

Rural Society of Kashmir: Amusements, Recreation and their Transformation

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ABSTRACT

One of the primary concerns of this paper is to capture the process of changes in amusements and recreation that occurred in rural Kashmir since 1947 following the changes in governance, economy, education, communication and recent modernization and globalization. In this paper an attempt has been made to study the impact of these developments on amusements and recreation. It begins with a discussion on traditional games, amusements and recreation and there upon other changes have been documented in a systematic manner. The paper is based on both conventional and non-conventional sources. Census reports, vernacular literature and oral sources have been consulted for a holistic understanding of the theme under reference.

Keywords: Folklore, Recreation, Rural life, Transition, Modernity.

Introduction

Change is a universal phenomenon. No society remains static. The Rural society of Kashmir also underwent a change. The process of change started during the Dogra rule from 1890s onwards as a result of the role of Christian missionaries, spread of modern education, establishment of modern health institutions, certain tenancy reforms and establishment of communication links with outside world. However, it accelerated only after 1947, when the fetters of autocratic rule were thrown away. Measures initiated by the popular government in post 1947 era set the track for the spread of education, awareness, growth in income and employment of the inhabitants in a more vibrant form. Waves of this change manifested in the overall living conditions of the people. The amusements and recreation of the people did not remain immune to all these developments and as such, registered a significant change

Although the historical accounts written so far on Kashmir are mostly silent on this subject and there is little mention of games which were usually played by people during leisure time. Walter R. Lawrence, the keen observer of Kashmiri society, is also of the same view. He writes that ‘there are no games for young or old, and in

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the villages there is no leisure for games. Life is terribly earnest, and the child who can walk can work.¹ Even Earnest F. Neve who was on medical mission to Kashmir during Dogra time writes:²

With the village people, however, life is too serious for games; and children, beginning as early as their fourth and fifth year, fetch water, go into the jungle for firewood, supplement their scanty vegetable diet by digging up edible plants, and tend the cattle, taking them or the village flocks daily, in the early morning, up to the nearest pastures, and returning with them in the evening.

In fact there was the paucity of games for the grownups, old men and women, but it does not mean that people didn't possess the sense of games. Needless to mention, Kashmiris till recent past were living a life of servitude. They bore the atrocities and exploitation of several feudal regimes from time to time. During the Dogra times they were made to work from dawn to dusk either as bonded agricultural labourers or as petty worker in *Karkhana* (small scale industry). In view of this busy schedule and paupers life style a Kashmiri, of course, could not develop the taste of costly games, but he definitely played less expensive and simple games. Those games, however, failed to catch the attention of foreign travelers and they as such ignored them in their travel accounts. However, after consulting the nonconventional sources like folklore and other oral traditions following description of traditional games and recreation can be made.

A number of games were played by children during leisure. Some of the games were, *chep-chour*, *kaneh marven*, *zang tarr*, *guti* etc. The *chep chour*, also called as hide and seek, was played in late evening particularly in moonlit nights. A number of boys participated in this game. The game used to start with closing the eyes of one of the boy by another boy with his hands. In the meantime, others were required to run away and to hide themselves at different places so that they may not be easily traceable. After this the boy was let off to seek out the other players. If he succeeded to get any one of them, the latter was required to function as the next searcher. If he failed, he was to repeat the process and search absentees for the second time.³

Another game played was called as *kaneh marven* or stone striking. Only two participants, each holding a small stone, in his hand were required to play this game. One of the participant used to throw his stone over a distance of 4 to 5 yards and other was required to make it a target by striking it with the stone in his hand. If he successfully stroked it then the first player was required to lift him physically on his shoulders and carry him to the place where the striking stone was lying. If

he failed in this target chasing, then it was his turn to throw the stone and of the first player to chase and strike it.⁴ Add to this, the games like *guti* and *zangtarr* were also played by teenagers.

Zang tarr was played by about a dozen of children, who by majority selected one of them whose eyes were closed by another boy, sitting at his back, with his hands. He was required to spread his legs on the ground and the remaining boys were required to cross between them. Every boy who used to cross was touching the leg thereby giving an indication that someone has crossed between his legs. In case he quoted or uttered the incorrect name the practice was repeated and continued on the same boy till he used to quote the names correctly.⁵

The game of *gutti* was played by any number of children with nuts or pice.⁶ Similarly *Leth kig loth, tulay loungun, okus bokus, ate sawary istambaray, eny katar, kath shahey bam, saza long, gieer bachan, aaro barov.*⁷ *Kerkich mohul, Kul garm, tenchen gindun, dad dab,* were other games played by children.⁸ *Kabbaddi* was also played in leisure by young and old together.

During winters neighbours would gather in a house after dinner and listen to a man called as *Daleel-e-Gour* and *Kitab Paran Voul*. The former belonged to shepherd community and the latter a local villager having knowledge of Persian, Urdu and Kashmiri. The popular romantic *masnavies* and war epics like *Gulrez, Laila Mujnoon, Gule Bakawali, Dastan-e-AmirHamza, Sheereen Farhad, Shama-Poanpoor* were recited especially during the long winter nights. These tales were translated from Persian literature into Kashmiri. The local tales like *akanandun, hemal nagray* were also enjoyed. Besides, some other religious epics like that of *karballah* were also recited. *Kehwa* or *noon-chay* was served at the occasion. This would last till late night or for several nights till the whole story was completed. Some of the well-known epic or masnavi reciters of Kashmir were Wali Agur from Kulgam, Aziz Shah from Nambal, Mukhtar Mir from Chevdera, Subhan Shah from Darigan, Aziz lone Nanil, Nabi Thoker Aung Matipora Khalil Dar and Ghulam Usman from Sopore.⁹

Listening music and watching *Bande Pather* and *Dambali* was also a favorite pass-time. *Band Pather* served as a powerful and exciting source of entertainment and recreation. 'Their orchestra' [group], writes Walter R. Lawrence, 'usually consists of four fiddles with a drum in the centre, or of clarionets and drums, but the company often contains twenty members or more... Their acting is excellent and their songs are often very pretty... The *Bhaggats* are very pleasant people and their mirth and good humour form a cheerful contrast to the gloom of the Kashrniri

peasant... They relieve the sadness of the village life in Kashmir.¹⁰ Another group was that of *Dhamal fakir* who used to present dance called locally as *dhamel* at the shrines of Rishis and Saints at the time of their anniversaries, urs and fairs.¹¹ Dhameil is performed at shrines located at Darigam, Chadoora, Wathora, Zolar, Aushmuqam, Bijbehara.¹²

Ladishah was another folk entertainer who used to sing humorous and satiric poetic composition in a peculiar tune. With all astonishment and humor he used to criticize modern social changes, tensions of joint family, the *khanadamadi* institution, unusual events and even aggressive revenue officials, anti-social elements and religious exploiters.¹³

Rov also called as *rouf* was a popular traditional folk song-cum-dance of women and a source of entertainment. While performing *rov* women used to sing melodious songs particularly on festive occasions of Eid, *shabi qader*, *shabi mehraj* etc. After completing their routine work, women would assemble in any courtyard *angun* of the village after *magrib* prayers and would perform the *rov*. During the month of Ramadan it was performed during evening hours. Another important entertainment was *hikat*. It was performed by young girls by singing folk songs and holding hands firmly in a circle dance. It would last for few minutes.

At times young men would encourage bullfighting, ram fighting and even chicken fighting called locally as *koker jang jang*. Besides, people would attend festivals called *Melas* usually held on the anniversaries of *Sufi* and *Reshi* Saints in different villages across valley.

In 1948 Radio Kashmir was established at Srinagar. In addition to its routine programmes, it also broadcasted the programmes that were entertainment programmes meant for the people at large. Music remained the most popular form of entertainment for the listeners. *Chhaker teh Rouf*, *Sufiyana Kalam*, *Ladishah*, *Dramas*, and *Dastans* used to entertain the listeners. Ismal Mir, the famous *Dastango* (story teller) was a household name in Kashmir. Besides reciting the *Dastans* at radio for wider audiences, he along with his associates would recite *Dastans* in different villages as well. Different shows were held under shady trees and the large gatherings of people assembled to watch his performance. These events emerged as a popular source of entertainment in the period under study.

Such was the attachment with the modern means of entertainment that villagers began to take the radio sets along with them to their fields. Radio Kashmir produced a number of Dramas in Kashmiri and Urdu, and the popular ones which are being still remembered by the people are Pushaker Bahan's *machama*, Farooq

Nazki's *haba khatoon*, Sofi Ghulam Mohammad's *beech kath*, Shankar Raina's *bikus chi kus etc.*¹⁴ In early 1970s one of the famous programme broadcasted from Radio Kashmir Srinagar was *Zoondab* produced by Somnath Sadhu. *Zoon Dab* was aired for more than 19 years from Radio Kashmir Srinagar.¹⁵ This programme was both informative as well as a comedy. Radio Kashmir, Srinagar was also running a special drama on every Monday at 9:30 PM. During the month of January there used to be a Drama Festival in which popular plays of great content and value were aired. People in general used to love and enjoy listening such dramas.¹⁶

One of the important developments in 1970s was the establishment of television station in Srinagar. Though this Station used to broadcast its programmes only for few hours and its audiences were minimal as compared to that of the radio listeners, primarily because the cost of television set was so high that it was a luxurious item and choice of well to do households alone. Later on, Community Television sets were provided to villagers by government. Television set was kept in the *Panchayat Ghar* or a community hall where most of the villagers would assemble and watch the telecast. Gradually television emerged as the most important medium of entertainment and enjoyment. Different programmes with a variety of themes were telecasted from television. Folk songs, Hindi films of bollywood, songs, serials, and dramas etc; were included in routine telecast. The television emerged an important channel that influenced the life style of villagers in a significant way. That is why the mainstream religious section of Kashmiri rural society often resented the installation of television sets which, according to them were promoting immorality. Even some religious scholars resorted to *fatwas* against those who installed T.V sets and various other recreational instruments like Tape Recorder, V.C.P and V.C.R.¹⁷ A new trend that started in early 70s was that youngsters from the rural populace used to bring V.C.P and V.C.R on rent from the nearby towns along with cassettes of Hindi featured films and enjoyed their watching.

Due to the spread of educational sector a new literate public emerged from the so called *listening public*. This group of people started to read novels, magazines, papers and other periodicals and books for the sake of entertainment.

Modern games like football, cricket, volleyball, badminton, carom board, snake and ladder, chess, *kho kho*, hockey and tennis assumed much popularity during the later period of our study. Although, these games were introduced by Europeans during Dogra times in different schools of Srinagar, but these games assumed much

popularity only from 1970s and 1980s onwards. Besides, being expensive such games were time consuming as well.

Shure gindune (child amusement) has almost disappeared by now. *Hikt* and *rov* are now the things of bygone times. The invasion of television, internet and cinema has overtaken the tradition of *daleel goo* (story teller) and now the treasure of Kashmiri folktales is only a material for the study of our rich cultural heritage.¹⁸

References and Endnotes

- ¹ Walter R. Lawrence, *The Valley of Kashmir*, London: Oxford University Press, 1895, p. 255.
- ² Ernest F. Neve, *Things Seen in Kashmir*, London: Seely Service and Co. 1931, p. 157.
- ³ The game has been documented in the census report of 1961 as well. For details see *Census of India 1961: Aishmuqam a Village Survey*, New Delhi: Manager of Publications, 1969, pp. 51-52.
- ⁴ Ibid. Although it has been reported from Aishmuqam, a village in south Kashmir's Anantnag District, it would have been played in other rural areas as well.
- ⁵ This game has been documented in, *Census of India 1961, Vol. VI Part VI. No. 2 Village Survey Monograph of Mattan*, New Delhi: Manager of Publications, 1969, pp. 40-41.
- ⁶ In this game a hole of about 3'' diameter and 2'' depth was sunk in the soil which was called *guti*. For a detailed description of this game see, *Village Survey Monograph of Mattan*, p. 40.
- ⁷ Nazir Gh Nabi, (Kash.) *Kashri Ginden Trai*, Srinagar: Jammu and Kashmir Academy of Art, Culture and Language, 1972. The author has compiled a number of games *Shure Gindne* played by children in Kashmir since immemorial times. According to him there were some fifty games *Gindne* of male children, twelve games *Gindne* of female children and nineteen games *Gindne* were played by both the sexes.
- ⁸ Mohmmad Ahmad Indrabi, *Sein Ginden*, in Mohmmad Yousuf Taing, (ed.) *Kashir: Sun Adab 1977*, Srinagar: Jammu and Kashmir Academy of Art culture and Languages, 1978, p. 330.
- ⁹ Atash Ghulam Nabi, *Intangible Cultural Heritage of Kashmir*, Srinagar: Jammu and Kashmir, Academy of Art, Culture and Languages, 2018, p. 78.
- ¹⁰ Walter R. Lawrence, *The Valley of Kashmir*, pp. 312-313.
- ¹¹ Atash Ghulam Nabi, *Intangible Cultural Heritage of Kashmir*, p. 95.
- ¹² Ibid.
- ¹³ Ibid.
- ¹⁴ Interview with Ghulam Nabi Atash, Nanil, Anantnag, 2017.
- ¹⁵ Such was the popularity of the programme that three of its characters namely Somnath Sadhu, Pushkar Bhan and Maryam Begum received *Padhma Shree* for their outstanding performance in the programme.
- ¹⁶ Radio Kashmir, Srinagar also broadcasted programmes for the entertainment of children and women. Besides entertainment, education and moral lessons were also communicated to the radio listeners.
- ¹⁷ During field visits this researcher came to know about the early resistance shown to installation of T.V sets and V.C.Ps.
- ¹⁸ Atash Ghulam Nabi, *Intangible Cultural Heritage of Kashmir*, p. 117.

