

UNDERSTANDING THE CHAK PERIOD IN THE HISTORY OF KASHMIR

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Abstract:

Inspired by Marcus Garvey's assertion that a people without knowledge of their past resemble a tree without roots, this study undertakes an exploration of the historical traditions of Kashmir, Jammu, and other regions associated with the Chak dynasty. For the inhabitants of Jammu and Kashmir, engagement with regional history is indispensable, as it forms the foundation of cultural awareness and identity. This work seeks to interpret the legacy of the Chak rulers within the broader historical narrative of Kashmir, often described metaphorically as an "ocean in a pot." History, rather than ending, continually re-emerges, reflecting both human progress and regression. From prehistory—understood as the period before written records—to documented events, history encompasses the processes of recollection, collection, organization, and interpretation. Kashmir, popularly known as "heaven on earth," has long attracted political ambition, a sentiment echoed in a Persian couplet attributed to Amir Khusrau. Following the establishment of Muslim rule in 1339 CE, the Chak dynasty governed Kashmir between 1561 and 1586. Despite limited treaty records, their administration largely preserved and strengthened existing institutions. This study examines the enduring political and administrative legacy of the Chak dynasty in Kashmir.

Key words: Chak, Dynasty, Rule, Religion and Administration etc

1. INTRODUCTION

The Shah Mir dynasty governed Kashmir from 1339 to 1555 CE, a period marked by prolonged dynastic rule. Between 1555 and 1586 CE, the Chak dynasty produced only four rulers, from Ghazi Shah Chak to Yusuf Shah Chak, before the Mughal annexation under Akbar. Kashmir's strategic location and natural wealth attracted successive powers, each establishing distinct administrative systems. Scholars generally agree that the Chak dynasty ruled Kashmir from 1555 to 1586, during which its administrative framework underwent several transformations. Mughal authority in Kashmir was consolidated in 1586 under the diplomatic leadership of Akbar, though Mughal power in the subcontinent had earlier been established by Babur following his victory over Ibrahim Lodi. Historians trace the Chaks' origins to Dardistan (Gilgit-Hunza), with their rise aided by Shah Mir. Despite their military prominence, the Chaks later declined during the reign of Sultan Zain-ul-Abidin, amid sectarian pressures intensified under Mirza Haider Dughlat. The resurgence of Chak authority followed the death of Mirza Haider Dughlat, after which the Chaks consolidated power through strategic matrimonial alliances with influential landholders, thereby strengthening their sovereignty in Kashmir. The Chak polity comprised multiple hierarchical elites who successively exercised authority. The dynasty was formally established when Ghazi Shah Chak deposed Habib Shah between 1561 and 1563. Ghazi Shah's declining health weakened governance toward the end of his reign. Subsequently, his brother Hussain Shah Chak ruled from 1563 to 1570. Throughout their tenure, successive Chak rulers sought to develop a distinct administrative system in Kashmir.

2. RESEARCH OBJECTIVE

- The purpose of this study is to investigate the Chak Dynasty's legacy in Jammu and Kashmir, as well as the religious and governmental frameworks established by its successors between 1339 and 1555 A.D.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study's data was primarily gathered from primary and secondary sources. To construct a study framework and reach an objective conclusion, historical and contemporary literature were used without bias. This examination focused on the origins and governance of Chaks in Kashmir.

4. DISCUSSION AND RESULT

4.1 MUHAMMAD GHAZI SHAH CHAK (1555 CE)

Nasir ud-Din Muhammad Ghazi Shah Chak was the first Chak Sultan of Kashmir, ascending the throne in 1561 and ruling until 1563. Known for his prudent and reform-oriented outlook, Ghazi Shah sought to address longstanding political, economic, and environmental challenges that had weakened the state treasury. He prioritized fiscal recovery and entrusted the administration of justice to competent and senior governors, reflecting his strong commitment to equity and governance. Through military and diplomatic efforts, he successfully reasserted control over key frontier regions such as Skardu, Gilgit, Kishtwar, and Pakli, thereby restoring relative stability. Despite adhering to Shi'a Islam, Ghazi Shah upheld religious tolerance and permitted freedom of worship for all communities. Contemporary accounts portray him as a forceful yet capable ruler who strengthened law and order and actively resisted Mughal expansion through administrative vigilance and institutional discipline.

4.2 YUSUF SHAH CHAK (1579 - 1586 CE)

Yusuf Shah Chak ruled Kashmir from 1579 to 1586 CE, succeeding his father Ali Shah Chak, and is remembered as the last independent Muslim sovereign of the Kashmir Valley. His reign reflected the complex religious landscape of the Chaks, among whom the Nurbakhshiya Sufi order—often regarded as a Shia offshoot—held influence, while Sunni leadership figures such as Regi Chak and Shams Chak also remained prominent. As recent converts to Islam, some Chaks retained pre-Islamic names, indicating cultural continuity. Yusuf Shah Chak is also noted for his marriage to the celebrated Kashmiri poet Habba Khatoon, enhancing his romantic image in history. However, his inclination toward luxury weakened administrative efficiency. Despite abolishing several oppressive taxes, ministerial incompetence led to internal unrest. Seeking political restoration, he travelled to Akbar's court in Agra, marking a critical turning point in Kashmir's autonomy.

4.3 ADMINISTRATION UNDER THE CHAK DYNASTY

The Chaks are believed to have entered Kashmir during the reign of Suhadeva, and were later granted permanent settlement by Shams-ud-Din. Their political influence expanded significantly under Muhammad Shah, when matrimonial alliances with the ruling dynasty enabled their gradual integration into state affairs. Through strategic acumen, resilience, and military capability, the Chaks eventually emerged as the dominant power in Kashmir. Although predominantly Shi'a, they upheld religious tolerance, affirming the right of individuals to practice their faith freely. Chak rule functioned as a monarchy in both legal and political terms, yet it was not absolute; the law, nobility, and religious scholars acted as institutional restraints. Sovereign authority encompassed executive, legislative, and judicial powers, symbolized through khutba recitations and coinage, reflecting an enlightened autocratic system tempered by moral responsibility.

4.4 THE RELIGION OF THE CHAK DYNASTY

The Chak dynasty holds historical significance as the first Shi'a ruling house to exercise dominance in northern India and is also noted for its contributions to architecture and religious life. Chak rulers actively promoted Shi'ism while simultaneously upholding the principle of religious tolerance, affirming the right of individuals to practice their faith without coercion. Governance under Ali Shah Chak was strongly influenced by religious ethics, which shaped administrative conduct and public policy. The Chaks strategically engaged with the Reshi tradition through dialogue rather than persecution, aiming to integrate influential segments of Kashmiri Muslim society. Conversions to Shi'ism among prominent Chak lineages—including those of Pandu Chak, Hussain Chak, and Kaji Chak—were encouraged by the teachings of Mir Shamsu-d-Din Iraqi, whose patronage played a central role in strengthening Shi'a influence during a period of political stability. The expansion of Shiism in Kashmir intensified with the rise of Kaji Chak to the influential position of wazir and kingmaker, which encouraged Shi'a communities to articulate and disseminate their religious beliefs more openly. This period was marked by intellectual debates between Shias, Sufis, Rishis, and scholars of other Islamic traditions. As noted by Sayyid Ali, Shi'as increasingly sought to test the spiritual authority of Sunni Sufis and Reshis, aiming to demonstrate doctrinal superiority and attract converts. According to Tawarikh Kashmiri, religious tensions (fitna) during the rule of Malik Kaji Chak led Baba Lusti, a disciple of Baba Hanafu-d-Din, to assume leadership of the Reshi order. Some Reshis, including

Shungli Reshi and Beni Kaka, reportedly adopted Shi'ism under the influence of Mir Shamsu-d-Din Iraqi, reflecting the growing religious realignments of the period. The expansion of Shi'ism in Kashmir accelerated with the rise of Kaji Chak to the influential office of wazir and kingmaker, a development that emboldened Shi'a communities to articulate and disseminate their religious beliefs more openly. This period was characterized by public debate and intellectual engagement between Shi'as, Sufis, Reshis, and scholars of other Islamic traditions. As noted by Sayyid Ali, Shi'as increasingly sought to assess and challenge the spiritual authority of Sunni Sufis and Reshis in ways unprecedented under earlier regimes, with the aim of demonstrating doctrinal superiority and attracting converts. According to Tawarikh Kashmiri, the reign of Malik Kaji Chak witnessed religious discord (fitna), during which Baba Lusti, a disciple of Baba Hanafu-d-Din, emerged as a leading Reshi figure amid sectarian pressures. The subsequent conversions of figures such as Shungli Reshi and Beni Kaka are interpreted as part of a broader strategy to influence influential segments of Kashmiri Muslim society during a phase of growing Chak political consolidation and relative stability.

4.5 ARCHITECTURE OF CHAKS

The Muzaffarabad Fort, also known as the Red Fort, was built in the 17th century and is located in Azad Jammu and Kashmir, Pakistan. The Chak dynasty from Kashmir was in charge of its construction. The fort is generally referred to as the "Rutta Qila," or just "Qila" for short. The Chak rulers in Kashmir were aware of the threat posed by the Mughals to their capital. In 1559, work of the fortified structure began on a strategic site. When Kashmir became part of the Mughal Empire in 1587, the fort lost its status.

In 1646, Sultan Muzaffar Khan of the Bomba Dynasty, who also founded Muzaffarabad, completed the construction of the fortress.

5. CONCLUSION

The Chaks who went to Kashmir from Darads, also known as Dardistan, were noted for their violent behaviour and physical strength. Shah Mir established the Sultanate, elevating his subjects to the forefront of society. During Zainul Abidin's reign, Pandu Chak led the people. However, due to his premeditated activities, the Sultan executed him and numerous other notable Chaks. After migrating to Kupwara and Trahgam, the remaining Chak families were known as the Kupwari Chaks and Trahgami Chaks. Kashmir is often viewed as a peaceful region, yet it has a history of conflict dating back to ancient times. Kashmir has been controlled by various dynasties over time, including the Mauryan, Pathan, Hun, Sultanate, Chak, Afghan, and Dogra. The dynasty that controlled the princely state of Jammu and Kashmir for the last time. Each dynasty had its own administrative structure and portfolio, each with a distinct name. Kashmir had various changes in its political, social, economic, cultural, and administrative institutions over time. Although the former dynasties are no longer present, remains of their culture and footsteps may still be observed in the valley.

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