

The Rise and Fall of New Kashmir

Andrew Whitehead

Introduction

On 27 October 1947, when the first Indian troops landed at the very basic airfield on the outskirts of Srinagar, they came to the Kashmir Valley with the keen support of the leading Kashmiri political figure of that era. Sheikh Abdullah, a Kashmiri nationalist, was also at this time an Indian nationalist. He endorsed the princely state's hurried accession to India. His supporters organized a volunteer militia to help Indian troops in repulsing an invading force of Pakistani tribesmen. Their presence on the streets of the Kashmiri capital was an emphatic demonstration that the old princely order had been banished. The alliance between Kashmiri and Indian nationalisms was both personal – there was a deep bond of friendship and common purpose between Abdullah and India's first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru – and political, with a shared allegiance to a progressive agenda. Yet, six years later, Nehru oversaw the dismissal and arrest of his old ally because Sheikh Abdullah, as Prime Minister of Jammu and Kashmir, was questioning the state's accession to India and talking about the option of independence. The national aspirations and imperatives of Kashmir and of India, as expressed by their political leaders, were in conflict. Competing nationalisms can co-exist within the same nation-state, though only with constant adjustment and compromise. That in turn requires a level of comfort and confidence between political leaderships – something that has not been evident in relations between Delhi and Srinagar.

In a celebrated article published a quarter of a century ago, prompted by the outbreak of a violent separatist insurgency in Kashmir and the determined military response of the Indian Government, the political scientist Ashutosh Varshney described the Kashmir problem as a consequence of three compromised nationalisms (Varshney, 1992). The 'religious nationalism' of Pakistan claimed Kashmir because Islam was the basis of its national identity and most Kashmiris were Muslims; the 'secular nationalism' of Nehru cleaved to Kashmir because as India's only Muslim-majority state, it was a statement that religion did not define

the nation; while Kashmir's 'ethnic nationalism' sought a political expression of the Valley's distinct history, culture, traditions and aspirations, which – to an appreciable extent – were common to the Muslim majority and the small but influential Pandit (that is, Kashmiri-speaking high-caste Hindu) minority. All these nationalisms had been tarnished by the conflict over Kashmir's status, Varshney argued – and all had been locked into political stances, which left no appreciable room for a settlement. For both Pakistan and India, the territorial claim to Kashmir has been central to their own concept of the nation – and the more that Kashmir became contested between these regional rivals, the more difficult any compromise became. As a consequence of its determination to hang on to Kashmir, Delhi chose not to accommodate Kashmiri nationalism, but to smother it. Institutions were corrupted, political parties and movements were suborned or repressed, and civil society was stunted by official disapproval and disruption.

Of the three nationalisms in this painful triangle, Kashmiri nationalism is, perhaps understandably, the least well understood. Sheikh Abdullah (sometimes known as 'the Sheikh', though he was not born to privilege or any position of authority) spearheaded the political 'awakening' in the Kashmir Valley in the 1930s, and led the opposition to autocratic princely rule. He gave expression to a vision of a New (or *Naya*) Kashmir, which was to be democratic, socialist and secular. In devising this agenda, Sheikh Abdullah was influenced by communists in particular, to an extent that has been largely overlooked (except as partisan polemic). This chapter explores the nationalism, which became such a powerful force in the Kashmir Valley;¹ the leftist inflection it adopted in its early years; the manner in which Indian and Kashmiri nationalisms became so entwined; and how they came to diverge.

Kashmir's political 'awakening'

Jammu and Kashmir was slow to feel the new political breezes blowing after the First World War, namely nationalism, liberalism and socialism. The Kashmir Valley was geographically and intellectually isolated. There were in the 1920s no newspapers to speak of, no political parties and no secular intelligentsia of consequence apart from those who relied on the patronage of the ruling princely family. The schools administered by the Maharaja and the handful established by Christian missionaries disproportionately served the small and privileged Hindu minority in the towns. Across the princely state, Muslims outnumbered non-Muslims by three to one – in the Kashmir Valley the ratio at this time was

thirteen-to-one – but few Muslims held positions of any importance in the Hindu Maharaja's administration. Those Kashmiri Muslims with ambition tended to migrate to towns in Punjab to seek their way in the world.

Sheikh Mohammad Abdullah is indelibly associated with the birth of popular politics in Kashmir, and his personal story reflects the lack of opportunities available to talented young Muslims. He was born in 1905 just outside Srinagar into a middle-class family in the shawl business, though the death of his father just before his youngest son's birth plunged the household into poverty. He secured a college place in Lahore, and then at one of north India's most prestigious places of learning, Aligarh Muslim University, but was angered that the state administration would neither fund his studies outside Kashmir nor support his ambition to become a doctor. He was eventually given a teaching post, but quickly gave it up in favour of politics. Much of the energy and passion which Abdullah displayed throughout his long political life may well have been fuelled by a deep sense of grievance.

Political activity in Kashmir did not, as is sometimes suggested, emerge from a clear blue sky in 1930. But the establishment in that year by Sheikh Abdullah and a handful of other young, educated, Srinagar-based Kashmiris of the Reading Room group was an important step in the development of a more assertive political leadership, which sought to represent the marginalized and poor. This was, as the name suggests, more of a discussion group than a political movement – but it had an agenda, that the humiliations endured by Kashmir's Muslim majority would only be remedied through political reform. The following year, a combination of issues – more religious than political – prompted demonstrations in the streets of Srinagar, which resulted in some communal attacks on Hindus and their businesses. On 13 July 1931 – the anniversary is still marked in Kashmir as Martyrs' Day – twenty-one protestors were shot dead by the Maharaja's security forces, who also resorted to mass arrests (Abdullah himself was held for three weeks). The unrest spread to other towns in the Kashmir Valley, and beyond to Jammu province where several hundred British troops were drafted in to help the Maharaja restore order. For the first time, politics in Jammu and Kashmir attracted international attention, with newspaper headlines speaking of a Kashmiri 'revolt' or 'uprising'.

These violent protests, among the most serious anywhere in India between the wars, changed Kashmiri politics in two ways, occasioning a measure of reform and allowing an opening to a popularly-based opposition. The spotlight fell on the Maharaja's autocratic rule. A British official led a commission of investigation,

which prompted some tentative measures of liberalization. Maharaja Hari Singh was persuaded to establish a partly-elected assembly, and although it had little real power and the franchise was very restricted, this was a tentative step towards representative government. The 1931 Uprising had no central leadership, nor indeed a common purpose. But it was the moment when Sheikh Abdullah emerged in Srinagar as a popular leader among the city's Muslims, reinforced by the way in which he advocated political reform and demanded concessions about religious practises and sites from the government. He was accomplished at reciting from the *Quran* and his height and resonant voice added to his authority. He became known as *Sher-e-Kashmir*, the Lion of Kashmir, a title he relished. Sheikh Abdullah's voluminous autobiography is more revealing than its author perhaps intended (Abdullah, 2013). It demonstrates his courage, confidence and charisma, as well as an impetuous nature, intensely self-regarding and often waspish about colleagues whom he regarded as disloyal.

The year after the protests and repression, in 1932, Sheikh Abdullah took the lead – along with Muslim activists in Jammu – in establishing a political party, the All Jammu and Kashmir Muslim Conference, of which he became the founding president. His political authority in Srinagar was not unchallenged. There was an intense rivalry with a one-time ally, Srinagar's senior hereditary Muslim chief priest, the Mirwaiz Kashmir (a division which is still evident today). Sheikh Abdullah's following was largely in the Kashmir Valley, and Muslim Conference leaders in Jammu were uncomfortable with both the style and substance of his leadership (another enduring political fault line). But Abdullah, supported by a small group of able colleagues, was able to fashion the Conference into a broad-based political organization.

Sheikh Abdullah's particular achievement was to instil in the Muslim Conference a progressive and outward-looking political approach. Its founding had been rooted in a community's sense of grievance – against the manner in which the Hindu princely state was run and defining Muslims' interests against those of their more privileged Hindu neighbours. But within a few years, Abdullah began to adopt a language that emphasized national rather than religious identity (Zutshi, 2003, 244–58). In the mid-1930s, he met Jawaharlal Nehru, the leading figure in the Indian National Congress. Nehru's family were, several generations earlier, from Kashmir – they were Pandits – and while his visits there prior to 1940 were infrequent, his affinity with Kashmir was profound. 'Kashmir affects me in a peculiar way', Nehru confided to Edwina Mountbatten, 'it is a kind of mild intoxication' (Ziegler, 1985, 445). When he addressed Sheikh Abdullah's

party activists in 1945 as ‘my brother and sister Kashmiris, people of the same blood and kith and kin’ (Nehru, 1982, 388–91), he meant it. This helped build bonds with Sheikh Abdullah as well as shaping the Congress’s (and later the Indian Government’s) engagement with Kashmir. Sheikh Abdullah for his part was increasingly attracted to Nehru’s style of politics:

The position of the Congress was in favour of the people of the [princely] states, whereas the Muslim League leaned to the rulers of the states. This had an impact on us too, so we were spontaneously drawn to the Congress (Abdullah, 2013, 160–61).

Sheikh Abdullah travelled with Nehru in the North West Frontier Province in 1937 where they both met another popular Muslim political leader who was attracted towards secular and progressive politics, the ‘Frontier Gandhi’, Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan. A few years later, the three men met again, at Abdullah’s invitation, in Kashmir. Abdullah attended annual sessions of the Congress and was given a senior position in the Congress-aligned All India States’ People’s Conference, which represented political movements in the princely states. He began to develop a profile beyond Jammu and Kashmir.

In 1938, Sheikh Abdullah, swayed by Nehru, proposed renaming the Muslim Conference as the National Conference. This was intended to demonstrate that the party sought to represent the interests of all subjects of the princely state, not simply the majority community. It was an important statement that the party saw political identity as based on nation and not religion – echoing Nehru’s Congress rather than Jinnah’s Muslim League. There was opposition to the change of name and Abdullah described the ‘conversion’ as a ‘painful process’ – but also as ‘a revolutionary act in the Kashmir politics’ (Abdullah, 2013, 169, 178). It was a considerable political achievement when, the following year, the party accepted the new name with little active dissent. The adaptation of the Conference was not entirely successful. Within a few years, a group including the party’s most prominent figure in Jammu, Chaudhuri Ghulam Abbas, broke away and re-established the Muslim Conference, which became loosely aligned with the Muslim League.² This reborn Muslim Conference probably had broader support among Jammu’s Muslims than the National Conference. The Kashmiri nationalism that Sheikh Abdullah espoused, although nominally embracing all of the princely state, was always more about the Kashmiri-speaking heartlands.

New Kashmir

While Sheikh Abdullah achieved a personal and political alliance with Nehru and the Congress there was another pole of attraction for Kashmiri nationalism: the left. Communist influence within the National Conference helped to shape both the tone and the agenda of its nationalism. Communists were responsible for the 1944 'New Kashmir' document, which gave detailed expression to the goals of the National Conference and came to be the shorthand by which Sheikh Abdullah's ambition for a transformation of Kashmir was known. By embracing communist support, Sheikh Abdullah was not renouncing the Congress – it was in all probability a pragmatic decision, if a decision at all. The Congress had little time for detailed involvement in Kashmiri politics in this crucial decade for the subcontinent and indeed for the last three years of the Second World War, when Nehru – along with much of the Congress leadership – was locked up in jail. Communists, both Kashmiri and well-wishers from outside the Valley, were committed to the support of radical parties such as the National Conference and had the intellectual and organizational grounding to make a difference.

Communist activity in Kashmir dated from the late 1930s and their approach chimed with the emphasis on social justice and economic opportunity, which was such an important component of the political 'awakening' (Whitehead, 2010). It was encouraged by summer gatherings in Srinagar of left-leaning intellectuals from Lahore and elsewhere. By the early 1940s, the Communist Party of India had identified Kashmir as a political issue worthy of active support and a small but significant number of local recruits had been made. 'New Kashmir' – which has been described as 'the most important political document in modern Kashmir's history' (Bose, 2003, 250) – was written in response to an initiative by the Maharaja to establish a commission to consider constitutional change. The National Conference prepared as its submission a comprehensive proposed constitution for Jammu and Kashmir. The English edition amounted to forty-four pages. 'To compile the manifesto we requisitioned the services of a famous progressive friend from Panjab [sic], B.P.L. Bedi', Abdullah recalled (2013, 217). Bedi had been attracted to communism at Oxford, where he also met his wife, a fellow student, Freda Houlston. Both became political figures of influence in Lahore and later in Srinagar.

The conventional wisdom is that Bedi, with help from communist colleagues in Lahore, wrote 'New Kashmir'. In fact, the document was largely lifted from the constitution Stalin had introduced in the Soviet Union and which Bedi knew well, having republished it in full in 1937 in a political quarterly he edited

in Lahore, *Contemporary India*. There were some concessions to Kashmir's particular circumstances – notably an acceptance of constitutional monarchy – but it was a thoroughly radical prescription for the state: freedom of conscience, worship, speech, press and assembly was to be enshrined in law; there was to be free and universal elementary education conducted in the mother tongue; women were assured of equal rights, including equal wages; there would be a planned economy; and a National Assembly was to be elected by secret ballot with everyone aged over eighteen able to vote.

Alongside this draft constitution, 'New Kashmir' contained a national economic plan, which may also have had a Soviet inspiration. This included a blueprint for a state-managed economy and embraced the abolition of landlordism and a detailed policy of agrarian reform encapsulated by the phrase 'land to the tiller'. It incorporated a women's charter, which included the right to enter trades and professions, to own and inherit property, and to consent to marriage. In his introduction, Sheikh Abdullah made explicit the inspiration that the National Conference took from Moscow: 'In our times, Soviet Russia has demonstrated before our eyes, not merely theoretically but in her actual day to day life and development, that real freedom takes birth only from economic emancipation' (New Kashmir, 7). To reinforce this revolutionary hue, the cover of the document when published in pamphlet form was in red – showing a pheran-wearing woman with her head covered brandishing the National Conference flag of a plough in white on a red background (which, as the British communist Rajani Palme Dutt noted in *Labour Monthly* in October 1946, had more than a passing similarity to the hammer and sickle).³ It was as if Marianne, the flag-wielding and barricade-storming emblem of the French republic, had come to the foothills of the Himalayas.

'New Kashmir' was, said Sheikh Abdullah, 'a revolutionary document'. He was sensitive to charges that he had relinquished his party's policy strategy to the left, just as he was keen to rebut suggestion that he was too close to the Congress:

One aspect of communist ideology is that it sides internationally with labourers and oppressed people, a fact that the National Conference has always appreciated. It has illumined its conscience not only by the Russian revolution but also by the ideals and emancipatory principles of the French revolution. Indeed, we too favoured combining the communist ideology with democracy and liberal humanism (Abdullah, 2013, 218).

In its imagery and approach, the document borrowed heavily from the French

and Soviet traditions of a determinedly secular style of nationalism. New Kashmir now became the National Conference's rallying cry. And while much of the policy prescription it contained was not acted upon, in certain crucial aspects, notably the outlining of a comprehensive plan for land redistribution, it gave notice of what a future National Conference administration would implement.

Quit Kashmir

In Kashmir, as in the rest of India, the tone of politics changed after the end of the Second World War, when it became clear that the newly elected Labour Government in Britain was committed to granting independence. Sheikh Abdullah was not in Srinagar when a British Cabinet Mission visited in April 1946, but he sent a telegram to express the National Conference's increasingly forthright point of view: 'Today the national demand of the people of Kashmir is not merely the establishment of a system of responsible government, but their right to absolute freedom from the autocratic rule of the Maharaja' (Abdullah, 1947, 1–3). This was a notable hardening of political attitude from the New Kashmir manifesto. Sheikh Abdullah was no longer arguing for a constitutional monarchy but making a 'national demand' for the sovereignty of the people of Kashmir.

A matter of weeks later, the National Conference adopted the slogan 'Quit Kashmir' – a deliberate echo of the 'Quit India' campaign pursued by the Congress during the war. While Indian nationalists had been calling on the British to leave, the Kashmiri nationalists' target was their own princely family. Sheikh Abdullah insisted that one campaign was a 'logical extension' of the other:

When the Indian freedom movement demands the complete withdrawal of British power, logically enough the stooges of British Imperialism also should go and restore sovereignty to its real owners - the people Sovereignty is not the birthright of a ruler. Every man, woman and child will shout 'Quit Kashmir.' The Kashmiri nation has expressed its will (Abdullah, 1947, 7–8).

The campaign was in part intended to buttress the faltering support for the National Conference in the war years – when the party was variously castigated for being too close to the Congress, seen by some in Kashmir as Hindu-dominated, and for being too willing to collaborate with princely rule.

Quit Kashmir saw protests across much of the Kashmir Valley, though with less support elsewhere in the state. The Maharaja's administration responded

with repression. Sheikh Abdullah was arrested in May along with many other National Conference leaders. His key lieutenants, Bakshi Ghulam Mohammad and G. M. Sadiq, managed to get to Lahore from where they sought to lead the movement from a distance. Communists and those working with them, notably Ghulam Mohiuddin Karra, were active underground in Kashmir. And for the first time, women came to prominence within the Kashmiri nationalist movement. 'When [the] male leadership was put behind the bars or driven underground, the women leaders took charge and gave a new direction to the struggle', recalled Krishna Misri, then a teenager living in Srinagar. 'However the leaders addressed no controversial woman-specific issues for they did not want to come across as social rebels' (Misri, 2002, 19–20).

The pursuit of the Quit Kashmir campaign caused an overwhelming difficulty for the National Conference – almost all the leadership was under arrest or out of the picture at a time of political turbulence and crisis. Sheikh Abdullah was in part saved by the failings of his political rivals; the Muslim Conference was divided, but the larger faction was goaded to oppose the Maharaja's repression and some of its leaders were also jailed. There was, however, a key dividend for Sheikh Abdullah. The Quit Kashmir agitation, Sheikh Abdullah's arrest and the widespread condemnation that attracted, confirmed his party as the most determined opposition in the Kashmir Valley to an unpopular and unwise Maharaja. Abdullah himself, with his charisma and undoubted political courage, was unrivalled in his popular support. 'As the architect of the Kashmir freedom struggle, his sacrifices in that cause had become legendary', asserts the historian Ian Copland. 'Of course, like every leader, the Lion of Kashmir had his flaws and limitations ... But in the early 1940s he dominated his party and region to an extent probably unmatched by any other contemporary politician' (Copland, 1991, 230).

Sheikh Abdullah was put on trial for sedition and exciting disaffection towards the Maharaja. Nehru tried to get to Srinagar to take part in his defence. On the first occasion, he was stopped and detained by the Jammu and Kashmir state authorities – a move which horrified Karan Singh, the Maharaja's son and heir: 'instead of welcoming [Nehru] and seeking his co-operation, we had arrested him. I have no doubt that his arrest was the turning point in the history of the State' (Singh, 1982, 40). A few weeks later in July, Nehru managed to reach the Kashmiri capital and Sheikh Abdullah recalled that it was the only time he saw his friend in his barrister's gown. Rajani Palme Dutt, a leading British communist who had enormous influence in the Indian party, also met Sheikh Abdullah in

court and described Kashmir as 'the political storm-centre of the Indian fight for freedom' (Dutt, 1946, 321). In the Valley, communists organized discretely within the National Conference; Sheikh Abdullah 'was very sensitive about any parallel political activity', one communist veteran recalled.⁴ Indian communist publications, which had hitherto largely ignored Kashmir, championed both the Quit Kashmir movement and Sheikh Abdullah.

In the turbulent politics of the mid-1940s, there was little open discussion of how the Kashmiri nationalism of the National Conference would co-exist with the Indian nationalism of the Congress. In September 1946, Nehru provided the introduction to an account of Sheikh Abdullah's trial in Srinagar earlier that year which sought to address the relationship between these two nationalisms:

Just when we find that India is on the verge of independence, we find the Kashmir authorities, totally oblivious of this fact, seeking to crush their own people and their desire for freedom. A real people's movement can never be crushed in this way, much less can it be crushed when India herself is putting an end to foreign rule. ... The story ... will go on till it reaches the logical end which can only be the establishment of freedom in Kashmir within the larger frame-work of a free and independent India (Abdullah, 1947, i-iii).

The same volume carried Sheikh Abdullah's speech from the dock, which ended with a peroration looking to a future 'in which we as free men and women, linked organically with the rest of India, will build the New Kashmir of our dreams' (Abdullah, 1947, 38). The subtle difference of emphasis here would have been regarded as inconsequential at the time, but it exposed a fault line, which would later become much more pronounced. Abdullah was talking of a relationship between Kashmir and India based on equality and mutual respect; Nehru's comment implied an element of hierarchy.

Kashmiri nationalism in power

Kashmiris often complain of a lack of agency in determining how they are governed. The much repeated adage is that Kashmir has not been ruled by Kashmiris since 1586, when Mughal rule was established over the Valley. That sense of grievance is profound – and understandable. But the tumultuous events of the autumn of 1947, when Sheikh Abdullah was released from jail and within weeks found himself effectively in command in Srinagar, were a rare moment of mass political mobilization during which the actions of Kashmiris shaped events,

rather than merely registering a protest against them. This is not the place for a detailed account of Kashmir's accession to India and the initial episodes of the enduring dispute between India and Pakistan – but it is necessary to rehearse at least some of that narrative to understand how Kashmiri nationalists came to power and the limits to their authority.⁵

India and Pakistan gained independence in August 1947 with Maharaja Hari Singh still vacillating about the state's future – he hoped that Jammu and Kashmir could be independent, though he had been told that this was not an option – and its most commanding political leader behind bars. The Maharaja's administration came under pressure from Delhi to free Sheikh Abdullah and did so on 29 September. The crowds, which greeted the National Conference leader in Srinagar, were a powerful affirmation of his popularity. But the political situation had changed during his detention and it took him a while to realize just how rapidly events were moving. The most pressing issue facing Jammu and Kashmir on his release was accession: would the princely state sign up with India or Pakistan? Both the Maharaja and Sheikh Abdullah were, for different reasons, leaning towards India – but Abdullah argued for 'freedom before accession', insisting that Kashmir's priority was responsible government and that a decision on its future status could wait. Some within the National Conference were even at this late stage indulging in left-wing rhetoric. 'What the present moment demands and demands urgently is not accession to Pakistan or India', argued a newspaper supporting the National Conference, 'but power to the people' (Zutshi, 2003, 307–08).

In as much as the British authorities had thought about Kashmir's future dispensation, there was a tacit assumption that it would go to Pakistan (Messervy, 1949, 482). This reflected not simply the logic of Partition that adjoining Muslim-majority areas would form a state for the subcontinent's Muslims, but also patterns of transport, trade and cultural affinity (Snedden, 2015, 153–54). The Muslim Conference came to advocate accession to Pakistan, and there were other, at first glance unlikely, proponents of Pakistan's case; among those who came to Srinagar in early October to lobby was Sheikh Abdullah's old friend, Muhammad Din Taseer, a leftist who had been a college principal in the Kashmiri capital (Taseer, 1986, 49–53).

The issue was forced by an invasion of Kashmir in late October by several thousand armed tribesmen from areas adjoining Pakistan's North West Frontier Province. The Maharaja's authority was already being challenged by a serious local uprising in Poonch in the west of Jammu province, which spread to areas

near Mirpur where a provisional government was declared (Snedden, 2012, 41–47). The tribal army that entered the Kashmir Valley was a more considerable force, and had the silent support of sections of Pakistan's government and armed forces. It advanced with a mix of motives: to secure Kashmir for Pakistan, wage *jihad*, evict its non-Muslim ruler and accumulate loot. As a fighting force it was formidable but ill-disciplined. At first, some Kashmiris welcomed these invaders as liberators from an unpopular Maharaja. But the tribesmen's appetite for ransacking, rape and abduction – targeted mainly, but far from exclusively, at non-Muslims – both delayed their advance and lost them local support. It also terrified the Maharaja and with the encouragement of the Indian Government, he abandoned Srinagar for Jammu (Whitehead, 2007, 104–12).

As soon as Hari Singh reached his palace at Jammu, he signed the document which made his princely state part of India. By then, India's armed forces had begun an airlift to Srinagar – though they were not able to land more than a few hundred troops a day. These forces initially failed to stem the invaders' advance, and the armed tribesmen reached within a few miles of the Kashmiri capital. But as India's military presence in Srinagar grew, and with the deployment of military aircraft to strafe and bomb the Pakistani irregulars, it gained the upper hand. The tide turned with an encounter at Shalateng just outside Srinagar on 7 November. The following day, the Indian army entered unchallenged the key town of Baramulla, which had been under the invaders' control for a little under two weeks. The conflict was not over, indeed in many ways it had hardly begun, but ever since then India has had military control of the Kashmir Valley.

The departure of the Maharaja and most of his administration left a political vacuum which the National Conference was quick to fill. National Conference volunteers took to the streets – and with Nehru's support, and with weapons and training provided by the Indian army, were transformed into a national militia. The depredations of the tribal fighters in Baramulla had deeply alarmed many in Srinagar and the immediate goal of the militia was to defend the Kashmiri capital. In the most startling innovation of the new era, a Women's Self Defence Corps was raised in Srinagar, consisting disproportionately of Pandit women and teenage girls, but extending across communities. The women volunteers drilled in public and were trained in the use of rifles and grenades. There could be no more emphatic demonstration that princely rule was in effect over than the presence of Sheikh Abdullah's supporters, some of them armed, on the streets of Srinagar.

The Kashmiri capital, by the accounts of those witnessing the new order, pulsed with political energy. The *Times of India* correspondent in an article

published on 8 November 1947, the same day that Indian troops took Baramulla, gave a sense of the mood of the moment:

The National Conference red flag ... decorates every public building in the city. In the main square in the heart of the city, which has been renamed 'Red Square', a giant red flag flutters from a tall mast under which workers and ordinary people foregather at all hours of the day to hear the latest news of the war and exchange political gossip. Here also is located the National Militia's 'guerilla operational headquarters' and the National Conference H.Q.

The square was renamed as (and is still known as) Lal Chowk or Red Square not simply because of the National Conference flag, but in tribute to the Red Square in the Soviet capital. The left took the initiative in organizing both the men's and women's militia. Communists also initiated a cultural front by which progressive writers and artists from across India sought to celebrate the popular mobilization, which had secured Sheikh Abdullah's rise to power. While what Srinagar experienced was not a classic revolution, it was a popular mobilization, which hastened and confirmed a change of regime; but as it was also an endorsement of Indian rule, this chapter in Kashmir's modern history does not easily fit any of the competing Nationalist narratives and so has been largely written out of the historical record.

At Nehru's insistence, Sheikh Abdullah was appointed by the Maharaja as head of the emergency administration, working in tandem with his Prime Minister. This awkward, and short-lived, constitutional dispensation could not disguise that political authority in the Kashmir Valley rested with the National Conference – where of course it was buttressed by the presence of the Indian army. Within six weeks of his release from jail, Sheikh Abdullah had come to power – though not of an independent nation-state, but of a constituent of newly-independent India. Kashmir's status was not finally resolved by the Maharaja's signature on the instrument of accession. Lord Mountbatten, the first Governor-General of independent India, accepted accession but subject to 'a reference to the people' of Jammu and Kashmir once law and order had been restored.

A few days later on 2 November 1947, with the struggle for Srinagar still unresolved, Nehru made two commitments which the Indian Government failed to honour: that India's military presence in Kashmir would end once 'Kashmir is free from the invader'; and that Kashmir's future status would be determined by 'a referendum held under international auspices like the United Nations' (*White*

Paper, 1948, 52–55). Nehru visited the Kashmir Valley nine days later, addressing a rally alongside Sheikh Abdullah at Lal Chowk and visiting the devastated town of Baramulla. The National Conference leader, still becoming accustomed to his new-found power, was not initially enthused by the prospect of a popular vote. 'After what happened in these places', he was quoted as saying in the *Hindustan Times* of 12 November 1947, 'the people of Kashmir may not bother about a referendum.' Over the years, both men's views changed – Nehru came to argue that a referendum was no longer necessary, while Sheikh Abdullah put such an emphasis on self-determination that the organization in which his followers mustered from the mid-1950s was called the Plebiscite Front.

The parting of the ways

Sheikh Abdullah and his colleagues took power in Jammu and Kashmir under the shadow of war. While the Indian army repulsed the invading forces from the Kashmir Valley, it failed to secure control of the entire princely state. In the spring of 1948, Pakistan – worried about the prospect of a renewed Indian offensive – openly deployed troops to Kashmir. The two neighbours were at war. A ceasefire was achieved at the end of the year and the ceasefire line – which has changed remarkably little down the decades – entailed an informal partition of Jammu and Kashmir, with the greater part in terms of population, including all the Kashmir Valley, coming under Indian control. But this was not an enduring settlement – and decades later, there still is no resolution of Indian and Pakistani conflicting territorial claims over the region. Parts of the former princely state were also caught up in the communal violence, which disfigured the end of the British Raj, with substantial population movements in the Jammu region in particular and grievous massacres of Jammu Muslims.

It was not an easy backdrop to achieve the idealism of New Kashmir. The leaders of the National Conference had next to no experience in administration. Sheikh Abdullah had proved himself to be a hugely effective political mobilizer, but he was not an instinctive pluralist. The party had never needed to organize a significant election campaign; it had not come to power by the ballot box and the first elections of consequence were to the state's Constituent Assembly in 1951, four years after accession. The new administration's task was further complicated by the sharply varying political cultures of the constituent parts of the Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir – the Jammu region, almost as populous as the Kashmir Valley, had (after 1947) a Hindu majority, which broadly supported full integration with India; the sparsely populated Ladakh region, which was

itself divided into areas of Buddhist and of Shia Muslim predominance, was also uneasy about Kashmiri domination of the state.

In all the circumstances, it is remarkable that Sheikh Abdullah's administration (he formally became Prime Minister of Jammu and Kashmir in the spring of 1948 and the monarchy, by then of no real authority, was abolished in 1952) made any headway in building a progressive Kashmir. His great achievement, and one in which he took pride, was the implementation of perhaps the most far-reaching land reforms in independent India. In the early 1950s, several thousand large and medium-size landowners, most non-Muslims, lost much of their estates without payment of compensation. The implementation was not without flaws, nevertheless 7,00,000 landless cultivators became peasant proprietors, albeit often with small plots and the profound problem of rural indebtedness was also alleviated. In an agrarian society, this really was a revolution – for most Kashmiris, this was the most emphatic demonstration of New Kashmir in action.

Kashmir's new leader had less success in achieving unity of purpose within his movement. While Sheikh Abdullah had been happy to have the left's support in his years in opposition, he was instinctively uncomfortable with the communists, not least because their loyalty was not unwaveringly to him. Abdullah did not include the left's champion, G. M. Karra – the only Kashmiri political leader with a popular following to rival his own – in his cabinet, and rather than agree to the communist call to turn his volunteer force into a 'People's Militia', in 1948 he reorganized the militia to curb communist influence. By then, the Communist Party of India had lurched towards ultra-leftism and largely abandoned work within 'national bourgeois' political forces. That did not stop loud complaints of communist influence, both from political rivals and from outside observers such as the Czechoslovak diplomat Josef Korbel, who regarded Abdullah as 'an opportunist and, worse, a dictator' and was worried 'that Kashmir might eventually become a hub of Communist activities in Southern Asia' (Korbel, 1966, 97, 198, 207).

Factional infighting and complaints of corruption also troubled the state administration and tarnished the reputation of its leaders. Opponents of the state government were harassed, and some – including Karra – were jailed. Alongside all this, Sheikh Abdullah became increasingly critical of Delhi's attitude towards Kashmir. For the Indian Government, keeping hold of Kashmir – as a statement of its secular nationalism and to deny its neighbour and rival – became a greater priority than securing the good governance of the state and the popular legitimacy of its rulers. 'Commitment to liberal principles was the reason Nehru offered plebiscite to Kashmir as a method of confirming a provisional accession.

But nationalism soon defined the limits of liberalism ...', Ashutosh Varshney has argued. According to him, 'Kashmir exemplifies the helplessness of liberalism against nationalism' (Varshney, 1992, 197). Or to put it another way, Indian nationalism trumped Kashmiri nationalism.

The Indian Constitution, which came into effect in the early 1950s contained a provision, Article 370, which codified the distinct status of Jammu and Kashmir. This limited Delhi's direct authority over the state and allowed for Jammu and Kashmir to have its own constituent assembly. In practical terms, it meant that the authority of some India-wide bodies such as the Supreme Court and the Election Commission did not automatically extend to the state; that Kashmir's flag could fly alongside the national flag; and that some idiosyncracies in titles and procedures could persist. In a broadly federal system of government, in which the states have considerable power, it meant that Jammu and Kashmir had a measure more autonomy than other states. In practice, it has had less autonomy. Many of the provisions of Article 370 have been unravelled – though its totemic political importance remains – and Delhi has interfered more persistently in Jammu and Kashmir than probably any other state. It is now, in the apt words of Christopher Snedden, 'fully integrated into India administratively, economically and politically – although not emotionally' (Snedden, 2015, 193).

From Delhi's perspective, Sheikh Abdullah appeared to be arguing with growing vehemence that if India did not respect Kashmir and its institutions, then the issue of accession might need to be revisited. Sheikh Abdullah angrily insisted that he was not, as alleged, working with outside powers to detach Kashmir from India. But for all his protestations, his impassioned rhetoric – in public and in private – could give rise to such suspicions. Sheikh Abdullah told a British journalist in 1949 that 'independence – guaranteed by the United Nations – may be the only solution' to the issue of Kashmir's status (Davidson, 1949). Of even greater concern in Delhi was Abdullah's conversations with diplomats. In January 1948, while in New York to press India's case at the United Nations, Abdullah had a conversation with an American diplomat who put on record the substance of their meeting. 'It is possible that [the] principal purpose of Abdullah's visit was to make it clear to [the] US that there is a third alternative, namely independence. He was overly anxious to get this point across.' This was not an isolated act. In September 1950, the American Ambassador to India sent a telegram to Washington about 'two secret discussions' with, and at the initiative of, Sheikh Abdullah: 'He was vigorous in restating that in his opinion [Kashmir] should be independent; that overwhelming majority population

desired this independence' (Bhattacharjea, 2008, 154; Varshney, 1992, 205). When addressing local audiences, Sheikh Abdullah was more circumspect, and in his inaugural address to Jammu and Kashmir's Constituent Assembly in May 1951, he specifically set his face against independence. But when he later began to speak of 'a free and voluntary association of partners' (Bhattacharjea, 2008, 161), a partnership between Kashmir and India rather than Delhi's goal of integration, the Indian Government began to lose patience.

In August 1953, Sheikh Abdullah was dismissed as Prime Minister and detained. His deputy and long-time close associate, Bakshi Ghulam Mohammad, took over as Prime Minister of Jammu and Kashmir. In public, Nehru kept a distance from the decision, but the memoirs of his intelligence chief leave no doubt that India's Prime Minister was party to the arrest of his one-time friend (Mullik, 1971, 36–45). Sheikh Abdullah spent most of the next twenty years in Indian jails, under house arrest, or banned from his home state. He was eventually reconciled with Nehru, after a fashion, but in his memoirs, the Kashmiri leader's bitterness at what he called a 'coup' seeps through, made more intense because the two men had once been such staunch allies. 'For me', Abdullah laments regarding Nehru, 'he proved more oppressive and dictatorial than the Maharaja' (Abdullah, 2013, 188). The brutal response to the protests prompted by Abdullah's dismissal – Nehru recorded that his intelligence service said there had been forty-nine deaths in 'police and like action' (Nehru, 1998, 373–74) – were more reminiscent of the Maharaja's rule than of the promise of New Kashmir. Abdullah's successors necessarily relied on Delhi for their position, so much so that the National Conference was at one point merged with the Congress party. Sheikh Abdullah regained power in Kashmir a little over twenty years after his dismissal, but then only because he had made an inelegant deal with Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, Nehru's daughter.

India's action in replacing Sheikh Abdullah and the habit of interference in Kashmir affairs it initiated, tarnished the legitimacy of state governments in Jammu and Kashmir for half a century. Some would argue that its shadow still hangs over Srinagar. Kashmiri nationalist parties committed to constitutional politics have been compromised by the deeply unequal relationship with Delhi. The broad Kashmiri nationalist current has at times made accommodations – sometimes out of principle, at others largely tactical – with the Indian state. But there has been no enduring settlement between Kashmiri and Indian nationalisms, no agreement about the extent of autonomy for the state, and it is not hard to see why such a resolution has proved so elusive.

Endnotes

- 1 This chapter is principally concerned with the Kashmir Valley, the heartland of Kashmiri culture and national identity, which constituted a little less than half the population of the domain of the Maharaja of Kashmir (the princely state of Jammu and Kashmir), and currently constitutes a little more than half the population of the Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir.
- 2 When Jinnah visited the Kashmir Valley in 1944, he lavished praise on the Muslim Conference and rebuffed Sheikh Abdullah's political overtures. This may have been a recognition that Sheikh Abdullah was unlikely to endorse eventual accession to Pakistan, but it may also have served to push Abdullah towards the Congress.
- 3 The *pheran* is the cloak-like garment, which is widely worn in the Kashmir Valley.
- 4 Pran Nath Jalali, interviewed by the author, 30 March 2007, Delhi.
- 5 A detailed account of Kashmir in 1947 can be found in Whitehead, 2007. This presents the compelling evidence that the Maharaja signed the instrument of accession by which his princely state became part of India on 27 October 1947, and not, as the official Indian account continues to insist, on the previous day.

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