

Passion and Revenge in 19th Century Kashmir

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To understand rivalry in 19th century Kashmir one needs to know that Kashmiri agriculture was organized under the system of Kārdārī, in which the collection of agricultural tax from the peasants was contracted out to the kārdārs, who would collect half the produce, pay the taxes due to the governor and keep the rest to themselves. But when the crops failed, they were at the mercy of the governor or his agent. The good ruler let the kārdār carry the debt to the next year or even forgive it. The bad ruler used the occasion to unleash tyranny.

In the stagnant economy of the late 18th and early 19th centuries, ravaged by unsettled conditions and continuing war in India, the name of the game for powerful families in Kashmiri was the kārdārī position. In spite of its risks, it also offered much reward. The Kashmiri Pandit vied with each other to become kārdār.

The Afghans (the Durrani dynasty) ruled Kashmir from 1753 to 1754 and then from 1762 to 1819. During 1754-1762, while the Durrani king Ahmad Shah was busy raiding north India in several campaigns, the governor Raja Sukh Jivan declared independence. Ahmad Shah sacked Delhi in 1757 and then triumphed over the Marathas in the Third Battle of Panipat in 1761. In 1762, Ahmad Shah turned to Kashmir and defeated Raja Sukh Jivan.

Shah Timur succeeded his father at Kabul from 1772 to 1793. The Afghan chieftains began quarrelling and Timur was not quite as firm as his father in his dealings with them. Shah Zaman became king in 1793.

Since the king, during the Afghan rule of Kashmir, was in remote Kabul, without a sense of what was actually going on in the valley, and the governor was changed often, it was normal for the governor to be

coercive when the crops failed. As a consequence, many Kashmiri families migrated out of the valley.

For example, an ancestor to the Kak family, Mukund Kak (approx 1776-1847), who was a kārḍār, was put in prison and his houses demolished when his rivals complained to the governor about the revenue collected in his districts. He was let out only when his friend Trinayan Kaul paid off the governor. To seal their friendship the two decided on marriage between their children, Sataram Kak (c. 1805-1845) and Ganga Devi. After this wedding, Trinayan Kaul fled to Lahore where Sataram took to marksmanship and he became good at it.

During the late 18th century, new political and military forces were emerging in India. The Durrani king Shah Zaman (1793-1800) appointed a young Sikh, Ranjit Singh, as governor of Punjab. Ranjit Singh declared independence in 1801 and soon he was the most powerful king of the region.

During Shah Zaman's reign, the Kashmiri Nand Ram Tikku joined the service of Zaman's Prime Minister Wafadar Khan and later rose to be the Diwan of Kabul. The British were by now plotting to control India using strategic alliances and they induced the Iranians to attack Zaman who lost and was blinded and imprisoned.

In 1803, the eighteen year old Shah Shuja became the king of Afghanistan. In 1809, he was overthrown and he took refuge in Ranjit Singh's court. He was asked by Ranjit Singh and Diwan Nand Ram Tikku to take a force to Kashmir but he lost on the battlefield and taken prisoner. After a few months, the Afghan governor handed him over to Maharaja Ranjit Singh who kept him in jail during 1813 and 1814. The Maharaja ultimately granted him freedom in exchange for the Kohinoor diamond. From 1809 to 1818, Shah Mahmud, who had ruled during 1801-1803 returned to power.

Birbal Dhar

The story of Mirza Pandit Dhar and his nephew Birbal Dhar in freeing Kashmir from the oppression of the Afghans is better known. The crops had failed and Birbal Dhar couldn't collect the one hundred thousand rupees that were due to the Afghan governor of Kashmir, Sardar Azim Khan (governor during 1810-1816 and a powerful general who had defeated Shah Shuja at Peshawar). The governor sent 100 soldiers to arrest Birbal Dhar.

Meanwhile, Mirza Pandit gave a bond to Azim Khan that he would pay Birbal Dhar's debt but he advised his nephew to escape to Lahore to urge Ranjit Singh to intervene in Kashmir.

Birbal Dhar was urged by Vasakak Harkarabashi to leave his wife and daughter-in-law with his friend Qudus Gojawari for safety. Birbal did so and he fled with his son to Lahore on horseback. When Azim Khan found that Birbal was missing he asked Mirza Pandit Dhar what had happened. Mirza Pandit told him that Birbal had either gone on a pilgrimage or to Lahore to get the Sikhs against Azim. When asked what should be done next, Mirza Pandit said that he, namely Mirza Pandit, should be put to death and Birbal's debts charged to him.

The dialogue between Azim Khan and Mirza Pandit went as follows (as recounted by Anand Koul in his book *The Kashmiri Pandit*):

Azim: *Birbal kujā raft* (Where has Birbal gone?)

Mirza Pandit: *Hargāh au rā hawas-i-dunyā na munda bāshad ba Gangā khwāhad raft warnah peshi Ranjit rafta Singhān bar tu ārad* (Should he care no more for the world he will go to the Ganga; otherwise, he will go to Ranjit and bring the Singhs against you.)

Azim: *Pas chi salāh* (What advice then?)

Mirza Pandit: *Kushtani Mirzā Pandit* (Putting Mirza Pandit to death.)

Azim: *Bākayāt-i-Birbal?* (The debt of Birbal?)

Mirza Pandit: *Ba pāyi Mirza Pandit* (To be paid by Mirza Pandit.)

The tyrant was so impressed by Mirza Pandit's fearlessness that he left him alone. But he imposed a daily fine of 1000 rupees on Vasakak Harkarabashi to reveal the whereabouts of Birbal Dhar's wife and daughter-in-law. This continued for nine days. Vasakak was in a terrible bind. He had given his word to Birbal that he would keep the information about his wife's and daughter-in-law's whereabouts secret. On the other hand, the daily fine, if continued longer, would bring him and his family to ruin. His relatives were distraught. Birbal Dhar's son-in-law Tilak Chand Munshi found out from his wife where the ladies were and he informed the Sardar.

Azim pounced on this opportunity to destroy Birbal's family. The two ladies were arrested and brought to Azim Khan's compound by boat. Birbal Dhar's wife took poison and died, and the daughter-in-law was sent to Kabul to the King's harem. Vasakak Harkarabashi was put to death for not having assisted Azim in finding the ladies.

Maharaja Ranjit Singh sent an army to liberate Kashmir after Azim Khan had returned to Afghanistan in 1816 with 20 million rupees and installing his younger brother Jabbar Khan as governor. Birbal Dhar promised to compensate Ranjit Singh for his losses if the Sikhs did not take Kashmir and he left his son Raja Kak Dhar in Ranjit's court as guarantee.

Jabbar was defeated by the Sikh army and Kashmir became a province of Punjab in 1819. The first Sikh governor was Diwan Moti Ram and Birbal Dhar was appointed Peshkar, or his principal native adviser. The administration in Kashmir was conducted in Persian and the Peshkar's job included translating the Diwan's orders into Persian.

The Peshkar appointed his own staff, called the ahalkārs, to run the administration. These were generally from his own family. When the Peshkar lost his job so did the ahalkārs. One can imagine that there was much incentive for those who were not in power to bring down the Peshkar and his family in the hope that the next Peshkar would be from amongst their relatives. Life for the ambitious in the 19th century Kashmir was a zero-sum game.

After a year, Birbal Dhar and his uncles Mirza Pandit Dhar and Sahaj Ram Dhar were invited to attend Ranjit Singh's Darbar. Mirza Pandit Dhar died on the way of cholera and his brother Sahaj Ram Dhar decided to retire from active life. Birbal Dhar proceeded to Lahore by himself and he was showered many honors by the Maharaja.

When Birbal Dhar returned to Kashmir, he didn't properly acknowledge his cousin, Ram Dhar, Sahaj Ram Dhar's son, who had come to receive him. Upon this slight, Ram Dhar went to the governor Hari Singh and told him that Birbal Dhar was conspiring with the Rajas of Muzaffarabad against the Sikhs. The governor and Birbal Dhar soon fell out and Birbal Dhar was dismissed as Peshkar and Ram Dhar's brother Ganesh Dhar was appointed Peshkar in his place.

Sataram Kak

Amar Nath Kak (1888-1963), in his autobiography *Hamārā Vrittānta* provides another sidelight to this story that pits the Bhan and the Kak families against each other. When the Sikhs seized Kashmir, Trinayan Kaul's family as well as Sataram Kak returned to Kashmir and in due course Sataram Kak, the ace shooter, became the kārdār of Anantnag district. Birbal Dhar's daughter was married into the Bhan family, and one of their young men had a falling out with his brother and he intended to go to Lahore to bring his brother down. He was passing through Sataram Kak's

district to go to Lahore, but Sataram Kak prevented him from doing so. The young man now vowed to bring down Sataram Kak also.

This young man from the Bhan family eventually became a high official and he schemed to impose a fine of 100,000 rupees on Sataram Kak. Like his father before him, Sataram Kak's properties were seized and he was put in prison. Sataram Kak died of cholera in the epidemic of 1945, leaving behind his wife, four sons, and two daughters.

Sataram Kak's youngest son Govind Kak (1844-1904) wrote a version of the Mahabharata in Persian. Govind Kak was the grandfather of Ram Chandra Kak (1893-1983) who was a pioneering archaeologist, author on Kashmir antiquities, and prime minister of the Jammu and Kashmir State during 1945-1947.

The immediate ancestors of our own branch of the Kak family are described in my father's autobiography (Ram Nath Kak, *Autumn Leaves*, 1995). Ram Chandra Kak's family is descended from Prabhakar, the second son to Sundar Kak (c. 1670), whereas ours descends from Raghav, the fourth son.

My own link to the 19th century Kashmir was through my granduncle Bayaji, Kishan Lal Kak, who was also my father's adoptive dad after my father lost both his parents when he was young. Bayaji must have been born around 1875 or so. He was austere and disciplined. He woke up before dawn, had a cold shower, and then he did puja for several hours. He was an excellent chess player and he would tell us stories of his days in service in Abbotabad, Quetta, and Muzaffarabad.

My paternal grandmother's family was from Pulwama, a town that I never got a chance to see. My father tells me that his grandfather from Pulwama had written a version of the Ramayana in Farsi.