



# Walter Lawrence's 'The Valley of Kashmir' and Exploitation of the Kashmiris.

Ishfaq Hussain Bhat

Former Student,

Department of English,

University of Kashmir.

J&K, India.

[Eshfaqbhat786@gmail.com](mailto:Eshfaqbhat786@gmail.com)

## ABSTRACT:

Kashmiris, the poorest of the poor, throughout ages, have greatly been oppressed, suppressed, subjugated and marginalized. The pages of history document the inhumane and barbaric treatment that the Kashmiris have received from their masters/rulers. The sale of Kashmir by the British to Gulab Singh in 75 lakhs, is a seminal exemplification of the fact that the Kashmiris were not even considered/ consulted while taking this significant, drastic and disastrous decision. The sale deed itself implies that it was not only the territory of Kashmir that was sold but, the people/ citizens/residents of Kashmir were also sold to, and thereby, inherited, like other insignificant things and animals, by another master. The Kashmiris, as the marginalized other, have substantially been subjected to all forms of oppression and exploitation since then. Since the Maharaja's considered Kashmir as their personal, purchased property, they levied tax on everything except water and air. The paper as such, aims to highlight and condemn the exploitation of the downtrodden Kashmiris at the hands of their despotic masters. The paper attempts to bring to light the treatment of the Kashmiri people as the marginalized other, during the tyrannical Dogra rule, artistically documented by Sir Walter Roper Lawrence in his seminal book The Valley of Kashmir. Though the paper primarily focuses on the portrayal of the Kashmiris in a positive light in Lawrence's The Valley of Kashmir, it also advertently tries to



assess as to whether Sir Walter Lawrence's account of the exploitation of the Kashmiri people was completely impartial or not.

**KEYWORDS: peasants, Maharaja, exploitation, prejudice**

## **INTRODUCTION:**

Sir Walter Roper Lawrence's book *The Valley of Kashmir* is a very significant book on the history of Kashmir. The book does not only talk about the culture and Geography of the valley but also documents the oppression of the Kashmiris at the hands of the governors or the officials assigned to collect taxes and revenue by the government. It throws an immense light on the miserable condition of the people of Kashmir who had to work hard by cultivating land but when the harvest was ready, the officials and soldiers assigned the job of revenue and tax collection would come and take a share of the produce.

Walter Lawrence raises various issues in his book *The Valley of Kashmir* – the misrepresentation of the Kashmiris as dishonest, deceitful and corrupt; the exploitation of the people of Kashmir at the different levels – at the level of ideas, economics, politics, etc. In this paper we shall discuss all the issues raised by Walter Lawrence in his book in order to bring to light and thereby condemn the inhumane, unjust and barbaric treatment of the people of Kashmir.

## **DISCUSSION**

Sir Walter Lawrence states:

"Much has been written of the abuses which have prevailed in the administration of Kashmir. They were numerous and deplorable, and when I first came to Kashmir in 1889, I found the people sullen, desperate and suspicious. They had been taught for many years that they were



serfs without any rights but with many disabilities. They were forced by soldiers to plough and sow, and the same soldiers attended at harvest time. They were dragged away from their houses to carry loads to Gilgit, and every official had a right to their labour and their property. Their simple proposition '*yus Karih goiight sui Karih Krao*' was ignored, and their position was infinitely worse than that of the Tiers Etat before the French Revolution."<sup>1</sup>

The above lines throw an immense light on the miserable plight of the Kashmiris during the tyrannical rule of the Dogras. It also highlights the fact that they were greatly marginalized, exploited and oppressed – they were forced by the soldiers to plough and sow which implies that they were considered mere slaves who had no life of their own, no will of their own. Moreover, they were also forced to carry loads to Gilgit for the soldiers and they had no right to deny, and if anyone would do so, he would mercilessly be abused, assaulted, battered and punished.

Lawrence goes on to talk about the position of the Kashmiri people before the Settlement:

“While the villagers were thus degraded, the people of the city were pampered and humoured, and the following passage from Hazlitt's *Life of Napoleon Bonaparte* gives a fair idea of Kashmir before the Settlement commenced : — ' The peasants were overworked, half-starved, treated with hard words and hard blows, subjected to unceasing exactions and every species of petty tyranny . . . while in the cities a number of unwholesome and useless professions, and a crowd of lazy menials, pampered the vices or administered to the pride and luxury of the great.’”<sup>2</sup>

By quoting Hazlitt's *Life of Napoleon*, Lawrence wants to drive home the point that the peasants were the class that suffered the most before the commencement of the Settlement operation. The expressions like “overworked,” “half-starved” represent the miserable condition of the Kashmiri people in those days. Moreover, the treatment of the peasants with “hard words and hard blows” exemplifies to what extent can the so-called human being, be tyrannical and callous, when given absolute power over others

“It was no wonder that cultivation was bad, that the revenue was not paid, and that the peasants were roving from one village to another in the hope of finding some rest and freedom from oppression. The Kashmiri is made up of contradictions. He is timid yet persistent, degraded yet intellectual. Village life meant little to him. His one object was to escape the pressgang when carriage was wanted for Gilgit, and to secure some share of the autumn's grain when the tax



collectors appeared. He would not hesitate to throw his burden on to his neighbour's shoulders, and if he failed he would depart to some other village under the aegis of a privileged person who would protect him from the *corvee*, and would allow no one but himself to oppress the wanderer.”<sup>3</sup>

Lawrence again highlights the oppression of the downtrodden Kashmiris, who were so degraded and exploited that they would roam from one village to another in the hope of finding some rest and freedom from the oppression and exploitation. This shows that they were living under a constant fear of being taken to *begaar* by the soldiers. Since the cultivation was bad and despite working very hard, they were not able to generate and assemble enough produce, they would secure some share of the harvest when the tax collector appeared. According to Lawrence, the peasants were exploited to such a degree that they used to roam from place to place in order evade the payment of tax, revenue, etc.

Moreover, Lawrence, being the Settlement commissioner of Kashmir, had a firsthand experience of this oppression. He blames the persons in authority for the oppression of the people of Kashmir, for discrepancy between revenue assigned and revenue collected:

“Pages might be written by me on facts which have come under my personal observation, but it will suffice to say that the system of administration had degraded the people and taken all heart out of them. The country was in confusion, the revenue was falling off, and those in authority were making hay while the sun shone.”<sup>4</sup>

However, it has to be taken into consideration that Lawrence in his book *The Valley of Kashmir*, does not blame the Maharajas for the exploitation of the downtrodden people of Kashmir. On the contrary, he blames the deputies of the Maharajas for it. According to Lawrence, the rulers were sympathetic and anxious to secure the property of their subjects. Lawrence, therefore, wants to bring home the point that that it were the deputies and not the Maharajas who oppressed the common people, especially, the peasants:

“Strong personal government is, I believe, the only form of government possible in Kashmir for many years to come, but it is difficult for the Maharajas to supervise the administration of the



valley when they are away in their winter capital Jammu. The peasants, one and all, attributed their miseries to the deputies through whom the Maharajas ruled, and they have always recognized that their rulers were sympathetic and anxious to secure their prosperity. But the officials of Kashmir would never allow their master to know the real condition of the people, or to find out that the revenue of the country was diminishing the Governor of Kashmir were not active and honest, dishonesty ran rampant through every grade of officialdom. 'There's not a crime But takes its proper change out still in crime If once rung on the counter of this world,' and the slightest weakness or corruption on the part of the Governor had its echo in every corner of the valley. Not only were the officials corrupt but the peasants and their headmen were also dishonest, all joining to rob their master's treasury."<sup>5</sup>

Thus, Lawrence states that officials at all levels of the officialdom were dishonest and corrupt. They did not only loot the common masses but also strived to rob their master's treasures. They deceived the Maharajas, and did not allow the Maharajas to know the real condition of people, and the causes for falling off of the revenue.

The following passage from the book brings to light the miserable condition of the people of Kashmir though Lawrence, in through this passage wants to establish the fact that, the settlement operation resulted in ensuring happiness and prosperity for the people of Kashmir. The passage implies that before 1887, the peasants lived in a miserable condition – they rarely ate rice, salt, etc. The passage in spite of exemplifying the prosperity and happiness of the people after 1887, brings to light the poverty and exploitation of the common masses at the hands of the government officials especially soldiers.

“When the harvest is ripe the peasant reaps it at his own good time, and not a soldier ever enters the villages. The old saying—

*'Batta, batta,*

*Tah piyada patta,'*

which meant ' we are asking for food and the tax collector is after us,' is no longer heard, for the people are left with ample grain to feed their families. Before 1887 the peasants rarely tasted their beloved food rice. Now all eat rice, and enjoy salt, and the luxury of tea. Little shops are springing up in the villages, and whereas I never saw a metal vessel in any peasant's house three years ago, now a brass cooking-pot is by no means rare."<sup>6</sup>



Sir Walter Lawrence also believes that the hungry middlemen driven to exploit the common masses, are responsible for the non-implementation of the schemes, etc for the welfare of the people. He presents the scenario of Kashmir after the settlement in the following words:

“It is well to bear in mind that many hungry middlemen, driven out by the Settlement are waiting and watching. It is well too to remember that a people so broken and degraded as the Kashmiris do not in a few years harden into a resolute and self-respecting community. They are a soft, timid people, only too ready to avoid a citizen’s responsibilities and to shelter themselves behind the plausible and fraudulent middleman. There is not a single middleman left in the villages at the present time, but if the State withdrew its vigilant watch some 40 per cent, of the peasants might again become the serfs of middlemen and officials... It was no uncommon thing for 300 sheep to be collected at one stage. Nothing would be paid for them. Now all supplies are paid for. If honest dealing continues for another ten years I believe that the Kashmiris, so hardly spoken of, will become honest. It should be remembered that from the point of view of the peasant, honesty has not hitherto been the best policy.”<sup>7</sup>

Lawrence also blames the official interpreters who, usually were foreigners and corrupt for the representation of the people of Kashmir as treacherous, dishonest, and the worshippers of tyranny. He states that the portrayal of the Kashmiris is partial and biased. Moreover, the official visit is in no way appreciated by the Kashmiris because they consider it as a means to exploit them – to take away their hard-earned grains and food. The reason why they resort to deceit is that they want to secure food for themselves. Furthermore, he also presents the relation of Kashmiri peasants with the village shopkeepers – their deal exemplifies the real character of the Kashmiri peasants as being embodiments of honesty:

“I think that many of the hard things said about the Kashmiris are due to the fact that the official interpreters of their character have been foreigners, often grasping and corrupt, always unsympathetic. Mughal Subahs, Pathan Sirdars, Sikh and Dogra Governors dismissed all difficulties of administration, and all humane suggestions emanating from their masters, with the remark that the Kashmiris were dishonest, treacherous and *zulmparast*. It is the old tale of giving



a dog a bad name, and I must confess that during my first year's work in the valley I shared these views. But I soon grew to understand that the Kashmiri, like other orientals, has two sides to his character as distinct as light and darkness. His great yearning is to be left alone—to till his fields and weave his woollen cloth. The official visit, which to us officials seems so pleasant to all concerned, sends the pulse of the village up many degrees, and those are happy who dwell far away from the beaten tracks. The dark side of the Kashmiri is revealed when he is in the presence of officials. He has had good reason to hate and distrust them, and his only weapon against them is deceit. His light side is seen when he is in his field or with his family in the house. Take as an instance the relations of a Kashmiri cultivator with the village shopkeepers. The shopkeeper (*wani*) is a Musalman and must not take *interest*. He lends money to the peasants on a system known as *wad*. A man borrows 50 rupees, and promises to pay this within the year in blankets, ghi, apples, grain, etc. The rate fixed by the *wani* for blankets will be 3 rupees, whereas the market price at which the *wani* will sell is 3 rupees 8 annas, or 4 rupees. No bond (*hujat*) is signed by the borrower, and the only record of the transaction is an entry in the daily ledger of the *wani*. I have always made a point of talking with the *wanis* whenever I see a village shop, and they are unanimous in saying that they never make a bad debt and that they are never obliged to sue a debtor. This state of things does not argue that the Kashmiri peasants are dishonest."<sup>8</sup>

## CONCLUSION:

To conclude, many things need to be brought together. Walter Lawrence presents a vivid picture of the position of the people of Kashmir, in so far as their exploitation by their masters is concerned. He presents the Kashmiris in a positive light, in stark contrast with the misrepresentation of the Kashmiris by the officials working under the government who, in order to exploit and oppress the common masses used to portray them as treacherous, dishonest, and the like. They would take away a share from the harvest produce of the peasants, which had made the life of the peasants miserable. However, Walter Lawrence does not blame the Maharajas for the exploitation of the people and, instead, blames the officials and governors for it. This is the point where he compromises – he, in a way, shields the tyrant masters – the Maharajas. It has to be taken into consideration and thereby acknowledged, that the deputies of the Maharajas would not allow the Maharajas to know the real/ground situation, but the fact is that it is impossible that they could have concealed all information from the Maharajas. The

inexorable taxes, etc were levied by the Maharajas, almost all affairs related by revenue collection were managed by the Maharajas. Therefore, the Maharajas were equally responsible for the inhumane and barbaric treatment of the people of Kashmir. I would conclude my paper with a quotation from Suhaib Matto's article Kashmir: The History of Exploitation during the Dogra Rule:

“After the Dogras became masters of Kashmir subsequent to the notorious Treaty of Amritsar, Kashmiri Muslims were living a life of abject poverty, ignorance disease and above all oppression. Considering Kashmir as his purchased property, the Maharaja levied tax on everything save air and water. Even the office of the grave digger was taxed. The Muslims had to pay taxes even for the maintenance of temples (Mandri) and for the support of the Hindu priests (Ashgal). These taxes were only to be paid by the Muslims while as the Hindus were exempted from paying these taxes. Further the Muslims were subjected to inhuman forced labour (*Begaar*) resulting in untold miseries both to the individual and to his family. In most of the cases the person forced to undertake ‘*Begaar*’ could not endure the harsh weather and the hardships and so died unknown unwept and unsung in a far off place. The condition of the Muslim peasants was even worse. They not only had to feed the revenue officials but also had to provide for the needs of their relatives and friends. To extract land revenue from the poor peasants, the use of nettle (locally called soi) in summer and of plunging the defaulting tax payer into cold water in winter were the most notorious methods of torture.”<sup>9</sup>

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