

Contextualizing Governance in Jammu & Kashmir under Shaikh Mohammad Abdullah (1947 -1953)

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ABSTRACT

Sheikh Mohammad Abdullah has been the most dominating political figure of modern Jammu and Kashmir who played a dominating role in shaping the post-1947 governance. He has been the most enigmatic and one among the complex leaders ever produced by the state. His era in the state marked a single minded assertion by the people of Kashmir of their identity. Despite certain drastic measures to improve the socio-economic and cultural conditions of the state, his period was underlined by may serious infirmities in governance. The present paper attempts a retrospective assessment to understand the nature of governance during the era of Sheikh Mohmmad Abdullah. The paper is divided into two sections. Section I traces the various reforms taken to improve the socio-economic conditions in the state and section II highlights the infirmities and crises in governance during the said period.

Keywords: *Shiekh Abdullah, Governance, Enigmatic, Retrospective, Infirmities.*

I. INTRODUCTION

An eminent scholar and journalist, M J Akbar, rightly regards Sheikh Mohammed Abdullah as the architect of modern Kashmir saying: “The modern history of Kashmir begin with the greatest Kashmiri of modern times, Sheikh Abdullah”.¹ He was the most enigmatic and complex political leader of Kashmir. He had a meteoric rise to the top slot of Kashmir politics and continued to dominate the political scene for more than fifty years with enduring impact. He emerged as a unquestioned leader of the Muslims because of his unitizing efforts to organize the Muslims under one banner for demanding exit of the Dogra rule from the state. As every movement has its objectives, aims and also its character. It was this character of Kashmir Movement led by Shiekh Mohammad Abdullah which got manifested in the political party christened as All Jammu and Kashmir Muslim Conference. With the establishment of Muslim Conference, later renamed as National Conference, the Kashmiri’s nationalist urge took a organized and structured form. Sheikh Mohammad Abdullah, the moving spirit behind its establishment and activity, it was not only his fame which grew rapidly , but also his thinking began to grew mature at an ever faster pace. However, notwithstanding his abiding contribution, perhaps no other person has become as controversial as did the Sheikh. There are two main reasons behind this. First is Sheikh Abdullah’s own split personality. His frequent U-turns and adherence to various divergent ideologies and agendas has made it all the more difficult to analyze his historical role. On the one hand he organized a mass movement against the autocratic and feudal socio-political setup and became a vocal advocate of civil

rights and social democracy, on the other hand there is ample evidence to show his autocratic and intolerant behavior against those who disagreed with his political views. Likewise, on the one side he facilitated the Kashmir's accession with India and became its strongest champion at different levels, on the other side he patronized a movement for twenty two years, using all his abilities and mobilizing tactics to undo that accession.

II. REFORMS AND RECONSTRUCTION

On 30th October 1947², Maharaja Hari Singh in accordance with the wishes of the Govt of India, appointed Shaikh Mohammad Abdullah once his fiercest enemy, as Head of Emergency Administration to work with Dewan Mehar Chand Mahajan who was still the Prime Minister of the State. There was no clear demarcation of the powers between the two Mahajan and Abdullah. However Abdullah soon over shadowed the administration because he derived his real powers from popular support, compulsions of the political situation and by the backing of Jawahar Lal Nehru.³ Whereas as Prime Minister Mehar Chand Mahajan was backed by Maharaja Hari Singh whose own position had turned very weak after the poonch revolt, tribal invasion and by signing the instrument of accession with India. To India, Shaikh was the key factor for wining plebiscite, which Jawahar Lal Nehru had promised. Satisfied with his role New Delhi decided to mark an end to the dual administration and accordingly on 5 march , 1948 Sheikh Abdullah was nominated to the office of Prime Minister and was made all set to control the full authority of the state administration. Accordingly the Emergency Council was converted into a regular council of ministers. Below is the description of various reforms brought out by National Conference Govt. headed by sheikh Abdullah in the state during his short tenure of less than six years.

III. AGRARIAN REFORMS

For the peasant masses in Jammu and Kashmir after 1947, the arrogance and authoritarianism of the new ruling elite-the revolutionaries of the National Conference-led movement- were compensated for by the rapid fulfillment of a key point of the Naya Kashmir program - the agrarian reform. Perhaps the three most significant goals enunciated in the Naya Kashmir, geared to the interest of the state agriculturists were the abolition of landlordism, land to the tiller, and co-operative association. The new state took its first concrete steps towards agrarian reforms in 1948 with the abolition of *Jagirs*, *muafis* and *Mukararies* grants, except those granted to religious institutions.⁵ The rights of 396 Jagirs/muafis involving an annual land revenue assignment of Rs. 5,66,313 were abolished. Besides, fixed cash grants⁴ known as Mukararies (2,347 in all) to the tune of Rs. 1,77,921 per annum were also abolished.⁶ One Jagir in Jammu was 95 square miles in area and had a population of 12,000; the annual income was Rs. 40,000 from this, of which the Jagirdar took about one-third. The Jagir was taken away, and the owner, the Raja of Chanai, given a monthly allowance of Rs. 300.⁷ In October 1948, the government amended the State Tenancy Act, 1924, providing for a maximum rental payment by a tenant was now liable to pay not more than a quarter of the produce in case of wet land and not more than a third of the produce in case of dry land in respect of tenancy holdings exceeding 12^{1/2} acres, while in the case of holdings not exceeding 12^{1/2} acres, the landlord was entitled to no more than half of the produce. Also through this

amendment, tenants were protected from arbitrary eviction without court procedure. Moreover, 6250 acres of *Khalisa* (state-owned) land were distributed free of cost to land laborers.

On 13 July 1950 the National Conference Government headed by Shiekh Abdullah, in accordance with ‘Nay Kashmir’, introduced the most sweeping land reform in the entire subcontinent and probably most radical in any non-communist state world over. To give the programme a legal shape, the government enacted, on 17 October 1950, the Big Landed Estates Abolition Act. The Act has been described as the Magna Carta of the peasants, which “revolutionized the whole agrestic organization of the State.”⁸ This legislation set a maximum limit of 22 ¾ acres on the holdings of land holdings of landowners. Proprietors could, however, retain orchards, grass farms, and fuel and fodder reserves beyond this ceiling and would have full freedom to choose which acres of their holding they would keep for these purposes. Land in excess of this amount was transferred in ownership right to the tiller without compensation to the original owner. “As a result of this enactment, 9,000 and odd proprietors were expropriated from 4.5 lakh acres of land and out of this 2.3 lakhs acres were transferred in ownership right to the tillers free of all encumbrances, and the remaining land vested in the State”. Between 1950 and 1952, 7090,000 landless peasants, mostly Muslims in the Valley but including 250,000 lower-caste Hindus in the Jammu region, became peasant -proprietors.

However, corruption in the administrative machinery and some loopholes in the scheme such as exemption of orchards from the ceiling limit and making no distinction between the 22.75 acres of dry or irrigated/ fertile land, and other such limitations mitigated the effectiveness of the reforms in real practice. The transformation of rural Kashmir, as a result of those “sweeping land reforms”, had far-reaching political consequences. Hundreds of thousands of newly empowered families would henceforth regard Shaikh Abdullah, seen a principle agent of this transformation, as a *messiah*,⁹ and he earned the name *Bab* (father) among the rural masses. These peasant masses tirelessly backed Abdullah through out his period of political wilderness after his dismissal in 1953.

In order to improve the state of agriculture, an Irrigation Department was set up to tackle the problem of irrigating dry lands and consequently ten old and new canals were either restored or constructed. One of these canals, the Awantipura Canal which was completed at the cost of about Rs. 8,22,000, irrigated an area of 4,000 acres of land.¹⁰

IV. COOPERATIVE ASSOCIATION

Great emphasis was put on the cooperative movement, “with the object mainly of bringing the entire village life within its fold.” It’s main purposes were to:

1. scale down debts outstanding against members to the extent of their own repaying capacity;
2. spread out the reduced debt over a number of years;
3. take surrenders of lands and lease them back to members of the societies for cultivation;
4. finance crops,
5. encourage repayment in kind; and

6. Supply necessities of life.

In 1948 there were 222 multipurpose Cooperative Societies in the state with 25,673 members; in 1949 the figures rose to 347 and 56, 499 respectively. Statistics for 1950 give the figures of 1,731 agricultural cooperatives, 386 purchase and scale cooperatives, and 378 non-agricultural credit cooperatives. The operational side of the scheme was not, however, as bright as the above cited statics. In practice the cooperative movement turned into an instrument of the National Conference party politics. Moreover, as the government itself had to admit in the summer of 1953, the cooperatives completely collapsed because of “corruption and maladministration” of governmental officials.¹¹

V. DEVELOPMENTS OF NON-AGRARIAN SECTOR

In accordance with the “Naya Kashmir”, the National Conference government directly involved itself at in the development of industrial sector and the expansion of trade and commerce. The turmoil of 1947 had given a big blow to the timber trade in the state. The government claimed, however, to have restored the timber trade to the extent that it in 1949 it yields 5.5 million rupees to the state treasury in comparison with 2.9 million in 1947.¹² Motor transport was made available at cheap rates so that the timber could be carried to the nearest new rail link at Pathankot within two or three days as compared to several months taken by floating. Similarly considerable government support was given to the silk industry through the importation of silkworm eggs from foreign countries, which were distributed among rearers and through three government owned silk-weaving factories. Other industries include manufacture of wood, sports goods, drugs and carpets. The government organized and subsidized the cottage industries and helped new entrepreneurs to start small scale manufacturing units. Among the major industries which were established during the period include Joinery Mill and a ply board factory at Pampore, a cement factory at Wuyan, and the Drug Research Laboratory in Jammu.¹³

All foreign trade was managed through governmental Kashmir People’s Cooperative Society, (K.P.C.S), handled by the Kashmir Industrial Arts Emporium, with depots in New Delhi, Amritsar, Bombay, Simla, Lucknow Madras and Calcutta. Nationalized bazaars were organized for trade within the country. There was a marked expansion of the tourism industry during the period. For example, in 1949 the total number of tourists visiting to the state was 3,746 including 3,321 Indian and 420 foreign tourists. The number rose up to 21,318 in 1953, which includes 19,319 Indians and 2,062 tourists from other countries.

V. IMPROVEMENTS IN SOCIAL SERVICES SECTOR

A special care was given to the development of Public Health in the state. As a result of setting up of an Isolation Hospital, an Epidemiological Laboratory and mobile dispensaries, the mortality rate went down in the state. A campaign to register T.B. affected patients was launched and as a result 10,000 were attended in 1948-49. The B.C. G. campaign was also started with the help of the International Tuberculosis Organization. Besides attention was given to improve the infrastructural aspects in the hospitals with this purpose, X-ray, Electro-Therapeutic, Electro-Cardiogram and Ultra Violet Lamps apparatus has been imported to equip the hospitals in the State.¹⁴

As a result of above discussed socio-economic reforms there was a marked improvement in the living standard of the common people in the state. Even Prem Nath Bazaz, who was by now most vocal critique of the Shaikh Abdullah's administration agrees that: "After a long period of dismal poverty and semi-starvation the Kashmir's were witnessing the dawn of a new era of prosperity which was being shared more or less by all classes and communities; there was an all-round rise in the standard of living through some sections in the cities and towns profited by it in far larger proportion than those living in the rural areas".

The Abdullah's government attached great importance to education and according to Joseph Korbel, "much has been done in this field."¹⁵ Almost a total of 35% of annual budget was spent for the expansion of education and the development of educational infrastructure. The Jammu and Kashmir University was established in the year 1948. New schools were opened, some 60 of them for children from three to five. Two intermediate colleges were opened in Anantnag and Sopore and an intermediated college exclusively for girls started in Srinagar. This was, besides the Gandhi Memorial College established in Jammu. In order to end the feudal character and traditional nature of the educational system in the state, the government introduced a new structure of educational system. Its main feature was a four year's courses for secondary education, where besides the ordinary subjects special care was given to impart scientific knowledge, with agricultural technical and industrial bias suited to the needs of the country and its industry.

VII. CRISES IN GOVERNANCE

The post 1947 governance in Jammu and Kashmir particularly under National conference Govt. headed by Sheikh Mohammad Abdullah produced a series of consequence namely deficit of peace, intolerance of opposition and installation of cliental governments. The political creed of Shiekh Abdullah was from the mid 1940's of a distinctly socialist ting, which was outlined by his organization, in its New Kashmir Manifesto, which called for what amounted to a one party Government in the state of Jammu and Kashmir dedicated to social reform along the lines pioneered by the Soviet Union. But as Sumantra Bose mentions "the manifesto was clearly based on a Jacobin concept of popular sovereignty"¹⁶ it tends to be in tension with liberal-democratic norms of political pluralism, accountability of those in power, and tolerance of dissent and opposition. Thus, in accordance with the set norms in the Manifesto, the Sheik Abdullah used the enormous powers, which he enjoyed to govern Kashmir as a party-state. Indeed, "the National Conference's slogan was "one leader, one party, one programme"- meaning Abdullah, the National Conference and the 1944 Naya Kashmir agenda.¹⁷

The National Conference regime ironically, suppresses all the opposition against its views in the state, no healthy opposition was allowed to grow. The intolerance of opposition was shown during the elections of Constitution Assembly 1951 in which National Conference won all the 75 mostly unopposed, as no one dares to file nominations against the National Conference candidates. The state government promulgated an Ordinance entitled the 'Enemy Agents Ordinance' allocating for the arrest and summary trials of those suspected of pro-Pakistan leanings. Some of the political leaders who had earlier shown their reservations to bye the views of the National Conferenc were arrested or externed from the state. Political leaders like, Agra Showkat Ali, Mohammad Noorudin, Khawaja Gulam Nabi Gilkar, Mohammad Abdullah Shopyani, Khawaja Abdul Gani, Pandit Prem Nath Bazaz, Jagar Nath Sathu, Khawaja Abdul Salam Yattu- the president of Kisan Mazdoor

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Conference and his colleagues were arrested; later on all these leaders excepting Pandit Prem Nath Bazaz and a few of his colleagues were taken to Jammu where from they were pushed into Pakistan. Listening to Radio Pakistan was banned in the state; and any person doubted of listening to it, was arrested along with the radio-set. The government also suppressed papers and periodicals that did not agree with Shaikh Abdullah.¹⁸ In doing all this Shaikh Abdullah was helped by his deputy, Bakhshi Gulam Mohammad, the iron man of National Conference, who was an effective executive with little concern for democratic and legal procedures. In 1947 before NC came to power there were more than 48 newspapers and periodicals published from Srinagar, Jammu and other big towns, propagating different views and belonging to all shades of political opinion. But soon after NC took over it became a thing of past. More than half of these journals, including all critical, bold and independent were banned by highhanded methods. *The Statesman*, a prominent Indian newspaper which consistently supported Shaikh Abdullah's policy, observed on 1 March, 1949: "there are signs of establishment of a police state- futile notices in restaurants forbidding political conversations when everybody talks politics; more 'public safety' prisoners than are healthy", and some eighteen months later, sir Owen Dixon observed during his mission that "the state government was exercising wide powers of arbitrary arrest."¹⁹ But the most interesting observation came from Gulam Ahmad Mahjoor, a National Conference sympathizer who was declared as the national poet of Kashmir by Shaikh Abdullah regime. He wrote satires like *Poshinoolo* (O golden oriole) and *Aazaadi* (Freedom) in which he expressed his disapproval to the undemocratic and autocratic nature of National Conference government:

Hawks have left your garden

In western climes Freedom comes

With a shower of light and grace,

But dry, sterile thunder is all

She has for our own soil.

Freedom, being of heavenly birth,

Can not move from door to door;

You will find her camping in the homes

Of a chosen few alone.

The administration was reduced to a hand-maid of the National Conference, and its office holders became virtually masters of public fate. The economic blockade from Pakistan, caused an acute shortage of essentials in the state particularly, there was acute scarcity of salt, green tea, sugar and kerosene. Thus the entire distribution was kept in the hands of the National Conference office bearers. And those who were suspected for having any affiliation with the non-National Conference parties were denied these commodities. To enforce its totalitarian

policy the NC government created officially national militia comprising of more than 6000 me, 500 detectives and unofficially a peace Brigade of 300 men, storm troopers of more than 5000 men.²⁰

VIII. CONCLUSION

To conclude one must say that with the appointment of Shiekh Abdullah as prime minister of the state, the people particularly of the valley tasted the first dose of self rule. He derived his authority from the people and his tenure enjoyed a considerable popular sanction. He introduced radical reforms which within a short period of six years changed the face of state, carried people with him despite strong negative waves within and without. However despite the State witnessed tremendous development in many respects, the fact remains that system of governance right from 1947 was marred by certain grave infirmities on account of which on one hand targeted results could not be achieved, and on the other hand Kashmir become a smoldering volcano. The misuse of administrative power widened the gulf between rich and poor besides acting as a ban on realization of full economic potential f the state

Notes.

- i. Akbar, M.J, *Kashmir: Behind the Vale*, Roli Books, New Delhi, 1991, p. xii
- ii. Birdwood, Lord, *Two Nations and Kashmir*, London, 1956, p.176
- iii. Lamb, Aliaster, *Kashmir A disputed Legacy*, Karachi, 1993, p.184
- iv. Jagirs were land granted for political services rendered to the state *Muafis* were granted as charity to individuals, and such other bodies.
- v. Land Reforms (A Review of the Land Reforms with Special Reforms to Big Landed Estates Abolition Act for the period ending July 1952, in the Jammu and Kashmir State) Land Reforms Officer, J&K Srinagar, 1952, pp.3-4.
- vi. Mirza Afzal Beg, “*Land Reforms in J&K*” in *Mainstream* Vol. XV, 1 June 1976, p. 2
- vii. Gupta, Sisir, *Kashmir-A Study of Indo-Pakistan Relations*, p.395.
- viii. H.D. Malaviya, *Land Reforms in India*, AICC. New Delhi, 1954, p. 415
- ix. Bose, Summantra, *Kashmir-Roots of Conflict Paths to Peace*, Vistaar Publications, New Delhi, 2003, p.28.
- x. Shiekh Mohammad Abdullah, *Jammu and Kashmir (947-1950)*, Department of Information, J&K Govt., p.4.
- xi. Korbelt, Josep, *Danger in Kashmir*, Princeton University Press ,1954 pp. 215-16.
- xii. Shiekh Mohammad Abdullah, *Jammu and Kashmir (947-1950)*, Department of Information, J&K Govt., p.5.
- xiii. Ibid.
- xiv. Ibid.
- xv. Korbelt, Josep, *Danger in Kashmir*, p.209.
- xvi. Bose, Summantra, *Kashmir-Roots of Conflict Paths to Peace*, Vistaar Publications, New Delhi, 2003, pp.26-28.

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xvii. Ibid.

xviii. Bazaz, Prem Nath, *the History of Struggle for Freedom in Kashmir* Cultural and Political, Gulshan Publishers & Distributors, Srinagar(2009), pp.207-232.

xix. Korbelt, Joseph, cit., p.208

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