

# Formation of National Conference and its role in party system of Jammu and Kashmir

FAYAZ AHMAD WANI

Research Scholar  
Political Science  
Jiwaji University, M.P.

**Abstract:** The Jammu and Kashmir state is consisted of three main cultural units and geographical divisions, namely, Jammu, Kashmir and Ladakh. The Jammu and Kashmir state came in to being as a result of the conquest of the Punjab by the British in 1845. The territories of Jammu and Kashmir which formed a part of the Sikh state were separated from it. The Provinces of Kashmir and Gilgat were handed over to tax payer of Sikh Empire Gulab Singh, for a cash payment of seventy five lakh of rupees by the British. Gulab Singh was recognized the Maharaja of Jammu and Kashmir. He laid the foundation of Dogra rule in the state. The Dogras retained the feudal structure of society, which the earlier rulers had already established in the state. The Muslim subjects who formed the majority of the population bore the heaviest brunt and burden of the Dogra autocracy which was restrictive, despotic and exploitative. The freedom movement was actually a vigorous struggle against the oppressive rule of Dogras. The present study with the role of National Conference in the politics of the state of Jammu and Kashmir. It started freedom struggle against autocratic ruler, Maharaja Hari Singh organized in 1931. The ideology of the National Conference is Socialism, Secularism, and Democracy. National Conference was in favor of independent state with free united India. Its achievement was to grant rights to oppressed Muslim majority and its failure was partition of Indian Sub continent and partition of the state of Jammu and Kashmir.

**Keywords:** Dogra, autocratic, spearheaded, espousing, pendal, erosion of autonomy, asymmetrical, neo-liberal, Jacobian.

## Introduction:

Political parties have become a must for the existence of a modern democratic state. Parties play a crucial role in the political process and they determine the operational character of the system. In fact the functioning of the formal institutions in a parliamentary democracy becomes clearly understandable only through the dynamics of party system. Like other states of the Union of India, Jammu and Kashmir has its party system. Before the present position of the political parties is taken up for discussion, it seems rather essential to have brief historical survey of the origin, growth and development of the party system in the state of Jammu and Kashmir. The state was a native state. For a little more than one hundred years, from 1846 to 1947, the state was ruled by the Dogras. The political system of the state was based on the personal rule of the prince who used to be the centre of all power Executive, legislative and Judicial. But as a result of the political agitation which the people of Kashmir launched against the rule of autocracy and despotism in July, 1931 the Maharaja was compelled to grant them the right to platform and to form association. Accordingly, in October, 1932 the first political party, namely, the All Jammu and Kashmir Muslim Conference was founded by Sheikh Mohammad Abdullah. The Muslim Conference spearheaded the struggle for freedom in the state for seven years during which period the party performed an appreciable role in the political life of the people of the State. It made people conscious of their rights by the means of imparting to them political education through the instrumentality of press, platform and electioneering. But the Muslim Conference was converted into a secular organization in 1939 when its doors were thrown open to all sections of people of the state irrespective of their religion, creed, caste and color. The new party came to be known as the All Jammu and Kashmir National Conference.

## Formation and Role of Muslim Conference:

The move gained momentum especially after the release of political leaders on 4<sup>th</sup> June, 1932. According to Maulana Mohammed Sayeed Masoodi, the decision to form a party and name it Muslim Conference was taken in the central jail, Srinagar in course of discussion he had with Sheikh Mohammad Abdullah, while both were interned together.

### The First session:

The inaugural session was held from 14<sup>th</sup> to 16<sup>th</sup> of October, 1932 in the historic Pather Masjid, Srinagar under the presidentship 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. Among them were Mirwaiz Mohammad Yusuf Shah, Mirwaiz Hamdani and Moulvi Abdullah. The conference drafted the Constitution and also adopted a Party flag which consisted of green cloth with a crescent and star. The flag hoisting ceremony was performed on 14<sup>th</sup> of October, by Waliullah Zain-ul-Abedin of All India Kashmir Committee. The session was attended by about three lakh men, women and children who turned the pendal into a place of pilgrimage. The open session began on 15<sup>th</sup> October, with Kahawaja Ghulam Ahmad Ashai reading the address of welcome.

### **Muslim Conference Renamed as National Conference:**

On 28<sup>th</sup> February, 1939 Sheikh Abdullah was released and in order to prepare the ground for final transformation of Muslim Conference into National Conference, he made a country-wide tour. In a statement, he said, “Communal politics does not suit the temperament of the people of this state. It cannot help us in removing the evils of poverty, hunger, illiteracy and above all our slavery.” Under the presidentship of Mr. Ghulam Mohammad Sadiq, a special session of Muslim Conference was convened at Pathar Masjid on 10<sup>th</sup> June, 1939, to reconsider the decision on the resolution of working committee, passed on 28<sup>th</sup> June 1938, regarding the name and constitution of the party. According to Prem Nath Bazaz, 176 delegates and hundreds of workers participated in the session. G. M. Sadiq inaugurated the session.

So National Conference came into being. Some Non-Muslims were included into the working committee as members; prominent among them were Sardar Budh Sing, Jia Lal Kilam, Prem Nath Bazaz and Kashyap Bandhu. The party also adopted a new flag having a white plough on red back ground. It was designed by Pandit Prem Nath Dhar. The flag depicts the influence of the socialistic ideology. In fact, the leaders, who worked and voted in favour of the change, were deeply influenced by progressive movements of Russia; Naya Kashmir was another manifestation of their progressive ideology.

The conversation of Muslim conference into National Conference was executed not only to provide a political platform to Non-Muslims, but Sheikh Mohammad Abdullah was not feeling comfortable with communal politics and he wanted to get rid of it. His belief in secularism was unshakable and was not confined in changing the name only. He provided his secular stance throughout his life. In 1947 when the whole sub continent was engulfed into communal holocaust, it was only Kashmir, which stood aloof because of Sheikh Abdullah’s unwavering belief in secularism.

### **National Conference Ideology and Programme:**

Ideology may be defined as any systematic and all embracing political doctrine, which claims to give a complete and universally applicable theory of man and society and to derive there from a programme of Political action. In other words, ideology means an explicitly definite philosophy which forms the basis of a social, economic and political system and for the realization of which a commitment is made, a programme formulated and a collective action taken. The National Conference has always cherished and practiced the ideals of secularism, nationalism, socialism and democracy. In fact the very foundation of the party was laid on secular ideology. The party at the time of its formation in 1939, was thrown open to any person on the condition that he would take oath, declaring that he will maintain the unity among different classes of the people and offer every possible sacrifice for the attainment of liberty and responsible government in the state.

The programme Naya Kashmir was prepared in 1944, with some amendments in its contents on August 25, 1976 by the central Executive of the party, under the chairmanship of Sheikh Mohammad Abdullah. The amendments were affected “to bring it up to date and in conformity with the all-round requirements of a welfare state.”

Article 2 of the ‘Naya Kashmir’ mentions that “complete freedom of faith conscience, worship and expression shall be guaranteed to every resident of the state”.

Article 3 reads the people of the state shall be guaranteed the rights to;

- Freedom of speech.
- Freedom of press.
- Freedom of assembly.
- Freedom of association and organization.

Article 23 mentions that the state economy shall be planned with a view to ensuring rapid economic growth and social justice. The manifesto issued by the party on the eve of elections also confirms that the ideology of the party to the principles of socialism, secularism and democracy. A firm believer in liberal democracy the party has been championing the cause of such human rights as are essential for the establishment of an egalitarian society based on the principle of equality and justice. In short, the party’s commitment to, secular, national and socialistic ideology has become an article of faith with it and the party has unabatedly been espousing the cause of secular democracy, Hindu-Muslim unity and national integration.

### **National Conference administration 1948-1953:**

Sheikh Abdullah became the undisputed head of the interim government of Jammu and Kashmir, with title of Prime Minister, in March 1948. The new administration was to govern until a Constituent Assembly could be elected. The interim government was interested in the implementation of its Naya Kashmir programme. The Naya Kashmir manifesto put forward by the National Conference was clearly based on the Jacobian conception of popular sovereignty, augmented by a generous dollop of Bolshevism in the socio economic parts of the Programme. In the Naya Kashmir proposals Abdullah made a powerful case for the conversion of Jammu and Kashmir into an independent state and described it as the Switzerland of south Asia, perhaps in alliance with India free from British rule but not an integral part of it. According to Widmalm the ideas of modern Kashmir nationalism, expressed as distinct from Indian and Pakistan nationalism, can be traced this Naya Kashmir proposal. The implementation of this proposal commenced without delay with the main trust on land reforms. The Abolition of Big Landed Estates Act, passed in

1950, put maximum land holding at 22.5 acres; the rest went to the tenants. As most of the cultivable land in Kashmir belonged to the Maharaja directly or his Jagirdars and a small class of landlords who mostly constituted Jammu Hindus, it created a sense of loss of economic power after the loss of political power. Akbar argues that this land reforms programme, on the one hand, benefited the peasantry and, on the other, consolidated the peasants ties with India because they understood it and Abdullah told them so- that such reforms would not be possible in Pakistan which protected feudalism.

In early 1951 the National Conference government began preparations to convene a Constituent Assembly in Srinagar. Pakistan objected to this move and raised the matter in United Nations, where the security Council responded with a resolution in late March 1951, reminding the concerned authorities of the principle embodied in its earlier resolution that the final disposition of Jammu and Kashmir will be made in accordance with the will of the people, expressed through the democratic method of free and impartial plebiscite under the auspices of the United Nations. The National Conference Government went ahead nonetheless and Constituent Assembly elections were announced on April 30, 1951 for 75 seats, while 25 were reserved for the areas of Azad Kashmir. Though it was supposed to be the first 'free and fair' elections after overthrowing the Maharaja's rule, it set a grim precedent for future election.

In the Kashmir valley and Ladakh, 43 National Conference candidates were elected unopposed and the two non-National Conference candidates withdrew latter. The Parja Parishad representing Jammu Hindus, and the only other tolerably organized party in the state, boycotted the elections after the nominations of 13 candidates were rejected. No democratic space was left for opposition. Thus, the National conference with absolute majority and the slogan of 'one leader' (Abdullah), 'one party' (National Conference) and 'one programme' (Naya Kashmir) formed the Constituent Assembly.

### **Role of National Conference from 1975-1982:**

Plebiscite Front decided to participate in the elections but the Constitution of Jammu and Kashmir made technical hindrance in it. Because the preamble of the constitution as:

"we the people of the state of Jammu and Kashmir having solemnly resolved, in pursuance of the accession of this state to India which took place in the twenty sixth day of October, 1947 to further define the existing relationship of the state with the union of India as an integral part there of..."

Soon after the exile orders were cancelled on Plebiscite Front leaders in May, 1972, Sheikh Abdullah at the same time had dialogues which resulted into something secretly. Sheikh Abdullah writes to Shri. G. Parthasarthi in the following words:

"Apropos to our talks yesterday and the day before, I hope that I have made it abundantly clear to you that I can assume office only on the basis of the position as it existed on 8 August, 1953. With regard to the provisions of the Constitution or the Union laws and Entries applied to the Jammu and Kashmir after 9 August, 1953, judgment there upon will be deferred until the newly elected Assembly comes into being."

The Jan Sangh expressed its opposition to the Sheikh Centre dialogue, because it felt that it could reverse the process of the integration of the state of the Jammu and Kashmir with the Indian Union. The Working Committee of the Jan Sangh on 10 September 1974 adopted a resolution which demanded that the talks with Sheikh Abdullah should be called off immediately because the great autonomy as demanded by him for Jammu and Kashmir would mean nothing less than taking it away from India.

Delhi based newspaper Motherland supporting the demand of Jan Sangh and writes:

"Pandit Nehru had promised the country that Article 370 of the Constitution giving a special status to Kashmir, being a temporary provision, will gradually erodes away, making the state as much as integral parts of the India as any other. It is time that this erosion would be completed, article 370 deleted, separate citizenship and the Constitution of the state terminated."

In October 2008, the Jammu and Kashmir National Conference came out with a vision document. Apart from other things, the party believes that restoration of autonomy in its pristine form is the only viable solution to Kashmir conflict. The National Conference government as per its vision shall pursue with the union government the matter of providing objective and urgent consideration to the resolution on autonomy passed by state Assembly. In fact, the Chief Minister Mr. Umar Abdullah observed, "Autonomy for Jammu and Kashmir had been designed to address genuine issues of identity, borders and governance in a consensual democracy". "the erosion of autonomy", he said, "has impacted everything from political discourse to personal conduct, from economy to emotions, from society to sensibilities and from institutions to ideologies." The special constitutional status of the Jammu and Kashmir state was recognition of unique socio cultural identity of the state and greater autonomy is seen as part of the larger desirable process of federalization sweeping the world. The neo-liberal model has dented the notion of sovereignty in a unique way and identities have been not only in flux but shifting as well. Here an attempt has been made to look at the question of autonomy from the National Conference perspective. Autonomy forms core of the ideological apparatus of the party. The party claims that alienation in Kashmir is primarily due to erosion of special constitutional position of the state in the Indian union.

### Omar Abdullah on Autonomy:

The theme for India Today Conclave, 2009 was “Challenges of Change”. The Jammu and Kashmir chief minister Mr. Omar Abdullah was one of the speakers. He along with the chief minister of Maharashtra and Madhya Pradesh spoke on the topic ‘Do states need more autonomy to deliver change’. Omar Abdullah claimed that he may be the youngest chief minister but represents a state’s autonomy. He argued that we have a historical, constitutional and political basis for this claim. He launched several strong arguments for greater autonomy not only for his state but as a model for all states in the Indian federation. It is apt to remember that in February 2005, the then union Home Minister, Shivraj Patil maintained that the centre has decided to set up one more commission to look into the centre state relations in India. He said that the country could not remain stagnant in the face of new development in Science, technology, greater autonomy, participation of NGOs and the new concepts of administration. The common minimum programme of UPA-1 government also stated that since the establishment of the Sarkaria Commission many drastic changes have taken place in Centre-State relations in India. Perhaps, Omar Abdullah too situated himself in the midst of these changes and advocated greater autonomy to meet the challenges of change.

In the case of the Jammu and Kashmir state; the arrangement worked out under Article 370 of the Indian Constitution is one of an asymmetrical federalism. However, the gradual and unilateral erosion of autonomy from 1953 onwards resulted in the emergence of a conflictual federal situation in the case of Kashmir. Some drivers of the peace process attribute the breakdown in Jammu and Kashmir to the original sin of erosion of greater autonomy. It is highly educative to know that the principle of indestructibility of the Indian federation emanated essentially not from greater autonomy to the Jammu and Kashmir state but from DMK agitation in the south and subsequently formalized in 1963 by the 16<sup>th</sup> amendment to the Constitution of India. The fact remains that centre state relations in the case of Kashmir remained cordial during 1948 to 1953.

Another important point made by Omar Abdullah in favour of greater autonomy is the rise of regional parties and their impact as new democratic channels. The reality of course is that the pluralist federal polity in India is getting reflected in the party domain as well. The party system in India is in flux. It was during Indira Gandhi’s time that the party system in India started shifting from mediatory to plebiscitary mode.

### Dominance of NC:

The dominance of one party system in Jammu and Kashmir started with the dominance of National Conference since it came into power in 1947. Being the fore runner, in the freedom struggle against Dogra rule, since its inception the National Conference was able to dominate the political landscape of the state with its ideology of secularism, socialism, secularism and democracy. National Conference had established the dominance of one Political Party under the leadership of Sheikh Mohammad Abdullah in all its phases; be it the freedom struggle launched in 1931 by the Sheikh Abdullah or the Accession of Jammu and Kashmir to the Indian union after independence in 1947, coupled with the arrest of Sheikh Abdullah 1953-1972.

The year 1996 had seen renewed efforts on the part of the Indian government to normalize the situation of the valley. The centre tried to win over the local people with the objective of holding elections to the state of Jammu and Kashmir legislative Assembly. However, after a certain amount of prevarication the Farooq Abdullah and NC agreed to participate and elections has finally scheduled for September 1996. His manifesto was for the ‘Maximum Autonomy’. Farooq demanded his volte face on the ground that something is better than nothing. The said elections brought back NC to the power, the political party that governed Kashmir for maximum years since 1951. The Farooq’s ministry brought nearly seven years of governor rule to an end. On the political front Farooq had attempted to make good pledge to restore the state to its pre 1953 autonomy as according to the recommendations of the Kashmir Autonomy report. Meanwhile at the centre, in 1998 Gujral’s United Front government had fallen after congress withdrew its support. For the first time in India’s Political history, a coalition government of Hindu nationalist, Bharatiya Janata Party assumed office with Atal Bihari Vajpayee as the prime minister. The BJP had staunchly opposed to any special status for J&K.

Farooq who had learned in 1984 the importance of being in Delhi’s good books promptly aligned with BJP. With the result his political position within the state became even weaker.

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