



## CHANGING STATUS OF WOMEN; A HISTORICAL STUDY OF KASHMIRI SOCIETY

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### Abstract

*This research paper delves into the historical evolution of the status of women in Kashmiri society, tracing the transformation of their roles, rights, and societal perceptions across different epochs. Employing a multidisciplinary approach, the study integrates historical narratives, sociological analyses, and cultural perspectives to comprehend the nuanced shifts in the position of women within the intricate fabric of Kashmiri society. The investigation commences with an exploration of prehistoric Kashmir, examining indigenous practices, societal norms, and the initial roles ascribed to women. Subsequent sections scrutinize key historical periods, including medieval times, Mughal rule, Sikh dominance, and the impact of colonialism, shedding light on how these eras influenced and, in turn, were shaped by the changing status of women. The paper also scrutinizes religious and cultural factors, emphasizing the impact of Islam on gender dynamics and the subsequent reinterpretations of religious teachings over time. It addresses the role of education, legal reforms, and socio-political movements in shaping the narrative of women's rights, showcasing the interplay between local traditions and global influences.*

**Keywords:** *Kashmiri Society, Women's Status, Historical Evolution, Cultural Dynamics, Gender Transformations*

### INTRODUCTION

In contemporary society, we can discern a prevailing sentiment that the birth of a girl is widely regarded as a blessing by the majority, despite the persistence of a significant segment that still views girls as a burden. From an early age, girls are actively nurtured to cultivate qualities of courage and are accorded equal importance in various spheres of life. Historically, women from lower social strata were actively involved in diverse economic endeavors such as agriculture, spinning, weaving, and handicrafts. However, it is crucial to note that their engagement in these activities often stemmed from financial necessity rather than choice, and unfortunately, it did not elevate their status either socially or economically.

The Nilmata, identified as the oldest text in Kashmir, sanctions the active participation of women in various festivals and religious ceremonies. Within the context of the Kumauni-Mahotsava, the text describes women, including the peasant's wife, seated beside the sacred fire in the company of family, servants, and the husband's friends during the moonlit night. The extent of the woman's involvement in the musical and dramatic performances during these occasions remains unclear. Nevertheless, the narrative indicates her presence at communal feasts on the subsequent day, not only during domestic celebrations but also at outdoor festivals, where she is depicted freely enjoying herself. During ceremonial events related to agricultural activities, characterized by music, dance, and feasting, the peasant's wife is

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portrayed as actively participating rather than being confined within the domestic sphere. The social status of women during this period is emphasized by their prominent role in religious practices, as evident in the portrayal of goddesses in Kashmir's ancient religious texts. These texts frequently mention gods alongside their consorts, highlighting the significance of female deities in religious narratives. Various goddesses, such as Asokika, Syama, Durga, Sri, Karisini, Bhadrakali, Bheda, Kapinjal, Suresvari, Bhadesvari, Gautamesi, Kalasila, Udyogasri, Gavaksi, Canaika, Gauri, Suvijaya, Sakuni, Brahmacarini, Cakreavari, and Gihadevi, are worshipped by the people of Kashmir. Furthermore, the rivers of Kashmir are personified as the goddess Uma. The authenticity of the information provided by the Nilmata is reinforced by its alignment with the works of various Kashmiri writers. Bilhana, for instance, attests to the literary proficiency of women in Kashmir, and the Rajatarangini provides numerous instances illustrating the elevated status of women in both religious and political domains.

Women faced several challenges that harmed their well-being. These challenges included not being able to read, being forced into child marriages, dealing with polygamy, and facing the practice of sati. Additionally, women were not allowed to make decisions independently; their autonomy was limited, and they were reliant on the decisions made by male family members. Over the course of time, women have found themselves contending independently with a spectrum of challenges encompassing health, economic issues, education, political participation, instances of domestic violence, a diminishing sex ratio, the malevolent practices of female feticide and infanticide, various forms of violence, harassment related to dowries, instances of eve teasing, disparities in wages, and the persistence of child labor.

### RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

1. To Analyze the role and importance of women in Kashmiri society since ancient times till now.
2. To critically explore the elements responsible for the changing status of Kashmiri women in various periods of history.

### RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This paper is qualitative in nature. So, the investigator uses secondary sources in order to collect the data. Data were collected from journals, articles, books and magazines. Libraries were also used for collecting the information.

### HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

In early society of Kashmir women was given high place in religious and social organizations. Though under the protective umbrella of family, women occupied a pivotal place in social life and moved freely. The status of women in early Kashmir which one gets from various literary sources was very high. One of the most significant features of the ancient society of Kashmir was the freedom that women enjoyed (Toshkhani. S.S & Warikoo). Women enjoyed remarkable freedom, wielded ample powers and exercised responsibility, which gave them a high status in the society. There was no attempt to marginalize them, as was being done in other contemporary societies elsewhere in the world (P.N.KBazaz, 2004).

There are numerous references in the old Kashmir texts that abundantly reveal that women were highly respected and at sometimes even worshipped by men. Here, for instance is an excerpt from Nilmatpurana: On the full-moon night of Margasira, one should take meals at night, and worship the moon with white garland etc., grains, other type of food, gifts of lamps, fruits, gifts of salt, fire- worships, worship of the Brahmans and worship of women .A pair offered cloths should be given to a Brahman Women whose husbands and sons are alive and also sisters, father's sister and wife of a friend (Kumari Ved Nilmatpurana).The status of women was much better than the status of their sisters in other parts or



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communities of the sub-continent. They lived a comparatively comfortable life. The factors, which contributed to this situation, included the traditional nature of Kashmiri society, practice of strict endogamy, participation of women in social and cultural affairs and the non-opposition of religious forces in women (Bamzi P.N). In ancient period, female seclusion was something unknown in Kashmir till the advent of Islam (R.S. Pandit, 2000). Women participated joyfully in the numerous festivals like Iramanjari-utsava- a festival of flowers. On this day all the females were offered garlands and flowers to show them respect and thank them the duties they do for the society. They would freely play with men under the flower-laden boughs of the *Iramanjri* shrubs, exchanging garlands of flowers with men. Since ancient times Kashmir has many water-bodies, the water sport must have been common among the resident. There is a mention that females in Kashmir enjoyed water-sports. The festival called Sravani was a special day for all the maiden girls to play and enjoy in waters. Playing with men in water bodies was allowed to the ladies.

Women of Kashmir in ancient times were in no way confined to the four walls of house. Several women have played vital role in shaping the political history of Kashmir. Undoubtedly, the society was patriarchal, but women had much say in the house and took decisions on policy matters and played an important role in all social, economic, political and religious spheres. A remarkable feature of ancient society of Kashmir was that men gave their women unrestricted freedom of movement and activity. Naturally *Pardha* (Screening of women from the gaze of men) could find no place in society in which women had achieved a substantial measure of freedom.

During the 19th century the condition of women in Kashmir became weak and miserable. Sikh period (1819-1846) and Dogra Rule (1846-1947) proved very harmful for the women of Kashmir. Their condition and position of depreciated. The sole aim of Sikhs and Dogras was plunder the country and, for that purpose, to keep the Kashmiris in a state of suppression and terror. In such circumstances, the conditions of women could hardly improve. (M. Ishaq Khan). During the 19th century the birth of daughter was regarded as an unfortunate event. The birth of a girl was considered a curse and the parents pulled long faces at it. She was called *Bram hatya* (Killer of Brahman) by a Pandits and *qahar-i-khuda* ( Anger of God) by a Muslim. Her appearance in the world brought deep gloom to the family and intense disappointment to the relations. From birth until the moment of death her existence was lamented as an unwanted burden on the males. The practice of early marriage prevalent since the yore days in Kashmir had become universal during the 19th century. Though the popular literature does not provide us any definite clue that might help us to establish the actual marriageable age of Kashmiri girl, but we can infer from innumerable folk expressions that girl was married at the very early age during the 19th century.

It is generally believed by the expert, Kashmir that conditions in Kashmir started undergoing change from the early decades 20th century. Various factors can be identified for the initiations of this process of change. These factors can be divided in two categories: endogenous and exogenous. At the endogenous level. Emerging political consciousness, expanding education, spreading of cultural awareness, deteriorating economic conditions and large-scale social awakening created a situation in which women felt concerned about their position, especially their role and status in and out of family. They started thinking about their rights in the broader social context. At the exogenous level, there was a string impact of the process of Neubremization which refers to a process of impact of outside or alien cultures and other development on the inhabitants in the Kashmir valley (Dabla B.A et.al.,2001). Consequently, political, social and economic development in the Indian sub-continent, especially Punjab and Delhi, had positive impact on overall situation in Kashmir. Interaction with the outsiders made assumption of change very easy and relevant. In addition to these factors, there was another contributing



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factor which made a significant and vital contribution to the process of change among Muslims women in Kashmir. Women of the minority Kashmiri Pandit community proved carriers of change and local agents of change in the broader social dynamics. Their constant interaction with the Muslim women had decisive impact on the latter. The Kashmiri Pandits women were well educated and were culturally exposed. They responded to cultural and other changes much earlier than many communities in India. They shunned the traditional Kashmiri Pheran and started wearing sarees (which is considered a non-Kashmiri dress) from the early twentieth century. They also got modern education and adopted working careers much early than other communities in India. Mass change among women in Kashmir started from early decades of 20th century, especially from early 1930s when the freedom movement started here. The women in Kashmir participated in that movement against the feudal rule of the outsiders in large numbers and men put no restrictions on them. This movement gave rise to some prominent women political leaders and political activists who also worked for social causes relating to women. That was the first time in Kashmir history when women at large and in an organized way participated in any socio- political movement. It was in the context of that

Women in Kashmir were provided equal rights which were enshrined in the Naya Kashmir Programme that guided all post- Independence governments in Jammu And Kashmir State. The programme stood for one of the earliest and important political documents in the entire Indian Sub-continent which upheld equal rights of women. An important fact is that the Muslim women in Kashmir have responded differently to the process of change. On the one hand, the Muslim women belonging to upper/feudal/aristocratic classes and the Sayyid/Hojja groups have responded fully to the processes of change. Consequently, women of these classes and groups attained modern education, adopted new cultural patterns and developed career by working outside their homes in governmental and nongovernmental offices on a regular basis. On the other hand, the Kashmiri women belonging to the lower socio-economic classes and groups responded to the process of change very late. In fact, they started receiving modern education and getting employment only in the post-Independence decades. Thus, the emancipation of women in the Kashmir Valley started with the initiation of a movement for National Independence. This movement was responsible for the renaissance of the Kashmir in modern times. It shook the consciousness of the masses and triggered off a mass change in many fields.

After 1947, when the local leadership assumed political power after a long period of alienpolitical domination, successive governments in Jammu and Kashmir State, irrespective of political and ideological differences, attempted to improve the conditions of women. Many efforts in this direction were started in the shape of programmes and schemes. Free education, including professional and technical education was provided to the women from primary till the university stage. Women were guaranteed jobs in government offices, technical-professional institutes, public and private enterprises, and commercial and business establishments. The government also safeguarded the political, economic and social rights of women. However, the governmental programmes about the welfare of women were neither properly planned nor carried out with seriousness. The political uncertainty and consequent political disturbances in the Valley during the entire post-1947 period, did not allow politicians, planner and administrators to make women's welfare programmes successful.

#### WOMEN'S DRESS:

The Pheran's worn by Kashmiri Pundit women were slightly different from those worn by the Muslim ladies. The Pherans of the former were shorter in the size than those worn by their male counterparts. An inch wide ribbon of red colour called dur was stitched all around the collar and the bottom of the Pheran. Unmarried girls wore small skull-caps. After marriage however, in Muslim lady would have think turban like red cap (qasaba) studded with innumerable pins. A piece of cloth was thrown over the qasaba which worked as a veil and always covered the entire back. The Muslim women, of well-to-do families wore slightly different type of qasaba a taller qasaba called "Khonda qasaba". The



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veil worn by the Kashmiri Muslim women was called Burga, it consisted of long white cotton cape or gown which reached from the top of the head to the bottom of the back. In rural areas Burga still continues to be in vogue among the Muslim ladies. This is used even now though rarely, particularly when the ladies go out to attend some marriage or a similar social get together. The Kashmiri women used collyrium (surma) in order to beautify their eyes. Special dresses were prepared on the occasion of marriage. The Kashmiri Muslims generally wore amulets (Tawize). These amulets contained the piece of paper with the name of God or that of the prophet Muhammad (Peace be upon him), or the names of Muslim saints or verses from the Holy Quran.

## HANJI WOMEN AND FISHING INDUSTRY IN KASHMIR :

Hanji women have historically played a key role in Kashmir's fishing sector, participating in the actual fishing operation just like men, in addition to simple native methods of fish processing and retail sales. Actually, Hanji women play a significant role in Kashmir's fishing industry. Despite the fact that men are responsible for the actual physical fish gathering, they go out practically every day in their canoes with various types of fishing equipment. But women always advertise and sell the fish they catch at the end of a fishing expedition. In addition to being housewives, Hanji women are active in a variety of tasks ranging from catching, processing (salting, drying, etc.), and marketing, as well as hand braiding of nets. These women may spend 8-10 hours per day on such chores, generating a significant amount of income to help the household economy.

In reality, these women are in charge of bringing the money home, which is a full economic role reversal. They converse with people in the markets while their male folk stay inside. They have established quite a name for themselves in the market over time.

After taking into account some of the most important facets of the Hanji women's involvement in Kashmir's fishing industry, the question of what difference this kind of role makes to these women's households and to themselves remains. How do they see the benefits and drawbacks of doing this market-driven work? Does employment outside the house elevate one's standing in the family and in society at large? Again, these are the inquiries that must be made in terms of the respective cultures. There is no simple generalisation possible. Even though they are Muslims, the Hanji group in Kashmir occasionally practises culturally distinctive practises. This subculture gives women more freedom to act outside the home than does mainstream Kashmiri society. There may be various causes for this occurrence, but in our opinion the economic imperatives override cultural history more often than not. 59-year-old Dal-Gate Srinagar resident Muhammad Jabar provides a compelling justification for this position:

Specifically, women fish vendors must be encouraged to form associations for the retail sale of fish, to increase their bargaining power against exploitation at the hands of many stakeholders and put forward the demand for an official fish market in Kashmir. Such associations would also act as a buffer against the inherent vagaries of the trade. The historical narratives from the early times down to the 13<sup>th</sup> century A.D. glorify women. Several queens acted as sovereigns in their own rights and as queen-regents or commanders of armies in ancient times. However, a close look at these narratives reveals the inbuilt discrimination and biases against women in primitive social order. Nonetheless, the spirit of womanhood resurfaced in the poetic expressions of legendary Lal Ded, Habba Khatoon and other celebrated women. Interspersed with time, their verses enlivened many a gloomy lives and are on the lips of Kashmiris even today. The difficult and delayed process of resurgence was set in motion towards the end of the first quarter of the last century. Patriarchy played a positive role and helped women, perched on the edge, to break their shackles. Education and dawn of political consciousness had a multiplier effect and changed the course of women's lives.

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### PRESENT SOCIAL STATUS OF WOMEN IN KASHMIR :

In present times we can observe that when a girl is born, it is considered to be a blessing by most people (even though a large section of society still considers girls as a burden). From childhood girls are being taught to be brave and are being given equal importance. Their opinion is considered, they are treated as an important part of family, their education is given utmost concern. The status of women has improved in every field, whether social, economical, political, or cultural. Socially, women are no longer considered as inferior to men. Culturally, their role is no more to merely to look after their family and children. Economically, women are no longer dependent on male members of their family but are working in various white collar jobs and even in male-dominated fields. Being independent, equal and secure has helped women develop self-esteem and self-confidence. The government has also played a vital role in improving the status of women. The Indian Constitution under “Article 15(B)” gives special status to women and over the years various programmes have been initiated for the development and prosperity of women. Women are the plinth of the society. Women play a vital role in building up the nation. Women build the future of the nation. William Golding, the British novelist, playwright and poet, has said thus and I quote him further: “I think women are foolish to pretend they are equal to men. They are far superior and always have been. Whatever you give a women, she will make it greater. If you give her a sperm, she will give you a baby. If you give her a house, she will give you a home. If you give her groceries, she will give you a meal. If you give her a smile, she will give you her heart. She multiplies and enlarges what is given to her. So, if you give her any crap, be ready to receive a ton of shit.”

The position of women in Kashmir was much better as compared to the women in ancient India. They emerged from the domestic into the political stage, were free, owned landed and other immovable property, managed their own estates and even fought on the battlefield as generals and commanders as the head of troops. The urban female literacy rate is 75.70% and literacy rate of women in rural areas is 66%. The survey reveals only 8.4% and 2.8% of males and females in Jammu and Kashmir, respectively are graduates and above in rural areas.

### ANALYSIS

Analyzing the social status of women in Kashmir over time reveals a complex evolution. In ancient times, research by scholars like Andrabi (2002) emphasizes the significant role women played in society, participating in economic and cultural activities. However, the medieval period witnessed shifts due to external influences, as highlighted by Koul (2010), impacting women's status negatively.

During the British era, works such as Bhat (2015) indicate some improvements, influenced by socio-political changes. Post-independence, research by Ahmad (1998) underscores the persistence of conservative norms despite legal advancements. The conflict-ridden period from the late 20th century, explored by Mir (2014), brought forth additional challenges for women, with disruptions impacting their social roles.

Recent studies by Rashid (2021) suggest a nuanced contemporary scenario. While strides have been made, gender disparities persist. Social and political contexts continue to shape women's status, highlighting the need for holistic approaches for sustainable change.

These findings collectively portray a dynamic narrative of women's social status in Kashmir, acknowledging both historical strengths and contemporary challenges.

### CONCLUSION

Change is a universal phenomenon. No society remains static. The society of Kashmir also changed. Although the process of change got started during the Dogra rule from the 1890s onwards as a result of the role of Christian missionaries, the spread of modern education, the establishment of modern health institutions, certain tenancy reforms, and establishment of communication links with the outside world. However, it accelerated only after 1947, when the fetters of autocratic rule were thrown away.





Measures initiated by the popular government in the post-1947 era set the track for the spread of education, awareness, growth in income, and employment of the inhabitants in a more vibrant form. Waves of this change got manifested in all living conditions of the people. The status of women, dress, food habits and recreation of the people did not remain immune to all these developments and as such, registered a significant change. In this study an attempt has been made to study these changes with special reference to the changing status of women.

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