



Irrigation Works and the Sultans of Kashmir c. 1339-1586

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Abstract:

The people of Kashmir has been largely depended on agriculture for their livelihood. The agricultural economy was dominated by the rice crop cultivation and was supported by the geographical setting as well. As the rice crop cultivation mostly depended on the irrigation, its organization has become one of the main concerns of the people and the rulers. Both of them had devised a number of measures to harness the irrigation potential and increase the production. The sultans played a significant role in the organization of the irrigational works and brought prosperity to the region under their rule. Therefore, in this paper an attempt has been made to study the role of the sultans in the irrigational works.

Keywords: People, Sultans, Rice, Irrigation, Geography

Irrigational works are reported far back in remote antiquity, but they became especially widespread in the period when the first major states were being formed.¹ Kashmir valley, itself born out of water is not an exception. Land in an agrarian economy is considered as a major source of income to the state but more importantly it was and still is a matter of survival for the people of Kashmir. Therefore, it would be more interesting to see what actually motivated the state to undertake the irrigational works? Who actually benefitted from such measures; state, peasant or the landed aristocracies? Was it a part of the process of stabilization of state apparatus? Irrigation is a rice related phenomenon in Kashmir. It becomes necessary to assess the place and importance of rice in the life of the people of medieval Kashmir.

Importance and place of rice (*shali*) in the life of people of Kashmir can be judged from the statement made by Kalhana. He writes that, "Rice is the only hope of the people's existence."² Lawrence also observed this fact in Kashmir at the end of the nineteenth century. He remarks that, "rice is the only crop which people of Kashmir consider worthy as food, other crops are not deemed as staple food."³ It was not only important for the people but for the state as well. *shali* (unhusked rice) has remained from centuries the currency. The minted money

¹ G. M. Bongard Levin, *Mauryan India* (New Delhi: Sterling, 1985), 122.

² Kalhana, *Rajatarangini*, 58.

³ Walter Lawrence, *The Valley of Kashmir* (New Delhi: Asian Educational Services, 2005), 331.

was almost unknown or enjoyed only subsidiary importance. A *kharwar* of *shali* was the standard of weight.

The state realized the revenue in *shali*. Public transactions were carried out through it.

The wealth of an individual was determined by the quantity of rice he possessed.⁴ The prosperity and adversity of the people of Kashmir depended upon the abundance or scarcity of rice. *Shali* remained the nexus of trade till 1586. There are some incidences recorded by contemporary chroniclers which show that the price of rice had an inverse impact on the price of other eatables. This situation occurred mostly during famines.

Srivara writes that, "The high price of ghee, salt, and oil was also reduced on account of the deariness of rice, as the greatness of good men is detracted by the pride of low."⁵

The Sultans of Kashmir obviously would not have remained indifferent to this reality. The founder of the Sultanate, Shah Mir, had spent almost 26 years in Kashmir. He was very much acquainted with the life and conditions of the people of Kashmir. But being a foreigner, he spent most of his time in the strengthening and consolidation of his newly established rule. Therefore, he could not contribute much towards the reorganization of agricultural conditions in a short reign of four years. Although, he fixed revenue demand at the rate of 1/6th, it was only a part of the political expediency to avoid any revolt and thereby consolidate his rule.⁶ He did not aim at the overall reform of the agrarian structure. Up to the reign of Sultan Zain-ul-Abidin, we do not find any ruler credited with large-scale activities for the reorganization of the agricultural sector and large-scale canal construction. If Feroz Shah Tughlaq of Delhi is regarded as the pioneer of canal irrigation Zain-ul-Abidin can be regarded as the reorganizer and rejuvenator of the tradition of canal building in Kashmir.

However, there are references about the Sultans before Zain-ul-Abidin who took steps to rehabilitate the peasants. This was possibly the initial stage which kept its momentum slow and reached at its peak during the period of Bud Shah. Now the question arises why this development only occurred in his period? Why not during the previous eight Sultans of the Shah Miri dynasty. The reasons are not far away to find. He was a strong and energetic Sultan. He ruled Kashmir for fifty years. It gave him an ample space to undertake some reformatory and constructive activities. He was able to keep a sort of balance between the religious forces and the interests of the state. He kept the turbulent Sayyid nobility under control while the previous Sultans were greatly influenced and even controlled by the Sayyid nobility. He was also lucky to have some great contemporary Sufi saints like Nuru-ud-din Reshi, who had great influence on the masses and thereby helped in the maintenance of peaceful society. Stein also writes in this connection that, "the long and peaceful reign of Zain-ul-Abidin which in many respects revived the traditions of the earlier Hindu rule, seems in particular to have been productive of important irrigation works."⁷

Sultan Zain-ul-Abidin judiciously utilized the resources and brought a new spirit in the agrarian economy of Kashmir. The contemporary chroniclers have given a long list of canals being constructed during the reign of Sultan Zain-ul-Abidin. But they did not furnish much information about the methods, regulation, and distribution and more importantly the benefits accrued to the peasants through this canal building activity. It

⁴ R. K. Parmu, *A History of Muslim Rule in Kashmir* (1320-1819) (Delhi, 1969), 421.

⁵ Srivara, *Jaina Rajatarangini*, 21-22.

⁶ R. L. Hangloo, *State in Medieval Kashmir* (New Delhi: Manohar Publishers, 2000), 77.

⁷ M. A. Stein, *Ancient Geography of Kashmir* (Srinagar: Gulshan Books, 2005), 121.

became possible to bring large tracts of land under the plough and it greatly increased the material prosperity of the people of Kashmir valley.

If we take a brief look at the conditions of agricultural sector during the pre-sultanate period, the picture is quite disappointing. Agricultural in Kashmir had progressively declined during the last two centuries before the establishment of Sultanate.⁸ The invasion of Zulju, a mongol invader, had further accentuated the process. He stayed almost eight months in the valley continuing his loot and plunder. As a result, villages had become depopulated and large tracts of land turned barren. Now the newly established Shah Miri state had great challenge to tackle with these problems. The Sultans not only had to consolidate their rule but side by side remove the heartbreaking memories and distress caused by the ruthless invasion. Consequently, the Shah Mir Sultans did their best to check the disturbing tendencies and promote agriculture. They took the steps to repopulate the villages, reduced the revenue demand, abolished many extra cesses, drained the marshes and constructed new irrigation works. The result of their efforts was that the area under cultivation greatly increased and the country became self-sufficient in foodstuffs. Under the Chaks also except the period towards the end, agriculture remained in a flourishing state.⁹

As mentioned above Shah Mir, the founder of Sultanate, had spent quite a good number of years in Kashmir as a state official. He remained on the prime ministerial office for a number of years. He was very much aware about the decayed agricultural conditions of Kashmir and the pathetic life of peasantry. Nothing is known about Shah Mir's activities about the reorganization of agriculture, except that he fixed the revenue at one-sixth of the gross produce to secure peace and tranquility.¹⁰ He also brought some administrative and military reform too. Obviously he had done something to be able to identify himself with the masses of Kashmir. He achieved great popularity among the people of Kashmir which ensured his bright career of political leadership. Jonaraja also writes about Shah Mir that "Strange this believer in alla, calm and active, became the saviour of the people and protected the terrified subjects."¹¹ He further says that "this king assuaged the troubles of Kashmir and changed its condition."¹²

Sultan Ala-ud-Din continued the work of consolidation and reform began by his father. The chroniclers have nothing to say about his interest in the agricultural reform. However, it is said about him that he brought back the peasants to the abandoned lands from which they had fled during the Zulju's invasion and repopulated the deserted towns.¹³ This provides an evidence that he made appropriate arrangements and provided the necessary facilities to the peasants to bring the land under cultivation.

It is quite surprising that Shihab-ud-Din, renowned as a great conqueror, did not undertake any measure to put the agricultural prospectus of Kashmir on the right track. It seems that he was more interested in conquests and obviously could not divert his full attention to bring a new spirit into the barren lands. In spite of this negligence he is credited with the construction of gardens, parks and mosques for the benefit of the masses.¹⁴ Logically all these works presuppose a sufficient and steady supply of water. The construction of water channels, tanks, wells

⁸ Hasan, *Kashmir under the Sultans*, 248.

⁹ Ibid, 248-49.

¹⁰ Parmu, *A History of Muslim Rule in Kashmir*, 89.

¹¹ Jonaraja, *Rajatarangini*, Vol. I, 27.

¹² Ibid, 33.

¹³ Hasan, *Kashmir Under the Sultans*, 48.

¹⁴ Ibid, 52.

etc. also becomes a necessary condition. Whether the water of these structures was utilized or had a provision for the irrigation of the agricultural lands is not known clearly.

With the enthronement of Sultan Zain-ul-Abidin commences the period of real progress of agricultural economy. After the restoration of political stability, he diverted his attention towards the reorganization of the country's economy. He put great effort in the promotion of agriculture, which was the backbone of Kashmir economy. He displayed an uncommon and unprecedented interest in bringing the country's agriculture at the progressive track. He very well understood the fundamental importance of agriculture in the country's economy and had no doubt about the synonymy of agricultural welfare with the well-being of general masses. But the development of this vital sector was subservient to the steady and sufficient supply of irrigation. Sultan Zain-ul-Abidin not only reclaimed the lands but the water as well. He introduced the floating islands (*radh*) in Kashmir. A large number of vegetables were grown on these artificial islands. These were constructed in the Dal Lake and Nagin.¹⁵

Rice has been a chief agricultural crop of Kashmir throughout its history. Like Bengal, to apply the phrase of H.C. Verma, it was considered to be the "Prime element"¹⁶ in the wealth of Kashmir. Its cultivation in Kashmir not only dominated the agricultural activities but also the irrigation. Rice culture could not be even imagined without water. It requires water in abundance.

Sultan Zain-ul-Abidin rightly understood the importance of governmental initiative for providing increased irrigation facilities to the cultivators to give a boost to the rice production.¹⁷ Therefore, we find a phenomenal development in canal building activity under the reign of Sultan Zain-ul-Abidin. He evolved an integrated programme for the reclamation of new lands and the revival of canal building tradition. He got the depressions in lands converted into tanks and fed them by means of canals.¹⁸ His reign is seen as a landmark in the construction of a network of canals and water courses traversing and irrigating the different areas of the valley.¹⁹ To quote a contemporary court chronicler, Srivara, "there was not a piece of land, and not a forest, where the king did not excavate a canal."²⁰

¹⁵ N. K. Zutshi, *Sultan Zain-ul-Abidin An Age of Enlightenment* (Srinagar: Gulshan Books, 2012), 129-30.

¹⁶ H. C. Verma, *Harvesting Water and Rationalisation of Agriculture in North Medieval India* (New Delhi: Anamika Publishers & Distributors, 2001), 80.

¹⁷ Zutshi, *Sultan Zain-ul-Abidin*, 129.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Srivara, *Jaina Rajatarangini*, 45.