THE ERA OF SHEIKH MOHAMMAD ABDULLAH IN JAMMU AND KASHMIR POLITICS

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ABSTRACT

Sheikh Mohammad Abdullah held an unrivaled place in the history of Kashmir and in the historic conversion from tradition to modernity. He left an indelible impact on the political landscape of Kashmir. He was a charismatic leader having a magnetic quality to change the mood of the public and drove them in the direction he desired. Besides being a charismatic, he was stubborn idealist, who was reluctant to compromise on his principles and the plans he had envisaged for the welfare of his people. He was a prominent freedom fighter in Kashmir as he brought about several changes to the political history of India. Sheikh Mohammad Abdullah has been the most dominating political figure of modern Jammu and Kashmir who played a significant role in shaping its post-1947 politics. Frequently mentioned in various works, both scholarly and journalistic, his role is often viewed in black and white terms. This Article deals with, the role of Sheikh Mohammad Abdullah in the shaping and building peace regime in Jammu and Kashmir political set-up.

Keywords: Sheikh Mohammad Abdullah, charismatic, politics, Prominent, Freedom Fighter.

Introduction

Sheikh Mohammad Abdullah was one of the most distinguished political leaders who ruled in the Kashmir valley, prior to the Indian Independence and the post freedom struggle in India. His never-say-die attitude earned him the moniker of "Sher-e-Kashmir" (Lion of Kashmir), by his ardent supporters. Abdullah was the founder and leader of the National Conference, which was believed to be one of the biggest political parties in

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the region. The aim was to work actively for the progress of the common people. Sheikh Abdullah was a
reputed man and he worked for equal rights, medical infrastructure for the people and establishment of trade
and commerce in Kashmir, during his tenure. Till today, he continues to be held in great reverence as an
important political figure. One of Sheikh Abdullah and his party members' achievements was that they were the
first few educated individuals who struggled to make a change in the feudal system and establish a democratic
rule in Kashmir.

Sheikh Abdullah has been variously called an enigmatic as well as a magnetic personality, a crowd puller, a
cola tile public figure who used different languages at different places and on different occasions depending
upon the mood and response of his audience. His authoritarian style of functioning earned him more foes
(hidden and open) than friends. Yet he was admired for his courage and boldness by the peasantry for whom he
has done a lot. He was conscious and aware of his capacity to elicit from his followers deference, devotion and
awe. The man whose charismatic leadership strengthened this unique delinking of nationalism form religious
intolerance – an inflammmable mixture still haunting India and the world – was Sheikh Abdullah. His
commitment to secularism, socialism, and campaign for azaadi (freedom from oppression) motivated his people
to rebuff the appeal of religious politics sweeping the subcontinent. The foundations of the transformation were
laid by changing the name of the party he led in the struggle for popular rule against the maharaja from Muslim
Conference to Kashmir National Conference, open to all communities, the Historic date was 11 June 1939, the
stirring manifesto of the new party was no less revolutionary, land to the tiller without compensation, a
commitment that laid the foundations of the party’s popularity among the vast majority of Kashmir is. He came
to be known as sher-e- Kashmir, Lion of Kashmir. He fought a relentless battle against the autocratic Dogra
rule.

Secularism was further strengthened and history made on 26 October 1947 when, with Abdullah’s support, the
predominantly Muslim princely state of Jammu & Kashmir joined the Indian Union rather than the adjoining
Islamic state of Pakistan. The rest of India, the accession helped Mahatma Gandhi and Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru to douse Hindu communal reactions to Partition. Gandhi was moved to tell in Prayer
meeting on 29 December 1947, two months after the state joined the Indian Union:

“It must be evident to the outsider, as it is to me, that Kashmir must be lost to the invaders, otherwise called the
raiders, if Sheikh Abdullah Sahib’s effort to hold together the Muslims and the minority [in the valley] fails…My sole hope and prayer is that Kashmir become a beacon of light in this benighted subcontinent.”

Secularism had become an article of faith for Sheikh Mohammad Abdullah’s party. He committed his party
and people to a secular movement for representative government with a radical socio – economic reform
agenda; a commitment that went against the communal tide sweeping much of India.

All Jammu and Kashmir Muslim Conference
The all Jammu and Kashmir Muslim Conference is a major political party of Jammu and Kashmir. In 1932 Pro-
Congress Sheikh Abdullah formed Kashmir’s first political party, the All Jammu & Kashmir Muslim
Conference, with a demand for merger of Kashmir and Jammu with India. His party was renamed the National
Conference in 1939 to suite the secular nature of Kashmir culture. The All Jammu and Kashmir National
Conference, led by Sheikh Mohammad Abdullah, espoused a secular ideology and wished to create a secular,
democratic but independent Kashmir with close ties to British India.
When the All Jammu and Kashmir Muslim Conference was converted into a secular political party in 1939, the
Muslim leaders amended the Constitution of the Muslim Conference , modified its objectives and threw its
membership open to the people of the State. On 13 June 1941, the breakaway factions of the National Conference revived the rest while Muslim Conference under the leadership of Choudry Ghulam Abbas.

**Muslim Conference Renamed as National Conference**

On 28th February, 1939 Sheikh Abdullah was released and in order to prepare the ground for final transformation of Muslim Conference into National Conference, he made a country–wide tour. In a statement, he said, “Communal politics does not suit the temperament of the people of this state. It cannot help us in removing the evils of poverty, hunger, illiteracy and above all our slavery.” Under the Presidentship of Mr. Ghulam Mohammad Sadiq, a special session of Muslim Conference was convened at Pathar Majid on 10th June, 1939, to reconsider the decision on the resolution of working committee, passed on 28th June 1938, regarding the name and constitution of the party. According to Prem Nath Bazaz, 176 delegates and hundreds of workers participated in the session. G.M. Sadiq inaugurated the session, he said:

“All responsible government cannot be the Government of any particular class or party or religious group but, on the other hand, every individual comprising the forty lakh inhabitants of the state will be a component part of the same and will have the same share in running it”

So National Conference came into being. Some Non-Muslims were included into the working committee as members; prominent among them were Sardar Budh Sing, Jia Lal Kilam, Prem Nath Bazaz and Kashyap bandhu. The party also adopted a new flag having a white plough on red back-ground. It was designed by Pandit Prem Nath Dhar. The Flag depicts the influence of socialistic ideology. In fact, the leaders, who worked and voted in favour of the change, were deeply influenced by progressive movements of Russia; Naya Kashmir was another manifestation of their progressive ideology.

The conversion of Muslim conference into National conference was executed not only to provide a political platform to Non–Muslims, but Sheikh Mohammad Abdullah was not feeling comfortable with communal politics and he wanted to get rid of it. His belief in secularism was unshakeable and was not confined in changing the name only. He provided his secular stance throughout his life. In 1947 when the whole sub continent was engulfed into communal holocaust, it was only Kashmir, which stood aloof because of Sheikh Abdullah’s unwavering belief in secularism.

**Accord on Kashmir**

On 24th March 1972, Indira Gandhi informed Parliament that she welcomed the change in the thinking of Abdullah for having expressed his willingness to accept the finality of Kashmir accession. This started the process of negotiations between Parthasarthy and begs, the former representing Indira Gandhi and the latter Sheikh Mohammad Abdullah. Beg began by asking for the transfer of the fundamental rights provisions of the Indian Constitution to the Jammu and Kashmir Constitution. He also demanded removal of the authority of the Election Commission and abrogation of article 356 to prevent arbitrary imposition of President’s rule. None of these were accepted and as Indira Gandhi informed Parliament later on 24th February 1975 that it was not found possible to agree to any of these proposals and relations between Kashmir and Indian Union would continue as before. In the same breath she praised Abdullah as a statesman having strong views on these issues but nevertheless having agreed to drop them in broader national interests, Beg Prathasarthy talks finally culminated in an agreement, known as agreed conclusions, which was signed on 13th November 1974 and forwarded to principal parties.

**Agreed Conclusions**

1. The State of Jammu and Kashmir, which is a constituent unit of the Union of India, Shall in its relations with the union, with the Union, continue to be governed to by Article 370 of the Constitution of India.
2. The residuary powers of legislation shall remain with the state, however, Parliament will continue to have power to make laws relating to the prevention of activities directed towards disclaiming questioning or disrupting the sovereignty and territorial integrity of India or bringing about secession of a part of the territory of India from the Union or causing insult to the Indian National Flag, the Indian National Anthem and the Constitution.

3. Where any provisions of the Constitution of India had been applied to the State of Jammu and Kashmir with adaptations and modifications, such adaptations and modifications can be altered or repealed by any order of the President under Article 370, each individual proposal in this behalf being considered on its merits; but provisions of the Constitution of India already applied to the State of Jammu and Kashmir without adaptation or modification are unalterable.

4. With a view to assuring freedom to the State of Jammu and Kashmir, to have its own legislation on matters like welfare measures, cultural matters, social security, personal law and procedural laws, in a manner suited to be special conditions in the State, it is agreed that the state Government can review the laws made by Parliament or extended to the State after 1953 or any matter relatable to the Concurrent List and may decide which of them, it its opinion, needs amendment or repeal. Thereafter appropriate steps may be taken under Article 254 of the Constitution of India. The grant of the President’s assent to such legislation would be sympathetically considered. The same approach would be adopted in regard to the last to be made by the Parliament in future under the proviso the clause 2 of that Article; the State Government shall be consulted regarding the application of any such law to the State and the views of the State Government shall receive the fullest consideration.

5. As an arrangement reciprocal to what has been provided under Article 368, a suitable modification of that Article as applied to the State should be made by Presidential order to the effect that no law made by the Legislature of the State of Jammu and Kashmir, seeking to make any change in or in the effect of any provision of Constitution of the State of Jammu and Kashmir relating to any of the under mentioned matters, shall take effect unless the Bill, having been reserved for the consideration of the President, receives his assent; the matters are:

(a) the appointment, powers, functions, duties, privileges and immunities of the Governor, and

(b) the following matters relating to Elections namely, the superintendence, direction and control of Elections by the Election Commission of India, eligibility for inclusion in the electoral rolls without discrimination, adult suffrage and composition of the legislative Council, being matters specified in sections 138, 139 140 and 50 of the Constitution of the State of Jammu and Kashmir.

6. No agreement was possible on the question of nomenclature of the Governor and the Chief Minister and the matter is therefore, remitted to the Principles.

**Quit Kashmir Agitation**

In May 1946 Sheikh Mohammad Abdullah launched the Quit Kashmir agitation against Maharaja Hari Singh. His aversion to the Dogra dynasty could not be contained, when the British Cabinet Mission’s negotiations of Indian independence raised their prospect of Maharaja Hari Singh determining the future of the state. He was in Lahore when he learnt that the mission had gone to Kashmir for a break from the summer heat in Delhi, and promptly sent a lengthy telegram addressed to Sir Stafford Cripps. Its essence was that Kashmir had been
bought by the Dogras for a mere 75 lakh rupees in 1846, a hundred years earlier. The dynasty had no right to rule the state; its future should be decided by the people. Here are the extracts:

“Today the people of Kashmir cannot be pacified with only a representative system of governance. They want total freedom from the autocratic Maharaja. We change the political and moral status of this sale deed, this instrument of subjugation, handed by the East India Company to a bunch of Dogras.”

Abdullah followed this with public speeches declaring that the end of British regime would mean an end to the rulers. He appealed to people to contribute one rupee each towards a collection of 75 lakhs so that they could buy back Kashmir’s independence. The slogan ‘Quit Kashmir’ was coined. However, in contrast to British India, where the British were asked to quit in 1942, here the target was the maharaja. Loyalists objected that Hari Singh could not be asked to abandon his own homeland, but Abdullah was convinced that it was time to demonstrate the power of the people.

Nehru wanted Abdullah to come to Delhi to brief him, but he was arrested on the way on 20 May 1946, and detained in Srinagar’s Badami Bagh Cantonment. Widespread demonstrations and arrests followed. The police opened fire and twenty deaths were officially admitted. National Conference leaders were arrested. Bakshi Ghulam Mohammad and G.M Sadiq escaped to Lahore

**Naya Kashmir**

The growing tides of the Great October Socialist Revolution had far reaching reverations and influence on thinkers and leaders of the world. Allama Iqbal was also highly impressed by the ideology of socialism. In one of his poem, advocating socialism, he writes:

“jis kahit say dehkan ko Muyassar na ho rozi, Us Khait kay har khosha-e-gandam ko jalo do”

(The field that does not give sustenance to its own tiller, Should be burnt to the ground with its Wheat, fodder and filler)

Sheikh Mohammad Abdullah was a deeply religious man but at the same time he was an ardent supporter of Socialism. It was perhaps because of his close association with some eminent socialists like Faiz, B.P.L, Bedi, Nehru, etc. In his own party, there were some known socialists like G.M Sadiq, D.P. Dhar, Sardar Budh Singh, who exited decisive influence in moulding his opinion. Sheikh Mohammad Abdullah advocated socialism in order to improve the living standard of his people, who were victims of the wretched socio-economic conditions then prevailing in Kashmir.

In the fifth annual session, held at Pather Masjid in September 1944, under the presidencship of Sheikh Mohammad Abdullah, National Conference adopted an elaborate politico-economic document known as ‘Naya Kashmir’. The document was authored by a known intellectual B.P.L., Bedi with the aid and advice of Faiz Ahmad Faiz, Maulana Masoodi, Mirza Afzal Beg and G.M. Sadiq. In the inaugural speech, Sheikh Mohammad Abdullah, “In our times, Soviet Russia has demonstrated before our eyes, not merely theoretically but in her actual day-to-day life and development that real freedom takes birth only from economic emancipation.” Naya Kashmir offered a complete economic programme and high ideals of reformation in all spheres of life. The document was divided into two main parts:

1) Constitutional structure and
2) The National Economic Plan

The first part lays down comprehensive details of fundamental personal and political rights of the citizens; Freedom of worship, Freedom of press, Freedom of Meetings and procession. Naya Kashmir assured equality of rights irrespective of religion, race, colour, birth or sex in all spheres of life. Council of Ministers would be
accountable to National Assembly, which is the legislating body elected by the citizens on the basis of universal equal direct suffrage by a secret ballot. Naya Kashmir also guarantees the right to work, right to education and equal opportunity for all. It proposed independent judicial system. It also ensures equal rights to women in all fields of National life. According to Faiz Ahmad Faiz, “politics in Punjab were dominated by feudal lords, but the National Conference adopted ‘Naya Kashmir’ as its manifesto, which was much ahead of the times and represented a revolutionary trend.

Conclusion
Sheikh Mohammad Abdullah was, without question, the dominant figure in Kashmir from 1930s until his death in 1982. He was the harbinger of National consciousness and instrumental to introduce political modernization in the state. Sheikh Abdullah was deeply religious and staunchly secular. He committed his party and people to a secular movement for representative government with a radical socio-economic reform agenda; a commitment that went against the communal tide sweeping much of India. Abdullah’s imposing presence and resonant voice provided an iconic leader. Sheikh Abdullah was deeply religious, but a subtle politician. During his tenure, the hereditary rule of the royal family was replaced by the system of electing the head of the government. He also recognized the education system. After the 1975 Indra- Abdullah Accord he laid a new foundation for overall development of State. This landmark accord ushered in an era of much needed peace and political stability in the State. His charisma arose from the bold and spirited presentation of his unshakable socio-political convictions. He learnt his politics and nationalism the hard way mot from books and ideologies but from active politics.

References

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