

WHO WAS ROBERT THORP?

WHY ROBERT THORP AWARD?

Robert Thorp, a young British Army officer, arrived in Kashmir as a tourist in 1865. It was the time when British had vanquished Sikhs and the Dogra ruler Maharaja Gulab Singh a beneficiary of the Sikhs, deceived them and helped British. As a war indemnity the Sikhs handed over Kashmir to British and in turn it was sold to Gulab Singh as a reward. This unlawful act of selling the land and enslaving the people was deplorable and shattered Kashmiris as they lost not only ownership rights, honour and dignity, but as slaves were forced to do what their masters desired. Maharaja regarded Kashmir as his personal property and never thought of reform and reconstruction. There was no question of social upliftment of the people.

Foreigners required permission of the British authorities to enter Kashmir. They could not stay in the Valley for more than two months at that time. 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 was total sanction on information reaching the government of India. His sole motive was to deliver the people of Kashmir from the miserable state.

Thorp took it on himself to inform and educate the British people about the situation in Kashmir by writing to the British Press without caring for consequences. Thorp felt the British were responsible for the plight of Kashmiris, as it was they who had sold it to the Maharaja under the "Treaty of Amritsar." Thorp pleaded before the government to release Kashmiris from the wretched condition, oppression and misery. He believed that public opinion was paramount to influence the government to do what was needed.

Thorp traveled to Valley's nook and corner collecting information about the plight of the people and thoroughly investigating the facts. **He later on published a book entitled "*Misgovernment in Kashmir*" 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".** Here I feel it worthwhile to mention the extracts of his study and try to throw some light on his real contribution.

Taxation:

Thorp thoroughly studied the various aspects of taxation to get to the truth of the matter and proved each act of oppression along with its source. This, he did, in spite of the fact that Englishmen were excluded from the dominions of the Jammu government during six months of winter.

All classes of Muslims were taxpayers except the tailors. Even the boatman who earned 2-8 chilkas a month were taxed. The sale of young girls to established houses of ill fame was lawful and encouraged by the government to swell the revenue. License granting permission to purchase a girl was 100 chilka rupees and additional payment was sought onwards. A girl who got into prostitution could never quit because it was impossible for her to raise money for the repayment and the government also banned remarriage of such girls.

Land Produced Taxation:

Government would take large portion of the produce at various levels. The produce would be collected under the supervision of the Tehsildar, the Thandar, Kardar, Mukhdam, Pathwari, the Shuqdar, the Saragowl, Taroughdar, the Harkakar, Doom etc., who would be provided with sepoy to collect the produce or punish if there was any lapse. Out of 32 trakhs of grain produced of the Rabi crop, the official would get about seven seers in addition to 20 trakhs as the government share leaving Zameendars starving. In addition, 3-chilka annas as money tax would be levied on every 16 trakhs of grain. Similarly for Khareef crop out of 32 trakhs in addition to 21 trakhs of the govt., share, 11 $\frac{3}{4}$ seers would be shared by other officials. A many tax of 2 $\frac{3}{4}$ chilka annas would be levied on 16 trakhs.

Fruit Tax:

¾ of annual produce.

Animal tax

For 500 Kharwars 2-3 animals (half their valued would be return to the Zameendars.)

1 Pony, 1 loie or woolen blanket under similar conditions, half seer of ghee for each cow, 1-10 fowls from each house and 2/3 of honey produced.

There were of course instances when a larger portion of grain or money would be elicited from Zameendars and the complaints if lodged were silenced by paying bribes to the officials concerned. The Zameendars had no surplus supplies and government quotas were shut at certain times so as to create artificial scarcity and thus increase prices for the quotas allowed to be bought by Zameendars. They got only 15 traks for one Kharwar. To further strangle the people economically the trade/exchange between the village and the city was totally banned.

Shawl system

About 100 Karkhandars each employed 20 to 300 shawl weavers and tax levied on each Karkhandar till 1st December 1867 was 47-48 chilka rupees for each weaver in the employment of Karkhandar and thereafter a reduction of 11 chilkas was made.

Dagh-shali

A daghshali was often a source of oppression in the hands of its officers, who were armed with the authority of the Maharaja. They harassed the shawl weavers to the maximum extent possible.

About 200 pundits were working at Dagh-shali under the supervision of daroga. The Karkhandar would have to take the sample of the shawl to be woven to Dagh-shali and pay 18.12 % of the price of the shawl and have not the piece stamped. The shawl could not be sold in the market if this piece wouldn't be fixed on the finished shawl and all this would be regulated by Dagh-shali by frequent inspections of pundits who would charge the Karkhandars for boat hire and transport, a considerable illegal sum of money.

There were several other fields in which the people of Kashmir were treated like beggars.

Robert Thorp pleaded that the British were the first nation, which led the way to the abolition of slavery. But the people of Kashmir were not only sold into slavery but Britishers paved the way to 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 pleaded that British government had committed a wanton outrage and injustice by handing over Kashmir to the unjust Maharaja. He pleaded to the British government to establish the facts as he had done by laborious investigation in Kashmir itself.

However, trouble came upon Thorp and he 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 the 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. The British officers were appointed. Laws were enforced to protect life and property. The state machinery slowly started gearing up. The intervention of the British helped in easing the situation to some extent.

So, Robert Thorp is the first traveler on the path of freedom struggle of Kashmir and thus a torchbearer of our struggle. It is in this light the Civil Society of Kashmir has decided to confer Robert Thorp award to the locals/internationals who have shown exemplary courage, contributed for the civil and political rights and welfare of the people of Kashmir, and taken stand against the injustice and oppression. This award shall be conferred every year on 22nd November, the anniversary of Robert Thorp. ---ENDS--