

FOOD SHORTAGES IN KASHMIR

RESPONSE OF SOCIETY

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Abstract

This paper aims at explaining the food crisis that ravaged the life and conditions of the people of Kashmir during pre-modern times. It focuses on a variety of causes behind food shortages with a view to broaden our understanding about the present and to provide a guideline for the future. Besides analysing the philosophy of food shortages, it also dwells upon how the various sections of the society from the 'landlords' through galladars (grain merchants) and waddars (money-lenders) to peasants and workers responded to the situation and the web of consequences that followed from it impacting polity, economy, mentality and culture of the society.

Keywords

Famine, Food Stock, Survival, Crises, Surplus, Peasant, Migration, Vagabondage, Landlords, Money Lenders.

Introduction

The valley of Kashmir situated in the bosom of the western Himalayas at an average elevation of 6000ft¹, encircled by an unbroken chain of heaven high mountains and presenting an interesting morphology, witnessed tremendous devastation on account of food shortages of various natures. In fact, like other agrarian societies of the world, food crisis had also been the pre-dominant feature of the Kashmir society caused by a wide range of factors both natural and artificial. However, it is pertinent to highlight that there prevailed in the valley two-types of shortages, *apikaal* or subsistence crisis and *drag* or famine.

***Apikaal* (Subsistence Crisis)**

Apikaal is a local name of the recurrent almost annual, food shortage faced by the masses effected not less than 90% of the population of the valley and having no parallels in the annals of the history of the Indian subcontinent. This type of food shortage was faced by the people during the spring and early months of summer as the food available at their command could suffice their needs only for five to six months. For the remaining part of the year the peasant had to battle for survival. Though *apikaal* was not responsible for death en masse but it certainly made the people vulnerable to death as they had to forcibly depend on sub-standard foods or those foods which were not good

for health making them vulnerable to diseases.

Oral Evidence

As per the unanimous version of the octogenarian people, the produce left with the peasant by the state machinery could suffice his needs only for four to five months of the year. The rest of the year they survived on rice gruel, vegetables (both green and dried) and different seasonal fruits, among which the first one was mulberry fruit, others that followed were apricot, apples, pears, etc. to help the people to survive upon. Wild produce (both vegetables and fruits) was another substitute for the people. Besides the peasant's sustenance on these eatables for the major part of the year, he sometimes sold his property in lieu of paltry quantity of food.²

Muhammad Naji Munawar (resident of Kapran Shopyian) says:

The period from spring to autumn used to be the toughest period of the year in terms of food availability. During these months we used to feed mostly on wild fruits like mulberry, chanch, strawberry, etc. Fruit trees of soar apples (cheuk choent) and a variety of pears locally called as 'Bata Tang' (consumed in place of rice), were planted to support life during the period of food shortages.

Quoting Abdul Gani Baba (resident of Tral Pulwama):

During the cultivating season (June to August) when the peasant sweat his brow his staple food was already exhausted. The only food available to him at that time used to be raw fruits, bottle guards (aleh), beans (Rajmah-hembeh), knoll-kohl (hakh), and some other vegetables.

Ghulam Ahmad Khanday (resident of Parganam Phak) says:

Rice was not cultivated in the pargana Phak for the lack of irrigation facilities till 1950s. It was only from the time when Shalteng Canal, popular as Bakshi Kuhl, was constructed that this area was able to produce rice and the people tasted the staple food to the satisfaction. Till then maize was the staple food. The scarcity of food almost for half-a-year forced the people to survive on coarse food-grains [buck wheat - trombeh; kangni - shol; chena - pingeh; barley - vishkeh; beans (mung and peas); boiled maize - whaat and half grinded maize (satu) with tea]. Once a lady (named Tajeh) in our neighbourhood felt unconscious during day time and we all ran to their house. After enquiring about the cause it was found that she had not taken food for the past nine days. At times the raw and unhygienic food on which the people survived was the cause of many diseases.

Abdul Karim Wagay (resident of Padgampur, Awantipur, Pulwama) *while recollecting his father's (who had died at the age of 102 in 2010) experiences, with whom he had shared a major period of his life, Wagay narrated that the other options available to the people for survival after the depletion of their stocks, usually after six months, were satu (roasted and grinded maize) and wat (a preparation made of half grinded and boiled maize) as maize was the only food crop grown in the area till 1950s.*

Haji Abdul Rahman Mir (resident of Shadipora Pattan Baramulla says: *Till the construction of Sumbal Canal (Official name) popular as Shiekh Kuhl as it was constructed by Sheikh Mohammad Abdullah in the Sumbal-Sonawari area of district Baramulla the people cultivated only maize. During the scarcities people survived up on berries of mulberry (tul) during spring season, on fish during summer and barley (wishkeh) during autumn.*

Quoting Haji Aziz Parray (resident of Chodus Awantipora Pulwama): *The winters used to be long and harsh but the people were acclimatized with such conditions. We used to feed on dry vegetables like dried guards (al-hatchi), dried brinjal (wangan Hatchi), dried knoll-khol (hukh hakh), handh, etc.*

Hamid-ullah Bhat (resident of Arrah Kulgam) says: *During winters, people mostly used to go to Punjab in search of manual job or physical work (mazuer) to eke out living. I myself had gone to Punjab twenty five times to earn livelihood. Those people who stayed in the valley took to spinning and weaving and survived upon dried vegetables, kachniel handh, hakeh kandh, posh-handh and wild produce mainly different varieties of knoll-khol (pambeh hakh, dij dij hakh, shranzal hakh, yendurtul hakh) and van pran (wild spring onion or shallot).*

The distressing economic condition faced by the valley people gave birth to the following proverbs:

'Doh Kadun Go Koh Kadun'

In the period of scarcity and starvation, passing a day without food and meals was equivalent to passing a year.

*'Wathiv Kuthav Khayew Shikaar Maaz
Wathiv Nai Teh Khayev Panun Maaz'*

In strife and struggle a person was compelled to live on the hunting of wild animals and birds, otherwise, he had the only option to die in starvation.

*'Bujeh Lob Kujeh Tul Cheont
Doh Dish Gai Teh Haptan khay'*

In the time of starvation; the people used to go to jungles in search of wild grown fruits and vegetables. In the strife; an old woman found a fruit (an apple) under a tree and continued to visit the spot to collect the fruits for some days for her survival. Finally she fell victim to a wild bear as one day she encountered with the animal in this strife; the food was basically the food of that animal.

'Bata Thoda Toh Bismillah Bechara Kya Karay'

Muslims believe that to begin the eating of meals they shall begin it with the name of Allah which spiritually suffices their bodily need. Since the people had too scanty food, the proverb took its origin that when food is too less; how Bismillah (the name of Allah) will suffice the need.

'Batah Dadeh Chai Wateh Wil Gachan'

For want of meals (Rice) the people would lose their way, country and relations as the search for the same would take them to distant lands unheard and unknown to them.

Recorded Evidence

The written evidence mentions only acute food crisis due to crop failures leaving out the food shortages the poor sections, who constituted the largest segment of the society, faced invariably for most of the year. However, we have produced whatever little evidence the written sources provided to support that food shortages existed even during normal times in the valley.

The peasants lived for the most part of the year on sub-standard diet like, rice gruel, vegetables, wild fruits tea, and grass or without food for days.³ In fact according to the 19th and 20th century observers the condition of Kashmiri peasantry was worse than that of the peasants living in elsewhere in India.⁴ This is also substantiated by the fact that even in normal times the peasant could not dream of having a food-stock which could suffice his basic necessities till he could harvest his crops.⁵ This was due to the fact that in Kashmir the state demand from the peasant was far in excess of his surplus produce (i.e., the produce over and above that required for his subsistence). It is, therefore, no wonder to come across a decline in the number of Kashmiri peasants⁶ and to see them roving from place to place.⁷ Moorcraft noted the heart rending condition of the people:⁸

The number of Kashmirians.....and their appearance, half naked and miserably emaciated, presented a ghastly picture of poverty and starvation.

G.T. Vigne, who visited Kashmir in 1835, found exactly the same situation:⁹

...not a day passed when traveling in the valley, that I didn't see the bleached remains of some unfortunate wretch who had fallen a victim either to sickness or starvation; and principally, as I had afterwards reason to believe, to the consequences of the dreadful scarcity with which Kashmir was afflicted...

During the six months when the food was deficient the common masses in the absence of any relief from the state were forced to sell whatever little property in terms of trees, cattle or blankets they had produced during the year or exchanging the land for a few seers (seer is less than one kilogram) of rice to appease their hunger. Vagabondage or itinerant begging was largely the outcome of food shortages. Either they were migrating from rural homes to urban centres where they hoped to beg for their food or they wandered out from towns and cities into the open country-side in a last ditch attempt to find anything to eat. As per Joseph Wolff:¹⁰

The country is so completely subjugated, that the natives except a few traders in shawls, are nothing better than so many beggars. B.C. Hugel narrates his encounter with a Brahmin, who stopped his horse, seized the bridle and demanded alms. Hugel remarks:¹¹

The manner in which charity to sometimes is asked here shows the degree of misery and despair.

To quote Bazaz:¹²

...a Muslim peasant presents the appearance of a starving beggar.

The people during winters survived on pulses, dried vegetables (obtained from kitchen gardens, forests and grazing fields) and dried fruits for their survival.¹³ In the absence of any substantial means to earn livelihood the inhabitants starving at home were driven in great numbers to the plains of Hindustan during winters in search of labour, save some of their wages and to return in early spring.¹⁴ However, the condition of the people who visited the plains during winters for earning livelihood was not better than the beggars as is revealed by Shiekh Mohammad Abdullah:¹⁵

...I saw Kashmiri Muslims in big bands leaving their beautiful land for the hard plains of Punjab in search of livelihood....Many a time I found some Kashmiris begging for meals. I felt ashamed and asked one of them, "Why are you begging? Don't you get any work?" the labourer replied, "Yes Sir! We definitely get it. We earn about 12 to 16 annas a day but we have to collect and save this amount because on our return we have to pay land revenue to the state, buy clothes for our children and carry some food items for our families. If we spend this money on our meals, we can't make both ends meet.

The graveness of the scarcity can be imagined by the fact that in 1643 the valley people engulfed with scarcity took to violence and set ablaze the dwelling of Pandit Mahadev¹⁶ (the then *peshkar*) for the reason that the official had turned to be a hoarder.¹⁷ Similar incident of popular uprising which led to the killing of *mir 'adl* and *daroga-i-adalat* and setting ablaze the houses of the grain dealers, is detectable during the deputy governorship of Ihtiram Khan (1731-32).¹⁸ In 1931 there were serious riots in the State as a result of which the Muslim Conference was formed. In particular the clamour was for agrarian reform.¹⁹

Next to the peasantry, the most discontented segment of the population of Kashmir was the shawl-weavers and workers of other cottage industries. These workers mostly hailed from urban areas especially Srinagar and exclusively belonged to the Muslim community. Like peasantry the shawl-weavers also lived in chronic poverty because of their exploitation by the state as well as its officials. The officials of the Dagshawl were sucking the life-blood of this class by exacting the usual *nazrana*. The shawl-baf and his family were often reduced to a state of semi-starvation.²⁰ Madusuden Ganju has also highlighted the pitiable condition of the shawl weavers:²¹

the standard of living of workers engaged in the woollen industry, as a whole, is very low. Their food is poor..... Their staple food in Kashmir province is rice which they eat with an ordinary kind of cooked vegetable leaves called *hak* (knoll-kohl). Some of them cannot afford even that much.

The people dwelling around the lakes especially Wular survived upon Sinharas (water-nuts) for nearly 2/5part of the year showing the scarcity people were facing. As per Moorcraft:²²

Another principal article of the food of the common people, the Sinhara or water-nut, grows abundantly in the different lakes in the vicinity of the capital and especially in the Wular Lake...it constituted the almost only food of at least 30,000 persons for five months in the year.

The heavy taxation policy of the state as well as the official oppression had forced the shawl-bafs of Srinagar to revolt against the government earlier in 1865.²³ But the agitation lacked the organized character that accounted for its failure. Again in 1924, the labourers of the silk factory, Srinagar, had launched an agitation against the corruption and atrocities of the Pandit officialdom and the payment of the extremely low wages.²⁴ The government took swift measures to suppress this uprising, which was portrayed in official records as the Muslim community's attempt at pressurizing the darbar to grant them political concessions.²⁵

Famines (*qahat* or *drag*)

Besides the permanent shortage of food, there occurred occasionally severe food crisis called *qahat* or *drag* in local parlance. This severe crisis was the result of crop failures owing to untimely floods, early snowfall and other such reasons. Till 1950s Kashmir history witnessed a number of famines causing a crescendo of death, misery, forcible flights and impoverishment of the peasantry and other poor sections of the society. The famines that occurred in the history of Kashmir are as:

Famine of 1831

During the governorship of *Sher Singh*, a serious famine occurred in the valley, which was given the name of governor itself.²⁶ The terrible famine namely *Sher Singh* was caused by the early autumn snow of 1831 which

destroyed the paddy crop on a large scale.²⁷ The famine had devastating effects and it has been calculated that the population of Kashmir was reduced from eight lakh to two lakh.²⁸ The famine was followed by a flood which destroyed many important irrigation works and permanently submerged large areas of valuable cultivation.²⁹ The problems of the people were increased by the revenue collectors as they embezzled much public money and hoarded grain.³⁰ *Jamadaar Khushal Singh* was sent by *Ranajit Singh* from Lahore to Kashmir to watch events.³¹ Before giving the hungry masses the food *Khushal Singh* took more interest in harassing and torturing the revenue collectors, which ultimately gave rise to a mass protest by marching down to Lahore and Amritsar in batches in order to excite the sympathy of the Maharaja.³² In this way due to his unwise methods, *Khushal Singh* deepened the famine resulting in the migration of a number of Kashmiris to Punjab.³³ The total picture was a devastating famine. An eyewitness account of the general devastation caused by the severity of cold, extortions by *Khushal Singh* and the great famine which followed, is contained in one of the most touching *musnavis* written by *Khazir Shah*, resident of *Bijbehara, nom de plume, "Muqbil"*. He says:³⁴

Owing to the famine cereals became scarce having been secreted by the 'godless' hoarders. The prices of eatables went up 10-15 times their normal prices...all were bundled in one shroud of hunger. To survive, therefore, they started hunger-marches to the Punjab, many having died on the way, unwept, unburied and unsung.

Another eyewitness, *Khalil Mirjanpuri, Adds*,³⁵

Whatever has been stated above (by *Muqbil*) actually many times worse was the condition. Parents even sold their children for food.

Famine of 1877-79

The disaster of 1877 was caused by continuous rains which fell from October 1877 till January 1878.³⁶ According to an eyewitness, the sky had been overcast for full five months.³⁷ In this famine there was an enormous loss of life. The loss in terms of crops would have been much lesser had the people been allowed to cut their crops on time.³⁸ The reaping operations had been delayed due to procedural difficulties.³⁹ As per the existing system of revenue collection the cultivators were allowed to cut their crops only after the revenue assessment had been made by Govt. officials. This system had always stood in the way of timely harvest. Thus the un-harvested crop was damaged by the rain.⁴⁰ After rice and maize were destroyed by the rains, an order was issued to sell the state stocks of Barley at Rs. 1.4.0 per *Kharwar* to the city people. However the self seeking middlemen took the advantage of the situation and bought up barley and wheat at once at this rate and afterwards retailed it at Rs. 19 per *Kharwar*.⁴¹ In the spring of 1878, the new Rabi crops (wheat and Barley) and the fruits were also damaged by the heavy rains. This demoralized the people. Most of the people starved to death. Corpses were scattered

everywhere. Wells and holes were choked with dead bodies and prowling dogs played on human carcasses.⁴² The *Gujjars* of the mountains were the heaviest sufferers. Many orphan girls were sold to the city 'Amjis'.⁴³ The people who survived were terror-stricken and never shared their scanty stock of food with anybody. When the vegetables were finished, the hungry people took to oil-cakes and rice-chaff and this diet soon hastened the work of death.⁴⁴ After much devastation, some half hearted and feeble attempts were made to organize famine relief. A few almshouses were established and grain was imported from Punjab.⁴⁵ The imported grain was adulterated with dirt and the agency for its distribution was often corrupt. There by retailing the adulterated grain to the wealthy people at Rs. 25 per *kharwar*.⁴⁶ During the famine, the state added the troubles of the cultivators by issuing an order to search their houses for seed grain, there by totally demoralizing the cultivators as they knew that the state policy was to save the city at all costs from the horrors of famine.⁴⁷ Thus they preferred to hide their scanty grain in the damp earth or in water.⁴⁸ Even in the next season the starving cultivators were given only a small share of the produce as the heavy rains had once again damaged the harvest.⁴⁹ Thus the cultivators were not able to overcome famine in the second year also. During the famine many people tried to escape to the Punjab but were prevented by the troops to do so. However, some succeeded to migrate by bribing the troops at the passes while leaving their wives and children to starve in Kashmir.⁵⁰ The mortality was greatest among villagers, while shawl weavers were the chief victims of famine in the city.⁵¹ According to Muslims,⁵² Hindus being a privileged class used their official power to seize all available grain and thus there was little mortality among them from starvation. However, Lawrence states that in reality the Hindus of Kashmir consume less food than the Muslims and were used to fasts and this helped them to survive during the famine.⁵³ One authority has stated that the population of Srinagar was reduced from 127,400 to 60,000 and others say that of the total population of the valley only 2/5th survived⁵⁴ as the famine took away 67,400 persons from the city and 1,74,220 from the villages.⁵⁵

Famine of 1893

During *Pratap Singh's* reign,⁵⁶ in the year 1893, a great calamity struck the state in the form of two consecutive floods. As the floods approached Srinagar, the country to the south of Srinagar was converted into a vast lake.⁵⁷ In the month of July 1893,⁵⁸ the spring crops of wheat, Barley and rape-seed had been harvested but were still lying on the threshing floor. The expectations were that the autumn harvest would be that of a bumper one. But to their dismay a great flood occurred and destroyed both, harvested spring crops and standing autumn crops simultaneously. The *Jehlum* River flooded with water broke through the gate which protects the *Dal Lake* from floods and submerged the vegetable gardens in the lake,⁵⁹ thus destroying the vegetable

marrows, cucumbers, tomatoes, and melons which formed an Important of the citizen's diet in the month of July.⁶⁰ The area of *radhs* (floating gardens) thus destroyed was estimated at forty acres.⁶¹ In the *Wular* area, rice and maize crops laid rotting in the flood waters.⁶² The area of cultivable land submerged under water was estimated at 25,426 acres.⁶³ Houses along with the spring crops were carried off by the flood and the country presented a pitiable sight. In these floods 2,225 houses were wrecked and 329 cattle were killed.⁶⁴ It cost the state Rs. 64,804 in land revenue under crops.⁶⁵ The flood caused a great loss to both grain as well as the fodder.⁶⁶ The State started the construction of the road from *Baramula* to Srinagar as a famine relief measure after 1892. Ample work was provided to the people in the neighbourhood of Srinagar who had lost their crops in the 1892 flood. The *Mir Bahri* cultivators were exempted from beggar (forced labour) for one month to enable them to raise a fresh crop of vegetables and *Mr. Nethersole*, In-charge, Water Works Department, was instructed to offer them employment.⁶⁷ The *tehsildars* were issued orders to repair the irrigated channels so as to save the remaining rice crop which was almost in ears.⁶⁸ The state provided work for the common masses in the form of repairs of embankments and construction of water works. In every way the state acted with greatest liberality and consideration.⁶⁹

Famine of 1901

During the first years of 20th century (1901), the insensitiveness and carelessness of the state and the realization of entry tax (*Chongi*) octroi fee on every edible commodity entering the city had its adverse impact, the effects of the famine surfaced, every kind of corn/grain especially rice went into extinction from the market. People of the city were drenched into extreme difficulty and calamity. The grain dealers became totally inhuman and the prices of rice went from one rupee to one rupee four anna and fluctuated to Rs. four a *kharwar*. The administration did not pay any attention. The continuous rains for one week led to the flood which added to the miseries. Flood unleashed a worst spell across river *Jhelum*, *Dal*, *Wular*, etc. and thereby the people living around. The situation led to great famine. The flood consumed a heavy toll of cattle. One seer of rice was not available for the rate of one rupee. The grain dealers and hoarders were selling one or two seer of paddy behind the curtain even on higher price twice or four times than the actual price. People were sustaining themselves on tea, grass, *sag* (knol-kohl) or without food for day. The situation reached to the extent that they began to sell their properties, houses, jewellery on throw away prices for their survival. The careless government was not moved at all. They only imposed restriction on export of grain and just issued an advisory to the wealthy grain dealers to arrange grain from villages and peripheries and to distribute the same among the needy on reasonable prices. However, the water logged lands was exempted from revenue. These steps hardly mitigated the sufferings and thus were forced by the situation

to opt for begging. People resorted to the intake of ripe and raw fruits. On the recommendations of Manager Carpet Weaving, *Mr. Michel*, rationing of paddy was fixed for nine months and maize four *trak* was facilitated to per individual at one rupee. The unconcerned corrupt government officials with their cunningness took the rationing in their own hands and acted as per their sweet will of favouritism against considerations. Poor people had to suffer despite the all concessions and efforts of the government. People under the leadership of *Molvi Hussain Zerak Shah* raised their voice of protest near *Shergadi* on the banks of river Jhelum. The establishment did not like the move, termed it as a rebellion and took preventive measures and action. The army and police resorted to senseless arrests. About one thousand protestors were arrested and about three hundred people including *Molvi Hussain Zerak Shah* were sent for judicial trail and they were convicted after a summary trail and sent to jail. Only after a few days revenue minister *Gh. Ahmed Khan Munshi* passed away and *Zerak Shah* wrote a *marsia* (mourning song) and send it to his home which is translated as under,⁷⁰

The suppression raised its voice that the suppressor and killer of Kashmiris has reached to his destination.

Famine of 1929

On 29th August 1929, the villages situated near the river banks and the whole area below Srinagar around *Sonawari* was submerged under water because of continuous rains. Whatever crops like paddy, maize, pulses, etc., stand devastated. On 4th September, a public meeting was held at *Hazooribagh*. The sincere efforts, performance and sympathy of Maharaja Bahadur in difficult times was appreciated. Thanks giving resolutions were passed for the role of Maharaja to rescue the people hit by the calamity and for taking flood preventive measures.⁷¹

To make it clear we have attempted to separately highlight the causes of *apikaal* (subsistence crisis) and *drag* (famine). Nevertheless, it would not be out of place to mention that while as due respect has been shown towards the different theoretical perspectives on the causation of food crisis especially famines, as mentioned above; and insights have been drawn from them, however, we have not let ourselves to be over swayed by any of them. Indeed our attempt has been to rationally and objectively analyse the causes of the food crisis on the basis of available evidence.

Societal Response

The perpetual problem of food shortages and the occasional but inevitable crop failures, which the valley faced for centuries, produced expected response from the people to survive the challenges of extinction though the response had the limitations of the time underlined by poor technology and poverty. The social responses of common folk that undoubtedly suffered the most

from famine or *batta sakhti* (scarcity of rice meal) including thievery, flight, vagabondage, religious prayers and processions and above all consumption of alternative food stuff.

Certainly, every Kashmiris first priority was to have rice meal but when it became scarce, the people would leave no stone unturned to obtain it even if it meant selling their land or they would work in some rich peasant family in lieu of two times meals. Thus the term '*batta mohnu*' i.e., the one who sold his labour in lieu of meals. However, when obtaining rice would become absolutely impossible the people had to unwillingly raise and survive on substitute cereals or purchase them in exchange of goods. The rearing of cattle, sheep, planting of walnut, poplar and willow trees collectively called *maal* (wealth) was considered *muhimuk yar* (friend in need or problem). It is only to be expected that when faced with desperate circumstances, to either steal or starve, humans will opt for the choice that preserves their lives. There are some indications that crime was on the uprising during the famines. During the famines or scarcity of food, people used to indulge in crimes mostly related to theft of rice from the store houses (*kucheh*).⁷²

Vagabondage or itinerant begging was largely the outcome of food shortages. People took to the road during famines under two main circumstances; either they were migrating from rural homes to urban centres where they hoped to beg for their food or they wandered out from towns and cities into the open country-side in a last ditch attempt to find anything to eat. As per Joseph Wolff:⁷³

The country is so completely subjugated, that the natives except a few traders in shawls, are nothing better than so many beggars.

B.C. Hugel's narrates his encounter with a Brahmin, who stopped his horse, seized the bridle and demanded alms. Hugel remarks:⁷⁴

The manner in which charity to sometimes is asked here shows the degree of misery and despair.

During the scarcity of 1901, the government issued an advisory to the wealthy grain dealers to arrange grain from villages and peripheries and to distribute the same among the needy on reasonable prices. However, the water logged lands was exempted from revenue. These steps hardly mitigated the sufferings and thus were forced by the situation to opt for begging⁷⁵. For a Kashmiri peasant his life was a battle for survival, i.e., how to manage two times ordinary meals for himself and his family. For the cause of survival large-scale migrations to Indian Plains⁷⁶ used to take place. The sufferers flocked in thousands to Punjab and to Hindustan, numerous "*dying on the road, the others selling their children for a morsel of bread.*"⁷⁷ Lawrence gives a heart rending condition of the people of valley, who tried to escape the 1878 famine conditions. He writes:⁷⁸

many attempted to escape to the Punjab...and harrowing tales are told of the fathers of families getting past the barrier by bribing the

guardians of the passes, while the wives and children were left to die in Kashmir.

Communities led by the *Ulama* organized prayers and processions to entreat God for better weather. Supernatural explanations for atmospheric disturbances of course go back to very beginning of human civilization, as did the notion that appeasing or supplicating the God in question gave humans some means of indirect control over the elements. In Kashmir, the causation and remedy of famine, plague, etc, considered by the folk exactly the same as we find in Europe. A London chronicler wrote that in 1315, the city's Churchmen to avert the famine, processed in bare feet every Friday and carried on display the host and other relics. In Paris and elsewhere in northern France similar processions occurred in which the participants were not only barefoot but completely nude, likewise carrying holy relics. Prayers and parading of relics also occurred in the region of Xanten on Germany's western border with France. Prayer unions to spiritually intercede with God on behalf of the community were established during the famine.⁷⁹ The peasants of Kashmir, too, were deeply steeped in conservatism and tradition. Indeed, remedy for the prevalent deficiency of irrigation was sought by the peasants in the 'Supernatural' powers of the Sayyids and Saints⁸⁰. They attributed all natural and manmade calamities to the curse of God. The droughts, earth quakes, cholera, famines and the cruelty of rulers were all attributed to God. In order to get relief from these calamities, though temporarily, the peasants were made to part with their cattle wealth and the surplus amount of produce, in the shape of offerings by these Sayyids and Saints⁸¹.

How the people fought the food crisis, we have pieced together the information from oral and written sources which is reproduced below:

During famines people used to survive upon inferior food items like the coarse food grains (pingeh, shoel). The crops could be cultivated in a short span of time for personal use. At some rare places the peasants would also cultivate Bajra and Jawar. The wild produce was also consumed like, wild Brinjal (van vangan), hapat-bazin, trumboh, kaneyat, fruit berries, nuts, etc.⁸²

During the famine of 1877-79, when the vegetables were finished, the hungry people took to oil-cakes and rice-chaff⁸³ and saffron bulbs.⁸⁴

During famines people used to flee their villages and would migrate to other areas with their cattle. The people would survive on barley (vishkeh), Ganhar, Shoel, milk, fish, berries of Mulberry, apricots and almonds during such harsh conditions. Also the domestic animals used to be the alternative source of food for survival.⁸⁵

However, after the establishment of Sikh rule, the slaughter of cow was forbidden and people found guilty of this practice were put to death.⁸⁶

Wild fruits would be the only food to feed upon during famines.⁸⁷

I have heard from my mother that once in a famine a person brought five kilograms of rice in exchange of sheep.⁸⁸

During my childhood, there was a period when people had nothing to eat for a year and survived on tubers of a wild grass locally known as 'Maagmuesh'.⁸⁹

During the cultivating season (June to August) when the peasant sweat his brow his staple food was already exhausted. The only food available to him at that time used to be raw fruits, bottle guards (aleh), beans (Rajmah-hembeh), knoll-khol (hakh), and some other vegetables.⁹⁰

As per the unanimous version of the octogenarian people whom I interviewed during the field study, the produce left with the peasant by the state machinery could suffice his needs only for four to five months of the year. The rest of the year they survived on different seasonal fruits, among which the first one was mulberry fruit⁹¹. To substantiate it, there goes a proverb:

Tula aaw teh draag drav

[With the appearance of mulberry, famine petered out]

Other fruits that followed the mulberry were apricot, apples, pears, etc. to help the people to survive upon. Kitchen garden was another substitute for the people⁹².

The Shadipora Canal was constructed during the Prime Minister-ship of Mr. G.M. Bakshi for irrigation purposes. From that period onwards rice began to be cultivated in the area. Till then only maize was cultivated and that too occasionally because of recurrent floods. So during the scarcities people survived up on berries of mulberry (tul) during spring season, on fish during summer and barley (wishkeh) during autumn.⁹³

While recollecting his father's (who had died at the age of 103 in 2005) experiences, with whom he had shared a major period of his life, Wagay narrated that the area used to face recurrent floods. Then the people used to consume milk, roasted and grinded maize (Satu) as well as Wat (a preparation made of half grinded and boiled maize) as maize was the only food crop grown in the area.⁹⁴

Although milk was abundantly available to the peasant but he consumed very small part of it. The poor peasant used to make ghee out of the major share of milk and handed it over to the money-lender so as to come out of the vicious circle of indebtedness.⁹⁵

The period from spring to autumn used to be the toughest period of the year in terms of food availability. During these months we used to feed mostly on wild fruits like mulberry, Chanch, strawberry, etc. Fruit trees of soar apples (cheuk choent) and a variety of pears locally called as 'Bata Tang' (consumed in place of rice), were planted to support life during the period of food shortages.⁹⁶

The people dwelling around the lakes especially Wular survived upon Sigharas (water-nuts) for nearly 2/5 part of the year showing the scarcity people were facing. As per Moorcraft.⁹⁷

Another principal article of the food of the common people, the Sinhara or water-nut, grows abundantly in the different lakes in the vicinity of the capital and especially in the Wular Lake... it constituted the almost only food of at least 30,000 persons for five months in the year.

Somehow, the people living in and around Dal Lake would manage to get fish from the waters as ban had been imposed on fishing.⁹⁸ As per the version of elderly people living near forests around the Dal Lake:

they used to pluck the raw tubers of a herb locally known as 'Assud' from the forests in spring for consumption during scarcity of food. However, it could not be consumed during autumn as it released toxins on ripening

Apart from food grains received by the people living in Dal from state, fish and water chest-nuts (Guer Gul-harvested mostly from Wular Lake in autumn season when the water level would be very low), was transported by the boatmen of Srinagar and supplied the same to Srinagar people.⁹⁹

The stem of the *Nymphaea Lotus* (*Nadru* in local dialect) was an important source of food derived from the lakes. It supported 5000 persons in the city for nearly eight months¹⁰⁰. The floating gardens also provided a rich source of survival to the people of city.

Besides the peasant's sustenance on rice gruel, vegetables, wild fruits and other sub-standard kind of diet for the major part of the year, he sometimes sold his property in lieu of paltry quantity of food¹⁰¹.

The winters used to be long and severe. There used to be heavy snowfalls and it was too hard to go out. No production was possible as the land used to remain under cover by snow up to four to five feet. So the only food to survive up on during winters for a peasant was whatever he had stored during summers. The food during the winters mainly constituted of pulses, dried vegetables (obtained from kitchen gardens, forests and grazing fields) and dried fruits¹⁰².

The winters used to be long and harsh but the people were acclimatized with such conditions. We used to feed on dry vegetables like dried guards (al-hatchi), dried brinjal (wangan Hatchi), dried knoll-khol (hukh hakh), handh, etc.¹⁰³

During winters, people mostly used to go to Punjab in search of manual job or physical work (mazuer) to eke out living. I myself had gone to Punjab twenty five times to earn livelihood. Those people who stayed in the valley took to spinning and weaving and survived upon dried vegetables, kachniel handh, hakeh kandh, posh handh and wild produce mainly different varieties of knoll-khol (pambeh

hakh, dij dij hakh, shranzal hakh, yendurtul hakh) and Van Pran (wild spring onion or shallot).¹⁰⁴

No less important means adopted by the people to survive the food crisis was to migrate to plains. Drew records his personal observation in this regard;¹⁰⁵

When a bad year comes they (people of the valley) are put to great straits and will perhaps leave the country in number for the isolation of the place such that it is exceedingly difficult for any great importation of corn to be made to redress the failure of the harvest.

Lawrence also says that the agricultural wage labourers were engaged in agricultural pursuit only for a specific period of five months a year. Therefore, they migrated to the plains during winter months to earn their sustenance¹⁰⁶. Girdlestone also states that very few supplemented their income by taking to weaving of woollen blankets and baskets while staying at home¹⁰⁷. However, the condition of the peasants, labourers, or others, who visited to plains during winters for earning livelihood, was not better than the beggars as is revealed by Shiekh Mohammad Abdullah:¹⁰⁸

My stay at Lahore, for other reasons, awakened me from the slumber and made me familiar with new spirits. I saw Kashmiri Muslims in big bands leaving their beautiful land for the hard plains of Punjab in search of livelihood. These labourers had to cross on foot the snowy mountains of Mari and Banihall and had to face thousands of odds in their way. Sometimes, while crossing the mountains, these people were perishing as a result of difficult passes, snowstorms, etc. these unfortunate people were dying unwept and unsung. It was not easy once reaching the plains; there they had to face numerous odds and worries. During the day they wandered through the streets in search of work. Some worked as wood cutters, some as helpers to the shopkeepers, some carried heavy loads on their backs while some of them did grinding. After doing hard work during the day, they earned very little money of which maximum was spent on their meals. They passed their nights either in any inn or mosque, where they were harassed like dumb driven cattle. Many a time I found some Kashmiris begging for meals. I felt ashamed and asked one of them, "Why are you begging? Don't you get any work?" the labourer replied, "Yes Sir! We definitely get it. We earn about 12 to 16 annas a day but we have to collect and save this amount because on our return we have to pay land revenue to the state, buy clothes for our children and carry some food items for our families. If we spend this money on our meals, we can't make both ends meet.

The nineteenth century sources are replete with references that the sufferers flocked in thousands to Punjab and to Hindustan, numerous:¹⁰⁹ dying on the road, the others selling their children for a morsel of bread.

Though for crossing the passes ‘*rahdari*’ (pass) was required¹¹⁰, yet the oppressed peasantry managed to escape through by-passes or by bribing the troops stationed at passes¹¹¹. And when any famine occurred the state observed leniency and let the people to leave the land for eking out their existence elsewhere in plains¹¹². The non-availability of food and the forced migrations during the famine of 1831 is contained in one of the most touching *musnavis* written by Khazir Shah, resident of Bijbehara, *nom de plume*, “Muqbil”:¹¹³

Owing to the famine cereals became scarce having been secreted by the ‘godless’ hoarders. The prices of eatables went up 10-15 times their normal prices...all were bundled in one shroud of hunger. To survive, therefore, they started hunger-marches to the Punjab, many having died on the way, unwept, unburied and unsung.

Another eyewitness, Khalil Mirjanpuri, Adds:¹¹⁴

Whatever has been stated above (by Muqbil) actually many times worse was the condition. Parents even sold their children for food.

The great famine of 1877-79 had compelled the state to abolish the *rahdari* system,¹¹⁵ though temporarily as we find strict orders being issued by the state government even as late in 1926-27, prohibiting the migration and those who disobeyed were fined and even their private property, if any, was auctioned.¹¹⁶ As the system was abolished peasants flocked towards the plains, which is borne by these words:

The lifting of the ban witnessed a stampede, it appeared as if a bund had suddenly collapsed, for a sea of humanity, drawn from every town and village, was moving towards the snow clad passes, on their way to the land of hope – the British India¹¹⁷”, and therefore, “the migration was so extensive that according to the 1891 census Report of Punjab, 1,11,775 Muslims born in Kashmir were counted as having settled in the Punjab¹¹⁸.” The number would have been much more had the information regarding other parts been available.

In Kashmir the sale of children had been purely an economic problem. The horrors of starvation consequent on famines had in the past compelled parents to sell their beloved children in order to save them from imminent death¹¹⁹. Moore’s poem had given the impression that Kashmir was a land of smouldering dark-eyed beauties. Jacquemont explained this that the lack of pretty women in Kashmir was undoubtedly because all little girls who promised to turn out pretty were¹²⁰ sold at eight years of age and conveyed into the Punjab and to India. Their parents sell them at from twenty to three hundred francs, most commonly fifty to sixty. The orphan girls were sold to the city *Amjis*¹²¹ during the famine of 1877-79.

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