

## VINEYARD CULTIVATION IN KASHMIR: A HISTORICAL EXAMINATION OF DOGRA ERA AGRICULTURE

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### Abstract

The Dogra era in Kashmir, spanning from the mid-19th to the mid-20th century, played a pivotal role in shaping the region's agriculture, particularly in the cultivation of vineyards. Vineyard cultivation during this period represents a notable chapter in Kashmir's agricultural history. This paper examines the efforts made during the Dogra rule which actively promoted viticulture as part of broader economic development initiatives. Vineyards were established in various parts of Kashmir, leveraging the region's favourable climatic and soil conditions. This era also saw the introduction of modern agricultural practices and the cultivation of improved grape varieties, which led to increased grape productivity and enhanced quality. In addition to its economic benefits, vineyard cultivation held significant cultural value, becoming interwoven with the daily lives of the people despite facing many challenges. Grapes emerged as a key crop for many farmers, and wine production developed into a prominent industry in Kashmir. With the support of foreign experts, the Dogra rulers facilitated the establishment of wineries in the Gupkar area of Srinagar and encouraged the consumption of locally produced wine. However, the decline of vineyard cultivation began in the mid-20th century, influenced by factors such as political instability, rising costs, shifts in agricultural policies, and the rise of alternative cash crops. In recent decades, efforts have been made to revive the viticulture industry in Kashmir, recognizing its historical importance and potential for economic development. While this aspect of history has been largely overlooked by scholars, this author has sought to highlight the key developments during the important period of Dogra rule.

**Key Words:** Kashmir, Dogras, Climate, Viticulture, British, French, Wine-making

## Introduction

Vineyard cultivation, the deliberate and systematic nurturing of grapevines for the purpose of producing grapes, primarily for winemaking, represents an ancient and time-honoured agricultural practice. It entails a series of meticulous agricultural techniques aimed at fostering and managing grapevines to optimize their growth, health, and fruit quality. In the context of Kashmir, known for its bountiful fruits, particularly the luscious grapes, vineyard cultivation holds a significant historical and cultural importance.

In antiquity, Kashmir boasted a reputation for its abundant grape cultivation. However, it was during the Dogra era, under the reigns of Maharaja Ranbir Singh and Maharaja Pratap Singh, that systematic efforts were made to expand and improve grape cultivation in the region, further enhancing its reputation for viticulture. The region's fertile soil and favourable climate have always been conducive to the advancement of horticulture. Throughout Kashmir's rich history, successive ruling dynasties and monarchs displayed keen interest in grape cultivation.

## Types of Grapes

The citrus fruit known as grapefruit, referred to as "*Dach*" in Kashmiri language, is renowned for its juicy flesh and rich nutritional content, offering a myriad of health advantages.<sup>1</sup>

There were six varieties of grapes growing in Kashmir, of which Dr. Elmslie gave the following names: *Kishmishi dach*, *Krihun* or *Kawir dach*, *dun dach* or *pan dach*, *kawa dach*, *apaiman dach* and *Hassain dach*.

Typically, native vines were planted at the base of prominent trees and extended upwards to heights ranging between fifty to sixty feet, yielding copious amounts of fruit. Harvested around October, the grapes were stored in shallow earthen vessels throughout winter. Grapes were in season in September, with unripe grapes used to make vinegar, known as *kur*. Additionally, Moorcraft mentions that out of eighteen to twenty grape varieties in Kashmir, four are of foreign origin: *sahibi*, *maska*, *hoseni*, and *kishmish*. These foreign grapes are typically larger, thin-skinned, and grown in bunches. *Sahibi* and *maska* were considered fine table grapes, while the others would be used for making wine and resins. C.E Bates eloquently remarked that, with proper care and attention, 'Kashmiri wines have the potential to compete with those of Europe.'<sup>2</sup>

### **Early History and Development**

The cultivation of fruits appears to have been a longstanding practice in Kashmir, dating back to ancient times. References to grape cultivation and vineyards can be found in the historical texts of *Rajatarangini*, when Kalhana says that grapes “which were scarce in heaven were common in Kashmir.”<sup>3</sup> The town of Martand, for instance, was “swelling with grapes” during Lalitaditya’s time. It was renowned for its abundant grape production, with Bilhana, the famous author of *Vikramankadeva Charita*, also praising the valley's beauty adorned with flourishing grapevines.<sup>4</sup>

The synergy between the Mughuls and Kashmir was evident, as the valley offered them solace from the sweltering Indian heat, serving as a retreat for rejuvenation and leisure. Kashmir played a crucial role in providing fresh produce to the royal gardens of Agra, Delhi, and Lahore, including a variety of fruits like melons, apples, peaches, plums, apricots, and grapes. Abul-Fazl’s accounts highlight the steady influx of fruits from Kabul, Qandahar, and Kashmir, ensuring abundant supplies in markets and bazars throughout the year.<sup>5</sup> But due to the transportation challenges, it appears that fruit exportation was not common, although it’s reasonable to infer that grapes were likely traded in Northern Indian markets. This inference finds support in the *A’in-i-Akbari*, where Abul Fazl notes the Kashmiris’ practice of ‘carrying grapes in long baskets on their backs’.<sup>6</sup>

During Shah Jahan’s reign, Governor Zafar Khan Ahsan implemented measures to enhance the quality and flavour of fruits like grapes by employing superior grafting techniques and introducing imported saplings from regions like Persia and Kabul.<sup>7</sup>

During the early Afghan rule, wine and spirit were manufactured but the practice was prohibited by Atta Mohammad Khan (1800-1805). Later, during the governorship of Azim Khan these restrictions were relaxed and their manufacture was started again. Under the Sikhs this industry was encouraged, and wine was manufactured on a large scale. In the past the grape vine in its wild state composed the undergrowth of the jungle; sometimes indeed it attained a size seldom found in gardens: the fruit as might be expected, was numerous, but very tart and rough.<sup>8</sup> While grapes were abundant, the finer varieties were scarce, and the vines often grew intertwined with mulberry trees.<sup>9</sup>

**Revival under Dogra rule**

During the Maharaja Gulab Singh's reign, grape cultivation struggled, with meager production. It was Maharaja Ranbir Singh who spurred the revitalization of this fruit through various initiatives. Credit for enhancing both indigenous Kashmiri fruits and introducing European varieties primarily goes to French experts. The potential of Kashmir transforming into an orchard yielding diverse delicate fruits and vegetables was noted by European travellers from Bernier to Vigne. The narrative of modern horticulture in Kashmir is captivating. Starting from 1856, French firms dispatched agents to the Valley for shawl procurement. Among them was M. Dauvergne, present in Kashmir from 1856 to 1882, who, inspired by wild grape wines, experimented with winemaking. Maharaja Ranbir Singh endorsed Dauvergne's venture and insisted on continuing it under state patronage, emphasizing the need for superior wine quality and expertise from France. M. Ermens, a former head gardener in Paris, was engaged through the School of Horticulture at Versailles to conduct a comprehensive assessment of Kashmir's soil, climate, rainfall, and prevailing conditions. His findings led to recommendations for importing various grapevine varieties.<sup>10</sup>

Wine production, which ceased under the Afghan administration, saw a revival during the reign of Gulab Singh.<sup>11</sup> The Dogra's showed keen interest in the wine industry. Even then it was not in a flourishing state owing to the lack of market. The only market for it was Srinagar.<sup>12</sup>

In 1875, vine cuttings and fruit trees were planted in Chashma Shahi. Four years later, when the grapes ripened, M. Ermens attempted winemaking. However, lacking distillation expertise, his efforts were unsuccessful. He advocated hiring two additional experts—one to oversee vineyards and another for the manufacturing process. These roles were filled by M. Bouley, a vineyard specialist, and M. Peychaud, an experienced distiller. Nevertheless, these experts expressed concerns about the profitability of the wine manufacturing industry due to the absence of a cart road linking the Valley with the British Indian market.

The resident proposed a meeting to be held in Srinagar in September 1886 between the Kashmir ministers, Sir E. Buck, the Resident and Mr Lawrence, Settlement Officer, to evolve a plan for ten years. At this conference, Sir E. Buck's scheme was discussed in detail. The State Council resolved to extend the cooperation of the Durbar to the improvement of fruit and wine culture in Kashmir. The success of the scheme would depend on skilled European supervision.<sup>13</sup> Massive plantations were done in state-run Vineyards. The land under vine kept

steadily increasing, and in 1885 there were now about 900 acres containing 4,58,000 vines included in the State vineyards.<sup>14</sup>

Walter Lawrence<sup>15</sup> describes witnessing massive vines entwining poplars and various other trees, often growing wild, with their fruit proving to be of poor quality and lacking in taste. Contrary to this, the grapes, whether white or red, harvested from the State vineyard at Raipur in the Sind valley, were celebrated for their exquisite flavour.<sup>16</sup> Arthur Neve also corroborates that only a handful of vineyards at the mouth of the Sind valley boast exceptional yields of 'delectable white and red dessert grapes'<sup>17</sup> and no such quality of grapes were found in other parts of the country. Attempts were made to spread the cultivation of Raipur vines to other regions of the valley. As the demand for table grapes diminished, initiatives were launched to introduce viticulture for wine production. Lawrence further mentions that presently, there are 389 acres of vineyards adorning the shores of Dal Lake. These vines were originally imported from the Bordeaux region of France during the reign of Maharaja Ranbir Singh, with no expense spared to ensure the success of this endeavour. A high-cost distillery plant was brought in and installed at Gupkar on the banks of Dal Lake, producing wines of Medoc and Barsac varieties on an annual basis. Despite significant investment, the vineyards struggled to thrive, evident by the onset of Phylloxera infestations in 1890. To combat this, American vines were promptly imported, gradually replacing the ailing Bordeaux plants. Throughout this period, the vineyards were overseen by an Italian, Signor Benvenuti, while another Italian, Signor Bassi, managed the wine manufacturing facility.<sup>18</sup>

### **Plantation and Production**

Sir Walter Lawrence predicted that Kashmir was likely to owe much of its prosperity to its fruit in the future and this made it one of the most lucrative directions in which public revenue could be expended. The whole valley was suitable for vine cultivation, and where the soil is rich, cognac could be advantageously made. The wines made were similar to Medoc and Barsac (French cities), and were of first quality, containing naturally all the principles necessary to their conservation and travelling.<sup>19</sup>

The total produce from these gardens decreased from 241 *kharwars*<sup>20</sup> in 1897 to 170 *kharwars* in 1898 resulting in a loss of Rs 3082.<sup>21</sup> New viticulture plantations were established in nurseries, with 15,779 grafts planted in 1902.<sup>22</sup> The quantity of grapes in the State vineyards was 190 *kharwars* and 12 *trakhs*<sup>23</sup> during the year 1903 against

139 *kharwars* and 9 *trakhs* in the year 1902, showing an increase of 51 *kharwars* and 3 *trakhs*, which is satisfactory. But of the total produce, only 1 *kharwar* and 4 *trakhs* were sold to the public, the rest being supplied to the Wine Manufactory. There was a net profit of Rs. 2754 in 1903.<sup>24</sup> By 1904, the total number of grafted vines planted in nurseries had reached 34,100.<sup>25</sup> In 1905, a total of 7,947 vines and various fruit trees were planted, compared to 7,295 in the previous year. The produce consisted of 287 *kharwars* and 12 *trakhs* of grapes against 202 *kharwars* and 10 *trakhs* in 1904. The total receipts of the year 1905 amounted to Rs. 8,866 against Rs. 3,910 realised in the previous year, showing a satisfactory increase of Rs. 4956.<sup>26</sup>

The table below provides a detailed overview of the state of the vineyards, including the amount of produce, revenue generated, expenditure, profit, and plantation figures over the years before its closure in 1914.

**Table of statistics of the state vineyards from 1906 to 1914.:**

YEAR	QUANTITY OF GRAPES PRODUCED (Kharwars)	REVENUE (Rs)	EXPENDITURE (Rs)	PROFIT (Rs)	PLANTATION OF VINES. (numbers)
1906	430	4880	2124	2756	5500
1907	573	6120	1846	4274	1300
1908	276	3025	1658	1367	5000
1909	160 1/4	1607 1/2	1724	-117	750
1910	440 1/2	2202/8	1845	357	500
1911	328	3600	1631	1969	700
1912	415	4980	1460	3520	800
1913	385	1925	1403	522	3000
1914	236 maunds	528	1264	-736	—

**Source:-** W.S Talbot, Annual report of the horticulture and vineyards department, for the year 1914, Jammu, 1915, p.15.

The above table on vine plantations reveals a pattern of inconsistency in vineyard efforts. In 1906, a significant effort was made in viticulture with the planting of 5,500 vines, demonstrating optimism and investment in the vineyard operations. However, this number dropped sharply to 1,300 vines in 1907, indicating possible setbacks. In 1908, another major effort resulted in the planting of 5,000 vines, but subsequent years saw a steep decline. In 1913, a final attempt was made with 3,000 vines planted before the eventual closure of the vineyards. These fluctuations reflect the instability in vineyard operations and the challenges contributing to their decline.

Grape production from 1906 to 1914 also exhibited significant variation. In 1906, 430 *kharwars* of grapes were produced, peaking at 573 *kharwars* in 1907. However, production fell to 276 *kharwars* in 1908 and further declined to 160 *kharwars* in 1909. A recovery occurred in 1910 with 440 *kharwars*, followed by 328 *kharwars* in 1911, 415 *kharwars* in 1912, and 385 *kharwars* in 1913. By 1914, production dropped to 236 Maunds<sup>27</sup>, just before the vineyards closed. Due to severe drought in 1913<sup>28</sup> and 1914, the crop quality was poor, and fruit sellers struggled to sell the produce in time, leading to a substantial loss in income.<sup>29</sup>

The financial performance of the state vineyards from 1906 to 1914 mirrored these fluctuations. In 1906, profits were Rs. 2,756, rising to Rs. 4,274 in 1907, marking the peak of profitability. However, in 1908, profits fell to Rs. 1,367, and by 1909, the vineyards faced a loss of Rs. 117. A modest recovery occurred in 1910 with profits at Rs. 357, followed by Rs. 1,969 in 1911. In 1912, profits rose to Rs. 3,520, but dropped again to Rs. 522 in 1913. The final year, 1914, saw a loss of Rs. 736, ultimately leading to the closure of the vineyards.

In summary, the state vineyards experienced significant fluctuations in vine plantations, grape production, and financial performance from 1906 to 1914. These trends reflect the underlying challenges, including environmental factors, market dynamics, and operational difficulties that culminated in the eventual closure of the vineyards.

### **Transition period: Closure of Vineyards and After**

Despite being directly managed by the State, the vineyards lacked the meticulous cultivation necessary for success, even under supervision. In 1892, Signor Benventi said that Kashmiri gardeners on small pay, have little inducement to do good work and he believed that the vineyards will never be properly cultivated while they remain under

the direct control of the State.<sup>30</sup> Local cultivators showed little interest in viticulture due to the exploitative nature of Dogra rule<sup>31</sup>, although Raja Sir Amar Singh and Diwan Amar Nath maintained their vineyards and supplied grapes to the wine factory. Lawrence expressed doubts about the Kashmir wine industry's potential for significant growth unless villagers actively participated in vine-growing. There were complaints among the populace about the necessity of cutting down their thriving vines to evade the demands of officials.<sup>32</sup> The market for wines was limited to Srinagar due to the challenges of long-distance transportation and high frontier duties, making it difficult to sell Kashmiri wine in India at competitive prices. Consequently, operating under such conditions was scarcely profitable.<sup>33</sup>

In 1896, the Committee emphasized that grape cultivation and wine production were unprofitable ventures. The Durbar had been incurring significant expenses without sufficient returns, with no prospects of future gain. To minimize losses, it was decided to reduce both the vineyard area and viticulture costs. The grape-growing area was scaled back to produce 120 *kharwars* of grapes annually, enough for 6,000 bottles of wine. A small area was maintained for wood, grafting, and nurseries, so that vineyards could be replanted if necessary. By year-end 1897, the total vineyard area was reduced to 25 gardens compared to 75 at the start, with the rest leased for other cultivation. White and black grapes were sent to the distillery, diseased vines were replaced with American stocks,<sup>34</sup> and 45,000 vine cuttings were planted to replace old vines.<sup>35</sup>

The Distillery, it would appear, was established at first more with scientific and industrial than purely commercial purposes in view, the later, however, predominated gradually. In a report in 1907, Mr. Peychaud suggests that the Durbar should at once abandon the idea of manufacturing liquors of which there is little or no sale and which only add to the burden and complexity. He further argued that in the art of wine making much progress was made abroad and it is vain to suppose that Kashmir can, in the near future, be able to compete. In this report it is mentioned that distillery has not much field in the State and in order to improve the financial prospects it was suggested to seek both reputation and profit in the markets of British India. For this purpose it has to improve the quality and make it cheap enough to stand in the competition with those already in favour. Cost of production was high and the addition to it of the excessively high cost of the carriage on the Jhelum Valley road, there is not the remotest chance for any considerable demand being created.<sup>36</sup> The only demand for the wine seemed to be due to the European



visitors to the valley and the sales every year were not considerable. So, the cultivation of grapes and manufacture of wine proved a failure in Kashmir. Hence it was necessary to close the distillery and vineyard in order to prevent the future losses if the undertaking was to be continued.<sup>37</sup>

By 1912 the Viticulture operations were limited to Shirazi Bagh, the only Vineyard, and the others being transferred to the Horticulture department.<sup>38</sup> In 1914, it was decided to close the Wine Manufactory to make room for almonds or fruit trees.<sup>39</sup> However, the Maharaja Pratap Singh not having agreed to the immediate destruction of the vines, the order passed the previous year regarding the transfer of the vineyards to the Horticulture Department was held in abeyance and the vineyards continued as a separate concern under the management of Mr. A. M. Psychaud.<sup>40</sup> The whole vineyards were, however, interplanted with over 1,000 fruit trees as a preliminary measure towards the new arrangement which, it was hoped, will come into force in 1914.<sup>41</sup>

The significant drop in income in 1914 from grapes was not solely due to the year's inferior crop, but also to the fact that the produce was useless except for wine making.<sup>42</sup> The grapes sold were not suitable for that purpose, and the income they yielded could not cover the expenditure on them.<sup>43</sup>

The new arrangement sanctioned in 1914 dividing horticultural work in Kashmir between the Directors of Horticulture and Agriculture was brought into operation during 1915 and apart from the changes it involved, Shirazi Bagh, the last state-run vineyard was absorbed in the Horticulture Department on the final abolition of the Vineyards.<sup>44</sup>

Even after the abolition of the State Vineyards in 1915, grape cultivation continued in local gardens. Now, nearly a century later, the state government has recognized the potential of the Valley and is revitalizing grape production, starting with the Ganderbal district of Kashmir.<sup>45</sup> Correcting the mistakes made in the past, today the government is directly engaging with the cultivators instead of focusing on state-run vineyards, as recommended in 1880's by Signor Benventi and Walter Lawrence. In 2023, Ganderbal's grape production reached an impressive 2000 to 3000 metric tons annually.<sup>46</sup>

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, the history of vineyard cultivation in Kashmir reflects a tale of changing fortunes and efforts to revive and innovate in grape production for both local consumption and commercial purposes.

From ancient times, Kashmir's climate and soil have been conducive to horticulture, with grapes being a prominent fruit.

Over the centuries, various rulers made efforts to improve grape varieties and wine production methods. The involvement of French experts in the 19th century marked a significant turning point, bringing expertise and technology to enhance viticulture in the region. Though the prospects of wine consumption in Kashmir were bleak due to the beliefs of the majority population, all the wine and brandy made was readily disposed of to the visitors. The production reached a point at which exportation was necessary to foster the industry. Over time, the focus shifted from large-scale wine production to more sustainable and economically viable horticultural practices.

Vineyard cultivation, initially undertaken to produce wines and as a revenue source by the Dogra government, after nearly two decades into operation, was deemed uneconomical to expand the plantations. The venture struggled to tap into foreign markets due to rising costs, long distances, poor communication infrastructure, diseases, changing market demands, inability to compete in quality within British Indian markets and the need to adapt to new agricultural practices all influenced the trajectory of Kashmir's vineyards. Consequently, the project was abandoned. Nevertheless, the introduction of improved grape varieties and expertise, which were disseminated among local cultivators, ensured the continued cultivation of grapes.

Today, while the era of large state-run vineyards and wineries has passed, the legacy of grape cultivation in Kashmir lives on. The prime example being the revival of this age-old practice of grape cultivation in Sind Valley (Ganderbal district of Kashmir) holds great promise for a fruitful future. Efforts to integrate vineyards with horticulture and adapt to changing market dynamics continue, reflecting a resilient spirit and a commitment to preserving Kashmir's agricultural heritage. As the region looks towards the future, the story of vineyard cultivation in Kashmir serves as a testament to the enduring connection between land, climate, culture, and innovation in agriculture.

### **Notes and References**

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<sup>11</sup> *Ibid*, p.225.

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<sup>13</sup> P.N.K Bamzai, *op. cit.*, 2007.p. 226.

<sup>14</sup> *Report on 'Duty on Wine and Spirits manufactured in Kashmir*, Foreign Department, November 1885, File no. 25-26.

<sup>15</sup> He was the first settlement commissioner for Jammu and Kashmir (1889-1894).

<sup>16</sup> Walter Lawrence, *The Valley of Kashmir*, Oxford University Press, London, 1895, p. 351.

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<sup>19</sup> *Gazetteer of Kashmir and Ladakh; together with routes in the territories of the Maharaja of Jammu and Kashmir*, 1890, Calcutta, P. 51.

<sup>20</sup> 1 *Kharwar* (ass-load) = 80.600 kg.

<sup>21</sup> *Report on the administration of the Jammu and Kashmir State for the year 1897-98, 1900*, p. 173.

<sup>22</sup> *Triennial administration report of the Jammu and Kashmir State for the year 1901-1904*, Lahore, 1908, p.280.

<sup>23</sup> 1 *Trakh*= 4.43 kgs.

<sup>24</sup> *Triennial administration report of the Jammu and Kashmir State for the year 1901-1904*, Lahore, 1908, p.280.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid*, p.283.

<sup>26</sup> Jammu and Kashmir Administrative report for 1905, p.114.

<sup>27</sup> 1 maund=37 kg.

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<sup>28</sup> *The annual administration report Jammu and Kashmir State for 1912-1913, Jammu, 1915*, p.41.

<sup>29</sup> W.S Talbot, *Annual report of the horticulture and vineyards department, for the year 1914*, Jammu, 1915, p.13.

<sup>30</sup> *Report on the Administration of Jammu and Kashmir for the year 1892-93*, Jammu, 1895, p.133.

<sup>31</sup> When the question of remitting duty on Kashmir wine was recommended by Sir St. John, first British Resident of Kashmir, Mr. Henvey categorically rejected it as he believed that workmen are not paid their dues and villagers' fruits are seized and unpaid. (Foreign Department, November 1885, File no. 25-26.

<sup>32</sup> Walter Lawrence, op. cit., p. 351.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid*, p.352.

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<sup>45</sup> Vineyard Vigour in the Valley,

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<sup>46</sup> Chief Horticulture Officer Ganderbal, Madan Lal Tak, [www.greaterkashmir.com](http://www.greaterkashmir.com).