

Followers of Guru Nanak's path-The Sikhs of Kashmir Sufferers but Savors

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Abstract:

The history of the origin of Sikhs in Kashmir is associated with the arrivals of pious Sikh Gurus over here. Small in size they are scattered all over J&K. Their population district wise varies from 0.44% to 7.74%, with largest concentration in Jammu region. They started their carrier as the peasants but with the passage of time these hardy peasants joined the army as soldiers first of Afghans, then of khalsa raj and later under Dogra rulers. Their carriers and lives suffered considerable ups and downs but they survived every odd of the time with their self determination, firm belief and due to the blessings of their gurus. Throughout Kashmir history they witness sufferings sometimes at the hands of communalist forces, sometime due to the invaders and sometimes they became scapegoat of the political maneuvers. If history is to be believed, these peace loving people were most hit during the tribal invasion of the valley in 1947 and the 1984 carnage. Their decision to stay back in Kashmir after the mass exodus of KPs in 1989 expressed their love and attachment towards the land. They not only provided diversity to the Kashmir but also acted as the guardians of peace and saviors to the majority Muslim community in adverse situations. On numerous occasions during the past three decades they came into the rescue of the Kashmiri Muslims both materially and physically. Most recently, post 1919 pulwama attack they became the saviors of the Kashmiri Muslims, including students, in Jammu and outside against the anti kashmir rand.

Keywords: *Afghans, Dogras, Gurdwara, Udasi, proselytization, Sikhs, tribals*

Introduction:

The journey of Sikhs to Kashmir can't be traced as invaders instead as missionaries. Sikhs entered into Kashmir valley during 16th century when Guru Nanak passed through Jammu and Kashmir during his Udasi towards *Mansarovar* and *Kailash*, on his return journey he stayed at various places which are now marked with Gurdwaras such as *Pathar Sahib, Mattan, Avantipur, Bandipur* etc; At Mattan he is said to have converted first person Pandith Braham Das (A learned Brahmin) to Sikhism. Thus he laid down the foundation of Sikh community in Kashmir which has

been attested by both Indian and Foreign writers. One among them is the Max Arthur McAuliffe, he confirms that guru Nanak made many embrace Sikhism in Kashmir and went into the Himalayas. The next to visit Kashmir was Guru Hargobind; he accompanied Emperor Jahangir, then friendly to the Guru. At Srinagar he stayed for quite some time near Shalimar Garden close to Jahangir's camp where it is believed that queen Nur Jahan often came to get blessings from him. Among his converts to Sikhism most prominent and ardent were Biru Datt, Mula and Bhai Jhanda. Hargobind is said to have visited far off places in Kashmir. He visited *Mirpur kain, samani* and many other villages. At Srinagar, he paid a visit to the elderly mother of his devout Sikh, Swedas Bhaghau, and accepted her hand-woven apparel. It was the time when the number of Sikh followers was apparently on rise in Kashmir. Hargobind returned to Punjab via Baramullah after having a fruitful visit to Kashmir which resulted into the hype of ratio of Sikh followers in Kashmir and the establishment of Sikh Gurudawars at several places. Hargobind was followed by Guru Har Rai and Guru Gobind Singh. Both paid short but effective visits to Kashmir. Guru Gobind was received with great love by the people inside Jammu. Under his able guidance many a Kashmiri Sikhs joined his army and sacrificed their lives in Chamkar and other battles. Proselytizing zeal made Guru's on different occasions to depute several Masands and preachers to Kashmir for spreading Guru's message. Among them Bhai Pheru, Bhai Madho Sodhi, Bhai Garhai and Bhai Makhhan Shah Lubana are well known. After the death of Guru Gobind Singh the Sikh command came into the hands of Banda Singh Bahadur, who operated mostly from his Jammu headquarters.

In 1753AD Kashmir witnessed the arrival of cruel Afghans who due to their hardcore approach made the economy, political and social ethos of Kashmir to shatter down. Sikhs along with other non-Muslim community paid a heavy prize for their belief system. Their residential houses were taxed, their jagirs and agricultural lands were confiscated and their religious structures were sealed. Under Karim Dad Khan they escaped to neighboring regions to survive the massacre. If G.T.Vieque is to be believed they returned back to Kashmir during Raja Sukh Jiwan's Governorship in 1775. The minimal number of Sikhs in comparison to Muslim population however survived the communal mishap, *Bhat-i-chuk teh khosa dehte* (if you are a non Muslim I will ride upon you). Their patience proved a blessing in disguise for them and they witnessed Sikh invasion of Jammu in 1800CE and later of Kashmir in 1819CE under Maharaja Ranjit Singh. From 1819-1846 CE Kashmir remained under Sikh rule and till Ranjit Singh was alive Kashmir saw progress in arts and crafts, agriculture and trade. Religious harmony was the trademark of this era. If Kashmir witnessed any sort of savory under Sikh rule that was at the hands of Dogras through whom Ranjit Singh was ruling Kashmir. Dogra brothers, Dhain Singh, Suchet Singh and Gulab Singh all waited his death which occurred on 1839CE and soon they started treachery which brought an end to the Sikh rule over Kashmir in 1846CE and marked the beginning of Dogra rule. During Dogra period Sikhs marked their first impression in 1920's under the influence of Akali movement which had affected Kashmir as well. Sikhs in 1939 through Sardar Budh Singh marked their representation in National conference, after it had turned secular in the same year. From 1939CE till the accession of Kashmir in October 1947 Sikhs supported Kashmiri Muslims at every step. In 1947 British Govt through Indian Independence Act decided to divide India into two

regions Pakistan and India. The princely states within both the dominions were given an option to join either India or Pakistan and almost all the states made their choice before 15th of August except few including Kashmir. Delay to decide its future provide an opportunity to Pakistan to push tribals and its militia into Kashmir to invade it. They came in hordes, and until the Indian Army was moved to check them they devastated, looted and burned all the villages and towns on their way. They subjected the non- Muslim population to untold atrocities; murders, rapes and abductions. Many young girls committed mass suicide by jumping into rivers or by being killed by their own men folk to save their honor. Muzaffarabad, Mirpur, Baramullah, Uri, Poonch and many other towns suffered badly. It is estimated that more than 18000 Sikhs died and as many as 14000 had to move as refugees towards other parts of country including Srinagar. The roaring trucks full of tribals were chanting the slogans *Hindu ka zar, Sikh ka sar* (we want the Hindu's wealth and Sikh's head). Their arrival led to sudden panic starting from POK down to IOK. I would let you know about the several painstaking incidents related to Sikh massacre during 1947 tribal invasion. On 22 October following the massacre on the streets, tribals rounded up around 300 Sikhs at Dumel bridge in Muzaffarabad (why Sikhs because they were easily identifiable than Hindus due to their turbans). Initially raiders said, we'll let you go, we are just collecting you in one place so that no harm will come your way. But the moment they came together, they fired upon them several died on bridge and several jumped into the river Jhelum below. Several Sikh parents deliberately killed their girls to save their honor and some killed their breast feeding babies to save the community in general. The incident like this happened to a Sikh lady from Muzaffarabad. She had three children; one was infant while other two named Arjun Singh and Hari Singh were only 10 years old. Both his elder sons got separated from her following the terror in the city. The hapless lady to save her only infant went into hiding. There was no food, no water and being famished herself, she had no milk in her to feed the child, who kept crying out of hunger. The wails were so loud that people who were also in hiding told her that the raiders would easily trace them and kill all of them. The lady short of options threw her baby into the river to save everyone around her.

Another incident happened with the family of Avtar Singh who got displaced amidst the butchery and it was only hours later that he found his mother, lying dead under the bridge. He dragged her dead corpse hoping she'd wake up. The tribals caught an eye of him and Avtar Singh was picked up along with other boys. They were forced to dance around the fire which these tribals lit to cook food. The boys were forced to take care of all legal and illegal needs of these raiders. It was only a month later, once the tribal's personal objectives were met, they were set free. But the trauma was so severe that many of them commit suicide and Avtar Singh couldn't ever do anything in his life. This heart wrenching episode made children saw their parents killed in front of their eyes. One such incident happened with a Sikh girl when she was just five. Raiders entered into her house, demand money and jewelry, beat her family members to pulp, killed them and dragged them outside. The girl child was sitting on windowsill seeing her parents drenched into blood she fell down from the window returned only after few hours she saw only blood stained floor. She sat into the corner waited for someone to help her, eventually she fell asleep. The next morning she

walked towards Dumel Bridge and found her mother's dead body there. She sat by it and cried for hours. In the meanwhile a Muslim man happened to see her crying he gave her, his hand and she without any option went with him. He converted her to Islam and after she reached 14, he married her off to his son, who was suffering from TB. She had no choice but to accept him.

Majority of the Sikh families of Muzaffarabad, Uri and Poonch etc; left their property including agriculture land, following the tribal invasion and escaped to Pakistan, India or Srinagar. One such family was that of Sunder Singh's in Uri. He left the place amidst the bloodbath leaving his land in the hands of a Muslim tenant. In 1978CE Sunder Singh visited his personal property in Uri. The Muslim tenant found to be alive said him; *Tu sunder Singh hai, are you sunder Singh, you left your land with me , come take it back, my sons intentions are not good, they want to usurp it.* This shows the cordiality and brotherhood between the two communities.

Even after the end of the carnage the condition of the Sikhs didn't improve. Scattered all over J&K they lacked basic economic standard. The community saw a little improvement in their condition during Bakshi Ghulam Mohamed's PMship in 1957 when all India Annual Akali Conference was held in Srinagar. It was in this Conference P.M Bakshi assured Akali leadership of the Sikh upliftment. In 1984 following the assassination of miscalculator Indira Gandhi, Sikhs throughout India paid the prize for being the conspirators. In Jammu numerous Sikh Gurdwaras were damaged, hundreds of Sikh shops and homes were looted, Sikh girls were raped and men between 15 and 50 were brutally murdered, buses were halted and Sikh passengers were dragged out and murdered. The Hindu mob shouted the slogans, "*Khoon ka badla khoon say lengey*" (we will avenge blood by blood) and with naked swords attacked the Sikhs wherever they found them. It was the outcome of this massacre that Sikhs in 1990 decided to stay back in valley against the KPs decision for mass exodus. It was the Sikhs who served as a source of diversity in Kashmir. They stood grounded despite pulls, pressures and politics. This decision of 75000 Sikhs to stay back in Kashmir was admired by the majority community including the resistance leadership of Kashmir. Their faith upon Kashmir as the safe abode was going well till 2000. It was in March the same year at village Chattisinghpora the community saw the brutal killing of 35 Sikhs. The slaughter happened on the eve of USA president Bill Clinton's visit to India. This was the only occasion after the eruption of militancy in 1989 when the minority community was targeted in the darkness of the night by some unknown gunmen. This incident shocked them deep so does the Muslims but they stood their ground and have been vocal of the right of Kashmiri Muslims to have a plebiscite. This decision of Sikhs brought both the communities further closer to each other. Since then like before they organize *iftaar* parties for the Muslims, serve meat to them in their marriages, and participate in each other's joys and sorrows. They celebrate festivals together. They consider and also in loud words express that they are safer and happier in Kashmir than in Delhi. They never felt discrimination for being Sikhs. In fact Muslims always made them feel special. This is evident from the *Tral* area of Pulwama, which has been at the centre of the anti-government protests in the last two years, also has a Sikh population of 8165 living happily with 98632 Muslims. The peace loving Sikhs of Kashmir themselves are sufferers but became saviors to Muslims both in good and

bad times. In the aftermath of 2010 Amarnath land row they rescued Kashmiri drivers and passengers from Jammu. They organize free langars at different places throughout Kashmir to feed the people during 2016 Burhan killing. In the aftermath of 2019 Pulwama attack when the whole north India started anti Kashmir protests and Kashmiries (especially students) were tortured to return back. Kashmiri traders and students were also beaten at some places. It was the Sikhs from Punjab, Jammu and other parts of Kashmir who not only rescued them but also provided them safe passage home. This generosity of theirs is although priceless but, Muslim community for thanks giving launched several temporary but free schemes at different places inside private hospitals, saloons, nursing homes, shops, private schools etc;

Conclusion:

The Sikh community in Kashmir defines itself as a distinct ethnic identity with visible distinction on the basis of religion, language and scripture of its own. Being an enterprising community, the Sikhs since the exodus of KPs improved in all spheres of life and today, one could perceive their overall mobility and presence in various fields of Kashmir's society. Settled in different parts of Kashmir; they share the common cultural space with the majority community. Behind this decision to stay in Kashmir was the old brotherly relationship which didn't have witnessed any history of communal tension. The bold decision brought the two communities further close to each other. The Sikhs during Dogra period like other communities lacked basic facilities they were denied the education and employment opportunities. However during the initial years of 20th century they were affected by the changes occurred in the name of development. They not only absorbed the changes occurred at Govt side but also incorporated those changes occurred due to various socio- religious organizations which helped them to develop their identity at a sudden. The 1947 tribal invasion, 1984 anti-Sikh riots and 2000 Chattisinghpura massacre were considered as the black days in Sikh history of Kashmir. With barbarity they were sliced like mangos by the evil forces but they kept the courage alive and overcame all the wounds. They are politically active through various political organizations. Being highly religious they adhered to the guidance from several Deras and Sabhas among which the most important is the *Dera Gufa Muzafarabad, Dera Nangali Sahib Poonch and Dera Banda Singh Bahadur Raisi*.

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