



## Formation of National Conference and Its Role in Jammu and Kashmir

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**Abstract :** *In every modern state, political party is a medium between the public and the government. Jammu and Kashmir National Conference (JKNC) political party is the first and oldest political party in the Union Territory of Jammu and Kashmir. The transformation of the role of the National Conference (NC) from a hegemonic actor to the single largest party of the state has to be located in the larger political context of the state in the last 15 years. It is in the context of the significant role of National Conference in the contemporary politics of Jammu and Kashmir that the present paper has been attempted. The paper begins with the historical background of the JKNC political party and its role in the accession of the State with the Union of India. The paper tries to answer the question how far the National Conference succeeded in order to restore its autonomy to the state. The question has assumed special significance as we have seen that Autonomy of the state of Jammu and Kashmir has undergone change since 1953 and many more with the coming of other regional political parties into the forefront. The paper also discusses the pitfalls of autonomy which the National Conference had faced in last century and in recent times.*

**Key Words:** *Autonomy, Kashmir, Political Party, National Conference, Unity.*

### 1. Historical Background of the National Conference

The three regions of Jammu, Kashmir and Ladakh that constitute the present State of Jammu and Kashmir were for the first time united in a single political entity by Maharaja Gulab Singh of Jammu in 1846 after the disintegration of Sikh power.<sup>1</sup> It was in 1930's that the era of popular politics in Kashmir arrived with the emergence of new generation of political leaders and activists headed by a school teacher called Sheikh Mohammad Abdullah, an Aligarh educated Kashmiri, a celebrated institution of learning in northern India.<sup>2</sup> Sheikh Abdullah was a passionate orator who raised his voice against the policies of Maharaja Hari Singh and became to be known as "Shere-i-Kashmir" – The Lion of Kashmir.<sup>3</sup> Sheikh Abdullah with his group of energetic and educated young men established a Reading Room Party (RRP) in Fateh Kadal, Srinagar, to awaken the youth about their human rights. The Reading Room Party took up the cause of the educationally and economically backward Muslim community. It prepared the ground for a political campaign against the injustice and suppressive policies of the Maharaja which became the foundation of the Kashmir freedom struggle.

Reading Room Party organized a big meeting on 21 June 1931, at Khanqah-e-Mohla in order to elect a representative body of Kashmiri Muslims to submit a memorandum of their grievances. In this historic gathering, a Pathan from Northeast Frontier Province of British India, Abdul Qadeer Khan spoke against Maharaja and exhorting the people to fight for their rights. He pointed his finger towards the Maharaja's palace and raised slogans to destroy its every brick. The result was that he was arrested on 25 June 1931 and prosecuted on the charges of sedition in the court of Sessions Judge.<sup>4</sup> While Abdul Qadeer's trial was in progress at the Central Jail in Srinagar, in between the Court proceedings a scuffle took place between a huge mob of Muslims, who had gathered outside the Jail and a group of Dogra Sepoys took place. The Sepoys opened the fire and twenty-one people were killed. This event marked a turning point in the history



of political struggle in Kashmir.<sup>5</sup> While Sheikh Abdullah and the other political leaders were detained in Srinagar Central Jail, they discussed the formation of a political party. After released from prison in June 1932, they founded Jammu and Kashmir's first mass freedom organization, called, the All-Jammu and Kashmir Muslim Conference (MC) in October 1932. Its leaders were Sheikh Abdullah from the Valley and Chaudhary Ghulam Abbas from the Jammu region. Sheikh Abdullah became President and Ghulam Abbas the first General Secretary.<sup>6</sup>

Sheikh Mohammad Abdullah and Prem Nath Bazaz had already made it clear in July, 1932, that "*the Kashmir freedom struggle will be conducted on secular, progressive and democratic lines*".<sup>7</sup> In March 1938, Sheikh Abdullah, the chief architect of the transformation, declared that the first condition to achieve is 'Responsible Government' in the state. We do not demand responsible government for 80 lakhs Muslims only but all the 100% state subjects and we must build a *common national front* by universal suffrage on the basis of joint electorate.<sup>8</sup> Finally, in the Party's special session on June 1939, where the historic change was registered as the Muslim Conference (MC) was accordingly renamed as the All-Jammu and Kashmir National Conference (NC).<sup>9</sup> Out of 176 delegates who were present at the session, 173 approved the change and only three expressed their doubts against this change. These critics expressed their worries that a secular organization would drift towards the Indian National Congress, the party leading India's independence movement, and "*that the Hindu-Sikh element in the party would undermine the movement because of their vested interests in Dogra rule*".<sup>10</sup>

## **2. Role of National Conference from 1939-47**

All Jammu and Kashmir National Conference had played a significant role in the freedom movement of Kashmir.

## **3. Aims and Objectives of the Party**

- (i) As a secular organisation, National Conference was aimed at the emancipation and welfare of the people of State irrespective of their caste and creed. To maintain its secular identity, it has implemented policies and schemes for the Kashmiri pundits as well the maulvis. It has built colleges and universities for women and reserved categories of the population, thereby paying attention to the issues of minority rights.
- (ii) The membership of the Conference was open to every person of the State irrespective of his caste, creed and sex. It has continually worked for the restoration of internal peace between the different factions within the state. It strongly objects the formation of any barrier between the two halves of the state of J&K.
- (iii) The Conference was aimed at the realization of a responsible government in the State, in which the administration would be responsible to a National Assembly of the State, which would be elected by the people on the basis of universal adult franchise and in which the policies and decisions of the Government would be determined by the people.<sup>11</sup>

## **4. Political Role of the National Conference**

The first annual session of National Conference was called at Sarnal Anantnag from September 30 to October 1, 1939. This session was an important event in the political annals of the State, because it was for the first time that the foundation of a joint platform of various communities was formally laid, in order to give a sustained fight to the Dogra autocracy.<sup>12</sup> It was on the invitation of Mirza Muhammad Afzal Beg that the Conference called its first session at Anantnag and Gh. Muhammad Bakshi was appointed as the convener of this historical session. The slogan that dominated the scene of the session was Sheri-Kashmir-Ka-Kiya irshad! Hindu Muslim Sikh Itihad. In his Presidential address S.M. Abdullah congratulated the Muslims Hindus and Sikhs for joining their hands in the formation of a common platform. Speaking on the subject of unity S.M. Abdullah observed, "*We wish the unity of purpose among all the sufferers irrespective of their creed, for we know that the usurper will never take the side of the sufferers. All our sufferings are the result of the prevailing irresponsible government and its will come to an end with the achievement of the responsible government. We are proud that among the people of 561 Princely States, have prepared a new formula of responsible government, which has become popular in other states also*".<sup>13</sup>

### **4.1 Accession of State to India and Role of National Conference**

The state of Jammu and Kashmir was inclined to the dreadful events of July 1947, when armed rebellion broke out in the Sudhnuti tract of Poonch district in Jammu division. Soon the rebellion assumed a militant and separatist character and the Maharaja's police forces responded it with tremendous brutality. This resulted the crisis that reached at its climax on 20<sup>th</sup> – 22<sup>nd</sup> October, when some people of Azad Kashmir equipped with arms and the active support of tribesmen took control of Muzaffarabad side. On 24<sup>th</sup> October 1947, they formed their own government, which is today known as



“Azad Kashmir”. The tribesmen from North-West Frontier Province (NWFP), who were mostly provoked and motivated by the massacre of Muslims in Jammu Province at the hands of Hindu extremists descended on Baramullah, only 30 miles from Srinagar on October 24-26 and opened up Gulmarg front to control the Kashmir valley.<sup>14</sup> On 27<sup>th</sup> October, the Government of India declared that the Hindu ruler had acceded to Indian Dominion which was also supported by the largest political party in the State, the National Conference.<sup>15</sup>

The accession of the state to India imposed an obligation on the dominion of India to defend the State. With the accession of the state of Jammu and Kashmir to India on 26<sup>th</sup> October, 1947, the state had acceded in respect of only three subjects over which the Government of India has jurisdiction to make laws, these are – Defence, Communications and External Affairs.<sup>16</sup> While all other 564 Princely States decided to surrender their autonomy and accepted all the terms of the Indian Constitution in complete sense. However, the state of Jammu and Kashmir decided to retain its autonomy and kept the doors open for further integration if and when the Union and the state considered it fit according to circumstances.<sup>17</sup> After the execution of Instrument of Accession on 26<sup>th</sup> October, 1947, and commencement of the Constitution, Article 370 under Part XXI of the Indian Constitution came into being which governs the future relationship between the Union of India and the State of Jammu and Kashmir. The Jammu and Kashmir State enjoys very special status and unique position as compared to other states in India in regard to its relations with the Centre Government and to its internal administration. Despite these Constitutional safeguards, there is a widespread view that, there has been erosion of autonomy in the state of Jammu and Kashmir since 1953.

In 1952, there were many discussions and negotiations between the Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru and the Sheikh Abdullah which finally worked out Delhi Agreement on 24 July, 1952. Under the agreement, the Government of India affirmed the fact that Jammu and Kashmir was the constituent unit of Indian federation and agreed to grant certain matters to the state, like – residuary powers, dual citizenship, separate constitution and separate flag to the state and it was agreed that the Fundamental Rights of the Indian constitution could not be conferred on the residents of the Jammu and Kashmir, etc.<sup>18</sup> Though the agreement spelt out the details of state’s autonomy within the Union of India but at the same time it confirmed that Kashmir is an integral part of India. By way of several subjects that had not been conceded to the Union of India in the Instrument of Accession were granted through this agreement.<sup>19</sup> Finally, Sheikh Abdullah, the most potent advocate of the state’s autonomy, was dismissed with conspiracy and was arrested on 9 August, 1953. The arrest of Sheikh Abdullah wrecked down the Delhi Agreement and the measure of trust on which it was based. Subsequently, the erosion of the autonomy in the state of Jammu and Kashmir has begun slowly and gradually. In the post-1953 period, the rulers during this period from time to time also initiated the policies which not only washed down the special status but also diluted the autonomy of Jammu and Kashmir.<sup>20</sup>

#### **4.2 Politics of Autonomy and Role of National Conference**

Apart from its cadre, it was its traditional ideological base that the party could use for reclaiming its political base in the valley. After a period of the withdrawal, the NC had to use its discourse of ‘autonomy’ to gain entry into the politics. This discourse carried the value of expediency as it provided both an explanation for the post-1989 crisis as well as a solution to the problem from within the mainstream politics, as an alternate to the separatist discourse of ‘azadi’. It located the prevalent problem of militancy and popular political discontent in the erosion of autonomy constitutionally guaranteed to the state of Jammu and Kashmir and considered its restoration as the essential condition for the reversal. In its central working committee meeting in 1994, held after a gap of five years, the party held the union of India responsible for destroying the original constitutional arrangement of the state and for alienating the people of Kashmir. It passed a resolution, which asserted that, ‘the time has come when this state of affairs should be reviewed in order to restore autonomy to its pristine and original form’.<sup>21</sup>

The issue of autonomy fitted in the traditional position being taken by the NC since 1975. According to this position, the autonomy guaranteed to the state by the Constitution was gradually eroded after the dismissal and detention of Sheikh Abdullah in 1953. By 1975 the state was almost brought at par with other state through various presidential orders and through the amendment of the state Constitution. Hence, the recurring demand for revision of all central laws extended to the state after 1953. In the prevailing context of popular resentment against the Indian state, the politics of autonomy certainly had its relevance. It had sufficient popular appeal as it acknowledged the role of Indian state in exacerbating the state of political alienation in Kashmir. Pursued earnestly, in fact, it had also the potential of subduing the impact of the separatist politics. Hence, it was around the demand of autonomy that the NC contested the 1996 assembly election and after winning the election, appointed a state autonomy committee (SAC) to recommend measures to restore autonomy of the state to the pre-1953 position.<sup>22</sup> As per the report of this committee, “serious deviations were



made and vital positions were altered in the state's constitutional relationship with the centre by repeated application of constitutional orders, with the result that the Article 370 was 'emptied of its substantive content'. However, the NC could not take political advantage of the politics of autonomy as it could not get the required support from the centre in the process.<sup>23</sup>

#### **4.3 Eruption of Militancy in Jammu and Kashmir and Role of National Conference**

The period 1985-1995, is considered as the darkest period in the State as militancy was its peak in the Kashmir. It was the result of forty years of misrule and manipulations by the Central Government. Finally, the unfulfilled promise of Plebiscite given by the Centre Government had consolidated the people's desire for a separate state. Thus, the separatists and angry youth in Kashmir demanded "Azadi" (Independence) to the state.<sup>24</sup> In 1989 Lok Sabha elections, National Conference won all the three seats from the Valley and from Srinagar, its candidate was elected unopposed. There was low turnout in polls due to boycott call given by militants that was responded well in the Valley. The militant organizations had given the boycott call as they wanted to show the world that the people of Kashmir have lost faith in Indian Parliamentary Democracy. Jagmohan was re-appointed as Governor of Jammu and Kashmir on 19<sup>th</sup> January, 1990 and Farooq Abdullah resigned from office of Chief Ministership in protest against this decision.<sup>25</sup> The state remained under President's rule from July 1990 to 1996. Mr. Narsimha Rao, the then Prime Minister of India announced in 1995 that the Union Government is ready to consider greater autonomy "*short of independence*" for the state of Jammu and Kashmir within the Constitution of India.<sup>26</sup>

The United Front Government at the Centre recognized the need and followed it up only by means of declaration in the Common Minimum Programme in 1996 by holding the prospect of "*Greater Autonomy within the Constitution of India*" as a live issue for bringing people of Kashmir back to the era of normalcy and Kashmir's political scenario back into the national mainstream.<sup>27</sup> Mr. Deve Gowda, the Prime Minister of India, therefore, finally offered Jammu and Kashmir "*maximum autonomy within the Constitution of India*" which convinced Farooq Abdullah and his party to participate in the Assembly Elections in September 1996.<sup>28</sup> The Party fought the elections on the autonomy plank with the following manifesto:

We pledge that if we are elected, our party will be bound to accomplish the following – dignified undiluted and meaningful autonomy which has been inspiring our people will be restored and made unalterable. We will strive to bring it to the shape which was kept before us at the time of the Accession. We will also demand credible guarantees from the federal Centre to keep constitutional relationship with the state in its pristine form so that the tragic events through which we have had to pass are not repeated in future.<sup>29</sup>

#### **4.4 Role of National Conference in Contemporary Politics of Jammu and Kashmir**

It was the charismatic personality of Sheikh Abdullah, who was the image and ideologue of National Conference, and result of autonomy plank that the people of the state returned the National Conference into power with a single largest party in all the three regions of the state in 1996 State Elections.<sup>30</sup> It is in pursuance of two-thirds majority and assurance of the Central Government that the state government under Farooq Abdullah without any further delay appointed two high-power committees to inquire into the twin issue of (a) the autonomy of the State in its relations with the Union of India, known as State Autonomy Committee (SAC) (b) autonomy of the sub-regional identities of Jammu and Ladakh, known as Regional Autonomy Committee (RAC).<sup>31</sup> The nine member SAC under the chairmanship of Dr. Karan Singh, was formed on 29 November 1996 in order to "*examine and recommend measures for the restoration of autonomy to the State of Jammu and Kashmir consistent with the Instrument of Accession, the Constitution Application Order, 1950, and the Delhi Agreement*".<sup>32</sup> While Mr. Balraj Puri, headed the RAC, in order to "*recommend measures for decentralisation of power at the regional level within the State of Jammu and Kashmir*". All in all the Committees held 39 meetings to finalise both the reports and on 13 April 1999, the Chief Minister, Farooq Abdullah tabled the reports of both the SAC and RAC in the Legislative Assembly. However, the Centre Government rejected the recommendations of both the committees later.<sup>33</sup>

#### **4.5 From a Hegemonic to Competitive Space**

The 2002 assembly election that ended the era of hegemonic politics of the NC has a healthy impact both on the politics of state as well as that of the NC. This adversely impacted on the process of democratisation process, especially in the Valley where the presence of the opposition was almost negligible. In the absence of the democratic channels, the process of articulation and expression of discontent was blocked and was routed through the only available space of oppositional politics, i.e. the separatist politics. The mainstream politics, meanwhile, lost its regional character as the



NC, ensured of its return to power election after election, had tended to become complacent about the need for attaining its linkage with its local constituency, the people of Kashmir. Now with the NC facing competition from PDP and other parties, the Kashmiri mainstream politics has become more vibrant. Such transformation of politics is particularly beneficial for the NC as it has been forced by the compulsions of circumstances to find its bearings, once again, in the local politics.<sup>34</sup>

In October 2008, the Jammu and Kashmir National Conference came out with a vision document. Apart from other things, the party believes that restoration of autonomy in its pristine form is the only viable solution to Kashmir conflict. In fact, the new and youngest Chief Minister of the State, Mr. Omar Abdullah observed, “*Autonomy for Jammu and Kashmir had been designed to address genuine issues of identity, borders and governance in a consensual democracy*”. “The erosion of autonomy”, he said, “*has impacted everything from political discourse to personal conduct, from economy to emotions, from society to sensibilities and from institutions to ideologies.*”<sup>35</sup>

## 5. CONCLUSION :

From the above discussion, it is clear that the dominance of one party system in Jammu and Kashmir started with the dominance of National Conference since it came into power in 1947. Being the fore runner, in the freedom struggle against Dogra rule, since its inception the National Conference was able to dominate the political landscape of the state with its ideology of secularism, socialism and democracy. National Conference had established the dominance of one Political Party under the leadership of Sheikh Mohammad Abdullah in all its phases: be it the freedom struggle launched in 1931 by the Sheikh Abdullah or the Accession of Jammu and Kashmir to the Indian union after independence in 1947, coupled with the arrest of Sheikh Abdullah 1953-1972. To state here, the most common thing among the National Conference is the issue of autonomy. While the party discuss the issue at length and sometimes discussed it slightly but all of it realize that there is a need to grant greater autonomy to the state of Jammu and Kashmir. The party claims that alienation in Kashmir is primarily due to erosion of special constitutional position of the state in the Indian union. Thus, Greater Autonomy or Pre-1953 status of the State forms core of the ideological apparatus of the party in the past as well as in present times.

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