Diverse Meanings of Freedom Struggle in South Asia: Movement against Dogra Rule in Kashmir

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Abstract: This paper is a modest attempt to understand the movement in Kashmir against the oppressive Dogra rule. It tries to address a larger historiographical problem of modern South Asia that gives primacy to the freedom struggle against the British and accorded lesser attention to people's movement in the princely states. The political mobilization in princely India did not get adequate academic attention as they are seen as backward in consciousness and intent as they are organized around communitarian, caste and regional lines. The paper underscores the manifold meanings of freedom struggle in South Asia.

Keywords: Freedom Struggle, Princely States, British India, Movement.

1. INTRODUCTION

Narratives on anti-colonial movement in South Asia has been focusing by and large on the struggles in British India, with 'native states', better known as princely states, receiving lesser scholarly attention. Of late the princely states to receive a lot of academic attention particularly with the influx of studies that look for native roots of Indian modernity and those looking at the diverse determinants of the regional character of modernity. Different from the earlier works that juxtapose princely states in opposition to British India, these works approach them as distinct entities where particular social, economic and political conditions, combined with an interaction with external ideas and movements produced certain outcomes in the realms of state, society and collective identity, deciding their regional character (Zutshi 2009). The Imperial Gazetteer of India, published in 1909, listed 693 princely states in India / South Asia, including Nepal and the Shan states in Burma, and of which majority were estates or Jagirs (Ramusack 2004: 2). While three-fifths of the subcontinent was under direct imperial administration, the rest was under the princely rule. The princely states under British imperialism are seen on the one hand as a continuing processes of native rule and state formation as these that their rulers exerted considerable powers, enjoying authority in their domains (Ramusack 2004). Another view essentially see them as the creation of British imperialism, who allowed 'feudal hierarchy' to continue for reasons of political expediency and to set the princes off as 'natural' leaders, who in turn supported the paramount power politically as well as economically (Ramusack 2004: 92, Kawashima 1998). The political mobilization in princely India also did not get adequate academic attention as the movements therein often are seen as backward in consciousness and intent as they are organized around communitarian, caste and regional lines. Caste, religious and linguistic identities became more tightly defined in the princely states, as a result of which the nationalist mobilizations outook longer to develop (Ramusack 2004, Kooiman 2002). The Indian national movement was also ambivalent towards political movements in princely states, following their declared policy of interference in the princely states until the late 1930s, due to the purported positive attitude toward the princely states and its alleged desire to maintain ties with conservative Indians (Ramusack 2004, Copland 1997). This made the condition of the people in princely states very difficult as they had to suffer the double disadvantage of monarchical rule, which were often parochial and authoritative, and that of being under the empire indirectly. As a result, often the public anger in such states was against the princes in the first instance and not against colonialism. Freedom

therein thus got a political articulation of freedom from oppressive native monarchs, leaving the nationalist movement against the British insignificant. Kashmir is a classic example.

2. THE PRINCELY STATE OF KASHMIR

Before the Dogras, Kashmir was ruled by Maharaja Ranjit Singh, the Sikh ruler with at that time with its capital at Lahore. And the Dogras were feudatories in the Sikh kingdom.Kashmir became from, a princely state in the British Empire in India, 1846 until 1947and was ruled by a Maharaja Gulab Singh and his successors. The state was created in 1846 when, after its victory in the First Anglo-Sikh War, the East India Company annexed the Kashmir valley and immediately sold it to the Dogra ruler of Jammu under the Treaty of Amritsar at the cost of rupees seventy five Lakh.According to the treaty, the state was "situated to the eastward of the river Indus and westward of the river Ravi", and covered an area of 80,900 square miles 210,000 km (Kaul 1963: 93). Later, the regions of Hunza, Nagar, and Gilgit were added to the state.The British wished to use Kashmir as a buffer against possible threats from Afghanistan, China, and Russia, but in the 1840's and 1850's, little in the way of danger existed from any of these directions. Therefore, Gulab Singh was encouraged by the British to extend his hegemony to the tribal areas to the north of the veil itself to Gilgit, Hunza, Nagar, Ponial, Chilas, Darei, Tangir, and Gor (Huttenback1973: 1-2).

After the death of the Raja of Jammu, Kishore Singh, in 1822, his son Gulab Singh was recognized by the Sikhs as his heir. He then, initially under the Sikhs, began expanding his kingdom. In the winter of 1845, war broke out between the British and the Sikhs. Gulab Singh remained neutral until the battle of Sobraon in 1846, when he appeared as a useful mediator and the trusted adviser of Sir Henry Lawrence. Two treaties were concluded. By the first, the State of Lahore was handed over to the British, as equivalent to an indemnity of one crore rupee, the hill countries between the rivers Beas and the Indus, by the second, the British made over to Gulab Singh for 75 Lakh rupees all the hilly or mountainous country situated to the east of the Indus and west of the Ravi¹.

3. TREATY OF AMRITSAR OF 16TH MARCH 1846 OR SALE OF KASHMIR

As many treaties were signed before the treaty of Amritsar of 1846. But, the Treaty of Amritsar, signed on March 16, 1846, formalized the arrangements in the Treaty of Lahore between the British East India Company and Maharaja Gulab Singh Dogra after the First Anglo-Sikh War. By this treaty, Gulab Singh acquired all the hilly or mountainous country with its dependencies situated to the eastward of the River Indus and the westward of the River Ravi including Chamba and excluding Lahul, being part of the territories ceded to the British Government by the Lahore State according to the provisions of Article IV of the Treaty of Lahore 9th March, 1846. Gulab Singh was to pay 75 Lakhs (7.5 million) of Nanak Shahi rupees (the ruling currency of Punjab) to the British Government, along with other annual tributes. The treaty between the British Government on the one part and Maharajah Gulab Singh of Jammu on the other concluded on the part of the British Government by Frederick Currie, Esq. and Brever-Major Henry Montgomery Lawrence, acting under the orders of the Rt. Hon. Sir Henry Hardinge, G.C.B., one of her Britannic Majesty's most Honorable Privy Council, Governor-General of the possessions of the East India Company, to direct and control all the affairs in the East Indies and by Maharajah Gulab Singh in person (Kaul 1963: 92). The Treaty of Amritsar marked the beginning of Dogra rule in the state of Jammu and Kashmir. After this treaty Maharaja Gulab Singh become the ruler of Kashmir.

The great poet Iqbal wrote

"Their fields, their crops, their streams,

Even the peasants in the vale,

They sold, they sold all, Alas!

How cheap was the sale" (Sharma and Sharma 1998: 354).

¹http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Treaty_of_Amritsar,_1846 (Accessed on 18/ 01/2014).

4. KASHMIR UNDER THE DOGRAS

When Kashmir came under the control of Dogras the people of Kashmir suffered more due to the atrocities of Dogra rulers on Kashmiri people. The Dogra rulers openly demonstrated their communal stance by revoking the jagirs and inam grants and transferred them to their coreligionists. Maharaja Hari Singh also confiscated the rent free grants and established the Dharmarth Trust to which huge amount of revenue was imposed on people (Ganai 2003: 1).

As the Kashmiri handicrafts were famous throughout the world. But during the rule of Dogras especially under Hari Singh the Handicrafts were discouraged and there were no avenues of work for them and large number of people migrated from Kashmir in search of work, which resulted in the thinning of population. Besides this Maharaja and his officials troubled Kashmiris by the huge exactions of tax. The peasants were deprived from the ownership of land. The people were deprived from the freedom of press and speech and they were prohibited to form any organisation before 1931 and they were also not allowed to organise any procession without the permission of Government (Thorp and F. M. Hassnain 1980: 38-9). In addition to this many taxes were also levied on the people like tax on houses, fruit tax and animal tax (Singh 1974: 171).

When Hari Singh came to the throne, he gave all key and higher posts to Pandiths. Though Pandiths were only two percent of the total populationthey were given preference over other communities, but Muslims, Sikhs, Christians and Buddhists were ignored (Sundarajan 2010: 51-2). The Muslims particularly felt marginalized and oppressed socially, economically and politically. The result was a political movement against Dogra rule in the valley of Kashmir.

On June 21, 1931 that the 'Young man's Muslim Association', led by Sheikh Mohammed Abdullah, planned a public meeting at the Khanqah-i-Moula. It was a unique meeting because all Muslim divines, irrespective of their schools of thought, assembled there. The meeting was addressed by Abdullah himself. He asked all the Muslims to unite and demand for their rights. He also appealed to the Pandiths to join hands with Muslims to seek redress of grievances as well as, demand for independence, around 36-40 years old man, rose up and delivered an inspiring speech which was considered to be seditious by the State Government. The Pathan was Abdul Qadeer khan and he was then imprisoned under section 124(A) On 25thJune 1931. Many authors are of the view that the report was delivered against the Dogra rule as the rule was very brutal. During the hearings, it was found that the trial had greatly excited the Muslims as it was the first case of a political nature in the state. The Muslims of the state were sympathetic towards Khan and thousands of people assembled in the court to know the fate of the prisoner. As such, there was an imminent danger of turmoil and so on 11 July, 1931, District Magistrate suggested that the trial be held in Jail and permission for it was granted. Not to forget is the fact that no lawyer came forward todefend Khan, except Maulvi Abdullah Vakil. Historians say Maharaja Hari Singh had appealed to the masses to stay away from the functioning of government but that appeal was completely rejected by the Muslims. They were "prepared to sacrifice for the sake of the helpless prisoner and they planned to help him (Bhat 2011: 2).

The trial was to be held in the Srinagar Jail premises. The Jailor told the Judge that people wanted to have a glimpse of Khan but the Judge refused and Khan was brought out of the Jail. People were gathered in the jail compound and raised slogans. The Deputy Commissioner ordered the policemen to fire in air but they fired on the people and near about 22 people were massacred. The entire valley observed a strike for 19 days as a protest against these atrocities. The people shouted slogans against the Maharaja from their rooftops. At many places, the police and the military resorted to firing and killed several Muslims in Maisuma, Habakadal, Nawakadal and Jamia Masjid area. For the first time, the Kashmiri Muslims had risen from deep slumber, and now none could stop them from their onward march towards wounded. Large number of people were arrested. The next day the leaders of the Muslims -Sheikh Muhammad Abdullah, Chaudary Ghulam Abbas, Moulvi Abdul Rahim, and Sardar Gohar Rehman were arrested and Sheikh Muhammad Abdullah was locked in a solitary cell of the Hari Parbat Fort. The Maharaja had failed to check this upsurge and as such he decided to make changes in the administration. He appointed PanditHariKishanKoul as the new Prime Minister of the State and issued orders for the release of all political prisoners except Abdul Qadeer Khan, who was given five years rigorous imprisonment. A compromise was reached between the leaders of the Kashmiri Muslims and the Maharaja through the efforts of Maulana Abdul Kalam Azad (Bhat 2011: 3). But the movement against the Dogra rule has got a resounding beginning. How do we measure the age of a movement? Why do we start with July 13, 1931, when 21 persons were killed in police firing on a Muslim demonstration outside the central jail of Srinagar where one Abdul Qadeer was being

tried for an allegedly seditious speech? Not that there were no protest movements or repressive acts by the state authority before that date. But it was the organized reaction to the incident of this day that led to the movement which, with modifications and transformations, has continued and is called the freedom movement of Kashmir. In fact, Kashmiri leaders often date back their freedom movement to 1586 when Akbar annexed Kashmir to his Mughal empire (Puri 1983: 186).

5. GLANCY COMMISSION OF 1931

In 1931, the Maharaja appointed a commission of enquiry headed by Sir B. J. Glancy for the foreign and political department of government of India and the commission submitted its report of grievances to Maharaja in 1932. The GlancyCommission recommended for constitutional reforms and for taking the Muslim majority on board. Almost all the recommendations were accepted by the Maharaja and issued a notification to the effect in April 1932. The people of state wanted a responsible government answerable to assembly based on the adult franchise. To fulfill this aim a political organization called the Jammu and Kashmir Muslim Conference was formed with Sheikh Abdullah as its President and Ghulam Abbas as its Secretary in 1931.

In 1934 Praja Sabha was formed by the Maharaja consisting of 75 members including 33 elected members- 21 Muslims, 10 Hindus and 2 Sikhs. Very less number of people were enfranchised even then. It was just a formality to divert the attention of the people and Glancy Commission was not beneficial to the people at all. Sheikh Abdullah and his colleagues continuously hold meetings and rallies throughout the valley. Responsible govt. day was organized which proved a great success (Sundarajan 2010: 54-55).

Though reflected the sentiments of the Muslim majority, the movement tried to define itself on secular lines. Many newspapers were also published in order to popularize the idea of secular politics. Prem Nath Bazaz started a newspaper called *The Daily Vitasta* Sheikh Abdullah and Prem Nath Bazaz started a weekly journal *The Hamdard* in 1935 which provided help for strengthening the secular trends in Kashmir politics (Kaul 1985: 15). The 8th May 1936 was observed as a Responsible Government Day and Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs gathered on a same platform. A huge procession of labourers in 1937 was led by Bakshi Ghulam Mohammad and G. M. Sadiq and was joined by the labourers from all communities. This demonstration gave a firm base to the movement (Kaul 1985: 16). On June 28, 1938, another milestone in Kashmir's journey to secularism a marathon debate lasting 52 hours was held among the members of Working Committee of the Muslim Conference. It concluded in recommending to the General Council that all people irrespective of their caste, creed, and their religion could become its members (Kaul 1985: 36).

Hari Singh tried to drive wedge between the different communities in the Kashmir but his efforts were frustrated. The Maharaja introduced constitutional reforms but it was a halfhearted attempt and there was no positive reaction by the Muslim Conference. More and more people started coming forward and joining the movement. Sheikh Abdullah became very popular and came to be known as the *Sher-i-Kashmir*, the Lion of Kashmir. He frequently visited and met leaders like Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru. Main aim of Sheikh Abdullah and his colleagues is that to provide a front against the autocratic role of Dogra Maharaja (Kaul 1985: 17-19).

Gradually he realized the need to carry with him the non-Muslims also to achieve his aim of gaining the responsible government in the state. At the working committee meeting of Jammu and Kashmir Muslim Conference held in June1938 Sheikh Abdullah moved a resolution proposing a change in the name of the party as Jammu and Kashmir National Conference and amendment of its Constitution to admit the non-Muslims also in the party. Ghulam Abbas was opposed this movement and the proposal was deferred for one year. However in October 1939 ,at a special session of the Muslim conference, the change in the name of the party was approved and its constitution was amended to allow the admission of non-Muslims into the party (Sundarajan 2010: 55).

After the visit of Jawaharlal Nehru to Kashmir the organization itself got affiliated with the All India States Peoples Conference- an organization widely identified as affiliated to Indian National Congress (Sundarajan 2010: 55).

The first large-scale attempt to dislodge Maharajah's autocracy came in the early 1930's in Kashmir. The movement was inspired and influenced by the celebrated civil disobedience campaigns organized by the Indian National Congress. The movement was lead by Sheikh Mohammed Abdullah, a young Moslem schoolteacher of middle-class origin. During the Second World War the National Conference gained in strength as a result of its ceaseless activity on behalf of fair

distribution of scarce foodstuffs and fuel. A new program called "New Kashmir" was put forward in 1944 by the Conference and its basic law provided for a constitutional monarchy with democratic political procedures (Thorner 1948: 174). There was no accountability and people continued living under miserable conditions. The rulers got new punishments invented; the most dreaded one was *Beggar* (transport of materials to distant areas through precarious mountainous roads, without pay). The people were forced to do *Beggar*. The taxes were always rebuking with each passing regime.²

There were two main political parties in the state: Muslim Conference which was founded in 1931 under the leadership of Sheikh Mohd Abdullah, Bakshi Ghulam Mohammad, and Khawaja Ghulam Mohammad. After this these members got a secular outlook and changed the name of Muslim Conference to Notional Conference in 1939. The membership was opened for all communities and they started campaigning against the autocratic rule of Dogras. The National Conference waged a fierce battle against the oppressive rule by mobilizing people against it. It has gone through many up and down with the arrest and imprisonments of thousands of freedom fighters. Sheikh Abdullah and his colleagues were in prison for many years (Nath 1998: 47).

6. END OF THE PRINCELY STATE

At the war's end, when questions of constitution making for India as a whole were once more in debate between Britain and the various Indian parties, Jawaharlal Nehru in the name of both the All-India States' Peoples' Conference and the Indian National Congress demanded that the people rather than the Princes should be consulted as to the future of the states. Sheikh Abdullah, in a memorandum to the British Cabinet Mission which came to India in the spring of 1946, Abdullah, in a memorandum denounced the Treaty of Amritsar by which Kashmir's sale to the Dogra house had been formalized and called upon the Maharajah Hari Singh to Quit Kashmir. But PandithKak thought otherwise. He blocked entry of Pandith Nehru at Kehal Bridge. When Nehru persisted, he was arrested on June 22, and kept in the Dakbunglow at Domel, near Muzzaffarabad. This arrest made Pandith Nehru, who was then tipped to be the head of the Interim Government to be formed at New Delhi, a hardened Kashmir. When Sheikh Abdulla and his colleagues made an made demonstrations against the Maharaja to quit Kashmir, Maharajah's Government moved swiftly. Abdullah was arrested together with 300 of his chief supporters and sentenced to a long jail term. The Indian National Congress condemned the action of the State Government and provided Abdullah's legal defense (Thorner 1948: 175).

Sheikh Abdullah and his colleagues were arrested in 1946 and held in prison. Jawaharlal Nehru who was negotiating with the cabinet mission visited the valley and left the Delhi at that time. He wanted to reach Domel but he was intercepted at Korala. After 1940 Pakistan resolution, Muslim Conference was revived with some vigour by Ghulam Abbas and he was too imprisoned in 1946, to be accurate (Nath 1998: 49). The credit of launching Quit Kashmir Movement goes to Indian National Conference. Jammu and Kashmir Muslims Conference played the most important role in creating political awakening and turmoil in Jammu and Kashmir. The brainchild of it was Sheik Abdullah, who dominated the political scene in Kashmir till his death in 1982.

7. ARREST OF SHEIKH ABDULLAH AND QUIT KASHMIR MOVEMENT

On reaching Srinagar, Sheikh Abdullah made a public call to the Maharaja to quit Kashmir and made his followers ready to do everything possible to end the Dogra rule over Kashmir- His speeches were so fiery and virulent that the government had to order his arrest. He was arrested on May, 20 1946 Sheikh Abdullah and his followers made a large scale violence in the valley, many key bridges were burnt and governmentoffices were attacked. Many key bridges were burnt down and government offices were attacked. Pandith Ram Chandra Kak, a Kashmiri himself, who had been appointed Prime Minister of the state by Hari Singh in 1945, came down on the agitators with a heavy hand. The movement died down within a short time. But, a new turn to the situation was given by Pandith Nehru who decided to visit Srinagar much against the advice of Mahatma Gandhi and Sardar Patel. It would have been wise on the part of the state government to allow him to enter Kashmir and see for himself the devastation enemy of Maharaja Hari Singh

²https://www.google.co.in/search?q=421+years+of+foreign+rule+in+kashmir&oq=421+years+of+foreign+rule+in+kash (Accessed on 01/10/2014)

(Madhok 1992: 26-27). Kashmir leaders closely watched the direction of political wind in the country and on the basis of this started their own Quit Kashmir movement (Kaul 1985: 23).

Abdullah was tried by a special court under section 144 of the Ranbir Penal Code pertaining to armed rebellion and was sentenced to three years imprisonment. He was thus put out of the picture during the crucial period preceding partition and freedom of India in August, 1947. The Quit Kashmir movement made the real intentions of Sheikh Abdullah clear beyond any doubt. Two things became evident:

1. Sheikh Abdullah was interested only in Kashmir valley. He had neither any interest nor any stake in the rest of the Jammu & Kashmir state. He built his whole case for Quit Kashmir movement on the suspected sale of Kashmir to Maharaja Gulab Singh by the Treaty of Amritsar of March, 1946 for Rs. 75 lakhs. A glance of the Treaty of Amritsar makes it clear that this money had nothing to do with Kashmir as such. It was the war indemnity which the British had demanded from Lahore Darbar which surrendered all the mountainous territory of Lahore Kingdom lying between the Ravi and the Indus in lieu of it (Modhoc 1992: 27).

2. Sheikh Abdullah had no claim on the sympathy and support of the Indian National Congress and the people of India for this movement. He launched this movement against the advice of the Congress President, Acharya Kripalani and other Congress leaders. It had nothing to do with the Indian freedom movement against the British rule. In fact, he had not raised even a finger in support of the Quit India movement launched by the Congress in 1942. These objectives of Sheikh Abdullah for the achievement of which he launched the Quit Kashmir movement was an independent Kashmir valley under his guidance. He was a central character of Kashmiri nationalism (Madhok 1992: 28).

8. ACCESSION OF KASHMIR PRINCELY STATE WITH INDIA

As already said, Kashmir had a Muslim majority but was ruled by a Hindu Raja. The Working Committee of the National Conference met under Sheikh Mohammad Abdullah's presidency on 2 October 1947 and took the decision to support the accession of the State to India under the troubled condition of partition and Pakistan's eagerness to have Kashmir with them and Hari Singh's keenness to remain independent first, and then to join India. The decision of the Working Committee was conveyed to Nehru by another Kashmiri, Dwarka Nath Kachroo, the Secretary General of the All India States Peoples' Conference, who was invited to attend the Working Committee meeting of the National Conference as an observer. Maharaja Hari Singh wanted his state to remain independent, joining neither Pakistan nor India. For this reason, he offered a standstill agreement (to maintain the status quo) to both India and Pakistan. India refused the offer but Pakistan accepted it. The Maharaja was advised by Mehr Chand Mahajan, who later became his Prime Minister that a landlocked country such as Kashmir would be soon engulfed by foreign powers such as the USSR or China and hence it is better to be part of either country.³ Kashmir thus become part of India, which went against the wishes of Pakistan and a section within the Kashmiri society, causing militancy and unpeace in the valley even today.

9. CONCLUSION

The Dogra rule was oppressive and exploitative for the majority of people in Kashmir. It also communally polarized the population. The *Jagirs* and other *Inam* grants were transferred from Kashmiris to the coreligionists of the Maharaja and his trustworthy friends. Hari Singh imposed lot of taxes on native people by establishing a Dharmarth Trust. Kashmiris were snatched from all the key posts, and the government jobs were largely not open to the majority community. Kashmiris were mainly engaged in called *Beggar*. Slowly the people of Kashmir started to raise their voices against the autocratic rule of Dogras. The important figure to support the people was Sheikh Abdullah. He and his followers openly challenged the Dogra State. He was often put behind the bars by Dogra rulers but still he continued his mission to raise his voice against the Dogras. Muslim Conference was formed with Sheikh Abdullah as its President and Ghulam Abbas as its Secretary. Sheikh Abdullah and his colleagues continuously hold meetings and rallies throughout the valley against the Dogra Rule. Later on Muslim Conference was converted into National Conference in 1939 due to the secular outlook of its members. Maharajah Hari Singh, ruler of the princely state of Jammu and Kashmir, signed a legal document called instrument of accession on 26 October 1947. By executing this document under the provisions of the Indian Independence Act 1947, Maharajah Hari Singh agreed to accede to the Dominion of India, so also was the leadership of

³http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kashmir_and_Jammu_(princely_state) (Accessed on 01/10/2014).

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the National Conference. Kashmir history thus offers an interesting case in which freedom was not from the colonial masters, but from the oppressive native rulers. This has significant impact on the subsequent politics of Kashmir as it remained by and large unaffected by the movement against colonialism.

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