

CULTURAL DIMENSION OF AGRICULTURAL RITUALS IN KASHMIR

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ABSTRACT:

Where there has been agriculture, rituals and customs have always fastened to it like a shadow. And complete dependence on agriculture left rituals to be part and parcel of agricultural practices. Kashmir valley was surrounded by lofty mountains from all the four side which cut it from the rest of the world. At the same time because of the lack of agricultural advancement, technologies and sufficient labour, agriculture was totally dependent on nature for successful harvest. The people had adopted number of rituals that were commonly accepted as a means to appease nature and increase the yield. These rituals were carrying their own message and were commonly taken as a means to approach a problem but presently declared as superstitious and unwanted practices. But keeping in view the circumstances and environment of the valley, these rituals were having their own rational side formulated through observation and experience. This paper is an attempt to explain the agricultural rituals followed in Kashmir during nineteenth and twentieth century that suggests if superstition was a myth, myth too has reality and backed by power or ideology.

Keywords: Kashmir, Agriculture, Rituals, Nature, Labour, collective-consciousness.

Man had lived a nomadic life for several generations in order to sustain himself and fulfill his need. He strictly depended on fruits, vegetables and animals which he didn't rear but meet them accidently. Once he found these resources, in a particular area, getting exhausted he was compelled to pack his raw tools, move ahead, roam here and there and reside somewhere else again temporarily. In Neolithic period man came to know about agriculture; the life of man got revolutionized and nomadic life turned into sedentary and he began to live a settled life in small hamlets to which V. Gordon Child called Neolithic Revolution. The emergence of the village signified that the man had passed from the nomadic mode of collective life to the settled one.¹ Man began to settle in small

¹ Akshayakumar Ramanlal, Desai. *Rural sociology in India*. Popular Prakashan, 1994, p. 14

hamlets mostly on the banks of rivers where water was available in abundance and soil was rich in fertility, both necessary for the maintenance of agriculture. With the passage of time sedentary life based on agriculture became a dominant discourse that took place in every society, early or late, through transmission or through exchange. In every society agriculture was dominant source of livelihood and it retained its dominant source of sustenance till very recent until industrial revolution take its place.

Agriculture was a man made discovery but it was totally depended on nature for its sustenance. From sowing till reaping, nature played a pivotal role in the agricultural life. Though, whole life was revolving round agriculture, if an agricultural output fails it has its direct impact on the species dependent on it. At the same time, Man before nature was helpless and there was no way out except to appease it. In order to please nature man perform different ceremonies, rituals and sacrifices on different stages of agriculture to avoid the fear of disasters which nature could offer through early or late rainfall or snowfall, excessive heat, floods, winds etc. After industrial revolution, agriculture was overshadowed by Industrial activities and agriculture became second contributor of the economy. But at the same time, industry itself was mostly dependent on agriculture and agriculture retains its primordial status less in Europe and more in the rest of the world, where industrial revolution was a dream.² The logic behind these agricultural rituals and customs was not only to appease nature and satisfy superstitious being but it was a means to approach problems faced by peasants in carrying their profession in harmonious way.

Kashmir, a land locked country surrounded by lofty Himalayas all around, had always remained cut off from the rest of world. Agriculture was not only the sole means of livelihood for the people but main source of revenue generation for state as well. Considering topography, mono-crop economy and the land-locked condition of the valley, the prosperity of the population depended on successful and satisfactory harvest. The peasants devotes most of his time and energy in terracing his fields, expend great labour in digging out irrigation channels, spend his nights out in the fields watching the flow of water, and pass laborious days moving about like an amphibious animal in the wet deep mud³ in order to feed the whole population. Consequently, large number of crops has gained the attention of the villagers like Rice, Maize, Wheat, Barley, Buck-Wheat, Pulses, Water-nuts, Cotton, Hops, saffron etc. Besides large number of fruits were also reared. But the most important product in Kashmir was rice. So important was the rice to the economy of the valley that until the beginning of the twentieth century not only the state pays its officials in the grain, but private persons paid their servants in the same fashion⁴. Rice

² Industrial revolution first took place in 18th century in Europe and it is still absent in many under-developed countries where agriculture retains its primary importance.

³ Walter Roper Lawrence, *The valley of Kashmir*. Asian Educational Services, 1895, p. 330.

⁴ M. A. Stein, *Rice crop of Kashmir*, The march of India, VOL-XI, 1959, p. 23.

was not only the staple crop but the currency or means of exchange in the villages of Kashmir as well. Cultivator has realized that their labor wouldn't be repaid if they sown crop other than rice⁵. Such was the importance of rice that peasant was specialized in growing ninety-four different varieties of rice⁶ as every effort was made to increase the output. As a result, rice accounted three-fourth (3/4th) of the cultivable area during Sikh period⁷ and was most important crop in terms of value during the Dogra period.⁸ The importance given to the cultivation of rice was a necessity in itself, because villager was assigned the responsibility of feeding all the mouths. But when Kashmir came under Sikhs neither a new revenue system was introduced nor a proper revenue settlement was framed on the spot, but in Lahore available returns of the Afghan times were compared and a quick report on the resource of the valley was prepared by Fakir Aziz⁹ to fix the annual demands of the valley. At the same time, there was no general rule for the appointment or suspension of governors except they were recalled if they failed to extract the excessive stipulated revenue¹⁰. They were only interested to collect as much as possible without investing a single penny, and the worst hit of the policy was always agriculturist. In the year 1834, out of the total 110767 *kharwars* of land, 76481 *kharwars*¹¹ of land were under paddy cultivation. The total paddy production in the same year was 2000000 *kharwars*¹². Under *batai*, half (1/2) of the revenue was taken by the state that accounted 1000000 *kharwars* and out of this half was taken from the cultivator in the form of cash on Govt. fixed rates known as *mujwaza*¹³. However, half of the produce was not the only tax levied by the Govt. on the paddy produce. There were many other taxes which a peasant was subjected to and on whole he had to part 2/3rd of his produce towards state. Among such taxes *trakki* was famous that was charged regularly, where a peasant was required to deposit more four (4) *traks* additional per *kharwar* towards state¹⁴. Under Dogras the intensity of the taxation increased and peasants were compelled to bear responsibility of feeding all state officials. *Tehsildar*, *pathwari*, *sazawol*, *kardar*, *shakdar* (officials who assisted in revenue collection) received fixed share after every harvest. Besides, different peculations offered by the corrupt revenue administration the officials enjoyed recognized perquisite by the name of *rasum*¹⁵. Thus, more than 3/4th¹⁶ of the gross produce was squeezed from the peasants that disable them to reserve some stock to meet the vagaries of climate, the demands of the next year and

⁵ R. L. Hangloo, *Agrarian System of Kashmir*. Commonwealth Publication, New Delhi (1995),

⁶ Kripa Ram, *Gulzar-i-kashmir*, p.278.

⁷ Vigne, *Travels in Kashmir, Ladakh and Iskardo*, Vol 1, P. 309. and *Dastur*, ff.1-65.

⁸ Hangloo, *Op.cit*.

⁹ Radha Krishan Parmu, *A History of Sikh Rule in Kashmir, 1819-1846*. Department of Education, Jammu and Kashmir Government, 1977, P. 287.

¹⁰ During Ranjit Sing's twenty years of rule over Kashmir he sent as many as nine governors to valley and six out of them were consistently grilled for non-fulfillment of their contracts, irrespective of havoc caused by famines, floods and cholera etc which destroyed the means and mode of production, rendering collection of revenue very difficult. Radha Krishan Parmu, *Op.cit*, P. 277.

¹¹ Prithpal Singh, *Unpublished M.Phil thesis*, Dept. of History, University of Kashmir, P.12; *Dastur*, ff. 1-65.

¹² William Moorcroft, *Travels In The Himalayan Provinces Of Hindustan And The Panjab*, Vol. ii. (1837), P.133.

¹³ Vigne, *Travels in Kashmir, Ladakh and Iskardo*, Vol II, P. 311

¹⁴ *Majumut –ut-tawarikh*, ff. 263a-263b.

¹⁵ Lawrence, *The valley of Kashmir*, P. 415

¹⁶ Sir Francis Younghusband. *Kashmir*. Asian Educational Services, 1996, P. 173.

their own creature comforts.¹⁷ The villager sustain himself mostly on wild fruits, vegetable and water nuts alone formed only food of at least thirty-thousand persons for five months in a year¹⁸ but where subsidiary food was not available economic crises bordering on starvation became more or less a regular affair.¹⁹ To avoid starvation, peasants spent whole time and energy on the land and for the land. Nevertheless in the absence of high yielding seeds, irrigation and technology the most effective means of production was labour or man power. But the severe problem faced by the agriculturists during nineteenth and twentieth century was labour itself.

Natural calamities had always destined the demography of the valley since ancient times. Nineteenth century Kashmir also witnessed the adverse effects of calamities which altogether diminished the population in the form of increasing mortality and exodus. In the beginning of the Nineteenth century the population of valley was 800000²⁰ but the famines (1813 & 1833), earthquake (1828), cholera²¹ has created general devastation and reduced the population to 2,00000 in 1835. Vigne, who has left an eye-witness account of the 26th July 1828 earthquake, says some 1200 dwellings fell down, many were dead and many more wounded while a large majority was rendered homeless, naked, hungry, weak and uncared. The corpses of dead animals littered about sweltering in the hot sun of June and July created conditions which caused cholera that killed many more²². Dr Elmslie who has witnessed the devastating famine of 1877-79 in Kashmir says that out of the total population of 4,02700 famine swept 2,41,620 persons. Not only 2/3rd of the population was swept but large number of villages lay in ruins as villagers had extracted beams and doors for sale²³. Inevitable appalling natural calamities led to mass migration of Kashmiri's from the valley to the neighboring states that resulted into the establishment of permanent Kashmiri colonies at places like *Doda, Bhadrawah, Jammu, Lahore, Lucknow, Mandi, Sialkot* etc and created increasing dearth of labour in the valley. The consequences of gradual depopulation of the country resulted into under-cultivation of the land as in 1834 not more than 1/16th of the cultivable land was under cultivation and the inhabitants starving at home were driven in great number to the plains of Hindustan.²⁴ The shortage of labour can be gauged from the fact that the state distributed *tukm musada* (advanced seed) and

¹⁷ Parmu. *A history of Muslim rule in Kashmir, 1320-1819*.

¹⁸ Jacquemont, Victor. *Letters from India, 1829-1832: Being a Selection from the Correspondence of Victor Jacquemont*. Macmillan and Company, limited, 1936, II, p.76

¹⁹ Prem Nath Bazaz, *Kashmir in crucible*. Verinag Publishers, 1991, P.9.

²⁰ William Moorcroft, *Travels In The Himalayan Provinces Of Hindustan And The Panjab*, Vol. ii. P. 123

²¹ "In the present century there have been ten epidemic of cholera all more or less disastrous to the people of Kashmir", Lawrence, Op.cit, 218

²² Vigne, *Travels in Kashmir, Ladakh and Iskardo*, Vol 1, P. 282.

²³ Sir Francis Younghusband. Op.cit, P. 173.

²⁴ Moorcroft, *Travels In The Himalayan Provinces Of Hindustan And The Panjab*, vol., 2, P. 124.

irrigated land according to the number of persons in the family or *nafri*²⁵ and the intention of the cultivator was always to fetch more irrigated land by increasing family size.

Thus, rice cultivation was the primary source of livelihood and the only pillar of sustenance but was dreadfully labour intensive and always dependent on nature. The peasant has to carry on cultivation not only to keep their body and soul together but they had to fill the coffers of the state compulsory. Keeping in consideration the climatic condition and dearth of labour, peasant used to perform the agricultural rituals throughout whole valley. These rituals had their own significance. Firstly, agricultural operations in Kashmir were carefully timed so as to fall within a certain period before or after *Nauroz*, the spring day and the *mezan* or commencement of autumn. If the period is prolonged, there will be a certain failure in the crop, which is calculated in the most precise manner²⁶. The circumstance which interferes with punctuality in ploughing and sowing was the absence of labour or natural calamity. By offering *Mangal* (Rice was cooked and was mixed with oil and turmeric powder and was distributed among the villagers), *Gongul* (When first turf was taken family member, man or woman, distribute walnuts almonds, sugar among children and neighbors and the ritual was popularly as *Gongul*), *Kaad* (those who assisted in the rice-plantation were invited to share the lunch or dinner with the family and were served with meat, chicken, eggs, milk etc and this ritual was known as *Kaad*) etc they were attracting their attention and seeking help from them in the process of cultivation. The participation of friends, neighbors and the relatives in the cultivation solves the labour problem and provided redress to the tedious job at the right time. Second, these rituals also developed collective consciousness among the people of particular village or tribe and when a challenge or problem related to agriculture crop-up the people responded it at collective level. For example, When rice plant sprouts a ritual was performed at village known as *Halpoot*, in other parts of valley it was known as *Gaamkhirat* (village offering). This ritual was performed to pry for good yield and for the safety of the plant. During *Halpoot* all the house holders cook rice in their home and mix the rice with cooked vegetables and all the food was collected near local mosque and distributed among children, men and women near the rice fields²⁷. Unconsciously, the ritual had its other logical side too. When the rice plant sprouted it was prone to insects like grasshopper and bugs. When food was distributed near rice fields these insects became the pray of birds that arrive there to feed on residue²⁸. Thirdly, Agricultural rituals were manifestation of the social significance of the local community. By inviting neighbors, relatives and friends develop a social bond between peasant families that

²⁵ “Every year the *kardar* would arrange for the cultivation of the estate. The unit was known as *nafre*’, which consisted of a man and his wife and one adult son. To the *nafre* was given four(4) acres of land. The *nim nafre* consists of a man and his wife was given two (2) acres of irrigated land. *Poa nafre*, a bachelor, was given one and half (1/1/2) acres of irrigated land”, Lawrence , *the valley of Kashmir*, P. 420.

²⁶ Lawrence, p. 325

²⁷ An interview with Gulam Hassan Bhat, resident of Laroo Kulgam, Age 75, on 20/12/2017

²⁸ An interview with Mohammad Ramzan Chek resident of Laroo Kulgam, Age 75, on 10/11/2017

was necessary to carry out cultivation smoothly. The peasants needed bull, plough, seeds etc and proper water sharing in agricultural process that was impossible in isolation or without mutual sharing and help.

All this compelled the locals to turn superstitious beliefs and offer different rituals to please nature and satisfy themselves. These rituals started once spring season made its entry and continued to be performed till the last grain of the produce remained there. Numbers of rituals were followed either pre-harvesting or post-harvesting either collectively or individually by the peasants at family level. These rituals were adopted in order to respond the challenges offered by the nature from time to time during the cultivation process. In Kashmir, where land used remain under snow for more than five months the peasant has to remain very alert, quick and punctual on his land. The more early he sows the more early he reaps and all this needed more labour. Performing rituals was a way to assemble more labour to defend nature and sometimes to combat a natural calamity at collectively level. Thus, a Kashmiri proverb runs:

yus kare gongul , sue kare krav
(*One who will plough; will also reap*)

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