

“MAKING OF KASHMIRI IDENTITY AND ITS RELIGIOUS CONNOTATIONS: A HISTORICAL REVIEW”

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Abstract: The factor of religion remained significant in the identity formation as well as in the process of political mobilization in the Kashmir valley since Dogra period. It has been argued that in the internally fragmented and backward Muslim society of Kashmir, the popular leadership initially used religion as a uniting force but in the later period the identity politics of Kashmir became more inclusive and secular in character. The paper also argues that identity politics of Kashmir does not have much space for extreme religious expression, though, in the absence of democratic and pacific means of expression religion might assume central space in the politics of Kashmir.

Keywords: Kashmir, Muslim, Religion, and Politics.

I. INTRODUCTION

The history of modern ‘Kashmiri identity’ and its politics can be traced back to the Dogra period. This was an important period since it witnessed vast changes in the social, religious, economic and political life of the state. Not only, it integrated the three disparate units into one state but also introduced the context of modernity and political consciousness. Though the society was to assume a modern progressive form in the later period and politics was to evolve a radical content, yet the beginning of the modern period in Kashmir was to usher in lot of debates involving religion. At least two different manifestations of the role of religion could be perceived during this period. Firstly, there was an intra-religious debate within the Muslim community regarding the nature of Islam in Kashmir and secondly, there was an increasing consciousness about the ‘subject’ status of the majority community vis-à-vis the Hindu ruling class.

II. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This paper is primarily based on the secondary sources. It has been done exploring the existing literature from the books, journals, newspaper articles and Internet collected the data.

III. OBJECTIVES OF THE RESEARCH PAPER

- To examine the role of religion in mobilising Kashmiri Muslims and Identity formation during Dogra period.
- To analyse how the ‘mainstream’ and ‘separatist’ political parties have used religion as a marker of identity after 1947.

IV. RELIGION AND KASHMIRI MUSLIM IDENTITY BEFORE 1947

With the collapse of Shawl industry during the later half of the 19th century and alongside the outbreak of the Franco-Persian war of 1870, there was a steep decline in the economy of Jammu and Kashmir, particularly that of the Kashmir region. (Zutshi, Languages of Belonging: Islam, Regional Identity and Making of Kashmir 2003) This resulted into a sort of competition among the various social elites to have an access to the other financial resources in the society. Since Shrines in the valley had emerged as an important financial resource, a conflict aroused among various social elites of the valley around shrines and shrine worship so as to re-establish their position and status in the society and the politics. Shrines in valley have political and economic importance. They are one of the chief platform were people regularly meet and exchange their views. In addition to the religious importance, they provide time and space for political and economic exchanges, since coming of Islam in the Kashmir. As Zutshi notes, the elite competition revolved around two major places of worship – the Jama Masjid and Shah-i- Hamdaan. This also brought to focus the two different manifestation of Islam in Kashmir, one reflecting the cultural form of Islam reflected in ‘Kashmiri Sufism’ and the second more modern version of Islam reflected in the uniformity of religious practices under pan-Islamism. Since much of rural Kashmir followed the Sufi version of Islam the Shah-i-Hamdaan provided a very important political space for consolidation of the institution of Mirwaiz. Mirwaiz Hamdaan, therefore, represented not only the supreme religious leader of Kashmir but also a source of power. In competition to Mirwaiz Hamdaan was another Mirwaiz, who preached at Jama Masjid and was the leader of the ‘Wahabhi sect’. The later was quite critical of the Sufi cultural practices of Islam and declaring them as un-Islamic; he used his power as a religious leader to emphasize on reforming Kashmiri attitude toward religion. The two clergies also contested each other’s claim to preach in significant places of worship. By this, valley became a stage for an ideological war between Mirwaiz Kashmir led Wahhabi sect and Mirwaiz Hamdaani led Sufi sect. (Zutshi, Languages of Belonging: Islam, Regional Identity and Making of Kashmir 2003) This gave a chance to the State to intervene in the intra-religious matters of the community. The State sustained its position by joining hands with the Sufi sect, which represented the dominant number of Muslims in Kashmir. However, this dispute in the valley was not confined to mere an ideological

war, or to define and redefine Islam in Kashmir, significantly, it led to birth of Kashmiri Muslim leadership which could converse on the behalf of the community in its wider perspective.

Kashmiri Muslim community is not a homogenous and is internally fragmented along the ideological, social and economic lines. It appeared to be unified and integrated but is divided not only among the popular sects of Shias and Sunnis but also on the basis of caste, class (like Sheikhs, Sayeeds, Mughals, Pathans, Gujjars, Bakerwals, Doms and Wattals).(Lawerence 1996)And this social division has its implication on the politics of the state.

Initially, the Kashmiri political consciousness was limited to the educated, urban, middle class elite and lacked the mass base. The rural populace, which was generally backward and illiterate and could not identified with the objectives of the movement, which were oriented towards the interest of a particular group. It was the demand of increased educational and employment opportunities for Kashmiris, and the ownership of the mosques to Kashmiri Muslims which dominated the movement. It was the general perception of the leadership that the backwardness of the community is directly related with their religious faith. In other words, Muslims in the valley started believing that were intentionally kept at the bottom by the ruling class.

Till the end of the decade of 1920s, there was no serious political organization, which could talk on the behalf of 'Kashmiris' in general and 'Muslims' in particular about their political rights. In the absence of a political force, it was inevitable that religion only could act as the articulating force in the context of political identity formation.

The first phase of the political movement in Kashmir clearly reveals as to how religion became the central point around which the Kashmiri identity was constituted. The context of religion became more pronounced in the political discourse in valley in 1930s. The educated unemployed Kashmiri youth started a vigorous demand for redressing the socio-political and economic grievances of Muslims. The movement was launched in 1930 beneath the banner of 'Reading Room Party'. The party was led by Sheikh Mohammad Abdullah and enjoyed the full cooperation of the two Mirwaizes of Srinagar. The major purpose of organizing the Reading Room Party was to discuss the various problems faced by Kashmiri Muslim Community. (Bazaz 2002)

The discontent against the Dogra rulers took a communal and violent shape in 1931. The protest was basically the accumulation of the feeling of injustice that the majority community in the valley was

facing under the Dogra rule in various fields. These grievances, which evolved over a period of time, were related to the socio-economic discrimination of Kashmiri Muslims. That is why, many political analysts have regarded the 1931 outburst as a 'genuine expression' of mass discontent rather than merely a 'communal incident'.

After the 1931 crisis, Sheikh Abdullah was convinced that denial of social and political rights to the Kashmiri Muslim community was based on the 'religious lines', as the Dogra rule was majoritarian in character. He also held that the internal defection among the valley-Muslims responsible for their present vulnerable condition. At this point of time, he was able to conclude that adhering to the religious leadership is important to articulate the interests of Kashmiri society as the later is still trapped between the two contending Islamic thoughts. He realized that the religious influence of Mirwaiz Kashmir would prove a catalyst in uniting the Kashmiri Muslims. And mosques were acting as a 'space' for the political mobilization of people.

V. FORMATION OF MUSLIM CONFERENCE

In 1932, Muslim Conference (MC) demanded the redressal of political, religious and economic grievances of Kashmiri Muslim community. It is significant to note that, at that time majority of Kashmiri Muslims were the landless peasants while the feudal lords were mostly the Dogra Hindus. The Hindus of Kashmir (Kashmiri Pandits) were also the most privileged class and occupied high ranks in government offices. In a way, there was religious differentiation between the privileged section of society and the marginalised masses. It was around this perception of religious differentiation between the rulers and the ruled that the politics of resistance in Kashmir was organized. The demands of the emerging Muslim leadership were therefore, related to increased opportunities for the people belonging to the Muslim community and establishment of a democratic government. (Behra, State, Identity and Violence: Jammu, Kashmir and Ladakh 2000)

It can be argued that the demands made by the Muslim Conference were more or less regionalized in their expression, in the sense Kashmir remained central to their politics. It also becomes obvious that the Kashmiri identity at that time was manifesting religious and regional overtones.

Despite its emphasis on the demands of the Muslim community, the MC was not able to hold all of its constituents and experienced first jolt when Mirwaiz Kashmir came out of it. He formed a separate political organization, the Azad Muslim Party Conference in 1933. He blamed the former of diluting Islam in the valley. During this phase of the political movement in Kashmir, the syncretic

Kashmiri identity, *Kashmiriyat*, was at the back foot, MC was purely an organization representing people of one religion and one region.

VI. PROGRESSIVE AND INCLUSIVE IDEALS

The Kashmiri leadership soon realized that MC would not achieve its desired goals if its exclusive approach dealing with one particular community were not changed into the inclusive one. It was also considered that economic rights of the community are as important as the socio-political and religious rights. It accepted that hunger, poverty and unemployment are the areas, which need immediate redressal.

This change of strategy helped the movement to become not only popular among the masses but also to gain its strength vis-à-vis the administration. The state administration was in no place to ignore the growing uproar in the valley, as the movement was now started progressing with 'Nationalist concerns'. The politics of Kashmir at this moment got moved from a 'narrow community' base to a 'broader nationalist' concern. Giving new dimension to its politics, Muslim Conference now started stepping towards the Indian National Congress. It set a new objective of formation of responsible Government in the state, and which was only possible when two communities, Muslims and Hindus could come together under the same umbrella. At this juncture, Sheikh Abdullah was joined by a Kashmiri Hindu intellectual P.N.Bazaz and called for the formation of joint Hindu-Muslim Front. (P.N.Bazaz 1954)

It is in this context, that on June 11, 1939, the Muslim Conference became 'All Jammu and Kashmir National Conference'. This transformation of the organization was done so that people belonging to communities other than Muslims also could join the tireless political struggle. The Conference was not merely against the Dogra rule but also against the British rule in India and saw its ideology in the same lines as of the Indian National Congress. Thus, the movement, which earlier represented the interests of Muslim elite gradually, got the secularist character. (Schofield, Kashmir in the Crossfire: India, Pakistan and Unending War 2004)

The politics of the state reached still new dimensions in the decade of 1940s, with revival of Muslim Conference in 1940-41. A section of Muslim community of Jammu region perceived that National conference was more concerned about the issues related to one particular region and its cultural identity was more important and dear to it than its co-religious group in the Jammu region. There

was a general notion among the Muslim of this region that politics of state had got centralized limited to the boundaries of the valley only.

It is important to mention here, that religion at this point of time was no more acting as the unifying force as it was in the early years of the movement. Now the markers of the identity had been changed. Now it was the region, language and the culture that were acting as the communicative force. The Muslims of Jammu, who speak Dogri, the language of Dogra rulers, shared cultural ties with local Hindus and Punjabi Muslims, recognized that there was hardly any cultural or lingual link between the Muslims of Jammu region and that of the Kashmir. This played a crucial role in the revival of MC in 1940-41. The main objective of the MC was to create a Muslim state in Jammu and Kashmir, where minorities would enjoy the full freedom.

In Kashmir, Mirwiaz Yusuf Shah found this as a great opportunity to re-establish him in the politics of the state and very soon became the representative of Muslim Conference from the valley. On the other hand, National Conference (NC) was evolving through a period of time, its close association with Congress and its leadership in particular, had reshaped its aims and objectives to achieve the nationalist goal of Kashmiri and Indian Nationalism. Pundit Nehru was fully convinced by the 'Nationalist Agenda' of NC and supported its claim of the sole representative of the state. The MC, which was also following the path of All India Muslim League used this opportunity of contesting the claim of NC and its leadership and launched statewide propaganda against it. It argued this party led by Sheikh Abdullah was ignoring the popular sentiments, for the sake of so-called Nationalist emotions.

The fragmentation of the politics of the State between the NC and MC resulted into a competition between the two on the issue of 'real representative' of the people of the State. While the MC sought to represent all the Muslims of the state, the NC, on the other hand sought to represent all the people of the state irrespective of their religious affiliations. In the process, it identified itself with the Indian National Congress and the liberal-secular politics of India.

Following this direction, Sheikh Abdullah argued in the favour of establishment of secular-democratic government in the state on popular base. The National Conference thereafter adopted a comprehensive plan, which came to be known as 'Naya Kashmir' manifesto in 1944 in Srinagar. Later on being influenced by the 'Quit India Movement' in British India, the NC launched a vibrant protest against the Dogra rulers for the transfer of sovereignty to the people, in the shape of 'Quit Kashmir Movement' in May 1946.

VII. RELIGION AND KASHMIRI MUSLIM IDENTITY AFTER 1947

In accordance with the evolution of Kashmiri identity on secular basis in the decade of forties the NC was not very much enamoured by the idea of Pakistan as the homeland for the Muslims. Sheikh Abdullah personally felt that the Kashmiri identity would be submerged in the larger Muslim identity in case Jammu and Kashmir decides to accede with Pakistan. He also felt that it might not be possible to pursue the larger economic agenda of restructuring the agrarian setup of Kashmir and bringing about reforms in favour of the mass of peasantry and artisans in the feudal society of Pakistan. Due to his close association with Congress, he was inclined in favour of joining India knowing that the Congress party which was going to form the government here would be committed to land reforms and other pro-people policies. He therefore, believed that his agenda of 'New Kashmir' would be possible only in democratic and secular India than in feudalistic and theocratic Pakistan. And he supported the instrument of accession on same grounds. However, the decision of accession lay with the monarch, who was indecisive and was forced to accede in the wake of tribal invasion on 26 October, 1947. Sheikh Abdullah became the Prime Minister of Jammu and Kashmir, and negotiated 'special status' under article 370 of the Indian Constitution.

The NC leadership by rejecting the 'two-nation theory' was able to carry-on its objectives based on the principles of raising the standard of living of the masses by implementing the Big Landed Estates Abolition Act 1950, under which each proprietor could only retain 22.75 acres of land and the right of the ownership in the land in excess of this unit was transferred to the tillers to the extent of their actual cultivating possession.

The relation between the Indian state and Jammu and Kashmir were most cordial during the brief period from 1947-52, it was during this period the state was enjoying its special status to the fullest. But gradually the 'bigger' Indian state with the passage of time started viewing, J&K as the integral part of India and 'Kashmiri' as one of its 'sub-national identity'. The Kashmiri leadership viewed this as an encroachment in the autonomous sphere of the state by the Indian agencies. The failure of central government in conducting the much desired 'Plebiscite', Abdullah's advocacy of considering the option of 'independence' and thus throwing him behind the bars in 1953 created an atmosphere of mistrust and suspicion in minds of common Kashmiri about the Indian approach towards Kashmir.

The identity politics of Kashmir under the leadership of Sheikh Abdullah progressed on secular lines till the time he and his party were given sufficient space for this identity to express itself within the broader national context. However, with the removal of Sheikh Abdullah from mainstream politics and the intrusion of Centre in the politics of the state the Kashmiri identity could not be expressed

within the mainstream politics. However, even when Sheikh Abdullah's resistance politics continued to be organized on secular lines there evolved lot of popular resentment, which at times was manifested in religious terms. One such situation was the expression of the mass discontent during the 'Relic Agitation', which was launched in 1963. The movement for the recovery of the relic changed into a mass protest against the local regime and the valley was echoed with the slogans belonging to different religious communities from a common platform. (Schofield, Kashmir in Conflict: India, Pakistan and the Unending War 1966) As the context of the agitation around the holy relic shows that the identity politics of Kashmir does not have much space for extreme religious expression, though, in the absence of democratic and pacific means of expression religion might assume central space in the politics of Kashmir. However, even in the separatist realm the identity expression have remained more or less secular. The religion-based political parties have not been very successful here. This can be seen from limited space that 'Jamat-i-Islami' traditionally has had in Kashmir.

During the early years of its birth it kept itself away from the electoral politics. It was only in 1972, Assembly Elections that Jammat, came to the election arena for the first time in its history and could managed only 5 seats with a vote share of 7.2%. During the assembly election of 1977, Jammat won only 1 assembly seat with 3.6% vote share. It didn't succeed in winning a single seat in the assembly elections (1983). (Mayilvaganan 2002) The electoral history of Jamaat clearly shows that it did not have much space in politics of Kashmir. Since the identity politics of Kashmir was expressed through secular goals, Jamaat with its religious oriented goals could not find much support base.

During the period, 1953-75 it was 'Plebiscite Front' led by Sheikh Abdullah which articulated the Kashmiri identity in secular terms. While contesting the ruling elite at the local level and the Central government at the national level, it continued with secular ideology. After 1975, it was the NC which the harbinger of the identity politics of Kashmir. Throughout this period the Jamaat and other communal organizations had not much space in Kashmir. It was the post 1984 period, especially after the NC took the decision to join Congress through a formal alliance that there developed a 'vacuum' in the identity politics of Kashmir. The NC that had sharpened the identity politics of Kashmir and had provided a 'secular forum' for its expression became unpopular when it towed the line of the Centre. It was in this situation that Jamaat-i-Islami capture the central space of Kashmiri politics. In the 1987 assembly elections, it played a leading role in the formation of Muslim United Front (MUF). The MUF had the primary objective to safeguard the interests of 'Kashmiri Muslims' and focused on ushering 'Nizam-e-Mustafa' in Kashmir. It called for the demand of self-determination and openly advocated merger with Pakistan. It was able to increase its voting share from 6.2% to 32% in these elections. (Behra, State, Identity and Violence: Jammu, Kashmir and Ladakh 2000)

Though the MUF could not succeed in getting more than 4 seats in Legislative Assembly, yet it had emerged as an important political force during 1987 elections. The main reason for its extended political space was the inability of the secular forces like the NC to pursue the identity politics of Kashmir. There was an expectation that the party would register its victory in at least 10 seats. But there was a general perception that the election results were manipulated by the NC-Congress alliance. This was one of the important factor that led to mass discontent and the armed militancy in 1989.

The violent struggle in the state, particularly in the valley was never based on the religious fundamentalism, though later on, the pan Islamic groups got involved in it. It was started by indigenous separatist groups like Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Front (JKLF), which demanded independence of the state from 'Indian rule' through an armed struggle. However, due to the political vacuum some religious and fundamentalist organisations started operating in the period of militancy, even though at the fringe level. The religious slogans, religious spaces and religious teachings were used by these organizations to mobilize masses. The Kashmiri identity was projected as the 'Muslim identity' by these organisations. The role of these organisations came to the forefront in the initial period of militancy itself when call was given by some of these organisations to veil women, to close cinema halls and beauty parlour and even to enforce sex segregation. However, most of these measures especially the veiling of women and sex segregation could not succeed as the Kashmiri society habituated to liberal lifestyle under Sufi Islam did not approve of these changes.

However, the nature of the armed militancy was changed with the intervention of Pakistan, which tried to control the militancy by eliminating JKLF cadre through its created organisation- HizbulMujahideen (Hizb). Unlike the JKLF, the Hizb had merger of J&K with Pakistan as its objective and therefore it saw the 'Kashmir issue' as 'unfinished agenda of partition'. The Islamization of Kashmiri movement and introduction of the idea of *jihad* was based on the ideology of pan-Islamism. Though, the *jehadis* were initially welcome in Kashmir, yet due to their fundamentalist attitude they were not accepted for long time. Within the movement there developed friction between the supporters of *jehadis* and those oppose the idea of *jihad* and pan-Islamism.

The initial 'shift' in Kashmiri's movement politics gave some relevance to fundamentalist organisations who created an atmosphere of mistrust and suspicion among the minorities of the region. The onset of militancy in valley had in any case a wider impact on the minorities. It created a sort of fear and terror in the minds of Kashmiri Pandits community, who generally have pro-Indian affiliations, and this resulted in the process of mass exodus from the valley. Though the exodus of Pandits from the valley was not a communal response, an atmosphere of fear and terror certainly affected the minds of two communities. (Verma 1994)

However, exodus during the period of militancy was not confined to one community i.e. Kashmiri Pandits, but there were migration of Kashmiri Muslims, who were having pro-Indian, progressive, liberal position. The migration of the Muslims largely remained unnoticed.

It can be drawn from above that religion had played an important role in the process of identity formation and political mobilization in Kashmir since 1920s. However, religion in valley could not polarize the society as it has done in many parts of South-Asia. This can be contributed mainly due to the popular tradition of Sufism, shared set of values and common cultural practices which remained very much intact with the Kashmiri society. And therefore, politics based on the principles of fundamentalism and divisive politics could not flourish here for a longer run.

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