

Gandhi and Kashmir

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Kashmir has been witnessing unprecedented violence and turmoil for the last decade and a half. Many a reputed Gandhian have been visiting Kashmir and interacting with different sections of the society. Some of them have been advocating to adopt a Gandhian approach in dealing with Kashmir. It needs to be remembered that Kashmir was dear to Gandhiji. In the last phase of struggle for freedom, he was personally drawn in many a controversy relating to Kashmir. He did not look at Kashmir merely as a territory; rather it was model of communal amity and a symbol of cultural continuity of the sub-continent for him. He was striving to recreate this model for the country in its post-Independence phase. Kashmir had a special place in Gandhiji's social, political and spiritual philosophy. Ironically, many a concern and issue relating to Kashmir, India-Pakistan relations and communal harmony on which Gandhiji reflected and took strong positions, have occupied a center-stage during last one decade. In this background it would be refreshing to look back in history and reconstruct Gandhiji's approach to Kashmir and other related issues.

On his return from South Africa, Gandhiji undertook long journeys across the country to have a feel of the conditions of people. These travels provided great inputs in the evolution of his political and social philosophy. However, it took him a long time to travel to Kashmir. It is interesting to note that although he traveled to Kashmir in August 1947, he had remained constantly in touch with the people and even encouraged his friends and followers in Kashmir to keep him informed about the developments in the state. In fact, he was earlier invited twice by the Maharaja of J&K to visit the state. In 1938 he was even prepared to visit the state as a guest of the Maharaja but was dissuaded by Shiekh Abdullah from accepting the Maharajas offer on the plea that it would send wrong signals to the people in Kashmir who had launched a movement against the autocratic rule in the state. Ultimately he visited the state in August 1947 although in peculiar political circumstances. And it was during this journey that he articulated his position on Kashmir in unambiguous terms. He was conscious of the fact that the Ruler of Jammu and Kashmir, Maharaja Hari Singh, was legally competent enough to take a decision on the future affiliation of the state. But he took a position that the people were themselves the rulers of their destiny and they should be allowed to decide about their future status. Thus, his pronouncement was in accordance with his persistent position of identifying himself with the people. This, in fact, is where his heart always was.

In a Prayer Meeting in New Delhi on June 7, 1947, Gandhiji had said that Congress wanted to establish a democratic rule in the country. He had urged princes to devolve sovereignty to people. Making a special reference to Kashmir, he said that "as against this, the state of Kashmir

(J&K), although it is worth millions, will be wiped out if it does not listen to the voice of its people. Hitherto these rulers may have behaved arrogantly with the support of the British authorities; but now they must realize that their authority issues from the people. I made a special mention of Kashmir because at the moment our eyes are fixed on it. But this applies to all the native states[1].”

Gandhiji’s visit to Kashmir took place in curious political circumstances. In June 1947, his mind was traumatized due to grave communal riots in Bihar and Noakhali in Bengal. He was keen to visit these places to restore the communal order. In the meantime, a new crisis was building up in Kashmir. Maharaja Hari Singh, the last autocratic ruler of J&K state, was dithering to take a decision about the future affiliation of the state. It had become quite clear by then that he was dreaming of an independent Kashmir and aspiring to continue to be its ruler. He had arrested the most popular leader of the state, Sheikh Abdullah. Jawaharlal Nehru was anxious to visit Kashmir to seek the release of Sheikh who was his close friend and fellow traveler. A year ago, in June 1946, under the similar circumstances, Maharaja had arrested Jawaharlal Nehru because the latter had defied the Maharaja’s order which banned his entry into Kashmir. The episode had created a very unpleasant scene. However, Nehru was pressurized by the Congress leadership to return back to Delhi to avoid a direct confrontation with the Maharaja at that point of time. In view of the eagerness of Nehru to visit Kashmir again, Lord Mountbatten, (the last Viceroy of undivided India) expressed his reservations about Nehru’s visit to Kashmir. The role of Lord Mountbatten appears quite mysterious. In the first place, he offered his services to seek the release of Sheikh Abdullah. Having failed to seek the release, he advanced the argument that since Nehru had to take over as the Prime Minister of India within two weeks, he could not be spared to visit Kashmir. When Gandhiji offered to go, Mountbatten came out with the argument that the visit of eminent Indian leaders would be perceived as “political lobbying”[2]. On the advice of Pandit Nehru, Gandhiji informed Lord Mountbatten that he had no objection if Mr. Jinnah and his other colleagues followed him and visited Kashmir. Then Mountbatten informed Gandhiji that he would be himself visiting Kashmir but was unable to go. Later, he accepted “the full blame for having delayed his (Gandhiji ‘s) visit by offering to go himself to Kashmir.”[3]

Before leaving for Kashmir, addressing a Prayer Meeting in New Delhi on July 29, 1947, Gandhiji reiterated his position that the people had the absolute right to decide about themselves. He said that “the real sovereign of the state are people of the state. If a ruler is not the servant of the people then he is not the ruler. This is my belief and that is why I became a rebel because the British claimed to be rulers of India and I refused to recognize them as rulers.”[4] It was clear that Gandhiji and Maharaja of J&K were holding two divergent and irreconcilable positions. Gandhiji adopted a very sharp stance by saying that “the people of Kashmir should be asked to join Pakistan or India. Let them do as they want. The ruler is nothing. The people are everything.”[5]

Gandhiji arrived in Kashmir on August 1, 1947 and stayed there for two days and on his return from Kashmir spent one day in Jammu. He refused the offer of government hospitality and declined to accept the courtesies of Maharaja. He stayed in a private house arranged by his followers in the state. He did the same thing in Jammu. On his arrival in Jammu, he sent back the transport arranged by the Maharaja’s government. From airport he walked with the crowd of ordinary people who had come to receive him. During his visit in Srinagar, he was always

accompanied by Begum Akbar Jahan, the wife of jailed popular leader, Sheikh Abdullah. He met people on the streets and addressed Prayer Meetings. Since he had informed Lord Mountbatten, he did not address any political meeting nor did he make any political speech. Sheikh Abdullah has provided a graphic account of Gandhiji's visit to Kashmir in his autobiography *Aatish-I-Chinar* (Fire of Chinar). He was greatly impressed with the communal amity and tranquil atmosphere of Kashmir. Later, he said that it was "difficult for me to distinguish between a Kashmiri Hindu (popularly called Pandits) and Kashmiri Mussalman (Muslim) because they share one language and one culture." [6] It seems that Gandhiji had counseled the ruler during a meeting with him and his wife, Maharani Tara Devi, to take a decision in accordance with the wishes of the people of the state. However, it becomes clear that Maharaja was still dithering to take a decision and pursuing with his ambition. In a note to Jawaharlal Nehru, on his return on August 6 1947, Gandhiji informed him that during a meeting with Maharaja and Maharani, both admitted that with the lapse of British paramountcy the true paramountcy of the people of Kashmir would commence. They told him that "however much they might wish to join the Union (of India), they would have to make the choice in accordance with the wishes of the people. How they (wishes) could be determined was not discussed at the interview." [7] It is clear that in view of strong position of Gandhiji to involve the people of Kashmir, Maharaja could not openly differ with him. But he continued with his tactics of delaying to take a decision. This tactics created many complexities which had grave consequences for not only J&K state but for both, India and Pakistan, as well. Later, when tribesmen from Pakistan attacked Kashmir, Gandhiji lamented that "if Maharaja had acted on my advice, he would have risen very high in his own eyes and in the eyes of the world . To day his own plight and the plight of state are not enviable". [8] In fact, Gandhiji had proposed that the mechanism of determining the will of the people should be decided by two Dominions (India and Pakistan), Maharaja and Kashmiris. [9]

Gandhiji was highly impressed with communal amity in the J&K state. However, in November 1947 communal riots broke out in Jammu in which a large number of Muslims were massacred. In a state of shock, Gandhiji said that considerable excesses had been committed by the Hindus there. He said that he could not apportion blame on any body but "those things happened there and it is a great shame for us." [10] Later, addressing a Prayer Meeting he said that Maharaja should be held responsible for these riots because he was holding power as Maharaja. [11]

In the last week of October, tribal raiders from North Western Frontier Province (NWFP) launched a full scale attack on Kashmir valley and they were proceeding towards the winter capital of the state, Srinagar. Maharaja of the state had signed the instrument of state's accession with the Union of India. The Indian Army and volunteers of National Conference party were fighting the raiders. Gandhiji was conscious that Hindus and Muslims had to remain united in meeting this challenge. He said: "Today Hinduism and Islam are being tested on the soil of Kashmir. If the right thing is done and the right direction given to the process the chief actors will win fame. It is my prayer that in the present darkness in the country Kashmir may become the star that provides light." [12] Gandhiji was confident about secular credentials of Kashmiri people. He highly appreciated the secular qualities of great Kashmiri leader, Shiekh Abdullah. In a Prayer Meeting on October 29 1947, Gandhiji said that "he (Shiekh Abdullah) would not let the Hindus and the Sikhs die before the Muslims. What if the Hindus and Sikhs are in a minority there? If this is the attitude of Shiekh and if he has the influence on the Muslims, all is well with us. The poison (of communal hatred) which has spread amongst us should never have spread.

Through Kashmir that poison might be removed from us.”[13] Now more than five decades out of scene, one wonders how Gandhiji would have responded to the mass exodus of Kashmiri Pandits from the Kashmir valley.

After the J&K States’ accession with the Union of India, Gandhiji was of the opinion that Maharaja and his Prime Minister should withdraw and handover to Shiekh Abdullah whom he described as real Maharaja of Kashmir in view of his popularity and enable him to form an interim government and deal with the law and order situation.[14] Gandhiji was highly critical of the role Maharaja was playing in the state. Gandhiji was unable to comprehend a new role which could be assigned to the Maharaja. It appears that there were people in the Union government who had a soft corner for Maharaja and who wanted him to be accommodated in the new dispensation in J&K state. It would have been an ideal arrangement and would have resulted in greater intra-regional harmony in the state. However, in view of acrimony between Shiekh Abdullah who had headed a movement against autocratic rule and harsh responses of Maharaja, there was little scope for a reconciliation between the two. Under pressure from the quarters sympathetic to Maharaja, Gandhiji did propose a role for Maharaja. Addressing a Prayer Meeting on December 29 1947, Gandhiji said that he had been “severely reprimanded for his views on Maharaja and Kashmir. Maharaja should be a constitutional sovereign like the King of England and run his government and use the Dogra army (The J&K state forces) according to the advice of Shiekh Abdullah and his Interim Cabinet”.[15]

Gandhiji had a genuine conviction that people were the ultimate sovereign in the conduct of their affairs. According to him with the expiry of British paramountcy in India on 15th August 1947, sovereignty devolved to the people of Kashmir with the lapse of Treaty Of Amritsar, under which British had transferred J&K to the first Maharaja of the state, Gulab Singh in 1846. He said that this “sale deed concluded between the sellers represented by Sir Henry Harding, the then Governor General of India and the buyer, Maharaja Gulab Singh, I presume lapses on the 15th instant. To whom does the state revert. Does it not go to the people”?[16] On his return from Kashmir, Gandhiji sent an interesting note to Jawaharlal Nehru. He informed Nehru that “Bakhshi (Bhakshi Ghulam Mohammad was the next in command in National Conference party and Deputy Prime Minister in Shiekh Abdullah’s cabinet) was most sanguine that the result of the free vote of the people, whether on the adult franchise or on the existing register, would be in favor of Kashmir joining the Union (of India) provided, of course, Shiekh and his co-prisoners were released , all bans were removed and the present Prime Minister was not in power. Probably he echoed the general sentiment”.[17] This conclusion has been confirmed by later historians on Kashmir as well. For instance, noted British Historian, Alistair Lamb, writes in his latest work “When the memory of horrors of tribal invasion was fresh in the minds of the local population and the prestige of Sheikh Abdullah at its height, thoughtful Pakistani leaders were not convinced that the vote would go in their favour”.[18] He further writes, “Had Pakistan lost, Azad Kashmir (PoK) would have disappeared into Sheikh Abdullah’s empire”.[19]

Gandhiji’s compassion and strong belief in human spirit may be judged from his responses towards the Afridi tribesmen from NWFP in Pakistan who had attacked and committed atrocities in Kashmir. Addressing a Prayer Meeting, Gandhiji said that: “The Afridis are like our brothers and NWFP is our town. Then why should they indulge in such acts? We should know

who is giving them help. I would only pray that God may dwell in their hearts and the temples of their hearts be illuminated with the flame of love. Then the darkness around us will vanish and we will see light all around. This is my prayer. May you all join me in my prayer that such light should pervade both India and Pakistan that people live together in mutual love.”[20]

In January 1948, after the ceasefire in which Pakistan occupied large tracts of J&K state, India took the case of aggression and occupation of parts of J&K to the UN Security Council. In the meantime, many new proposals started emanating from Pakistan and elsewhere on the resolution of Kashmir. In fact, the entire issue got entangled in the cold war global politics. The resolutions in the shape of ‘Third Party Intervention’ and ‘Division of the state on religious or communal lines between India and Pakistan’ started gaining currency. Ironically, the same very formulas have started reverberating again - more in the international forums and less at the national levels in India and Pakistan.

Gandhiji has reflected on these formulas. He had himself witnessed the horrors of partition of India. He had put all his weight, until the last moment, to avoid the partition of the country. Thus, how could he be a party to another partition with further grave consequences. On partitioning J&K on religious lines between India and Pakistan, Gandhiji responded in these words : “I do not know what is the percentage of Muslims in the population but J&K is one state. It can not be partitioned. If we start the process of partitioning where is it going to end. It is enough and more than enough that India has been partitioned into two. If we partition Kashmir, why not other states”?[21]

In the similar vein, Gandhiji did not approve of the third party mediation on Kashmir. He proposed that both the countries, India and Pakistan should bilaterally resolve this problem. He said that “I advise Pakistan and India to sit together and decide the matter. If the two are interested in the settlement of the dispute, where is the need for an arbitration?”[22]

Gandhiji’s mission of Hindu-Muslim unity was not confined to India alone. He wanted to work on this mission in Pakistan also. He desired that his mission of religious and communal tolerance should transcend the newly constructed boundaries.

In a Prayer Meeting he appealed to Mr. M. A. Jinnah, the founder of Pakistan “to build a Pakistan where the Gita could be recited side by side with the Quran, and temple and Gurudwara would be given the same respect as the mosque, so that those who had been opposing Pakistan till now would be sorry for their mistake and would only sing praises of Pakistan”.[23] In fact, Gandhiji was aiming at, apart from transcending his mission of religious tolerance the newly created boundaries; he was also seeking stability and peace in Pakistan.

Endnotes

1. *The Collected Works Of Mahatma Gandhi(CWMG)*, Vol. 88, Publication Division, New Delhi, p.99
2. *CWMG*, op.cit., Vol.88, pp. 491-492

3. Lord Mountbatten's note on Interview with GandhiJi, July 29, 1947, Appendix XI, p. 491
4. *CWVG*, Vol.88, p. 461
5. *CWVG*, Vol.88, p461
6. *CWVG*, Vol. 89, p.6
7. *CWVG*, Vol. 89, p.7
8. *CWVG*, Vol.90, p.318
9. *CWVG*, Vol. 89, p.6
10. *CWVG*, Vol. 90, p.115
11. *CWVG*, Vol. 90, p.298
12. *CWVG*, Vol. 90, p.319
13. *CWVG*, Vol. 90, pp.433-434
14. *CWVG*, Vol. 90, p.298
15. *CWVG*, Vol.90, p.318
16. *CWVG*, VOL 90, pp.7-8
17. *CWVG*, Vol.90, pp.7-8
18. Lamb, Alistair, *Kashmir: A Disputed Legacy*, Roxford Books, London, 1990, p.166
19. Ibid
20. *CWVG*, Vol. 90, p.445
21. *CWVG*, Vol. 90 , p. 297
22. *CWVG*, Vol 90 p. 298
23. *CWVG*, Vol. 88, pp. 99-100