

Formation of National Conference and Redefining National Identity under Sheikh Abdullah's Governance

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Abstract— This article examines the establishment of the National Conference (NC) in 1932 and its influence on reshaping the national identity of Jammu and Kashmir under Sheikh Mohammad Abdullah's leadership. The party was originally founded as the Muslim Conference to represent the concerns of the Muslim majority under the oppressive Dogra regime, and it evolved into the secular National Conference in 1939. Sheikh Abdullah's vision was founded on secular nationalism, socialism, and economic justice, as articulated in the progressive "Naya Kashmir" platform. His administration emphasized land reforms, the empowerment of the peasantry, and the unification of various religious communities under a common regional identity. The study emphasizes the ideological transition from communal politics to secularism and the difficulties Abdullah encountered in maneuvering across the intricate political terrain of Kashmir, India, and Pakistan. Sheikh Abdullah's leadership legacy continues to impact the region's political debate.

Index Terms- National Conference, Naya Kashmir Manifesto, Secular Nationalism, Dogra Rule, Land Reforms, Kashmiri Identity

I. INTRODUCTION

The establishment of the National Conference (NC) in 1932 signified a pivotal moment in the political history of Jammu and Kashmir, a territory historically noted for its religious diversity and intricate political dynamics. Sheikh Mohammad Abdullah, affectionately known as the "Lion of Kashmir," had a pivotal role in establishing the NC, which became the inaugural significant secular political movement in the princely state of Jammu and Kashmir. Under Sheikh Abdullah's leadership, the NC not only contested the authoritarian governance of the Dogra dynasty but also aimed to reconstitute the national identity of the Kashmiri populace, uniting its varied communities under a cohesive political ideology.

This article examines the establishment of the National Conference, its ideological foundations, and the manner in which Sheikh Abdullah's leadership transformed Kashmir's national identity among colonial, regional, and religious adversities.

The 20th-century political history of Jammu and Kashmir is characterized by considerable social turmoil, influenced by the region's religious plurality and the intricacies of colonial and princely governance. The creation of the National Conference (NC) in 1932, led by Sheikh Mohammad Abdullah, a prominent political leader, is essential to this revolutionary phase, aiming to unify the people of Jammu and Kashmir under a secular and inclusive ideology. The NC arose amidst increasing anger among the predominantly Muslim populace, who experienced institutional discrimination and economic marginalization under the despotic Dogra dynasty.

The NC's transformation from the All Jammu and Kashmir Muslim Conference was a significant turning point in the region's political development. The group, first established to champion the rights of Kashmiri Muslims, experienced a significant ideological transformation in 1939, when Sheikh Abdullah and his associates redefined it as the National Conference, embracing a secular, socialist, and anti-feudal platform. This move was not only symbolic; it indicated Abdullah's aspiration to establish a collective political identity that transcended religious divisions and emphasized socio-economic justice for all communities in Jammu and Kashmir.

Under Sheikh Abdullah's leadership, the NC launched the progressive "Naya Kashmir" platform, which sought to redistribute land, empower the peasantry, and advance economic and social reforms to elevate the state's marginalized groups. His endeavors to reconceptualize Kashmiri national identity via secular nationalism and regional solidarity confronted the

prevailing communal politics of the day, especially during British colonial governance and the ascendant wave of religious nationalism in India and Pakistan.

This study aims to examine the establishment of the National Conference, its ideological development, and Sheikh Abdullah's endeavors to reshape the national identity of Jammu and Kashmir. The analysis also explores the governance reforms enacted during his tenure, the obstacles encountered, and the enduring impact of his vision within the intricate political and religious dynamics of the region.

II. HISTORICAL CONTEXT: KASHMIR DURING DOGRA GOVERNANCE

The princely state of Jammu and Kashmir was governed by the Dogra dynasty, founded by Maharaja Gulab Singh in the mid-19th century. The Dogra kings were predominantly Hindu, but the majority of the population in Kashmir, particularly in the Kashmir Valley, was Muslim. The theological inequality, along with the economic exploitation and political disenfranchisement of the predominantly Muslim populace, engendered profound resentment.

In the early 20th century, Kashmiri Muslims experienced increasing unrest due to discriminatory practices in education, land ownership, and government employment under the Dogra dynasty. The unrest culminated in the 1931 protests, a pivotal event where peaceful rallies escalated into violence, resulting in numerous fatalities among demonstrators. This event invigorated Kashmiri Muslims and established the foundation for political mobilization, resulting in the creation of the All Jammu and Kashmir Muslim Conference, a predecessor to the National Conference.

III. ESTABLISHMENT OF THE NATIONAL CONFERENCE (NC)

The National Conference was established on October 10, 1932, initially as the All Jammu and Kashmir Muslim Conference. Sheikh Abdullah, together with other reformist figures such as Chaudhry Ghulam Abbas, assumed leadership of the movement, directing public resentment against the Dogra rulers. The primary objective of the Muslim Conference was to

advocate for the interests of the Muslim majority and to pursue political, social, and economic justice in Jammu and Kashmir.

By 1939, Sheikh Abdullah and other progressive leaders of the Muslim Conference saw the necessity for a more inclusive political platform to cater to the demands of all populations in the state, including Hindus, Sikhs, and Buddhists. The Muslim Conference was converted into the National Conference to accomplish this. This changeover represented a substantial ideological change, as the NC embraced a secular and inclusive stance, distancing itself from religious politics and striving to unify the varied populace of Jammu and Kashmir against the dictatorial Dogra regime.

IV. IDEOLOGICAL UNDERPINNINGS OF THE NATIONAL CONFERENCE

The philosophy of the National Conference was founded on three principal pillars:

1. Secularism:

Sheikh Abdullah envisioned the National Conference as a manifestation of secular nationalism. The NC aimed to consolidate all religious and ethnic groups in Jammu and Kashmir under a unified political identity, rather than permitting the state's politics to be governed by communal or religious connections. This was a notable divergence from the previous Muslim Conference, which predominantly concentrated on Muslim grievances.

2. Socialism and Economic Reforms: Sheikh Abdullah was influenced by socialist ideals and advocated for economic equity. The NC's manifesto, the "Naya Kashmir" program (launched in 1944), delineated an ambitious agenda for agrarian reforms, labor rights, and land redistribution. The manifesto pledged to abolish feudal customs, mitigate landlessness among peasants, and establish social security, thus tackling the economic difficulties encountered by the majority populace.

3. Anti-Colonialism and Self-Determination:

Similar to several nationalist movements throughout India during the British colonial period, the National Conference was profoundly shaped by anti-colonial sentiments. Sheikh Abdullah's National Conference

collaborated with the Indian National Congress in its resistance to British imperialism, advocating for increased autonomy and self-governance for the populace of Jammu and Kashmir.

V. RECONCEPTUALIZING NATIONAL IDENTITY UNDER SHEIKH ABDULLAH'S LEADERSHIP

Sheikh Abdullah's leadership was instrumental in redefining the national identity of the Jammu and Kashmir populace. His endeavors concentrated on dismantling deep-seated community differences and cultivating a unified identity rooted in regional solidarity and common socio-political objectives.

4. Secular Nationalism

A major contribution of Sheikh Abdullah was his focus on secular nationalism. By converting the Muslim Conference into the National Conference, he broadened the movement's appeal to include Hindus, Sikhs, and Buddhists, so attracting their involvement. This secular strategy sought to establish a unified Kashmiri identity that surpassed religious boundaries. Sheikh Abdullah's leadership was crucial as it confronted the prevailing sectarian divisiveness in Indian politics and aimed to establish a secular and progressive political culture in Jammu and Kashmir.

In 1944, Sheikh Abdullah presented the "Naya Kashmir" manifesto, a progressive text that served as the ideological framework for the National Conference's governance agenda. The manifesto highlighted land reforms, labor rights, women's empowerment, and the creation of a welfare state. Sheikh Abdullah aimed to redefine national identity via economic justice and equality, emphasizing class unity and social equity over religious or ethnic affiliations. This manifesto articulated a vision of a contemporary, inclusive, and democratic Jammu and Kashmir, wherein everyone could equal rights irrespective of their religion or ethnicity.

5. Agrarian Reforms:

A fundamental aspect of Sheikh Abdullah's administration was the execution of land reforms. The "Big Landed Estates Abolition Act" of 1950 enacted the dissolution of feudal estates and the redistribution of land to peasants, representing one of the most

significant land reforms in the subcontinent. This reform enhanced the economic circumstances of the impoverished and cultivated a sense of ownership and belonging within the agrarian community. The reforms sought to dismantle the dominance of the landed nobility and empower the peasantry, so fostering a more egalitarian society.

6. Relationship with India and Pakistan:

Sheikh Abdullah's position on the relationship among Jammu and Kashmir, India, and Pakistan significantly impacted the state's national identity. Despite his initial endorsement of Kashmir's independence, the political circumstances surrounding the 1947 partition and the ensuing Indo-Pakistani struggle compelled him to align with India. His decision to accede to India, while preserving the state's autonomy under Article 370 of the Indian Constitution, was regarded as a pragmatic one. The endeavor aimed to preserve the distinct identity and autonomy of Jammu and Kashmir inside the Indian Union, while repudiating the two-nation theory that attempted to delineate political identity exclusively based on religious criteria.

7. Challenges and Legacy

Sheikh Abdullah's endeavors to reconstitute national identity in Jammu and Kashmir encountered significant obstacles. His secular nationalism encountered resistance from communal factions both within and beyond the state. The ascendance of the Muslim League in Pakistan and its advocacy for a distinct Muslim homeland contradicted Abdullah's vision of a multi-religious and inclusive Kashmiri identity. Likewise, extremist Hindu nationalist factions in India attacked the special status conferred upon Jammu and Kashmir under Article 370. In 1953, Sheikh Abdullah was removed from his position as Prime Minister of Jammu and Kashmir and incarcerated on allegations of colluding with foreign entities to achieve Kashmir's independence. This signified a pivotal moment in his political career and engendered significant divisions among the state's politics. Notwithstanding these problems, Sheikh Abdullah's legacy continues to be a fundamental aspect of Jammu and Kashmir's political history. His vision of a secular, progressive, and autonomous Jammu and Kashmir persists in influencing political discourse in the region, despite the intricacies of contemporary Kashmir politics. Sheikh Abdullah's

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CONCLUSION

The establishment of the National Conference and Sheikh Abdullah's leadership signified a pivotal era in the history of Jammu & Kashmir. Sheikh Abdullah aimed to reshape the national identity of the Kashmiri populace through his secular, socialist, and anti-feudal policies, promoting a transition from sectarian divisions to a cohesive and inclusive political society. His administration not only contested the dictatorial Dogra rule but also established the foundation for the socio-political advancement of Jammu and Kashmir in the post-independence period. Notwithstanding much resistance, Sheikh Abdullah's concept of a "Naya Kashmir" persists as a lasting emblem of progressive and secular nationalism within the region's intricate political milieu.

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