
“From Muslim Conference to National Conference: Historical Background of Jammu and Kashmir’s largest Political Party”

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Abstract

During the Dogra rule, the people of the state suffered miserably and were groaning under the oppressive rule of the Dogras, they, however, failed to launch an organized struggle against it till 1931³. The Klilafat movement of 1922, the labour strike of the Srinagar Silk Factory in 1924 and the presentation of a memorandum to the Viceroy of India, Lord Reading, in 1924 were more or less an expression of the desire on the part of the people of Kashmir for the establishment of a very soon and democratic organization politically in the state.

In order to mobilize the masses and to press for its demands, the Muslim Conference adopted different modus operandi at different stages. The conversion of Muslim conference into National conference in 1939 was an event of far-reaching consequences in the freedom movement of Kashmir. It was not an abrupt development but the culmination of a gradual process that began as early as the formation of Muslim conference. The present paper aims at discussing all such developments that paved way towards the formation of a common platform with an objective of making the freedom struggle of Kashmir broad-based. There is no denying in the fact that the leaders like Sheikh Muhammad Abdullah, Sardar Budh Singh and Prem Nath Bazaz sincerely believed in reorienting state politics on secular lines, but some basic social, economic and mental structures of the society frustrated the move to be translated into reality.

. As a matter of fact, religion had played an indirect role in the rise of Sheikh Muhammad Abdullah as a popular leader of the Kashmiri Muslims. But shortly after the formation of National Conference the non-Muslim leaders began to stress upon him to change the methods of mass mobilization. They raised objections against the shouting of slogans like Nara-e-Takbir (a slogan shouted by the Muslims especially in religious congregations which means that God is supreme) in National Conference sessions and mass meetings.

Keywords: Dogra Rule, Freedom, Jammu and Kashmir, Muslim Conference, National Conference, Pandits,

1: Introduction

During the Dogra rule, the people of the state suffered miserably. The need for the formation of a state-wide political organization at the early stages of the mass struggle was perceptively felt but without the freedom of association, no steps could be taken to meet the need. As a result of the discussions held with Chaudhri Ghulam Abbas Khan, Mistri Yaqub Ali, Sheikh Ghulam Qadir, A.R. Saghar and others, it was uniformly argued to make a single organization to embrace the Muslim of the State. The difficulty in the formation of a state-wide political organization was presented by the restricted movements or exile of certain leaders. For instance, Syed Mirak Shah had been exiled; the movements of Mian Ahmed Yar Khan, Advocate and Mufti Zia-ud-Din had been restricted to Muzaffarabad and Jammu city respectively. Through the intervention of the All India Kashmir Committee, whose representative Syed Zainul Abedin had several meetings with Col. Colvin and Mr. Lauther, the prohibitory orders were rescinded.

Maulvi Ismail Ghaznavi, Maulana Abdur Rahim Dard, Syed Habib Shah, Editor Daily "Siyasat" and Mr. Zahur Ahmed went to Srinagar, on the request by the All India Kashmir Committee, to assist in making all the necessary arrangements. Financial assistance was also made available along with a car to facilitate the movement of workers¹.

It was owing to its policy of making the conference a mass movement so that the government would be forced to come to terms that the leadership focused on common problems, persuaded every community of Kashmiri society to join hands with the struggle and left no stone unturned to forge Hindu-Muslim unity².

"Let us rise above petty communal bickering and work jointly for the welfare of the masses. I appeal to my Hindu brethren not to entertain imaginary fears and doubts. Let us assure them that their rights shall not be jeopardized if they join hands with the Musalmans." **S.M. Abdullah**

In order to mobilize the masses and to press for its demands, the Muslim Conference adopted different modus operandi at different stages. One important method that was adopted throughout its history was to convene annual sessions where the problems of the people were discussed and the response of the Government to the demands of the organization assessed and

the charter of demands framed for redressing the social, political and economic grievances of the people. The Muslim conference was most popular and famous in Kashmir, now, due to open discussion and the demand they highlighted. Besides the annual sessions working committee meetings of the party were frequently convened to take stock of the overall situation of the movement and to take decisions with regard to the problems and challenges it faced.

The conversion of Muslim conference into National conference in 1939 was an event of far-reaching consequences in the freedom movement of Kashmir. It was not an abrupt development but the culmination of a gradual process that began as early as the formation of Muslim conference. The present paper aims at discussing all such developments that paved way towards the formation of a common platform with an objective of making the freedom struggle of Kashmir broad-based.

2: Research Objectives

In the light of importance of the present study entitled "*From Muslim Conference to National Conference: Historical Background of Jammu and Kashmir's largest Political Party*" researcher has set the following objectives:

- To explore the formation of Muslim Conference.
- To examine the transformation of Muslim Conference to National Conference.
- To investigate the Nations demands of National Conference
- To explore the response of Kashmiri Pandits to National Conference.

3: Research Methodology

The study is purely based on secondary data. The secondary data have been collected as per the requirements of the study from Paleography (study of historical handwriting), diplomatic, the study of documents, records and archives, chronology (establishing the dates of past events), genealogy (the study of individuals and families) and historical geography. Further various published research papers, books, periodicals, reports, magazines, newspapers, and websites have also been used for the study.

4: Formation of Muslim Conference: An Organized Struggle

The Muslims were groaning under the oppressive rule of the Dogras, they, however, failed to launch an organized struggle against it till 1931³. The Klilafat movement of 1922, the labour strike of the Srinagar Silk Factory in 1924 and the presentation of a memorandum to the Viceroy of India, Lord Reading, in 1924 were more or less an expression of the desire on the part of the people of Kashmir for the establishment of a very soon and democratic organization politically in the state. The ban on Eid-Khutba in Jammu on April 29, 1931, *tauhin-i-Quran* (disrespect of the Holy Quran) in Jammu and ban on Friday prayers in a village of Jammu¹⁷ by the supporters of Dogra rule created strong resentment and the Muslim leaders did not lose the chance to cash it for mobilizing the people against the Raj⁴.

The openly agitation by Muslim leaders and the sermon delivered by them was not handled by the government and failed completely to motivate the leaders⁵. The struggle for freedom started openly from all spheres of life on 13th July 1931 and was regarded as the most important day in the annals of contemporary Kashmir both historically and politically as quoted by PremNathBazaz. The arrest of the Muslim representatives soon after the jail incident added fuel to the fire of wild excitement, which held the people in its grip. Great force behind the mass movement commencement was from 13th July 1931⁶.

The publication of the 13th July news in the Lahore Muslim press sent a wave of indignation all over India, resulting in protest meetings and processions in almost every city, town and important village, expressing sympathy and solidarity with the Muslims of Kashmir⁷. In order to coordinate these activities in various parts of India, Mirza Bashir-ud-Din Mahumud Ahmad, Amir of the Jamat-i-Ahmadiya took initiative and convened a meeting of some leading Muslims at Simla (presently known as Shimla) on 15 July 1931 to discuss the developments in Kashmir. It was in this historic meeting that the foundation of All India Kashmir Committee was laid which later on played a dynamic role in Kashmir politics.

In response to the call given by the Kashmir Committee, on 14 August 1931, Kashmir Day was celebrated both within and outside the Kashmir. After a few days Sheikh Muhammad Abdullah along with Khawaja Sad-ud-Din Shawl and Khawaja Ghulam Ahmad Ashai visited Baramulla, Sopore and Islamabad. During these tours, peace committees were formed which

later on helped in launching an organized struggle. It was during this period that preparations for the annual session of *Anjuman-i-Nusrat-ul-Islam* were made and Sheikh Muhammad Abdullah took upon himself the task of collecting funds from the people for this purpose. In the garb of raising funds he organized public meetings in which he criticized the policies of the state. In reaction to this he was again arrested on 21 December 1931. As soon as Sheikh Abdullah was arrested, it outraged the people of valley and they took procession to the streets and hartals were observed in every area in Srinagar and around⁸. Viewing the mass support which the Kashmiri Muslim leadership enjoyed beyond their expectations, it was considered timely to launch the movement in a systematic way to establish a political organization for the purpose⁹. For its ratification, a convention of Muslim leaders was convened at *Pather Masjid*, Srinagar from 14 to 16 October, 1932. All Jammu and Kashmir Muslim Conference was suggested and approved by the convention, after ratification of the draft.

Muslim Conference was not a communal movement as such, it was named as Muslim Conference simply because the Muslim community alone was suffering under the communal regime of the Dogras and the non-Muslims were not ready to join any such Movement which would work for forcing the government to change its policy, to say least of overthrowing the Raj. The demands of the Muslim Conference were not revolutionary in nature. The programme and activities of Muslim Conference leadership bore a close resemblance with those of the early Indian nationalists¹⁰.

4.1: Objectives of Muslim Conference

- a) Constitutional reforms.
- b) Freedom of speech
- c) Freedom of press
- d) Formation of associations.
- e) Increase of Muslim members in the constituent Assembly.
- f) Establishment of the Assembly

5: From Muslim Conference to National Conference: Formation of Common Platform

The Muslim conference was a secular and progressive organization. Nevertheless, Muslim Conference was started in the Muslim name, but in the nature it was secular. Being a secular in nature the Muslim leadership influenced some liberal minded non-Muslim leaders. The conference made relentless efforts to join non-Muslims and Muslims to strengthen struggle.

A sub-committee was set up on 7 March 1933, to contact non-Muslim leaders to seek their collaboration and to convince them to participate in the movement. However, the committee was unable to achieve any positive results because of the suspicion and non-cooperation of the Hindu leaders¹¹. The Muslim Conference in its welcome address in 2nd annual session fervently appealed the non-Muslims to forget the past and join hands with the Muslims to fight to support the struggle on common interests of all the communities:

“Before concluding my address let me tell my Hindu and Sikh brethren that all of us have lived cordially and brotherly all along. In future it is impossible for us to live in separation. It is in the nature of human beings that they occasionally fight with each other but it does not mean that they would remain divided for all times to come. The only way towards the overall welfare of all the communities is our mutual understanding and unity. In these circumstances I would not hesitate to request you to come forward, forget the past and to stand united in order to ensure an era of friendship, Love and peace.”

In the 2nd annual session the Muslim Conference tried to persuade the non-Muslims. In his Presidential address affirmed that the struggle of the Muslim conference was not meant for one particular community, instead considering the past record, it served the interests of all the communities of the state. The President said:

“So far the achievements of Muslim conference have benefited all the communities. These achievements include the grant of proprietary rights in land, concessions in connection with the use of forests, abolition of tax on cattle and nazrana, freedom of press and platform, right to formation of associations and the reforms related to Assembly, District Boards and Municipal Boards. There is no special treatment for

Muslims in these achievements and all the communities irrespective of caste and creed have been equally benefited. But at times the Hindus, in view of their past hegemony, have got a lion's share."

The President of Muslim conference issued a written statement on 29 June 1934 against the Franchise Committee report. The aim of the issued statement was to again convince the non-Muslims to join hands with the Muslims and assured them every kind of help and safeguard¹². It was made clear by the Glancy Commission report in month of May 1932 that all the Hindus were not against the reforms. At ChashmaShahi Garden, Srinagar an important meeting was held between Sheikh Abdullah and PremNathBazaz, in July 1932 wherein a decision was taken for the formation of a single platform. To familiarize the idea of secular politics and struggle for the establishment of a responsible Government in the state PremNathBazaz on the 31st of October 1932 started the first newspaper, Vitasta in Kashmir province. They began to realize that most of the basic problems were common to both and it helped in the formation of a joint platform¹³.

¹⁴Pandit Nehru had a detailed discussion with Sheikh about the nature and objectives of Kashmir movement. The Sheikh made it clear to Pandit Nehru that Muslim conference is a secular organization. But the congress leader suggested him to broaden the sphere of the movement in such a way that the non-Muslims would have no excuse in joining it. Besides, it would also leave no room for the Indian Hindu communalists and their press to continue their propaganda that "*Kashmir movement had a communal character*"¹⁵. On 1st August 1935, Sheikh Mohammad Abdullah and PremNathBazaz started a journal The Hamdard, in Urdu to popularize the ideology and to lay the foundations for accelerating nationalism in the state of Jammu and Kashmir. The published articles in this journal were critical to orthodox concepts and views without any hindrances. The dynamic role in secularization and reorientation of the state polity was quite evident in this journal¹⁶.

Chaudhary Ghulam Abbas also tried to allay the fears of non-Muslims and requested them to join hands with the Muslims in their struggle for the establishment of a responsible Government in the state. The Non-Muslims were asked to join hands with Muslim members by Chaudhary Abbas like other leaders, to strive for the needs and interests of communities without

cast, creed and religion¹⁷. The secular character of the Muslim conference and the repeated requests of the Muslim leaders to their non-Muslim brethren ultimately bore fruits and the liberal minded non-Muslim leaders like PremNathBazaz and SardarBudh Sing began to express their ideas of nationalism from the platform of Muslim conference from 1935¹⁸.

It was under the guidance of PremNathBazaz that an organization of young men called Kashmir Youth League came into existence in 1936. It believed in the equality of all people in the state and held that "there was no distinction between young men or women on the basis of religious beliefs they professed"¹⁹. For the interest of Hindu-Muslim unity Kashmir students union was organized by the students belonging to different communities²⁰. The fifth session held at Poonch in May 1937, Sheikh Abdullah once again try to convince the non-Muslims to join the movement and assured them that they will not be considered as minority and they are equal members in all affairs of State. In 1938 conference at Jammu, ²¹Sheikh observed that the Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs also met the same fate and were equally exploited by the government.

It was in the same session that Sheikh spoke in favour of the conversion of Muslim conference into National conference, which generated heated discussions and confrontations among Muslim conference leadership²². On 24 June 1938, he placed a resolution embodying his views about the conversion of the Muslim conference into the National conference before the working committee. The resolution said:²³

"Whereas in the opinion of the Working Committee the time has now come when all the progressive forces in the country will rally under one banner to fight for the attainment of accountable Government. The Working Committee recommends to the General Council that in the forth-coming session of the conference the name and constitution of the organization be so altered and amended that all such people who desire to participate in this struggle may easily become members of the conference irrespective of their caste and creed."

The meeting of the Working Committee lasted for 52 hours and heated discussion were held on the issue of conversion and some thoughtful details were put forward in the opposition of the resolution. The resolution was recommended for the approval of General Council after

passed with majority vote. As referred in the preceding chapter that on 8 August 1938, Muslim conference observed a Responsible Government Day. It was celebrated throughout the state with great enthusiasm. The public meetings called on this day were again participated by the Hindus as well as Sikhs²⁴. With all these developments, N. Gopal Swami Ayyengar who represented the Dogra government felt unhappy because of this changing trend in the state politics. A manifesto was, therefore, prepared and published on 29 August 1938, under the signatures of twelve leaders representing Muslims as well as non-Muslims. These leaders include:²⁵

1. Sheikh Mohammad Abdullah, President Muslims Conference
2. Pandit Kishap Bandhu, editor, Kesari.
3. Sardar Budh Singh, Ex-member Assembly.
4. Pandit Jai Lal Kilam, Ex-member Assembly.
5. Pandit Prem Nath Bazaz, Ex-member Glancy Commission.
6. Ghulam Mohammad Sadiq, Member Assembly.
7. Moulvi Muhammad Sayyid Masoodi, Member Assembly and Municipal Commissioner.
8. Pandit Sham Lal Saraf, President Kashmiri Hindu Progressive Party.
9. Mian Ahmad Yar Khan, Member Assembly.
10. Dr. Shambhu Nath Pushan, M.B.B.S.
11. Mirza Muhammad Afzal Beg, Member Assembly and
12. Bakshi Ghulam Muhammad, Commander Volunteer Crops.

In order to have a comprehensive understanding about the programme of the leadership at this particular stage, it is pertinent to reproduce the manifesto verbatim. This document is called as the manifesto of National Demand.

6: The National Demands of National Conference

The First session of the newly formed National Conference was held at Anantnag from September 30th to October 2nd, 1939. Sheikh Mohammad Abdullah was elected President. The Conference adopted a resolution embodying the National Demands proclamation issued earlier on 29th August, 1938, which said:-

1. The present system of administration shall be replaced by Responsible Government subject to the general control and residuary powers of His Highness the Maharaja Bahadur as hereinafter mentioned.
2. The Ministry shall be responsible to Legislature and shall have, subject to such responsibility, power to control the expenditure of the revenues and also to make such grants and appropriations on any part of those revenues or of any other property except the following which shall remain under the control of His Highness the Maharaja Bahadur:-
 - a. Expenditure on the Military Service.
 - b. Expenditure classed as Political and Foreign.
 - c. Payments of all debts liabilities hitherto lawfully contracted and incurred by His Highness in Council.
 - d. The Darmarth Trust.
3. The Principle of Responsibility to the Legislature shall be introduced in all branches of administration subject to general control, reservations and residuary powers vested in His Highness in respect of control of Military.
4. The Legislature shall consist entirely of members elected by constituencies, founded on the system of adult franchise; Provision should be made for the representation of labour, trade, landlords and educational interest by means of election.
5. The election to the Legislature shall be made on the basis of joint electorates; seats should be reserved for the minorities, and all safeguards and weightages should be guaranteed to them in the Constitution for the protection of their linguistic, religious, cultural, political and economic rights.
6. All the subjects of the state, without distinction of creed or caste, shall be admitted for service in all Services of Defense, and for that purpose His Highness shall be assisted by a Minister responsible to the Assembly.
7. No subject of His Highness shall be liable to suffer in liberty, life, Property or association, of speech or in respect of writing except under sentence by an ordinary Court of Justice and as a result of lawful and open trial.²⁸

In order to ratify the Manifesto of National Demand, a public meeting was convened at Hazratbal, Srinagar on 29 August 1938. The Manifesto of National Demand was ratified by the people with great enthusiasm. The leaders decided to call another mass meeting at Pratab Park, Srinagar. But they were arrested and put behind the bars²⁶. On June 3, 1936 Mohammad Ali Jinnah supported the cause of Hindu-Muslim unity in course of his speech delivered at Pather Masjid in reply to address presented to him by Chaudhary Ghulam Abbas on behalf of the all Jammu and Kashmir Muslim Conference. Jinnah said, *“As a great lover of Hindu-Muslim unity, I assure you that this unity is not for me confined to verbal and ambiguous statements. I say from the depths of my heart that I have worked for it for years together...I am sure that after Hindus and Muslims are united, it will not take a long time for the people in British India to rule over Hindustan”*.²⁷

On November 4, 1938 Mian Ahmad Yar Khan at a public meeting held at the Pather Masjid in connection with the celebration of Id-ul-Fitr²⁸ had declared: “we have to attend a Conference of All States peoples to be held at Ludhiana under the President ship of PanditJawaharLal Nehru.”²⁹ On 15th of February 1939, All India States Peoples Conference, under the President ship of Pandit Nehru began its session at Ludhiana. The president ship of Pandit Nehru was praised by All Jammu and Kashmir Muslim Conference and other nationalist forces in Jammu and Kashmir State. The Hindu Progressive Party in its telegram to Pandit Nehru expressed:³⁰ *“Kashmir Hindu Progressive Party sends hearty congratulations and hope you to lead personally the movement for responsible government.”* Similarly, the Young Men’s Muslim Association, Jammu congratulated Nehru on his election to the Presidentship³¹. Meanwhile, the Political prisoners in Kashmir Having served their term of imprisonment were released in the beginning of February and those who were to attend the Conference went directly to Ludhiana on their release³².

Ghulam Muhammad Sadiq presided a special session of Muslim Conference at Srinagar on 10th and 11th of June 1939. Following resolutions were introduced by MoulanaMasoodi, the chairman of the committee:³³ In this session the working committee approves the resolution number 5 of June 1938, to change the name of conference and to bring necessary changes in the constitution which was confirmed by the General Council in its session held on 27 April 1939. The working committee decided to change the name of Muslim conference to All Jammu

and Kashmir National Conference, so that every citizen irrespective of religion and race should make strenuous efforts for setting up of responsible government and achievement of civil liberties as their political goal. Some new faces from Hindu Youngman joined the Conference after the conversion of Muslim Conference into National Conference. The prominent among them were D.P. Dhr, Jankinath Zutshi, Sham Lal Saraf, Srikanth Raina, Sham Lal Wat and Prem Nath Dhar. Some youths from Baramullah also joined the National Conference.

7: Response of Kashmiri Pandits to National Conference

There is no denying in the fact that the leaders like Sheikh Muhammad Abdullah, Sardar Budh Singh and Prem Nath Bazaz sincerely believed in reorienting state politics on secular lines, but some basic social, economic and mental structures of the society frustrated the move to be translated into reality. A few Pandit leaders, no doubt, joined the movement, but they too resigned within a short span of one and a half years³⁴. Disgusted with the social response of the historic move of the conversion of the Muslim conference into the National Conference Sheikh Muhammad Abdullah exclaimed:³⁵

“Estranged I find my own people as well as the strangers.”

To substantiate the fact that the Kashmiri Pandits refused to respond to the clarion call for a joint struggle even after the conversion of the Muslim Conference into the National Conference³⁶. The basic factor that came in the way of a common platform was the disparate socio-economic conditions of the two communities that emanated from the ‘medieval character’ of the Dogra Raj:³⁷ Being a pampered minority, the Kashmiri Pandits had perceived doubts and fears against the freedom struggle that espoused the cause of democracy, social justice and freedom from exploitation and tyranny³⁸.

It may be pertinent to mention here that the Pandit leaders who were taken in the Working Committee as well as the General Council of the National Conference had worked for years in various communalist organizations and as such they joined the movement with a deeply embedded communal mentality which was difficult to be compromised with as demanded by the reoriented freedom struggle. As a matter of fact religion had played an indirect role in the rise of Sheikh Muhammad Abdullah as a popular leader of the Kashmiri Muslims. But shortly after the

formation of National Conference the non-Muslim leaders began to stress upon him to change the methods of mass mobilization (for example the recitation of holy Quran in public meetings) used during the course of Muslim Conference. But it was not less than a political suicide for Sheikh Muhammad Abdullah because the opposite forces like Mirwaiz Muhammad Yousuf Shah young Muslims Leaders had already declared the state. It is to be remembered that it was a time when the rate of modern education among Kashmiri Muslims was very low to whom progressive politics carried no meaning.

Sheikh Muhammad Abdullah always experienced difficulty in working with the Hindu leaders of the National Conference. They raised objections against the shouting of slogans like Nara-e-Takbir (a slogan shouted by the Muslims especially in religious congregations which means that God is supreme) in National Conference sessions and mass meetings on the plea that it blurred the secular character of the Conference. He tried his best to convince them by saying that he did so keeping in view the tradition and mental faculty of the audience³⁹. The Muslim League – the political mentor of the Muslim Conference, early in 1940 had thrown a challenge to his devotion to Islam by organizing Eid-i-Milad. Abdullah too decided to celebrate the Eid-i-Milad. The Pandit members of the conference did not appreciate this. It led to the resignation of two prominent Kashmiri Pandit leaders, Pandit Jai Lal Kilam and Pandit Kishap Bandhu from the Working Committee as well as from the primary membership of National Conference⁴⁰. The Pandit leaders also raised objections against the celebration of the Martyrs Day of 13 July 1931. In keeping with the traditions of the Party, Sheikh Mohammad Abdullah began preparation for its observance by the National Conference. The move was strongly opposed by his Hindu colleagues as in their opinion; it was an anti-Hindu movement with which they had nothing to do except that it was direct against them⁴¹.

8: Conclusion

During the Dogra rule, the people of the state suffered miserably and were groaning under the oppressive rule of the Dogras, they, however, failed to launch an organized struggle against it till 1931³. The Klilafat movement of 1922, the labour strike of the Srinagar Silk Factory in 1924 and the presentation of a memorandum to the Viceroy of India, Lord Reading, in 1924 were more or less an expression of the desire on the part of the people of Kashmir for

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41. Shaikh, *op. Cit.*, p. 254.