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Journey of Kashmiri Women from Domestic Spheres to Political Arenas-A Case Study of Dogra Regime

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ABSTRACT

In this study an attempt has been made to analyse the role of Kashmiri women in the struggle against Dogra rule, and their often-overlooked contributions to the freedom movement. Central to the narrative is the 1931 arrest of Abdul Qadeer, which ignited widespread protests in Srinagar. The study focuses on the active participation of women, particularly from the working classes, who, despite being illiterate and traditionally confined to domestic roles, emerged as key figures in resisting oppression. These women participated in demonstrations, endured police brutality, and vocally opposed the Dogra regime. it recounts the heroism of individuals like Fazli, Sajida Bano, and Jan Ded, whose sacrifices have been overlooked in historical accounts. Their active involvement demonstrates a significant shift in the societal roles of women during this period. The study also covers crucial events such as Kashmir Day, the first armed resistance in 1931, and the influence of the All India Kashmir Committee.

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INTRODUCTION

The historical setting of Kashmir's freedom struggle paints a vivid tableau of resistance, where women from various strata of society emerged as key figures. This paper seeks to explore and acknowledge the remarkable, yet often overshadowed role of Kashmiri women in the anti-Dogra and anti-colonial movements. Their contributions, transcending class and educational boundaries, were instrumental in shaping the region's quest for autonomy and justice. Theoretical underpinnings of this analysis are rooted in feminist historical revisionism and postcolonial theory. By examining the participation of women in the Kashmiri struggle through a feminist lens, this paper aims to bring forth the narratives of those who fought valiantly yet remained uncelebrated in mainstream historical discourse. Postcolonial theory further aids in understanding the complexities of their resistance against an oppressive regime within the broader context of colonialism and its aftermath. The onset of the struggle against Dogra rule witnessed an organic and spontaneous participation of women, primarily from the lower socioeconomic classes. The trial of Abdul Qadeer in 1931, a significant event in Kashmir's history, ignited widespread protests. Women, often illiterate and from humble backgrounds, stood shoulder to shoulder with men, challenging the oppressive Dogra regime. Their involvement was not a result of mobilization by the educated elite; rather, it was their movement that later inspired the participation of educated women. This phase of the struggle was marked by a raw, unfiltered expression of resistance, transcending the boundaries of traditional gender roles.

Research Objectives

The present research article aims to uncover and illuminate the underrepresented role of Kashmiri women in the anti-Dogra movement. It focuses on analysing their cross-class participation, the evolution of their protest strategies, and their impact on challenging traditional gender norms within the broader context of India's struggle for independence.

Research Methods

The methodology involves a review of historical documents, archival materials, and eyewitness accounts to analyse the role of Kashmiri women in the anti-Dogra movement. This study employs qualitative analysis to interpret the data, ensuring a nuanced understanding of the women's contributions and the socio-political context of their actions.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Kashmiri women notably contributed to the resistance against Dogra dominance. At a gathering in Khanqa-he-Maula, Abdul Qadeer, a non-local Muslim in Srinagar, made a notable statement about their lack of firearms but abundance of stones and brickbats. His arrest on June 25, 1931, led to his trial beginning on July 6, 1931, at Srinagar's high court, culminating in a verdict at the central jail on July 13, 1931. An estimated crowd of 4,000 to 5,000 people, chanting slogans like "Allaho-akbar" and "Qadeer Zindabaad," witnessed the trial and faced police gunfire, resulting in many casualties.[1] Remarkably, working-class Muslim women valiantly joined men in opposing Dogra tyranny. Initially, these resilient women, mostly from lower socio-economic backgrounds and lacking formal education, spearheaded the movement, which educated women later joined. Following martial law's implementation, Srinagar experienced severe repression, with Kashmiris subjected to humiliating acts of allegiance to Dogra authority. In this period, women, including

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those with infants, actively protested in the streets against the Dogra regime, calling for the release of detained leaders and the establishment of democracy in Kashmir. These demonstrations often met with brutal police action, resulting in abuse, molestation, and fatalities, with bodies found in Srinagar's rivers. On July 27, a women-led procession with black flags emerged, and on September 6, when military control intensified, a group of female demonstrators faced violent suppression. During a speech on August 2, 1931, a female orator underscored their resilience and appealed to international bodies for support, challenging the army's treatment of women and vowing to confront any oppression.[2]

In the city, frequent marches of women and children became a regular occurrence, with constant updates about these demonstrations emerging from various city areas. Observers often saw Ladi Shah reciting state-critical ballads, surrounded by large crowds of supportive women. These ballads typically featured a recurring chorus. Following an appeal by the All India Kashmir Committee, the state widely observed Kashmir Day on August 14, 1931. The goal was to exert pressure on the Indian government to recognize and grant the basic rights withheld from Kashmiris.[3] A complete shutdown (Hartal) was observed, with numerous processions and gatherings. Around thirty thousand women attended a significant assembly at Mazar-e-shohada, with speeches from Sheikh Mohammed Abdullah, Chaudhri Ghulam Abbas Khan, and Mistri Yaqub Ali. A subsequent large gathering took place at Jamia Masjid, where the martyrs' bloodied garments were displayed. Delhi's Muslim community marked Kashmir Day over two days. The first instance of armed resistance by Kashmiri Muslims against government overreach occurred on September 24, 1931. Notices were plastered across Srinagar, declaring a Jihad against the government, yet affirming no conflict with Hindus. By early afternoon, approximately fifteen thousand individuals, armed with various tools and weapons, had gathered.[4]

During the tumultuous events of 1931, a notable figure, Fazli, tragically lost her life on September 24 when the military opened fire on a women's procession in Maisuma bazaar, Srinagar. In a similar incident, 25-year-old Sajida Bano, a recent widow from Shopian, was fatally wounded by military gunfire, passing away immediately. Additionally, Jan Begum from Srinagar, bereaved spouse of Abel Lone, also fell victim to police gunfire. These women, despite their lack of education and lower social standing, were precursors to the movement that later saw the participation of educated women.[5]

Jan Ded, another significant but often overlooked figure in the struggle, emerged from humble beginnings. Despite her lack of formal education, she was a dynamic participant in the struggle against injustice, distinguishing herself with her pragmatic approach and commitment to secular values, setting her apart from many of Kashmir's male political figures. Her bold and assertive nature eventually led to opposition from senior Muslim leaders, resulting in her withdrawal from active politics post-1934.[6] A memorandum to the Maharaja sheds light on the severe mistreatment endured by both men and women: unprovoked attacks by constables, arbitrary arrests, and extreme violence under martial law, leading to the dishonoring and destruction of Muslim homes, with numerous incidents of assault and even killings during protests, such as the one on September 22 at the Jamia Masjid.[7] The military's response was severe, with numerous rounds fired, resulting in the death of three protesters on the spot and injuries to many others. Concurrently, in Maisuma, the military's gunfire targeted a different procession, which included

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women, resulting in the deaths of two men and injuries to three individuals, one of whom was a woman. Women's processions became a notable aspect of the protests in various parts of Srinagar and in the towns of Baramulla, Sopore, Islamabad (Anantnag), and Shopian. The courage of these Kashmiri women, traditionally homebound and unaware of their rights, was remarkable as they stood resolutely alongside men in their struggle against Dogra domination.[8] On August 18, a tragic incident occurred when a Muslim vegetable seller was assaulted by Pandit youths near Khankah-e-sokhta, leaving her almost unclothed. Later, a Muslim woman's body was found in a river, suspected to have been drowned by soldiers after a heinous assault.[9]

On January 28, 1932, a significant women-led procession was halted near Jhelum's right bank as the police obstructed their path, with a sub-inspector hurling insults at political leaders. In a striking act of defiance, Begum Bohru, a widow from Baramulla, threw a kangri filled with hot coals at the sub-inspector, permanently disfiguring his face, but she was fatally shot immediately thereafter. Noor Gujri, a milkman's daughter known for her bold statements and acts, was repeatedly arrested and released, drawing attention and support from national leaders who criticized her unjust imprisonment.[10] In 1939, the transformation of the Muslim Conference into the National Conference marked a crucial change. The Quit India Movement, launched by the Indian National Congress in 1942, led to the arrest of many leaders. By mid-1943, these leaders were released and visited Srinagar in the summers of 1944 and 1945, maintaining close ties with Sheikh Abdullah. Despite Abdullah's non-involvement in the Quit India Movement and differing policy stances, Congress leaders overlooked these differences to strengthen their bond with him. The annual party session took place in Srinagar at Pather Masjid from September 25 to 30, 1944.[11]

The significance of the session lay in its adoption of a comprehensive program for Kashmir's socio-political and economic development, termed "New Kashmir." This groundbreaking manifesto was a milestone in women's rights, as it not only provided them the privilege to vote and stand in elections but also assured them of equal status with men in various spheres, including politics, economics, culture, and state services. During the period from 1939 to May 1944, while the freedom movement in Kashmir did not escalate into widespread agitation, the persistent call for reforms and the establishment of a responsible government continued vigorously.[12]

Following the announcement of election results across the subcontinent, the British Government initiated a dialogue with Indian political leaders through a cabinet mission, aiming to formulate a mutually acceptable framework for power transition. In this context, Sheikh Abdullah presented a memorandum famously known as the "Quit Kashmir Memorandum."[13] This document emphasized that the aspirations of the Kashmiri people transcended beyond the mere establishment of a responsive governance system. It asserted the Kashmiri's right to complete liberation from the autocratic Dogra rule. Abdullah's memorandum highlighted Kashmir's unique position - geographically important at the confluence of India, China, and Russia, and symbolically significant as a land enriched by its natural beauty and resources.[14] More importantly, he pointed out that Kashmir, with its linguistic, cultural, and historical homogeneity, represented a unique blend of communities united in their quest for national self-determination.[15]

In the tumultuous period of 1946, Sheikh Abdullah catalyzed a significant political upheaval in the state of Jammu and Kashmir with the initiation of the "Quit Kashmir" movement. This movement, which began with Sheikh Abdullah's fervent speech in Srinagar on May 15, 1946,

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marked a turning point in the region's history. It was characterized by widespread public demonstrations and meetings, notably at prominent locations like Khanqahe-Maula and Hazratbal, drawing substantial participation from the local population, particularly women from various backgrounds.[16] These women, transcending socio-economic divisions, actively engaged in the movement, demonstrating their commitment to the cause through their spirited participation in public processions and meetings. This defiance was not without risk, as evidenced by the story of Zoni Gujjri, a young woman who faced repeated incarcerations and assaults by armed forces.[17] Despite these hardships, her resolve never wavered. Her poignant story is further marred by personal tragedy, as she lost her young son to police violence during a demonstration.[18]

Similarly, the story of Fatima, a peasant woman, stands as a testament to the brutality faced by demonstrators. Fatima was fatally shot by the Dogra forces in Anantnag while leading a protest march. This incident underscores the harsh reality of the movement, where even peaceful protesters were met with lethal force.[19] The presence of armed Dogra soldiers, patrolling the streets with bayonets at the ready, created an atmosphere of intimidation and fear. The "Quit Kashmir" movement, while often linked to the Indian National Congress's influence, showcased a more complex relationship. While it is true that prominent Congress leaders like Jawaharlal Nehru lent their support to Sheikh Abdullah, the movement itself faced criticism from Congress-affiliated media outlets. This indicates a nuanced interaction between the national political landscape and regional movements.[20] Among the key figures of the movement were women who played important roles in both organizing and participating in demonstrations. Begum Zainab, for instance, broke away from traditional purdah norms to lead protests and deliver empowering speeches. Her efforts in fundraising for victims of Dogra aggression were crucial in sustaining the movement's momentum.[21]

Another prominent figure was Begum Akbar Jahan, Sheikh Abdullah's wife. Following her husband's arrest, she took an active leadership role in the movement. Her involvement went beyond leading protests; she was instrumental in raising funds for those affected by the Dogra regime's repression. Her actions were a beacon of hope and resilience, inspiring many to continue the struggle.[22] The "Quit Kashmir" movement represented a crucial juncture in the history of Jammu and Kashmir. It was a movement that not only challenged the existing political order but also transformed the socio-political landscape of the region. The active participation of women, often facing severe repercussions, highlighted their indispensable role in the freedom struggle. Their courage and determination in the face of adversity played a vital role in shaping the movement and left an indelible mark on the history of Kashmir.[23] These women, hailing from diverse backgrounds, stood united in their fight against oppression. Their contribution, often overshadowed by the narratives centered around male leaders, was fundamental to the movement's progress. Their stories of bravery, sacrifice, and leadership challenge the conventional narratives of political movements being predominantly male-driven.[24]

In February of 1947, the state's cost of living reported a significant rise, which was cause for concern. For the purpose of providing food at subsidised prices, the National Conference established a food committee, with Begum Abdullah serving as the body's head. A widespread movement against the ever-increasing expense of living was initiated by her. 1947 was the year that saw the establishment of both India and Pakistan. Although Sheikh Abdullah was granted his

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freedom in September 1947, he continued to maintain his opposition to the two-nation doctrine.[25] Maharaja Hari Singh found himself in a difficult situation as a result of his choice to belong to either India or Pakistan. On the one hand, the Dogra Hindu community that is a part of the Maharaja's family would find itself in a position of subservience if the state were to become a member of Pakistan. The prospects of an independent state were fostered by him.[26] There was a ratification of an agreement between the Maharaja's authority and the government of Pakistan in August of 1947. This agreement indicated that the Pakistani government would take responsibility for the state's post and telegraph system and provide the state with vital goods; however, India refused to comply with this arrangement until the political prisoners were released. Due to the fact that the Maharaja declined, the agreement was seen to be inconclusive. An unwavering commitment to India was made by the National Conference, which also expressed its support for the incorporation of Kashmir into India.[27] During the National Conference, individuals were requested to collectively contribute their firearms and automobiles. We organised training sessions for those who volunteered their time. It was at this point that the people's militia in Kashmir established its existence. Also joining the militia were young women.When Zoni Gujjari joined the women's defence force, she underwent military training at a location that is currently the location of the New Secretariat building. During this time period, she exerted a great deal of effort so that the Dogra government could be overthrown and Kashmir could undergo democratic reform. [28]The title of "Zoni Mujahid" was bestowed to her as a manner of expressing gratitude for her services. Volunteer troops consisting of both men and women were formed under the leadership of Sheikh Mohammed Abdullah National Militia and Women's Defence Corps in order to protect the territory from the assault that was being carried out by the tribal raiders. The Women's Self-Defense Corps (WSDC) became the forerunner of societal transformations as a result of the radical and diversified actions it engaged in. Gujjari, who was dressed in traditional Kashmiri garb and slung a rifle across her shoulders, was a representation of the Women's Democratic Socialist Congress (WDSC). As a prominent member of the women's section of the Peace Brigade, which fought against the Pakistani invaders, Begum Abdullah was also a prominent figure. "Begum Abdullah was a woman who was not only highly intelligent but also a devoted Muslim." During the year 1947, when the nation was in the midst of a communal frenzy, she was the one who took the flame of love and peace to remote regions spread across the state. She provided the victims of the division with the motherly care and affection that they needed in order to recover.[29] It was only because of her hard efforts that the state of Jammu and Kashmir was able to avoid the religious violence that would have otherwise occurred. It was the people of Kashmir who bestowed upon her the honorific of "Mader-e-Meherban," which translates to "kind mother." Miss Mehmuda Ahamd Shah, a pioneering educationist and promoter of women's empowerment, together with other outstanding women, was in the vanguard of WSDC.[30] At the time that she was a student in Lahore, she became a member of the Punjab Students Federation, which was engaged in a struggle against the imperialism of the British. She established a "Free thinkers society" in Kashmir, which served to bring together the intellectuals of the people in the state. During this time, she became a member of the Freedom Movement, which was led by Sheikh Abdullah. During a time when the subcontinent was in the midst of a communal frenzy, she did a great service by restoring normalcy to the state. Following that, there was Begum Zainab, a leader at the grassroots level. Under the auspices of the National

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Congress, she actively fought against the Dogra rule. With a gun in her hand, she was at the forefront of leading women's contingents and taking charge of the political agenda of the Women's Social Democratic Congress (WSDC).[31] In the later stages of the Quit Kashmir Movement, Sajida Zameer Ahmad was also someone who was associated with the movement. In 1947, she became a member of the World Service for Development and began working in a number of refugee camps.

CONCLUSION

In the quest for Kashmir's freedom, the role of women was remarkably prominent. Numerous women, transcending the safety and familiarity of their homes, actively engaged in the quest for Kashmir's liberation. Regrettably, historical accounts have often overlooked their significant contributions. This paper endeavors to shed light on and honor the vital role these women played in Kashmir's freedom movement. A key observation from our research reveals that these women stood shoulder to shoulder with men in their fight against Dogra and colonial oppression, demonstrating gender parity in their struggle. Additionally, it was observed that this participation transcended socio-economic boundaries, with women from various social classes actively participating in Kashmir's nationalist movement.

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