

dia and demanded the right to self-determination. Detailing the events of the 1950s, Shiekh Abdullah later wrote in the weekly *Awami Daur*,

I was detained in August 1953 due to my fundamental differences with the Government of India. The differences between the Government of India and me started sometime earlier. The Government of India wanted to back out of all those promises and agreements that she had made and concluded with me and the people of Kashmir.<sup>2</sup>

### Strategies Adopted by the Plebiscite Front for Garnering Public Support

The Plebiscite Front managed to penetrate the grassroots levels by operating on the plank of the plebiscite. Gradually, the front launched educative campaigns to magnify its presence. *Mahaaz-e-rai-Shumari*, as popularly known, acquired a mass character as its politics were presented as some service and sacrifice and not as politics of power. The rise and growth of the Plebiscite Front represented an ideological shift as it was asserted that Kashmiri cultural identity was incompatible with the mainstream culture and could only be maintained through the operationalisation of certain autonomous zones. Secondly, the intervening role of the state in the repeated distribution of patronage also created absolute chasms for political nationalism to thrive. The state's weakening of autonomous provisions through legal and constitutional measures was equivalent to sponsoring a formal nationalism.

In the political formation of identity, the state used specific historical references and symbols to promote cultural homogeneity. The state's espousal of Praja Parishad politics and the subsequent incarceration of Shiekh Muhammad Abdullah were working towards creating inaudible spheres of representation. These inaudible spheres were never formally

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<sup>2</sup> Shiekh Mohammad Abdullah, "Sarguzasht-i-Nau August 1953", p.175 October 2, 1978, Weekly *Awami Daur*, Jammu.

accommodated, and a firm policy of stifling political opposition and pursuit of patronage politics was encouraged. Connor (1994) notes that assertions of the rights of nationhood are problematic, as unwillingness on the part of the national government to give into mini-nationalism often disrupts the political order. Mini-nationalisms attach moral legitimacy to them and can become the source of complexity instead of generating homogeneity and cohesion.

The dilemma for the state arises as to how to satisfy the differing political claims. However, as Connor (1994) points out, the universal tendency of states is a non-compromisable position vis-a-vis the political integrity of the sovereign territory. The underlying premise, of course, remains that the state is given and must not be compromised.

The non-address of grievances for political and cultural autonomy also creates a sense of self-awareness and an awareness of the other group, a referent 'them' vs. 'us'. Levin (1993) suggests that subtle shifts in identity correspond to historical and demonstrable constructs and thus emerge as mental constructs contrary to histographical facts. This works to reinterpret the history of grieved people through a complex interplay of self-awareness and the awareness of the 'other'.

In the case of Kashmir, self-awareness happened through the formation of a vast network of committees at various levels—the essential committee at the mohalla or gram level, the halqa committee at the town or municipal level, followed by the tehsil committee, two provincial committees, the general council and the Central Committee. These committees worked democratically under the supervision and discipline of the central committees bounded by the programs and policies of the *Ma-haaz Rai Shumari*. Gradually, other political groupings, such as the Mirwaiz group, Jamaat-e-Islami, and Political Conference, allied with the Plebiscite Front.

The activism of Plebiscite Front was targeted soon after when the state government arrested its founder president, Mirza Mohammad Afzal Beg, along with several office bearers and prominent members under the Preventive Detention Act. However, this only strengthened the position of the Plebiscite Front. The rival group made every move to see the Plebiscite Front defeated politically. The defection of Plebiscite

Front workers towards the rival group was celebrated with enthusiasm. Accordingly, the government framed several programs at the administrative level, such as massive subsidies on rations, providing loans to farmers, establishing cooperative societies, and opening up government contracts to divert the people's attention from the policies of the Plebiscite Front. Thus, there were attempts to contain the Plebiscite Front at different levels – local, national, and international. The repression of the legitimate democratic opposition and pursuit of patronage politics was widely used to checkmate the growing popularity of the Plebiscite Front. The situation could find resonance in Sangpam's (1992) characterisation of the third world as an overtly politicised state where the central preoccupation of the state actors is accumulation for survival. Power-holders' strategies to legitimise their rule often fall under political violence and corruption. Kashmir became an over-politicized state without appropriate mediating institutions such as legitimate political parties and ineffective leadership.

A common allegation of the Plebiscite Front against the new government structure was the suppression and torture of its workers. The organisation successfully presented memorandums to confident world leaders for the immediate free, fair, and impartial plebiscite and support of Kashmiri's right to self-determination.<sup>3</sup> Other than this, the organisation managed to do publicity work. It came up with five weeklies, which propagated their party's ideologies. The Urdu weeklies were *Johaar*, *Payam Nau*, *Nawai Muslim*, *Awaam* and *Naya Payaam*. A fortnightly named *Free Thinker* was also published around the same time.

Tremblay (1996) explains in Kashmir that it was precisely the absence of a competitive party system in the population, combined with the unfortunate decisions of the leadership to pursue patronage politics at the expense of an appropriate economic strategy for development,

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3 Memorandums were presented to Earl Atlee-UN Secretary general, Mr. Dag Hammerskjold- Chinese Prime Minister, Bulganin-Premier of Soviet Union, Khrushev-Premier of Soviet Union, Mr. Macmillian-the Prime Minister of England, Dr Sukarno, Queen Elizabeth. The Times of India, January 2, 1957. The Dawn, Karachi, July 24, 1958.

generated the crisis of governability in the valley. This crisis quickly degenerated into challenges to the political viability of Kashmir's association with India, revolving around the issue of Kashmir's distinctness and consequent past political claims of self-determination.

Under mounting pressure from various quarters, Shiekh Muhammad Abdullah was released in 1958. The shrines of Kashmir again became powerful spaces for propagating Shiekh's political doctrines.<sup>4</sup> The Hazratbal Shrine, the Khanqah Shrine, and Jenab Sahib Soura allowed Shiekh Abdullah to propagate his political ideas. However, the war of words between Shiekh Muhammad Abdullah and political leaders in New Delhi resulted in a confrontation, again placing Shiekh in jail.

By 1972, the Plebiscite Front leadership concluded that they should settle the issue within the Indian constitutional framework. On the other hand, the Awami Action Committee, the Jamaat-e-Islami, and the Kashmir Political Conferences were emerging as new forces on the old narrative of the plebiscite. These forces allied to mobilise the situation in their favour. Mirwaiz Farooq's Awami Action Committee and the Jamaat-e-Islami constituted a new party called All Jammu and Kashmir Students Liberation League, seeking a solution to Kashmir through a plebiscite.<sup>5</sup>

According to Gochkhami (2011), the movement for Plebiscite in Jammu and Kashmir ran into two phases. The first phase can be between 1953 and 1966, and the second from 1966 to 1975. The first phase was a genuine movement for the achievement of the plebiscite. The second phase, from 1966 to 1975, was more related to state autonomy, power politics, and politics of reconciliation. However, two fundamental changes, the Indo-Pakistan war of 1965 and the formation of Bangladesh in 1971, had a bearing on the people of the state and the Plebiscite Front, which compelled them to rethink the political issues facing the state. Thus, these

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4 Shrines in Kashmir were and continue to be far more than simply spiritual retreats. It was in shrines where literature and politics intersected. Shrines provided legitimacy to the rulers and the agents respectively. For more on the role of shrines see *Languages of belonging* by Chitralekha Zutshi and Hindu Rulers Muslims Subjects by Mridu Rai.

5 *The Patriot*, Srinagar, March 17, 1974.

years were a process of rapport building for the Plebiscite leadership, who sought to create alternate avenues for political mobilisation.

The Kashmir Accord, signed in 1975, between Indira Gandhi and Shiekh Abdullah, also added to the resentment. The accord's provisions ensured that Shiekh Abdullah would be released and re-appointed as state chief minister. Additionally, the Plebiscite Front would be disbanded with immediate effect. This was bargained against integrating Kashmir into central constitutional structures and any further devolution of autonomy. This was a turning point in many ways, as the culture of systematic political mobilisation was replaced by sporadic mobilisations led by various youth groups.

## **Contribution of Plebiscite Front Movement to Kashmiri Nationalism**

The Plebiscite Front movement converted Kashmiris into a group possessing common and distinctive cultural elements, where a strong sentiment arose from everyday experiences. This historical point ensured a political awareness of the self and differentiated itself from other political collectivities. The process, which spanned several years, acquainted people with rights and responsibilities, essentially missing from the existing dispensation. A noteworthy aspect of the movement was the unity between the elites and the masses and a sense of owning up to institutions. The breakdown of autonomous provisions for the incarceration of Shiekh Muhammad Abdullah became a symbol of political mobilisation for Kashmiri nationalism.

The Plebiscite Front movement utilised the myths and memories from the past to reconstruct and transform the community into the modern phenomenon of nationalism through re-discovery and re-affirmation. By creating a political and cultural process of legitimacy, the movement ascertained the ownership of resources and infrastructure, launching disruptive actions against the authority. Participation in a movement like *Rai Shumari* was motivated by three key factors: a prevailing sense of injustice and moral acknowledgement that collective