

# Zain-ul-Abidin -- the Great Sultan of Kashmir

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**Abstract:** *Kashmir witnessed a great change in the field of culture and social life during the 14<sup>th</sup> century. It was the time when Muslim rule firmly established its roots in the green Valley and King Zain-ul-Abidin became the harbinger of new thoughts and ideas. Kashmir had the good fortune of having an equally great tolerant and the noblest ruler that Kashmir has ever known. He did much to heal the wounds inflicted on the non-Muslims of the Valley in the time of his predecessor. He did not brook any inequality in administration and abolished all discriminatory laws of his predecessors. Sultan Zain-ul-Abidin was imbued with high ideals of justice. He believed very firmly that justice is the edifice over which the structure of an efficient administration could be laid. Sultan Zain-ul-Abidin took great interest in the developmental programmes almost in all respects in Kashmir. No other Kashmiri Sultan did so much to promote the welfare of his subjects as Zain-ul-Abidin. He undertook tours to different parts of the country to find out the condition of the people, and how his officers were carrying on the administration. With the same object in view it was his practice. The paper is to describe the all-round development of Kashmir laid down by Sultan Zain-ul-Abidin during his period.*

**Keywords:** Edifice, lodging, Transitoriness, reign, gratitude, reverence.

## Introduction:

Zain-ul-Abidin was the eighth Sultan of Kashmir, who ruled for a period of fifty years (1420-1470). Of all the Sultans who sat on the throne of Kashmir, Zain-ul-Abidin was undoubtedly the greatest. He ushered in a period of nearly half a century of peace, prosperity and benevolent rule for his people. He acquired a halo in popular imagination which still surrounds his name in spite of the lapse of nearly five hundred years. He was known by his subjects and indeed still is, as Budshah (the Great King).

Shahi Khan, a son of Sultan Sikander the ruler of Kashmir, was charged with the rule of the kingdom of Kashmir when his elder brother, Ali Shah, left the kingdom on a pilgrimage to Mecca. It was at this time that Ali Shah gave Shahi Khan the title of Zain-ul-Abidin.

Sultan Zain-ul-Abidin's physical appearance there is no description in the chronicles. Shrivara says that he was handsome and had a black, flowing beard, but beyond this he does not mention anything. He married with a noble lady namely TajKhatun, to whom he had been very devoted. Zain-ul-Abidin possessed a mild temper and was very rarely provoked to anger. He was affectionate by nature as is shown attitude towards his courtiers and members of his family. He possessed a deeply religious nature. He was strict in performance of his religious duties, praying five times a day and keeping the Ramzan fasts during which he did not take meat. Though highly a religious man, Yet he loved and revered all the religious. The Sultan took part in the festivals of the Hindus like Shivratri etc.

#### **Discussion:**

#### **Education:**

Zain-ul-Abidin was the favorite son of his father and it is because of this that he received a good education at home. He took great interest in the spread of education in Kashmir. He opened a school near his palace in Naushahr and placed it in charge of Mulla Kabir. Sometimes he himself used to go there to attend the lectures of the Mulla. Another place where education was imparted was the hospice of Sheikh Ismail Kubravi who later in the reign of Hasan Shah became Sheikh-ul-Islam. Students came from outside to learn at his feet. He opened many schools, colleges and also built hostels where board and lodging were free for poor students, were all to spread knowledge.<sup>1</sup>

The Sultan was very fond of books and spent large amount of money in collecting them. Before his time the number of Persian and Arabic manuscripts in Kashmir was very small. He, therefore, sent his agents to India, Persia, Iraq and Turkistan to Purchase them. Sanskrit manuscripts were also purchased in large numbers and those works which during the reign of Sikandar had been removed to India, were by Zain-ul-Abidin efforts brought back.<sup>2</sup> In this way he built up a big library which existed until the time of Fath Shah.

Budshah was not only a patron of learned men, he was himself a scholar and a poet. He knew Sanskrit, Persian and Tibetan besides Kashmiri which was his mother tongue. The Sultan is said to have been the author of two works in Persian, One of them was on the manufacture of fireworks in the form of a dialogue-a method which became a model for the Kashmiri writers.<sup>3</sup> Another one named 'Shikayat' in which he discussed the vanity and transitoriness of this world.<sup>4</sup> The Sultan also composed poetry in Persian under the 'Nom De Plume of Qutb'. Zain-ul-Abidin's love for letters is well known in Kashmir. He realized that learning, for which Kashmir was noted from the earliest times, needed to be encouraged so that the land of Sarada might again shine forth as the fountain of knowledge and learning. For this purpose he established numerous schools, colleges and a residential University. His interest in the intellectual growth and development of his subjects was keen and unflagging and he extended his patronage to scholars in as unstinted a measure as he did to artisans and craftsmen. Many Kashmiri Pandits well-versed in Sanskrit adorned his court. Among these may be mentioned Som Pandit who held a high post in the Translation Bureau and wrote an account of Zain-ul-Abidin's life in his book 'Zina Charit.' The patronage of Sultan attracted scholars from various parts of Persia and Central Asia into Kashmir. Sultan established a translation bureau in which Persian books were translated into Sanskrit and Sanskrit into Persian. By the order of Sultan, Mulla Ahmad translated Mahabharata and Kalhans Rajtarangini into Persian, and the translation of Yousf-Zulaikha by Srivara etc.<sup>5</sup> This step of the king promoted literature in the Valley.

### **Art and Craft:**

Sultan Zain-ul-Abidin took great interest in development of arts and crafts. He invited trained craftsmen from other countries especially Central Asia to train his subjects.<sup>6</sup> He also introduced art of making pashmina shawl, from Tibet. The Sultan introduced wooden architecture and wood carving in Kashmir. Among some of the industries introduced by him may be mentioned carpet, paper-machie, paper-making, silk. Kashmiris with their natural aptitude for things artistic, soon acquired a great mastery in these crafts and began to produce articles in such beautiful designs and varieties that they acquired an unrivalled fame in Asia and Europe, so much so that when, a century after Zain-ul-Abidin's death, Mirza Haider of Kashgar brought Kashmir under his virtual rule, he was struck by the industrial and artistic productions of Kashmir. Says in his famous Tarikh-i-Rashidi

“ In Kashmir one meets with all those arts and crafts which are in most cities uncommon, such as stone polishing, stone-cutting, bottle making, window-cutting, gold

beating etc. In the whole Maver-ul-Nahr (the country beyond the river oxus, i.e. Khorasan), except in Samarqand and Bukhara ,these are nowhere to be met with, while in Kashmir they are even abundant. That is all due to Zain-ul-Abidin.”<sup>7</sup>

### **Music and Dance:**

Zain-ul-Abidin was a great lover of music and other fine arts. He always made generous allowances to musicians. Hearing of the Sulatan’s generosity and of his love for music. A good many masters in this art flocked to Kashmir from all directions. One such artist was Mulla Udi of Khorasan. He Played on Ud to the great delight of the Sulatan and his courtiers. Another master was Mulla Jamal who was a great expert in vocal music.<sup>8</sup> Srivara the author of the ‘Zaina Rajtarangini’ was also an accomplished musician and he used to entertain the king often and the later would always reward him for his fine performances. The Raja of Gwalior hearing of the Sultan’s taste for music sent him all the standard books on Indian music, including the ‘sangitchudaman’.Gwalior has been the centre of this art and later was proud of its associations with Tansen. It was thus indeed due to Zain-ul-Abidin that music in Kasmir reached a high pitch of excellence.<sup>9</sup>

The Sultan also reintroduced the art of drama and dancing which had suffered due to the Puritanism of Sikandar. Many actors and dancers, both male and female, came to Kashmir at his invitation and the king would hold special festivals for their performances. Srivara gives a graphic description of a large performance during the spring festival which was graced by the Sultan with his presence. These festivals were held at different places in the valley such as, Pampore, Bijbehara, Anantrnag, Baramulla etc.

### **Public Works:**

Sultan Zain-ul-Abidin was a great builder. Remains of his numerous towns, villages, canals, bridges. He founded many towns after his name viz., Zainapur, Zainagir.<sup>10</sup> The Sultan built magnificent places at Zainagar by the name of Zinadab. Zaindab was later burned down by Chaks. He laid down several gardens there. He also built an artificial Island in water of Wular lake by the name of the Zaina Lank and two in the Dal Lake viz., Sona Lank and Rupa Lank. At river Jhelum in Srinagar he built a larger wooden bridge by the name of the Zaina Kadal. He opened many dispensaries and employed many Hakims and Vaidis there. Medicines were supplied free for cost.

He took keen interest in agriculture. He built floating islands on which crops sown. He drained marshes and brought large areas which lay barren under cultivation.<sup>11</sup> He developed the irrigation system by making a number of tanks, canals and dams. The following is the list of important canals which were constructed by him:

The Lachhamkul carried the water of the Sind river to the new town of Naushahr founded by the Sultan. The canal extended to the Jamia Masjid and then emptied itself into the Marcanal

Owing to these irrigation works, the draining of marshes and the reclamation of large areas for cultivation. Kashmir became self-sufficient in food and rice was cheap.

### **Religious Tolerance:**

Zain-ul-Abidin will always be known in history. Living in an age when religious persecutions were the order of the day his reign shines out as a bright gem amidst the narrow-minded and short-sighted rulers of his time. He made Kashmir the real paradise in which men of all religions and nationalities mingled together and shared one another's joy and sorrow.<sup>12</sup> In return for his patronage and love the Hindus vied with the Muslims in turning their homeland into a smiling garden of peace and prosperity.

Sikandar's policy had left many deep wounds behind. As mentioned, a majority of Hindus had left Kashmir taking with them valuable books both religious and secular. Zain-ul-Abidin had already as heir-apparent and prime minister of his brother, made himself popular with the Hindus who looked upon him as their best protector during the dark period of religious bigotry. When therefore, he ascended the throne, confidence returned to them.

One of the most outstanding features of Zain-ul-Abidin's reign was the just and liberal treatment that was meted out to the non-Muslims. The Sultan allowed the Hindus complete freedom of worship and recalled those who had fled to Jammu and Kishtwar. He even permitted those who had become Muslims under duress to return to their former religion and gave them right to perform Sati and other customs which had been prohibited by his father. He not only permitted the repair and rebuilding of the temples destroyed in the time of Sikandar, but in some cases he himself repaired

and rebuilt them. He gave rent-free lands to Brahmans, endowed temple, and did not resume the grants made in the time of the Rajas.

### **Conclusion:**

Hence it has been found that the significant contribution of Zain-ul-Abidin was much that he provided every sort of encouragement and patronage to the common people. Sultan turned Kashmir into an industrial garden. As a result there was tremendous development in the Valley. Above all significant progress was made in the fields such as education, literature, art and craft, music and dance, public works, agriculture, irrigation etc. Sultan Zain-ul-abidin possessed a broad and tolerant outlook, with a desire to benefit mankind. He ruled with such equity and justice and did so much to improve the material prosperity of the people that one cannot fail to admire him, his benevolent rule demands special homage in as much as he lived in a period when he had no worthy and enlightened contemporary to emulate. Zain-ul-Abidin was deservedly surnamed Budshah or the great king. In spite of six centuries having rolled by since he ruled, his name is still remembered with genuine reverence and gratitude. Take the name Budshah before a Kashmiri and at once with a happy countenance. Budshah in his eternal sleep in the graveyard of the Sultan's Tomb at Zaina Kadal but we ever remain in debated to him for his acts of benevolence. So much is he remembered even today that the cartpullers and boat rowers sing in Chorus.

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