

Robert Thorp (1838- 1868)

Robert Thorp, a young British Army officer, arrived in Kashmir as a tourist in 1865. It was the time when British had defeated the Sikhs. The Dogra ruler Maharaja Gulab Singh, a feudal beneficiary under Sikh rule, deceived them and helped the British in the war. As a war indemnity the Sikhs handed over Kashmir to British and in turn it was sold to Gulab Singh as a reward for his help. A hugely unpopular man, the Maharaja regarded Kashmir as his personal fiefdom and never gave a thought to peoples' aspirations, or reform and reconstruction of his state.

Foreigners required permission of the British authorities to enter Kashmir at the time. They could not stay in the Valley for more than two months. Twenty-seven-year-old Thorp stayed longer to study the appalling condition of the people of his mother's birthplace. He raised his voice at the time when there were severe restrictions on independent information reaching the Government of India. He was motivated by a deep empathy for the Kashmiri people and a desire to deliver them from their miserable and disenfranchised conditions. Thorp took it on himself to inform and educate British public opinion about the situation in Kashmir by writing to the British Press. Thorp felt that the British owed a moral responsibility to Kashmiris, as it was they who had sold Kashmir to the Maharaja under the Treaty of Amritsar. He believed that public opinion was paramount to influence the government to do what was needed.

Thorp traveled the Valley's length and breadth collecting information about the plight of the people and thoroughly investigating the facts. He published a book entitled *Kashmir Misgovernment* and dedicated it to the people who, according to him 'do not approve of cruelties upon human beings, and to those who are exalted from the moral, religious and social point of view and do not like oppression'. He made a trenchant critique of the oppressive and discriminatory system of taxation under the Dogras, which he considered analogous to enslavement. Thorp pointed out that though the British had led the legal struggle for the abolition of slavery, the people of Kashmir were not only 'sold into slavery' but the British had paved the way for the Jammu ruler. When resistance was shown by one Sheikh Imam-ud-Din, the Britishers forced Sheikh to obey the new Sovereign of Kashmir or consider himself as an enemy of British power. Sheikh yielded and Gulab Singh's troops were permitted to occupy Srinagar without any resistance. Thorp asserted that British government had committed 'a wanton outrage' by handing over Kashmir to the unjust Maharaja. He pleaded to the British government to establish the true facts as he had done by laborious investigation in Kashmir itself.

However, soon after the publication of his book, Thorp was ordered to leave Kashmir. Undeterred, Thorp returned to Srinagar on November 21, 1868, and next morning after his breakfast he died, possibly because of poisoning. Thorp was found dead on the Suleman Taing Hill. He was buried in the Christian cemetery in Sheikh Bagh area of Srinagar city. The epitaph on his grave reads: “Robert Thorp, aged 30, who sacrificed his life for Kashmir on 22nd November 1868.”

Thorp’s death forced the Britishers to review the situation in Kashmir and steps were taken to better the conditions of Kashmir. More British officials were appointed to oversee the Maharaja’s regime and some of his depredations were curtailed. Laws were enforced to protect life and property. Robert Thorp is considered one of the first travelers on the path of freedom struggle of Kashmir for his courageous writings on behalf of Kashmiris and his contribution towards their political enfranchisement and socio-economic rights. It is in this light the Civil Society of Kashmir has decided to confer Robert Thorp award to the persons who have shown exemplary courage, contributed to the achievement of civil and political rights of the people of Jammu and Kashmir, and have taken stand against the injustice and oppression.