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Name of the Scholar: Asif Ahmad Bhat

Name of the Supervisor: Dr. Jawaid Alam

Name of the Department: History and Culture

Faculty: Faculty of Humanities and Languages

Research Topic: Caste Among Kashmiris 1846-1970

Findings

Key Words: *Kashmir, Caste, Colonial Intervention, Census, Untouchability, Reforms, Watalas.*

The research findings suggest that early Kashmiri society exhibited significant social fluidity, rather than rigid stratification. Although the four Varnas are mentioned in historical texts, there is a notable absence of a detailed implementation of the Varnashrama system in the region. Groups such as the Damaras, Rainas, Dombas, Chandalas, Tantrins, and others are documented, but they are not distinctly categorized within specific Varnas. In fact, individuals from lower castes had the opportunity to ascend to prominent positions in the administration, improving their social status through political opportunity or economic power.

However, colonial interventions—particularly through the census and other administrative mechanisms—played a pivotal role in solidifying and rigidifying social identities in Jammu and Kashmir. For instance, the census sought to classify the Muslim population of Kashmir according to the Hindu Varna system, which was inherently a misinterpretation of the region's social dynamics. The census enumeration integrated caste into various demographic factors, such as fertility rates, social conditions, education disparities, marital practices, language preferences, occupation trends, and health issues. This process essentially created a “character sheet,” where the traits of each caste were documented, often inaccurately. Over time, these records became deeply entrenched and accepted as fact.

The Census also played a significant role in reviving caste spirit, giving rise to new caste associations keen on enhancing the status of their social groups. In fact, the key objective of the Census was fundamentally political and did not include provisions to improve the well-being or social status of the people. The colonial influence, particularly through the census, not only reinforced social identities but also shaped the perspectives of scholars and writers of the time, who relied heavily on colonial records in their works. A notable example is Muhammad-Din-Fauk, whose extensive publication *Tarikh-i-Akwam-i-Kashmir* spans three volumes and reflects this reliance on colonial documentation.

In the final chapter, the research highlights how reform efforts during the colonial and post-colonial periods were predominantly focused on improving the conditions of lower-caste Hindus, while Muslims of similar social backgrounds were largely neglected, as caste distinctions were primarily perceived as a Hindu phenomenon. The study further underscores that even today, certain castes in Kashmir, particularly among Muslims—such as the Watal—continue to experience severe social discrimination.