

From Frying Pan into the Fire: *Begar* under Dogra Raj in Kashmir

Muzamil Rashid

Ph.D. Research Scholar, Department of History, University of Kashmir

Begar is a Persian term which means employing anyone without remuneration or to force anyone to work against his will. According to Muzaffar Ahmad Khan, *Begar* must have been an age-old practice in Kashmir perhaps as old as the history of organized wars, in view of the logistic requirements in a country of difficult terrain and mountain defiles.ⁱ The origin of this institution is traced back to the reign of king Samkaravarman who levied *rudhabharodhi* (forced labour) for military services. The practice continued as a vital institution of feudal and monarchical system under the Loharas, the Sultans, the Mughals, the Chaks, the Afghans and the Sikhs.

With the advent of the Dogra rule in Kashmir, the practice of *Begar* assumed dangerous proportions.ⁱⁱ This was mainly due to the fact that the earlier part of the Dogra rule was engaged in intense military actions in the frontier areas of Leh, Chilas, Kargil, Gilgit, Nagar, Yasin, Tibet, Iskardu, Hazara etc.ⁱⁱⁱ To suppress their rebellious activities the State would mobilize its army and this meant restlessness for the masses too.^{iv} Since the Government had to ensure a regular and constant supply to its army garrisons stationed in the conquered territories of those far-flung areas and since the army would not carry the supply loads themselves so as to preserve energy for possible encounters on the way which runs through terrains, snowy passes, dangerous and winding arid mountains paths, some 1700 feet from sea level from where not all would return alive, the exaction of *Begar* was an easy device.^v It was impossible for a person to hide when the avaricious officials were on lookout for human carriage for those dangerous destinations.^{vi} The *Begar* was chosen simply due to “the absence of any special labouring class in Kashmir and also because of the topography, the demand for *Begar* fell, naturally, on the villagers”.

Thus it was the Maharaja Gulab Singh^{vii} who established a continuous line of supply for the troops in the above mentioned territories through *Begaris* without any consideration to pay them

for their shelter, food and dress.^{viii} The *Begaris* carried the heavy loads in the month of autumn, in normal times, at any time of the year, if the conditions in the frontier territories were disturbed.^{ix} Condign punishments were meted out to such of the peasants who refused to carry loads and even children were also not spared.^x Pandit Khunya Lal, who was in Kashmir during the reign of Maharaja Gulab Sing, records in his diary:^{xi}

In the morning at Wutto, I saw a crowd of about 20 people at my doors. I asked them who they were and what they wanted. They said they were plaintiffs and came to *Sahib* to complain of their grievances. On being asked what they had to say. They added they were *Domes* and of other castes, but His Highness the Maharaja had given them axes and ordered to cut trees in the Jungle, whereby they were ruined. They showed me their hands, which were full of corns. I asked them whether they get any wages. They said that they get nothing but a *Seer* of rice per day per man; and the reasons of their complaining was that they used to plough lands and thereby to support their families, but being employed in cutting trees they are obliged to neglect their lands, and so their families die of starvation. On hearing this, I asked them what the Maharaja was doing with that wood. They said that he sends for it at Cashmere by *Begaris* and there has it so sold by his people. After all this I told them that this *Sahib* can do nothing for them, and they returned disappointed, saying whether *Sahiblog* had appointed the Maharaja to kill the people....

Begar continued to be cancer in the body politic under Maharaja Ranbir Singh (1858-1885 A.D.). Andrew Wilson has given us an eye-witness account of the miseries to which the villagers were subjected to *Begar* during this period. Thousands of them were employed for carrying the retinue of the Yarkand envoy on the latter's visit to Kashmir. There were said to be 3000 coolies employed carrying up him (envoy) and the commodities he had purchased in Europe.^{xii} The traveler goes on to say:^{xiii}

I cannot say as to the exact number; but really there seemed to be no end of them, and they came from all parts of Kashmir. They were to be met with at almost every turning, and in various positions. At one moment I would find half-a-dozen of them resisting to groan under the weight of 24-pounder gun, wrapped up in straw, while a policeman of the Kashmiri Maharaja threatened them with his stick or even with his sword....Again, I would come across three or four of them at sundown, kneeling down at prayers, with their faces turned towards what was supposed to be the

direction of Mecca....At another time a party of them would halt as I came by, support their burdens on the short poles which they carried for that purpose, and some Hindustani spokesman among them would say to me, 'O protector of the poor' (*Garib Parwar*), you have been among these snowy mountains-shall we see our house-roofs again? "They all had the same story as to their monetary position. Each man had got five rupees (I do not know whether small *chilki*, Kashmir rupee or British, but should fancy the former) in order to purchase rice for the journey; but their further expectations on the subject of pay were of the most desponding kind, and the only anxiety they showed us was, not as to how they were to get back again but as to whether it would be at all possible for them ever to get back again.

During the summer of 1866 A.D. an unusual number of troops was to be sent to Gilgit, so the peasants, boatmen and tradesmen were caught to carry their supplies and luggage, sent in a hurry without the slightest provision being made for their lodgings, clothing or subsistence on the road 'except one *seer* of rice for a day as their food and as payment'.^{xiv} A large number of them died on the occasion at the Gilgit Road, and the next batch was sent in the late autumn of 1866 A.D. with supplies on their backs but many of them died on the road due to cold and starvation. The authorities, however, continued sending the men-folk to a country through stony roads, which were covered with snow during winter season. The poor folk died enrooted for want of good arrangements by the Government during the reign of Maharaja Ranbir Singh.^{xv} Robert Thorp makes a comment:^{xvi}

I have elsewhere taken occasion to notice this truly Hindoo like act of barbarity.....A Hindoo-like act of barbarity I have called it, since it proceeded not so much from active cruelty as from a passive carelessness to human suffering; a dull, stupid indifference like that with which driver of the bullock wagon in Hindustan urges on his starved and yoke-galled beast, with blows and foul language, until the miserable brute falls dead on the road.

According to Pir Hassan Shah in 1880 A.D. the inhabitants of the Gilgit demand their usual rights and then they started a revolt and a few soldiers raided the fort *Sher Qilla*. And when Maharaja Ranbir Singh heard this news he sent about 3,000 soldiers to Gilgit in order to crush the revolt. For transporting their baggage and other food items up to Hazara, peasants were

brought to render *Begar*. In this operation many of the peasants lost their lives and thousands of rupees were given as bribes by the peasants to escape from *Begar*.^{xvii}

Begar remained one of the most pronounced features of the Kashmir administration during the period of Maharaja Pratap Singh (1885-1925 A. D.). The sufferings of the villagers of Kashmir were much greater in the late nineteenth century, mainly due to the construction of Jehlum Valley Cart Road and the Gilgit Road.^{xviii} Thousands of them were forced to work for the successful completion of these roads since their construction was considered to be vital importance for the interests of British imperialism.^{xix} The conditions of the Kashmiri villagers deteriorated during the frontier wars when a large number of them were seized for *Begar* so as to serve the British interests.^{xx} Well known Kashmiri poet Wahab Parray sum up the dreaded *Begar* in the following verses:^{xxi}

Kari Begaruk wanay kyah os asan shor-o-shar
Greesy palana ladith wariyas pethhan band ba khar.

Translation: I cannot explain what the hue and cry of *Kar-i-Begar*
 Peasants were tied with saddles like asses for the whole year.

No work on *Begar* will be complete if reference is not made to the woes and sufferings of the villagers on the Gilgit frontier. In fact, the very name of Gilgit was dreaded by the peasants in the Dogra rule.^{xxii} Thousands of them died in this area of strategic importance whenever the expeditions were sent to the frontier regions.^{xxiii} As Prof. Ganai observes:^{xxiv}

Though the construction of Gilgit Road considerably lessened the terror of Gilgit *Begar*, Gilgit menace still haunted the mental peace of many villagers, particularly those living near the road and those who were in possession of horses, mules and asses as they were often forced to carry the loads.

When it was rumored that *Begar*is were to be sent to Gilgit, the villagers left for hills to protect themselves from the ghastly Gilgit.^{xxv} Inhuman punishments were dealt out to those who demurred to leaving their homes for two or three months with the prospect of death from cold or starvation.^{xxvi} As Lawrence observes:^{xxvii}

Gilgit to the Kashmiris is a constant terror, and when it was rumored that transport was wanted to convey the baggage of the troops going to or coming from Gilgit, there was a general stampede among the villagers. I have seen whole villages bivouacking on the

mountains when the agents for the collection of transport arrived in their Tehsil, and I have seen inhuman punishment dealt out to men who demurred to leaving their homes for two or three months with the prospect of death from cold or starvation. I have seen villagers maimed from frost-bite or shriveled and paralyzed from exposure to cold, and it is no marvel that the Kashmiris should loathe the very name of Gilgit.

It was only a miracle if someone survived the most demanding journey, the frost bites, and the severity of winter, the meager and sometimes, an unfamiliar diet.^{xxviii} If some porters slipped down the precipice or fell ill or had his feet frost-bitten, he was heartlessly abandoned to die by inches, totally unattended in his anguish and a prey to vultures and beasts while the *caravan* moved on, shamelessly unmindful of his tragic impending doom.^{xxix} They died in large numbers along the road to Gilgit or Astor.^{xxx} While many others encouraged each other with the word of hope but it were only a few who survived^{xxxi} thinking of their loved ones. Saraf observes that outside Srinagar city, there is hardly a family in the Valley in which the tragic disappearance of some male relation employed on *Begar* has not descended as a tragic part of the family chronicle from generation to generation.^{xxxii}

Fortunately for posterity, some contemporary visitors to Kashmir have left some account of this dreadful institution of *Begar*. Dr. Arthur Neve furnishes an eye-witness account of the serene farewell given by the villagers to their unfortunate relatives and friends picked by the officials for *Begar*. The noble doctor remarks:^{xxxiii}

I was at Islamabad, endeavouring to fight an epidemic of cholera by sanitation, and noticed coolies collecting from all surrounding regions each with his blankets, spare grass-shoes, his carrying crutch, and light frame of sticks and rope in which to carry the load upon his back. And I was present at the great concourse on a green meadow in front of the mosque when a sort of farewell service was held for those starting on this perilous journey. Loud was the sobbing of many and fervid the demeanour of all as led by the *moullah*, they intoned their prayers and chanted some of their special *Ramzan* penitential psalms. Even braver men than the Kashmiris might have well be agitated at such a time, when taking farewell of their beloved ones! Who would till their fields, what would happen during their long absence to their wives and children? To what perils would they themselves be exposed in the crowded bivouacs and snowy passes of that deadly Gilgit district?

The labours impressed for *Begar* were much exploited by the officials to fill their purses. A. Wingate has given us a clear picture of the corrupt and cruel manipulation of *Begar* by the officials. To quote Wingate.^{xxxiv}

A requisition is made, say, for 500 coolies. The *Tehsildar* doubles the number. His emissaries quadruple it, and so a village that ought to supply, perhaps, five coolies, is asked for twenty. Fifteen men have to buy themselves off. It is notorious that this year large sums have been illegitimately collected in this way.

No arrangements were made to distribute the inhuman practice of *Begar* according to population, or to take it by turns from villages, and as a rule the unfortunate people who lived near the city or the town, or who lived near the Tehsil headquarters or along the line of communications were harassed daily, while more remote villages, whose inhabitants could flee to the mountains when the news came that coolies were wanted, had a comparatively speaking easy time.^{xxxv} Condign punishments were meted out to such of the peasants who refused to carry loads. Sometimes the non-compliers were tortured and beaten to pulp.^{xxxvi} Even children were not spared.^{xxxvii} As Wahab Pararray observes.^{xxxviii}

Gatchiha yus gair hazir os tas amli hisab

Chob tai be-izati, jurmana, dashnam-o-azab.

Translation: The absentees were intensely accountable

They were beaten, disgraced, fined and tortured.

And the most shameless part of *Begar* was that when those of the peasant-labourers who had survived the vagaries of weather and harshness of the terrain and reached Gilgit were sold as slaves to the wild inhabitants of that inhospitable region. Even they could be exchanged for some animals.^{xxxix} Tyndale Biscoe, who spent almost half a century in Srinagar,^{xl} has given the following account of *Begar* as he saw it:^{xli}

At Bandipura they (peasants) were collected and loaded up. The only ration allowed them was a *seer* of rice per day; this they had to carry, plus the straw for making their straw shoes, plus their load of food for the garrison. No provision was made for them as they crossed the snow passes, so that many died on the road, and often it happened that when they did reach Gilgit, they were sold as the slaves to the wild

inhabitants of that inhospitable region. The grandfather of one of my servants, who was sent there, was exchanged for a Chinese dog, but later on he escaped.

Besides the above information which was mostly gathered from the accounts of the foreigners, the memories of this institution are still with the older population of the Valley as well as the local poets. One of my informants Mohammad Abdullah Bhat narrated his dreaded memory of *Begar* as:^{xlii}

People were subjected to *Begar* during the Dogra period. The villagers were forced to carry loads of essential items like grains, fuel, ammunition etc. to the frontier areas without any remuneration. Many labourers died on the way because of cold and starvation. I remember that during the period every villager would sleep along with grass-footwear and *Satu* (a type of flour used with tea instead of bread) under the pillow as it was understood any time he may be called for *Begar*.

The famous poet of Kashmir Rahman Rahi laments the institution of *Begar* through his poetry. He gives voice to the pain and agony of helpless Kashmiris through his poetic rendition. The following verses of his poetry reflect the practice of *Begar* as:^{xliii}

Mulkas manz Begaer chay laejmach
Hakim lukaw paray kadmach
Yeti kanh wuntah mayasar sapdew
Tati gachi samaan saarni soozun
Yee buzith phifren chus logmut
Wuntan azz Begaer chay laejmach.

Translation: *Begar* has been imposed in the country
 The officials have issued the orders
 Where ever you find a camel like Kashmiri
 Send him to *Begar*
 I am restless on hearing this
 Camel like Kashmiris is subjected to *Begar*.

The gloomy condition of the agricultural classes is evident from the following verses of Mirza Arif:^{xliv}

Wuchan Jagirdaeri sag chu lugmut
Aem insaan machi hind paeth dugmut

Hukumach saet zulmus boajwath aes

Yihinzi rehmat gareebas naratrath aes

Yihind koonoon aasaan khoon adluk

Chukan trawan gareebas noon adluk.

Translation: On seeing the flourishing of *Jagirdari*

This has grinded the poor into pieces

The tranny had closeness with State

Their mercy is tyranny for the poor

Their laws are murder of justice

Their justice is adding salt to the injuries of the poor.

Reference may be made to the other aspect of *Begar* as well. It consisted of requisitions for village produce and was a form of purveyance on behalf of officials. Under this system officials would obtain wood, grass, milk, poultry and grain, blankets and an occasional pony, cows and sheep free of cost, and higher officials would build houses in the city or cultivate waste land through the unpaid labour of the villagers.^{xlv} Wahab Parray sums up this form of *Begar* in the following verse:^{xlvi}

Roz-o-shab thany gew ta kath zyan to kokar beyi sheer kham

Os dar har ja parayan kitch su lootuk intizam.

Translation: Day and night, the butter, ghee, sheep, fuel, poultry and milk was extracted in bribe.

There was everywhere the open arrangement of loot and plunder for foreigners.

The misery of canal *Begar* and helplessness of the poor peasants is epitomized in the following verses of G.N. Aatish:^{xlvii}

Ba Khudaya karta yaeri

Laeg Begari taawnus saeri

Gaey barbaad kam janaany

Kulla khan naeki boz afsaanai

Mard tae zani Begari laegikh

Faeky gaelikh hundri zaelikh

Raet haekimaw daba daeli

Kulla khan naeki boz afsaanai.

Translation: Oh! God have mercy on us

We have been caught by misery of *Begar*

It has ruined the young people

Listen the tale of the drudging the canals

Men and women have been subjected to *Begar*

They were starved and shivered in cold

The officials took gifts as bribe

Listen the tale of the drudging the canals.

Begar cannot be said to have been analogously applied throughout the State. It is also important to remember that several sections of the society enjoyed certain exemptions in the levy of *Begar* like Pandits,^{xlviii} Sikhs, religious clergy, privileged landlords, *Jagirdars* and cultivators working on the land grants of the privileged landholders.^{xlix} As Prof. Ganai writes:¹

The whole burden of *Begar* fell exclusively upon the common Muslim peasantry as the Hindus, Sayyids, Thakurs, Rajputs and Sikhs were exempted from it. There was no less a source of resentment among the Muslims of Kashmir. That is why the Glancy Commission recommended that when a requisition for labourers for *Kar-i-Sarkar* would arrive in a village, the burden should be uniformly imposed upon all sections of the agricultural community.

The following verses of Mirza Arif also testify the fact that all these classes' officials as well as the clergy tyrannized the people in the name of *Begar*.^{li}

Malaw, waizaw, muqdamaw, zaeldaraw

Shararat pasandaw tae sarmaydaraw

Samith zulum kur sarwiyl zulumgaraw

*Zarab guw lagan zakhmaki gul phalaan guw
Magar karwaan soun brunh brunh pakaan guw.*

Translation: Clergy, preachers and rural intermediaries
Troubleshooters and men of wealth
Together all these tyrannized us
Our wounds continued to be pestered
But our caravan continued to go on.

A close examination of *Begar* reveals that the tyrannical system had a baneful impact on socio-economic system of Kashmir. Firstly, *Begar* often resulted in a total dislocation of agricultural and other economic activities. It was mostly conducted in summer months when the lofty mountain passes remained open. Thus at a time, when the villager's presence was a must in their fields, the crops suffered owing to their absence. In consequence the village was impoverished and rendered incapable of paying its share of revenue to the State.^{lii} Abdul Ahad Azad too laments on the atrocities faced by the peasantry in terms of *Begar*:^{liii}

*Pakun chum kar-i-begaras
Barun chum genis sarkaras
Yeyam vograi bapari
Ba na zareh ishkeh bemari.*

Translation: I can't escape from *Begar*
And paying revenue in kind
I shall have to face the merchant who
would come to recover the debt I owe to him
How can I afford the romance?

Secondly, *Begar* had a disastrous effect on the developmental schemes and other works of the State. Many construction works, public and private, remained in the State of stand-stillness until the return of professionals, carpenters, masons, bricklayers from Gilgit and Astor.^{liv} Thus, the tyrannical system of *Begar* hampered the growth of any labour class in Kashmir.^{lv} As E. F. Knight writes:^{lvi}

When a dozen carpenters were required for Government work in a distant region, every carpenter in Srinagar was impressed by the police, and had to pay for his liberty. Sometimes all men of a trade-the bricklayers, for instance-getting wind that it is intended to make one of these raids upon them, fly from the capital to the mountains for a time, public and private building work coming to a standstill until they return.

Thirdly, the exploitative impact of *Begar* also manifested itself in the form of ruthless extortion of milk, poultry, grain, pulses, ghee, butter, cows, ponies, sheep, fowls, eggs, walnuts, blankets etc., free of cost from the villagers in order to save themselves from being taken for *Begar*.^{lvii}

Fourthly, the migration of people from Kashmir to different parts of Punjab and other parts of the British India resulted number of psycho-social problems. As Prof. Farooq Fayaz remarks:^{lviii}

The mass exodus of men folk to the distant lands of Punjab gave rise to number of psycho-social problems. During the long absence of male members, some appalling moral laxities found their way into Kashmiri family life, especially in peasant society. These resulted in an unending process of family feuds, divorces and breaking of joint family structure.

The following verses of Ghulam Ahmad Mahjoor also testify the fact:^{lix}

Haa gulav tohi maa sae vuchhvan yarr myon

Bulbulav tohy chhaeriton dildar myon

Vany divan poshan prechhum yemberzalan

Aav maa tohikun su jadoogoar myon

Rosha paaethe yita poshi baaghuk hith karith

Chaani yina pholi dilbaro gulzar myon.

Translation: O Roses, you must have seen my love
O Nightingales, pray seek him out
Roving amid flowers I ask my narcissus
Didn't that charmer pass by you?
Come slyly to watch the flowers, and

Let bloom my life's garden too.

Fifthly, because of the severity of the *Begar*, the institution of *Khana-damad* assumed a wide currency during the period under reference. Under this scheme of social governance, the plight of *Khan-damad* was always sad and pathetic. He was treated as chattel or serf and was always subjected to great injustice at the hands of his father-in-law and his own wife.^{lx} Commenting upon the deplorable position of *Khana-damad*, Walter A. Lawrence writes:^{lxi}

When a man's daughter is three years old...he takes a boy into his house as *Khana-damad* and this boy until he marries the daughter of the house, has to work like a drudge. And if forced labour was wanted for transport, the unfortunate *Khana-damad* was always sent. If he came back alive, he won his bride. If he died it did not matter as a son of the house, at any rate, escaped.....

This shows the position of a *Khana-damad* in father-in-law's house. The status of *Khana-damad* was no better than a slave who had no say and choice in his own matters and could not dare to dine even in the presence of his father-in-law.^{lxii} Moreover, he was treated as an outcaste in his own home. The fact is well reflected by following Kashmiri proverb:^{lxiii}

Gar pyathuk zaamitur, gov bari prethuk hoen.

Translation: A son-in-law who lives with his father-in-law is like a
dog at the outer door.

Lastly, owing to officials bullying in the conduct of *Begar* the villager became pessimistic.^{lxiv} He developed a somewhat fatalistic outlook on life and under the trying circumstances to become the worshipper of tyranny without any hope of redress, and without any authority to which he could appeal with the smallest hope of success, the villager found refuge in the shrines. But here he too was exploited to the maximum by the *Pirs*, *Pirzadas*, *Babzads* etc.^{lxv} In-fact his special veneration for these custodians of shrines grew out of his extreme poverty. Neither man nor nature took kindly to the poor villager.^{lxvi} Not infrequently he was tortured by natural calamities. The consequences of all this was degradation of morals in him.^{lxvii}

It was only after 1885 with the establishment of British Residency in Kashmir, the colonial State introduced some reforms for their own colonial interests. On the one hand they continuously pressed the Maharaja to eradicate the *Begar* system, but on the other hand, were actively

involved in perpetuating it.^{lxviii} According to Macdonald, at a minimum, the British had three specific reasons for maintaining the existing system of *Begar* or instituting some modified form of obligatory labour in Kashmir. He writes:^{lxix}

First, pressures to secure the frontier of British India against possible Russian invasion led to frequent conflicts with local rulers in Kohistan, Gilgit, Chitral, and Hunza and required coolie labour to transport supplies and munitions to the outposts of Kashmir and to travel with the troops during regular campaigns. Second, State and Indian Government officials travelling through the mountains required a trained transport corps to carry their luggage and supplies. In order to satisfy this irregular demand, men were taken from their villages and stationed at regular intervals on district roads for extended periods. Third, imperial institutions such as the Survey of India and, indirectly, the Royal Geographical Society were actively involved in creating an official geography of the Karakoram Range and demanded a regular supply of transport labour.

However, the institution of *Begar* witnessed some relaxations under British influence. The construction of the Gilgit Road and the Jehlum Valley Cart Road during 1890s brought a bit of relief to the *Begar*is. Wingate, in his Preliminary Report recommended that a fixed number of men be supplied from each village whenever the need arises for *Begar*.^{lxx} In 1889 Maharaja Pratap Sing ordered that the wages of 4 *annas* for every working day and 2 *annas* for every halt be fixed when engaging peasants as coolies for carrying baggage.^{lxxi} This was for the first time that the *Begar*is were supposed to be paid any remuneration. Another important reform was that the use of ponies to replace men being used as carriage of loads.^{lxxii} It does not mean *Begar* should be abolished but it changed it into forced but paid labour.

In 1891, the task to deal with *Begar* was entrusted to R.L. Logan, who after carefully analyzing the *Begar* system, submitted a report to the Maharaja. He suggested the fair distribution of *Begar* among all the inhabitants of Kashmir including Srinagar and also advocated for its continuance with some modifications.^{lxxiii}

In 1920, the State took an important step to abolish *Begar* system and decided to grant exemption to a greater number of people. Now the *Begar* was restricted only to the *Zamindars* in case of emergency.^{lxxiv} But the order was no more than a 'dead letter' because there is ample

evidence to show that it did exist even after that. As Prof. Ganai remarks:^{lxxv}

Though *Begar* was partially abolished by the Government in 1891 and fully in 1920, it continued unabated in different forms. Because of medieval means of communication, overall technological underdevelopment, the prevalence of feudal expenditure pattern of the State and the consequent meager resources at the disposal of the Government, the problem of raising labour power for carriage and construction purposes on nominal wages formed a critical feature of the Dogra administration.

If *Begar* was abolished in 1920 then why the State Council in 1922 opinion that *Begar* could not be abolished completely, as there were no means of transportation in the most parts of the State, especially in the far-flung areas.^{lxxvi} Then why the memorandums submitted by the Muslim representatives to the Maharaja in 1922^{lxxvii} and also to Lord Reading during his visit to Kashmir in 1924 for the complete eradication of *Begar*. Then why the Dogra Sadar Sabha submitted a number of memorandums from time to time in 1923, 1925, 1933 etc. to Maharaja for the complete abolition of *Begar* in the State.^{lxxviii} Moreover, as late as 1932, the Glancy Commission recommendations noted that “in many cases officials....employ villagers to carry their baggage free of charge over long distances and indent on villagers for other services without remuneration”.^{lxxix}

The introduction of *Kar-i-Sarkar* Bill in 1935, by *Praja Sabha* envisaged the removal of *Begar* from the State are nothing but a Xerox copy of rules of *Kar-i-Begar*.^{lxxx} In 1939, new rules enhancing the rates of impressed labour were made by the Governor of Kashmir^{lxxxi} but these hardly changed the nature of *Begar* in Kashmir. As Prof. Ganai writes:^{lxxxii}

As a matter of fact, till 1947, *Begar* was obligatory upon the villagers to construct and repair the canals and embankments besides helping the rulers and high officials in their hunting pursuits and to peddle the boats of the royal river processions without any remuneration. And if anyone showed negligence, he was harshly punished and fined.

Although *Begar* was totally abolished by the State in theory, but it continued to haunt people of Kashmir with renewed vigour till the end of Dogra rule in 1947. It was only after 1947 with the changing nature of the State, that the system of *Begar* was abolished in all its harsh forms.^{lxxxiii}

The Dogra administration corrupted a legitimate form of public work into forced labour to satisfy the interests of the State whereas the British modified a structure of forced labour in order to satisfy the interests of a new colonial power.

Reference

- i Khan, Muzaffar Ahmed, *Kashmiri Muslims: An Historical Outline*, Vol. II, Humanizer Publications, Srinagar, 2012, p.46.
- ii Khan, Mohammad Ishaq, "Some Aspects of Corvee (begar) in Kashmir (A. D. 833-1858)", *Jammu and Kashmir Research Biannual*, Srinagar, Vol.1, No. 2, 1974, p. 61.
- iii Saif-ud-Din, Mirza, *Akhbarat-i-Darbar-i-Maharaja Gulab Singh*, Vol. IV, 62ab, 64b, 66a, 67b, 70b and 74a. Other volumes of these *Akhbarat* are also replete with details regarding *Begar*. Taylor, Reynell G, *Lahore Political Diaries 1847-49 (Punjab Government Records)*, Vol. VI, P, 71; Khan, Ghulam Hassan, *Ideological Foundation of the Freedom Movement in Jammu and Kashmir (1931-1947)*, Bhavana Prakashan, Delhi, 2000, p. 56. The institution of *Begar* was the most cruel practice and forms of oppression established by the Dogra rulers to terrorize the population and keep them in submission. The misfortune of innocent Kashmiris in the form of *Begar* imposed upon them did not only hurt the pride and dignity of the already crushed peasants, but also accounted for the loss of immense manpower due to cold and starvation. Under the practice, thousands of people, village after village were picked up and ordered to carry loads of grains or other essentials to the frontier areas without being paid any compensation for the labour. Any refusal amounted to death. Naqash, Nasir A and Shah G.M., *Kashmir: From Crisis to Crisis*, APH Publishing Corporation, New Delhi, 1997, p. 39.
- iv Annual Administrative Report of the Jammu and Kashmir State for the Samvat 1996-97 (17th Oct. 1939-15th Oct. 1940), *The Ranbir Government Press*, Jammu. 1941, pp. 21-23.
- v Saraf writes, "In any regime, the civilians may die of hunger but the army continues to be adequately fed; so a permanent supply line had to be established between Srinagar and the northern areas to maintain the flow of supplies". Saraf, Muhammad Yusuf, *Kashmir's Fight for Freedom (1819-1946)*, Vol. I, Ferozsons Ltd. Lahore-Pakistan, 2005, p. 273.
- vi Ahmad, Khalid Bashir, *Kashmir: Exposing the Myth Behind the Narrative*, Sage Publications India Ltd., New Delhi, 2017, p. 78.
- vii Maharaja Gulab Singh himself employed forced labour on more than one occasion for carrying his baggage from Kashmir to Jammu. Singh, Bawa Satinder, *The Jammu Fox: A Biography of Maharaja Gulab Singh of Kashmir, 1792-1857*, Southern Illinois University Press, Carbondale, 1974, p. 169.
- viii ".....since the full amount that an ordinary man can carry is given to the *zamindar* or he was not allowed any *russad* (rations) for the journey and since little or nothing can be purchased on the road, it is obvious that he must either eat part of his load or starve; for which act their wages were reduced proportionately". Akhtar, Parveena, *The History of Kashmir in Political, Economic and Socio-cultural Perspective (1846-1885 A.D.)*, Kashmir Info Publications, Srinagar, 2007, p. 148.
- ix Bamzai, P. N. K., *A History of Kashmir Political, Social, Cultural from the Earliest Times to the Present Day*, Metropolitan Book Co., Delhi, 1962, pp. 658-59. Muzaffar Khan writes, "Villagers were dragged away from their houses by force and through fear, to carry the loads of the soldiers, food, fuel and even ammunition. The same village had to provide men, every time, not by rotation. If the labourer died on the way, his corpse was not returned to the bereaved family. On the other hand a substitute was demanded". Khan, Muzaffar Ahmad, *Kashmiri Muslims an Historical Outline*, Vol. II, p. 50.
- x Khan, Mohammad Ishaq, "Some Aspects of Corvee (begar) in Kashmir (A. D. 833-1858)", p. 61.
- xi Diary of Pandit Khunyal Lal, *Lahore Political Diaries*, Vol. VI, p. 260.
- xii Khan, Mohammad Ishaq, "Some Aspects of Corvee (begar) in Kashmir (A. D. 833-1858)", p. 62.
- xiii Wilson, Andrew, *The Abode of Snow: Observations on a Journey from Chinese Tibet to the Indian Caucasus, Through the Upper Valleys of the Himalaya*, William Blackwood & Sons, Edinburgh & London, 1876, pp. 267-88.
- xiv Thorp, Robert, *Cashmere Misgovernment*, Longmans, London, 1870, p. 74; Saraf, Muhammad Yusuf, *Kashmir's Fight for Freedom (1819-1946)*, Vol. I, p. 279; Akhtar, Parveena, *The History of Kashmir in Political, Economic and Socio-cultural Perspective (1846-1885 A.D.)*, p. 149.

-
- xv Ibid.
- xvi Thorp, Robert, *Cashmere Misgovernment*, pp. 98-99.
- xvii Hassan, Shah, *Tarikh-i-Hassan*, Vol. II, Research Library, Srinagar, pp. 869-70.
- xviii Three hundred labourers and their mules perished in a single storm on the Rajdiangan Pass between Bandipora and Guraz, in the autumn of 1890. Knight, E. F., *Where Three Empires Meet*, Longmans Green and Co., London, 1893, pp. 68-69.
- xix Lawrence writes, "Once when I was going up the Sindh Valley I came across some soldiers raising carriage for Gilgit. The *Havildar* admitted that he had torn the whole whisker off one man's face, and said he had done, it under instructions from a Pandit deputed from the *Tehsil*. He added that the people were so disinclined to go away for two months to Gilgit, that it was necessary to tear their hair out. He saw nothing to be ashamed of, and challenged my right to interfere". Lawrence to Nisbet, Nov. 13, 1889; NAI, For. Deptt. Sec. E, Progs. Nos. 295-326, Feb. 1891.
- xx It is difficult to say how many of the villagers died of cold and disease; how many died of starvation; how many fell into river or was beaten to death by the Dogra soldiers; or how many were sold as slaves in Dardistan or other parts of Central Asia. But their number must have been very large because there is both documentary and circumstantial evidence to support our contention. Khan, Mohammad Saleem, *The History of Jammu & Kashmir 1885-1925*, Gulshan Publishers, Srinagar, 2002, p. 127.
- xxi Hajini, Wahab Parray, *Dewan-i-Wahab*, edited by Prof. Mohi-ud-din Hajini, Jammu and Kashmir Academy of Art, Culture and Languages, Srinagar, 1971, p. 8.
- xxii Mrs. Hervey records that, "While entering in a village I heard nothing but weeping and on inquiry, I found that two hundred villagers were then being taken away to Gilgit. It is really distressing to hear nothing but mourning and lamentation in every village one enters". Mrs. Hervey, *The Adventures of a Lady in Tartary, Tibet, China and Kashmir*, Vol. 2, Hope and Co., London, 1853, p. 229.
- xxiii Biscoe, Tyndale, *Kashmir in Sunlight and Shade*, Seeley, Service & Co., London, 1922, p. 236.
- xxiv Ganai, Muhammad Yusuf, *Kashmir's Struggle for Independence (1931-1939)*, Mohsin Publications, 2003, p. 53.
- xxv ".....the more mention of Gilgit was sufficient to drive whole village to the hills, there to hide for days on end, until they were convinced that the danger of being pressed into service had passed". Norris, Dermot, *Kashmir-The Switzerland of India*, Gulshan Publishers, Srinagar, 1989, p. 94.
- xxvi Neve, Arthur, *Thirty Years in Kashmir*, Edward Arnold, London, 1913, p. 140; Akhtar, Parveena, *The History of Kashmir in Political, Economic and Socio-cultural Perspective (1846-1885 A.D.)*, p. 149.
- xxvii Lawrence, Walter R., *The Valley of Kashmir*, Chinara Publishing House, Srinagar, 1992, p. 413.
- xxviii Saraf, Muhammad Yusuf, *Kashmir's Fight for Freedom (1819-1946)*, Vol. I, Ferozoono Ltd. Lahore-Pakistan, 2005, p. 273.
- xxix Ibid., pp. 273-74; Arthur Neve writes about his passage through Rajdingan Pass where "I heard pitiful their tales of the plight of the poor coolies dragged from their homes in hundreds every year to carry supplies to the far off garrison of Gilgit. And I could realize some of the difficulties, for the unmade track were not easy for well-equipped lightly laden men, how much less for the porters, who had to carry sixty pound load in addition to their own personal rations for twenty days, clothing and grass shoes". Neve, Arthur, *Thirty Years in Kashmir*, p. 60.
- xxx Arthur Neve writes that while crossing Astor in the early eighties his old servant pointed out to him the places where he had seen groups of corpses, "on the Kamri Pass one of the camps was called "*murdadafan*" meaning the "burial ground", for some years previously an avalanche swept upon the party of soldiers camped there and buried them". Neve, Arthur, *Thirty Years in Kashmir*, p. 140.
- xxxi Thorp, Robert, *Cashmere Misgovernment*, pp. 76-77; Akhtar, Parveena, *The History of Kashmir in Political, Economic and Socio-cultural Perspective (1846-1885 A.D.)*, p. 149.
- xxxii Saraf, Muhammad Yusuf, *Kashmir's Fight for Freedom (1819-1946)*, Vol. I, p. 274.

- xxxiii Neve, Arthur, *Thirty Years in Kashmir*, p. 139.
- xxxiv Wingate, A., *Preliminary Report on Land Settlement in Kashmir and Jammu*, Lahore, 1888, p. 105.
- xxxv Lawrence, Walter R., *The Valley of Kashmir*, p. 413.
- xxxvi Malik, Fazal Hussain, *Kashmir Aur Dogra Raj (1848-1931)*, Gulshan Publishers, Srinagar, 1980, p. 138.
- xxxvii Saif-ud-Din, Mirza, *Akhbarat-i-Darbar-i-Maharaja Gulab Singh*, Vol. IV, f. 51a, f. 62b; Khan, Mohammad Ishaq, "Some Aspects of Corvee (begar) in Kashmir (A. D. 833-1858)", p. 61.
- xxxviii Hajini, Wahab Parray, *Dewan-i-Wahab*, edited by Prof. Mohi-ud-din Hajini, p. 8.
- xxxix Biscoe, Tyndale, *Kashmir in Sunlight and Shade*, p. 236; Khan, Ghulam Hassan, *Ideological Foundation of the Freedom Movement in Jammu and Kashmir (1931-1947)*, p. 57.
- xl Saraf, Muhammad Yusuf, *Kashmir's Fight for Freedom (1819-1946)*, Vol. I, p. 278.
- xli Biscoe, Tyndale, *Kashmir in Sunlight and Shade*, p. 236.
- xlii Interview with Mohammad Abdullah Bhat, resident of Kangan, Ganderbal, age 85 years old, dated on May 18, 2016.
- xliii Rahi, Rahman, *Novroz-o-Subah*, Kashmiri Department, Kashmir University Hazratbal, Srinagar, 2009, p. 26.
- xliv Arif, Mirza Ghulam Hassan Beg, *Kulyat-i- Arif*, edited by Prof. Ghulam Mohammad Shad, Mirza Arif Educational Trust, Srinagar, 2016, p. 385.
- xlvi Lawrence, Walter R., *The Valley of Kashmir*, p. 414.
- xlvi Hajini, Wahab Parray, *Dewan-i-Wahab*, edited by Prof. Mohi-ud-din Hajini, p. 76.
- xlvi Aatish, G. N., *Koushir Luka Beth*, Vol. VIII, Jammu and Kashmir Academy of Art, Culture and Languages, Srinagar, 1988, p. 268.
- xlvi E.F. Knight observed: "All Hindus were exempted from *Begar*, the burden falling on Mohammedan villages only. Some of these escape it, for it occasionally happens that a whole village is sold by its cultivators for a nominal sum to some influential Hindus, on condition that he obtains for him exemption from *Begar*, while they remain on the land as his tenants. So many others, more or less, fraudulent methods for attaining the same end are practiced that the incidence of the *Begar* falls very oppressively on certain poor and unprotected villages which cannot afford to purchase immunity". Knight, E. F., *Where Three Empires Meet*, p. 70.
- xlvi Saif-ud-Din, Mirza, *Akhbarat-i-Darbar-i-Maharaja Gulab Singh*, Vol. III, f. 27; INA, R. Logan, *Report on Financial Condition of Kashmir*, 1892, p. 29; Pampori, Mohammad Sultan, *Kashmir in Chains(1819-1992)*, Pampori Publishing House, Srinagar, 1992, p. 52. The total population of Kashmir as per the census of 1891 was 8, 14,241. Out of which, the Hindus were 52, 576, the Sikhs 4,092, the Christians 132, the Paris 08 and the rest 7, 57,433 were the Muslims. Thus out of the whole population of Muslims 414,241 persons were actually liable to *Begar*. Census of India, pp. 14-15; Imperial Gazetteer of India, Vol. XV, pp. 120-121. About half of the population lived in lands which were, by rule, exempted from *Begar*. Lawrence, Walter R., *The Valley of Kashmir*, p. 412.
- i Ganai, Muhammad Yusuf, *Kashmir's Struggle for Independence (1931-1939)*, p. 53.
- li Arif, Mirza Ghulam Hassan Beg, *Kulyat-i- Arif*, edited by Prof. Ghulam Mohammad Shad, p. 260.
- lii Knight, E. F., *Where Three Empires Meet*, p. 69; Khan, Mohammad Ishaq, "Some Aspects of Corvee (begar) in Kashmir (A. D. 833-1858)", p. 64.
- liii Azad, Abdul Ahad, *Kulyat-i-Azad*, edited by Dr. Padam Nath Ganjoo, Jammu and Kashmir Academy of Art, Culture and Languages, Srinagar, 1987, p. 277. These Kashmiri verses translated into English by Prof. Ganai in his book, *Kashmir's Struggle for Independence (1931-1939)*, p. 53.
- liv Throp, Robert, *Cashmere Misgovernment*, p. 45; Khan, Ghulam Hassan, *Ideological Foundations of the Freedom Movement in Jammu and Kashmir (1931-1947)*, p. 58.
- lv Khan, Mohammad Ishaq, "Some Aspects of Corvee (Begar) in Kashmir, A.D. 833-1858", p. 64.
- lvi Knight, E. F., *Where Three Empires Meet*, pp. 69-70.
- lvii Khan, Ghulam Hassan, *Ideological Foundations of the Freedom Movement in Jammu and Kashmir (1931-1947)*, p. 58; Ahmad, Parvez, *Economy and Society of Kashmir: A Study in Change and Continuity (1885-1925)*, p. 131.
- lviii Fayaz, Farooq, *Kashmir Folklore: A Study in Historical Perspective*, Gulshan Books, Srinagar, 2008, p. 248.

-
- lix Mahjoor, Ghulam Ahmad, *Kulyat-i- Mahjoor*, edited by Mohammad Yusuf Tang, Jammu and Kashmir Academy for Art, Culture and Languages, Srinagar, 1983, p. 192.
- lx Ahangar, Altaf Hussain, *Customary Succession among Muslims: A Critical Appraisal of Judicial Interpretation in Kashmir*, Uppal Publishing House, New Delhi, 1986, p. 178.
- lxi Lawrence, Walter R., *The Valley of Kashmir*, p. 267.
- lxii Ahangar, Altaf Hussain, *Customary Succession among Muslims: A Critical Appraisal of Judicial Interpretation in Kashmir*, pp. 179-180.
- lxiii Fayaz, Farooq, *Kashmir Folklore: A Study in Historical Perspective*, p. 155.
- lxiv Walter R. Lawrence wrote to Nisbet “.....the Kashmiri cultivator attributes all his misery and meanness to *Begar*”. NAI, For. and Gen. Deptt., Secret-E. Nos: 295-96 of 1891.
- lxv Khan, Mohammad Ishaq, “Some Aspects of Corvee (*Begar*) in Kashmir, A.D. 833-1858”, p. 65.
- lxvi Knight, E. F., *Where Three Empires Meet*, p. 69.
- lxvii Glancy Commission Report, p. 39; Khan, Mohammad Ishaq, “Some Aspects of Corvee (*Begar*) in Kashmir, A.D. 833-1858”, p. 65.
- lxviii Lone, Suhail-ul-Rehman, “*Begar* (Forced Labour) in Kashmir during the Dogra period (1846-1947 A. D.)”, *Indian History Congress*, Proceedings 73rd Session, 2012, p. 867.
- lxix Macdonald, Kenneth Iain, “Push and Shove: Spatial History and the Construction of a Portering Economy in Northern Pakistan”, *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, Vol. 40, No. 2, University of Toronto, Canada, 1998, p. 292.
- lxx Wingate, Andrew, *Preliminary Report of Settlement Operations in Kashmir and Jammu*, Lahore, 1888, pp. 37-38.
- lxxi Diary of Pratap Sing, p. 23; Lone, Suhail-ul-Rehman, “*Begar* (Forced Labour) in Kashmir during the Dogra period (1846-1947 A. D.)”, p. 866.
- lxxii ‘Article in “*Pioneer*” (5th Nov.1890) regarding the system of “*Begar*”, File Nos. 152-158, Dec.1890, Foreign Deptt., Secret-E, NAI, Administrative Report, 1941, p. 25; Lone, Suhail-ul-Rehman, “*Begar* (Forced Labour) in Kashmir during the Dogra period (1846-1947 A. D.)”, p. 866.
- lxxiii Logan, R. L., *Report on the Financial Conditions of the Kashmir State*, NAI, For. Deptt. Secret-E, File No: 513-E, 17th Nov., 1892.
- lxxiv JKA, Pol. and Gen. Deptt., File No: 33 of 1920.
- lxxv Ganai, Muhammad Yusuf, *Kashmir's Struggle for Independence (1931-1939)*, p. 50.
- lxxvi JKA, Pol. and Gen. Deptt., File No: 68/Misc. 73 of 1922.
- lxxvii Representation of the President *Anjuman-i- Nusrat-ul-Islam*, Srinagar, regarding the backward conditions of Muslims of Kashmir’, JKA, Pol. and Gen. Deptt., File No: 1609/G-84 of 1923. The Muslim leaders of different hues: the *Mirwaiz* of *Jama Masjid*, the *Mirwaiz* of *Khankah-i-Mulla*, Saad-ud-Din Shawl, Noor Shah, Hassan Shah and Syed Jalali submitted, in 1922 a memorandum to the Viceroy with different demands and one of the demands was abolition of *Begar* in the State. Ahad, Abdul, *Kashmir Rediscovered*, Humayun Publishing Co., Srinagar, 2006, pp. 292-293; Zutshi, Chitralekha, *Languages of Belonging: Islam, Regional Identity, and the Making of Kashmir*, Hurst & Company, London, 2004, pp. 200-201; Lone, Suhail-ul-Rehman, “*Begar* (Forced Labour) in Kashmir during the Dogra Period (1846-1947 A. D.)”, p. 868.
- lxxviii Dass, Udham, “Abolition of *Begar* and Dogra Sadar Sabha: J & K”, *Punjab History Conference*, Proceedings 40th Session, 2010, pp. 457-463.
- lxxix Glancy Commission Report, p. 39; Lone, Suhail-ul-Rehman, “*Begar* (Forced Labour) in Kashmir during the Dogra period (1846-1947 A. D.)”, p. 868.
- lxxx JKA, For. and Pol. Deptt., File No: 153/PR-12 of 1935.
- lxxxi JKA, For. and Pol. Deptt., File No: 113/G1-79 of 1939.
- lxxxii Ganai, Muhammad Yusuf, *Kashmir's Struggle for Independence (1931-1939)*, pp. 52-53.
- lxxxiii Beg, Mirza M. Afzal, *On the Way to Golden Harvests-Agricultural Reforms in Jammu and Kashmir*, Government of Jammu and Kashmir, 1951, pp. 15-17.