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Role of Women in the Politics of Jammu and Kashmir since 1947

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(After 1947, the women of Jammu and Kashmir have played an import role in shaping the better future of their homeland and thus contributed efficiently in its socio-cultural, educational and economic spheres, Although, this contribution is enormous in many sectors, however, the role of these women in the field of politics has been very little and with the result their participation in the decision making process remained always negligible. As such the desired objectives of "Women Empowerment" in Jammu and Kashmir are yet to be achieved.)

It has been always said that history repeats itself. But in case of Kashmir, history appears to have repeated itself many times over both as a tragedy and as farce. Vincent H Smith in his book "The Oxford History of India" has rightly mentioned that few regions in the world could have had worse luck than Kashmir in the matter of government. Except a few, almost all the rulers who ruled over Kashmir till 1947 were very cruel and highly exploitative towards its poor subjects. The plight of both Kashmiri men as well as women remained very much miserable as they enjoyed no liberty at all till 1947. It was only after the end of Dogra autocratic rule in Kashmir and particularly after the restoration of democratic government, there has been a significant change in the socio-economic and political conditions of the people. As a result of this positive change, it is for the first time that along with men some Kashmiri women also started discussing about their due role and participation in the necessary administrative and political affairs of Kashmir.

Although living in a patriarchal society, Kashmiri women worked very hard and started competing with their fellow men in the field of education, health sector, administration, journalism, judiciary etc. In many cases they are performing better as compared to their male counterparts. But in the field of male dominated politics they could not play any kind of significant role so far. The first lady who joined the politics of Jammu and Kashmir was Begum Akbar Jahan, wife of Shiekh Mohammad Abdullah, a very popular leader of Kashmir who fought a long political battle for the rights of Kashmiris against the Dogra autocracy. It is she who paved a way for Kashmiri women to opt for political profession and serve the masses. Whenever Shiekh was arrested, she not only took care of her family but also managed party affairs as a successful leader. She was elected twice for the parliament of India in 1977 and 1984 respectively. After the eruption of militancy in Kashmir in 1990 particularly when majority of the politicians either announced their dissociation from politics or fled from Kashmir, Begum Akbar Jahan remained in Kashmir watching keenly all the happenings till her death in 1996.

After Begum Abdullah, it was her daughter Khalida Shah wife of Ghulam Mohammad Shah who also assumed some name and fame in the politics of Kashmir. It was in 1984 that Ghulam Mohammad Shah, the son-in-law of Sheikh Mohammad Abdullah managed to overthrow Dr. Farooq as Chief Minister through defection and finally occupied the throne from 1984 to 1986. This led to the division of National Conference in to two groups, one began to be known as National Conference (F) Farooq group and other as National Conference (K) Khalida group. Latter on National Conference (K) was rechristened as Jammu and Kashmir Awami National Conference and Khalida shah became its president after the death of her husband. She also unsuccessfully contested the 2009 Parliamentary elections from Srinagar seat against her brother Dr. Farooq Abdullah.

The most prominent female politician of Kashmir who could give the male dominated politics of Jammu and Kashmir entirely a new outlook is Mehbooba Mufti, daughter of former Home Minister of India and Chief Minister of Jammu and Kashmir - Mufti Mohammad Syeed. She is the President of Jammu and Kashmir Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) and also served as the last Chief Minister of the state of Jammu and Kashmir (now a union territory), from 4 April 2016 to 19 June 2018. Miss Mufti was elected twice as parliament member and thrice as the member for the state legislative assembly of Jammu and Kashmir. She is known as a firebrand leader who is capable enough to settle down scores with her political opponents on all fronts. It is under her leadership that Peoples Democratic Party has emerged as a strong political force. Sakina Itto daughter of former National Conference Leader Wali Mohammad Itto is also an active female politician of Kashmir. She was elected several times as assembly member and remained cabinet minister from 2009 to 2014. Similarly some other female politicians of Kashmir are Shamima Firdous, Asiya Naqash, Shabnam Gani Lone, Dharakshah Indrabi and Dr. Hina Bhatt. Besides there are many other female political activists but they could not make any significant appearance on the political arena of Jammu and Kashmir.

Along with the female mainstream politicians, there are some female Separatist political activists as well. The eruption of Violence and the subsequent developments affected Kashmiri women more as compared to any other section of society. They are tirelessly trying to reconstruct their devastated lives as the armed conflict has caused an immense pain and sufferings to them. They have to sit largely on daily dharnas for pressurizing the belligerent parties not to arrest or kill their nearest ones. Some of the women also formed their own separatist political organizations but none of them directly joined armed militancy as an active combatant. It was in 1980, that Zamrooda Habib formed Muslim Khawateen Markaz (M K M) to sensitize Muslim women about adopting Islamic way of life. After the eruption of violence she was arrested and kept in jail for five years for her alleged links with the militants. After her release she formed Association for Kashmiri Prisoners in order to provide free legal aid to the detainees who are from poor families. Similarly Miss Asiya Indrabi formed Dukhtaran-e-Millat (Daughters of the Nation) organization in 1990 and thus actively involved it in the separatist politics of Kashmir. Her organization also claims to be fighting against all types of external cultural aggressions and waywardness among Muslim women. She was arrested several times for her subversive and antinational activities and put in jail for years together. In 1994, Association of the Parents of Disappeared Persons (APDP) was formed by Parveena Ahanger. This organization is usually protesting peacefully to know whereabouts of their disappeared nearest ones. Some of the educated women also formed Kashmiri Women's Initiative for Peace and Disarmament (KWIPD). In their opinion women constitute half of the population and without their involvement in the negotiating process, complete peace will never return in Jammu and Kashmir.

The role of women in politics from the other two regions of the former state- Jammu and Ladakh is further dismal. If ongoing violence in Kashmir can be an obstacle in the way of Kashmiri women to join politics but there are no such hindrances before the females of Jammu and Ladakh which can block

their entry in to the said field. Although a few women contested elections from Jammu region on the tickets of some prominent political parties, time and again but not only were they defeated, they even lost their security deposits. In 2008 Assembly Elections, three females were elected and in 2015 Elections it got reduced to only two in the 87 member Legislative Assembly.

To encourage the women to participate in the panchiyat elections, the government of Jammu and Kashmir in 2011 passed a law reserving one-third of seats for females of the state (now a union territory) in panchiyats. Although women panchs were elected in 2011 panchiyat elections on the basis of this one-third formula but out of 2125 sarpanch seats from Kashmir, only 3 seats were won by women and similarly out of 1956 sarpanch seats from Jammu, only 25 were secured by women. As a result of this dismal situation again the government has to issue an order in January 2017, regarding 33 percent reservation of women in 4098 seats of sarpanchs of Jammu and Kashmir for the 2018 Panchiyat elections. Similarly 33 percent Block Development Councils (BDCs), have been reserved for women which form the second tier of the Jammu and Kashmir's three tier Panchiyati Raj System. All such initiatives are taken by the government to encourage the female folk of Jammu and Kashmir to come forward and actively participate in the decision making process.

