

A HISTORICAL ANALYSIS OF CHANGING STATUS OF WOMEN IN KASHMIR: CHALLENGES AND FUTURE PROSPECTS

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Abstract

The changing status of women is often assessed based on their roles and positions in social, political, and economic spheres, reflecting gender differentiation in status. The core of gender inequality lies in the unequal access to material and social resources between the sexes (Bhagat, 1990). The status of women in Kashmir has evolved over time, spanning from ancient periods to the modern age. This study aims to review the evolving status of women in the modern era.

Key words: *Kashmir, Modernisation, Women development*

Introduction

For centuries, women remained in a subordinate position. However, a transformation in the conditions of Kashmir, and specifically for Kashmiri women, is believed to have commenced in the early 20th century. This comprehensive shift can be attributed to two main factors. Firstly, societal changes were underway due to the rise of political awareness, the expansion of modern education, the dissemination of cultural knowledge, the restructuring of economic institutions, and a widespread social awakening. These developments created a situation in which women became increasingly conscious of their position, particularly in terms of their roles and status within and outside the family. Furthermore, on an external level, the Neubremization process exerted a significant influence. This term refers to the impact of foreign cultures and other external developments on the people of Kashmir. (B.A. Dabla, 2007, pp.25-26) Westernization played a role in encouraging women to step out of their homes and engage in employment similar to men. Like women in various regions, Kashmiri women were affected by these changes, resembling traditional societies such as Afghanistan. While upper-class women quickly and fully embraced these transformations, Kashmiri society, until the late 19th century, closely resembled other medieval Muslim societies in its social structure, value system, and predominantly patriarchal outlook, adhering to set codes of conduct dictated by a combination of religious and customary norms. In such a socio-religious environment, women from lower socio-economic groups responded to these changes much later. Initially deprived of their rights and reminded of their duties, women's roles gradually evolved from being solely child-bearing and rearing machines to also becoming breadwinners. The changing economic landscape marked by industrialization, transportation, and communication not only introduced new roles for women but also gave rise to new social norms and values. Women began receiving education, showing interest in political and professional fields, and expanding beyond domestic spheres to take on professional roles outside their homes. This shift allowed them to realize their potential, broaden their perspectives, and redefine their identities. The traditional role of a housewife gradually transformed into the dual and more fulfilling role of a professional working wife. This narrative illustrates a success story of change in the realms of education, profession, nutrition, and health. Education, including technical and professional training, became available for women from primary to university levels. Women started finding

employment in various services, establishments, offices, and professional and technical occupations. (ShafiAneesa, 2002)

Women have entered occupations and professions that were previously practiced and dominated by men. As a result, an increasing number of Kashmiri women have not only departed from their traditional roles to enter the workforce but have quietly and steadily made significant strides in traditionally male-dominated domains. (Albuquerque.U, 2006) The combination of education and economic liberalization has opened up new market opportunities for women, playing a crucial role in the empowerment of Kashmiri women.

Presently, women are more attuned to their talents and recognize their social responsibilities. They are conscious of evolving trends and their own rights. The key motivations behind their choice of the medical profession include a desire for higher status, economic self-sufficiency, the utilization of individual talent, the pursuit of equality, self-confidence, satisfaction, and personal development. Additionally, the educational background of parents has influenced women to pursue careers in the medical field.

The changes in women's positions and roles have led to shifting attitudes, altered behaviour patterns, and the emergence of issues related to the medical profession. The success of Kashmiri women in modern professions, including the medical field, can be attributed to their individual talent, scientific knowledge, positive attitudes, outstanding academic records, and a keen interest in modern professions.

About five decades ago, traditional Kashmiri society was essentially crime-free. However, today, there is firsthand witness to the rise of both minor and major crimes, particularly violence against women, in Kashmiri society. This alarming situation is broadly linked to two distinct processes: modernization and militarization due to militancy. Factors contributing to this situation include urbanization, industrialization, cultural and media exposure, migration, education, secularization, materialistic orientation, a value-free environment, and moral degradation. Although determining the exact status of women in Kashmir at any given period is challenging, it is evident that there has been a well-established patriarchal system imposing concrete constraints on women in the region. SumonaDasgupta quotes Shamla Mufti, who highlights that prior to 1947, Kashmiri Muslim women faced complete suppression. During that time, there was strong resistance against sending girls to schools, and overall, women experienced widespread illiteracy. The influence of orthodox ulema (religious scholars) was significant, and the practice of purdah (seclusion of women) was strictly observed in upper and middle-class families. Throughout this period, Kashmiri women were subjected to various restrictions and regulations specific to their gender. These constraints aimed to shape their behaviour into what was perceived as appropriate for girls, focusing on household chores, culinary expertise, and care giving for family members. (SumonaDasgupta, 2001, p.21)

The initial wave of reforms and modernization in Kashmir dates back to 1863 when Christian missionaries played a pivotal role. Initially focusing on health and medicine, the missionaries later extended their efforts to the field of education. Despite facing resistance from local rulers and traditional mindsets, the missionaries successfully introduced girls' education in the state. (BazazPremNath, 2011, p.204) The first girls' school was established between 1893 and 1895, overcoming numerous challenges. In the early 20th century, the region witnessed the establishment of its first women's hospital, operated by lady doctors and nuns. While the first girls' school was founded by missionary ladies in 1893, the government only formed a committee in 1912 to explore the feasibility of opening girls' schools. The Pandits were the first to benefit from girls' education, with the state government opening a primary girls' school in Srinagar for Hindu girls. However, there was a shortage of female teachers. In 1929, a Muslim school was opened for imparting education to Muslim girls. Despite government involvement since 1912, by 1920, very few girls had completed matriculation, attributed to patriarchal norms restricting women's access to public institutions. The patriarchal ethos, prevalent in the region, confined women's lives to domestic

spheres, discouraging their participation in public institutions for education. While upper-class women adhered to strict norms of sex-segregation and veiling, women from the lower class were exempt from such rules. Lower-class women actively participated in the social and economic life of Kashmir, playing integral roles in cottage industries, agriculture, and urban trade activities. The traditional industries, including shawl and carpet manufacturing, heavily depended on the female workforce. In both urban and rural areas, women were essential to farming processes and various trade activities, such as fishing, boating, and selling vegetables in Srinagar's city life. Discussing the lower classes, particularly focusing on the trader and artisan segments, Athar Zia asserts that a distinctive form of gender equity existed, resulting from a complementary relationship between men and women engaged in their family trades. (ibid)

Among the fisher community, women handled the sale of the catch while men were involved in procuring it. In the baker's community, men were responsible for baking goods, while women took charge of selling them. Numerous praises for the contributions of tradeswomen, highlighting their beauty, diligence, and wit, can be found in Kashmiri literature and folklore. In rural areas, women were recognized as robust workers involved in tasks such as tending to farms, cultivating rice, and raising cattle. Historical records also indicate women's engagement in professions like dairy farming, embroidery, carpet weaving, and selling vegetables, in addition to their roles as traditional birth attendants. (Athar Zia, www.kashmiraffairs.org/Zia_Athar) It is noteworthy that, despite the substantial contribution of Kashmiri women to economic activities, men retained effective control over resources. Women in Kashmir were found lacking in various social indicators of growth and modernity.

Some philanthropic efforts, influenced by Europeans, were initiated in collaboration with the Indian Women's Association led by Annie Besant. In 1926, inspired theosophists from Kashmir established the Women's Welfare Trust with the goal of enhancing the well-being of Kashmiri women through education, promotion of home industries, and improvement of physical health. Notably, Professor Toshakhani and AftabKoulNizamat played significant roles in the trust, with Toshakhani's dedication and Nizamat's relentless efforts in advancing the institution. (Bazaz PremNath, 2015, p.222)

During the political transformation in Kashmir in the mid-to-late 1930s, the New Kashmir Manifesto, adopted by the National Conference in 1944, had substantial implications for women's status. The manifesto included a Women's Charter that presented forward-looking measures, granting women political representation and addressing social and economic upliftment. (ibid, pp.222-223) These measures encompassed equal wages for similar work, the right to choose any trade or profession, social insurance for women in industries, antenatal and postnatal care, paid maternity leave, and more. The charter also addressed social rights such as legal protection, protection from trafficking and prostitution, and special care for women from backward tribes and regions.

The Women's Charter further acknowledged legal and educational rights, ensuring the right to choose a husband, abolishing the dowry system, granting the right to obtain divorce and separation, and advocating for equal treatment of women prisoners. Educational rights included compulsory and free education for all women, mobile schools for nomadic women, boat schools for boat women, and scholarships at all levels. The New Kashmir Manifesto reflected a positive and progressive outlook for women's rights, aligning with the societal changes and radical political movement of the time. (Athar Zia, www.kashmiraffairs.org/Zia_Athar_Kashmiri_women.html)

After the Accession and the formation of the interim government led by Sheikh Mohd Abdullah, the government translated the ideological blueprint of the National Conference into concrete actions. Land reforms and mass education were introduced, benefiting women significantly. The establishment of Srinagar's women's college in 1950 marked an emancipatory step, opening avenues for women in professional and university education. The state's infrastructure development in primary, secondary, and higher education extended educational opportunities to both urban and rural women after 1947. According to Farida Abdulla Khan, the

establishment of women's colleges was undertaken by the state as part of a socialist initiative, diverging from the involvement of elite groups or philanthropic organizations pursuing their specific agendas for women's education. The shift in focus was away from the traditional aim of producing "good mothers and dutiful wives" to nurturing individuals who could actively contribute as partners in the development and progress of the region, aligning with the vision of a New Kashmir or "Naya Kashmir." (Farida Abdullah Khan, 2005, p.136)

By the end of the 1980s, there was a notable increase in the number of schools and colleges exclusively catering to women. The proliferation of girls' higher secondary schools was substantial, and women's colleges became established in nearly every district. The enrolment of women in government-opened professional colleges also witnessed growth. The establishment of Kashmir University in the valley in 1948 (ibid) played a pivotal role in dispelling parental hesitations regarding sending their daughters for higher education, leading to a rise in the number of women pursuing advanced studies. Prior to this, they had to seek education outside the state. Consequently, there was an upward trend in the number of educated women entering various professions and careers.

These changes contributed to a broader shift in societal attitudes, where women were increasingly regarded with respect. Simultaneously, women made concerted efforts to carve out space for themselves. Misri observes that education played a crucial role in empowering women to overcome societal constraints and develop their modern identities. Women, stepping beyond traditional familial, caste, and religious identities, began establishing their professional identities across diverse fields. This transformative landscape saw women making personal choices, reflected in their attire, demeanour, and conduct. Many women abandoned purdah, opting for the sari, which at the time did not symbolize a specific identity. This transition was self-driven and not coerced. Women asserted their independence, breaking away from stereotypical images and presenting new portrayals of modern and professional women. (Krishna Misri, 2002, p.311)

In the pre-1947 era of Kashmir's politics, despite extensive political activism, women were comparatively less involved. The period between 1920 and 1930 marked the entry of the peasantry, artisans, and working classes into the political movement. Although women were present across all classes, their visibility in politics was not as prominent as that of men. Two classes of women participated in politics: the first, hailing from the lower strata of society or having some education, enjoyed freedom in the public sphere, unbound by conservative societal norms. The second category consisted of women from families with political connections.

By the peak of the political movement during the Quit Kashmir movement in 1946, women were somewhat mobilized, particularly those from the working class who actively participated in demonstrations. Despite societal norms, women in Kashmir generally adhered to the cultural traditions of the region. They had historically played significant roles in economic activities, especially in rural areas, engaging in agricultural work. While patriarchal norms persisted, resulting in discrimination and unequal status for women, they did not confine themselves to domestic roles. Instead, women took up various jobs and pursued diverse career options, reflecting the extent of modernization in the lives of Kashmiri women.

Women NGO's in Kashmir

Non-Governmental organizations (NGOs) in Kashmir have emerged relatively recently, with the Dharmarth Trust being the oldest, established in 1846 under the royal patronage of Maharaja Gulab Singh. Initially focused on a specific religious community, this organization received significant support from the ruler. Noteworthy are early NGOs in Kashmir that contributed to social awakening and upliftment, laying the foundation for organized efforts in these areas. In contrast to the rest of the country, social reform movements in Kashmir, starting as early as 1931 with Chief Minister Sheikh Mohammad Abdullah, were secular, addressing all religious communities collectively. (Report, State social welfare board, J&K, 2013) Post-1947, the trend

shifted, and many organizations now encompass all communities, despite some retaining religious names due to the enduring influence of religion in the valley.

Presently, NGOs in Kashmir operate in a more structured manner, registering and receiving financial assistance from the government and other agencies. Their programs prioritize modern practices, focusing on contemporary issues. Both genders actively participate in NGO activities, leading to significant positive changes in various areas, including addressing domestic violence, improving education, combating illiteracy, and enhancing healthcare. Many NGOs in Kashmir, particularly those dedicated to women's empowerment, such as Markazi-Behboodi-Khawateen, Majlis-un-Nisa, and Unjamani-Nusratul Islam, work towards making women independent and self-sufficient.

Begum Akbar Jehan founded the Jammu and Kashmir MarkaziBehboodiKhawateen in 1975, a registered organization under the Societies Registration Act 1998. The primary objective was to empower women from marginalized backgrounds by providing financial assistance, literacy education, training in arts and crafts, healthcare, and social security. The organization aimed to economically empower these women, fostering self-respect, the protection of rights, and a purposeful existence. The organization's goals included intensive training in arts, crafts, and social work to enable women to earn a living, thus enhancing their roles as housewives, conscientious citizens, and social workers. It also sought to offer residential accommodations for working girls from rural areas, operate homes for destitute women and orphan girls, provide nutritive food to preschool children in slum areas, run guest houses for VIP women, promote the establishment of voluntary organizations for women's welfare, and coordinate activities of various entities engaged in social and economic welfare for women. The organization strived to undertake activities beneficial to the upliftment of women in the state. Currently, the organization provides free training to numerous girls in various handicrafts, offers informal education programs for women, and runs a shelter for destitute women like Aysha, who, after divorce, found refuge and learned tailoring to achieve independence. Each woman in the organization has a unique story of struggles, but the common thread is the need for emotional and financial resources, which the organization provides, inspiring many downtrodden women to rebuild their lives.

Additionally, the NGO conducts seminars, public meetings, and social gatherings to promote women's emancipation. It has a dedicated center for Gujars and Bakrwals, offering training, education, free boarding, and lodging. The organization operates a cooperative store providing essential commodities to poor families at non-profit rates. As the first of its kind in Kashmir, led by a dedicated social worker, the organization focuses on improving the lives of women and plays a crucial role in their welfare and development across various life domains. One significant function involves providing training to women for self-sufficiency, especially widows, the downtrodden, and the poor, enabling overall upliftment. The organization extends support to families with physically challenged male members through monthly household assistance, empowerment schemes, and marriage assistance for women. The organization's charitable efforts also include an orphanage within its compound, catering to around 400 orphans from distant areas of Kashmir, providing them with survival facilities and education. Throughout the ongoing turmoil in Kashmir, the organization has actively contributed to the overall welfare and development of society, particularly focusing on the safety and well-being of women, who often bear the brunt of violence in the region. The organization employs approximately 300 individuals, devoted to tirelessly working towards the noble cause initiated many years ago.

Majlis-un-Nisa (J&K): Established in 1970 in Sopore, a town located 60km from Srinagar, this organization focuses on promoting the overall well-being of women in the State. Its mission involves assisting economically disadvantaged, illiterate, socially maladjusted, and physically handicapped women. (Directorate of Social Welfare, Sopore, J&K, 2013) The NGO extends its support to a significant number of disabled individuals, widows, orphans, deserving

students, and destitute women, covering areas such as medical, educational, and social welfare training.

Additionally, Majlis-un-Nisa offers legal aid to women, aiding them in obtaining and maintaining their rights. The organization is also dedicated to helping unemployed individuals by identifying various job opportunities within the state. Alongside these efforts, it actively organizes seminars and public meetings to foster women's awakening and emancipation. The organization operates several institutions, including the Women Welfare Centre in Sopore, the Condensed Course of Adult Women in Sopore, Women Welfare Centres in Krankshivan, Tujjar Sharif, and Nowpora, the Institute of Home Science in Bandipur, and the Iqbal Memorial Education Centre in Bandipur.

Anjamani-Nusratul Islam, established in 1899 and situated in downtown Rajori Kadal, Srinagar, comprises over 15 executive members. The organization's primary objective is to provide religious, social, and moral education to Muslim children, fostering cultural, social, and moral reform within Muslim society. Additionally, it aims to impart both worldly and religious knowledge, fostering peaceful cooperation and coexistence for the overall improvement of human life. Anjamani-Nusratul Islam actively contributes to the social welfare of the community, alleviating hardships for the less privileged, offering financial aid to needy students, and establishing schools, libraries, and orphanages. Presently, the organization operates various educational institutions such as Islamia School and Islamia College of Science and Commerce. Moreover, it plays a crucial role in the maintenance and administration of the Grand Mosque, known as "Jamia Masjid, (built by Sultan Sikandar in 1400 A.D.)"

Eminent women personalities

The progressive mindset of Kashmiri society towards women was reflected in the "Naya Kashmir" Manifesto of Sheikh Abdullah in 1944. The manifesto aimed to assist women in attaining their rightful place in society and contributing fully to nation-building. It emphasized complete equality with men in all aspects of life, including politics, economics, and society. While successive governments acknowledged women's roles post-1947, few, like Begum Akbar Jehan and Zainab Begum, achieved political stature due to their strong political backgrounds. Begum Akbar Jehan, as the wife of the first Prime Minister Sheikh Abdullah, actively participated in the freedom struggle. Zainab Begum, sister of Chief Minister GM Sadiq, engaged in political activism, discarding purdah and leading anti-government demonstrations.

Begum Abdullah, chairperson of the food committee, played a crucial role in distributing subsidized food during a period of rising living costs in February 1947. (Nyla Ali Khan, 2009, p.26) The National Conference urged people to collectively donate weapons, and the formation of the people's militia of Kashmir began. Zoni Gujjari, part of the Women's Defense Force, symbolized the Women's Self Defense Corps (WSDC) by actively fighting against the Dogra Regime. (Madhvi Yasin, 1980, p.201) Begum Abdullah, a devout Muslim, carried the torch of love and peace during communal frenzy in 1947, helping victims of partition and earning the title of "Mader-e-Meherban" (kind mother). (ibid, p.206)

Educationist Mehmuda Ahmad Shah, the first female principal of Government Women's College in Srinagar, received the Padma Shri in 2006 for her contributions to education. (www.greaterkashmir.com, 11 March, 2014) Sajida Begam and Krishna Misri also made names in education. While some women leaders have emerged in recent times, many belong to political families. Shabnam Lone, daughter of AG Lone, is known for fighting cases on behalf of separatists, displaying a rebellious image. Mehbooba Mufti represents a new phase in Kashmiri politics, highlighting the acceptance of women not just as participants but as decision-makers.

Despite the courage displayed by Kashmiri women in historical events, such as the Quit Kashmir movement, gender roles defined by patriarchy persist. Aasiya Andrabi, founder of Dukhtaran-e-Millat, works to secure women's rights as per Islam. Atiqah Bano, known as

"Atiqabehanji," was a notable educationist and established Majlis-e-Nisa for the welfare of downtrodden women. Post-retirement, she curated MirasMahal, Kashmir's first and only private museum, celebrating the region's culture and history. The rise of industrialization, urbanization, and improvements in education allowed women to break traditional roles and contribute to political and professional fields beyond domestic spheres.

Challenges and Future Prospects for Women in Kashmir

As modernization necessitates not only the restructuring of roles through differentiation of social structures but also a shift in attitudes, it serves as a bulwark to this process. While modernization ultimately leads to a welfare social order, the time required for restructuring and readjusting social structures to meet the evolving demands of change often brings about various social problems. In the case of Kashmiri society, several challenges have arisen during this readjustment phase, including an alarming increase in domestic violence, a growing demand for employment, and issues related to social status.

The surge in domestic violence cases in Kashmir is a concerning trend, impacting even educated and economically independent women. Anecdotal evidence from police data indicates that violence against women has raised both qualitatively and quantitatively over the past two decades. (Sharma Pallavi, www.hindustantimes.com, 2010) The complex socio-political situation, marked by militancy and armed conflict, has further intensified the problem. Violence against women can take various forms—physical, sexual, and psychological. Physical violence includes acts of aggression such as slapping, hitting, and beating, while psychological abuse encompasses intimidation, constant belittling, and controlling behaviours.

In addition to direct violence, the insurgency in Kashmir has resulted in the deaths of loved ones, often the family's breadwinner, leading to the disintegration of families as viable socio-economic units. This has immediate repercussions on sustenance and emotional security, placing an added burden on women, who, in the absence of adequate counselling centers, face significant social and psychological challenges. The post-insurgency period has seen a dramatic increase in suicides by women, further exacerbated by the loss of male family members. (Afsana Rashid, 2005, p.5-6)

The enforced disappearance of male family members has given rise to the term "half-widows"—women whose spouses have neither been declared dead nor returned to their places of residence. These half-widows face uncertainty regarding the fate of their spouses, are unable to remarry, and are denied state assistance offered to widows. The emergence of women-headed households, often thrust into positions of responsibility, is a visible social impact of the conflict. (State of Human Rights in J&K, 1990-2005 Violence against women in the context of conflict takes a toll on their mental well-being, contributing to stress-related diseases. Rape has also been documented as a war weapon in Kashmir, with evidence of mass rape during cordon and search operations by security forces, as reported by the Jammu Kashmir Coalition of Civil Societies (JKCCS). Addressing these complex challenges requires concerted efforts and support systems to empower and uplift women in Kashmir.

Conclusion

Until the late 1980s, Kashmir experienced a period of relative peace and, since 1947, underwent significant advancements in modernization across various aspects of life, including women's education and overall modernization in both material and non-material dimensions. The transformation among Kashmiri women began in the early 20th century, with the upper-class responding more promptly to societal changes compared to women from lower socio-economic groups, who adapted later. Women's roles shifted from solely being child-bearing and rearing machines to also becoming breadwinners. Rapid industrialization, urbanization, advancements in science and technology, and improvements in transport and communication led to the emergence of new roles, social norms, and values for women.

As a result, women began pursuing education, showing interest in political and professional fields, and expanding beyond domestic spheres to assume professional roles. This shift allowed them to recognize their potential, broaden their perspectives, and establish new identities. The traditional role of a housewife gradually transformed into a dual role as a professional working wife. Kashmiri women have undergone significant changes in education, technology, entrepreneurship, sports, nutrition, and health. Education, including technical and professional education, is now accessible to women from primary to university levels. They have entered occupations and professions previously dominated by men, and in the past decade, female students have consistently outperformed male students in qualifying and professional examinations.

The study emphasizes that women's progress in society is largely attributed to their talent, scientific knowledge, and excellent academic pursuits. However, the changing positions and roles of women have brought about evolving attitudes, behaviour patterns, and associated challenges. Women's empowerment in Kashmir is interconnected with societal problems arising from modernization, necessitating institutional restructuring and adjustments in family dynamics, childcare, and power-sharing at both domestic and societal levels. Issues such as a rising divorce rate, late marriages, and dowry pose threats, especially for fathers with unemployed or economically disadvantaged daughters.

Education is identified as positively correlated with the payment of dowry, with an increase in women's education corresponding to an increase in dowry payments. Despite increasing education and societal roles, the practice of dowry is becoming more widespread, transitioning from bride price to groom price. Families with lower middle-class or lower-class status face increased stress due to this phenomenon. Domestic violence, including physical and psychological abuse, remains prevalent, with educated women also experiencing such violence. The case studies illustrate the fear women face in speaking out against abuse, out of concern for family honor.

The research findings highlight that with the spread of education, a substantial number of women in Kashmir are taking up professional jobs, particularly in teaching. However, diversification into other professions such as law, judiciary, engineering, technology, and administration is still relatively modest. The study indicates that women in Kashmir increasingly view employment as a means to attain economic independence, freedom, and empowerment, challenging misconceptions about women in the region.

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