

PUNJAB PRESS AND POLITICAL AWAKENING IN PRINCELY STATE OF JAMMU AND KASHMIR

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Abstract

The Press to society is like a mind to a body. Press played a significant role in bringing political consciousness across societies at different junctures of time. In fact, Renaissance, Reformation, Enlightenment, Rise of Nation states and Nationalism in the west was a result of vibrant Press. Press also played a prominent part in the rise and growth of Indian national movement. Started by the Western missionaries in India for evangelical purposes, it did not take long for the national leaders to understand the great potentialities of the press as a disseminator of ideas. Like the other indirectly ruled parts of the British Empire, the princely state of Jammu and Kashmir couldn't remain immune to the developments in British India albeit the influence of colonialism here was indirect. It was far behind the directly ruled regions of the British Empire in terms of education, economic growth and political freedom. While the print media was evolving and gaining new strengths in British India, Jammu and Kashmir was the only major state where the ruling Maharajas in order to safeguard their autocratic interests didn't allow print media to flourish and had a hostile attitude towards any such culture especially the press. Under conditions, Punjab press played a pivotal in political awakening of the masses.

Keywords: Press, Nationalism, Freedom, Pivotal role, Autocratic, Punjab press, Political consciousness.

The state of J&K as known at present came into existence as an outcome of the sale deed between East India Company and Gulab Singh the Raja of Jammu on 16 March 1846 in what is popularly known as Treaty of Amritsar. The most crucial consequence that followed the Treaty of Amritsar was that it caused devastating effects upon the majority community of Kashmir i.e. Muslims.¹ "The sale-deed of 1846", writes P.L Lakhnupal, put a largely populated Muslim state under Dogra rule which had been characterized as despotic, tyrannical and sectarian.² Political freedom in the state was totally non-existent. Civil liberties such as freedom of the press, of forming associations was totally banned. To file an application regarding establishing press was considered rebellion.³ Due to strict press regulations no one was allowed to set up press in Jammu and Kashmir till 1924. However, in British India and other states freedom was given for establishing press. Under such circumstances, it was Punjab press which came to the rescue of Kashmiri's to bring about political consciousness and help them to redress their grievances. The Punjab press arrived on the scene as a breeze of fresh air in the suffocating atmosphere of Dogra Raj. It served as a beacon of a lamp to the oppressed people walking on the paths of the darkness of Dogra rule. Kashmiri who had become a stranger in his own home found a Messenger to tell his story of agony and pain to the rest of the world. There were number of dailies and weeklies published from Punjab to represent the cause of Kashmiri's. The prominent among them were *the Akhbar-i-Kashmir*, *the Safir*, *the subh-i-Kashmir*, *the Bahar-i-Kaashmir*, *Hamdard Hind*, *the Kashmir*, *the Kashmiri Musalman*, *the Mazlum-i-Kashmir*, *the Maktub-i-Kashmir*⁴ etc.

It was an English newspaper published from Lahore, *The Punjabee* founded by Syed Mohammad Azam who later founded *the Lahore chronicle* was the first to raise the voice in support of the Muslim population, now the slaves of a tyrant.⁵ This paper continued to raise its voice against the plight of Kashmiri Muslims who were at the receiving end, wrote on 9 May 1857. "By the

brutality and tyranny of that incarnation of sensuality avarice and all evil, Maharaja Gulab Singh, Cashmere is rapidly being converted into a melancholy desert." The paper further said, " The smiling fields now lie waste, happy hamlet have turned wretched collections of ruined homesteads and desolate hearths. And all this is the work of one demon, to whose tender mercies an enlightened Christen Government has made over the most beautiful valley".⁶

The *Khair-Khawah-i-Kashmir*, an Urdu weekly published from Lahore and edited by Pandit Hargopal Khasta⁷, who was exiled by Maharaja on the suspicion of being among the patriots who had submitted a memorandum⁸ to the viceroy in 1877 regarding misgovernance, was critical of Maharaja Ranbir Singh. The *Kashmir Gazette Lahore*, an Urdu monthly founded Chaudary Jan Mohammad Ganai and edited by Munshi Muhammad-ud-din Fauq during 1901-1904 worked for the social and political awakening of Kashmiri Muslims.⁹ It published Patriotic poems by Indian Muslim poets which gave a clarion call to Kashmiri Nationalism.¹⁰ In 1901 Munshi Muhammad-ud-din Fauq brought out *panj-i-Faulad* which wrote on various Kashmir issues. This paper ceased to publish in 1906 and then he brought out a monthly *Kashmiri Magazine* which subsequently became a weekly and named as *Akhbar-i- Kashmir*. It was dedicated to historical, Social, and Political movement that agitated the mind of Kashmiri's during the reign of Maharaja Pratap Singh.¹¹ Fauq worked day and night to wake Kashmiris up from their slumber and was preparing them for fighting for their rights. Among others that pleaded for the Kashmiri cause forcefully, the *Inqilab* published from Lahore is worth mentioning. Sheikh Muhammad Abdullah says that it was through this organ that he published statistical information to demonstrate the under-representation of Kashmiri Muslims in the state services.¹² The daily was so dedicated to Kashmiri Muslims cause that Government imposed a ban on its entry into the valley. While highlighting the role of *Inqilab* in bringing political awakening among Kashmiri Muslims Sheikh Muhammad Abdullah writes¹³:

"The editors of Inqilab, published from Lahore, Maulana Mehar and Maulana Salik pleaded our case and boosted our morale right from the beginning and raised their pen to expose the tyrannies of Dogra rule".

Since there was ban on publishing and printing of newspapers in Kashmir, some writers from this land got their write-ups also published in Lahore newspapers. Mention may be made of Maulana Muhammad Masoodi who was assisted by Pir Muhammad Afzal Makhdoomi, Pir Muhammad Maqbool Bihagi and Muhammad Yehya Rafiqi. Maulana Muhammad Masoodi wrote under the name of Rajlan Yessa¹⁴ to escape detection of state. Articles were sent secretly to Lahore by Haji Muhammad Ishfaq who was associated with different transport companies of Srinagar.¹⁵ Pandit Prem Nath Bazaz started writing for a Lahore based Urdu weekly *Akhbari- I-Am* when he was a student as back as 1928.¹⁶

The writings in Punjab press about the pitiable condition of people in Kashmir mobilized some Muslims of Kashmir origin to launch an organization, The Anjuman-I-Kashmiri Mussalman-I-Lahore. This organization became a strong voice for redeeming people from deprivation and exploitation. The Anjuman raised its voice against providing jobs in the State to non-state subjects, it worked for recruitment of Muslims in the army and demanded the restoration of proprietorship of land to peasants.¹⁷

In the history of Freedom Struggle, 13th July 1931 is an important milestone. On this day many people fell to the bullets of the Dogra soldiers. The news of indiscriminate and unprovoked firing outside the Central Jail, Srinagar, reached Lahore on the evening of 16th July and was published in the Muslim Press on the 17th morning. The news shocked Muslims of Punjab. Individuals and organization sent about seven to eight thousand protest telegrams to Maharaja. Thousands of telegrams were also addressed to the Viceroy urging immediate intervention.¹⁸ Publication of news about the mayhem outside the Central Jail in Lahore newspapers sent a chain of shockwaves to the Muslim community all over India. There were widespread demonstrations against the killing of Muslims outside the Central Jail all over India. It stirred the conscience of the Muslim intellectuals. Hundreds of poems appeared in newspapers of Punjab in condemnation of the firing which were recited to huge crowds. Two of the poems one by Abdul Majid Salik and second by Agha Hashar Kashmiri were read out from pulpits in mosques.¹⁹ Had not the

Lahore newspapers reported 13th July tragedy, it would perhaps have gone unnoticed and Kashmir Struggle would not have gathered the desired momentum. The indignation that the news created amongst the Muslims of India against the Maharaja earned many friends to Kashmir movement and resulted in the birth All India Kashmir Committee that subsequently played a very significant role in mustering mass support for the Kashmir movement. Seen in retrospect this organization which was later on headed by Dr. Mohammad Iqbal played a more vital role in exposing the misrule of Maharaja before the world community.

From 1931 onwards the Punjab press started a vigorous campaign against the Maharaja and his administration. Newspapers containing articles written in the words of fire were sent by thousands into the state.²⁰ It would not be beside the point to mention that it was because of Punjab press that grievances of Kashmiris were brought before the eyes of the world. To quote Sheikh Muhammad Abdullah²¹:

“It was during these days that we started to acquaint the world with the condition of Kashmiris in general and those of Muslims in particular. We dispatched our articles to Urdu organs of Lahore and thus for the first time brought the dark side of the conditions of Kashmir in the notice of the outside world”.

Conclusion

The Punjab press added a new chapter to the Kashmir history. It highlighted and criticized not only the policies of the state but also took a keen interest in mobilizing the people against the atrocities of the government. It also helped the people of Jammu and Kashmir in bringing awareness about their backwardness in education and other fields. It initially promoted a culture of written complaint subsequently it acted as a weapon of protest and resistance mobilizing people against Dogra Raj. The newspapers published a number of articles criticizing the policies of the state. It popularized the ideas of nationalism, freedom, representative government, liberty, justice, democratic institutions, and Independence. It became an important instrument of educating the masses with regard to political matters and other developments. Thus the Punjab press undoubtedly played an important role in political awakening among masses.

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