

NATIONAL CONFERENCE AND THE RISE OF POLITICAL AWAKENING IN KASHMIR

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Abstract

The promising land of Kashmir lost its independence when the Mughals annexed and joined it with their Empire of India in 1586 A.D; and thus from that time it served as the north most point of an empire whose power pedestal was situated in Delhi. After their departure it came under Afghans (1753-1819), Sikhs (1819-46) and then under Dogra's of Jammu (1846-1947). Thus over the centuries the Kashmiri's lived under the yoke of foreign dynasties. Their policies were always against the inhabitants as it was a guiding principle to rule longer. It helped in arousing consciousness among the inhabitants and resulted in the rise of political awakening in the Kashmir. Although it emerged very late in comparison to Indian subcontinent, but they were enough conscious of the exploitations prior to their counterparts. They resisted throughout ages but the oppression continues. The chief organisation which helped the people at the odd hours was the Sheik Abdulla's Muslim Conference which within a passage of time changed its nomenclature as All Jammu and Kashmir National Conference. It initially accommodated the divergent religions i.e. Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs but within a passage of time fizzled out of mission. This research paper briefly traces the factors and delineates the genesis for the Rise of Political Awakening in Kashmir.

Key words: Kashmir, Dogras, Reading Room Party, Muslim Conference, National Conference and Sheikh Abdulla.

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[1] Introduction

The theme 'Kashmir' attracts every one as it has always been portrayed and linked to prettiness and peace; it has been the subject of the saints, philosophers, mystics, emperors, politicians and travellers. Everybody chants and admires it on his own ways. Some compares it with 'Switzerland' and others with 'paradise' on earth. The author of the *Tarikh-i- Rashidi*, says that "Kashmir is among the most famous countries of the world, and is celebrated for its attractions and its wonders." [1] Whereas Maxmuller said, "If I were to look over the whole world to find the country most richly endowed with all the wealth, power, and beauty that nature can bestow--in some places a very paradise on earth-- I should point to India." Clearly by paradise he meant Kashmir.

This breathtakingly Valley of Kashmir throughout the ages has stood for peaceful contemplation, intellectual advancement and religious diversity coexisting in an atmosphere of tolerance for the most part. Its beauty attracted the fortune seekers from the very past and it is because as warned by Dr. Parmu that the "beautiful countries have often been the homes of tragedy. Happiness is rarely the lot of a beautiful land. So Kashmir-the desired land of men and monarchs paid for her beauty." [2] In the modern geopolitical era, Kashmir is the centre of warfare and hostility rather than cultural innovation; and the paradise out-and-out is hell-hole of violence, ethno-nationalistic assertion, intimidation, human right violation and as a result of tension between the two nuclear powers is considered the most dangerous place in the world today to live in. A great jewel of ancient Kashmir Kalhana Pandit rightly put it that "this land after having been a virtuous women, has fallen like a prostitute into the arms of the insolent. Henceforth whoever knows how to succeed by mere intrigue will aspire to that kingdom, whose power has gone".

[2] Historical Background

The promising land of Kashmir lost its independence when the Mughals annexed and joined it with their empire of India in 1586; and thus from that time it served as the north most point of an empire whose power pedestal was situated in Delhi. As the Mughal power waned in India (A.D 1753), Kashmir was conquered by Afghans (1753-1819) who lacked the benevolence and proved tyrannical. The Afghans did not take part in a state building process in 18th century India and it becomes clear from the Kashmiri documents that the Afghans presence in the valley of Kashmir proved fatal and disruptive.

Although both Mughals and Afghans were Muslims but when the Sikhs drive out the Afghans from Kashmir in A.D 1819, the Kashmiris welcomed them with open arms but these fortune seekers soon turned out to be even greater oppressors. The rule of Sikhs (1819-1846) says Balraj Puri “established a specifically Hindu tone”[3] which continued although the Dogra regime. In 1846, the land was sold to Maharaja Gulab Singh, a vassal of Sikh rulers, during the first Anglo Sikh war by Lord Hardinge, the Governor General of East India Company for 75 lakhs of rupees Or Nanak Shahi (around £100,000 at current rates). It was a price for his disloyalty against his master.[4] By the treaty of Amritsar the state was handed to Maharaja and his male descendants with an ‘independent authority’ maintained the dynastic, feudal and religion-centric rule over his subjects; which was a total contrast of transforming rule of British in India.

The salient point in this context is that by this perfidy the Modern state of J&K came into being. The founders were perceived as foreigners by the inhabitants of Kashmir and It is important to mention here that the vilayat of Kashmir had long before the era of Kaljug, been favoured by the Rajas of Jammu who were Hindus. [5] These Dogra Maharajas favoured the Rajputs in the ruling structure over the other inhabitants whether it be Muslims or Kashmiri Pundits. During the Dogra regime the bias and communalism was at its apex [6] and it led to marginalization of Kashmiri Muslims. By seeing the misery, injustice, and the slavery of the people all-round Robert Thrope sacrificed his life for the freedom of Kashmir’s. [7]

The first element of the treaty of Amritsar was the concept of sovereignty became territorialized during the colonial period. Prior to it was a seamless terrain of overlapping and layered sovereignty- but now it turned into territorially bounded sovereignty. [8] It is important here to describe that in the late 18th and the 19th century the British hallowed out the concept of kingship as they were garneting the sovereignty to the Dogra ruler over the subjects in the Jammu and Kashmir. But earlier on rulers in order to be legitimate would give patronage to the religious and cultural sites of all people regardless of religious affiliations. But that was not necessary any more in the late 19th century. In a sense princely despotism was reinforced by the colonial Paramountancy. So to say a stage was set more than a hundred years for Kashmiri’s to register their dissent against ruler which was buttressed by the English. Although it is true that few socio-economic changes occurred in Kashmir due to the result of state’s contact with the British India. It resulted in arousing the consciousness among masses but of limited nature. For

e.g. In A.D 1847 the Shawls- bafs went on strike during the reign of Gulab Singh and in 1877 a memorandum was submitted to the British Viceroy containing “grave allegations against the Dogra administration”. Afterwards the Silk factory workers revolted against the oppressive working condition in A.D 1925. [9] But nothing positive happened as the administration was entirely “manned by Hindus”.

[3] Emergence of Political Consciousness and the Formation of Associations

Until 1920s, Kashmir remained politically inactive in comparison to their co-religionists in India. It was because of the restrictions imposed by the state authorities on the associations. Within a passage of times i.e. as late as 1921-22, the state hesitatingly permitted the formation of a religious association (Anjuman) whose object was non-political i.e. the teaching of the Koran and Ahadis, but ordered the police to ensure that they did not take part in political matters.[10]

In 1930's there was an awakening of Kashmiri social consciousness sparked by religious and social issues. When the young Maharaja Hari Singh succeeded his uncle's throne in 1925 a lot of faith was shown by the people on him. However he relied much on his advisers, that he lost personal touch with his subjects and became ignorant to their grievances; which resulted in the formation of Reading Room Party (RRP) at Srinagar in 1930. [11] This party attracted well educated and frustrated cream of Muslim community. According to Saraf, it was Mirwaiz Mohammad Yusuf Shah who suggested the name of Sheikh Abdulla ‘who rose from the masses’ as leader of RRP and declared publically him as “our leader” who represented “my views and those of our entire people.” On the eve its formation, the Imam of Jamia Mashjid Calcutta namely “Azad Subhani” was present in Srinagar, who held many secret meetings with the religious heads of Srinagar urging them to support the young Shiekh Abdulla. [12] It is necessary to examine here that not only the Muslim individuals but many political organisations from British India supported the aspirations of people to redress their grievances. For e.g. All India Kashmir Committee which was formed in Shimla on 24 July 1931 and Majalis Ahrar-i-Islam-i-Hind initially rendering financial assistance to Kashmir leaders for organizing the movement against the Maharaja, they openly supported the Muslim movement by sending jathas and arousing disturbance in Kashmir. [13]

However in response, Maharaja gave his blessings to three communal parties i.e. Kashmiri Pandits Conference, Hindu Sabha in Jammu, and Shiromani Khalsa Darbar. It resulted for a time being a lack of organised political party in Kashmir. The year of 1931 was a watershed

in the history of Kashmir as the growing discontent of the people burst into flames when a Hindu constable in a Jammu Jail made desecration of the Holy Quran. This incident resulted in a series of events that sparked an uprising in Kashmir. Maharaja reacted to this episode by declaring martial law and putting lion (Sheikh Abdulla) into the cave (prison). These events intensified an outsider namely- Abdul Qadir, who delivered a sadistic speech at Khanqah-i-Maula, was put behind the bars very next day. On 13th July when his trial was to be scheduled, a large crowd assembled outside the jail disrupting the property. In response, police fired on the unarmed mob and killed 26 people. [14]

Sheikh was soon released from prison, encouraged by the support from within and outside state the Muslim opposition became much more politically organised which led to the establishment of the All Jammu and Kashmir Muslim Conference in October 1932. The leadership of the Muslim Conference came from two distinct sections: traditional Muslim elites or religious preachers--Yusuf Shah and Unemployed higher educated youth-- Sheikh Abdullah. This organization however does not remain Muslim in toto as has been said. From 1935 onwards many dynamic personalities like- Sardar Budh Singh and Prem Nath Bazaz joined it. However Miwaiz Kashmir Yusuf Shah resigned soon and formed his own separate organisation named as Azad Muslim Party Conference which very soon fizzled down because of Abdulla's Political orientation.

The founding father of AJKMC –Sheikh Abdulla, one could find the secular traits in him and he did not regard his organisation as communalistic. He stressed that “we must end communalism by ceasing to think in terms of Muslims and non-Muslims when discussing our political problems..And we must open our doors to all such Hindus and Sikhs, who like ourselves, believe in the freedom of their country from the shackles of an irresponsible rule.” [15] One of the modern scholars of Pakistan I. H. Qureshi remarked that Abdulla “spoke for enlightened, progressive, secular nationalism, and was in a sense consistent with the historical background of Kashmir itself”. The Sheikh Abdulla's intentions can be clearly seen from his speech at inaugural function of Muslim conference as-“our movement is not directed against the minorities (Pundits and Sikhs). I assure all my Countrymen (Kashmiri's) be they Hindus or Sikhs that we shall always try to redress their grievances. [16]

But one can't run away from reality that AJKMC was predominantly Muslim organisation and it was limited in its goals and ideology, as it aimed at safeguarding the interests

of the Muslims in general and middle and upper class Muslims in particular. One could see that the All Jammu and Kashmir Muslim Conference had its ideological programmes similar to that of the moderates of Indian National Congress as both the political organisations were not aimed to overthrow the Raj[17] (be it Dogra's in case of Kashmir or for INC-Britishers).

This could also mean that the people of the Kashmir in general and the leaders in particular knew that "they had a state and all they wanted was adoption of a democratic system. When India was struggling for its freedom from the British colonialists and the Muslims of the subcontinent wanted a separate homeland" (Pakistan resolution was made in 1940 in the Lahore), "the Kashmirers were a step ahead of them. The Kashmir was a sovereign state struggling to make it a democratic one".

Within a period of time the radical organisations like youth league, Kashmir Motor drivers association, Kashmir students Union league, Carpet weavers association etc representing the grievances of the masses. All Jammu and Kashmir Muslim conference did not remain impassive by the radicalisation of Kashmiri political consciousness says Rekha Chaudhary.[18] Thus when the Muslim conference observed on 8th May 1936 as a 'Responsible Government Day' President Abdulla requested non-Muslims to participate in it. The effort was not in vain, says Bazaz a contemporary great intellectual and leader of Kashmir youth league—"In many places like Srinagar, Jammu and Poonch the Hindus or Sikhs participated".[19]

[4] Change of Nomenclature- an experiment failed

On 11 June 1939, Sheikh Abdulla changed the nomenclature of the Muslim conference into National conference. It served the dual objectives of Sheikh Abdulla; first- "Moslems were to be protected not necessarily because of the Muslim faith but because persecutions of any community in any form was to be fought and overcome" [20] second- it was an effort to reach out to non-Muslims and to broaden the horizon of his political party. But changing nomenclature was not an abrupt development, as we have seen during the addresses of annual sessions of the Muslim Conference non-Muslims were eagerly appealed to participate. One of the important causes responsible for change of nomenclature was the impact 'of Jawaharlal Nehru's secular and progressive concepts on Indian society, including his dream of a united independent India' on Sheikh Abdulla. It is worth to mention here that Sheikh Abdulla 'became a friend to Pandit Nehru, to whom, it is said he was introduced by Bazaz.' Although the conversion from Muslim conference to National conference led to a tragic schism as it was strongly opposed by

Chaudhary Hamidullah khan, Khawaja Ahmad-ud-din Banhali, Moulvi Abdullah (advocate) and Ghulam Ahmad Ganie.[21] These conservatives view this move as a 'pro-Hindu' and 'pro-congress' of Nehru and remain stick with old Muslim Conference as a party which shared the same ideological theory of Muslim League of Jinnah. While as the National conference opened its membership to the all communities; Prem Nath Bazaz, Sardar Budh Singh, Jia lal Kilim and Kashyap Bandhu were some prominent non- Muslim Members of the NC. These members set their heart on bringing the party, and as has been said earlier by the motives of Sheik Abdulla, he sponsored a resolution at the annual session of NC at Mirpur 28th of December urging inclusion of Hindustani as one of the language in the Kashmir civil service examination, with faculty to be given to the candidates to use either Persian or Devangari script as they like. It was a departure from the existing official language of the state which was Urdu in the Persian script. Moreover according to Mirwaiz "there was never any movement in the state in favour of the Hindi language or Devangiri script, no request was made for its introduction....no community claimed it as its own language." [22] This move was criticised by the Muslims of India in general and Kashmiri's in particular; it resulted the loss of reputation of Sheikh Abdulla and his Organisation.

Within few years the Hindu Intellectuals resigned from National conference- it resulted in the fizzling out of NC. Why the non-Muslims (Pandits) withdraw? Many causes are responsible for separation. It was because "kashmiri Pandits had perceived doubts and fear against the freedom struggle that espoused the cause of democracy, social justice, and freedom from exploitation and tyranny". [23] The resignation was according to Bazaz because of "Nearly all the new entrants had worked for years in different communalist Hindu and Sikh organisations and had risen to eminence by espousing the cause of obscurantism, reaction and repression. By merely joining the National conference it was difficult for them to totally eschew their old mentality and the political doctrines in support of which they had fought for many years. At best from being Hindu communalist they could take a big jump and became Hindu Nationalist. Above that they could not rise. Though all of them paid extravagant tribute to secularism in season and out of season, that noble creed still existed only in name. [24]

Among the other important cause responsible for the separation would have been the extreme religiosity of the Sheikh Abdulla as in the Working committee conference he is reported to have insisted that he was "a Muslim first and Muslim Last". I think it was to absorb the

pressure which was mounting inside in favour of Muslim league of Jinnah who visits Valley during 1936. But he could not accommodate the radicalisation of the aspirations of the Muslims of the Jammu and Kashmir in general and Muslims of Valley in particular. Not only the Pandits resigned from the National conference but some Muslims too resigned, for example in 1944 Mirza Afzal beg, one of the founding fathers of the NC entered the Maharaja Hari Singh's Government and became a minister of the Public Works Department and Ghulam Abass returned to the Muslim conference and he stated that "the Muslim conference is a part and parcel of the All India Muslim League" of Jinnah.

[5] Partition and Kashmir

As the British rule came to an end in South Asia, "On August 15, India celebrated independence from the British Raj. A day symbolising the end of colonialism in India became a day symbolising Indian colonialism in the Valley".[25] The authority was vested to princely states whether they would accede to Hindu majority India or Muslim- majority Pakistan. It not surprisingly, sparked a political manoeuvring in Jammu and Kashmir. [26] Sheikh Abdulla In 1946 launched "Quiet Kashmir Movement" to oust Maharaja Hari Singh while as the Muslim Conference supported the cause of Muslim League of Jinnah but they opposed the movement of Sheikh. It was responded by the Maharaja with "Jail Baro" policy.

It is important to mention her that one could divide the public opinion of the people of Kashmir in 1946 into three categories—**first**: the nationalists of Kashmir (NC) dominated by Abdulla wanted the end of autocracy of the Dogras and the replacement by an independent Kashmir under leadership of this very party; although his stand was in flux. **Second**: the beneficiaries of the Dogras rulers- those who calming Rajput origin and the upper class Hindus supported the cause of the ruler. But it should not be negated that many Hindu intellectuals for example Prem Nath Bazaz advocated the independent Jammu and Kashmir. **Third**: the Muslim Conference, All Jammu and Kashmir Mazdoor conference, led by Abdul Salam Yatu and Kashmir socialist Party demanded the state accession with Pakistan.[27]

Maharaja Hari Singh resisted the aspirations and demands of regional parties to join either Pakistan or India hoping to get independence from both countries. Maharaja, to buy time offered standstill agreement to both countries and to maintain status quo, the India rejected as it refused to countenance any proposals of a standstill agreement; so long the State Government would not send its accredited representatives to the Indian capital to negotiate the terms of the

agreement. Hari Singh probably, weighed down by the changes the British withdrawal had brought about in India and unsure of the consequences of his accession to India waited, perhaps to seek political balances, which could retain him a measure of the prerogative he had enjoyed under the Paramountcy.

On the other hand Pakistan signed it on 12 August, under its terms Pakistan would assume the responsibilities to run the communications, postal and telegraph service. However the violence erupted in the different parts of the state and the tribal's from the Northwest Frontier Province (NWFP) invaded Kashmir. Similarly the enraged people fought under the leadership of a young Kashmiri, Sardar Mohammad Ibrahim Khan founded a parallel government and laid the foundation of a political movement of liberation subsequently known as Azad Kashmir government.[28] Maharaja of Kashmir was disturbed by the situation created by these tribal's, fled to Delhi sought for help which India refused unless the Maharajah signed the instrument of accession on October 27, 1947[29] paving the way for Indian soldiers to come to his aid. However, the accession of Kashmir with India has been contested by the Pakistan as illegal as since Maharaja Hari Singh had no right to sign an agreement with India when standstill agreement with Pakistan was still in force.

The signing of the accession was a man-made catastrophe befell on Kashmiri's. Claims from both ends made it a power-keg, which have triggered three wars between the two nuclear powers Pakistan and India, and more than 90 thousand people of the state has been perished and rest struggling to get the separate identity.

[6] CONCLUSION

With the formation of the Jammu and Kashmir state in A.D 1846, the Dogras deemed the land and the people of the Kashmir as their personal property. The government apathy and policy of alienations and suppression on the Muslim majority resulted in awakening the inner consciousness of the people of Kashmir which resulted in the formation of the associations like Reading Room Party and Muslim Conference. Although these mini- parties aimed at the safeguarding the interests of their co-religious people i.e Muslims, but with founding the National Conference under the leadership of Shiekh Abdullah, the horizon of the party was somewhat broadened which paved the way of entry for non-Muslims as well. This soon fizzled out as both (Muslim and non- Muslim leadership) lacked the broader vision of handling the situation around 1946. Sheikh Abdulla emerged as a sole monopolistic decision maker impressed

by the ideology of J. L. Nehru shaped the rest history of the state of J&K. His organisation could not remain stick with the primary goal of accommodating the other religions. Thus the experiment failed.

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- [2] R.K. Parmu, *Muslim Rule in Kashmir 1320-1819*, Peoples Publishing House, Delhi, 1969.p. 37
- [3] C. Zutshi, *Language of Belongings*, Review by Balraj Puri, Economic and Political weekly, Vol. 39, No. 42 (Oct. 16-22, 2004), pp. 4632-4634.
- [4] Madhavi Yasin, *British Paramountcy in Kashmir 1876-1896*, Atlantic Publishers, New Delhi, 1985, p. 16
- [5] Ganesh Das writes that there were twenty –two Rajas of Jammu line who ruled over Kashmir for 650 years. According to another testimony there were 55 rulers who ruled over Kashmir. Cf. Rajdarshani, Eng. trans. S.D.S. Charak, p. 228
- [6] The jagirs and Innam grants were not only revoked but were transferred to their co-religionists. JKA, File No: 117 of 1986 (Samvat).
- [7] He was a first foreigner who came to his motherland, raised his voice against the despotic rule of Dogras, was murdered on 22-11- 1868. He also criticised the Britisher's for committing atrocities on people of Kashmir by making "sale- deed" with Dogras. Robert Throp, *Kashmir Misgovernment*, (Ed. by F.M. Hassnian), pp. 15-18
- [8] Greater Kashmir, October 18, 2012.
- [9] A memorandum was submitted to Lord Reading by Khwaja Sadud-din-Shawl. He is also called Father of Modern Political movement in Kashmir. Muhammad Yusuf Saraf, *Kashmir's Fight for freedom*, Vol. 1, Karachi, 1977, p. 237.
- [10] Kashmir Government Records (General), File No. 66/102/C of 1921. The Civil and Military Gazette (Lahore), 1 Nov. 1923, p. 13
- [11] Sheikh Muhammad Abdulla, *Atish-i-Chinar*, pp. 49-53. This organisation mostly focused on the recruitment policy of the dogra state and to seek change in it. Mohammad Rajib

was elected as its president and Sheikh Abdulla as general secretary with headquarter at Fatehkadal Srinagar.

- [12] Taasir Rashid, *Tahreek-i-Huriyyat-i-Kashmir*, vol. I, Srinagar, 1968, p.77.
- [13] Sheikh Muhammad Abdulla, *Atish-i-Chinar*, pp. 103. The president of this organisation was Mirza Mian Bashiruddin Mohmud Ahmad, Khalifa of the Quadain Party, and its prominent members were Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, Dr. S.M. Iqbal, Mian Afzal Husain, Zulfiqar Khan, and Dr. M.A. Ansari, Maulana Shaukat Ali the Nawab of Dacca, Sheikh Sadiq Husain Ansari, Saif-ud-din Kitchlew and the Nawab of Kanchoore. See also National Archives India, File No.13/23-31 of 1931.
- [14] Prem Nath Bazaz, *The History of Struggle for Freedom in Kashmir*, Gulshan Books, Srinagar, 2003, pp. 143-147
- [15] Cf. Alastair Lamb, *The Kashmir Problem*, New York, 1968, p. 31.
- [16] The very first Annual speech of Abdulla on December 17, 1932, *Dastawaizat*, p.222-23. Also see Legal Document No 60. March 26, 1938.
- [17]Islam does not allow us to turn against the rulers but it teaches us obedience of the rulers. Then how is it possible that the Muslims will disobey him.... It is true that we want Sawaraj.....and the maladministration would come to an end....Chauddhary Ghulam Abas's presidential lecture on Oct 27, 1935, *Dastawaizat*, pp.376-83. Mostly of the demands of Muslim conference were adequate representation in government services, priority to Muslim education, and effective share in the state legislature
- [18] Rekha Chowdhary, *Political Upsurge in Kashmir-Then and Now*, Economic and Political weekly, Vol.30, No. 39 (Sep. 30, 1995), p. 2420.
- [19] Prem Nath Bazaz, *op.cit*, p. 160.
- [20] Lord Birdwood, *Two nations and Kashmir*, London, 1956, p. 35
- [21] Sheikh Abdulla, *Aitish-i-Chinar*, pp. 232-233
- [22] Jammu State Archives, Political Department, E224/b196/1941, pp.8-9.
- [23] Muhammad Yusuf Ganai, *Kashmir struggle for Independence 1931-1939*, Mohsin Publishers Srinagar, 2003, p. 181.
- [24] Prem Nath Bazaz, *op.cit*, p. 167.
- [25] The Times of India 17, August 2008
- [26] M.J. Akbar, *Kashmir: Behind the Vale*, Roli Books, New Delhi, 2003, pp. 94-102.

- [27] Under the president ship of Himid Ullah Muslim Conference adopted a resolution which was sent to Prime Minister Janak Singh; it highlighted one of the provisions of Mountbatten plan that “the desirability of taking a speedy of decision about the accession issue in accordance with the desire of the overwhelming population of the people. The party impresses upon the Maharaja that without any further unnecessary delay he should make an announcement accordingly. ” On the other hand the demand of the socialists was “The party is of the opinion that in view of the developments during the last few months the nature and the best course for the state to adopt would be to join Pakistan. For obvious and substantial reasons the party believes that the state cannot remain independent”. Prem Nath Bazaz, *op.cit*, pp. 320-321.
- [28] Josef Korbel, *op.cit*, pp. 65-66
- [29] The actual date of the Instrument of Accession remains historically unclear. According to Indians it was signed on 26 Oct. before Hari Singh fled the valley and India airlifted troops to Srinagar airport; where as those support the Pakistan claim that it was on 27 Oct after he had abdicated his throne by fleeing the valley.