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The study ‘The Economic Roots of the National Awakening in Jammu and Kashmir (1846-1947)’ aims to trace the growth of ‘national consciousness’ among the people of Jammu & Kashmir in the backdrop of their economic deprivation. Ever since March 1846, when the British ‘sold’ it for seventy five lakh of rupees to the Dogra maharaja Gulab Singh, the predominantly Muslim-Kashmir together with the principality of Jammu and the frontier districts including Buddhist and Ladakh experienced unmitigated autocratic rule. A succession of maharajas, fostering ties with a small group of Hindu Pandits in the Kashmir valley and a more extensive network of Dogra kinsmen in Jammu, willfully trampled on the rights of their subjects but rarely succeeded in pushing an insensitive state administration to adopt even the most nominal of reforms. Practically no form of economic activity, not even prostitution, escaped taxation. Muslims were debarred from expressing their opinions freely, virtually excluded from the army and poorly represented in the government services. The state claimed exclusive ownership of the land.

The Dogra administration lacked active sympathy with the aspirations of the people not to speak of their prosperity or improving their standard of living. With the amalgamation of different territories by a new ruling class, came a change in the administration of the State. But it was precisely under the aegis of the colonial rule that the new regime established a permanent fit to ride roughshod over the interests and rights of the vast majority of their Muslim subjects. The new structure withheld the rights of citizenship from its subjects, the scope for articulating and assessing political demands as individuals was severely limited. Peasants in a small holding structure with as yet limited differentiation lived under common yet individually fragmented conditions of social and economic existence. Religious communitarian identity under these circumstances imparted the social base of solidarity to articulate class based political demands. The generally
stronger ties of dominance of the ruling class and their hegemonic power prevailed over the peasants in Kashmir were major factors in the relatively muted nature of resistance by peasants and labourers at the first instance. In addition, the decisive undermining of the artisanal economy threw many weavers—who formed the most important component in the non-agrarian system—into the ranks of agricultural labour and forged a potential link between weaver and peasants’ discontent.

The marked features were remarkable deprivation, destitution and oppression. There were many new problems as well as old ones, including persistence of famines and widespread hunger, violation of elementary political freedoms as well as of basic liberties. People were left with little choice and little opportunity of exercising their reasoned agency.

Most of the produce of the land was seized by the state while cultivators paid hefty taxes. Begar or forced labour was rampant as was corruption among state officials. As an insurance against revolt, the state banned Muslims from keeping arms and ammunition. Remarkably little organized resistance was put up by Kashmiri Muslims until the third decade of the twentieth century.

The argument the present study insists upon comes out still more clearly when one examines a society somewhat further on its development, where oppression has assumed a more complete form, and becomes economic rather than purely domestic in character. Such are the characteristics of slave economy. Here the psychological and human element is practically lacking, and the labourer is reduced to the condition of a brute. His acquiescence in usurpation is accordingly assured through fear, which causes him to look upon revolt as totally incapable of securing him his liberty. An imposing system of moral oppression succeeded in making the labourer really believe that he is a slave by nature that his chains have been forged by a superior power, and it is futile to strive to break them. This
fiction, built up with the secular assistance of clients and liegeman, becomes so formidable in the minds of the oppressed that they no longer dare to rebel against their masters, and bow instead before the destiny which condemns them to serve.

It is in this way the importance of economic factor as a subject of study is commensurate with the loss which they inflict. All other factors are real, and have more or less a vitality of their own. But it is impossible to divorce them safely from their material source. In the present study it is mainly the economic aspect that is presented, dissected and utilized to investigate the economic aspect in inclusive terms that integrate all other aspects, social, political, and cultural.

The major types of social organization of production that have been identified in this thesis did not display a remarkable degree of adaptability and resilience. The Dogra state concerned themselves with the stability of revenue receipts, armed the rentier landlords with considerable legal powers of extra economic coercion which laid the foundation of revenue and rent offensive. In the long run it facilitated the process of twisting the agrarian economy and society to an export orientation. The struggle for freedom was basically the result of a fundamental contradiction between the interests of the people of Kashmir and that of the Dogra autocratic regime. Kashmir during the period was economically regressed. The freedom struggle, thus, was a struggle for economic emancipation. As a result economic ideology developed which was to dominate the post 1930’s Kashmir.

The thesis has taken into board both the economic conditions as well as all those leaders who exercised the functioning of forming and guiding the growing of public opinion on economic deprivations and economic questions. The resolutions and proceedings of the Muslim Conference were effective in moulding public opinion only to the extent to which they filtered down to the people through mass campaigning and gatherings. As ‘national’ leaders they looked upon Kashmir and
its people realizing that they had common interests and destiny in the broadest sense of the term; who visualized the ultimate aim of self-government for all the people of Jammu and Kashmir or at least for the masses, rather than for a smaller, narrower body within it. The criterion in this respect has been what they professed and what they wanted in practice. The latter part has been examined at length in the main body of the thesis.

The thesis has mostly dealt not with the attitude and policies of the leaders as judged according to the canons of the science of economics, but with what the leaders said and their manner of saying about the basic economic and political understanding and approach. To attempt the latter task would involve a discussion on the evolution of the economic backwardness in Kashmir and the changes brought in it the consequences of which resulted in mass awakening. Therefore, the present study is not simply a study of the political developments in Jammu and Kashmir but calls into question the economic dimension behind these developments.

The corresponding evolution of means of control which should have taken place had been retarded by the competition of private interests, especially the landed class. Production was for gain only. The solution of the economic problems was not provided for by a system based on gross negligence to promote anything new. Kashmir turned into a slough of despond. Against the backdrop of this gross negligence, heavy taxation of agriculture and commercial activities tightened the noose on an emaciated and dejected populace. Mounting economic distress and political disaffection found a ready outlet. All this entails a rather different narrative from what the mainstream historiography of the freedom movement in Kashmir has usually adopted.

Moving away from the traditional approach, the present work has attempted to explore the economic dimension, with some focus on other aspects too, in order
to have a fuller understanding of the whole dynamics of the rise of the national movement. The previous studies have given only a surface treatment to the economic aspect; therefore, a need was felt to have a thorough understanding of the aspect. The present study has, therefore, been undertaken to objectively analyze the economic trajectory of Kashmir since 1846 to 1947, and aims at understanding the various facets of its underdevelopment and its impact upon the consciousness of the people of Jammu and Kashmir.

It was not only the rank and file but also the most elite section of the Kashmiri Muslim society was pushed to the wall. That small section which any oppressor or occupational force requires at local level to main its administrative apparatus was also drawn from non-Muslims and non-Kashmiris like Pandits and Punjabis. Small wonder that among those groups and sections of Kashmir who during the previous regimes had acted as instruments of oppression saw no hope under this regime, only the non-Muslim Kashmiris were found on the other side of the fence thus completed the communal divide. The majority community heard the sympathetic voices and saw the helping hand from such a state of economic oppression where exactions and state demand made eviction from land a relief rather than a punishment, where forests and forest lands were preferred over home and hearth, and where death looked a lesser misfortune than begar. The statistical definition of poverty changed for the worse. In fact, the categories of poor and prosperous became non-existent and were replaced by oppressor and oppressed. The rack rented peasantry and industrial labour exclusively belonged to the majority community—the oppressed, who were grounded under religious, racial, economic and regional oppression, untold exactions and countless disabilities.

Silk weavers, shawl bafs, English educated and religious class all discovered a convergence of interest in fighting the regime out. The increasing disillusionment among these classes in Kashmir in the context of denial of basic economic rights to them owed to their outright exclusion from the political and
economic structures, resulting in the eventual alienation. This irreconcilable contradiction that emerged between the Dogra regime and the junior ally—the local elite—on the one hand, and the bulk of the people of Kashmir including the middle class, the working class and the peasantry, on the other hand, laid the seeds of the struggle for national liberation.

The problem that this study has attempted to address is, therefore, the growing economic backwardness of Jammu and Kashmir during the 2nd half of 19th century and early 20th century, and its consequences. The leadership, on the basis of their understanding of the economic policies of Dogra regime in Kashmir, formulated an alternative program for the development of an independent national economy. One can say without doubt that National Conference leadership got much popularity and success due to the redress of the economic grievances rather than of political issues. Though it is naïve to believe that only a single cause can lead to a mass outburst, yet the dominant trend has to be kept in view; in the present case the dominant cause was certainly economic in nature. The proverbial economic backwardness stultifying all progress put the whole economic spectrum in disorder. The absence of any kind of growth whether social, economic or political largely resulted in the stagnation of the society. The economic exploitation, problem of social (dis)adjustment and political domination by an ‘alien’ group gave rise to a vigorous battle for self-identification of the people suffering under an imposed political system which had rendered them sullen and submissive.