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AGRARIAN EXPLOITATION AND INDUSTRIAL STAGNATION IN KASHMIR UNDER EARLY DOGRA RULE (1846–1885)

Altaf Hussain Para[1]*
[1] Associate Professor, Higher Education Department (J&K)
Corresponding author
altafhussainpara@gmail.com

Abstract

The transfer of Kashmir to Maharaja Gulab Singh under the Treaty of Amritsar (1846) inaugurated an era of profound economic dislocation for the region's population. This paper examines the agrarian and industrial conditions of Kashmir during the early Dogra period (1846–1885), focusing on the structural mechanisms through which the ruling state systematically extracted resources from the predominantly Muslim peasantry and artisan class. Drawing on primary archival sources from the National Archives of India as well as contemporary travel accounts and administrative records, the study analyses the feudalisation of state machinery, exploitative land revenue systems, the oppressive *begar* (forced labour) institution, and the deliberate suppression of industrial enterprise. The paper further examines the catastrophic impact of the famines of 1864 and 1877–79, which exposed the structural vulnerabilities of an economy governed without regard for productive investment or social welfare. The findings demonstrate that the early Dogra administration prioritised fiscal extraction over economic development, resulting in the long-term impoverishment of Kashmir's agrarian and artisanal communities. These historical processes have left enduring socio-economic scars on the region.

Keywords: Dogra rule, Kashmir agrarian history, land revenue, begar, forced labour, Kashmir economy, Gulab Singh, Ranbir Singh, feudalism, colonial India.

1. Introduction

The annexation of Kashmir by the British East India Company in 1846 and its subsequent sale to Maharaja Gulab Singh through the Treaty of Amritsar represented a decisive turning point in the region's political economy. The transaction conferred both *de jure* and *de facto* sovereignty upon Gulab Singh, making him, with the support of the colonial government, the undisputed ruler of a newly consolidated Jammu and Kashmir state (Bruce, 1915; Younghusband, 1911). However, rather than inaugurating a period of progressive reform, the early decades of Dogra administration were characterised by the entrenchment of feudal structures that had long restrained the region's economic potential (Khan, 1983). The Dogra rulers Gulab Singh (1846–1857) and his successor Ranbir Singh (1857–1885) treated Kashmir not as a territory to be developed but as personal property purchased from the British Crown. This proprietary disposition translated into extractive governance: the state apparatus was oriented almost entirely toward maximising fiscal revenue at the expense of the peasantry's productive capacity. Far from modernising Kashmir's agrarian base or fostering industrial enterprise, the early Dogra administration presided over what Khan (1983) describes as a "strong feudalisation" of state machinery, culminating in widespread poverty, periodic famine, and the systematic marginalisation of the Muslim majority population.

This study situates the early Dogra period within broader debates on colonial and semi-colonial agrarian economies, examining

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how internal fiscal imperatives, caste-based administrative hierarchies, and the structural neglect of productive sectors combined to impoverish Kashmir's population. The paper is organised as follows: Section 2 analyses the origins and mechanisms of the agrarian crisis; Section 3 examines the state's industrial policies and their consequences; Section 4 assesses the impact on peasants and artisans; and Section 5 offers conclusions.

2. Origins and Mechanisms of the Agrarian Crisis

2.1 Dispossession of Muslim Landholders and the Chak System

The agrarian crisis in early Dogra Kashmir was not a product of structural economic forces alone; it was deliberately constructed through a series of administrative decisions that systematically stripped the Muslim majority of land rights while consolidating property in the hands of the Kashmiri Pandit community. Facing acute legitimacy concerns and seeking to neutralise potential resistance from the majority population, the Dogra state moved swiftly to revoke *jagir* and *inam* grants from Muslim landholders. Acting on the counsel of Pandit and Rajput advisers, Gulab Singh confiscated estates from numerous Muslim *jagirdars* and transferred these holdings to co-religionists of the ruling class (Khan, 2000).

The preferential treatment accorded to Kashmiri Pandits enabled them to accumulate substantial landed property during this period (Saraf, 1977). Ranbir Singh further accelerated this process through the introduction of the *chak* system, designed ostensibly to bring fallow land under cultivation. In 1862, he introduced *zer-i-niaz chaks*, granting large tracts predominantly to Kashmiri Pandits on favourable terms with a mandate to cultivate uncultivated land using labourers unconnected to agriculture (Wilson, 1875). Additional grants known as *chak hanudi* followed in 1866–67, permitting cultivation of waste land without recourse to government cultivators (Wingate, 1888).

The devastating famine of 1877–79 created further opportunities for dispossession. As large numbers of Muslim cultivators fled to Punjab to escape starvation, extensive tracts of land were temporarily abandoned. The Pandit community, determined to capture every available parcel of fallow land, persuaded the state to issue *mukarrari chaks* in 1880. Returning Muslim peasants consequently found themselves evicted from fields their families had cultivated for generations (Wingate, 1888). The *chakdari* system thus evolved from an ostensible cultivation incentive into what Wingate (1888) characterises as a mechanism of oppression, enabling minority elites to control extensive tracts of valley land while subjugating the Muslim peasantry.

2.2 Land Revenue Extraction and the Failure of Reform

Land revenue constituted the fiscal backbone of the Dogra state, accounting for approximately 60–70 per cent of total state income (Charak, n.d.). Yet the revenue system was characterised not by rational administration but by arbitrariness, corruption, and relentless extraction. The Dogra rulers continued the revenue collection methods inherited from the Sikh period (Jalali, 1931), under which the cultivator was effectively stripped of the greater part of his produce. Contemporary observers estimated that as much as seven-eighths of agricultural output was appropriated by the state under Gulab Singh (Ireland, n.d.).

Under Ranbir Singh, the land was parcelled among *kardars* (state land agents) from 1859, each responsible for a defined number of villages and the collection of their revenue (Lawrence, 1895; Thorpe, 1870). Village-level supervision was delegated to *shakdars*, whose remuneration was partly drawn directly from villagers in addition to their official state grain allowance (Lawrence, 1895). The state's share of produce under this arrangement was set at three-quarters of rice,

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maize, buckwheat, and millets, and nine-sixteenths of oilseeds, pulses, and cotton (Lawrence, 1895). Although the state share was nominally reduced by the reform of 1860, the corrupt practices of *chakladars* (speculating contractors) neutralised any relief (Lawrence, 1895).

The introduction of a three-year raiyatwari settlement in 1873 a direct cash assessment with individual cultivators represented a genuine attempt at rationalisation. Over three lakh cultivators benefited from reduced assessments, and approximately six lakh rupees in contractors' arrears were remitted (Charak, n.d.). However, resistance from contractors and middlemen who had profited from the old system, compounded by the famine of 1877–79, rendered the reform unsustainable (Lawrence, 1895; Jalali, 1931).

The subsequent *assamiwar khewat* system (1880), based on average production of the preceding three years, retained theoretical cash assessment but in practice allowed discretionary extraction by the *hakim-i-Ala*. Crucially, no systematic village survey preceded the new assessment, meaning that communities already devastated by famine were taxed at rates comparable to those applicable to relatively prosperous villages. The system also afforded influential headmen the opportunity to shift tax burdens from their own villages onto smaller, weaker neighbours (Lawrence, 1895). The final attempt at a workable revenue system the *izad boli* or village auction of 1882 proved equally dysfunctional: bidders comprising Pandits and boatmen lacked knowledge of village productive capacity and extracted maximum short-term rents without regard for the sustainability of agricultural production, before defaulting on state payments by claiming poor harvests (Lawrence, 1895).

Compounding these structural deficiencies was the composition of the revenue-collecting bureaucracy itself, dominated from village to district level by Kashmiri Pandits. This machinery employed violent and fraudulent methods in the absence of maps and records, systematically overcharging a largely illiterate peasantry (Lawrence, 1928). Illegal exactions by officials including *shakdars*, *kardars*, *ziladars*, and soldiers routinely exceeded the official state levy by an additional quarter of produce (Thompson, 1876).

2.3 Agricultural Underdevelopment and the Neglect of Infrastructure

Despite its overwhelming dependence on agriculture, the Dogra state demonstrated a striking indifference to agrarian modernisation. Investment in irrigation infrastructure was negligible: existing canals went unrepaired, and no new irrigation networks were constructed (Hangloo, 1984). Agricultural implements remained primitive wooden ploughs, weakened draft oxen, crude iron tools, and inferior seeds and manures reflecting both cultivators' poverty and the complete absence of state-sponsored agricultural improvement initiatives (Hangloo, 1984). All agricultural implements were manufactured locally by artisans without any state technical support. No institutional credit was extended to cultivators, and land fragmentation continued unchecked, with no policy effort directed at rationalising land use (Khan, 2000).

2.4 Begar: Forced Labour as an Instrument of Dispossession

Of all the mechanisms through which the Dogra state extracted resources from the rural population, none was more destructive than the institution of *begar* compulsory unpaid labour requisitioned by state and military officials. The imposition of *begar* during peak agricultural seasons had catastrophic consequences for agrarian productivity: in the absence of labourers from villages, crops remained unharvested or were cultivated late, simultaneously reducing peasant incomes and depressing the tax base of the state (Khan, 2000).

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The institution also operated as a mechanism for dispossession. Cultivators unable to pay for exemption from *begar* obligations could secure release by surrendering their landholdings to local officials. This arrangement transferred land systematically from impoverished cultivators to officials, facilitating the formation of large private estates (Khan, 2000). Influential landholders, meanwhile, exploited the system to secure labour for cultivating their own waste land, constructing their buildings, and staffing their households all without remuneration (Khan, 2000). The extractive dimension of forced labour extended further to the requisitioning of grain, pulses, dairy products, poultry, livestock, woollen blankets, and other commodities from rural communities without payment (Lawrence, 1895). The cumulative destructiveness of this institution led Walter Lawrence (1895) to conclude that nothing had done more to ruin Kashmir than the corrupt and brutal manipulation of the *corvée*.

3. State Policy and Industrial Stagnation

3.1 Absence of Industrial Patronage

Kashmir's industrial backwardness under early Dogra rule contrasted sharply with contemporaneous princely states such as Mysore and Baroda, which invested in industrial development. The Dogra state's patronage of industry was minimal and selective: Ranbir Singh extended limited support to vine distilling, silk production, and the carpet industry, but made no concerted effort to establish a broader industrial base (*Gazetteer of Kashmir and Ladak*, 1890; Lawrence, n.d.; Charak, n.d.).

The state's hostility to external investment compounded its own inaction. Entrepreneurs from British India who sought to invest in Kashmir were systematically obstructed: land was difficult to obtain on lease, and when granted at all, it was on uncertain and unpredictable terms. The European business community operating in Kashmir consistently complained about the prohibitive regulatory environment that discouraged investment (Foreign Department, Internal-A, October 1910). Despite appeals, the British Government of India declined to pressure the Dogra state to extend concessions to external investors in the absence of state consent (Foreign Department, Frontier-A, September 1884; Foreign Department, Secret-E, August 1896), leaving the regional economy sealed off from the capital and enterprise flows that were transforming other parts of the subcontinent.

3.2 The Craft Economy: Exploitation and Decline

Kashmir's artisan industries had flourished for centuries, with internationally recognised products shawls, embroidery, papier-mâché, silverwork, woodwork, carpets, namdas, and jewellery sustaining a substantial urban workforce concentrated in Srinagar, where the artisan class was drawn almost exclusively from the Muslim community. The insatiable demand for Kashmiri shawls in European markets during the first half of the nineteenth century had enriched state coffers while providing livelihoods for a large segment of the urban population (Ganju, 1945; Dhar, 1999). However, the state's oppressive taxation of artisans left craftspeople with only a fraction of their wages frequently insufficient to meet basic household needs. Artisan protests calling for tax relief were suppressed by force rather than addressed through policy reform. The structural fragility of the craft economy was further exposed by two external shocks: the Franco-Prussian War (1870–71), which contracted European demand for luxury goods including Kashmiri shawls, and the famine of 1877–79, which devastated the local consumer base and disrupted the productive workforce. The state's emergency measures to support artisans during this period were insufficient and produced limited results (Ganju, 1945; Dhar, 1999).

4. Impact on Peasants and Artisans: Economic and Demographic Consequences

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4.1 State Revenue and Expenditure Patterns

The cumulative impact of extractive agrarian and industrial policies is reflected in the fiscal record of the early Dogra period. Under Gulab Singh, whose short-sighted revenue policies progressively diminished productive capacity, annual income from Kashmir was estimated at no more than five to six lakh rupees (Hervey, 1853). The reign of Ranbir Singh produced a more substantial revenue base: total state income reached approximately Rs. 54,94,718 in 1868, of which the Kashmir province contributed Rs. 28,36,718 (Charak, n.d.). John Ince (1876) placed annual revenue at approximately forty lakh rupees.

Yet the allocation of this revenue betrayed the state's priorities with stark clarity. In 1871, out of a total income of Rs. 66,86,644 from Kashmir, Rs. 2,86,128 was spent on entertainment and social gatherings associated with European visitors, while a mere Rs. 46,244 was allocated to road construction and public buildings (Saraf, 1977). Investment in health, education, irrigation, and productive infrastructure remained negligible. This pattern of expenditure conspicuous consumption alongside systematic neglect of productive investment structurally reproduced the conditions of underdevelopment that made the region acutely vulnerable to natural shocks.

4.2 The Famines of 1864 and 1877–79: Economic and Humanitarian Catastrophe

The consequences of systematic economic mismanagement were most devastatingly revealed by the two major famines that struck Kashmir during the early Dogra period. The first, in 1864, arose primarily from crop failure exacerbated by administrative incompetence under Wazir Pannu. Even where grain stores existed, the corrupt state machinery failed to distribute relief effectively; improvement came only after Wazir Pannu was replaced by Diwan Kirpa Ram (Sufi, 1974). The famine of 1877–79 was catastrophic in both scale and structural causation. Triggered by unseasonal rainfall and heavy snowfall, the disaster was compounded by the prevailing revenue system, under which cultivators were prohibited from harvesting crops until state revenue assessors had completed their calculations. This procedural requirement prevented even those farmers whose crops had been reaped before the rains from preserving their harvest: stacked grain in open fields was destroyed (Dev, 1983). The state's monopoly on grain trade, combined with Kashmir's isolation from external markets and the endemic corruption of the state apparatus, prevented effective famine relief (Foreign Department, Secret-E, March 1883).

The human and economic toll was staggering. Contemporary accounts and official reports describe the population being reduced to consuming bread made from tree bark, roots, and grass seeds. Children were sold by destitute families, and in extreme cases killed to spare them from continued suffering. Large numbers of survivors fled to neighbouring states, leaving villages and even sections of Srinagar city deserted (Younghusband, 1911; Foreign Department, Secret-E, March 1883). Estimates suggest that approximately two-thirds of Kashmir's population perished or fled, leaving many of the chief valleys uninhabited (Younghusband, 1911). The famine simultaneously destroyed the human capital, the physical capital, and the social fabric of Kashmir's agrarian economy with consequences that persisted for generations.

5. Conclusion

The period from 1846 to 1885 constituted one of the most economically destructive phases in Kashmir's modern history. Under both Gulab Singh and Ranbir Singh, the Dogra state operated as an extraction machine, deploying the full apparatus of state power land revenue systems, forced labour, caste-based administrative hierarchies, and monopolistic market controls to siphon resources from an overwhelmingly poor agricultural and artisan

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population. The state's refusal to invest in irrigation, agricultural technology, education, or industrial enterprise reflected not mere oversight but a coherent logic of accumulation: one in which the welfare of the population was structurally irrelevant to the calculus of rule. The consequences were predictable and catastrophic. A state described by Lawrence (1895) as one where "no product was too insignificant and no person too poor" to escape taxation produced a society with almost no visible prosperity. The famines of 1864 and 1877–79 exposed the lethal intersection of structural underdevelopment and administrative malevolence. The craft industries, Kashmir's most internationally integrated economic sector, were throttled by punitive taxation and deprived of the investment that might have enabled their modernisation. This analysis contributes to the historiography of agrarian colonialism and semi-colonial political economies in South Asia by demonstrating how internally generated extractive imperatives in this case, the Dogra rulers' treatment of Kashmir as dynastic property could replicate, and in some respects exceed, the exploitative dynamics associated with direct colonial administration. The socio-economic inequalities and structural vulnerabilities that characterised Kashmir in the mid-nineteenth century were not historically inevitable; they were the product of deliberate policy choices whose consequences continue to shape the region's developmental trajectory.

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