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Objective Analysis of Education in Kashmir: A Historical Perspective

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Abstract:

Kashmir was regarded as a great seat of Sanskrit learning. With the coming of Muslims in valley Persian began to dominate the scene and eventually became the court language. But soon education began to lose its ground with the subsequent rulers. Kashmir was lagging behind in Modern Education in the subcontinent. Modern education came to Kashmir only with the advent of Christian missionaries. Education spread rapidly with the establishment of Jammu and Kashmir board in 1975. From 1989 number of militant activities in the state increased with the passage of time and resulted in the havoc of education. In this paper an attempt has been made to analyze the history of education in Kashmir and to trace it's trajectory to contemporary times. This paper will also try to objectively highlight the turning points in the history of education in Kashmir. However the turbulent situation from 1989 till present has impoverished the education system in Kashmir, leading to the ruin of future generations. If education keeps on suffering at the present scale, it will take a heavy toll on quality of human resource.

Keywords: Education, Kashmir, Crossroads, literacy.

Education is seen as a main pillar of a society and society is defined by the quality of education that it imparts. Like a photographer who takes a clean estimate of the background before capturing a photograph, in a similar fashion understanding the education system in Kashmir requires traversing into its history. Encomiums written on Kashmir, describe it a culturally rich region with a distinct civilization and a long history. In his book Biscoe writes “Kashmir fortunately possesses an ancient history and a civilization more ancient than our own” (Biscoe 67). At the very outset Kashmir was known for its Sanskrit learning across India. Scholars from different parts of India thronged Kashmir valley with an ease to acquire knowledge from great Sanskrit teachers. Kashmir has been the “abode of Sanskrit learning and this small valley has produced masterpieces of history, poetry, romance, fable and philosophy. For centuries it was the humble abode of the greatest Sanskrit Scholars and Saivism- the great Indian religion tradition- found some of its best teachers on the banks of Vitasta (The river Jhelum is called Vitastā in Rigveda). Some of the greatest Sanskrit poets were born and wrote in the valley, and has also offered a world famous collection of folk-lore in the Sanskrit language” (Grierson 241-251).

Many historians argued that successive waves of Islam were first experienced in Kashmir during 1305 with the Tatar invasion. But several stated that Islam came to Kashmir with the advent of Bulbul Shah in the second decade of the 14th century. However, P N K Bamzai writes “Islam entered the valley in medieval period not as a result of foreign invasion, but by coup defeat from within country” (Bamzai 422). The status of Sanskrit language did not undergo any replacement and continued to be official language for nearly two hundred years even after the advent of Muslim rule. Muslim rule is considered to be the magnificent one as far as education is concerned. Most of the Sultans and Mughal governors were patrons of art and literature. It also comes to our knowledge that several poets and literatures received pensions and stipend from the rulers (Bamzai Vol-II 496). With the coming of Muslims Persian language thrive in the valley due to the presence of Sayedds who came from distant lands for proselytization. With the result, the use of Persian (also known by its autonym Farsi) became so important that it became the court language. New Maktabas and patshals were opened almost all over Kashmir, where Persian and Sanskrit were taught. The great king, “Sultan Zain-ul-Abidin is said to have established a university at his capital, Nau-Shahar. The mughal rulers encouraged vocational training in carpet, shawl making, papier-mache and other handicrafts” (Ishaq Khan 160).

Education in Kashmir received a stern setback with the end of Mughal rule and occupation of valley by Ahmed Shah Abadali, the great Afghan king. The ruthless suppression of Pathans too was no less than calamity. Sikhs too followed the same path of their predecessor rulers. This shows that with the passage of time education began to lose its ground under subsequent rulers and remained confined to mosques and temples. This can be easily noticed in the writings of Tyndale Biscoe, who writes “The indigenous schools of Kashmir have always been in connection with the mosques, where the boys are taught to read Arabic so that they may be able to read the Koran, but not necessarily to understand it. Likewise the Brahmans have their schools, where Sanskrit is taught so that the boys may be able to read the sacred Hindu books” (Biscoe 253). During the rule of Dogras, Kashmir was predominately known outside for the despondency of its land and hardships of its people. In his book Biscoe writes, “Robert Thorp came to Kashmir, like many other British officers, to shoot big game on the mountains. But his heart soon softened and directed him to a more important matter- namely, the miseries of kashmiris under incompetent government. Mohammedans peasants not only suffered terribly under Hindu officials but their very blood was sucked out of them. They were forced to pay taxes in kind which was half of the produce. This forced farmer and his family to live on roots” (Biscoe 234). It may be the exaggeration that peasants were compelled to live on roots but it is true that state act ruthlessly while collecting taxes. Dogra rulers who were more interested in squeezing people obviously would have paid less attention towards education.

The Dogra rulers particularly Gulab Singh was inclined to money and land, resulting in great set-back to education. After his death in 1857, his successor Maharaja Ranbir Singh also paid less attention towards education of their subjects. Of course, he introduced some measures in the

education of his subjects. But these measures were like drops of water in the sea. Maharaja spent a sum of 11,737 on translation of work (Ishaq Khan 161). The translation of standard works selected from the whole range of Darshanas, the Dharma, and other Shastras with the one and only object to enhance the knowledge of the classical Hindu learning among the Maharaja's Dogra subjects. Maharaja Ranbir Singh instead of opening schools in his own state contributed huge sum of "one lakh for the establishment of the Punjab University" (Banzai Vol-III 682). This means that Maharaja was not against the spread of education, but was against the mass education. While Maharaja Ranbir Singh patronized Arabic, Persian, and Sanskrit learning, the education of the masses remained in an extremely low state. Maharaja was threatened that education may educate people of their basic rights which were often denied to them by state. One must bear in mind that the educational institutions that existed prior to missionaries provided mainly rudimentary instructions to the students. It is on account this that these institutions cannot be considered as institutions engaged in the promotion of general education in the modern sense.

In the field of Modern education, Kashmir was lagging behind in the subcontinent. It was only in the second half of the 19th century that modern education began to be imparted in Kashmir with the advent of Christian missionaries. Initially, Maharaja Gulab Singh received them warmly. "My subjects in Kashmir are very bad". The Maharaja is reported to have told the missionaries, "I am sure that no one can do them harm. I am rather conscious to see whether Padari Sahib can do them any good" (Sherring Et al 72). But this soft corner of Maharaja for missionaries did not last long. Undoubtedly, the main aim of missionaries was to spread the gospel of Jesus and they believed that with the message of Christ the sufferings of people could be lessened. Subsequently, they considered it moral duty to educate the people and to help them in redressal of grievances.

Missionaries travelled distant lands primarily with one objective, to spread the gospel of Jesus. In a similar fashion, they came to Kashmir for the purpose of preaching, but they soon realize that preaching the gospel to ignorant people would fall on deaf ears. Thus they began with the idea of medical mission by offering much needed help to the destitute through medical sector and later by education. First medical missionary to visit Kashmir Dr. Elmslie arrived Srinagar in 1864. Initially, they faced stiff resistance from different quarters of the society for their alleged involvement in spreading Christianity in the valley through modern education. The state government of Kashmir also showed cold shoulders towards the missionaries. Maharaja tried his level best in keeping missionaries out of reach to people, but all in vain. Maharaja wrote to the British that "missionaries were not safe in Kashmir, as it was primarily populated by Muslims who, ignorant and fanatic, might insult them. British turned a deaf ear to it. Subsequently Maharaja sent his top officer of the state, Diwan Jawalai Sahi, to apprise the governor general of the situation and request him not to allow missionaries to enter the Kashmir" (Qadri 23). This shows the attitude of state government was not friendly towards missionaries. However missionaries continued their schools under firm opposition and with the passage of time, won the heart of the people. It were the pioneering efforts of Christian missionaries to

educate people of Kashmir on the pattern of Western education. The proposal to establish schools in Kashmir was approved by the C.M.S in London. The first western boy's school in Kashmir was "founded in 1880 by Reverend J Hinton Knowles, founded as the Church Mission Society Boys School (Ishaq Khan 162). The opening of the CMS School "heralded the dawn of a new era in the annals of modern Srinagar" (Ishaq Khan 164). Nowadays it is famous by the name of Tyndale Biscoe School, named after Tyndale Biscoe, a British missionary who became the school's principal in 1891. Tyndale Biscoe is often credited with founding the modern education system in Kashmir, through western modernization and rejection of local tradition (Raise Ahmad 83). In order to pay a tribute to Biscoe, Shaikh Mohamad Abdullah wrote in his golden words "the death of Rev. Canon Tyndale Biscoe has indeed been a personal loss to the people of Kashmir. Canon Biscoe came here at a time when Kashmiris were steeped in ignorance and apathy which are generally attributes of a backward community" (Shaikh Abdullah tribute to Tyndale Biscoe in 1949). Shafi Ahmad Qadri while eulogizing CMS School writes "The opening of CMS School in Kashmir is a red-letter day in the recorded history of Kashmir, it brought a new era by imparting scientific education on modern lines" (Qadri 25). PN Bazaz too asserts that the "opening of the CMS School here was in importance next only to the introduction of Buddhism by Ashoka in the 3rd century BC and the acceptance of Islam by Renchen Shah in the 14th century" (Bazaz 210).

In the beginning fruits of the modern education were reaped by the children of Kashmiri pundits. The CMS School was, in fact monopolized by Brahmin bundles. Despite being in majority, Muslims population from the very beginning showed least interest in Western Education. Many factors were responsible for this. One among the many was Kashmiri pundits possessed the economic means to acquire education while the Muslims were very poor. Conservatism of Muslims made them believe that by studying English they would become Christians. Keeping in account this behavior Ernest Neve writes "Unfortunately Mohammedans have been less influenced by education than the Hindus. The Islamic brotherhood is very conservative in matters of education, and in it forms more than ninety percent of population" (Neve 64). In addition, majority of Muslim population in Kashmir comprised of artisans who were not enthusiastic about education. Peasants were often heard of saying 'education brings on ruin; it is only through ploughing that good living can be earned'. Indifferent attitude of teachers and the discriminatory policies of Dogra administration were the other causes of backwardness of the Muslims.

It was at this critical juncture that God bestowed his mercy upon Muslims of Kashmir and endowed them with angel in the form of a man on earth, that angel was Moulvi Rasool Shah. Not a single account of "educational, social, and political metamorphoses of Kashmir is complete without a reference to the great role of the celebrated Maulana Rasul Shah II popularly known as Sir Sayyied of Kashmir"(Qadri 175) The late Mirwaiz, Moulvi Rasool Shah of Kashmir soon realized that without modern education Muslims would remain backward. He was strongly determined to promote education among the Muslims in order to overcome educational

backwardness. Like a medical practitioner he was able to diagnose the disease i.e. backwardness due to illiteracy, of Muslim community and the medicine recommended by him was education based on modern scientific lines. His aim was to launch a crusade against the rigidity and conservative beliefs prevalent among the Muslims of Kashmir. “He was a social scientist par excellence. He realizes that the age-old shackles of slavery had thrown Muslims into a dark and bewildering abyss of the ignorance, and it warranted ceaseless endeavors to save it” (Qadri 176). To fulfill his aim he started Muslim Educational Movement in Kashmir in nineties of last century. It was Moulvi Rasool Shah who led the “Muslims from darkness to light who use to distribute books free of cost to the poor and needy Muslim students. It was he who laid the foundation of Anjuman-i-Nasrat-ul-Islam by opening primary school in 1899 A.D and in 1905 was upgraded as high school- the fore-runner of present Islamiya College” (Mohd Ashraf 37).

Partition brought havoc to Kashmir when its fate was not met out with proper justice. And Kashmir Conflict turned out to be the eyesore for India-Pakistan in general and Kashmiris in particular who are its worst victims. It is a territorial conflict which started after the partition of India. Hitherto, several wars were fought between the two nations but all in vain. State of Jammu and Kashmir witnessed four wars since partition in 1947. This led to the displacement, deaths destruction and eventually affected education system in Kashmir too. For example, “Indo-Pak wars led to the creation of the current Line of Control between Pakistan administered Azad Jammu and Kashmir and Indian administered Jammu and Kashmir .These wars also uprooted many students from their homes, and negatively affected their school routine” (Raise Ahmad 83).

In 28th August 1975, the state government of Jammu and Kashmir established its own board named Jammu and Kashmir board of school education. In 1980s education system in valley reached to its heights. However this short span of peace in Kashmir history doomed with clouds of despair. History of Kashmir witnesses emergence of Armed Conflict. Armed conflict started in valley during 1989, which not only led to social disorder, disorganization, mass psychological depression but also proved disastrous for education. It became a unique fashion for scholars to declare openly that lack of employment opportunities began to rise with the passage of time in Kashmir. And which in turn culminated with the military uprising of the 1990s. For me it is an intellectual bankruptcy and nothing else. Of course it can be considered as one out of many causes but not the main factor responsible for the armed conflict. Education sector was one out of many to face the scourge in 1990s’ conflict. A huge number of school buildings were either damaged or gutted during the course of armed conflict. Bomb blasts, Security threats, strikes, arrest of teachers etc have left education crippled in Kashmir. In this way “education in Kashmir became a major causality as a result of armed resistance and the overwhelming state response to it” (Asima 122). Years of turmoil-1989, 2008, 2010 and 2016 clearly depicts how education in Kashmir went through tough trials and tests of time.

The unrest of 2016 in Kashmir which broke out after the killing of Hizbul Mujahideen Commander Burhan Wani, popularly known as ‘Poster Boy’ triggered protests

across the Valley. Students from different corners of Kashmir were unable to attend schools regularly due to the constant state of unrest. The presence of heavy paramilitary forces and curfews resulted in the shutdown of schools. Thus the worst sufferers of this constant state of conflict were none but children, who have been confined to their homes and were denied their basic right of education. In these testing times, “the youth of Kashmir has stepped in to educate the children of Kashmir in ‘Curfew Schools’ for free. These community schools were started in August when the youth realized that the Kashmiri children’s education and future was suffering due to the violence. Coming from all kinds of professional backgrounds, the youth across the state have been contributing their time to teach these school going kids in these community schools”. (Srini 1-5). In the aftermath of Burhan Wani’s death, thirty-two schools were reportedly targeted by unknown persons” (News 18). Even the Economic Survey Report claims “education sector was badly hit in Kashmir for around five months causing “irreversible loss to students” (Hindustan Times). The mass promotion of students to next levels in 2016 clearly indicates the sufferings of education in Kashmir.

Keeping in view the literacy rate, which is the visible and quantifiable indicator of education level, the Jammu and Kashmir state stands at bottom along with states like Bihar, Rajasthan, Jharkhand, Andhra Pradesh and Arunachal Pradesh. Recent census of 2011 revealed that the state ranks 30 out of the 35 states and union territories taken together (Census of India 2011). This gives us clear glimpse about the weakness of education system in valley. From the last 26 years, the conflict circumstances brought havoc to education system in Kashmir valley, leading to the ruin of our future generations. If education keeps on suffering at the present scale, it will take a heavy toll on quality of human resources.

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