

## **Phenomenal leadership role of Sheikh Mohammad Abdullah and the radical changes in Jammu & Kashmir**

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### **Abstract**

Sheikh Mohammad Abdullah alias Sher-e-Kashmir [Lion of Kashmir] held an unrivaled place in the history of Kashmir and in the historic transition from tradition to modernity. He left an indelible impact on the political landscape of Kashmir. Sheikh Mohammad Abdullah's legacy of sacrifices and statesmanship while pledging to fulfill his mission of restoring the political rights and honour of the State and its people. His struggles and sacrifices for the dignity of the Jammu & Kashmir State. "Sher-e-Kashmir's life was a valiant story of selfless leadership. He fought for the political rights and dignity of his people till his last breath. The zeal in his eyes and dedication in his face were what made him supreme in the eyes of his fellow Kashmiris. His legacy denotes the State's high traits of pluralistic ethos and inclusiveness. He nurtured and strengthened this characteristic and cemented the bonds of love between various sections of the society and different regions of the State. His ultimate goal was the political and economic empowerment of the common man and the equitable development of the State. His vision of Naya [New] Kashmir encompassed holistic and comprehensive development of all sections and all regions of the State without any favour or discrimination. This Peace of descriptive research article intends to picture and ponder over the incredible traits of Abdullah's Leadership is establishing eternal peace in Jammu & Kashmir.

**Keywords:** Sheikh Mohammad Abdullah, leadership, traits, development, Sher-e-Kashmir, Naya Kashmir

### **Introduction**

Born to a merchant family in Soura a few miles outside the capital city of Srinagar, Kashmir, on December 5, 1905. At that time Kashmiris were overtaken by poverty, slavery, beggar (forced labour without wages) and continued political and economic deprivation/subjugation for over 50 years of Sikh brutalities and 100 years of Dogra tyrannical policies.

Sheikh Abdullah returned to Srinagar in 1930 after obtaining degrees from Lahore and Aligarh, both recognized Universities. He was twenty-five; an angry young man brimming with resentment against the pervasive discrimination practiced by the Dogra maharajas of Jammu & Kashmir against Muslims, the majority of their subjects. In Aligarh, he met some liberal and progressive intellectuals and prominent among them was Dr. Sir Muhammad Iqbal, that broadened his vision and understanding about the problems of Muslims in India.

Due to low self esteem people were driven like dumb, driven cattle and nobody had the courage to speak up against the Maharaja. Education was domain of privileged class. Only four seats were reserved in the only institution of Kashmir - Sri Pratap College - for Muslim students, established by Annie Besant, a British Social Reformer and educationist in 1905, for the then ruler Maharaja Pratap Singh.

Abdullah was among the relatively few Kashmiri Muslims who were graduates but frustrated by their inability to find suitable employment. The only job he could find with his M.Sc degree was as school teacher. He tried it for few months, but was drawn into the stirrings of political activity in

Srinagar. As political meetings were prohibited, he and a group of young, educated, frustrated Muslims set up what was described as a Reading Room in a private house in the Fathkadal area of Srinagar. They imparted their meetings with an academic flavor, but they discussed political issues, read political journals and established contacts with outside sympathizers. Mohammad Rajab was elected president and Sheikh Abdullah general secretary.

The Fathkadal Reading Room attracted the intelligent, well-educated, and frustrated cream of the Muslim community; their concerns went beyond employment, which they found so difficult to obtain, to social and political developments. Viewing themselves of an oppressive, monarchical system. The first Reading initiative in September 1930 was to send a memorandum to the authorities complaining against the rules. Sheikh Abdullah became known as an outspoken young leader and the Reading Room group as a political force.

The "reading room" also managed to obtain statistics regarding Muslims in government service and got them published in the newspapers of Lahore. Later these figures were also submitted to the "Glancy Commission". They also submitted a memorandum to the regency council headed by Mr. Wakefield. The "reading room" played a very pivotal role in Kashmir's struggle for freedom. It not only educated the masses about their political rights, but activated and brought them into active politics and political action.

In 1931 certain deplorable incidents agitated the masses and compelled them to take out processions and hold demonstrations against the maharaja and his lackeys. What

happened is history, but here we must know the landscape of the valley at the time it did. Firstly, the religious sentiments of the Muslims were hurt when in Jammu the holy Quran was desecrated by a Dogra police officer and in another case a Maulvi [preacher] while giving a sermon which was unreasonably stopped from giving the sermon. This created strong resentment among the Muslim masses and the Muslim leaders came out openly and delivered fiery speeches against the government.

On November 12, 1931, the Maharaja announced the appointment of Clancy Commission to look into the grievances of different communities of the State. The Commission attempted to allay Muslim grievances, which did not fulfill the demands of the Muslims.

### **Policy of Secular Values**

The Maharaja, ignorant of the feelings and aspirations of the people, did not take any initiative in winning back their good will and confidence, all these factors lead to the formation of Muslim conference. The most zealous and conspicuous among the young agitators was Sheikh Muhammad Abdullah. The inaugural session was held from 14<sup>th</sup> to 16<sup>th</sup> of October, in 1932 in the historic Pathar Masjid, Srinagar under the President ship of Sheikh Mohammad Abdullah. It was a unique gathering, especially in the sense that all Muslims irrespective of their religious differences or social distinction, sat shoulder to shoulder on the same platform with the common objective of providing Muslims with a single political platform.

Abdullah committed his party and people to a secular movement for representative government with a radical socioeconomic reform agenda. The process of secularization began, with Abdullah's address to the inaugural session of the Muslim Conference in October 1932, that it was not designed to be a communal body but to express popular grievances.

In the Sixth annual session of Muslim Conference was held in Jammu from 25<sup>th</sup> March to 27<sup>th</sup> March, 1938 under the President ship of Sheikh Mohammad Abdullah. In his address he invited non-Muslims for participation in the freedom struggle against the autocratic ruler and said, "Our Policy of admitting non-Muslims is neither tactical nor diplomatic, but it is a sincere voice from our heart.

Muslim Conference was then converted into the National Conference on the advice of Prem Nath Bazaz. He was already in touch with Congress leaders and lost no time to introduce Sheikh Abdullah to Jawaharlal Nehru and Mahatma Gandhi in 1937. Later on Prem Nath Bazaz formally joined National Conference. Sheikh Abdullah was known as Sher-e-Kashmir for his fearlessness and pro-people policies. He reached the masses, but they gave him back what bolstered his confidence and his determination to continue his struggle for their uplift. Their affection for him, their gatherings in tens of thousands to see and hear and if possible touch him, were spontaneous. They felt that something new was happening in their drab lives, that he really cared for them, understood their problems and was determined to do something about them.

In September 1944, a brain storming session of National Conference (NC) was held at Mujahid Manzil in which an elaborate socialistic-politico-economic document known as 'Naya Kashmir' was approved. This document was divided in

two parts. First: Constitutional structure which laid down details of fundamental rights of citizens, freedom of speech, press, freedom of worship and equality of rights, irrespective of religion, color, caste or sex in all spheres of life. It also proposed a democratic government with an independent judicial system. Second: National Economic Plan which proposed abolition of landlordism, assignment of land to tillers, right to work with wages and freedom from debt.

In 1982 Sheikh Abdullah writes in his autobiography: 'the New Kashmir Document was not only revolutionary in the State but in the whole sub-continent. After thirty eight years it is yet relevant document. Land to tiller idea presented in it, after freedom sub-continent could not implement it after years passed. New Kashmir Manifesto provides guarantee to rights of women, labourers and weaker sections of the society.

In May 1946 Sheikh Mohammad Abdullah launched the Quit Kashmir agitation against Maharaja Hari Singh. In May 1946 the Sheikh was sentenced to nine years in prison for having led the seditious Quit Kashmir movement against the maharaja's regime. Despite the support that the Quit Kashmir movement launched by the Sheikh's cadre received from some regional councils and state Congress committees, the movement was crushed tactically and militarily. On 20 May 1946, speaking at a public rally at the Shahi Masjid (mosque), Srinagar, the Sheikh thunderously condemned the 1846 Treaty of Amritsar, which had legitimized the Dogra possession of Kashmir. In a telegram sent by the Sheikh to the members of the British Cabinet Mission, he declared that the sale deed of Amritsar conferred no privileges "equivalent to those claimed by states governed by treaty rights. We wish to declare that no sale deed, however sacrosanct, can condemn more than four million men and women to servitude of an autocrat when will to live under this rule is no longer there."

### **Head of Emergency Administration & Prime Minister of Kashmir**

Following an attack by Pakistan, Hari Singh appealed to Lord Mountbatten, the Governor General of India for Indian military aid. The support of Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru, the prime minister of India was a key factor in getting Sheikh Abdullah appointed as Head of the emergency administration by the Maharaja.

As a consequence, Sheikh Abdullah was appointed head of an emergency administration by an order issued by the Maharaja. He took charge as Head of the Emergency Administration on 30 October 1947. He raised a force of local Kashmiri volunteers to patrol Srinagar and take control of administration after the flight of the Maharaja along with this family and Prime Minister Mahajan to Jammu even before the Indian troops had landed. This group of volunteers would serve as the nucleus for the subsequent formation of Jammu & Kashmir after the Indian army was withdrawn.

On intervention of Nehru, Sheikh Abdullah took over as Prime Minister of Kashmir on March 5, 1948. After getting empowered as prime Minister, Sheikh Abdullah immediately wanted to fulfill his promised policy of "Land to the Tillers" and do away with "Jagirdarana System". The government enacted the "Big Landlords Estates Abolition Act in 1950" which did not allow landlords to keep more than 20 acres of agricultural land and one acre of residential land. The land in

excess of the ceiling was transferred to the tillers and subsequently on March 26, 1952 Constituent Assembly passed a resolution that the tillers would not pay compensation to the landlords. Thus the Landlord Feudal System was abolished and thousands of peasant's earlier living as slaves became land holders. Hindu landlords who got adversely affected by the reforms got annoyed, as the beneficiaries were Muslims. They influenced Pandit Nehru and also Tara Devi poisoned Sardar Patel against Sheikh Mohammad Abdullah. Thus the land reforms became root cause of mistrust between Sheikh Abdullah and Government of India.

Karan Singh issued proclamation on April 30, 1951 for constitution of Constituent Assembly. Elections were held, the constituent Assembly drafted Constitution. The Constituent Assembly was given mandate to decide the future of the royal dynasty. The Constituent Assembly was still engaged in drafting Constitution, there was stiff resistance between various political leaders of Congress who objected the autonomous structure of the State. Praja Parishad launched agitation in Jammu. DP Dhar and Karan Singh poisoned Nehru against Sheikh Abdullah with concocted story that Sheikh had nexus with United States and planning to get independence. He had met US Envoy Adali Stevenson in Srinagar. Nehru was convinced that time has come to replace Sheikh Abdullah. Nehru told Karan Singh to dismiss Sheikh Abdullah. Accordingly Karan Singh issued an arrest warrant against Sheikh Abdullah who was in Gulmarg at that time. Thus Sheikh Abdullah was unconstitutionally dismissed as PM of Kashmir for alleged conspiracy against India.

When Sheikh was caged, there were widespread demonstrations in entire Kashmir. Bakshi Ghulam Mohammad was appointed as Prime Minister of Kashmir. He promised economic concessions to the people and undertook huge developmental projects. Bakshi abolished the permit system required for Indian citizens to enter Kashmir in 1959. During mid 1960s Sheikh established SKIMS (Sher-i-Kashmir Institute of Medical Sciences) and renovated Dargah Hazratbal which earned him name and fame. Sensing the popularity of Sheikh Abdullah, Nehru invited him again and sought his views on Kashmir. Sheikh Abdullah proposed confederation which probably could be acceptable to all the three parties, India, Pakistan and Kashmir. Nehru wanted Sheikh to seek approval of his proposal from Pakistan. Sheikh Abdullah left for Pakistan on May 24, 1964 with Mirza Afzal Beig and met President Ayub Khan. He out rightly rejected the proposal. He was still in Pakistan when he heard the news of death of Nehru. Thus the doors of reconciliation closed forever. After that he left for Haj pilgrimage and also visited Egypt, England and Algeria. Pakistan arranged his meeting with Chu-zu-lai, who invited Sheikh Abdullah to China. On these developments his passport was cancelled by Indian government May 8, 1965 and was arrested at Delhi Airport and sent to Ootacamund Jail. He spent 22 years in jail.

In 1964, he was released. He got enthusiastic reception. Sheikh Abdullah floated Plebiscite Front a political movement seeking a nationwide note on independence. He also initiated the construction of SKIMS which is a landmark achievement of his life. He travelled many countries and collected money for its construction. Kashmiri Muslims have emotional attachment with Dargah Hazratbal which was renovated.

Sensing popularity of Sheikh Abdullah. Pt. Nehru invited him and sought his opinion for everlasting solution of Kashmir tangle.

The 'Accord' was followed by the Sheikh Abdullah's assuming charge as the chief minister on February 25, 1975- an office which was a relegated one compared to the one Sheikh occupied prior to his dismissal on August 9, 1953. His seven years tenure as chief minister set the future pattern of the state politics. Even though squabbles with the Congress and his endeavor to reestablish his hold over the administrative machinery consumed much of his energy, Sheikh Abdullah took some very important steps of administrative nature. Even before the assumption of power and after the Accord, he had committed himself to certain changes in the administration and promised clean and fear administrative setup. He enthusiastically declared that "a clean and a fair administration shall be introduced in the state

### Conclusion

Sheikh Mohammad Abdullah was one of the most distinguished political leaders who ruled in the Kashmir valley, prior to the Indian Independence and post the freedom struggle in India. His never-say-die attitude earned him the moniker of "Sher-e-Kashmir" (Lion of Kashmir), by his ardent supporters. Sheikh Abdullah was distinguished and dominant political personality of the State for five decades (1930 to 1982). He made a long struggle for uprooting autocratic rule and establishment of democratic rule in the state. He was a charismatic leader. He left an indelible impact on the political landscape of Kashmir. He was a crowd puller. He was deeply religious, a symbol of secularism and ardent supporter of socialism. He was committed to women's emancipation through education. It was due to the force of his personality and the reverence in which was held that he was able to bring about a transformation in the basic attitudes of people. It was because of his care, understanding and affection for the women of Kashmir and their development in education and economic independence that there has been this revolutionary change, for he believed that women, being half of the human race, no society can progress if this half its members do not have equal opportunities and if they are not given a chance to develop their talents and capabilities.

The end of autocratic rule of Maharaja, establishment of democratically elected government, restoration of civil liberties, construction of SKIMS, reforms in education department and remodelling of Dargah Hazratbal and abolition of landlordism and land to tillers, introduction of single line administration are some of the landmark achievements of his life for which he will be remembered for long time to come.

Mr. B.K. Nehru, Governor of the State of Jammu & Kashmir and Chancellor of the University of Kashmir, 1980-84 talked in the same strain in his article, "A Personal Memoir" about Sheikh Mohammed Abdullah:

*"I miss the company of the Sheikh Sahab. Great men are not born every day. Those who have the opportunity of seeing them, meeting them and being intimate with them, are greatly privileged and honoured and when, as all mortals do, they pass away the memory remains even more*

*intense with those who had this privilege”*

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