An Illustrious Life

Introduction

- Sheikh Mohammed Abdullah, Sher-e-Kashmir (the Lion of Kashmir) (December 5, 1905 – September 8, 1982), was one of the most important political figures in the modern history of Jammu and Kashmir. In 1933 he married Akbar Jahan, the daughter of Michael Harry Nedou, the European proprietor of a chain of hotels in India, including Nedous Hotel in Srinagar and his Kashmiri wife Mirjan. Michael Harry Nedou was also the proprietor of a hotel at the tourist resort of Gulmarg.

- Sheikh Abdullah agitated against the rule of the Maharaja Hari Singh, and urged self-rule for Kashmir. He was the Prime Minister of Jammu and Kashmir State after its accession to India in 1947, and was later jailed and exiled. He again became the Chief Minister of the state, following the 1974 Indira-Sheikh accord and remained in the top slot till his death.

Early Life

[The most important source of Sheikh Abdullah’s early life is his official biography Atish-e-Chinar (In its foreword Sheikh Abdullah says,
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it should be considered as his memoirs) and the main facts regarding it as given in Atish-e-Chinar (Urdu) are detailed below.

Sheikh Mohammed Abdullah was born in Soura, a village on the outskirts of Srinagar, just eleven days after the death of his father Sheikh Mohammed Ibrahim, a middle class manufacturer and trader of Kashmir shawls. In his own words he was born an orphan. Sheikh Ibrahim like poet Iqbal was the descendant of a Hindu Kashmiri Pandit named Ragho Ram Koul, who was converted to Islam in 1722 by the saint Rashid Balkhi and after conversion changed his name to Sheikh Mohammed Abdullah. Thus Sheikh Abdullah was the namesake of the progenitor of his family branch.

His step brothers mistreated his mother and his early childhood was marked by utter poverty. His mother was keen that her children should receive proper education and so as a child he was first admitted to a traditional school or Maktab where he learnt the recitation of Holy Quran and some basic Persian texts like Gulistan, Bostan, Padshanama, etc. Then in 1911 he was admitted to a primary school, where he studied for about two years. His elder step brothers then stopped his further education and he was first set to work in the family workshop, embroidering shawls and later asked to sit on a grocers shop as a sales boy.

However, their family barber Mohammed Ramzan prevailed upon his uncle to send him back to school. He had to walk the distance of ten miles to school and back on foot but in his own words, the joy of being allowed to obtain a school education made it seem a light work. He passed his Matriculation examination from Punjab University in 1922.

Higher Studies

After matriculation he obtained admission in Sri Partap College the leading college of Kashmir. Because of extreme poverty he had to walk the distance of about fifteen miles from Soura to S.P. College and back and so developed Cardiomegaly (perhaps an early sign of beriberi brought about by malnutrition and severe exertion.) He was admitted to the Mission Hospital, where under
the treatment of the famous Neve brothers he recovered completely. His elder brother Sheikh Maqbool was moved by his illness and agreed to pay for his stay in the college hostel, from where he passed his intermediate (F.Sc.) examination.

He obtained admission in Islamia College Lahore, from where he completed his B.Sc. degree. After that he obtained admission to the M.Sc. Chemistry course in Aligarh Muslim University and obtained Masters degree in Chemistry on 12 April 1930. He was the first Kashmiri Muslim to have obtained a Master’s degree in Chemistry.

**In Political Arena**

As a student at Aligarh Muslim University, he came in contact with and was influenced by persons with liberal and progressive ideas. He became convinced that the feudal system was responsible for the miseries of the Kashmiris and like all progressive people of the world Kashmiris too should have a democratically elected government.

**Muslim Conference Formed**

Sheikh Abdullah and his colleagues were greatly influenced by the lectures of a Kashmiri polymath and lawyer Molvi Abdullah. Molvi Abdullah’s son Molvi Abdul Rahim, Sheikh Abdullah and Ghulam Nabi Gilkar were the first three educated Kashmiri youth to be arrested during the public agitation of 1931.

Kashmir’s first Political Party, the Muslim Conference with Sheikh Abdullah as President, Chaudhary Ghulam Abbas as General Secretary, and Molvi Abdul Rahim as Secretary was formed on 16 October 1932.

In his presidential address, Sheikh Abdullah categorically stated that the Muslim Conference had come into existence to struggle for the rights of all oppressed sections of the society and not Muslims alone. It was not a communal party and would struggle for the rights of the oppressed, whether Hindu, Muslim, or Sikh, with the same fervour. He reasserted that the struggle of Kashmiris was not a communal struggle.
In March 1933 the Muslim Conference constituted a committee, which included Molvi Abdullah and nine other members for the purpose of establishing contacts with non-Muslim parties and exploring the possibility of forming a joint organisation. According to Sheikh Abdullah, this effort was not successful because of the unfavourable reception of the idea by the non-Muslim parties. Sheikh Abdullah later changed the name of the Muslim Conference to National Conference, under the influence of Jawaharlal Nehru.

Formation of Praja Sabha (Legislative Assembly)

As a result of the 1931 agitation the Maharaja appointed a Greviances Commission with an Englishman B.J. Glancy as President which submitted its report in March 1932. Subsequently a Constitutional Reforms Conference also presided over by B.J. Glancy recommended the setting up of an elected Legislative Assembly (Praja Sabha). Consequently a Praja Sabha with 33 elected and 42 nominated members selected on the basis of separate electorates for Hindus and Muslims was established in 1934. Women and Illiterate men without sufficient property, or title, or annual income of less than Rupees four hundred did not have the right to vote. Roughly less than 10 per cent (According to Justice Anand only 3%) of the population were enfranchised. Even after the formation of Praja Sabha in 1934, as recommended by the Commission real power continued to remain in the hands of the Maharaja.

Meeting with Nehru

Sheikh Abdullah was introduced to Jawaharlal Nehru in 1937 and as he too as a leader of the Indian National Congress was demanding similar rights for people of British India and had formed ‘The All India States Peoples Conference’ for supporting the people of Princely States in their struggle for a representative government, the two became friends and political allies.

Muslim Conference Renamed as National Conference

Sheikh introduced a resolution in the working committee of the Muslim Conference for changing its name to National Conference on 24 June 1938 to allow people from all communities to
Sheikh Abdullah join the struggle against the autocratic rule of the Maharaja. Meanwhile he along with his liberal progressive friends, many of whom were not Muslims like Kashyap Bandhu, Jia Lal Kilam, Pandit Sudama Sidha, Prem Nath Bazaz and Sardar Budh Singh drafted the National Demands the forerunner of the famous Naya Kashmir (New Kashmir) Manifesto, which was a charter of demands for granting a democratic Constitution committed to the welfare of the common people of Kashmir.

He presented these demand to the Maharaja in a speech on 28 August 1938. The Maharaja of course was not willing to accept these demands and so he along with many of his companions was arrested for defying prohibitory orders and sentenced to six months imprisonment and a fine. His arrest provoked a public agitation in which volunteers called Dictators (so called because they had the authority to defy laws that was forbidden for normal law abiding party members) courted arrest. This agitation was called off on the appeal of Mahatama Gandhi. He was released after serving his sentence on 24 February 1939 and accorded a grand reception by the people of Srinagar on his return. Speeches were made at the reception, stressing the importance of unity among Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs. Subsequently the resolution for changing the name of Muslim Conference to National Conference was ratified with an overwhelming majority by the General Council of the Muslim Conference on 11 June 1939 and from that date Muslim Conference became National Conference.

Quit Kashmir Agitation

In May 1946 Sheikh Abdullah launched the Quit Kashmir agitation against Maharaja Hari Singh and was arrested and sentenced to three years imprisonment, but was released only sixteen months later on 29 September 1947.

Head of Emergency Administration

Following an attack by Pakistan, Hari Singh appealed to Lord Mountbatten, the Governor-General of India for Indian military aid. In his Accession Offer dated October 26, 1947, which accompanied the Instrument of Accession duly signed by him, Maharaja Hari Singh wrote: “I may also inform your
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Excellency’s Government that it is my intention at once to set up an interim Government and ask Sheikh Abdullah to carry the responsibilities in this emergency with my Prime Minister”.

Lord Mountbatten accepted the accession after a meeting of the Defence Committee on October 27, 1947. In accepting the accession unconditionally he wrote “I do hereby accept this Instrument of Accession. Dated this twenty seventh day of October, nineteen hundred and forty seven”.

In the covering letter to Hari Singh, he wrote “In consistence with their policy that in the case of any State where the issue of accession has been the subject of dispute, the question of accession should be decided in accordance with the wishes of the people of the State, it is my Government’s wish that, as soon as law and order have been restored in Kashmir and its soil cleared of the invader, the question of the State’s accession should be settled by a reference to the people”. Also in his letter to the Maharaja Lord Mountbatten wrote “My Government and I note with satisfaction that your Highness has decided to invite Sheikh Abdullah to form an Interim Government to work with your Prime Minister.”

In fact, 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, which was undated except for the mention October 1947 in place of the date. He took charge as Head of the Emergency Administration on 30 October 1947. After assuming the charge of the Head of the Emergency Administration, he addressing his first meeting with the government officers said “Pakistan is not our enemy and we have the same respect for Mr. Jinnah that we had previously. We want the Kashmir issue to be settled by dialogue and if for this purpose I have to go to Karachi to meet Mr. Jinnah I am willing to go there”.

He raised a force of local Kashmiri volunteers to patrol Srinagar and take control of administration after the flight of the Maharaja along with his family and Prime Minister Meher Chand Mahajan.
Sheikh Abdullah

to Jammu even before the Indian troops had landed. This group of volunteers would serve as the nucleus for the subsequent formation of Jammu and Kashmir Militia. This Sheikh Abdullah hoped would take over the defence of Kashmir after the Indian army was withdrawn.

This was articulated in his letter to Sardar Patel dated 7 October 1948 in which he wrote, “With the taking over of the State forces by the Indian Government, it was agreed that steps would be taken to reorganise and rebuild our army so that when the present emergency is over and the Indian forces are withdrawn, the State will be left with a proper organised army of its own to fall back upon”. (Sheikh Abdullah has alleged that most of the Muslim soldiers of the Militia were either discharged or imprisoned before his arrest in 1953. The Militia (dubbed as Dagan Brigade) was converted from a State Militia to a regular unit of the Indian Army on 2 December 1972 and re-designated the Jammu and Kashmir Light Infantry.

First Democratic Elections

In 1951; the government of Kashmir with Sheikh Abdullah as Prime Minister held elections to a Constituent Assembly on the basis of universal adult suffrage. Sheikh Abdullah’s Government had been accused of rigging in these elections to the Constituent Assembly. Nonetheless, due consideration should be given to the quantum leap in moving from elections with 10 per cent of enfranchised population to universal adult suffrage and that too just after a cease fire from an active war.

Prime Minister of Kashmir

Sheikh Abdullah took oath as Prime Minister of Kashmir on March 17, 1948. It was a saga that was like a Bollywood film. A poor orphan boy, set to work by his stepbrothers, embroidering shawls and selling groceries, allowed to go to school only on the pleading of a kind hearted barber, nearly dying of malnutrition and overexertion, getting his applications for grant of scholarships rejected time and again by a heartless aristocracy which heeded only those who had the backing of the rich and the powerful, had
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been appointed to an office to which only the most powerful landlords of the Maharaja or the highest ranking mandarins of the British administration would dare to aspire. Fate in one of its more munificent moods had once again replayed the drama of poor Dick Whittington.

Arrest and Release

On 8 August 1953, he was dismissed as Prime Minister by the then Sadr-e-Riyasat (Constitutional Head of State) Dr. Karan Singh son of the erstwhile Maharaja Hari Singh on the charge that he had lost the confidence of his Cabinet (not the house). He was denied the opportunity to prove his majority on the floor of the house and his dissident Cabinet minister Bakshi Ghulam Mohammed was appointed as Prime Minister. Sheikh Abdullah was immediately arrested and later jailed for eleven years, accused of conspiracy against the State in the infamous “Kashmir Conspiracy Case”.

According to Sheikh Abdullah his dismissal and arrest were engineered by the Central government headed by Prime Minister Nehru. He has quoted B.N. Mullick’s statements in his book “My Years with Nehru” in support of his statement. A.G. Noorani writing in ‘Frontline’ supported this view, as according to him Nehru himself had ordered the arrest. On 8 April 1964, the State Government dropped all charges in the so called “Kashmir Conspiracy Case”. Sheikh Abdullah was released and returned to Srinagar, where he was accorded an unprecedented welcome by the people of the valley”.

After his release, he was reconciled with Nehru. Nehru requested Sheikh Abdullah to act as a bridge between India and Pakistan and make President Ayub to agree to come to New Delhi for talks for a final solution of the Kashmir problem. President Ayub Khan also sent telegrams to Nehru and Sheikh Abdullah with the message that as Pakistan too was a party to the Kashmir dispute any resolution of the conflict without its participation would not be acceptable to Pakistan. This paved the way for Sheikh Abdullah’s visit to Pakistan to help broker a solution to the Kashmir problem.
Sheikh Abdullah went to Pakistan in spring of 1964. President Ayub Khan of Pakistan held extensive talks with him to explore various avenues for solving the Kashmir problem and agreed to come to Delhi in mid June for talks with Nehru as suggested by him. Even the date of his proposed visit was fixed and communicated to New Delhi. On 27 May, while he was en route to Muzaffarabad in Pakistani Occupied Kashmir, news came of the sudden death of Nehru and the Sheikh after addressing a public rally at Muzaffarabad returned to Delhi. On his suggestion President Ayub Khan sent a high level Pakistani delegation to take part in the last rites of Jawaharlal Nehru.

After Nehru’s death in 1964, he was interned from 1965 to 1968 and exiled from Kashmir in 1971 for 18 months. The Plebiscite Front was also banned. This was allegedly done to prevent him and the Plebiscite Front which was supported by him from taking part in elections in Kashmir.

**Indo-Pakistan War and Creation of Bangladesh**

In 1971 an insurrection broke out in erstwhile East Pakistan, and subsequently a war broke out between India and Pakistan, which ended in the creation of Bangladesh. Sheikh Abdullah watching the alarming turn of events in the subcontinent realised that for the survival of this region there was an urgent need to stop pursuing confrontational politics and promoting solution of issues by a process of reconciliation and dialogue rather than confrontation.

Realising this he started talks with the then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi for normalising the situation in the state and came to an accord, called 1974 Indira-Sheikh accord, by giving up the demand for a plebiscite in lieu of the people being given the right to self-rule by a democratically elected Government (as envisaged under article 370 of the Constitution of India) rather than the puppet governments which till then ruled the State.

**Chief Minister of the State**

Sheikh assumed the position of Chief Minister of Jammu and Kashmir. Unfortunately the Central Government and the ruling Congress Party withdrew its support so the State Assembly had to be dissolved and mid term elections were called.
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The National Conference won an overwhelming majority in the subsequent elections and re-elected Sheikh Abdullah as Chief Minister. He remained as Chief Minister till his death in 1982. During his brief tenure as Chief Minister, he tried to develop close ties between the three regions of the State namely Jammu, Kashmir and Ladakh. He also attempted to promote infrastructural development in the State and built the prestigious Sher-e-Kashmir Institute of Medical Sciences and a Convention Centre built to international standards so as to promote Medical and Business tourism in the valley.

Abdullah, described as a six feet four inches tall man, was fluent both in Kashmiri and Urdu. His biography in Urdu entitled Atish-e-Chinar was written by the noted Kashmiri author M.Y. Taing and published after Sheikh Abdullah’s death. It is often referred to as his autobiography as Taing claimed that he only acted as an amanuensis. It is based on extensive interviews that Taing had with Sheikh Abdullah and provides valuable information on Sheikh Abdullah’s family background, early life, ringside glimpses of happenings in Kashmir at a crucial juncture in its history, and his viewpoint about the political events in Kashmir, in which he himself played a central role.

After his death his eldest son Dr. Farooq Abdullah was elected as the Chief Minister of the State. Omar Abdullah who is the son of Farooq Abdullah has also emerged as an important political leader of the National Conference. He is the present chief minister of Jammu and Kashmir.

Demise and the Aftermath

The political situation in J&K remained stable for the next few years with Sheikh Abdullah as the Chief Minister, and the NC maintaining cordial relations with the Central Government and furthering the ideals of democracy and secularism in the State. However, the Congress started making efforts to stage a comeback in the State and expand its following. This led to a confrontation with the NC to an extent that it contributed towards Sheikh Abdullah, allegedly, indulging in anti-Centre fulminations.

Sheikh Abdullah died in September 8, 1982 and his son, Dr. Farooq Abdullah took over the leadership of the NC. This
succession led to a bitter conflict with his brother-in-law G.M. Shah, emerging as a rival aspirant. The June 1983 Assembly elections again returned NC under Dr. Farooq Abdullah to power, but the internal quarrels had not dissipated. Defection of the G.M. Shah group from the NC led to the fall of Dr. Farooq Abdullah’s government on 2 July 1984 and G.M. Shah (NC-K) assumed power with the support of the Congress, from outside. This ushered in a period of unprecedented communal violence and misrule in the State.

Lion of Kashmir (Brief Life Sketch)

Jawaharlal Nehru called him Sher-e-Kashmir, (‘the Lion of Kashmir’), before freedom from foreign rule, and the people of Kashmir joyously took up the chant after the freedom dawned. He led the struggle of Kashmiris for freedom from the King’s rule, and became the symbol of Kashmiri nationalism; but he stood for the merger of Kashmir with India. He was arrested and imprisoned for years by Nehru himself; but he became first the Prime Minister and then the chief minister of Kashmir under Congress rule.

Abdullah, born in 1905 in Saura of Kashmir, to Sheikh Muhammed Ibrahim who died just days before the birth of the child, was influenced in his early days by the history of Islam and poets like Iqbal, but later by Gandhiji and other political leaders of India like Nehru, Abul Kalam Azad. Another source of influence for him was Mustafa Kemal Pasha of Turkey. Abdullah joined hands with Iqbal to found the Muslim Conference, the goal of which was to replace the King’s rule and set up a responsible government. This saw him in prison for more than 15 years, under various arrests. But his Muslim Conference was able to snatch a decision in favour of its demand for a people’s assembly, and it won landslide victory in elections to the assembly.

The Jammu-Kashmir Muslim Conference, under the Sheikh’s leadership, decided to admit non-Muslims also into it, and so its name was changed as ‘Jammu-Kashmir National Conference’. Nehru and the other Indian leaders supported Abdullah’s demand for a popular rule for Jammu and Kashmir. In October 1947 an interim government was formed, Abdullah as its head. Shortly he became the Prime Minister, though the King continued as someone like a governor. Abdullah was a member of the Indian team to
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the UN (1948), and a member of the Constituent Assembly which drafted the Constitution for India (1949) and then the Prime Minister of Kashmir. But he was ousted, arrested and imprisoned on the charge of conspiracy to free Kashmir from India. He was freed in 1958, but seeing that he had turned more anti-Indian by this time, he was jailed again. He was freed after six years to mediate between India and Pakistan on the Kashmir dispute, but Nehru’s death in 1964 made things more uncertain.

The following years saw Sheikh Abdullah becoming in and out of favour with the government of India several times. But peace dawned between New Delhi and Abdullah again and a pact was signed according to which the state became a regular member of the Indian Union, and brought under all the provisions of the Constitution, and he became Chief Minister of Jammu and Kashmir. Elections were held in the state and he became Chief Minister again in 1977. He died in 1982, leaving the leadership to his son, Dr. Farooq Abdullah.