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Original Article

# Agricultural Policies and Economic Dynamics in Jammu and Kashmir during the Dogra –Era

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***Abstract***

*From ancient times to 1947, the rulers of Kashmir included Hindus, Muslims, Afghans, Sikhs, and Dogras. Once Gulab Singh took power under Dogra rule, the region's economy suffered, administration was ineffective, and it was often exploited. The peasant economy suffered because the Dogra rulers accused all land, awarded jagirs (land grants) to their representatives, and kept most peasants marginalized. Because of high taxes, compulsory labor (begars), and corruption, the rural population suffered from unending poverty. Because of unfair policies, artisans faced difficulties, and production from small farms did not improve thanks to traditional methods and little funding for the sector. This study examines the factors in the agricultural sector of Kashmir that contributed to its slow economic growth and persistent poverty in villages. By studying land ownership, taxes, and administration during the Dogra period, this study points out that feudalism and official neglect caused economic backwardness. It examines the socio-economic difficulties Kashmir's peasantry experienced because of these policies, showing that excessive colonial rule and poor infrastructure were obstacles to their long-term growth. The report points out that the relations between political systems, economic strategies, and poverty in rural areas help us understand the background of the Kashmir agrarian problem. Examining these events allows us to better understand the causes of the region's current development challenges.*

***Keywords:*** *Agriculture, Economy, Revenue, Irrigation, Fertilizer, Crop, Land*

## Introduction

Before its unification, Jammu, Kashmir, and Ladakh were governed independently. Following the British victory in the Second Sikh War—facilitated by Gulab Singh—Kashmir was ceded to him for ₹75 lakh under the Treaty of Amritsar (1846), establishing the princely state of Jammu and Kashmir. The Dogra regime instituted a feudal economic system, claiming absolute land ownership based on their purchase of the region. A military-landed aristocracy emerged, composed of the royal family, loyal elites, and upper-caste allies. Most land remained under state control, known as *Khalsa.* The Dogra rule was marked by widespread economic exploitation, with poor living conditions, especially in the Kashmir Valley. The agrarian economy, dominated by absentee landlordism, left peasants and laborers in deep poverty, as rulers prioritized their own interests over public welfare.

## Methodology

This study primarily relied on both primary and secondary data for its research technique. The analyzed data were examined thoroughly to arrive at fresh findings. Data were gathered from many sources, such as administrative records, books, journals, online connections, and research papers. Multidisciplinary methodologies for data collection were used to ensure the authenticity of the work.

## Agricultural Sector; an Economic Base

Agriculture has historically been the backbone of Jammu and Kashmir's economy, particularly in the Kashmir Valley, where limited development in other sectors has made it the primary source of income and employment. Cultivable land was restricted because of the hilly terrain of the region. Soil quality, traditional tools, livestock, and regional conditions influence agricultural productivity and rural livelihoods. By the late 19th century, the Land Revenue Settlement had recorded 11.95 lakh acres, excluding forests, hills, and water bodies.



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However, a significant portion—marshes (41.2 lakh acres) and cultivable waste (25.7 lakh acres)—remained underutilized. Approximately 51% of the surveyed area was farmed. The land was classified as *Abi* (irrigated) or *Khushki* (unirrigated). Abi lands supported paddy, mustard, and pulses, whereas Khushki lands yielded wheat, dry fruits, and saffron. Kashmir followed a single-crop system owing to climatic constraints, with **Kharif** crops (rice, maize, saffron, etc.) and **Rabi** crops (wheat, barley, opium, etc.). Rice dominated the valley's agriculture owing to favorable climatic and topographical conditions.

**Irrigation: Sources and Methods**

Irrigation has long been practiced in Kashmir, using abundant rivers, streams (*nallahs*), lakes, and springs. Although initially neglected under early Dogra rule, irrigation gained state attention during Maharaja Pratap Singh's reign. Following the 1888–89 Land Settlement, the state assumed canal maintenance funded through an irrigation cess. By 1891–92, Rs. 6,066 were allocated to system repairs. A dedicated irrigation department was established in 1923, although early development efforts favored Jammu. Significant improvements in Kashmir's irrigation infrastructure began in the 1940s, including the reconstruction of major canals such as Zaingir, Lal Kuhl, and Martand, and the creation of new canals sourced from the Jhelum, Vashav, and Lidder Rivers.

**The area irrigated from different sources in the state during 1930's is shown as under:**

**Table-1: Land area irrigated from different sources**

| Year | Govt Canals | Private Canals | Tanks | Wells | Others | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1934–35 | 72.8 | 219.3 | 2.4 | 2.8 | 8.0 | 305 |
| 1935-36 | 81.7 | 219.3 | 2.4 | 2.8 | 6.8 | 313 |
| 1936-37 | 50.1 | 262.6 | 2.4 | 2.8 | 6.8 | 324.7 |
| 1937-38 | 46.5 | 254.5 | 2.0 | 2.8 | 6.8 | 312.6 |
| 1938-39 | 47.7 | 246.8 | 2.4 | 2.8 | 7.6 | 307.3 |

**Source:** N.S Gupta (Development of Agriculture in the states of India)

**Agricultural Technology and Methods of Cultivation**

Agricultural technology in Kashmir has remained primitive, with traditional methods and basic tools such as shovels, rakes, hoes, and sickles dominating farming practices. The valley's geographical isolation has contributed to its limited exposure to modern techniques, distinguishing it from other regions. Threshing was performed manually using wooden planks or stones, and rice husking relied on mortars and pestles, with minimal use of husking machines. Fanning and winnowing were performed by using simple clothes and wooden devices. Although modern tools were later introduced by the agriculture department, their high cost rendered them inaccessible to most poor farmers, limiting their adoption.

**Animal Husbandry**

Animal husbandry has long been a vital livelihood in Kashmir, supported by favorable agro-climatic conditions, abundant pastures, and water resources. During the Dogra era, the sector gained attention, especially following the recommendations of the 1929 Royal Commission for Agriculture. Initial efforts focused on improving livestock for the Dogra Elite. Maharaja established cattle farms at Shalteng and Cheshmashi, housing local, Sindhi, and imported Ayrshire breeds. A Civil Veterinary Department with limited staff primarily served the royal cavalry animals. By the late 1930s, breeding farms in Srinagar and Jammu marked the beginning of systematic cattle improvements in the state.

**Horticulture and Sericulture Sectors**

During the review period, horticulture was a key contributor to Kashmir's economy. Common fruits include apples, pears, plums, cherries, apricots, grapes, and walnuts. Grapes were used for wine production, with 164 kharwars being processed in 1895. In 1902, the government promoted horticulture through nursery development, mulberry cultivation, and fruit-tree distribution. The European varieties were tested, and the trees were initially free and later sold for a nominal fee. Scientific orchard management and advanced grafting techniques enhanced productivity, reflected in fruit export growth, from Rs. 3.5 lakh in 1905–06 to over Rs. 10 lakhs by 1920–21.

Sericulture plays an important economic role. Revived under Maharaja Ranbir Singh in 1871 and managed by Nilamber Mukerji, the industry has expanded steadily. By 1923, over 46,000 people had produced 34,948 cocoons, yielding over two million pounds of silk. The state ensures mulberry tree care and provides 40,000 ounces of silkworm eggs annually. Sericulture supported around 50,000 seasonal rearers and 5,000 factory workers, generating consistent profits of Rs. 7–9 lakhs annually after 1913.

**Contribution of Forest Resources in the Economy of Kashmir**

Kashmir's vast forests have long been a major economic asset, in addition to agriculture. Following the 1881 forest boundary survey, state forests covered approximately 2,179 square miles, with additional jagir forests under royal ownership. By 1942, the forest department had managed over 10,274 square miles, up from 10,165 in 1940. These woodlands generated significant state revenue through the extraction and sale of timber and firewood, with volumes recorded in lakhs of cubic feet during 1940–41.

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**Table-2: Table showing fire wood and timber extracted**

| Timber and fire wood extracted | 1941 | 1942 | 1943 |
|---|---|---|---|
| Department | | | |
| Timber extracted | 0.21 | 0.02 | 0.47 |
| Firewood extracted | 0.08 | —— | 0.08 |
| By purchasers | | | |
| Timer extracted | 216.13 | 110.78 | 199.66 |
| Firewood extracted | 13.24 | 5.36 | 8.88 |

**Source:** P.N.K. Bamzai (1987), Socio- Economic History of Kashmir (1846-1925).

In the second half of 1941, a total of 0.87 lakh cubic feet of drift timber and fuel were gathered from river activities. In 1942, the volume collected increased to 3.05 lakh cubic feet. In 1942, the generated income amounted to INR 1,70,078. The quantity of lumber and firewood available for sale in depots was 0.20 and 0.06 hundred thousand cubic feet respectively at the end of the second half of 1941, and 0.60 and 0.04 hundred thousand cubic feet respectively at the end was 1943.

**Policy of Land Revenue and Taxation**

During the Dogra era, agricultural revenue formed the backbone of state income and was supported by a feudal structure and heavy taxation that entrenched rural poverty. Maharaja Gulab Singh upheld the exploitative Sikh system, initially claiming up to 75% of crops, which was later reduced to just over 50%, with farmers retaining barely a quarter after deductions. Additional taxes—on produce, events, and livestock—alongside forced obligations to state officials intensified the burden. The collection of in-kind revenue has led to widespread abuse. Reforms such as Mujwaza, the assamiwari khewat, and the Izad Boli auction system proved to be oppressive. Land revenue was often diverted to intermediaries and religious endowments, primarily benefiting Hindu institutions.

**State Policy towards Agricultural Development**

At the end of the non-interventionist approach, British involvement in Kashmir's internal affairs increased, beginning with the appointment of a resident in 1885 during Maharaja Ranbir Singh's rule. This marked a turning point in Dogra's governance. Key reforms were as follows: income assessments were made more conservative and preferred in cash; the revenue farming system was abolished; state monopolies were discontinued; and transit, customs, and trade taxes were revised.

Walter Lawrence became the Settlement Commissioner in 1889, succeeding Wingate. He rejected the flawed method of assessing villages in clusters, and instead divided the region into assessment circles. Using crop-cutting tests, he calculated the average crop yield and market-based gross revenue for each circle. Lawrence recommended a 10-year settlement term, balancing fairness for cultivators with the state's need for revenue amid low population density.

A major reform under Lawrence was granting *assami* rights and ensuring permanent tenancy for farmers. The 1883 Settlement addressed tax collection, lease terms, and land distribution, converting wastelands into cultivable plots and allocating them to landless peasants, thus expanding Kashmir's agricultural base.

**Conclusion**

In summary, the Dogra regime in Jammu and Kashmir was marked by socio economic stagnation and widespread underdevelopment. Poor infrastructure, primitive agriculture, and lack of irrigation have left uncultivated land and insufficient output. Heavy taxation and feudal exploitation deepened rural poverty, whereas illiteracy and the absence of educational institutions hindered intellectual progress. Although the Dogra rulers introduced some reforms in agriculture and trade, these largely served the interests of the monarchy. For the general population, life remained defined by poverty, ignorance, and limited opportunities.

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**Conflicts of interest**

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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