THE FIRST UPRISING IN KASHMIR: 1931 KASHMIR RIOTS

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to investigate the expression of extreme form of communalism in the Kashmir Valley on 13th July 1931. This research paper gives a vivid account of the various places who were ransacked.

During the riots in Kashmir, particularly Vicharnag. The reports of Inquiry commission, the statements of various Kashmiri Pandits who either witness to the said event or whose properties were plundered. And whether there is any connection between the leading leader of Kashmir Sheikh Mohammad Abdullah and the riots, as many Kashmiri Pandits believed that it was an organised loot and Sheikh Abdullah was behind it.

KEYWORDS: Kashmir riots, Vicharnag Riots & Sheikh Abdullah of Kashmir

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INTRODUCTION

In the politics of Kashmir, nationalism was not a dynamic aspect until 1930. One of the main changes took place in the Kashmir valley after 1931 was the rise of massive nationalism. The movement was against the Dogra rule in the context of feudal bondage. A Mohd. Ishaq Khan once said, 13 July 1931 was the historic day in the history of Kashmir. **“The dumb – driven cattle raised the standard of revolt”**.¹ After suffering unspeakable brutalities under the Dogra rule for eight decades, Kashmir finally rose up in 1931. There were many reasons behind the uprising. The poor economic conditions of Kashmiri Muslims, discriminations against Muslims in educational and government services. Muslims were treated as third class citizens in their own country where they were the main taxpayers.

On 29th April 1931, occurred Khutbah incident in Jammu, where during Id prayers the police officer prohibited the Imam who was conducting the Namaz.² Another incident followed, which is known as Tohhin-I-Quran (insult of the Holy Quran) on 4th July 1931 in which the head constable Labho Ram who took a copy of the Quran from the bag of a Muslim colleague and tore it up.³ The reports of these incidents spread like lightning throughout J&K and many protest meetings were held at several places.

Mr. Ghulam Nabi Gilkar who was among close political associate of Sheikh Abdullah (who was the leading freedom fighter of that time in Kashmir) instigated Sheikh Abdullah to deliver a speech at the mass meeting of Muslims at Jamia Masjid Srinagar. This was the first political meeting of Muslim where thousands of Muslims had participated. In this very meeting Sheikh Abdullah came and recited verses from the Holy Quran in front of the people. It is said that people out there wept bitterly. He not only related the incident relating to the defilement of the Holy Book but also ask the Muslims to struggle for their cause.

Then he started attending various gatherings of the Muslims in towns and villages of the valley.⁴

When Maharaja Hari Singh returned to Srinagar from abroad, he tried to assuage Muslim sentiments and invited their leaders from Jammu & Kashmir to meet him. Among those nominated to represent Jammu was Chaudhari Ghulam Abbas. A public meeting was held in Srinagar to select representatives. The outcome was a committee representing a wide spectrum of views, including the influential but conservative Mirwaiz Mohammad Yusuf Shah and Mirwaiz Ahmedullah Hamaadani, but also radicals like Khwaja Ghulam Ahmad Ashai and Sheikh Abdullah.⁵

Hopes of reconciliation were, however dashed by an event that instigated by the popular passions. An impassioned visitor Abdul Qadeer Khana follower of Islamic ideologue Maulana Jamaluddin Afghani, disrupting the tea being served in a school building after the meeting, showering abuses on the Maharaja Hari Singh, he insisted that the only course for Muslims was to fight his oppression with sticks and stones if they had no guns. Soon he was arrested on charges of sedition, thousands of Muslims would attend his every trial. People would bring him flowers, fruits and sweets. Dogra sensed the support in favour of Qadeer and shifted the venue of the trial by the court of the Session judge in the Central Jail where Qadeer was already imprisoned. Outside the Central jail at least five thousand Kashmiri Muslims had already assembled in support of QadeerKhan.

THE RIOTS

With the arrest of Abdul Qadeer on charges of sedition, the communal instigations, culminated into uninhibited loot, arson, murder, and extreme violence, against the ethnic minority community of Kashmiri Pandits. The Tribune, a leading national newspaper of that time, reported on the riots. It reported: "At noon about a thousand Muslims gathered outside the Central Jail and there, in defiance of the law, arranged a meeting. The Police Superintendent ordered them to disperse but they refused. The Superintendent next ordered his constables to disperse the unlawful assembly. He had hardly given these orders when the mob which had swelled into thousands charged the small police force present with brickbats. The mob, despite police resistance, broke open the Jail gate and set a barrack on fire. The small prison guard fired, and a few protestors died. About ten deaths are reported. A short time later cavalry Police and military force arrived. Alarm bugle was sounded.

Wild rumours spread in the city fast. The Muslims had already been observing a complete hartal since the morning but now the Hindu shops were closed. The mischief - mongers, realizing that all the forces, were centred around the Central Jail, a place 3 miles away from the city, decided upon raiding the houses and shops of the Hindus in the city. There seemed to be a well- organized conspiracy behind all this. The telephone and electric wires were cut off, and about six thousand Mohammadans raided Maharaja Gunj, looting and plundering the Hindus of the vicinity. Then followed harrowing scenes of incendiarism. No military or police aid reached those quarters for full two hours during which hundreds of Hindus had been looted and hundreds of them were injured with lathis and stones and incalculable damage was caused to Hindu property. Visitors were also not spared, they were severely belaboured, and everything, even their shoes and turbans, were snatched away. Cars and buses were stoned and smashed. When the military and police force did arrive, it found the mob beyond control; and it was not before 7 p.m. that the havoc abated. Children, while returning from their schools, are reported to have been picked up and hurled in the river Jhelum. Hindu women were insulted and maltreated. The magistrates, military soldiers and police constables were stoned as a result of which many got seriously wounded. State buses carrying the soldiers were also stoned and their drivers grievously hurt. The police had to open fire at Maharajgunj also. A few casualties are reported from among Mohammadans. But despite all this the mob did not disperse and continued looting and wandering.

At last order was restored by the energetic action of the State forces. Among the 15 deaths reported due to police firing almost all were Muslims. Many Hindus, including women were reported missing. In the night curfew order and section 144 were promulgated. Services of more military were requisitioned, as the city observed a complete hartal amidst the prevailing panic. In Amira Kadal, the Hindu shops were open as the military and police patrolled the city. All business came to a standstill. Colleges, schools, courts and offices remained closed. Except for the General Post-office all other post - offices were also closed. Besides 150 arrests, house searches were made to recover looted property. Unconfirmed reports of looting, plundering and belabouring of Hindus were received from Vicharnag."

The communal riots that engulfed Srinagar (Kashmir) on July 13, 1931 were not spontaneous, but the culmination of the prolonged intrigues by the British to violate the Treaty of Amritsar, which they had signed with Maharaja Gulab Singh in 1846, the founder of the political and geographical entity called the State of Jammu and Kashmir. However, their aim was to control the Northern Frontiers of India to keep an eye on the Russian advances and ethnic tribes that inhabited these regions. They also understood the importance of the Jammu and Kashmir in terms of guarding their rule in India. They were also aware of the fact that Himalayas defined the civilizational and cultural moorings of the Indian Nation and the State of Jammu and Kashmir, which holds the key to the Sanskritisation of India. They wanted the control over the Himalayas not to serve them but to subvert the authority of the ruler of the State as the seeds of the Anglo-Muslim alliance were already sown to implement the policy of divide and rule. This unfortunately was made operative on the ground in 1931 in Kashmir.

Hindus Killed and Wounded

Meanwhile, many Hindu shops were looted and killed by the infuriated Muslims on that fateful day 13th July 1931. It is estimated that 290 Hindu persons were assaulted, 167 persons wounded, 2 persons killed in assaults, 1 person killed by drowning, 54 shops looted and 11 houses containing 13 families looted.

Pre-Arranged Rebellion

It is said that the uprising was a prearranged rebellion against the government and not a riot, provoke on the spur of the moment by or clash between Hindus and Muslims. After the mob had been dispersed by the action of the police, sections of it proceeded in various directions. Our Muslim countryman had been persistently taught to believe that the government and the Hindus were synonymous terms and that a blow at the latter was a blow aimed at the former. The infuriated mob looted almost all the Hindu shops of nearby areas of Srinagar as stated in the Government Communiqué.

"A little earlier in the day, volunteers had been seen hurrying about and telling Muslims to observe complete hartal and inciting them to loot and plunder. Amid carries on the Hindus in general, were crying like 'Maharaja Barbad' and 'Hari Singh Muradabad' were being echoed and re-echoed throughout".

"It is significant that the loot took place at almost the same time in such distant parts of the city as MahrajganjChattabal and Vicharnag. This fact shows that the outbreak was pre-arranged and that it was not the firing that gave the provocations."⁶

Hindus Forced to Embrace Islam

There are many cases of Hindus being forced to recite Kalma and their sacred threads being torn and their tuffs clipped to symbolize this forcible conversion to Islam. It is not unreasonable to presume that there occurred many other

cases that have not been reported to the inquiry commission.

"Hindus and Muslim shops were located side by side. The former was closed on account of the panic and the latter on account of the hartal but there is not a single instance of any Muslim shop having suffered even by mistake. This also shows that good care had been taken before hand to mark out the Hindu shops for loot. On several shops, warnings were written in charcoal to show that they belonged to Muslims".

Vandalism at Vicharnag

At Vicharnag, 12 families inhabiting 10 houses were looted. On the evening of July 12, 1931, Moulvi Yahya Shah and G.A. Ashai lectured to the mob at Saura and on July 13, 1931 is alleged that volunteers came down to Vicharnag in a motor car and gave orders for the loot which began at 2.30 pm. The behaviour of the mob was more inhuman at Vicharnag than elsewhere.⁷ Untold atrocities and indescribable outrages on women were committed there. The greatest sufferer here was Pandit Kailash Bhutt who happened to be the creditor of Sheikh Abdullah's brother to the amount of several thousands. Kailash Bhutt had been the owner of cash and property worth over a lakh but was penniless only two hours later. His house was emptied of everything, Special Committee found him gathering grains of rice scattered on the steps.⁸

The plunders took away hard cash, ornaments and household property, mortgaged articles and burnings of documents. Holy scriptures were desecrated and burnt the males of the houses were thrashed and females were insulted, and if were not raped, the reason was that their men folk allowed their property to be looted, burnt and destroyed. Some of them were without clothes for days after the pillage and to cover their shame they had to borrow things from their fewer unfortunate neighbours who had escaped the attention of the mobs.⁹

According to the statement given by the Kailash Bhutt whose house was looted by the mob to the Riot Inquiry Commission is that everything in the house was ransacked, his property stolen, his account book torn. A large iron safe was carried out and broken there and was lying there on the road. Another statement given by Vidhlal whom the son of Kailash Bhutt was, whose house was ransacked by the mob, he believes that there have been some connections between Sheikh Abdullah and the loot at Vicharnag as Sheikh Abdullah's brothers were his debtors and that Sheikh Abdullah's brother was arrested at Vicharnag on the spot during the riot. Hence, he believed that it was an organized loot.

THE STATEMENT OF VIDHLAL

On 13th July last I left my house at Vicharnag at about 9:30 A.M, in order to attend the Sub Registrar's court in Srinagar where I had to see a sale deed registrar. I was therefore away from my home on this fateful day, leaving behind my aged father, my mother, my four sisters 2 unmarried and two children of the married sisters. At 2.00 in the afternoon there was a general commotion in the court and in the city. The infuriated mob proceeded towards Maharaj Ganj and looting had started at Bohri – kadal and Maharaj Ganj. I came home down from the court to Narpirastan between 2nd bridge and to a chemist shop where I left my bicycle and some documents. All along the bazaar there was panic. Muslims in batches were moving about, crying inauspicious cries about Hindus and the maharaja. Then I began to think of my home and went back to Amira kadal. I got on to a Tonga with another companion Pt. Ram Nath Kaul of Vicharnag. When we reached near Sadakadal a group of Mohammadans stopped our tanga and cried out "offer Niaz" an offering at a shrine or else we will kill you. "At this Vidhalal gave them rupees five and then they could go. Later, when the reached Ashai Bagh another group of Mohammadans stopped their Tonga. They asked for the money, but when they found that they don't have the money, then they demanded to give them the clothes which they were wearing. Later some men ordered them to go.

When they reached near Vicharnag one Mohammadans met them and said, **“don’t go to Vicharnag, it is not safe, and you will be killed”**.

He further said “Our eagerness to reach home we proceeded through fields on foot. We then reached Vanta Bhavan. There we heard the huge noise and the clash of looting etc at Vicharnag. I however, encountered a Mohammadansdebater who seeing me in panic wept over my condition and gave shelter in his house. Later I was told that all pandits of Vicharnag had assembled in RafizBagh which was only about 20 yards distance. We therefore started to join them in the said Bagh. We were crossing the fields and were approaching one end of the RafizBagh, I saw some Mohammadans with knives, hatchets other weapons running towards us. We ran back to Vanta Bhavan. Then we met one Mohammadans who gave us shelter in his house. We stayed till 7 P.M and in the mean time through a mehmandardebater I conveyed my message of my safety and where about to my home.”

Later Vidhlal met one Pandit and a Muslim who came from Vicharnag and assured him that the military had arrived and the looting had stopped. Then finally he reached his home at Vicharnag.

If you go through the account of his statement how was the condition of his house when he reached his house is unspeakable.

“The miserable detail of devastation in my house is inestimable. It brings tears to the hardest hearted to see the ruined state of our house. Everything was taken away. Not even the food stuff has been spared. There I saw lying outside the big nine mound iron see broken open with stones and hammers and emptied. I also saw huge conflagration of doors, windows, books and papers. My parents, my sisters, and all were left utterly destitute and panic stricken, deprived of all ornaments and personal things. In the room the floor had dug out, the electric fittings damaged, the mirrors on the walls were damaged and incalculable damage done”.¹⁰

There is another point to which I would like to state that at Saura the residence of Sheikh Abdullah meetings was held for the last three months on the days he visited his house from Srinagar.

According to the statement of the witness of Pt. Siri Kanthkhar of Vicharnag, what kind of discourse did Sheikh Abdullah used to have in those meetings in Naoshera?

He said **“the discourse was that Mohammadans were not getting rights and that the Government was working against him. Mohammadans felt annoyed and excited because they were told that the pundits take all the employments and none were given to them”**.¹¹ He further said gave a brief account of the riots, **“ my house is situated centrally in Vicarage and from there I could see both Nowshera and Saura. One shopkeeperMadhusudankhar came running to Vicharnag he is my nephew. He said that we shopkeepers will be looted because the messengers came on bicycle. I saw Mohammadans going to Nowshera. I saw crowd collected at Nowshera. Mahanand Khar my nephew came to me and said that Mohammadans beat him and looted his shop. I saw Mohammadans taking away property and other things from the shops of the Hindus under their kurtas or in bundles to their own homes. The house of Gopi Nath Khar’s was looted first and then the houses of Sarvanad,, Mahanand Khar and Madhav Ram Tikko and Kailash Bhut were looted respectively”**.¹²

The people of Naoshera, Saura and Anchar and Awantibatan were always present at their meetings.¹³ The proceedings of the meetings of the Mohammedan leaders such as G.A. Aghai, Dr. Abdul Wahid, Mir Waiz and Mohammad Abdullah Vakilin Srinagar were communicated to these people by Sheikh Abdullah and his brothers. As a

result of these meetings, the uneducated people used to give out to the public that soon, Mohammedans will hold all the responsible posts in the Government.

According to vidhlal, **“he thinks it was an organised loot. As I have already mentioned above Sheikh Abdullah’s brothers were the debtors and were also arrested at Vicharnag on spot during the riots”**.¹⁴

By the statements of the Hindus of Vicharnag to the Riot Inquiry Commission we get the fair idea how Sheikh Mohammad Abdullah and his brother were involved in the riots, yet we cannot hold them directly responsible for the incident as there is not enough evidences to prove his involvement. Indirectly we can say to some extent there is some connections between Sheikh Abdullah and the loot at Vicharnag.¹⁵

“After some days of the occurrence of the incident, the police were about to take the investigation in hand, when Mr. Wakefield, who was the police minister of Kashmir came to Naoshera. Under his verbal orders, the activities of the police in making investigations practically ceased. Before his visit to Naoshera the Mohammedans were prepared to return the looted property of their own accord, but they refused to do so after his visit.”¹⁶Mr. Wakefield did not care to pay a visit to see the harrowing scenes at Vicharnag.”¹⁷

CALLOUSNESS OF THE AUTHORITIES

- No. minister or responsible officer of the government paid a visit to Vicharnag to enquire into the atrocities perpetrated on them.
- Those who took part in the looting could be easily identified, as they belonged to the neighbouring villages and some of them owed large sums of money to the traders whom they looted.
- The police party at Vicharnag was composed mostly of Muslims and they declined to help in tracing the looted property, most of which could have been recorded at the time of careful search.¹⁸

Sheikh Abdullah and the Leaders Arrested

Next day on 14 July 1931 all the leaders of the Muslim such as Sheikh Mohammad Abdullah, Chowdhari Ghulam Abbas, Moulvi Abdul Rahim, Sardar Gohar Rehman and Khawaja Ghulam Nabi Gilkar were arrested. Sheikh Abdullah was put in a solitary cell of the Hari Parbat fort in Srinagar, as a protest, the people observed hartal for 19 days in Kashmir. The news of the agitation had now started reverberating in the British India. By this the Maharaja Hari Singh got alarmed and set free Sheikh Abdullah and other leaders after three week's imprisonment.¹⁹

CONCLUSIONS

The event of 13th of July 1931 was politically an important event in the history of Kashmir. From this day the struggle for independence and freedom in the most modern sense started openly. Without examining its merits and demerits as communal or secular event, it made the Muslim conference and later the National conference, to determine the course of Maharaja's politics.²⁰

It was this incident-which made Sheikh Abdullah as Sher-i-Kashmir or lion of the Kashmir. Thus, sang the poem:

***“A Youngman, known as Sher-i-Kashmir has appeared,
He demands freedom of speech the begs for our***

deliverances at the shrine of Amir-i-Kabir,
He demands freedom of press and assembly,
He has no arms and ammunition,
He has faith in Allah !
All this change is due to our,
*MianSher-i-Kashmir”.*²¹

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