



Dynamics of Politics in Jammu and Kashmir, 1953-1957

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Abstract

The issue of Jammu and Kashmir has become one of the longest dispute in the history of modern South Asia. It started with the unqualified trust between Shiekh Mohammad Abdullah and Jawaharlal Nehru in 1947. It became even more complex and ended up in the morbid sensations in their outlook vis a vis relations of Jammu and Kashmir with the Indian Union. This compexity took its own shape in 1953 leading to dismissal of Shiekh Abdullah and installation of Bakshi Gulam Mohammad as the Prime Minister of Jammu and Kashmir. The period between 1953 and 1957 was the crucial in the history of Jammu and Kashmir in the sense that it marked the end of conditionalities of accession act and declared Jammu and Kashmir as the integral part of India. This paper attempts to examine the dynamic of politics which emerged in Jammu and Kashmir and brought it closer to New-Delhi. Further, it examines how emergence of politics of plebiscite, concern for economic development and delicate political maneuvering by both the Union and State Governments brought Jammu and Kashmir's integration with India.

Key Words: Jammu and Kashmir, Politics, Partition, Acession. Dogra Rule, Shiekh Abdullah

Introduction

In theory the Jammu and Kashmir, one of the largest princely state, was the directly under the British Crown, by virtue of having acknowledged the British paramountancy, rather than of the British Indian Government.¹ It occupied very strategic position from the colonial to post colonial times. On the eve of British withdrawal in 1947, geographically it was better situated to exercise its choice to join either of the dominions—India and Pakistan, or to stay independent. The dynamics of partition politics made it one of the long lasting dispute in the history of subcontinent. Erstwhile Jammu and Kashmir state shared its borders with Tibet, with Sinkiang province of China and with Afganistan through which it became very close to Soviet Union seperated by very narrow Wakhan tract of Afgan territory. Thereby the state of Jammu and Kashmir was exposed to the terrorities outside the conventional British Indian Empire. This greatly made it apposite to the idea of going for indepedence.²

On June 3, 1947, the British government announced a plan to partition India. Despite their strong opposition to the demand for the creation of Pakistan. The Congress leaders accepted the partition resolution on June 15, 1947. Consequently, the India Independence Act was passed on 18th July 1947 which declared that power would be transfered to the dominions of India and Pakistan. Regarding the princely states, Lord Mountbatten told to the princes in a declaration before the Chamber of Princes, on July 25 1947 that, "... states have complete freedom" and on the British withdrawl of power they become "...technically and legally free".³ They were also suggested to join whatever successor dominion they wish, which obviously meant either India or Pakistan even without mentioning to follow the choice of their people.⁴ However, complexities of reffereing to the will of the people are the products of post 15th August 1947 development.⁵ Three princely

states, those of Hyderabad, Junagadh, and Kashmir, opted not to join either of the dominions and thereby became technically independent entities on August 15. Unlike Junagadh and Hyderabad Jammua and Kashmir had more contiguity and proximity with Pakistan and it shared its borders with the giant powers like Soviet Union and China it was more located to exercise its choice of future. In addition to that, major rivers, which are now so important to Pakistan's economy, were also the primary lines of communication between Kashmir and the rest of the world.⁶ As to Alaister Lamb, Kashmir became the victim of nationalist discourse of India and Pakistan and that is where, what Joseph Korbel calls the "real issue" of Kashmir issue lies.⁷

On the morning of October 22, 1947, an invading column of Pathans tribesmen from Pakistan's North West Frontier Province and Pakistan army personnel captured Muzaffarabad and Uri.⁸ From the 27th of October 1947 onwards, the invasion was fully operational. The raiders then marched on to Poonch, Baramulla, and Srinagar. Maharaja facing the imminent threat of collapse of Srinagar sought help from Indian Union which asked him to first sign the Instrument of Accession, which he signed on 26 October 1947. Following the Instrument of Accession, India considered it its legal obligation to protect the entire territory of Jammu and Kashmir, which it subsequently regarded as an integral part of its sovereign domain.⁹

The accession document was accepted next day by Lord Mountbatten but included the clause in his cover letter that "... in consistence with their policy that in the case of any state, where the issue of accession has been the subject of dispute, the question of accession should be decided in accordance with the wishes of the people of the state, it is my government's wish that as soon as law and order have been restored in Kashmir and her soil cleared of the invader, the question of the States' accession should be settled by a reference to the people".¹⁰

And finally, the Indian army landed on 27th October to fight the Pukhtoon Invaders.¹¹ As Altaf Hussain Para argues that, Jawaharlal Nehru persuaded the Maharaja to handover the reigns of state to Shiekh Abdullah who supported Maharaja's decision to accede to India. Hence Shiekh Abdullah with some other National Conference members formed an Emergency Administration—29 October 1947 to 29 November 1947.¹² Thereafter an Interim Government was established in March 1948 to oversee all of the areas of J&K under Indian Administration.¹³

I

The Instrument of Accession guaranteed two things to the State; one was the internal autonomy to the state of Jammu and Kashmir and the other was the promise which Nehru himself has made to "hold a referendum under international auspices such as the United Nations to determine whether the people wished to join India or Pakistan".¹⁴ This politically baited Abdullah, who had earlier made the statement 'freedom before accession', now replaced the Maharaja for the future political decisions with regard to Jammu and Kashmir.

On 5th March 1948 that Sheikh Mohammad Abdullah assumed the charge of Prime Minister and Emergency Council was converted into regular council of ministers this way Abdullah formed the government and assumed the charge of internal affairs of the state. In addition to this on October 17, 1949, the Constituent Assembly in Delhi passed a new article of 306-A which later became the Article 370, in the Constitution which granted it special status.¹⁵ Thus, the trust which Abdullah harboured on the Indian Union was being sanctified through these constitutional measures which proved very fragile, and had very dramatic consequences for Abdullah in particular and the state of Jammu and Kashmir politics in general, in the years to follow.

The Praja Parishad agitation of Jammu province became a nationwide mobilisation for the complete integration of Kashmir with India. Significantly, according to Joseph Korb, even Jawaharlal Nehru 'could not ignore their voice altogether, more so . . . the National Congress has not remained entirely deaf to their cries'.¹⁶ Eventually, Nehru realised Abdullah is turning unpredictable he began to develop sympathise with the agitators. Soon after these expressions by Nehru, the agitation was called off on 7 July 1953, but 'not before it had caused irreparable damage to the state's organic unity'.¹⁷ By this time, Bakhshi was in close contact with New Delhi, so much that when the Sheikh declined to visit New Delhi in July 1953 to show his resentment, Bakhshi went. So did the *sadr-i-riyasat*, Karan Singh. The New Delhi found in Bakhshi the right person to mould Kashmir politics as per its requirements. On 7 August 1953, three cabinet members led by Bakhshi submitted a memorandum to the *sadr-i-riyasat* accusing Abdullah of misgovernance and of creating conditions for rupture in the relations of the state with India and for the exploitation of the situation by foreign powers. The memorandum concluded by informing the Sheikh and the cabinet had lost the confidence of the people. The head of the state, avenging his father, dismissed Abdullah on 9 August 1953 and nominated Bakhshi as prime minister.¹⁸

II

Sheikh Abdullah was sacked and jailed at midnight on August 8–9, 1953, in a boardroom coup orchestrated by the central government to remove a roadblock in its concealed aim of fully merging Kashmir with India. During Delhi agreement in 1952 Nehru told him "We will bind you in gold chains".¹⁹ The attitude of Sheikh Mohammad Abdullah to preserve political autonomy of State even at the cost of economic development became anathema and eyesore to Indian union which eventually led him out of power and replacement by Bakshi Gulam Mohammad unceremoniously. All modern observers, both supporters and adversaries of Sheikh Abdullah, agree that the state's undermining of democracy has created extraordinary fury. The mass protests engulfed the valley for several weeks involving every person across the population following his arrest.²⁰ Sheikh Abdullah again became a symbol of Kashmiri nationalist aspirations and rallying point to the pro-freedom/ pro-Pakistan/pro-autonomy sentiments in the state. The whole valley was simmering with the discontent, according to the Mir Qasim, "Srinagar was in total chaos," Bakshi Ghulam Mohammad no doubt was made prime Minister, "his own house despite the police guard, was under attack, Bakshi was nervous and wanted to step down" but with the full push of Indian Union he was pushed to the prime ministership and proved up to the very expectations of Indian government. The police oppression dominated the landscape in whole Kashmir, people were killed and political activists sympathising with Sheikh were sent behind the bars. Several leaders, including Mirza Afzal Beg, Khwaja Ahmad Ashaie, Ghulam Mohammad Kochoq, Mir Maqbool Geelani, and Hakeem Gulam Murtaza, were also imprisoned. Indeed, it was a tough position, especially when the Kashmiris' reaction found a sympathetic ear among many national and international audiences, and at a time when Kashmir was a hot topic of discussion with international forums. As a result, the throne granted upon Bakhshi Ghulam Mohammad by the Indian government was not a bed of roses. His own validity was dangling by his eyelids as well. To reverse the trend, astute statesmanship was required at both the national and state levels. And Bakhshi, with the support of the central government, proved up to the challenge. However, by the end of 1953, Bakhshi became the confident enough to boast that he had as much public support as Sheikh Abdullah. As a result, it's worth considering Bakhshi's efforts to manufacture peace to troubled region which will help us to understand the dynamics of state politics.

Bakshi immediately after taking oath as the new prime minister of Jammu and Kashmir State criticised Abdullah's Kashmir policy and made his ideological stand on Kashmir crystal clear:

“Abdullah's independence policy had ‘naturally the connivance and support of interested foreign powers who have all along been resisting the exercise of the right of the people of the State to freedom and self-determination. . . . An ‘independent’ Kashmir under the influence of imperialist power will be a great threat to the freedom and independence of Indian and Pakistani people. In view of the geographical position of the State, such independence is bound to involve us in a bitter and violent international controversy and another Korea may be staged here, as a result of the armed conflict between interested powers.” He then had words of praise for India with which Kashmir had established ‘indissoluble links.’”²¹

III

It's no surprise, then, that Bakshi addressed the nation via radio on August 9, 1953, just after entering office, firmly reminding them of the economic disaster brought on by his predecessor's policies.²² He also stressed the benefits that the people will receive as a result of the Indian government's “progressive economic policies.” As Idrees Kanth argues that what people wanted after the centuries of economic oppression and political subjugation was more economic relief and stability after having tasted the fruits of land reforms. That is why “peasantry remained status quoist rather than seeking *rai-shumari* (plebiscite) and *haq-e-khudiradiat* (self-determination),... (and), the peasants experienced some economic relief and gravitated toward stability rather than resistance.”²³ When Shiekh Mohamad Abdullah became the prime minister of Jammu and Kashmir State in 1948, he immediately executed the plans outlined in his ‘Naya Kashmir Manifesto’ which included among other the abolition of landlordism and granted land to tillers. The land reforms of Shiekh Mohamad Abdullah were, as Hafsa Kanwal, argues precursor of politics of life which was the policy followed by Bakshi Gulam Mohammad through-out his reign to maintain his position and public acceptibility. However while in detention, Shiekh Abdullah advised his colleague Mirza Afzal Beg to establish the plebiscite front. This politics of plebiscite kept Abdullah's relevance alive in the public memory of Kashmir. As Bilal Nazir argues that the “the free transfer of land to landless peasants strengtned Abdullah's reputaion in general populace”²⁴ so he wanted to continue this legacy through the politics of plebiscite. However, Bakshi's politics of life and economic developmentalism deviated public from the politics of plebiscite and brought them closer to the Union. As there has been a lifelong economic instability which has caught people in clutches of poverty so it was but natural that after seeing the opportunity to ward off this poverty they naturally were driven towards the developmental policies of Bakshi. Consequently with packages of economic developmentalism came the greater integration of state to the Union. Therefore when Jammu and Kashmir adopted its own constitution in 1957, State of Jammu and Kashmir was declared as the integral part of the Union of India. So Bakshi having his fingers on the pulse of population announced several of the economic concessions in the same broadcast, such as:

- Abolition of the system of forced extraction of food grains from the peasantry.
- Subsidized permanent ration system to the extent of 75 per cent of its cost for urban areas.
- Grant of subsidies on the sale price of salt.
- Free education from primary to university level.
- Abolition of the monopoly of cooperatives.
- Remission of cooperative debts.

- Substantial increase in the salaries of all government servants and enhancement of wages of labourers.²⁵

In addition, Bakshi Government with full support of centre abolished the custom duty on salt and medicine manufactured in India and the Wazir Committee report on economic reforms, which Shiekh Mohammad Abdullah has pigeonholed, was published and arrangements were made for its implementation.²⁶ Thus Bakshi financially integrated the state of Jammu and Kashmir with the Indian Union. While footing the bill of this economic packages Bakshi Ghulam Mohammad in the constituent Assembly which met on 6th February 1954, approved to implement Delhi Agreement of 1952.²⁷ In the same year, a Constitutional (application to Jammu and Kashmir) Order was promulgated by the president of India, which empowered the Indian government to legislate on all matters on the Union List, not just defence, foreign affairs, and communications,²⁸ as envisaged in the accession act of 1947.

This makes it clear that Bakshi Gulam Mohammad focussed on economic development and this policy of economic benevolence, abundance and magnificence armed him with ideological apparatus to project his regime as people centric and thereby gained public approval if not legitimacy, and this way Bakshi Government was fully backed by New Delhi. This resonated with people who wanted economic stability and more than they wanted anything else.

Conclusion

It's no surprise that Bakhshi was able to acquire a place in the hearts and minds of Kashmiris amidst an anti-Indian tsunami on the one hand and sweeping constitutional reforms which brought closer relationship between Jammu and Kashmir and New Delhi. To maintain his position, he adopted both fair and foul means, in the words of his contemporary Sanaullah Butt, the editor of daily Aftab:

‘Inside Kashmir Bakshi Ghulam Mohammad worked successfully on three fronts. His first front was in New Delhi where with money and gifts he managed to create a pro-Bakshi lobby comprising Congress leaders including influential members of Parliament. And the members of this front worked for the Bakshi in New Delhi. The second front on which he worked was to create a proper political image for himself in the state and within three years he had tightened his grip on the political and administrative machinery of the state. The third front in which also he succeeded was to keep alive anti-India campaign in the state. He knew if the elements, who were struggling against India, turned weak it would result in weakening his power. ... Conscious of it, he kept on financing, though secretly, some people of the Plebiscite Front and the Political Conference. Some other pro-Pakistani elements too received liberal financial help from him. He told me many times ‘existence of such elements was necessary otherwise New Delhi will do anything here it liked’.²⁹

The dynamics of politics in Jammu and Kashmir during the period 1953-57 seemed to be entangled in mercurial tendencies of the centre. The Centre was ready to foot the bill in shape of providing the generous aid to state which which resonated with public and gravitated them towards the Indian union. And people of Kashmir after many years of economic subjugation turned more towards economic stability and pushed their political aspirations (autonomy and Rai shamari) to backyards.

It was never the case that Bakshi Gulam Mohammad replaced the Shiekh Mohammad Abdullah rather after the dismissal of Abdullah in 1953, Karan Singh became the close confidant of Jawaharlal Nehru. The unease shared by both Karan Singh and Jawahar Lal Nehru to finalise the accession with the only difference

that Jawahar Lal Nehru thought that without Shiekh Abdullah accession would not be finalised. In the reply to the letter of Karan Singh, Nehru expressed "... so long as Shiekh Abdullah is in prision, the dispute will not be finally closed. It is only when he has been released and we have faced the consequences of that release and survived them, that it will be possible for the situation to develop towards final end".³⁰

Karan Singh believed that "... Shiekh Abdullah might be able to browbeat the MLAs to gain the majority in the Assembly, of which he continues to be the member".³¹ But Shiekh Abdullah was adamant still in continous detention without trial and accession was ratified without him. So what began in 1953 as the conditional accession of Jammu and Kashmir to Indian Union that was removed in the process of historical developments and eventually in 1957 the Jammu and Kashmir Constituent Assembly adopted the Constitution of State whereby it was declared the accesson as final and Jammu and Kashmir as the integral part of Indian Union.

Notes on Contributors

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- ³Josef Korbel, *Danger in Kashmir* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1954), p.48.
- ⁴Lamb, *Kashmir: A Disputed Legacy, 1846–1990*, 5.
- ⁵Ibid, 165
- ⁶Ibid.
- ⁷Korbel, *Danger in Kashmir*, 126..
- ⁸Alice Thorner, “The Kashmir Conflict,” *Middle East Journal* 3, no. 1 (1949): 17–30, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4322039>.
- ⁹Arghya Sengupta, Jinaly Dani, Kevin James, and Pranay Modi, *Hamin Ast? A Biography of Article 370* (New Delhi: Navi Books, 2022), 3.
- ¹⁰Lord Birdwood, *Two Nations and Kashmir* (London: Robert Hale Limited, 1956), 58
- ¹¹Christopher Snedden, *Understanding Kashmir and Kashmiris* (London: Hurst & Company, 2015), 192.
- ¹²Altaf Hussain Para, *The Making of Modern Kashmir* (London and New York: Routledge, 2019), 147.
- ¹³Snedden, *Understanding Kashmir and Kashmiris*, 188.
- ¹⁴Para, *The Making of Modern Kashmir*, 147–48.
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