutual jealousy on the master less kingdom likes wolves on the dead buffalo in the desert (Ray, 1969).

Similarly, king Lalitaditya on the advice of the Kayasthas (official bureaucracy) introduced 'oppressive fiscal policy' as he advised his ministers not to let the peasantry have anything in surplus either in grain or bullocks than one year need.^{xiv} He even plundered the cultivators share of the harvest. This probably was so because if the peasant kept more wealth they would become landlord, and would defy the diktats of the king. King Tarapida (721 to 725 A.D) even felt pleasure while oppressing his subjects. His voracious activities even forced subjects to leave for the forests.

Subsequently, Mangjarika was a great persecutor of his subjects^{xv}, and Jayapida (753 to 782 A.D) a grandson of Lalitaditya has also oppressed his subjects by fiscal extractions. According to Kalhana, the increasing tax burden led the kings to ruin and hatred, and ultimately effaced the memory of their family, their glory, their life, their wives, and even the destruction of their names. According to Kalhana, King Shankavarman (883 to 902 A.D) "who was once doing glorious acts, now began to do things which were evil, he became avaricious and began to oppress his subjects".^{xvi} In order to meet expenses of luxury he plundered the temples after consultation with his advisers. He raised the money from towns, houses and villages, and for this he created two new administrative departments known as attapatibhaga and grihakritya. The office of attapatibhaga was concerned with the collection of taxes on market shops and artificers while as the second one was to charge the fines on villages and similar other imposts. Kalhana highlighting his actions further he says:

He also appropriated the money which was set apart for the purchase of incense and oil for the use of temples. And on pretences of superintending temples he plundered sixty-four of them through their headmen. He took lease of villages attached to the temples, but appropriated all the income without paying anything to gods.....when he found village officers absent from their posts, he fined them one year's pay. He also fined innocent ruler

officers their year's pay. Thus he introduced heavy and improvised imposts in villages by collecting the monthly savings made by reducing gifts to temples as also from the fine imposed on villages, he managed his household expenditure.

As if that were not enough, he introduced the new cesses which were for the monthly pay of the skandakas (village headman), and gramakayasthas (village accountant) thus drove the villagers to poverty. His son Gopalavarman is said to have advised him to desist from avarice policy but of no success, as Kalhana wrote:

"O father! The steps which you have adopted through the advice of kayasthas, hardly leave any hope or means to your subjects to live upon. It is not that any good will come to you in this or the next world from your tyranny who can say what effect these oppressive acts may bring in future world?"

Post Samkaravarman era also witnessed chaos and confusion, the life and property became insecure. With the accession of the Partha (906 to 921 A.D) an eight year boy to the throne, it was his father Nirjitavarman nick named as Pangu who became the actual ruler. But 'he took bribe and joined the ministers, and oppressed the people through tyrannical extortion'.^{xvii} It was also in his rule that scarcity and famine took a heavy tool of life. The impact was so high that according to Kalhana, 'bones of the deceased lay scattered on every side, and the corpse of dead were floating everywhere on the water of Vitasta, the officials were busy in amassing wealth by selling grains at the rate of 1000 dinars for one khari to the pauperized people'. Likewise, Chakravarman (923 to 933 A.D), Unmattavant (937 to 939 A.D) and Harsha inflicted the most tyrannical extortion from the peasants. King Harsha (1089 to 1101 A.D), according to Kalhana imposed new and oppressive imposts. He appointed nayaks to collect people's property. In order to raise revenue he even charged night soil.

In such an awful situation where the corridors of power enjoyed all the privileged positions and maintained their status quo; the favour they enjoyed provided them a better security and strength, although alienated them from the majority who live in disarray at the bottom. The ruling classes within themselves were continuously involved in faction fighting, each class eagerly waiting to see the downfall of the other; the common man at the bottom lived in misery, and also yearned for the fall of those above him were ready to give way to the smallest stroke from any side. The new alternative was provided by Islam, which presented a new worldview comprehending social, political and ideological-cultural aspects. Popular reaction, indeed popular protest, against the unjust acts of those in power, took the non violent form of mass conversion to this new world view,

that is, Islam.

Conflict of Interests

The authors have not declared any conflicts of interest.

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ⁱ Ali Kufi, *op.cit*, pp. 445-46; P. K. Hitti, *History of the Arabs*, Macmillan Press, London, 2001, p. 292

ⁱⁱ Abul Fazl Baihaqi, *Tarikh-i-Bahaqi*, Vol. I, Tehran, 1964, p. 270

ⁱⁱⁱ Farukhi Sistani, *Devan-i-Farukhi*, Tehran, p. 325

^{iv} Kalhana, *Rajatarangini*, Book vii, p.923

^v *Loc.cit*

^{vi} For details see Showkat Ahmad Dar, *Dynamics of Trade and Commerce, regional relations and the State Policies of the Mughals in Kashmir (A.D 1586-1627)* in Sarita Rana, ed., K. G. Graphics, Amritsar, 2013, p. 94-107

^{vii} Kalhana, *Rajatarangini*, vii. p 119, 126,

^{viii} Ved Kumari, *The Nilamata Purana*, Vol. I, pp. 86-88

^{ix} Cf. R.L Hangloo, *The state in Medieval Kashmir*, p. 50

^x Agrahara was an area of cultivable land the ownership of which rested with the temple deity, but it cultivated by the peasants and a large portion of the resources of that land was used by the Brahmans for maintenance of temple, mathas and also for their own purpose. These were termed as religious agraharas. The secular agraharas were the ones where the land was owned by the peasants but the major portions were of revenues were given in salaries to officials of the state. The various agrahara granted by Kashmiri rulers in the pre-sultanate period were those of the Levera, Kuruvara, Khagi, Khonmusa, Godhara, Jalora, Hastisala, Samangsa, Sanara, Varabala, Kantkotsa, Aksavala, Bedara, Khola, Hadigrama, Skandapura, Katimusa, Nadavavana, Khadua, Samma, Galuna, Kamalahatta, Kamlakeshava, Parishakeshava, Phalapura, Locantsa, Suvarnaparasva, Adistivara, Vijeshvara, Khaduya, Hastikarna, Panchatta, Sureshverikshetra, Avantivara, Suryakunda, Nandikshetra, Vitasta, Trigami. Cf. R.L Hangloo in Aparna Rao, Ed. *The Valley of Kashmir*, Manohar, 2008, p. 99

^{xi} *Ibid*, pp. 92-96

^{xii} King Samkarvarman plundered sixty-four temples under the pretext of the supervision and even robbed the temples of the revenues of sandalwood. He resumed the villages of these temples and is said to have cultivated them for himself against the compensatory assignment. He also demanded a fixed sum of amount as the compensation from the revenues of agraharas and thereafter brought all these lands under direct fiscal management. Kalhana, *Rajatarangini*, vol.1, 207-8, v. 165-70. Kshemagupta burnt down the vihara after rifling it of its riches including a splendid brass image of the Buddha. *Rajatarangini*, I, vi, 172-173, 696-97. Harsha plundered the riches of the temples all over his territories including that of Bhimakasava. However, he made certain concessions in respect of Martanda images, the Ranavami image and two colossal Buddha images. *Rajatarangini*, I, vii, 1096-98.

^{xiii} Kalhana, *Rajatarangini*, Eng. trans., J.C. Dutt, Book iv, pp.33-36

^{xiv} Kayasthas did not signify caste in the medieval Kashmir but meant to signify certain professional. This term has not been mentioned by the Kalhana in the first three books; however they appear as a distinct class in the fourth book. Kalhana, op.cit, Book iv, pp.38-41

^{xv} Ibid, pp. 34-35

^{xvi} Kalhana, *Rajatarangini*, Eng. trans., J.C. Dutt, Book v, pp.47

^{xvii} Kalhana, op.cit, Book , v, p. 49



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