

REMEMBERING MAHARAJA HARI SINGH

Maharaja Hari Singh- An era of reforms towards gender equality

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Maharaja Hari Singh ascended the throne after the death of his uncle Maharaja Pratap Singh on September 23, 1925. He was the fourth and the last *Dogra* ruler of the princely State of Jammu and Kashmir is best known for his extensive reforms in an attempt to modernize the State of Jammu and Kashmir. He implemented sweeping social reforms in which one of the major concerns was to ameliorate the condition of women in the state of Jammu and Kashmir. He unfolded his agenda of reform right on the day of his coronation when in his first public speech he declared, “If I am considered worth governing this State, then I will say that for me all communities, religions and races are equal. As ruler I have no religion, all religions are mine and my religion is *Justice*. It is possible that while dispensing justice I may commit mistake. To err is human. One who says that he does not commit a mistake is not speaking the truth. Only God is free from error. My duty is to look at one and all with equality. I shall, as far as possible, work with justice.”

The present paper, therefore, seeks to highlight the contribution of Maharaja Hari Singh towards improving the condition of the women which went in a long way to put the society of Jammu and Kashmir on the path of modernization. The

arguments made in the paper is sought to be situated in the larger framework emerging out of the fact that the period from 1925 A.D. to 1947 A.D., witnessed a series of revolutionary changes in the socio-religious and cultural life of the people of this region and the issue of women constituted one of the major agenda of reform reforms undertaken by Maharaja Hari Singh. The paper also tries to ascertain as to what conditions were prevalent which the women of that period had to undergo and the measures undertaken by the Maharaja. It also assesses the patriarchal attitude of the society towards the women and welfare measures undertaken by social activists and reform movements like *Arya Samaj*, *Dogra Sadar Sabha* of that era.

Maharaja Hari Singh was an enlightened ruler, who was fully aware of the impact of several socio-religious evils and rigid customs of the society which were mainly woven for the women and which deprived women from many rights. Women are mostly identified with silence, deprivations and marginalization and are considered as the weaker or second sex. The Maharaja was aware that in order to bring changes in the society, he had to look upon the various issues which were responsible for the women's deprivable condition. He thus convened a meeting of the representatives of various social and political bodies. The objective of the meeting was to ascertain their views on various issues like female –infanticide, *sati-pratha*, child marriage, widow- remarriage, polygamy, *rum-rasum*, prostitution and women trafficking.

Female Infanticide - Female infanticide was very common in Jammu region and especially in high caste Rajputs. Rajputs were considered as a caste which was over conscious about their self esteem. One of the major reasons behind the female infanticide was frequent foreign attacks which forced them to kill their

daughters at the time of birth for their honour. The Jamwals, Jasrotias, Sambyals being highest in status in society, found difficult to find husband for their daughters and the dowry to be given at the time of marriage, forced them to kill their infant daughters. When several daughters were born in succession, the destruction of the last born was carried out with the following observance - a piece of *gur* was placed in the mouth of the child, a skin of cotton was laid on her breast and the following incantation recited two or three times.

Gur khaiyan poon kattin

Apna bhaiya ghalen

(Eat your, sugar, spin your thread

Send a brother in your stead)

According to *Rajadarshani*, Maharaja Ranjit Dev was totally against this evil. Though he had two male children, he sought blessings of *faqirs* and begged God for the birth of a daughter.

The social reformers of 19th century had created impact in the sub-continent. Punjab and Jammu and Kashmir had remained ineffective by this movement. In the year 1846 much was done by the British representatives in persuading to denounce this practice. Maharaja Gulab Singh was influenced by this movement and tried his best to eradicate this evil. But he could not do much to eradicate this as he was much inclined to consolidate his State. Maharaja Ranbir Singh took some measures in this direction and did lot of work to save the life of infant girls.

As mentioned earlier, when Maharaja Hari Singh ascended the throne, he convened a meeting. The objective was to ascertain various views on the issues of female infanticide. The heinous crime was very common in Jammu region among

the Hindus, especially in the Rajput community. The girls were considered inferior to the boys and were victims of “gene bias”. The Maharaja appointed a Private Secretary’s memorandum on July 1929A.D. to look into this matter. They after investigating gave their report to the Maharaja, that the female infanticide dominated the Hindu society. Maharaja Hari Singh made a Committee to take stern actions against those who were found practicing this crime.

Maharaja Hari Singh was firm to eradicate this evil; he established a special trust called Dhandevi Memorial Fund after the name of his first wife. This trust gave financial help to the orphan girls, the girls whose parents were alive but below poverty line and those who had lost their fathers. These measures discouraged the inhuman social evil of female Infanticide. He in order give importance to the girls issued an order that father of every new born girl will be given an acre of land. The grant will be taken back if the child dies before completing the age of three years. Many social workers were sent to the villages to educate the village people regarding this crime.

Sati Pratha - According to *Rajadarshani* Ranjit Dev “in his death bed, before unconscious and in agony he expressed, on authority of numerous conventions and regulations, his last will to his sons, intimates and all wise chiefs and courtiers and all kith and kin and others, that no woman should perform *Sati* with him. They submitted that this is a question of prestige and honour for the Rajas, how he should set out on journey to the world of non-existence all alone, and the chastity- loving women are meant for this very day that they accompany the husband and lead him to the heaven hand in hand.” He replied, “Have you not heard If women are a medium to gain heaven, I refuse go to heaven through

women.” According to *Rajadarshani* none of the royal consorts burnt herself with him.

On becoming the Maharaja of Jammu and Kashmir, Gulab Singh’s first and foremost priority was to restore law and order in the state and subsequently to eradicate the social-religious evils. The Maharaja was not able to do much in this sphere but Maharaja Ranbir Singh adopted persuasive measures to stop this evil custom of *sati*. He took constructive steps in this sphere. He issued an order on April 14, 1859, and enjoined upon his heirs and successors and also his subjects to ensure that this evil is uprooted from the State. In order to make the status of the widows respectable, he sanctioned a donation of 1 lakh rupee. Maharaja Pratap Singh adopted an Act in 1916 to suppress *Sati* in the State. But even after taking strict action the custom remained in practice in some parts of the region.

It was Maharaja Hari Singh who took harsh and concrete steps in uprooting this evil practice. He knew that it was one of the sensitive issue which could offend many high caste Rajputs but he took measures to eradicate this crime from the State.

Maharaja Hari in 1932 convened a meeting of the representatives in which ill-effects of this evil were discussed and after full debate on this issue, Law related to this inhuman practice was made in 1933. The Act clearly stated that any person found practicing this evil shall be punished.

Child Marriage - Another social evil which was making the life of the women worst was child marriage. It gave birth to more social evils like *sati pratha*, prostitution, ill-literacy, female-infanticide, *Rum Rasum*, women trafficking. Many measures were taken by the *Dogra* rulers, Britishers, social reformers but it was

difficult as it was deep-rooted in the minds of the people that girls should be married as early as possible. Kuldeep Chand Agnihotri, in his book, *Jammu-Kashmir Kay Jan-nayak, Maharaja Hari Singh*, mentions about , A renowned writer Padma Sachdev of Jammu that she in her novel “*Jammu Jo Kabhi Shaher Tha*” mentions that in the past, during the marriage the girl was so small that she was laid in a plate during her marriage ceremony. Maharaja Hari Singh was an enlightened ruler, who was fully aware of the impact of socio-religious evils and heinous customs. Determined as he was to formulate to realistic social policy, he convened meeting of the representatives from the Jammu region in May 1927. The objective was to ascertain their views on various issues. However the issue which was seriously discussed was related to child marriage. Almost all those who assembled in the meeting gave their opinion against this evil and urged Maharaja Hari Singh to enact a law to eradicate this evil. Accordingly instructions were issued. Ministers scrutinized the whole issue minutely and finally drafted a guideline. Maharaja Hari Singh approved it and put in to practice in 1928 A.D., called the “*Infant Marriage Prevention Regulation Act*”. According to the guideline, girls were not to allow marrying before they were 16years and for boys it was 18years.

Prostitution and Women Trafficking- Also known as “*Bardafaroshi*”, has been for many years the question of severe concern in various parts of the Jammu province, where a prearranged business in the kidnapping of women and girls and removing them outside the boundaries of the State was being conducted.¹ One of the main causes of this evil was poverty. Taking the advantage of this the person’s involving in this crime procured the girls from their parents and sold them to old rich persons or to the brothels. The girls from the upper regions of Reasi, Udhampur, Basooli, Kishtwar were sold in the Punjab, Bihar, Bengal and other

parts of the country. This immoral practice of women trafficking was a serious issue which needed serious attention and solution. Maharaja Hari Singh took rigorous steps in this direction and a law committee was appointed which after studying thoroughly, gave its report to the Maharaja. They stressed on the need of social awareness and propaganda campaign. They further extended their programme by distribution of pamphlets and through lectures. The Law Committee suggested few measures to modify the existing laws by making them strict to prevent the traffickers. They recommended that the amendments to be brought to the sections dealing with such offences under “*The Ranbir Dand Bidhi*,” based on the Indian Penal Code.

The first daily Urdu language newspaper of Jammu and Kashmir *The Ranbir*, wrote many articles regarding this inhuman practice. The paper had gained a wide readership in the state which played an important role in motivating the people against this. Therefore in 1934 “Suppression of Immoral Traffic Regulation Act” was passed. The Act declared that any person found practicing prostitution or involved in women trafficking will be strictly punished. Persons encouraging or supporting this practice or forcing minor girls for this crime will be punished strictly which included imprisonment of three to five years.

Widow Remarriage – The curse of widowhood was considered as a disgrace to the society. A Hindu woman could not remarry when her husband died. One of the main reasons behind widowhood was the child marriage, the practice of marrying young girls with old rich man. This mismatch led to the death of the husband leaving behind their young widows. The miseries and hardship from which a widow had to suffer was very pitiful. Her presence at festivals or the marriage ceremonies was considered most inauspicious. She could not wear colored clothes.

The only colour which she could wear was white. She had to eat simple food and live simple life. Many social organizations like *Arya samaj*, *Hindu Sabha*, the Britishers and enlightened public strongly advocated the widow remarriage.² The conservative orthodox groups were totally against this reform. The State like the other parts of the country at this point witnessed a social reform movement. The *Dogra* rulers to some extent were able to improve the condition of the widows. It was Maharaja Hari Singh who took strong action against the conservative forces who were against the widow remarriage. Maharaja Hari Singh passed the Hindu Widow's "Remarriage and Property Act" of 1932. This Act gave liberty to the widow to remarry and removed the age old insidious evil prevailing in the society

Rum-Rasum- It was another social evil which had adversely affected all the communities. *Rum- rasum* means purchase of a girl from the parents or relative in exchange of cash, land or cattles, which was taken from the side of the bridegroom by the bride's side at the time of marriage or betrothal. This evil was mainly prevalent among the poor sections of the society and was responsible for many serious offences. Maharaja Hari Singh passed a bill for the prevention of *Rum Rasum* which was introduced in the assembly on October 25 1937. After full debate by the members it was passed by the *Praja Sabha* on September 1939. It was declared that any person found committing such crime, shall be punished with imprisonment of 3 years. The Maharaja's government initiated welfare schemes and formative steps to alleviate the conditions of the women by marrying them or providing them financial aid. For their rehabilitation, they were trained in handicrafts to make them economically independent and self-reliant.

Buddhist Polyandrous Marriage Prohibition Act of 1941– Maharaja Hari Singh condemned polyandrous among the Hindu especially in Ladakhis. There was a

tradition among the Buddhists that all the brothers of one family could marry one woman. Parents, to relieve themselves from the burden of dowry they also married their daughters with them. Soon this polyandrous gave rise to the bitterness in the family and encouraged child marriage, female infanticide, women trafficking.³

The Maharaja passed an Act in 1941 which prohibited the conduct and practice of polyandrous marriage as an offence. Person found practicing this will be imprisoned in the form of punishment.

Education for women - Before the introduction of the western education system in the State the indigenous schools, *pathshalas* and *madrasas*, were run by the members of the Hindu and Muslim communities and were generally housed in temples and mosques. Much of in this direction was done during Maharaja Ranbir Singh's reign. He was endowed with scholarly bent of mind. He took keen personal interest in the advancement of education throughout his kingdom. Maharaja Ranbir Singh in order to raise the standard of education issued free and compulsory education in the State. He built two colleges, one at Jammu and other at Srinagar. But he did not establish any school on western lines. His son and successor Maharaja Pratap Singh established the first school which imparted western education. He believed that if we really want to progress and compete with other countries, western education was very important. Education provided on the indigenous lines is not sufficient; it has to be upgraded with western education. Though he faced much resistance from conservative, orthodox Hindus and Muslims but nothing could stop him. He opened many schools where western education was imparted. While making provisions for modern education, he gave full consideration to the female education. Female was mostly neglected when it comes to education. *Gurmat Kanya Pathshala* was the first Girl's school in

Jammu which was based on western lines; the lady named *Jewan Mukat* served as its first principal.

Though lot was done in the field of education but still State was handicapped in its educational activities and achievements. Education was still inaccessible in many areas of Jammu and Kashmir. When Maharaja Hari Singh ascended the throne he was aware of many social evils prevailing in the society and which needed serious attention. After minutely discussing all the issues, it was felt that education is the medium through which one could enlighten the masses. He knew that education was the most important factor in the progress of the State. Special attention was paid towards female education. Maharaja took keen interest in the expansion of Primary education for girls. In order to give impetus to Girl's education in localities where no girl's school existed, the Maharaja's government sanctioned in

1939, a proposal for admission of girl's below 10 years of age in boys schools, provided their parents or guardians were willing. Still the State was very backward in the education of females and the cause behind this was the *pardha* system which was a great hurdle in the way of female education. It debarred women, particularly in the adolescent age, from attending the schools. Secondly, the parents took away their daughters from the schools when they reached a certain age. This system was especially encouraged by the custom of early marriage. And third, the conservative attitude of the people. It was due to these reasons that the State was finding it difficult to start the schools for girls in the rural areas and providing them with efficient female staff. In 1924 and 1925, the state government sanctioned 48 new primary schools for girls but 18 of these could not be opened due to the lack of female teachers. In 1930, Maharaja's government introduced free and compulsory education.

Mr. Sharp, the Educational Commissioner with the Govt. of India, visited Jammu and Kashmir to give advice with regard to the Maharaja for the improvements required in the Education department. At the time, the primary schools were 311 including 36 aided schools. His advice was that the number of schools should be increased by 1,100 so as to provide primary education in villages.

At this time the schools for girls in the State stood at 16. It recommended that 16 more should be added. The number of educational institutions for in the State was now reported be as follows;

High Schools – 2

Middle schools - 14

Primary Schools- 128

Total =144

Mr. Sharp recommended that a grant of Rs. 1,000 might be provided for scholarships for girls. The present allotment stood at Rs.5, 600 including widow's scholarships. To promote the welfare of women, two Women's Welfare Trusts were set up in 1927 and 1928. The trusts started primary education in the mother tongue. *Mullahs* were appointed to teach Urdu while *Pandits* were appointed to teach Hindi.

In order to improve the standard of the female education, Maharaja Hari Singh appointed the Educational Reorganization Committee 1938 under the Chairmanship of the Director of education, K.G Saiyidan and the following gentlemen Dr. Zakir Hussain, C.E.Tyndale, Qazi Mohammed, Mr. R.C.

Mehdiratta, Pandit Nand Lal Kitroo as members to examine the suitability and adequacy of the then system of primary and secondary education and to make recommendations. The following suggestions were given by the committee for the expansion of girl education:

- a. 20 primary and 4 middle schools should open every year instead of 6 primary schools and 2 middle schools.
- b. To attract girls to schools, more scholarships should be provided to them.
- c. Free books should be distributed to girls reading in 4th and 5th classes.
- d. Syllabus for girl's school was to be reorganized.

Maharaja Hari Singh clearly stated that he took measures to ameliorate the condition of his people and organized my Government on progressively democratic lines. Special provision was made for educational advancement of Muslims who were considered backward.

From the above discussion we can conclude that Maharaja Hari Singh was the first Dogra ruler to be formally educated. The development around the world had created a strong urge for development of the State in his mind. Maharaja Hari Singh was fully aware of the impact of several social-religious evils such as Sati pratha, polygamy, female infanticide, Women trafficking, rum-rasum, female education, child marriage. Therefore, in very short span of time, he introduced several laws which aimed at the upliftment of the women. It is no surprise that his reign is often termed as age of reformation. His gradual reform to improve the condition of women brought about significant change in the life of women which was to have profound implications for much of the subsequent history of state of Jammu and Kashmir.
