



**NMML
OCCASIONAL PAPER**

HISTORY AND SOCIETY

New Series

58

**Understanding Sheikh Mohammad
Abdullah: The movement against princely
rule, 1931–1947**

Nyla Ali Khan

*Visiting Professor at the University of Oklahoma,
USA and former Professor at the University of
Nebraska-Kearney, USA*



**Nehru Memorial Museum and Library
2014**

NMML Occasional Paper



© Nyla Ali Khan, 2014

All rights reserved. No portion of the contents may be reproduced in any form without the written permission of the author. The findings, interpretations, and conclusions expressed herein are those of the author and do not reflect the opinion of the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library Society, in whole or part thereof.

Published by

Nehru Memorial Museum and Library
Teen Murti House
New Delhi-110011

e-mail : ddnehrumemorial@gmail.com

ISBN : 978-93-83650-38-5

Price Rs. 100/-; US \$ 10

Page setting & Printed by : A.D. Print Studio, 1749 B/6, Govind Puri
Extn. Kalkaji, New Delhi - 110019. E-mail : studio.adprint@gmail.com

NMML Occasional Paper



Understanding Sheikh Mohammad Abdullah: The movement against princely rule, 1931–1947*

Nyla Ali Khan

My attempt is to not interpret history through the subjective lens of contemporary politics. There is a historical value in revisiting narratives about the political actors of pre-1947 Jammu and Kashmir and the movement for enfranchising the people.

The author begins by quoting from Sheikh Mohammad Abdullah's statement in the Court of the Sessions Judge in Srinagar, Kashmir, during the Quit Kashmir Trial of 1946:

The All India States People's Conference has clearly laid down that the old treaties between the States and the British government or its representatives are obsolete, and must end. That applies to all treaties including the Treaty of Amritsar, which has some special and unhappy features which make it a kind of sale-deed of the territory and people of Kashmir. This treatment of a people as a commodity which can be transferred for hard cash has all along been deeply resented by the Kashmiris, whether Hindu, Sikh, or Muslim. It hurts their national dignity. In practice, the peculiar nature of the Treaty of Amritsar has led to all kinds of discrimination against Kashmiris, resulting in their treatment as some kind of lower class. (The Statement of Sher-e-Kashmir in the Court of the Sessions Judge, Srinagar, in *Kashmir on Trial: State vs. Sheikh Abdullah*.)

* Lecture delivered at the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, New Delhi, 4 June 2014.

The 'Quit Kashmir' cry concretized the vociferous demand for the dissolution of a system of government which was in the process of being eliminated all over India. Sheikh Mohammad Abdullah and his colleagues launched the 'Quit Kashmir' movement to oust the Dogra monarchy. The movement for enfranchising the people was not about personal enmity or vendetta.

The defense counsel, Mr. Asif Ali, began his defense of the accused, Sheikh Mohammad Abdullah, with the main question:

...whether it is the right of a people to demand responsible government even in emphatic terms if necessary... . Is it a crime to say that the basis of the government of this State should be the will of the people and not a treaty which is a hundred years old and which is impugnable in the highest International Court of Justice? This is the issue involved in this case and nothing less. (The Statement of Sher-e-Kashmir in the Court of the Sessions Judge, Srinagar, in *Kashmir on Trial: State vs. Sheikh Abdullah.*)

In an effort to enable the formation of representative governments in Indian states, the All India States People's Conference (AISPC) adopted a constitution in 1939 that underlined using legitimate means to form a responsible and representative government under the monarch. Once the AISPC drafted and proclaimed its objectives, a number of organizations were formed in order to achieve these objectives.

Prior to that, many people of the state were intellectually and politically drawn to the nationalist reform movements of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, formed organizations devoted to the welfare of a particular community or tribe. These groups amalgamated cultural, political and religious practices of their people. Kashmiri Pandits, for example, formed a Hindu revivalist party, in Jammu, The Dogra Sabha. It was established in 1903 and looked after the interests of the Dogras. These organizations did not seek involvement just with political issues but focused on social reform as well, particularly on improving the conditions of Hindu women. Kashmiri Muslims, led by their religious leader the *mirwaiz*, Maulana Rasool Shah formed the Anjuman-i-Nusrat-ul-Islam. Besides the dissemination of Islamic



teachings, the Anjuman aimed at social reform and educational improvement for the Muslims of the Valley.

While the political mobilization of Kashmiri Muslims was still in an embryonic stage, it was pulverized by a governmental edict banning all Muslim organizations. The grievances of many Muslims were exacerbated by the labour crisis in the silk mill in Srinagar, Kashmir, which was owned by the Maharaja. Most of the underpaid, overworked, and shabbily treated labourers in the mill were Kashmiri Muslims (for details, see Ganju 1945). These widespread exploitative practices and the resentment engendered by them impelled eminent Muslims to protest to the British rulers. A memorandum was presented to the Governor-General of India, Lord Reading in October 1924: 'In addition to specifying grievances, the memorandum called for an increase in Muslim employment, improved education, land reforms, protection of Muslim religious establishments from encroachment, the abolition of forced labour, equitable distribution of resources, a state constitution, and a legislative assembly that would give Muslims proper representation' (for an informative discussion, see Rahman 1996). When the first few Kashmiri Muslims to have obtained degrees at institutions of higher education—such as the Aligarh Muslim University in British India—returned to the state in the 1920s, they were imbued with 'new fangled' ideas of nationalism, liberty, and democracy.

Things were now moving very fast in the Indian subcontinent. In December 1929, the Indian National Congress adopted the resolution of complete independence as its goal in Lahore; a mass civil disobedience movement followed which electrified the subcontinent from Gilgit to Cape Comorin. Kashmir too felt its repercussions; people began to be excited with what was taking place in the rest of the country. And when a number of Muslim young men—among them Sheikh Mohammad Abdullah—educated at different universities in India and deeply moved by the Congress struggle for freedom returned home, a spark was applied to the explosive matter which had already accumulated in the Valley. (Prem Nath Bazaz, *Kashmir in Crucible*, [1967] 2005: 29).

A group of these young graduates, who were well educated but denied opportunities that would have enabled them to climb the socio-

economic ladder, started convening regular meetings at a house in Fateh Kadal, Srinagar, and from these seemingly innocuous gatherings evolved the 'Fateh Kadal Reading Room Party'. Members of the Reading Room Party wrote articles for various publications in which they expressed resentment against the arbitrary and discriminatory practices of the Maharaja.

The torch of cultural pride and political awakening in J & K was lit by Sheikh Mohammad Abdullah, a prominent member of the Fateh Kadal Reading Room Party, in 1931: 'Sheikh Abdullah was an imposing figure. His six feet four inches height towered over his countrymen, and his intellect attracted the attention and respect of those who were associated with him in his revolutionary efforts' (Korbel 2002:17). For the first time in decades, the Kashmiri people, particularly the Muslim population, acknowledged the leadership of a man who overtly challenged the hitherto impregnable authority of the Maharaja. They responded to his politics with a zeal that was previously unknown. Despite persecution, the Sheikh continued to vociferously fight for the political, economic, and religious rights of the Kashmiri people. Here is what Sir Mohammad Iqbal, spearhead of the Punjabi–Kashmiri Muslim Movement said:

One thing which stands out clearly about Sheikh Muhammad Abdullah is that he has completely removed from the Muslims of Kashmir the fear of facing the Dogra army. But with your limited resources and comparatively unlimited resources at the disposal of the monarch you cannot continue like this for a long time; therefore, the only way is to launch a movement in the Punjab and send volunteers from here because the Maharajah's resources would not be sufficient to withstand such a movement for a long time; he will have to seek the assistance of the British government and when this assistance is sought and naturally made available, then would be the appropriate moment for us to demand that if they wanted to intervene on the side of the Maharaja, then they must equally ensure that important grievances of the state's Muslims were also redressed. (M.Y. Saraf, *Kashmiris Fight for Freedom*, 1979.)

Ahmad Ullah Shah, the senior mirwaiz, had been unequivocally accepted by the Srinagar Muslims as their religious leader, and his authority had been ratified by the Dogra regime. When his nephew Muhammad Yusuf Shah assumed the leadership of the Jama Masjid in 1931, he had expected to don his uncle's mantle and exercise the same unquestioned authority. But, to his surprise his stature was undermined by a young politician of obscure origins and revolutionary political opinions—the Sheikh. The Sheikh, a political greenhorn at that point, challenged the hegemony of the mirwaiz. As a strategy to eliminate the threat posed to his position by the Sheikh's rising popularity and clout, Yusuf Shah contemptuously labelled him a heretic. The Sheikh vociferously retaliated by aligning himself with Mirwaiz Hamadani. That political move widened the gap between the two *mirwaizeen* (religious leaders). A couple of months after the formation of the Muslim Conference (MC), Yusuf Shah founded the Azad Conference, and in April 1933 the Sheikh's *Sher* (lion) followers and Yusuf Shah's goatee-wearing *Bakra* (goat) followers fought a violent battle during the *Id-uz-Zuha* (religious festival) prayers. But Shah's attitude towards the Dogra monarchy and his inclination to toe the official line made him an unappealing figure to the repressed Muslim masses. He sank further into the morass of unpopularity by accepting a stipend of Rs. 600 from the Dogra ruler. In the twilight of his political life, Shah reverted to the security of his priestly edifice (Copeland 1991: 248).

In 1931, Mirza Bashiruddin Mahmud Ahmed organized the work of the All India Kashmir Committee. At a meeting between Mirza Bashiruddin and Sheikh Muhammad Abdullah, it was decided that the Sheikh would lead the movement and Chaudhary Ghulam Abbas would be the secretary. The All India Kashmir Committee comprised representatives from the Kashmir Valley, Moulvi Abdur Rahim, and from the Jammu Province, Allah Rakhar Saghar. The duties allocated to the Committee were: 1) To give financial support to the agitation; 2) to give financial assistance to the dependents of incarcerated political leaders, martyrs, and those wounded in the firings and lathi charges; 3) to arrange for medical treatment of the injured; 4) to arrange legal defense for political workers; and 5) to provide legal assistance to the preparation of cases before the Middleton and Glancy Commissions. It was through Dr. Iqbal that the Glancy Commission made its report

advocating religious freedom in Kashmir and emphasizing that the Government could not exercise its authority at places of worship. It also mandated that education should be universal and more primary schools should be opened. It underscored the need to appoint Muslims teachers and the establishment of a special office for the administration of educational institutions for Muslims. It emphasized that jobs should be advertised and employment be given to people in proportion to their population.

Formation of the All Jammu and Kashmir Muslim Conference and its subsequent secularization into the National Conference

The Maharaja's policies and unwillingness to deploy quasi-democratic measures led to the uprising of 1933, which was put down with strong measures. Subsequently, a civil disobedience movement was organized by the Sheikh and his ally, Chaudhri Ghulam Abbas, but the Maharaja was adamant in his refusal to relent. The strident voice of the people, however, could not be drowned, and the first democratic election in the state was held in 1934.

In the years prior to 1938, the rallying banner and political ideology of the Muslim Conference (MC) mobilized a collective sense of pride in regional identity. Sheikh Mohammad Abdullah had the political will and astuteness to create an efficiently organized network of young people who were committed to the party's ideology. His initial emphasis on a shared Muslim identity, which promised social and political enfranchisement, was a light at the end of the tunnel for an abject and politically disenfranchised people.

The formation of secular local political organizations that espoused a nationalist and socialist ideology in the 1930s and 1940s, such as the Kashmiri Youth League, Peasants Association, Students Federation, Silk Labour Union and Telegraph Employees Union, enabled popular political leaders to shift their focus on to the structural inequities legitimized by the state rather than on just religious and sectarian conflict. Although the MC won fourteen out of twenty-one seats allotted to Muslim voters in the State Assembly, the assembly had only consultative powers. Two years later, however, fresh elections were held, because



the elected members of the legislature fiercely protested their restricted powers. The Sheikh's disillusionment with the supersession of nationalist aspirations by sectarian ones inspired him to forge a secular movement in the state. In order to disseminate his progressive ideas and strengthen the Shiekh's hand, a Kashmiri Pandit, Prem Nath Bazaz, founded an Urdu weekly, *Hamdard*, in 1935. Consequently, the MC was replaced by the secular All Jammu and Kashmir National Congress (NC) in June 1938, presided over by the Sheikh.

History has borne witness to the inability of several stalwarts to achieve their ideals because they took rigid and inflexible stands. So, in order to align itself with the purportedly secular and nationalist Indian National Congress, the younger generation of MC leaders strove to transform a religiously oriented political movement to a secular movement for political, economic, and social reforms. The nature of this transformation was articulated by the Sheikh in his address to the MC's annual session in March 1938:

We desire that we should be free to set our house in order and no foreign or internal autocratic power should interfere in our national and human birthrights. This very demand is known as Responsible Government... . The first condition to achieve Responsible Government is the participation of all those people... they are not the Muslims alone nor the Hindus and the Sikhs alone, nor the untouchables or Buddhists alone, but all those who live in this state... . We do not demand Responsible Government for 80 lakh Muslims but all the 100% state subjects... . Secondly, we must build a common national front by universal suffrage on the basis of joint electorate (Hassnain 1988: 88).

In 1944, the NC sought reconstitution of the political, economic, and social systems of J & K, and it came to be identified with a socially leftist ideology and the personality of the Sheikh (Bose 2003: 21). Its particular context of an indigenous political movement against the Dogra House helped the evolution of a distinct entity—which was Kashmiri nationalism.

This timely political move won the approbation and full-fledged support of emancipated Hindus and Muslims. The aim was to forge

connections between the group's agenda for socio-economic transformations with the agenda of other groups impacted by autocracy, feudalism, and communalism. Josef Korbel, the Czech chairman of the United Nations Commission for India and Pakistan, noted the prestige accorded to the Sheikh Abdullah-led NC in terms of the support it enjoyed at the organizational and grassroots level (Korbel 2002: 246). The Sheikh and his political organization fought tooth and nail against autocracy and demanded that the Treaty of Amritsar be revoked and monarchical rule ousted. He described the Dogra monarchy as a microcosm of colonial brutality and the Quit Kashmir movement as a ramification of the larger Indian struggle for independence.

Despite the establishment of an executive council, council of ministers, and a juridical and legislative branch of public administration in the princely state of J & K, the Maharaja retained his supreme authority. The Sheikh explicitly declared the anti-monarchical stance of his organization to the British Cabinet Mission, which was to chart the course of India's destiny, including that of the princely states:

The fate of the Kashmiri nation is in the balance and in that hour of decision we demand our basic democratic right to send our elected representatives to the constitution-making bodies that will construct the framework of Free India. We emphatically repudiate the right of the Princely Order to represent the people of the Indian States or their right to nominate personal representatives as our spokesmen. (Quit Kashmir Memorandum to the British Cabinet Mission on behalf of the All Jammu and Kashmir National Conference.)

This well-articulated demand for the introduction of democratic measures was brazenly ignored by the administration as well as by the British Cabinet Mission.

The Quit Kashmir Movement

Initially, the 'Quit Kashmir' movement did not garner the support that the Sheikh had hoped for. The movement did not bolster the Sheikh's position among the members of the Muslim Conference and



it antagonized the Hindus and Sikhs of the state who venerated the Maharaja because they owed him their political, economic, and religious privileges (Bazaz 1950: 4–5).

In May 1946 the Sheikh was sentenced to nine years in prison for having led the seditious Quit Kashmir movement against the Maharaja's regime. His defense against the charges levelled at him during the infamous Quit Kashmir trial was an attempt to underline a strategic syncretism enabling legitimate opposition to autocratic rule:

Where law is not based on the will of the people, it can lead to the suppression of their aspirations. Such law has no moral validity even though it may be enforced for a while. There is a law higher than that, the law that represents the people's will and secures their well being; and there is the tribute of the human conscience, which judges the ruler and the ruled alike by standards that do not change by the arbitrary will of the most powerful. To this law I gladly submit and that tribunal I shall face with confidence and without fear, leaving it to history and posterity to pronounce their verdict on the claims that I and my colleagues have made not merely on behalf of the four million people of Jammu and Kashmir but also of the ninety-three million people of all the States of India [under princely rule]. This claim has not been confined to a particular race or religion or color... . I hold that sovereignty resides in the people, all relationships political, social and economic, derive authority from the collective will of the people (Bhattacharjea 2008: 237–38).

Despite the support that the Quit Kashmir movement launched by the Sheikh's cadre received from some regional councils and state Congress committees, the movement was crushed tactically and militarily. On 20 May 1946, speaking at a public rally at the Shahi Masjid, Srinagar, the Sheikh thunderously condemned the 1846 Treaty of Amritsar, which had legitimized the Dogra possession of Kashmir (Copeland 1991: 251). In a telegram sent to the members of the British Cabinet Mission, the Sheikh declared that the sale deed of Amritsar conferred no privileges 'equivalent to those claimed by states governed by treaty rights. We wish to declare that no sale deed, however

sacrosanct, can condemn more than four million men and women to servitude of an autocrat when will to live under this rule is no longer there’.

As the NC made its support of secular principles and its affiliation with the All India National Congress more forceful, the gulf between the upholders of secularism and the guardians of an essential Muslim identity became wider. The Muslim Conference characterized itself as representing the Muslim segment of society attempting to undermine the political dominance of the Dogra Maharaja and create a state in which primacy would be given to Islamic laws and scriptures. In that environment, the NC found itself gasping for breath in the quagmire created by the Maharaja’s duplicitous policies. For example, the Maharaja’s government had passed a special ordinance introducing two scripts—Devanagari and Persian—in Kashmir’s government schools, signalling the metaphoric dislocation of Kashmiri culture. Language was seen in relation to an array of matters: political power, ethnicity, and cultural and psychological denigration. Also, the Jammu and Kashmir Arms Act of 1940, had prohibited all communities except Dogra Rajputs from owning arms and ammunition. Such communally oriented policies created a rift between the Muslim leadership of the NC and their Hindu colleagues.

The rift within the organization was further widened by Mohammad Ali Jinnah’s insistence that the Sheikh extend his support to the Muslim League and thereby disavow every principle he had fought for. His refusal to do so sharpened the awareness of the Muslim League that it would be unable to consolidate its political position without his support. Initially, the Congress supported the Quit Kashmir movement and later reinforced the Sheikh’s position on plebiscite. The Congress advised the Maharaja, right up to 1947, to gauge the public mood and accordingly accede to either India or Pakistan. Nehru’s argument that Kashmir was required to validate the secular credentials of India was a later development. Jinnah refuted the notion that Pakistan required Kashmir to vindicate its theocratic status and did not make an argument for the inclusion of Kashmir in the new dominion of Pakistan right up to the eve of partition. As Navnita Chadha Behera (2006) writes, ‘If Kashmir was integral to the very idea of Pakistan, it is difficult to see



why the Muslim League and the Muslim Conference did not ask the Maharaja to accede to Pakistan until as late as 25 July 1947'. By then politics in Kashmir had acquired a purposive nature. This new politics was devoid of the narrow limitations of religion, and it enabled the creation of a political collectivity. The author posits that the Sheikh perceived the evolution of Kashmiri nationalism in world-historical terms, as opposed to a domestic issue. He didn't subscribe to the notion that a powerful global ideology like pan-Islamism, or communism, or fascism would bring in universal liberation. He advocated the creation of a political structure in which a popular politics of mass mobilization would be integrated with institutional politics of governance.

The decision to accede to either India or Pakistan placed Maharaja Hari Singh in a dilemma. Consequently, the Maharaja disregarded the advice of the Congress and the British about the infeasibility of independence and opted for that choice because it would allow him to maintain his position. He was unable to recognize how independence would enhance the political and military vulnerability of the state. Hari Singh's decision to maintain his political independence which didn't recognize the agency of his subjects, was supported by Pakistan, but not by India. (For a more informative opinion, see Ian Copeland.)

Standstill Agreement

On 15 August 1947, Maharaja Hari Singh's regime ratified a standstill agreement with the government of Pakistan. This agreement stipulated that the Pakistan government assume charge of the state's post and telegraph system and supply the state with essential commodities. Given the political and personal affiliations of the Congress with the NC and its antipathy toward monarchical rule, the Maharaja and his cohorts considered it worthwhile to negotiate with Pakistan's Muslim League...in order to maintain the state's princely status. But this tenuous relationship was further weakened after the infiltration of armed groups from Pakistan into J & K. The validity of the division of India into the nation-states of India and Pakistan along religious lines was unequivocally challenged by Sheikh Abdullah. Abdullah's non-communal politics were vindicated by the ruthlessness

of the Pakistani tribal raiders' miscalculated attack, which drove various political forces in the state to willy-nilly align themselves with India. Although the raiders, or *Qabailis*, were unruly mercenaries, they were led by well-trained and well-equipped military leaders who were familiar with the arduous terrain, and the raiders launched what would have been a dexterous attack if they had not been tempted to pillage and plunder on the way to the capital city, Srinagar (Dasgupta 1968: 95). The brutal methods of the raiders received strong disapprobation from the people of the Valley who had disavowed a quintessentially Muslim identity and replaced it with the notion of a Kashmiri identity. This political and cultural ideology underscored the lack of religious homogeneity in the population of Kashmir. The raiders antagonized their co-religionists by perpetrating atrocities against the local people, including women and children.

This paper began with a quote from the statement of Sheikh Mohammad Abdullah in the Court of the Sessions Judge in Srinagar during the Quit Kashmir Trial in 1946, and is being concluded with another quote from the same statement. In recognition of human agency and mediation, the Sheikh observed,

No State can succeed in raising the standard of its people's life without educating and training them to pursue creative and productive activities. The percentage of literacy in the State is 6, the percentage of higher education is 1, and the average income per capita is Rs. 11/- per annum. This by itself is an eloquent commentary on the system and structure of government to which the slogan 'Quit Kashmir' is addressed. (*Kashmir on Trial: State vs. Sheikh Abdullah*. Lahore: Lion Press, 1947.)

Bibliography

- Abdullah, Sheikh Mohammad. "Quit Kashmir Memorandum to the British Cabinet Mission on behalf of the All Jammu and Kashmir National Conference", 1946. This memorandum was in the book *Kashmir on Trial: State vs. Sheikh Abdullah*. Lahore: Lion Press, 1947.
- —. "The Statement of Sher-e-Kashmir in the Court of the Sessions Judge." *Kashmir on Trial: State vs. Sheikh Abdullah*. Lahore: Lion Press, 1947.
- Bazaz, Prem Nath. *Kashmir in Crucible*. New Delhi: Pamposh Publications, 1967. Reprint, Srinagar: Gulshan Books, 2005.
- —. *Truth about Kashmir*. Delhi: Kashmir Democratic Union, 1950.
- Behera, Navnita Chadha. *Demystifying Kashmir*. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2006.
- Bhattacharjea, Ajit. *Kashmir: The Wounded Valley*. New Delhi: UBS, 1994.
- —. *Sheikh Mohammad Abdullah: The Tragic Hero of Kashmir*. New Delhi: Roli Books, 2008.
- Bose, Sumantra. *Kashmir: Roots of Conflict, Paths to Peace*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003, p. 21.
- Copeland, Ian. "The Abdullah Factor: Kashmiri Muslims and the 1947 Crisis", in *Political Inheritance of Pakistan*, D.A. Low (ed.), 218–54. London: Macmillan, 1991.
- Dasgupta, Jyoti Bhushan. *Jammu and Kashmir*. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1968.
- Ganju, M. *Textile Industry in Kashmir*. New Delhi: Premier, 1945.
- Hassnain, F.M. *Freedom Struggle in Kashmir*. New Delhi: Rima Publishing House, 1988.
- Korbel, Josef. *Danger in Kashmir*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1954. Reprint, New York: Oxford University Press, 2002.
- Rahman, Mushtaqur. *Divided Kashmir: Old Problems, New Opportunities for India, Pakistan, and the Kashmiri People*. Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 1996.
- Saraf, M.Y. *Kashmiris Fight for Freedom*. 1st edn. Lahore: Ferozsons, 1977.