

## Three Generations of Kashmir's Azaadi: A Short History of Discontent

How the Right to Self-determination Got Euphemised into Merely Ending Human Rights Violations

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*When did the question of Kashmir's right to self-determination get euphemised into Kashmiris' "grievances" against the Indian state, centred merely on ending human rights violations and better economic support? When did the people of Kashmir, who have been mobilising themselves long before India or Pakistan were created, get scripted as economically deprived, ignorant, alienated and unable to make rational decisions about their future? The article charts the politics of plebiscite by the Indian state, National Conference and Peoples Democratic Party alike, and shows how political solution has been obfuscated.*

The overwhelming participation of protesters in yet another summer uprising is being reported by Indian "experts" on Kashmir in both print and electronic media in simple terms. For them, the protests are nothing but a proxy war by the Pakistani state to disturb "peace" in the Valley, or at best, they are impulsive response of Kashmiris' to certain grievances. This understanding presents the Kashmiri population as a set of gullible individuals who are mere dummies. The portrayal refuses to acknowledge Kashmiris as self-affirmed rational actors capable of collective action.

On the contrary, long before the nation states of India and Pakistan came into existence and much before the advent of social media, the people of Kashmir have been unwaveringly mobilising themselves against subordination, injustices and oppression.

Whether it was the first organised protest of shawl weavers in 1865, the silk factory labour unrest in 1924, mobilisations against the autocratic rule of Maharaja Hari Singh in 1931, for demanding plebiscite from 1953-1975, the civilian uprising and armed rebellion against Indian rule in 1990, or the more recent mobilisations of 2008, 2009 and 2010, Kashmir has always resisted.

Kashmir again witnessed massive protests after the killing of 22-year-old militant

commander Burhan Wani on 8 July 2016. Repeating an age-old response, this time the state has killed 56 civilians so far, mostly teenagers, and has wounded thousands. An estimated 124 people have lost their eyesight to the so-called non-lethal pellets.

The nature and scale of participation in Wani's funeral and those of the 56 civilians reflects some spontaneity. But the overall phenomenon of cyclic protests in Kashmir is rooted in the complex sociopolitical history of the region.

One needs to see these protests against the backdrop of earlier mobilisations in Kashmir's history. Over a period of time, these mobilisations have given way to certain interpretative frameworks. While defining the complex sociopolitical events in the history of Kashmir, they also show the marked collective sense of injustice and longing for a desirable closure. Years of cyclic mobilisations have nurtured and crystalised these interpretive frameworks, which continue to remain available to generations of Kashmiris.

## **The Politics of Plebiscite**

On 31 December 1947, the then Prime Minister of India, Jawaharlal Nehru took the "Kashmir problem" to the United Nations (UN). For Kashmir and Kashmiris, this event came to define their political situation and became a ready reference point for all future debates and contestations on the subject. The UN recommended a plebiscite whereby the people of Kashmir would have the right to determine their own future. Ask any Kashmiri about his or her opinion about the *halaat* (political situation) in Kashmir and they will quickly remind you that "Panditji made a promise of plebiscite and later backed out." By 1949, a ceasefire line divided the region of Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) into two: one part being ruled by India and the other by Pakistan.

The UN placed the latter under Pakistan's control till a referendum could be conducted. Sixty nine years have passed since the UN intervention in 1948 with no signs of the concerned parties ready to conduct the referendum. With the help of constitutional mechanisations, the Indian state disregarded the UN resolutions and merged the Indian ruled part of J&K into its federal polity, promising it special status (Noorani 2010). Sheikh Abdullah became the first prime minister of this autonomous J&K.

However, he was arrested within three years of appointment, for questioning the erosion of Kashmir's autonomy and India's breach of promises against the backdrop of the UN resolutions. In response, India "installed" a puppet regime under the headmanship of

Bakshi Ghulam Mohammad, forever replacing the nomenclature of “Prime Minister of J&K” to “Chief Minister of J&K”. Sheikh Abdullah's arrest had become a rallying point for the people and in 1955, they came together under the newly created Plebiscite Front. These efforts at organising protests attracted youth participation on a large scale and challenged the Indian state's presumption about Kashmir's “inevitability of belonging to India.”

What followed was 22 years of protests and mobilisations against India, from 1953 to 1975. The streets of Kashmir were abuzz with the slogans of *azaadi ya maut* (freedom or death). The Plebiscite Front kept the aspiration of “azad and khudmukhtar Kashmir” (Free and Independent Kashmir) alive (*Seminar* 1964). When he was briefly released in 1965, Sheikh Abdullah asked India to “redeem her promise to allow the people of the state to exercise their right to self-determination” (Keesing 1968).

### ***How Abdullah's “Betrayal” entered the Core of Kashmiri Collective Consciousness***

Fearing that the Plebiscite Front members may contest elections, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi on her visit to Jammu in December 1970 declared that the government of India will not tolerate any attempt by such groups to enter the J&K assembly or the Indian Parliament with the intent of “wrecking the constitution” (Bose 2003: 87) . She further warned that the state would find its way to handle any such attempt.

By 1971, the Plebiscite Front was banned by the Indian government under the Unlawful Activities Act and “externment orders” were issued against its key leaders, instructing them to leave the territory of J&K. By 1975, having served a 11-year jail term, the lion of Kashmir as Abdullah was known, had been tamed. He compromised with the Indian state, giving up on the demand for self-determination which paved the way for his return to power. His party, the National Conference (NC) swept the 1977 assembly elections.

Abdullah returned to head the state but this time as the chief minister of J&K. The years between 1977 and 1983 witnessed NC's ascendancy in the electoral politics of J&K but the party's brand of politics and overall popularity saw a sharp decline. This decline was

exacerbated by the growth of youth-led organisations that were challenging his politics of deceit and collaboration (Bazaz 2007).

People feared that like Mohammad and his followers, the leaders of NC too were just a bunch of puppets in the hands of New Delhi (Sten 2002:55). In 1975, Sheikh Abdullah tried to conciliate his opponents by arguing that the pursuit of self-determination was meaningless and that one should not “run after shadows.”

However, the remainders of *raishumari* (plebiscite) and *azaadi ya maut*, popular slogans used by the Plebiscite Front during its 22 years of mobilisation, remained in the consciousness of the new generations of Kashmir. Novels, books, anecdotes and various literary texts that emerged criticising Abdullah's politics and his decision of signing the accord with India amplified the sentiment of plebiscite (Rahmani 1988).

These narratives planted the seeds of political consciousness which germinated into bigger civil uprisings in the early 1990s. This consciousness worked slowly and gradually from one generation to another and evolved into a cultural trauma for the Kashmiris. The acute discomfort created by what was seen as Abdullah's betrayal gradually entered into the core of the collective sense of Kashmiri identity.

Post-1975, a series of incidents: youth protests against Sheikh Abdullah in Srinagar (after the screening of the Libyan film *Lion of the Desert* on resisting Italy's occupation of Libya); attempts to desecrate Sheikh Abdullah's grave on the banks of Dal lake; the digging up of the pitch of India-West Indies match venue at Srinagar to “highlight the disputed status of Kashmir”, were all desperate yet well-informed attempts by Kashmiris to retrieve and engage with the memories of their past (Personal Interview with Qureshi and Bakshi 2009). Such small yet consistent protests culminated into the early 1990s uprising in Kashmir.

## **The 1990's Uprising and Three Generations of Azaadi**

The 1990s' civilian uprising that turned into an armed rebellion emerged against the perceived continuity of illegal and illegitimate Indian rule over J&K. The trigger to this was the rigging of elections in 1987 (though rigging was not unknown to J&K's electoral

politics) in which the newly formed and first-time contender Muslim United Front (MUF) was kept out of power despite its overwhelming success.

As an expression of resentment against the NC's politics and policies, a complete shutdown was observed on 8 September 1989, on Abdullah's seventh death anniversary. It was observed as *Youm-i-Nijat* (The Day of Deliverance) (*Kashmir Times* 1989). A new phase of protest rallies in the form of long marches emerged and became routine, with some convening at city centres, some at famous Sufi shrines or mosques and others at the office of the United Nations Military Observer Group in Srinagar. Kashmir became a land of processions where men, women and children would come out in big numbers raising slogans in support for azaadi (*Kashmir Times* 1990a).

During this period, there emerged a young militant named Ashfaq Majeed Wani, who was born in an economically well-off family in 1967 and went to one of the best English medium schools in Kashmir. Wani became the commander of an underground group called Jammu Kashmir Liberation Front (JKLF), and was killed by the Indian armed forces in 1990 in Srinagar at the age of 23.

Majeed Wani's death witnessed massive rallies across Kashmir. His funeral on 30 March 1990 was attended by about 5,00,000 mourners (Bose 2003). The slogans of "Ashfaq hamay teri kasam, poora karaingay tera mission" (Ashfaq we promise you we will accomplish your mission) resonated in the funeral procession (*Kashmir Times* 1990b).<sup>[i]</sup> Wani was buried between two other graves: one of his contemporary Hamid Sheikh and the other an empty spot in the name of Maqbool Bhat, the founder member of JKLF.

Maqbool Bhat was hanged and buried in New Delhi's Tihar Jail in 1984, a direct product of politics of the Plebiscite Front. He belonged to the generation of revolutionary Kashmiris before Ashfaq Wani's, and took up arms in the mid-1960s in pursuit of azaadi (1990 c). For common Kashmiris, Maqbool Bhat and Ashfaq Wani represented the second and third generations that pursued the demand for azaadi and who unlike Sheikh Abdullah did not sacrifice the aspirations of the people of Kashmir for their personal power and greed.

***Bakshi Ghulam Mohammad's Legacy and Electoral Process as "Normalcy"***

*Mohammad's* policy alleged that Abdullah's idea of independent Kashmir had "the connivance and support of interested foreign powers" and that "an independent Kashmir under the influence of imperialist powers will be a great threat" to India and Pakistan both (Korbel 1992: 242). Mohammad blamed the governmental crisis on "the deep economic discontent of the masses of the state" (Korbel 1992: 242).

Unpopular in Kashmir, Mohammad became India's most trusted man. He made complete use of the financial support that he received from India, spending on infrastructural development, hydroelectricity projects, highways and housing colonies to demonstrate to Kashmiris the benefits of having ties with India. However, people in Kashmir could never forgive his administration for its extent of oppression and collaboration with India (Bhattacharjea 1994: 207). The maximum erosion of J&K's autonomy took place during his rule.

Mohammad's government and the ones that followed "reflected a contractual relationship" between J&K and India (Bose 2003). In this relationship J&K governments are allowed to run a corrupt and "un-representative government in return for J&K's integration with India" (Bose 2003: 68).

Governments that were formed in subsequent years through rituals of staged elections continued to be based on this contractual relationship. At the same time, relentless protests and mobilisations by Kashmiris were challenged the legitimacy of such a relation, resisting Indian state's legal and political authority and control over Kashmir.

After seven years of governor's rule (1990-1996), the initiation of election process was indeed a very difficult task for the state. Finally in 1996, ritualistic elections and electoral politics once again made a comeback in Kashmir. To garner some acceptability among the people, the NC raised the issue of erosion of autonomy and sought definite assurances from the Indian state on restoration of pre-1953 status.

In the backdrop of allegations of people being coerced to vote and massive rigging, the NC led by Farooq Abdullah swept the assembly and parliamentary polls in 1996 and 1999 respectively (Chowdhary et al 2007). The NC wasted no time in passing the autonomy resolution in J&K assembly but it was rejected by both houses of the Parliament of India. The increase in inflow of tourists, opening of cinema halls and five star hotels were touted

as a sign of “normalcy” returning to the Valley.

## **Exchanging Aspirations for Grievances**

Nevertheless, for Kashmiris, their landscape was still dominated by the heavy presence of Indian army, their guns and sandbags (Schofield 2013). Between 1996 and 2016, four assembly elections were held in J&K. The so-called mainstream political discourse represented by local collaborators of the Indian state in Kashmir was again dominated by the NC and a new political entrant—the People’s Democratic Party (PDP).

Like the NC, the PDP also tried to make itself relevant by engaging with the political past of Kashmir. However, unlike the NC’s demand for autonomous pre-1953 status for J&K, PDP proposed self-rule for the two parts of J&K across the dividing line. Both parties repackaged pre-1953 status and self-rule as alternatives to the historically embedded and collective Kashmiri idea of azaadi. Both parties formed alliances with two major Indian national parties: the Indian National Congress (INC) and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP).

Like Mohammad’s regime, the NC and PDP sought economic packages from New Delhi, outsourcing Kashmiri aspirations for everyday grievances, that is, attracting funds from the central government, without engaging with the aspirations of the people. When each of these parties was out of power, they would verbalise the human rights discourse, demanding the abolition of the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act and demilitarisation of the region.

In the 2014 assembly elections, when the PDP’s election manifesto highlighted the special status of J&K and its importance to political “sensibilities,” it was once again presenting the aspirations of Kashmiris as mere grievances against the Indian state. The aspiration for self-determination is historically embedded in the sociopolitical landscape of Kashmir. Attempts by regional parties to outsource aspirations for grievances have an inherent contradiction. They do not openly challenge the historically embedded aspiration for Kashmiris’ right to self-determination but at the same time obfuscate any possible political solution. Mehbooba Mufti urged people to unite against the “danger in J&K and avert BJP’s invasion of the state in connivance with its allies” (Ganai 2014).

The political theatrics of regional parties in Kashmir reflect inherent contradictions. Clearly representing Indian state's authority over Kashmir, none of them openly championed the Indian national discourse of integration of Kashmir with the Indian union. With demands and promises of restoring the pre-1953 constitutional position and self-rule, the NC and PDP euphemised Indian control over Kashmir and attempted to create the appearance of consent for their policies.

In the corridors of power, the seasons of elections continued to replace parties, the PDP and NC one after the other, without any change in the ground realities. The prolonged euphemistic discourse of the PDP and NC produced a self-scripted narrative on Kashmir. This was a narrative where Kashmiris were presented as economically deprived, ignorant and alienated. In this discourse, demands for better economic packages and end to human rights violations masked the historical oppression and injustices experienced by people.

In addition, the years under their rules did not see any relief from brutalities at the hands of the Indian state. The systemic elimination of any "threat" remained the norm. Extrajudicial killings, enforced disappearances, torture, illegal detentions, rape and humiliation in the everyday life of the people saw no respite. The Public Safety Act (PSA) and the AFSPA continue to subjugate.

International human rights bodies like Amnesty have reported widespread use of the draconian laws, where the PSA leads to prolonged detention and AFSPA empowers armed forces to use force to the extent of causing death without any accountability whatsoever. In creating the myth of normalcy, apart from making elections the benchmark, the JKPSA is used to trap people "out of circulation" in detention centres without any legal obligation of following the standard procedure under the criminal code. According to one estimate 16,000 people have been detained under this law between 1991 and 2013 (Amnesty 2011).

### ***Revival of Azaadi Marches***

As long as elections were being conducted, the inflow of tourists increased, cultural programmes were organised and any "threat" to the state was eliminated. There was no breach to the normative order of its domination over the people. This normative order was being projected as "normalcy" and "peace". The state and its collaborators concluded that people have endorsed the terms and conditions of participation and have willingly accepted

elections as an alternative. However, the critique of the state's policies and its overall engagement was always abundant, even if its discussion was pushed into private walls of people.

The cyclic protests of 2008, 2009 and 2010 disturbed the dominant discourse of normalcy and peace and yet again dislodged the narrative that Kashmiris have given their consent in favour of India and its local collaborators. These three consecutive summers in J&K saw massive agitations around different issues. On closer look all these issues find root in the history and politics of the region. The 2008 agitation that lasted the whole summer was triggered by a controversial decision of J&K government to permanently transfer a patch of forestland for construction work to the Amaranth Shrine Board (ASB). The Kashmiri identity is strongly attached to the idea of belongingness and ownership over the region and the idea that the state belongs to subjects of the state.

Kashmiri society has a long history of protest on landownership rights. In fact the organised political response in the 1930s by the first political party in Kashmir "Muslim Conference" (which later became the National Conference) was mobilised against the ruler's exclusive right over land, culminating into some of the most radical reforms in the subcontinent in the early 1950s. This agitation saw civilian killings resulting in a breakdown of the state machinery.

During the 2008 agitation, people often revisited their history and debated how autonomy is being eroded under a sustained policy of the Indian state. The summer of 2009 saw similar massive and sustained protests after the murder and rape of two women in Shopian, South Kashmir. The Shopian rape and murder case represented the intimacy of state violence that has entered the private lives of the population over the years. The agitation was prolonged also because of the response of the state towards the issue. It became a reference point to understand how under the Indian rule, the lives of the people had become expendable.

The Shopian episode removed the façade of democracy, accountability and working of justice system in J&K (Hoffman and Duschinski 2013). The agitations of 2008 and 2009 still fresh in its memory, Kashmir once again erupted. This time it was a 17-year-old, Tufail Mattoo who was killed in cold blood by the Indian Forces on 10 June 2010. With his killing, death danced on the streets of Kashmir. During 100 days of curfew and agitations, more

than a 100 people, mostly teenagers, were killed. Thus in 2010, moving beyond more urgent claims of legal justice against everyday violations, the long-standing demand for self-determination and azaadi once again became the central theme of agitations.

## **Where We Stand Today**

The mass mobilisation in the aftermath of Burhan Wani's killing points towards the long pending demands of the Kashmiri people to get a chance to decide their own political future. The enormous popularity of Wani and his iconic status among people is noteworthy. He represents today's generation of youth who are desperate to end the status quo and who are tired of getting killed and humiliated on a daily basis. This generation is educated, confident, who converse with the outside world, cherishes the values of equality and freedom, and wants to live a life of respect and dignity.

Incidents like the Amarnath land row, the Shopian rape and murder case, killing of Tufail Matto or the recent killing of Burhan Wani have acted as triggers within a context that interweaves individual stories of injustice and oppression into a collective narrative. The concoction exerts strong influence on mobilisations against oppression, historical injustices and humiliation. This historical discontent of Kashmiris is always met by the state's brute force, followed by the announcement of economic packages and creation of jobs. This approach not only denies the Kashmiri people their agency, it also keeps India and its masses blinded about Kashmir, whose quest for a political solution remains obfuscated till another cycle of protests and ominous killings return.

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