



Historical Moments from Muslim Conference to National Conference

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Abstract:

The paper is an attempt to explore peoples history in the newly created state of Jammu and Kashmir in an atmosphere where the common masses were ruled by two alien authorities i.e. Dogras and British officers. The researcher will enquire into the moments in Kashmir valley which led to the formation of Muslim Conference and then later on National Conference. This conversion of Muslim Conference into National Conference in Jammu and Kashmir was not an abrupt development but the culmination of the gradual process that began as early as the formation of Muslim Conference. This paper aims at discussing all such developments that paved the way towards the formation of common platform.

Key words:

Dogras, Muslim Conference, National Conference, Sheikh Abdullah, Prem Nath Bazaz, Glancy report,

Introduction:

Soon after the creation of the princely state of Jammu and Kashmir in 1846 by the first Dogra Maharaja Gulab Singh, the people in the state particularly the inhabitants of Kashmir valley had to face many challenges. These challenges were both internal and external. On one hand they had to face the brunt of Dogra rulers and on the other hand the people had to bear the British officers. Political parties have become a must for the existence of a modern democratic state. Parties play a crucial role in the political process and they determine the operational character of the system. As the formations of political associations were banned in Kashmir. The political system of the state was based on the personal rule of the prince who used to be the centre of all power Executive, legislative and Judicial. But as a result of the political agitation which the people of Kashmir launched against the rule of autocracy and despotism in July, 1931 the Maharaja was compelled to grant them the right to platform and to form association. Accordingly, in October, 1932 the first political party, namely, the All Jammu and Kashmir Muslim Conference was founded by Sheikh Mohammad Abdullah. For the first time Kashmir witnessed an organized political movement in early 1930s. It was a response of the educated youth to the social and economic limitations they had to face under the Dogra rule. They organized themselves against this inequality, and decided to organize Muslim youth to counter this action.ⁱ



Reading Room Party

The Muslim educated youth, who had returned from various Indian universities like Alligarh, decided to form a platform to discuss their issues. In April 1930, the Reading Roomⁱⁱ was inaugurated at Fateh Kadal, Srinagar in the house of Mufti Zia-ud-Din on 12 of April, 1930.ⁱⁱⁱ The idea behind the Reading Room was to give voice to the educated youth and bring them under one roof to find ways and means to fight out injustice. It was a cover meant to camouflage the political discussions held and to ward off immediate suspicion that could have otherwise attended the coming together of a dozen or more unemployed graduates. Encouraged by the response the Reading Room was given a regular organizational shape.^{iv}

According to Sheikh Abdullah, the Reading Room was actually a pretext; the real aim was to organize a movement. They were discussing in the reading room, employment policy, personal issues, national issues and international issues. They focused its attention on publishing the horrifying tale of Kashmiri Muslims through Indian and foreign press. The Reading Room members succeeded in attracting a large number of educated Muslim youth.

After its successful establishment and receiving an enthusiastic response from the Kashmiri Muslim youth, the members of the Reading Room began establishing contact with the Muslim news papers at Lahore. Fortunately, some of the stalwarts of the socio-political milieu of Indian Muslim culture became sympathizers of the organization, which strengthened its ideological and organizational basis. The first major concern of the members of the Reading Room Party was the unemployment and under-representation of Muslim community in administration. The leaders of the party also organized secret public meetings in which they exhorted the people to cultivate a spirit of sacrifice without which freedom would be a distant dream.

13 July 1931 Incident:

13 July 1931 is an important date in the political history of Kashmir because it had a long-lasting effect on the subsequent history of Kashmir. There were many causes responsible for this. However, there are many versions regarding this incident that make it difficult to get the clear picture, as said by Prem Nath Bazaz.

“Historically and politically”, to quote Prem Nath Bazaz, “13 July 1931” was the most important day in the annals of the contemporary Kashmir. From this day the struggle for independence and freedom in the most modern sense started openly. Doubtless in 1931, the struggle was aggressively communal outwardly but those who had not kept their eyes shut could see that it was in essence the struggle of victimized and enslaved people against the despotic rule. It was sooner or later bound to proceed on the right track.^v There had been demonstrations in Kashmir earlier against the Maharajas particularly by the shawl weavers, and by the peasants. But never before had the entire Muslim population risen as



one against the authorities. It is from that date that the people took upon themselves the task of securing for themselves the right of democratic self-rule.^{vi}

In 1931, one event more than any other seems to have turned a general dislike of the Maharaj's rule in the Vale of Kashmir into an organized opposite movement. There are various versions of the story; and there may well have been more than a single incident involved. It was reported, among other happenings, that a mosque in Reasi in Jammu Province had been demolished by Hindus with the approval of the Maharaj's Government; that at another place in Jammu, Muslims had been prevented from saying their prayers; that the Imam of a mosque in Jammu had been stopped by the authorities from giving his sermon (Khutba) before Friday prayers; even that pages of the Holy Quran had been found discarded in a public latrine. The essential point common to all these stories is that in early June 1931, it was reported that in Jammu Province the Maharaj's Government, or officials in its employ, had caused Muslim worship to be disrupted and the Holy Quran to be insulted. When the news of all this reached Srinagar, it caused great outrage.

There were fiery denunciation from mosque pulpits, processions and public meetings. Qadeer (he apparently came from the North-West Frontier region), made a particularly vehement speech, advocating violence against the Maharaj's rule. He was promptly arrested. This provided a fresh focus for public demonstration and protest.

Abdul Qadeer was put on trial at the Sessions Court, Srinagar, on 6 July 1931; but so great was the assembly of Muslims gathered outside the building that the proceedings had to be moved to the secured environment of the Srinagar Central Jail. It was outside the Jail, on 13 July 1931, when the trial of Abdul Qadir was reopened, that a crowd gathered only to be met with police baton charges. The police were resisted, stones were thrown and even so, some reports indicate shots were fired at them. The Police then opened fire. Some 22 demonstrators were killed as were as at least one member of the police (who was shot). 13 July 1931 became known in Kashmiri history as "Martyrs Day", the official beginning of a struggle for independence from alien rule. It immediately produced Muslim protests and clashes between Muslim demonstrators and the State Police throughout the Vale of Kashmir and in nearly every District in Jammu.

Glancy Commission:

By September 1931, the agitation had grown to such proportions that the British were worried about the effect events in Kashmir might have on the communal situation in India, especially in the Punjab. Consequently, they put pressure on the Durbar to form a body that would look into and remedy the Muslim grievances.^{vii} As a result, on 12 November 1931, the Maharaja announced the appointment of a Commission of Enquiry, headed an Englishman, Mr. Bertrand J. Glancy, a senior member of the Foreign and Political Department of the Government of India.^{viii}



The aim of the Glancy Commission was to examine the grievances of the Muslims and other communities and to present a list of the recommendations to the Maharaja.^{ix} While the Commission was conducting its enquiry, events in the State were moving fast. Roused from long political slumber, the people were clamoring for their basic rights.^x Each community was voicing its grievances, which to the surprise of all were fundamentally the same. No wonder the people began to seriously think whether there should not be a united movement to have these basic disabilities removed. The Glancy Commission started its work in the last week of November, 1931. The main recommendations of the report were to allow the formation of

Political parties and the publication of newspapers in the State. It was accepted by the Maharaja Hari Singh on March 12, 1932.^{xi} The Commission also recommended that all religious buildings of the Muslims in possession of the Government were restored to them the Hindu law of inheritance was allowed to remain as it was found by the Commission that no religious grievance of the Muslim could be admitted on this account. It recommended that the educational development should be strenuously taken in hand especially in regard to primary schools. An increase in the number of Muslim teachers and the appointment of a special officer for supervising and promoting Muslim education was also recommended. Bertrand Glancy though accepted that the Muslims suffered discrimination in the state, but instead of making recommendations which would ameliorate their lot, he suggested measures which had hardly any substantial content and did not even provide marginal benefits to the Muslim masses.

Muslim Conference:

Despite the uprising in 1931, Kashmir political movement was not arranged into an organized structure. It was only in June 1932, when the political leaders were released after six months imprisonment, the need for the formation of a state-wide political organization was being keenly felt but in the absence of the freedom of associations, no steps could be taken. The way was, however, cleared with the acceptance of the Glancy Report and the recommendations made by him later as Chairman of the Franchise Committee.^{xii}

According to Maulana Mohammad Saeed Masoodi, the decision to form a party and name it Muslim Conference was taken in the Central Jail of Srinagar in course of discussions with Sheikh Mohammad Abdullah. A Committee was appointed on 4 June, 1932 to organize the Muslims on a political platform. The committee framed the constitution of a political organization to be known as the All Jammu and Kashmir Muslim Conference.^{xiii} The inaugural session was held from 14- 16 October, 1932, in the historic *Pather Masjid*^{xiv}, Srinagar, under the presidentship of Sheikh Mohammad Abdullah. In his presidential address, Sheikh Mohammad Abdullah said, that Muslim Conference had been formed not only for the welfare of Muslims but for the restoration of the rights of all oppressed communities in the state. In fact, every section of people living in the state would equally benefit by it. It was a unique gathering, especially in the sense that all Muslims, irrespective of their religious differences or social distinction, sat shoulder to shoulder on the same platform with the common object of providing Muslims with a single



platform.^{xv} The committee which made arrangements for the conference and drafted the constitution also adopted a party flag which consisted of a green cloth, representing Muslim faith, with a crescent and star which was also the flag of the All India Muslim League. The flag hoisting ceremony was performed on 14 by Waliullah Zain-ul-Abedin, a representative of the All India Kashmir Committee. The session was attended by about three lakh men, women and children.^{xvi}

The All Jammu and Kashmir Muslim Conference remained in existence till June 1938. It held Six annual sessions in all. The first, second, fifth and sixth Sessions which were held at Srinagar, Mirpore, Poonch and Jammu respectively, were presided over by Sheikh Mohammad Abdullah. The third Session was held at Sopore under the presidency of Mian Ahmad Yar, while the fourth Session was held at Srinagar with Chaudhri Ghulam Abbas in the Chair.^{xvii}

At the occasion of the inauguration of the first session of the Conference, Sheikh Mohammad Abdullah commented on the recommendations of the Glancy Commission Report. He said that the Government deserves our gratitude for fulfilling our demands. But our basic issues were still unresolved. Among other things, it demanded convening of the Legislative Assembly, freedom of press and platform, representation of the Muslims in services, promotion of women's education, admission of the Kashmiris in the state army and grant of elementary rights to the people of Poonch. A committee consisting of Chaudhary Ghulam Abbas, Khwaja Saad-ud-Din Shawl, Agha Sayed Hussain Jalali, Moulvi Abdullah Vakil, Mian Ahmad Yar was constituted to approach the minorities, such as Pandits and the Sikhs, to seek their support in the freedom struggle. While the leaders of the Pandit community remained antagonists to the freedom movement, Sardar Budh Singh one of the prominent leaders of the Sikh community established close relations with the leaders of the Muslim Conference.^{xviii}

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."

Instead of taking some more time to create a general consensus for changing the nomenclature of the Muslim Conference, Sheikh Abdullah hastened his efforts to throw open the doors of Conference to non-Muslims. On April 26, 1939 the General Council approved the resolution and recommended amendment in the name and constitution of the Muslim Conference. It further decided "to hold a special session of the Conference.....on the 10th and 11th June 1939 at Srinagar to get the resolution approved by the representative gathering".^{xix}

The special session of the Muslim Conference was held at Pather Masjid Srinagar on 10th and 11th June 1939, under the presidentship of known leftist Khwaja Gulam



Mohammed Sadiq, and was attended by 178 delegates, besides many non-Muslims and a good number of press reporters.^{xx} The amended draft of the constitution of the Muslim Conference with a note from the committee of experts headed by Sadiq was placed before the General Assembly of the Conference on 10th June by Moulana Masoudi.

It was due to the advice of the Indian National Congress that the Jammu and Kashmir Conference was converted into the Jammu and Kashmir National Conference. Sheikh Mohammad Abdullah was immensely influenced by the leadership of Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru and Red Shirts Movement of the Pushto speaking people for freedom and social advancement led by Abdul Gaffar Khan. His own political convictions, the support of some liberal Hindus and Sikhs, activities of 'free thinker club', and Ahrars anti-British and pro-Congress role, and combined to change his basic thinking which resulted in the rapid secularization of politics in Kashmir.^{xxi} Those who did not like the move of changing the Muslim Conference get themselves separated and organized under different banners. In the valley, some of them like M.A. Saber, Gazi Ammanulla, Khwaja Gulam Nabi, Mirza Gulam Mohi-ud- Din, Mir Abdul Aziz Mirpuri and others organized meetings and raised the slogan of "Islam in danger".^{xxii} They even did not hesitate to level charges of corruption on Sheikh Abdullah and dubbed him as an agent of Congress and the one who had been purchased by Hindus.^{xxiii}

The first annual session of National Conference was called at Sarnal, Anantnag from September 30 to October 2, 1939 and Ghulam Muhammad Bakshi was its convener. While welcome address of the session was read by Mirza Mohammad Afzal Beg. Sheikh Mohammad Abdullah in his presidential address focused on unity of Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs for joining hands against the Dogra autocracy. This was the first demonstration of nationalist forces writes Rashid Taseer, "In which first time Hindus participated shoulder to shoulder with Muslims for the formation of future design of the State."

Rashid Taseer further writes, "The gathering was countless. In his presidential address Sheikh Mohammad Abdullah said, "We are struggling for unity that unity is of those people who are facing similar troubles and problems. We sat that unity of Hindu, Muslim and Sikh is necessary. It meant oppressed Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims. Because we know oppressor whether Hindu, Muslim or Sikh could not support struggle of oppressed."^{xxiv}

Naya Kashmir:

National Conference asked its members to submit to Maharaja a comprehensive plan for the economic, social, political and cultural reconstruction of the State which came to be called Naya Kashmir Manifesto which was submitted to Maharaja as memorandum on 31 July 1944 at Mujahid Manzil, the headquarters of National Conference in public ovation ceremony organized by National Conference after Maharaja had returned from Europe tour. Naya Kashmir Manifesto was adopted by National Conference in its annual session held in Srinagar from September 28th to 30th, 1944 under the presidentship of Sheikh Mohammad Abdullah.^{xxv}



The programme was not only a constitutional blue-print of a Sovereign Independent State, looking after its own defense and external affairs but also contained a radical socio-economic programme. The Naya Kashmir Manifesto adopted by National Conference in 1944 envisaged a pattern of parliamentary democracy in the State with independent judiciary and also a programme of social, economic and educational reforms.^{xxvi}

Article 23, of the ‘Naya Kashmir’ mentions that the state economy shall be planned with a view to ensuring rapid economic growth and social justice. The manifesto issued by the party on the eve of elections also confirms that the ideology of the party to the principles of socialism, secularism and democracy. A firm believer in liberal democracy the party has been championing the cause of such human rights as are essential for the establishment of an egalitarian society based on the principle of equality and justice. In short, the party’s commitment to, secular, national and socialistic ideology has become an article of faith with it and the party has unabatedly been espousing the cause of secular democracy, Hindu-Muslim unity and national integration.

Conclusion:

To conclude we can say that the Dogra rulers from the very inception showed a hostile attitude towards the masses and due to maladministration they were opposed from every nook and corner of the state. In short the basic reason for resistance activities of Kashmiri masses during Dogra rule were the feudal character of the state, the institution of jagirdari system, the defective system of revenue and taxation, corrupt administration and the disgraceful system of beggar or forced labour. It was because of the struggle of the many associations in Jammu and Kashmir especially, Muslim Conference that people got many rights and concessions in the absence of which their condition was extremely bad. By 1933 they got proprietary rights in land, some privileges regarding forests, exemption of tax on milch cow, exemption from Kahchhari (grazing tax) and nazrana, freedom of press and platform, formation of associations and the establishment of Legislative Assembly and District Boards. Then conversion of Muslim Conference into National Conference in 1939, which was a great historical event in the history of Jammu and Kashmir. This brought different sections of the society under one banner, in order to fight against the oppression of Maharaja of Jammu and Kashmir. Which helped to achieve the freedom from the despotic rule of Maharaja Hari Singh Kashmir and democracy was introduced in Jammu and Kashmir



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