CHAPTER V

POSITION OF WOMEN

The explanation of any social system is incomplete without reference to the position of and role of women, because in every social order it is really women who are responsible for bringing up the new generation. In Kashmir's case, too, women had definite roles to play which determined their position in various spheres. In India, the position of women in society was governed by the social ideals of family and its patriarchal structure which considerably favoured the superiority of men. 1 In

1. In ancient period women seem to have enjoyed much respect than the medieval period. The Smritis say that where women are respected there gods abide. In ancient period there was a special provision for their education and the period produced a good number of highly learned women. "The wife of Mandan Mishra is said to have defeated Sankracharya in a philosophical discussion. Avanti Sundari had prepared a lexicon containing words used in prakrit and she had given her own compositions to illustrate the usage of words. But in medieval period the Turks increased the size of harems and the social status of women became lower still. A.L. Altekar, Position of Women in Hindu Civilization, Banaras, 1938, pp. 21 and 167. P.N.H. Prabhu, Hindu Social Organization, Bombay 1952, pp. 257-258.
Europe, too, the situation of women was very definitely inferior to that of men. The inferiority of opportunities for women was long backed by tradition. 

In ancient Kashmir the women enjoyed great freedom but in medieval period when the social structure of Kashmir was completely transformed

2. Rousseau thought that women should be given only a domestic education. Joseph de Maistre said 'Knowledge is what is most dangerous for women'. Prondhon could see only two possible rules for them, housekeepers or prostitutes and rated their intellectual and moral value as one third of that of men. Michelet as has been seen, wrote in praise of them but only to extol them in their traditional domestic role. It is true that in the nineteenth century feminism was principally supported by the socialists but still they could do for them little beyond abolishing male predomination because the law still required the wife to obey the husband in return for which the husband owed her protection. Frances Clark, The Position of Women in Contemporary France, London 1939, pp. 27-30. T. Zeldin, France 1848-1945, London 1979, pp. 343-345. See also J. H. Mundy, Europe in High Middle Ages, (1150-1309), London 1975, pp. 205-221.
a new culture evolved and new influences penetrated in life and conditions of women of Kashmir. Under the Mughals also the women of Kashmir seem to have lost the last vestiges of liberty. They snatched the rights and privileges partly by law and partly by discouragement and disapproval of the ruling class.

3. In ancient Kashmir many women attained great proficiency even in administration and were accorded an honourable position in society. The women like Rani Dida, Kota Rani, and many others indulged in politics. For details see H.A. Stein, Kishavangini, vol. II. A. L. Alladar, op. cit., p. 21. There were also some holy and spiritual women like Lalla Ded, see P.N. Bazaz, Daughters of Veita, Delhi 1954, pp. 23-37.

4. P.N. Bazaz, op. cit., p. 170. The ladies were merely made a victim to the lust of menfolk. The system of purdah and the child marriage became the order of the day. Among the Mughal nobles lust and debauchery were common vices and the maintenance of concubines instead of being a matter of shame was regarded as an index of one’s richness.
Whatever amount of freedom had survived was completely curtailed by the Afghan rulers of Kashmir. According to Pandit Ramjoo Dhar, "No beautiful or married women could pass through streets unmolested."\(^5\)

The Afghan governors of Kashmir took away a good number of Kashmiri women to suit their harem and to their kith and kin in Afghanistan.\(^6\)

Under the Sikh rulers, too, the position of women was similar to that under the Afghan governors.

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5. Pandit Ramjoo Dhar, *Kafiat-i-Intizar-mulk-i-Kashmir*, op. cit., p. 4. In governor Abdullah Khan's time such incidents occurred very frequently. Sayed Bazruk Shah Razi raised his voice against the ruler Abdullah Khan but still the Afghan governors did not hesitate indulging in such activities.

6. During the Afghan period women were even punished for mistakes of their husbands. The wife of Pandit Birbal Dhar was arrested and harassed till she committed suicide. *Ibid.* Moorcroft, *Ms. EURL* - 264, p. 88.
women did not improve significantly. The Sikhs like their predecessors held Kashmiris in check. They failed to stop degeneration that had set in earlier. There are various instances of women receiving inhuman treatment at the hands of men during the Sikh rule. In the first half of the 19th century in Kashmir, women were primarily intended to serve as a modest wife to her husband and as a mother to her children. Her being symbol of chastity and modesty had almost become non-existent. Indeed she was in a constant state of perpetual worship and social laws and customs stamped her with a sort of mental deficiency.

7. Moorcroft, Ms. PURD - 264, p. 88.

The peasant women laboured in the fields, industries and crafts like comb-making, weaving, mat-making, pottery, fishing, fish drying, shawl industry, bakery, wood work, water nut collection and in saffron picking. It is important to note that the conditions under which these Kashmiri women worked varied from community to community. The practice of observing purdah was not generally followed. This was because of the fact that majority of the Muslim women had to work side by side with men in their fields and also at home. In such professions the observance of purdah

9. Various Trades in Kashmir, op. cit., 1708-1781. Apart from these activities the women of Kashmir indulged in tending cows, milk and fruit selling, in clay digging. Ibid.
was not possible. In these circumstances purdah remained confined to only Sayyid and some top business families.  

A number of contrary theories have been advanced as to the origin of purdah. But it is generally believed that with the advent of the Muslim rule in India, purdah system came into vogue. Under the influence of Muslims, the Hindu women also adopted the purdah system but only as a protective measure to save their honour at the hands of the foreign invaders. The Kashmiri Hindu women had their own views about purdah system. Generally


they were strict about the purdah system before elders and in the families while the Muslims were strict about it in public. However, Moorcroft did not see the Kashmiri Hindu women concealing their features either at home or outside during his period of visit to Kashmir. G.T. Vigne also observes that in Kashmir there is no purdah or concealment of the features of women excepting among the higher classes.

12. In middle ages the Hindus kings and nobles were strict about the observance of purdah. A.L. Basnum very rightly remarks that kings at any rate kept their women folk in seclusion. A.L. Basnum, The Wonder that was India, London 1954, p. 179. From Arth Shastra also it becomes clear that anatpura or royal harem was closely guarded and its inmates were not allowed to leave freely. For details see Marry L.R. Mortin, Women in Ancient India, Varanasi, 1964, pp. 23-48.


Though Kashmir was geographically isolated from other parts of the world but the Kashmiri women were not free from moral and illegal obligations, like the women of other parts of the world. Kashmiri women were also considered to be the objects of pleasure by the affluent traders and businessmen.\textsuperscript{15} These traders came from different parts of the world. There was a class of Kashmiri women who were professional prostitutes. They were known as Kanchni.\textsuperscript{16} The Sikh soldiers also encouraged this class by organizing parties (Jashan) on various occasions. These dancing and prostitute girls were subjected to a good deal of trouble.


\textsuperscript{16} For the entertainment of these traders a class of public women congregated in Srinagar. These indulged freely in vices. Moti Chandra, \textit{Courtesans of Medieval India}, Delhi 1975, pp. 180-185.

\textsuperscript{16} This class included some males and eunuches. Moorcroft, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 146. C.B. Hugel, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 146.
They were not in a position to sing or dance at their will but it all depended on the Afghan and Sikh rulers of the time. Apart from subjecting these to serious immoral practices the Sikh soldiers accompanied them to various places and snatched their earnings. To quote Hugel, "Dancing girls are brought in India under the surveillance of the government, and are, in fact, little better than slaves. These poor creatures are doomed to hard fate; they are not allowed either to sing or dance without permission, and if they get this, an officer of the government always accompanies them, who grasps whatever they receive."17 The Afghan and Sikh governors used them not only for their own

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17. Ibid., p. 146. The dancing girls were known as Kanchni. The State also earned annually Rs. 500 as the tax from these. Moorcroft, Ms. EURD, p. 118. In 1835, these girls were taxed at the rate of Rs. 4/- to Rs. 10/- each per month. In 1823, the government got Rs. 8000/- as a toll tax from this class of women. Ibid.
entertainment but even for all those travellers
who visited Valley during the period of our study. 18
P. N. Bazaz very rightly remarks "when the land
(Kashmir) was over-run by the armies of Mughals,
Afghans and Sikhs, women suffered along with all
other people. Men took advantage of chaotic
political conditions to enslave women. Hence
from the very beginning the oppression was the
common lot of women in Kashmir but in the first
half of the 19th century it touched its highest
magnitude. 19 Another consequence of the supremacy

See also Victor Jacquemont, op. cit.,
p. 68. C. B. Hugel, op. cit., p. 119.

In fact when Turks came to India, they
brought their own heritage which they derived
from Arabs and Abbasides. Among these women
seem to have occupied a respectable position.
They took active part in politics. Under
Islam women enjoy the rights of inheri-
tance to property as full and absolute as
those of men. As a general rule, the share
of inheritance of a female was half of the share
of a male of same degree. Every Muslim woman
could claim dower against her husband if there
arose need for the same. Seclusion was not
practised in the beginning but started growing
rigid after the tenth century. In case of
Kashmir the social status of women was better
but when the wickedmen came to power her posi-
tion was reduced and she became a domestic slave.
Rekha Mishra, op. cit., pp. 5-6. See also
Robert Orrwhyte, and Pamline Whyte, The Women
of men over women in Kashmir was the trafficking in women. Victor Jacquemont says that girls were sent to outside the state to stock the harems of Musalmans, Sikhs and Hindus. 20 W. G. Osborne observes, "Ranjit Singh received beautiful girls as a tribute from Kashmir." 21 According to J. Wolff, "The women were sold and purchased like pieces of bread." 22 The visitors to Kashmir were always on the look out for beautiful Kashmiri girls. Sheikh Badar Bakah, a servant of Victor Jacquemont, bought six women from Kashmir in 1831. Victor Jacquemont wrote that all little girls who promised


21. W. G. Osborne, op. cit., pp. 85-86. The beautiful girl that Ranjit Singh had from Kashmir was called by him as lotus.

to turn out pretty were sold at eight years of age and taken to the Punjab and other parts of India. Their parents sold them for a petty sum of fifty to sixty rupees.

Comparatively the Hindu women of Kashmir seemed better off than Muslims. But the disappointing

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23. Victor Jacquemont, op. cit., p. 215. This comment of V. Jacquemont, deserves careful examination, because he seems to have given allowance to exaggeration. It could not have been true that all the little girls who promised to turn out pretty would have been sold.

24. Ibid., See also J.N. Sarkar, Condition of Kashmiri people under Muslim Rula. Nehru Abinandan Granth, Delhi 1949, pp. 320-326. Generally the young girls were sold for two to three hundred francs. Mainly the girls of Wattal tribe were sold and sent as slaves to the Punjab. The main centres of trade in women were Lahore and Ludhiana. Even the European travellers indulged in this immoral trade. Victor Jacquemont, op. cit., p. 216.
feature concerning them was that of sati system. It was a practice by which Hindu women would mount the funeral pyre of their husbands and get immolated with them. Unlike the Muslims, widow remarriage was not permitted among the Hindus except among some lower classes and this explains why a widow had either to burn herself or had to lead a life of suffering and misery. She was treated with contempt by other members of the family. Like other parts of the country it was a usual practice in ancient times but during the medieval period the Muslim rulers always discouraged this custom.

25. The practice of performing sati voluntarily was an ancient custom but gradually emphasis was laid on becoming sati after the death of her husband even against her wishes. It was mostly performed by the ladies of Brahmin, Kshatriya and Bania community. James Tod, Annals and Antiquities of Rajasthan, vol. I, pp. 363-381. vol. II, pp. 744-45. M.E.R. Martin, Women in Ancient India, Varanasi 1964, pp. 60-65.

26. Sultan Sikander (1389-1413) was the first Muslim ruler of Kashmir who forbade the practice of sati. His successor Ali Shah also kept the prohibition in force upto 1420. Sultan Zain-ul-Abedin was liberal and Contd....
Sati seems to have been occasionally committed during our period of study. G.T. Vigne remarks that the cases of Sati were reported in the time of Kripa Ram (1821-30) and also during the governorship of Sher Singh (1831-33). It is interesting to note here that when Maharaja Ranjit Singh died in 1834 five of his Kashmirian slave girls were burnt along with him. Among them was Ranjit Singh's favourite dancing girl lotus too.

permitted its revival but even then the Hindus do not seem to have been favourably inclined towards this revival. Then again Emperor Aurangzeb issued a prohibition order. He even appointed Dogradas in almost every district to carry out the spirit of the proclamation. During the Afghan period also we do not hear of the custom of Sati. A few instances have been recorded during Sikh period. The earliest case of Sati in Kashmir took place in 10th century A.D. Kalhana, Rajatarangini, vol. I, pp. 170-195. W. Ward, A View of History, Literature and Mythology of Hindus, 2 vols., Sorempore 1815, vol. II, p. 238. See also Moorcroft, MS. Eurd. 265, p. 249. R.K. Parmu, A History of Muslim Rule in Kashmir, op. cit., p. 124.


Moorcroft believes that the practice of Sati had long stopped in Kashmir. In 1823, when Moorcroft was asked by Asiatic Society of Bengal to enquire into the history of Sati in Kashmir, he was informed that no individual of the present generation had ever witnessed a case of Sati. He was also informed that in one hundred and eighty three cases of Sati, two occurred at Amritsar and one at Lahore.²⁹ However, the practice of Sati was prevalent in the lower hill regions in the neighbourhood Kashmir. The wife of Govind Ran Tikoo burnt herself alive on the pyre of her husband.³⁰ In 1847, Maharaja Gulab Singh issued a proclamation prohibiting


³⁰. Birbal Sahni, op. cit. p. 244.
Sati in Jammu and Kashmir.\textsuperscript{31}

However, as a widow, Kashmiri women spent her time in recreation and in recites from sacred books, if she was literate. She did not use ornaments, perfumes and lively costumes.\textsuperscript{32} The Hindu ladies after becoming widows gave up many practices like wearing of costly or simple covering Karivar (A sleeve band of coloured shints) and an ornament talras which was an ornament pendant slung from ears.\textsuperscript{33} This is how they

\textsuperscript{31} This proclamation of banning Sati in Jammu and Kashmir State was published in newspaper Harbarn which was published in Calcutta on 23 December 1847. H.M. Lawrence, Administration of Kashmir on Transfer to Maharaja Gulab Singh. S.C. 26th January, 1948, No. 35-44. To what extent did this proclamation proved successful cannot be measured at present because most of the archival source material in and outside India has remained unveiled even now.

\textsuperscript{32} Dubious, \textit{op. cit.}, pp. 356-357.

\textsuperscript{33} \textit{Ibid.}
could be distinguished. Much is not known about the Muslim widows possibly because they remarried while the remarriage was uncommon among Hindus.34
But generally a widow, economically dependent on members of her husband’s family, could be ill-treated and abused, sometimes blamed for an unhappy occurrence in the family. She had to work hard and put up with all kinds of indignities and humiliations from senior, sometimes, junior household members. And if this were not sufficiently disregarding, she was considered inauspicious.35

34. See Sant Ram Dogra, Code on tribal customs in Kashmir, Sambat 1972, p. 8. Among Hindus remarriage was prohibited from 600 to 1000 A.D. The prohibition was extended to child widows. This was the norm among high castes. By the nineteenth century the lower castes wishing to raise their status also prohibited remarriage, but later relaxed the ban. Remarriage always seems to have been common among the lower caste Hindus. R.P. Whyte, op. cit., pp. 87-88.

To see her in the morning or face her while going on a journey or some mission was a bad omen. Her presence on any auspicious occasion was a harbinger of calamity. Thus widowhood in Kashmir seems to have been particularly unhappy for most.

The other aspects of Kashmiri women also do not seem to have improved significantly during the period of our study. The family life, as

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36. The strict Hindu traditions governing a widow's life in Kashmir remained until the last quarter of 19th century and a few upto present day. These traditions governing the widowhood emanated from the Code of Manu. It is laid down in the code that a faithful wife, who wishes to attain in heaven the mansion of her husband, must do nothing unkind to him, be he living or dead. Let her emaciate her body.... but let her not, when her husband is dead, even pronounce the name of another man. Let her continue till death, forgiving all injuries, performing harsh duties, avoiding every sensual pleasure and cheerfully practising the incomparable rules of virtue. The Laws of Manu as quoted in Sir George Dumbar, A History of India, 2 vols., London, 1949, vol. 1, pp. 34-42.
organized in Kashmir in these years had an effect on peoples' lives as profound as anything else. The marriage was a powerful institution which resisted change with remarkable vitality. It deserves much attention but it has seldom received it because there are very great difficulties in discovering the facts about it.*

How man used to choose his wife, what he expected of her and what could he expect their relations to be? The answers to such questions are varied. In Kashmir, so long as obedience was the principal virtue inculcated into children, so long as girls were brought up to the models of innocence, to be ignorant of the world, skilled in domestic arts, and destined for marriage, then the choice was made by the parents, using their own

37. In fact the folk literature is full of evidence regarding the institution of marriage in Kashmir. But no serious attempt has been made to study it till now.
criteria. Parents seem to have been influenced by the position they held within their class. The marriage of their children was a public valuation placed on the parents position, and it was also a method of improving their position. 38 Among the Hindus the aristocratic families laid great stress on the antiquity and nobility of the families that married. 39 Marriage was for them the great means of social ascension. Peasantry and the industrial workers could not afford the expense of the ceremony; so they generally did things on a more modest scale. Whether the marriage


was between a couple belonging to groups of equal status or between a woman of lower and a man of higher status groups (hypergamy) an elaborate code governed the behaviour of all participants. During the period of our study generally the partners had not set eyes on one another. The lengths to which a family would go to prevent their daughter from being seen by member of her future husband's family, were very large. Among Muslims the couple might know one another, often because they were related. However, the marriages took place only after the traditional pattern of parental choice. Marriages increasingly took place when women were very young and were deemed unworthy of education and their status was consequently lower. To quote P. N. Bazaz, "It was an


41. Ibid.

unusual sight to see a boy of any well to do family unmarried at the age of fifteen; custom disapproved of keeping a girl under parental roof after she had passed twelve summers of life. It was a sin to have a virgin of marriagable age in house. After performance of nuptials, while the boy husband could still continue his education the girlwife had to assist her mother-in-law in domestic chores. The two minds developed differently and gradually a chasm yawned between the two mental outlooks. Thus traditionally for a man marital bond was subordinate to the bond with his agnates particularly his mother.

Educationally the women of Kashmir were very backward. In medieval period there are references to some literate women like Sura, Hayat Khatun, Gul Khatun but the women in general were illiterate.

43. P.N. Bazaz, Daughters of Vitasta, p. 221.
It is not that they were not capable of doing anything in fine arts and culture but they were not provided such opportunities. At times this illiteracy added to the misfortunes in their family life. Men who were partially educated would live with their illiterate wives nicely but for those highly educated it was difficult to live with illiterate wives. Lack of education led to the high degree of female seclusion and made them ready to accept the subservient roles in families. Thus in the first half of 19th century the Kashmiri women lived in chronic dresses as unmarried girls, young wives, busy mothers, widows as well as older women.

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44. Ibid.
CONCLUSION

The study of travel accounts of first half of the nineteenth century reveals that they are an important and indispensable record for exploring the history of Kashmir. Though at times the travellers have taken cursory glance of things and interpreted them in their own way, they continue to be sources from which not only the modern scholars of history but even those of sociology, economics and geography can also derive both facts and opinions. While exploring the socio-economic life of Kashmir, the travellers with all their failings provide us with a whole arsenal of Kashmir's society, economy and polity in a comprehensive manner. They demonstrate that agriculture with all the natural and man-made handicaps was the mainstay of people. The nature of cultivation was dictated generally by the self-sufficient character of the village. The bulk of the produce was food-grains and such crops as oil-seeds, pulses, and other crops for local requirements. In these crops the commercial character was completely absent and the area covered by the food crops was also limited. Besides, the regularity of cultivation and the abundance of water posed lot of problems for ordinary peasants.
The rights that the peasant possessed over his land depended on the nature of tenure. Generally, the peasants, peasant-proprietors and the tenants worked on jagir and other religious and charitable lands. The revenue machinery which was corrupt from top to bottom collected revenues from the peasantry in a very ruthless manner. The revenues collected in taxes and cesses were pocketed by the revenue farmers. This not only deteriorated the position of the peasantry but equally registered huge losses in the state's financial condition. Consequently, most of the peasant families were fed up with the life of extreme exploitation and misery and fled to various parts of the country, leaving their fields uncultivated for years together.

Kashmir was famous for its handicraft industry throughout the world. But the nature of its organisation was such that neither the workers nor the state were benefitted in the long run. During the period of our study not only the heavy tax burden but the insecurity that prevailed did not permit people to invest and develop their concerns. On the other hand, the monopoly of the state in trade and handicraft products with the consequent depression of prices brought the peasants often
to such levels that it became difficult for them to make a reasonable living. The conditions of shawl-weavers were particularly bad. Since there was no specialization and technological development, the economic organization remained of a very primitive type. No craft was organised in guilds which would have looked after the welfare and also the quality of the work of their members. Apart from this, during the first half of the nineteenth century the British colonial influences made their way into Kashmir. The Europeans introduced new patterns in the Kashmiri handicrafts which the local craftsmen were not able to follow easily. It tended to lower the artistic value. In these circumstances only two courses were open to craftsmen, either to change their methods and turn out cheap art wares - of doubtful artistic value - or to keep their old standards and face the decay. Hence there was a relapse, a retrograde step and Kashmir in the first half of 19th century afforded only the spectacle of an isolated country with decaying handicrafts. All these changes in economy had serious repercussions on Kashmir's social life.

The society in Kashmir comprised Muslims and Hindus
including a small number of Sikhs who entered Kashmir during the Sikh rule (1819-1846). Generally both the Hindus and Muslims were superstitious and orthodox. They believed in a host of spirits and animistic beliefs. Both the communities lived in amity and friendship. But within the Muslim community there were some conflicts between Shia and Sunni which have been keenly observed by the travellers. The entire society was stratified on the basis of resources available to each professional group. Among Hindus also the caste system was the main cause for social stratification. Except for a few, the general life of people was ridden with poverty. Among them the happiness was a relative term. The social stratification and exploitation do not seem to have provided any momentum for the economic development. The other worst feature of the social life in Kashmir was the then prevalent forced labour. It not only introduced the migratory character and depopulated the country but gave birth to innumerable social evils. The Sikh government and even the first Dogra ruler did not abolish this practice. Instead every year a number of peasant families were ruined permanently when the head or any other male member of the family was taken to render the forced carriage of loads in course of which he perished.
Though knowledge of European travellers regarding the position of women in Kashmir is meagre and fragmentary, one can still make out what should have been the position of women in society which was dominated by mythological and animistic beliefs and where increasing economic pressures modified the traditional picture. Mostly the Kashmiri women were illiterate and in a complete subordinate position. They were considered unworthy of education. Most of them except those of Brahmin and Sayyid families worked in the fields to contribute to their families income. They also worked in rural industrial organization, yet they had very poor access to the resources and high status jobs. The social evils like the purdha and sati system were also prevalent and added to somewhat deplorable position of women in the society.

The social and economic life as described in the traveller accounts during the first half of the 19th century points to the pre-capitalist nature of society. The agrarian economy was the predominant source of income but the level of exploitation and backwardness being too great did not permit it to grow and develop on its own model. The state monopoly and the absence of technology
proved the chief bottleneck to the industrial activity. Consequently the society succumbed to the low standards of life and did not register progress at any level during the period of our study.