

HISTORICAL PROFILE OF THE FISHERWOMEN IN KASHMIR.

¹Mehraj-ud-Din Dar, ²Tawseef Mushtaq, ³Sajad Ahmad Rather

¹PhD Research Scholar, PhD Research Scholar, PhD Research Scholar

¹Department of History,

¹University of Kashmir, Srinagar, India.

Abstract

No study of a society is considered complete without a reference to the position of women in it. The position of women in a society reflects the cultural level, mental refinement and the standard of its civilization. An attentive study of the sources related to modern history of Kashmir lend us to hold that common believed less in gender discrimination particularly in context of work culture. We find abundance of information regarding Kashmiri women working side by side with their male partners in different disciplines of life. In this case, Kashmiri hanji women occupies highest place. In this paper the researchers will highlight the role played by the Hanji women in the economic sphere of the life. The condition of fisherwomen of Kashmir is corroborated both by folk literature and conventional sources. The researchers had utilized both the sources to understand the question properly.

Keywords: Kashmir, Fisherwomen, social status, economic status, cultural status.

Introduction

An alternative study of conventional and folktales lend us to hold that common believed less in gender discrimination particularly in context of work culture. We find abundance of information regarding Kashmiri women working side by side with their male partners in different disciplines of life. This is also substantiated by the information contained in the literary texts of the period. The folk poems like *KRAL KOER* (female-potters), *PEHLI KOER* (female-shepherds), *DHOBI BHAYI* (washerwomen), *KANDER KOER* (female bread-makers), *GAD HANZIN* (fisherwomen) and *GREES KOER* (peasant-girl) bear ample evidence to the fact that Kashmiri woman discharged her professional talent very skillfully and thereby she would contribute in overall welfare and the happiness of the family life.¹ Not to talk of discharging domestic assignment or field works, Kashmiri women discharged the function of catching fish and supplying it to the market.

The existence of rivers and lakes in Kashmir afforded the people, as it does now though in a lesser degree, sufficient scope for the movement of traffic along the waterways. The boatmen were thus an important class in the socio-economic life of the people. This section is directly dependent on the lake for their livelihood. They were called *Dhivar* or *Korijian*² but in India boatmen is usually called by the Hindustani name *Manji*, and in Kashmiri they are called *Hanji* or *Hanz*.³ *Hanjis* have been much discussed by the foreigners and are also

mentioned in the ancient and medieval chronicles. These are considered as an important and prominent tribe by the Walter Lawrence. It is impossible to obtain any information as to their origin, but their profession is very ancient⁴, and the history affirms that *Raja Pratab Sen* introduced boatmen from *Sangaldip*.⁵ The purpose of their migration and their introduction in Kashmir was to provide easy transportation in Kashmir. The view point expressed their gypsy origin. The gypsy nature is still reflected in their movement from one *ghat* to another in the lakes streams and rivers, in order to earn their livelihood. Some of the *Hanjis* claim themselves as the decedents of *Noah* but it generally believed that they were *Kshatriyas* before their conversion to Islam. In ancient literature *Hanz* of Kashmir has been identified as the “*Nishads*” the well known historian Kalhana calls them by the same name in his monumental work *Rajtarangni*. M.A. Stein writes that the term generally applied to the aboriginal tribes living by hunting and fishing,⁶ this however is certain that *Nishads* of ancient Kashmir were the fishermen of the valley. This class is considered a very important section of the society. Throughout the Kashmir history this class played an important role in every aspect of the life in Kashmir, whether that was the case during calamities such as in floods or during the river procession of the kings. In this section of the society the important place was taken by their female section who by their own talents and merit occupies a significant place in the history of Kashmir. Their position in Kashmir can be highlighted in the following sub headings.

1) Social Status of fisherwomen

Generally speaking the status of women among the boatmen is degraded and low. As a matter of fact, the status of women here is determined by various types of taboos or restrictions that are generally attached to Muslim women in India.⁷ From the economic point of view, as a daughter, she does not enjoy the same status as that of her brother. As a daughter-in-law or a wife her social mobility is restricted by many social laws and purdah system. Females were not given any freedom to receive education because female education was considered as useless in their society. Their utility lies in producing children one after another, upbringing them and to look after the household affair.⁸

It should be remembered that the *doonga hanjis* house provided no facilities for privacy or for the isolation of the sexes. This tribe has been mentioned in Tareikh-i-Hassan as most wicked compared to other tribes as they were unique in immorality and disgrace. They allow their women to enjoy sex with other people and often act as pimps. They do not feel ashamed by selling their daughters for sexual lust⁹. Gossip and petty squabbles of husband and wife, or wives, were conducted in the open air, and became the common property of the neighborhood. Such incidents gave occasion for shameless indecency or abuse which the children learnt at an early age when they were too young to understand anything. This highlights the degraded condition of women in this particular class where she was expected to bear everything from her male partners. The *hanji* class is very rude, rowdy and arrogant and is known for vulgarity for not pay any kind of respect to their women even during the time of need. Such condition was pointed out by Walter Lawrence¹⁰ and Tyndale Biscoe.¹¹ The two authors write that when a quarrel between two *hanji* ladies did not seem to an end till sunset, one of the quarrelling parties

would invert the basket hen-coop to signal of ceasefire till morning when the two sides would begin with new vigor. Educationally this class is still backward as the number of educated girls is very low as compared to the other section.

II) Economic status of fisherwomen

The occupations of women furnish a subject of much interest and importance.¹² Besides preparing food fisherwomen did laborious work and additional work like husking and grinding grain.¹³ Among all the women, Fisherwomen played a significant role not only in management of family but she also took part in fishing and collecting the water nuts. They are muscular, active and hardy. From early dawn to night fall, she was kept busily employed in preparing food, looking after babies, fishing and collecting water nuts in the lake and doing such work as she was able to perform.¹⁴ We are told that her only relaxation was that she chats with her friends at the lake or with customers who used to joke with her, and *hookah* which she loved as much as her husband. She is a cherry, hard working creature, devoted to the care of her household. If her moral sense was vague, her language foul, personally less clean than might be desired, these faults were largely due to her environment and those who knew her best learnt to respect her many virtues¹⁵. Occupational and other roles in fishermen community were based on gender basis. There seems a clear cut division of labour between two sexes.¹⁶ For example, men always go to water bodies during the night for catching fish and women used to go to the market during the day for selling fish and water nuts. Similarly, other works and responsibilities were predetermined. Women adopted all these roles and related behavior.¹⁷

III) Cultural status of fisherwomen

Culturally, they are committed to religious values, norms and its ethics. However, their conditions compel them to deviate from this commitment. They have common feelings of inferiority and sense of deprivation. This is reflected in their entire way of life, particularly in female names which seem funny, derogatory and convey their lowest social status. These names were given to them by their Preceptors (*Peers*) at the time of their birth and these were considered as sacred. Some of these odd names of fisherwomen were as, *Khatiz, Rahet, Phazi, Zooni, Jel, Shamil, Mugil, Mukhte* and *Azzi* etc. Religiously, they are conservative. They necessarily visit shrines, *Darghas* and *Peers*. They are less particular about daily religious ethics because of their total ignorance.

The women of Hanji class did not use much ornaments in general. They mainly wore red coral beads of various designs in the form of a chain or necklace. Glass bangles in various shades were worn by women of all classes because during the early 19th century, before the building of the cart road to Rawalpindi, glass bangles were made in Kashmir.¹⁸ These items of decoration were sold by *wani* from village to village and fisherwomen buy these items by providing grain and other item like wheat or *Singara* for the cost of this item.¹⁹

Conclusion:

From the above discussion we came to the conclusion that despite socially inferior, fisherwomen in Kashmir played a significant role in maintaining economic structure of their family. Being landless class, she always remains busy in carrying out their family-business smoothly, that form the only source of their livelihood. Thus, in order to correct the balance sheet of her family she pays very less attention to herself and towards various social taboos.

References and Notes

- ¹ Fayaz, Farooq., *Kashmir Folklore A study in Historical Perspective*, Gulshan books, Srinagar, 2008, P.69
- ² Zutshi, N.K., *Sultan Zain-ul-Abidin the Age of Enlightenment*, Gulshan books, Srinagar, 2013, P.182.
- ³ DeI, Mar Walter., *The Romantic East Burma Assam and Kashmir*, Gulshan books, Srinagar, 2013, P.129
- ⁴ Lawrence Walter., *The Valley of Kashmir*, chinara publishers, Mirpur, 1992, P. 113
- ⁵ Ibid. Sangaldeep was the ancient name of Sri Lanka
- ⁶ Kalhana, Pandit., *Rajatarangni*, Vol I, Eng. trans by Stein, Motilal Banarasidas, Delhi, 1900, P. 199.
- ⁷ Sanyal, Dr. Shanta., *The Boats and Boatmen of Kashmir*, Sagar publications, New Delhi, 1979. P. 84.
- ⁸ Ibid.
- ⁹ Hassan, GH., *Tareikh-i-Hassan*, English trans by A.R.KHAN, city book center, Srinagar, 2014, P.290.
- ¹⁰ Lawrence Walter., opcit, P.314
- ¹¹ Biscoe, Tyndale. *Kashmir in Sunlight and Shade*, Gulshan publishers, 2008. P. 95.
- ¹² Parbay., *Emerald Set With Pearls*, Gulshan publishers, Srinagar, 2009. P. 67.
- ¹³ Norris, Dermont., *Kashmir the Switzerland of India*, Mohan publisher, Calcutta, 1932, P. 115
- ¹⁴ Dar, Mehraj., *Wullar and its Role in History.*, Unpublished M.Phil dissertation, Department of History, University of Kashmir, 2014, P.114.
- ¹⁵ Khan, Ishaq., *History of Srinagar.*, Gulshan books, Srinagar, 2007. P.115.
- ¹⁶ Sanyal., opcit. P 83.
- ¹⁷ Dar., opcit, P.116.
- ¹⁸ Khan., opcit. P. 97.
- ¹⁹ Dar., opcit, P.102.