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Sikh Socio-Religious Reform Movements in Jammu and Kashmir from 1900-1947

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Abstract

Sikh community of the state was very less in number and existence and was very tiny in occurrence and from the very existence of this community, it was minority community. Like Muslims they too were backward and economically marginalized. Due to the modern education and after emergence of enough number of socio-religious reform movements within the other communities, the Sikh community also got influenced by this social revolution the leaders or activists of this community also wanted to do something good for their subjects. As the social sector of the state got changed due to modernization and western education like in parts of the India at that time, the Sikh members also were deeply concerned about it, because they too were lacking education and employment in government management and their main occupation was agriculture and very minor were employed in the state services. The socio-religious reform movement's among Sikh community were thus at aiming the Sikh community and making them as par with the other societies of the state.

Key words: Akhali Movement, Awakening, British, Colonialism, Deprived, Dogra, Khalsa Diwan, Priests, Political, Sikh, Sabha, Zamindars

Introduction

With the advent of the 19th century the state of Jammu and Kashmir saw a new revolutionary beginning from the very beginning of the century up to the independence period mostly and this was result of the modern education, political awakening and rise against the British colonial rule and the dogra atrocity in the state. The state subjects were far behind in all terms of development and had been in a stage of less development and were among the most deprived ones at that time. As soon the time grew up, there started a modernization and awakening in the society and the Muslim majority state ruled by the Hindu or Dogra rulers started rebellion movements and agitations against them. At that time Muslim and Hindu subjects of the state were at par with the competition against each other in reforming their state subjects, the Sikhs of that time were less represented and most deprived minority community of the state. Sikh leaders also got themselves engaged in making and forming new social and religious reforms movements and they too wanted to come at par equal level by eradicating social evils and evil deeds by transforming their subjects through the means of modern education and modern means of life. They too were busy in uplifting their subjects of state and opened and formed several socio-religious reform movements for tackling these social evils and making their society evil free. Some of the major socio-religious reform movements which came up against the colonial rule and in favour of the upliftment of the society are as:

CHIEF KHALSA DIWAN

Chief Khalsa Diwan holds an important key role in the upliftment of the Sikh subjects of the state. The association was active in both religious affairs and in political management of the state affairs. This socio-political organization of Sikhs was founded on the 30th of October 1902 under these aims and objectives:¹

1. "To promote the spiritual, intellectual, moral, social, educational and economic welfare of the Khalsa Panth."
2. "To propagate teaching of Gurbani and to spread knowledge of Sikh history and other authentic writings."
3. "To propagate the teaching as embodied in Sri Guru Granth Sabib."

4. "To represent their interests to the Government; and to make constitutional efforts for their attainment according to the times and conditions."

The chief Khalsa Diwan not only kept in mind the Sikh community of the Jammu but also kept the Kashmiri region community Sikhs also in target and worked a lot for the upliftment and moral upgradation of both the communities in the state. The association wanted to uplift them educationally and wanted to see their economies self sufficient and reliable. For the upliftment of the Sikh community educationally and for doing the same an educational committee was raised and a letter was sent by the honorary secretary of the association to the chief minister of the state mentioning these points in the letter:²

1. "It was requested that provision be made for the teaching of Punjabi in the state schools. There were at that time three hundred and fifty boys in that school. Of those, one hundred boys, about one-third of total number was prepared to take up Punjabi."
2. "Secondly, when the other languages such as Arabic and Persian were taught in the school, there was no reason that Punjabi, the mother tongue of Punjabis, spoken even in Kashmir state could not be taught in spite of repeated requests of the guardians who were willing to read Punjabi."
3. "Thirdly, the Sikhs of the Kashmir state were backward in education."
4. "Fourthly, their holy scriptures were written in Gurumukhi and their religion required them to get knowledge of religious tenets which could not be attained without the knowledge of the Punjabi."

They now indulged themselves in various welfare activities and kept only modernization as their goal and held annual meeting, public gatherings and religious tools for getting modern education and to make Sikh community of the state balanced and developed one in all sectors.

KHALSA YOUNGMEN'S ASSOCIATION

Khalsa Youngmen's association was one of the oldest socio-religious reforms movements of the state. Working for the upliftment and modernization of the poor Sikh subjects of the community, the association came into existence on 1917. Protecting rights and improving economic dignity of the Sikh residents of the state, the association under its yearly or annual proceedings had passed a resolution and later a copy of it was forwarded to the government of the state for approval.³ Later in the year, on 13th April, 1918 a fruitful meeting took place at the Diwan Jawala Sahai Sahib, Jammu, which was a temple under the auspices of the Khalsa Youngmen's association and the most prominent leaders among the participants were Professor Teja Sing, Master Hari Sing, Sher Singh, Babu Pratap Chand, Mai Ranko Ji and Bibi Veran Ji. The participating leaders who took part in this proceeding tried their best to peruse the youth of the society by literacy lectures; these lectures melted the minds of the youth and went successfully in changing their vision and especially were meant for the upliftment of the poor Sikh students of the state.⁴ In this meeting the resolution that was passed, mainly consisted of two resolutions and they were:⁵

1. "That, as for the other communities, special scholarships should be granted to the poor Sikhs of the Jammu and Kashmir state who were backward in education."
2. "That, Punjabi teachers to teach Punjabi in the state schools, as in the schools in British India, should be appointed for the development of the Punjabi language. A copy of the resolutions passed was then submitted by the president of the association to the chief minister of the state, for his favorable consideration."

The Khalsa Youngmen's association tried a lot in uplifting their colleges, but despite all these efforts, no proper attention was paid towards them in improving their overall setup and no scholarships were provided to the deserved Sikh students of the state despite poverty and lack of facilities and the association tried hard to acquire this upliftment and social change.⁶

SIKH SAHAIK SABHA, KASHMIR

As the society itself speaks of composition and contribution of all, it was not easy for one association or organization to take up forward the social reform revolution and for the same each ones contribution in the society was necessary, so from each corner of the society there was an uproar against the social evils and every subject of society wanted to take forward this upliftment of the weaker ones. It was year 1920 when a new organization namely Sikh Sahaik Sabha was formed in the state of jammu and kashmir and by dint of its swift works and success, it was only recognized within the one year by the state government in the following year 1921.⁷ The association's primary aim and focus was education of Sikh subjects and remove backwardness within the society and conserve and protect their rights. The association used several techniques and ways like passing of resolutions, sending deputations, convening meetings and preaching at religious places for pressurizing the government.⁸ In one of its annual celebrations held at Baramulla town at the Koti Tirth Gurdwara in May, 1921 all the Sikh Zamindars from the all the towns and villages attended it and they were more than two thousand persons in the gathering as participants.⁹ In this annual gathering which was held at the temple the association had unanimously passed a resolution which was a combination of claims and rights of the Sikh community of the state. After that, they were put before the government of the state and the resolutions passed by the association were as:¹⁰

1. "That the Sikh community of jammu and kashmir state is in a very bad condition in all respects, especially in education, when compared to their neighboring classes and communities."
2. "That the Sikhs are Zamindars and extremely loyal, ever ready to sacrifice their live for the cause of their state; such a helpful community should not be neglected altogether."
3. "That the scholarships be granted to the Sikh students in their primary and secondary classes and in the colleges and should be encouraged and helped like their Muslim brothers so that they would be able to stand with an equal footing with other communities and classes."
4. "That the Sikhs should be given employment according to their claims and rights in all the different departments, military, revenue, judicial, forest, medical, public works department and police."
5. "That in spite of our having most appropriate and high rights and claims in the state especially in the revenue department, our case has not been yet considered yet very seriously. Leaving other departments aside, even in the revenue the highest posts the Sikhs occupy are those of few Patwaries or in a case or two Munirams which shows that Sikh community in Kashmir is backward in every respect."

THE AKHALI MOVEMENT

The Political, Social, Economical, Religious and Modern educational awakening in the society of the state had brought Sikhs under more enlightened conditions. They were now totally different from earlier ages of the century and modernization and social upliftment was clearly seen in their society and broader vision had now got inserted into their minds. This was due to the result of earlier socio-religious reform movements particularly due to Sing Sabha Movement during the 1921¹¹, which resulted in Sikh's more conscious about their rights in the society. Every members of the Sikh community in the state of Jammu and Kashmir started his role in society, whether he was government employee, educated, illiterate, religious head or person serving in local, municipalities or provincial body. Everyone was in favour of change and in social setup and wanted to gain control of all their Gurdwaras. "There were no rules for the administration of the Sikh shrines; and over many of them, priests, who were Hindus as often as Sikhs, had asserted property rights. The income of the Gurdwaras such as golden temple in Amritsar and the birth place of Guru Nanak at Nankana ran into several lakh of rupees per year. For many years Sikh association carried on civil agitation against Mahants.¹² Then the impatience generated by the Ghadar and the nationalist movement spurred the Sikh masses into

giving up the methods of petitions for redress from courts of law followed by the sing sahaitees and into adopting instead the methods of non-cooperation and passive resistance of the newly formed party, the Akhalis which means 'immortals'. This brought them into conflict with the Punjabi Hindus, many of whom unwittingly sided with the Mahants as well as the administration, which felt impelled to support the priests who were in possession of the Gurduwaras."¹³ These Akhalis now considers themselves as sole caretakers of their society and they had also raised a semi-military corps of volunteers, that was known as Akali Dal which meant army of immortals and they had raised this small contingent of army for taking control over Gurduwars from the Mahants.¹⁴

The Akali movement did a lot in transforming political and social spectrum of its community members in the princely states of India after the settlement of the disputes with the Gurduwars. The Akhalis in the state of Jammu and Kashmir began agitating against the autocratic rule of the maharaja of the state¹⁵ and from the year 1921 afterwards, the Sikh society of the state continued its sympathy and which indirectly transformed the Sikh ideology of the jammu region. The movement started its socio-works after the encouragement from the civil society and wider cooperation among its subjects. It started its wider operation, annual gatherings, religious processions and meeting on regular basis not only in Jammu region but also it regularly started its works in the Srinagar city of the valley and weekly meetings were held in the Gurduwars of the Srinagar city, in which they openly criticized the government. The frequent religious processions were seen in the Srinagar city in view of the Guru Nanak's birth anniversary, who was the first Sikh Guru, but unfortunately governmental police forces had interrupted and stopped them but were unable to stop women activists, who successfully completed the procession. During this police activity, nearly about twenty Sikhs were arrested and jailed.¹⁶ This brutal and drastic act was condemned largely and a meeting was organized on 12th, December 1924, in Maisuma area of Srinagar city under the chairmanship of Deva Singh, passing these resolutions and later forwarded to the senior and foreign members of the council:¹⁷

1. "That the Sikhs of kashmir express their indignation, on the arrest and conviction of the Sikhs in the Raj of his Highness, the Maharaja Sahib for taking for taking out a religious procession on the birth anniversary of Guru Nanak."
2. "That the Sikhs of kashmir express sympathy with the families of Sikh Prisoners."

As the time and atmosphere changed and the society was gaining from modernization and social upliftment processes, slowly and slowly the Akhalis movement activists also became more active and now started new ways of upgrading their society. They invited social reform activists and from outside the state and mainly from the other parts of the country and these leaders and social activists delivered lectures and tried their best to enlighten the members of the community and inspire them with broader¹⁸visions. Although the Akhalis were less in number and in most deprived social and economical conditions, but they tried their ways of agitation and survival against the autocratic rule of the British and the Dogra rulers and wanted to uplift their society like other communities in the society.

Conclusion

As we all know that man is a social animal and nothing in society is possible without the contribution of all, there is no denial in the fact that these reforms that had started in the society among sections of the community and they all had worked hard and later pressed government to benefit the marginalized, downtrodden and weaker sections of the society, so that it becomes the reform for all and not the reform movement of one or any particular community. The society changed a lot from socio religious reforms to socio political reforms. The early socio religious reforms ignited the minds and help a lot in changing all the section of the society without any discrimination of anything. These reform movements emergence also resulted in the consciousness of the socio-economic reform movements and it was most probably that people now were more centric than earlier by virtue of these reform movements. Not only a limited

development but an overall healthy and prosperous growth was seen in the society. The society after the partition of the country or after the accession of the state with the union of the government of India was less discriminatory or less based on social evils. The people especially the society was free now from the deadly social evils which had eaten whole of the society before the pre independence period.

References

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 - ² Jammu and Kashmir archives, file No. 216/A-92 of year 1918.
 - ³ Kour, Ravinderjit, Political Awakening in Kashmir, Page No. 73.
 - ⁴ Khalsa, Newspaper, dated 28th April, 1918.
 - ⁵ Jammu and Kashmir archives, file No. 216/A-92 of year 1918.
 - ⁶ Jammu and Kashmir archives, proceedings of the meetings of the state of Jammu and Kashmir state council held on 19th August, 1922.
 - ⁷ Jammu and Kashmir archives, file No. 259/62 of year 1920.
 - ⁸ Ibid.
 - ⁹ Ibid.
 - ¹⁰ Ibid, Secretary Sikh Sahaik to the chief minister of the state of the Jammu and Kashmir, dated 23/06/1920.
 - ¹¹ "There was a serious decline of Sikhs due to the annexation of the church missionary society supported by the British officials, proliferation of Arya Samaj and Brahma Samaj that made a notable conversion of Sikhs. The Hindu orators in their speeches made scurrilous remarks against Sikh Gurus. Protest meetings were organized by a Sikh society against these organizations. This society described itself as the sing Sabha. Its objectives were: revival of the teachings of the gurus, production of religious literature in Punjabi and a campaign against illiteracy." Sing, Khushwant, History of the Sikhs, Page No. 136 To 141.
 - ¹² Priests.
 - ¹³ Singh, Khushwant, History of the Sikhs, Page No.193.
 - ¹⁴ Ibid., p.198.
 - ¹⁵ Ibid., p.125.
 - ¹⁶ Jammu and Kashmir archives, file No. 435 of year 1924.
 - ¹⁷ Jammu and Kashmir archives, file No. 389 of year 1925; No. G-104 of year 1925.