

Kashmir: On the Eve of Accession

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By October 1947, two Independent sovereign countries had emerged on the map of South Asia: the Secular Democratic Republic of India and Islamic Republic of Pakistan. These two countries had come into existence as a consequence of Independence of Indian sub-continent from British rule and the partition of India on August 15 and 14 respectively. The process of integration of most of the Indian Princely states with the Union of India was almost complete. The status of Jammu and Kashmir, however, remained undefined.

Maharaja Hari Singh, the last autocratic ruler of the Jammu and Kashmir State was dithering to take a decision regarding the accession of the state with either of the dominions. He had declined to confer with Lord Mountbatten, the last Viceroy of British empire in India, during the latter's visit to Kashmir in June 1947. Hari Singh, making a pretext of having a 'upset stomach' was in fact avoiding a discussion on the accession of Kashmir. Maharaja had entered into a standstill agreement with Pakistan, and India had sought some clarifications before such an agreement could be concluded with him. In the meantime, in September, Pakistan, in violation of standstill agreement, had stopped the supply of essential commodities from Rawalpindi road to Kashmir. The Indian Home Minister Sardar Patel had already written to Maharaja Hari Singh that in case the latter decided to accede to Pakistan, he was free to do so and the same "would not be deemed to be an unfriendly act." In July 1947, Mahatma Gandhi, disregarding the advice of Sardar Patel, had visited Kashmir. He had refused to accept the hospitality of Maharaja, even a cup of milk at the hands of his wife Maharani Tara Devi, on the plea that people did not accept Maharaja as their genuine ruler. In the words of Mahatma Gandhi: "Gandhi does not accept the milk from the hands of ruler whose subjects are miserable at his hands." Mahatma Gandhi trudged the lanes and interior of the city of Srinagar attracting large crowds of people. He visited the ancestral home of the popular leader of Kashmir, Sheikh Abdullah, in Soura, in the outskirts of Srinagar.

Sheikh Abdullah was in prison. He was heading the movement against the autocratic rule of Maharaja since 1931. In 1946, Sheikh Abdullah, had launched the last phase of his movement, 'Quit Kashmir'. He was awarded a cumulative imprisonment for nine years, three years each on account of three different offences, including sedition. All the three sentences had to run concurrently. During the Sheikh's trial, Jawaharlal Nehru donning the Lawyer's black robes had appeared in the Court and enlisted himself as a defence counsel for his friend and comrade-in-arm, Sheikh Abdullah. In September 1947, he was still in prison undergoing his imprisonment. He headed the National Conference party.

On the eve of Independence of India, the National Conference Party was the only popular and dynamic political grouping, which dominated the socio-political scene of Kashmir. The National

Conference had manifested on Kashmir scene in the year 1931 in the form of Muslim Conference with the limited objective of alleviating the difficulties of educated Kashmiri Muslims in seeking government jobs in the state. However, the party, over a period of time, enlarged its scope and area of activities. It opened its doors to non-Muslims as well, and launched the struggle to end the autocratic rule in the state and to replace this by the people's rule. The reorientation of the objectives, and a change in the complexion of the Muslim Conference, had much to do with Jawaharlal Nehru, Abul Kalam Azad, Khan Abdul Gaffar Khan and, of course, Mahatma Gandhi, with whom Shiekh Abdullah had come into contact in 1937. Mohammad Ali Jinnah, who visited Kashmir in 1935, in an address to a *Milad* (Prophet's Birthday) congregation in Shahi Masjid in Srinagar had advised the people that the Muslims of the state, although in majority, should also involve their non-Muslim brethren as another wheel to carry their political vehicle forward. It was during this visit that Mr. Jinnah appeared in the famous *Hanifa Begum case* to win the case on a delicate point of Islamic law. The Poet-Philosopher Mohammad Iqbal had earlier advised Sheikh Abdullah in the similar vein during the course of a meeting between the two.

The Muslim Conference was converted into National Conference in 1939 with an overwhelming approval of all the executive members of the Conference and delegates from different parts of the state. The marathon session of the party continued for thirty-nine hours debating the issue of the conversion of Muslim Conference into National Conference. However, in 1941, a small section of the National Conference leadership, essentially comprising Jammu based, non-Kashmiri Muslims, under the leadership of Choudhary Ghulam Abbas, revived the Muslim Conference. The prominent Kashmiri religious leader, Mirwaiz Maulvi Yusuf Shah, also joined the Muslim Conference. However, the reincarnated Muslim Conference could not make an effective front against the National Conference. Besides the fact that both the parties represented two divergent political ideologies, the main reasons for the marginalisation of Muslim Conference were: first, by 1941 the National Conference had made deep inroads into the rural areas of Kashmir by projecting the abysmal economic conditions of the rural poor, the artisans and the tillers of the land; the oppressive system of governance by the Maharaja, and the pledge to change all this. In this process National Conference had raised the pitch of Kashmir's ethno-cultural identity, Kashmiriyat, to such heights that the religious edge of the identity was blunted.

Second, the prominent leaders of Muslim Conference, Ghulam Abbas, Allah Rakha Sagar, Hamidullah Khan and some others, were mostly Jammu-based and more importantly non-Kashmiri speaking Muslims. They could not communicate with the masses in the valley at the grass-roots level. Third, due to the lackadaisical attitude of Mirwaiz Yusuf Shah towards the movement against Maharaja's rule, his area of influence had shrunk and ultimately got confined to a few pockets of Srinagar City in Kashmir valley. Ghulam Abbas later wrote in his autobiography, *Kashmakash*, that Mr. Jinnah did not favour Mirwaiz Yusuf Shah's being in politics, and wished latter's activities should remain confined to religion alone. Mirwaiz Yusuf Shah, was a respected Islamic Scholar and preacher. His family had rendered pioneering service in popularising education among Muslims of Kashmir. Ironically, Sheikh Abdullah owed his popularity among people to Mirwaiz who projected the former as a young Kashmir leader during his discourses on religion in the mosques in the earlier phase of Kashmir's struggle against autocratic rule. However, Mirwaiz was overtaken by the historical events.

In 1946, other developments further marginalised the Muslim Conference. In October 1946, Ghulam Abbas was arrested by Maharaja Hari Singh. Mirwaiz Yusuf Shah aspired to be the acting President of the Muslim Conference. However, Ghulam Abbas nominated Jammu leader Hamidullah Khan as acting President from jail, but this was not accepted by Mirwaiz Yusuf Shah. The Mirwaiz proclaimed himself as president of Muslim Conference, which split the party into two and its base, shrank further.

The opposition to 'Quit Kashmir' programme by a section of Muslim Conference Party proved to be the proverbial last nail in the coffin. It is believed that a section of influential Muslim Conference workers were manipulated by Mr. R.C. Kak, the Maharaja's Prime Minister in Kashmir, to oppose the movement, on the ground that the call of 'Quit Kashmir' had been given by Sheikh Abdullah and the National Conference —arch enemies of Mirwaiz Yusuf Shah and the Muslim Conference—and hence it should be completely ignored. All these developments left the field open for the National Conference, and it remained the only effective and popular political party to represent the voice of the people in Kashmir. The last imprisonment of the Sheikh for nine years added to the halo of the party.

In September 1947, the reports started pouring in that tribals from Pakistan had started infiltrating the state. The clashes between the raiders and the troops of the Maharaja on the borders made Maharaja to appeal to the Indian Government and other Maharajas for help to defend the state against the aggression. In absence of accession of the state with India, the Government of India was not in a position to help the Maharaja. In the tense atmosphere building up in the state, Sheikh Abdullah was released on 29 September 1947, after serving one year and four months term in the jail. Jawaharlal Nehru announced in the Indian Parliament that the circumstances had forced Maharaja to release Sheikh Abdullah from prison. Shiekh Abdullah galvanized the people and National Conference started devising strategies to deal with the aggression at the civilian level.

In October 1947, the tribals from Pakistan launched a full-scale attack on Jammu and Kashmir state. On October 15, M.C. Mahajan, on assuming the office as new Prime Minister of the state, issue a press statement urging Pakistan to desist from interfering in Kashmir. He sent a telegram to the government of Pakistan, demanding an impartial enquiry into the developments on the borders of the state, and in case Pakistan did not take necessary steps to stop it, Maharaja would be left with no option but to seek outside support to defend the borders of his state. On October 18, he sent another telegram to the Governor General of Pakistan, Mr. Jinnah, that in case Pakistan did not stop the aggression, Maharaja would be constrained to seek international help to save his state. However, raiders continued with their onward march in Kashmir. On 21 October the raiders had reached Muzaffarabad; on 24 October, they entered the valley and captured Uri and on 26 October, they destroyed the Mohra power station in Baramullah. Some of the raiders had managed to reach Shalteng, about five kilometres from Srinagar.

Maharaja left Kashmir for Jammu on the night of 25 October. And on 26 October, he signed the instrument of accession, which was carried to Delhi by Secretary of the States' Department V.P. Menon. The authors of *Freedom At Midnight*, Larry Collins and Dominique Lapiere have graphically described the event of Maharaja Hari Singh signing the instrument of accession. However, the accession would not have been accepted without the intervention of Sheikh Abdullah, who was present in Teen Murti when M.C. Mahajan, the last Prime Minister of

Maharaja, came with Maharaja's offer for accession. This is what Mahajan has written in his own autobiography. Rest is History.