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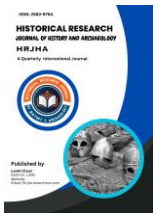

Agents of Change: Christian Missionaries and Educational Reform in Princely Kashmir

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ABSTRACT

Kashmir was once renowned as a prominent center of Sanskrit scholarship. However, with the arrival of Muslims in the region, Persian gradually became dominant and was eventually adopted as the official language. Over time, under successive rulers, the importance of education declined. Compared to other parts of the Indian subcontinent, Kashmir remained behind in embracing modern education. It was only with the arrival of Christian missionaries that modern educational practices were introduced in the valley. This paper aims to explore the historical trajectory of education in Kashmir, with particular emphasis on the role played by Christian missionaries during the latter half of the nineteenth century. It will examine both the initiatives undertaken by the missionaries to develop education and the reactions of the princely state and its people to these efforts. This period is significant in Kashmir's history due to a range of social, economic, and political transformations. Despite facing challenges, the missionaries succeeded in laying the foundations of a modern education system in Kashmir. However, access to mission schools was largely limited to the upper classes, especially the Kashmiri Pandits. Interestingly, very few individuals chose to convert to Christianity as a result of missionary activities.

INTRODUCTION

Kashmir has long been recognized as a hub of intellectual and cultural activity, producing significant works in history, poetry, and philosophy. For centuries, it served as a center of Sanskrit scholarship. As George Grierson noted, "Kashmiris are proud, and rightly so, of their nation's literary heritage."[1] The arrival of Islam brought profound cultural and religious influence to the region. Both Persian and Sanskrit education flourished during the Muslim rule, with the establishment of maktabs and madrasas. One of the earliest known madrasas, *Urwat al-Wuthqa*, was founded during Sultan Qutbuddin's reign (1373–1389 CE). Later, Sultan Sikandar established a madrasa in Nawhatta that included scholars from Central Asia. Under Sultan Zain-ul-Abidin (1420–1470 CE), a madrasa was created in the capital city of Nav-Shahr, employing teachers from both West and Central Asia. In Khawaja Bazar, Sheikh Hussain Chak (1562–1569 CE) founded a Darul Uloom.[2] Additional madrasas were founded during Emperor Jahangir's rule, while the Khanqah-i-Naqshbandiyah was established by Moinuddin Naqshbandi during Shah Jahan's era. The Mughal rulers also supported vocational education, particularly in traditional crafts such as carpet weaving, shawl making, and paper production. However, these educational and training institutions declined under Afghan rule due to a lack of funding and support. Later, Sikh rule caused irreversible harm to Kashmir's economy and further weakened these systems.[3]

Life in Kashmir remained largely unchanged until Christian missionaries arrived in the latter half of the nineteenth century. According to Mohd Ishaq Khan, a noted historian of Kashmir, several factors attracted missionaries to the region. He noted that Kashmir's strategic location, pleasant climate, and natural beauty made it an ideal base for missionary work targeting neighbouring areas such as Tibet, China, Yarkand, Afghanistan, and Turkistan. Additionally, Kashmir had historically been a confluence of major religions- Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam- making it fertile ground for religious outreach. As Khan explains, the missionaries believed that Christianity could establish a strong foothold in the valley. The missionaries were also aware of the hardships faced by the Kashmiri people, who had long suffered under oppressive rulers and corrupt religious leaders.[4] The region was experiencing a decline in moral values, education, healthcare, and economic conditions. Moved by these challenges, the missionaries felt compelled to respond. Their ultimate aim was to convert the population to Christianity, driven by the conviction that spreading the Christian message would bring about social and spiritual transformation in the region.[5]

Historical Emergence and Evolution of Modern Education

Before the arrival of Christian missionaries, there was a limited presence of modern education in Kashmir. These missionaries introduced a new intellectual perspective that marked the beginning of modern educational practices. In Srinagar and other parts of the valley, boys typically received instruction in Arabic at Maktabs linked to local mosques, primarily to enable them to read the Quran. Similarly, Kashmiri Pandits attended Sanskrit schools called Pathshalas to study their sacred texts in their original form. During the rule of Kashmir's Muslim sultans, Persian was established as the official language, remaining in use until it was replaced by Urdu in 1907.[6] This historical context indicates a general lack of educational infrastructure and opportunity in the region. The educational limitations of the urban population were formally recorded in the 1873 Administrative Report, the first of its kind in Jammu and Kashmir. This report mentions only a few publicly supported schools in the city, including the Pathshala, Gawakadal School, Maharaj Gunj School, and Basant Bagh School. However, institutions like Maktabs and Pathshalas were primarily focused on limited religious instruction and did not contribute significantly to broader educational development.[7]

The arrival of missionaries in Srinagar occurred during this same period. Travel accounts by European explorers published in the early 19th century highlighted the vast potential for missionary work in the Kashmir Valley, drawing the attention of Western benefactors. In 1854, Colonel Martin, a retired military officer from Peshawar, accompanied by Robert Clark from the Punjab Mission and two Indian Christians, made their way to Srinagar.[8] Although the Christian Missionary Society of London began its operations in Srinagar during the 1860s, it faced strong opposition from the local authorities.[9]

Initially, the missionaries chose to assist the people of Srinagar during a disease outbreak, which helped them gain the goodwill of the local population. The medical support provided by the missionaries was well-received by Kashmiris and encouraged efforts to combat illiteracy. At the time, there were no proper educational institutions in Srinagar. The only state-run school was one established by Maharaja Ranbir Singh in 1874, where instruction was given in Sanskrit and Persian.[10] It is evident that the Dogra government showed a clear disregard for the educational needs of its people. Reverend J. H. Knowles of the Church Mission Society of England founded a primary school based on Western educational principles within the Church Mission Hospital.[11] However, the Church Mission School faced numerous difficulties in its early stages. Until 1886, Dogra policy restricted education mainly to the study of religious scriptures. Subjects such as grammar, logic, rhetoric, and arithmetic were also taught, though to varying degrees, in the Maktabs and Pathshalas connected to mosques and temples.[12] It was only in 1886 that English instruction became available in the public school. Notably, until the early 20th century, not a single Muslim boy was enrolled in the Christian Missionary Schools.[13]

Christian Missionaries and Dogra Rule

On May 20, 1854, Robert Clark and his brother, Colonel Martyn Clark, arrived in Happy Valley after traveling from Rajouri and Poonch. They received a warm welcome from Kashmir's autocratic ruler, Maharaja Gulab Singh, who showed them several signs of goodwill. Clark did not ask for official permission to preach; instead, he chose to quietly observe and understand the situation before beginning his mission.[14] His honesty and political tact impressed the Maharaja. Although many tried for a year to turn Gulab Singh against Clark's efforts, the Maharaja eventually dismissed their objections.[15] Despite maintaining friendly ties with the British, Maharaja Gulab Singh was firmly against Western interference in Kashmir. That same year, at his request, Governor General Lord Dalhousie issued a special directive banning Europeans from spending winters in the region. The order specified that Europeans could only enter through designated routes, had to remain under strict supervision during their stay, and were prohibited from mingling with the local population.[16] While this posed little issue for tourists visiting during the summer to enjoy the scenery, it significantly hindered the work of Christian missionaries. They were barred from renting homes or conducting their activities freely, and under no condition could Europeans or British nationals own land within the Maharaja's territory.[17]

Guesthouses were constructed on the outskirts of Srinagar, Kashmir, to accommodate European visitors, and a specific area near the city was designated for their stay. The Maharaja appointed officials to manage their needs, with all communications handled through a designated clerk, or *Babu*.[18] This arrangement created obstacles for missionaries, whose work required regular and close interaction with the local population. The Maharaja's intention behind this isolation was driven not by social or religious concerns, but by political motives. In 1864, Robert Clark took the lead in establishing a permanent mission in Srinagar. Although the Maharaja personally respected Clark, he strongly opposed the creation of the mission. While the British framed the mission's purpose as a religious duty, their actions also revealed an awareness of the serious lack of social and educational development in the region.[19] The oppressed and impoverished population, denied full citizenship rights under monarchical

rule, began to look toward missionary education as a path to improvement even at the risk of religious conversion.

Regardless of how one interprets the foundation of the mission, whether as a religious or political move, it is clear that the conditions in Kashmir at the time were ripe for such an institution to take root and play a major role in educational reform.

The rigid monarchical system, rooted in feudalism, did little more than oppress the general population, making the introduction of a new educational system a welcome change. Robert Clark was confident in advocating for the importance of establishing schools through the Kashmir Mission. Initially, the missionaries believed that offering medical assistance to the local people, especially during outbreaks of disease-would be a good starting point. The positive impact of the medical missionaries helped them gain the trust and goodwill of the Kashmiri people, which in turn encouraged efforts to combat widespread illiteracy. At that time, there were no educational institutions in the valley capable of delivering proper instruction. The only government-run school was the Maharaja Ranbir Singh School, established in 1874, where Sanskrit and Persian were the main languages of instruction. The Dogra administration clearly showed little concern for educating its subjects. It was on April 18, 1864, that Robert Clark succeeded in founding the first school, marking a significant step toward educational reform in the region.[20]

In 1880, Reverend J. H. Knowles founded the CMS School within the Srinagar hospital complex, marking the beginning of modern education in Kashmir.[21] However, the school faced numerous obstacles in its early days. One major issue was the building itself, as government regulations at the time prohibited missionaries from renting property for educational purposes. As a result, Knowles had no choice but to open the school within the hospital premises.[22] Between 1864 and 1880, the Kashmir Medical Mission had played a significant role in fostering goodwill and social harmony among the people. Nevertheless, the government's stance toward the mission remained unchanged, and the ban on renting property for schools persisted.[23] When the CMS School began in 1880, only five students were enrolled, likely due to limited space and the remote location of the hospital.[24] The lack of transportation options in Srinagar further discouraged attendance. In 1883, the situation improved when the missionaries managed to rent a building in the Sheikh Bagh area of Srinagar. However, this move triggered suspicion and backlash. Knowles wrote that the government had shown intense opposition to the mission school over the past year, criticizing their decision to relocate to a large property near the city. The Maharaja even issued a strict decree forbidding anyone in the valley from renting property or owning even basic possessions to the missionaries. Hostility from the authorities was evident from the beginning. As a result, student enrollment dropped from 47 to 30 in 1883, which Knowles attributed to the enforced isolation of the school. Eventually, in 1890, the government granted permission for the CMS to relocate the school to a large house and compound along the riverbank in the central area of Fateh Kadal. By that time, the number of students had grown to approximately 200, signalling a turning point in the mission's educational efforts.[25]

Spreading Enlightenment: Tyndale Bisco's Impact on Western Education in Kashmir

It took Mr. Knowles ten years of foundational work to secure the current site of the C.M.S. School. He was supported by Reverend C.L.E. Burges, A.B. Tyndale, and a few Kashmiri teachers in establishing the institution. Rev. Burges taught mathematics, while A.B. Tyndale, a graduate of Magdalen College, Oxford, started a Technical School aimed at teaching carpentry to young Brahman boys.[26] However, due to religious restrictions upheld by the Kashmiri Pandits, who traditionally forbade Brahmans from engaging in such manual trades, the initiative failed. Despite this, one Brahman youth

worked in the school's smithy for two years and eventually opened his own bicycle repair shop. The origins of early childhood education in Srinagar are linked to Miss Helen Burges, recognized as the city's first female educator. Initially, the introduction of this educational system faced resistance. Some parents withdrew their sons from school, expressing concerns that schools focused more on play than on serious learning, saying, "Parents send their kids to school to learn, not to play."[27]

The founding of the Mission School in Srinagar signalled the beginning of a new chapter for modern education in the city.[28] When Reverend Tyndale Biscoe joined the school in 1891, it had around 250 students. Upon his arrival to assist Mr. Knowles, Biscoe was struck by the appearance of some of the boys- many wore filthy garments that resembled nightgowns and had bright red paint smeared on their foreheads. Biscoe remarked that their large gold earrings seemed so heavy that the boys' earlobes might have torn if not for a thread tied across their heads for support. Interestingly, during winter, the boys were initially allowed to carry *Kangris* (traditional fire pots) with them for warmth.[29] Most of the early students belonged to the Kashmiri Pandit community, a minority in the region. The author critically notes that despite receiving modest salaries from the state, these boys came from wealthy families with grand homes, wealth allegedly accumulated through generations of exploiting the Muslim peasantry. They were often the sons or grandsons of officials accused of oppressing the local population.[30]

Mr. Biscoe exerted tremendous effort to accomplish his goal. When he first tried to teach the Brahman boys a different method of schooling, he ran into a lot of problems. Biscoe's mission was monumental, yet he was ultimately successful in eradicating misconceptions. He claims that his primary motivation for visiting Kashmir was educational, rather than pedagogical. The immediate dilemma that troubled his thoughts was how and what to teach the advanced students.

So, Bisco researched the people of Kashmir extensively before implementing any major initiative. His research convinced him that the people's souls had been stolen by tyranny, corruption, exploitation, and superstition. Biscoe was resolved to provide these enslaved individuals with an education that would renew their hope and empower them to become contributing members of society. Many Brahman boys who attended C. M. S. School were in their twenties or more, and a sizable portion of them even married.[31]

It was difficult to persuade these mature males of the thane's merits and to prepare them for its founding in the metropolis[32]. It has been reported that for years, students wouldn't attend school until midday, despite classes officially starting at 11 a.m. The local school system did not emphasize punctuality, so it wasn't enforced. Hindu boys celebrated various religious festivals, making attendance inconsistent. Biscoe describes the unpredictability of student turnout, explaining that some boys observed certain deities while others didn't, making daily attendance unreliable. Without mandatory presence, discipline was nearly impossible.[33] To address this, Biscoe's first step was to enforce strict rules around punctual attendance by setting fixed class schedules. He also introduced Western-style holiday observances, marking the beginning of the CMS School's shift toward Western practices. Penalties were introduced to discourage absences, but they proved inadequate, as students frequently claimed to be sick to avoid school. In response, Biscoe began visiting the students' homes to verify these absences.[34] He also faced resistance from boys who were unwilling to take part in physical activities. This reflected the deep-rooted influence of superstition on their beliefs. For example, when Biscoe introduced football to Kashmir, Brahman boys refused to play, declaring the ball impure and incompatible with their religious purity.[35] Parental opposition to sports, seen as a distraction, was not unexpected. For many of these boys, education was simply a means to secure a government job, and

games were viewed as unproductive. Likewise, they saw activities like rowing as unworthy of their status.[36]

Biscoe even noted that some Brahman teachers actively discouraged their students from participating in rowing. However, the man credited with laying the foundation for modern education in Srinagar remained steadfast in his mission. He believed that school should be a place where children not only gained knowledge but also developed character. According to Ernest Neve, Biscoe's primary aim was to instil values such as courage, loyalty, compassion, good manners, hygiene, and honesty in his students.[37] To promote physical development, Biscoe encouraged volunteer work, sports, and other physical activities. For intellectual growth, the curriculum included English, Indian languages like Urdu and Hindi, Persian, mathematics, history, geography, science, and art. Swimming, a distinctive activity at the school, was mandatory. Each student had to pass a swimming test by the age of thirteen; failure to do so meant a significant tuition hike, effectively preventing non-swimmers from continuing their education at the school. Dr. Brian Holmes, in his study of British imperial policy and mission schools, highlighted the strong focus on athletics at the CMS School under Biscoe as an example of how British-style extracurricular activities were adapted for local use.[38] Starting in 1893, Biscoe launched various community service initiatives, which played a key role in shaping the students' moral character. These efforts also made the students more aware of the deeply rooted traditions of Srinagar and the importance of reform as part of their missionary education.

Missionary Engagements and Official Responses in Kashmir

Christian missionaries contributed positively in many ways, but Srinagar still lagged behind educationally despite their efforts. Faced with overwhelming challenges, the missionaries were unable to carry out large-scale educational initiatives. The government could have easily improved the lives of the people by setting up a proper school system.[39] However, the Dogra elite resisted any attempts to promote political awareness among the population. Reports in regional newspapers from Punjab reflect both the intellectual stagnation of the Kashmiri people and the apathy of the Dogra rulers. These publications consistently called on the Maharaja to make the education of his subjects a top priority.[40]

By the early 1900s, Maharaja Pratap Singh had established a High School in the city. However, state officials made no real effort to enhance their appeal or boost student enrollment. A report in the *Puisa Akhbar* (Lahore), dated November 30, 1901, noted that the authorities did little to motivate citizens to benefit even from the limited education available at the school. The 1901 census reflected this lax attitude toward education, revealing that only around 2% of the population was literate.[41] Although progress was initially slow, some advancements occurred after 1904. In 1905, Mrs. Annie Besant, with support from several theosophical social reformers and Pandit Bala Koul of the Sahib family, founded a Hindu College in the city. This institution was later taken over by the state and renamed Sri Pratap College. It was primarily the Hindu community that first welcomed Western-style education. Sri Pratap College went on to produce many prominent Hindu leaders, with its graduates occupying various government positions.[42]

CONCLUSION

This highlights the significant role Christian missionaries played in laying the foundation for modern education, an achievement for which they deserve recognition. Despite facing serious challenges, including hostility from the early Dogra rulers, the missionaries remained committed to their mission. They brought about notable changes in Kashmiri society, culture, and education, and their approach to education served as a model for other schools in the state. However, access to mission schools was largely limited to the wealthy and to Pandits. For a long time, missionary work was

concentrated in Srinagar, leaving much of the Valley untouched. Still, their influence gradually spread across society, contributing to the development of a more progressive mindset by the early 20th century. In terms of religious conversions, however, their efforts largely failed. Most conversions happened outside the Valley, primarily driven by the caste system- something that was not present in Kashmiri society.

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