

time were emerging as the powerful vehicles for political mobilisation in Kashmir. The slogans acted as memory snapshots, waiting to be discovered from generation to generation.

The cadre of the newly formed organisations revived and accelerated the political mobilisation through collective processes of interpretation, attribution, and social construction of political events and how these events mediate between political opportunities and action. The youth-led organisations and their intervention created a collective perception of the Indira-Abdullah Accord and developed a new language of political nationalism. Equally, political nationalism, be it Arab or Afghan nationalism, provides motivations and helps the imagination locate oneself in a global matrix.

Run-Up to the Elections of 1987

The closure of legitimate avenues of democratic political participation had made way for many youth protest groups. The 1975 Indira -Abdullah accord eroded the legitimacy of the National Conference as a representative of Kashmiri Nationalism.

Punjabi (1989) characterises the 1980s as the result of the non-fulfilment of urges and aspirations of the people, the result of undemocratic functioning of different institutions of the state, the result of mal-administration in running the affairs of the state and violent expression and militant assertion of a sub-national identity. As the process of participation of people in decision making, power sharing and restructuring of the institutions did not take the ordinary course in the state in general and Kashmir valley in particular, the policy of appeasement was used to win over the estranged majority of the population. Appeasement included generous central government aid, gearing up a highly subsidised economy, and arbitrary and discretionary sanctions of permits licenses and permits. The bureaucracy assumed the role of according legitimacy to the successive undemocratic government. Thus, the cumulative effect of all these processes was the emergence of the new middle class in Kash-

miri society. The services and privileges of the state remained confined to this very class.

From 1953 to 1975, the disenchantment and discontentment of the people were drained off through emotional slogans and sharpening the dual identity –religious and region. In other words, Shiekh Abdullah could restrain the Kashmiri identity from being confronted with the national identity. With the exit of Shiekh Abdullah from the socio-political scene, his successors could not maintain a balance between the centripetal and centrifugal tendencies. Puri (1989) states that from 1975 to 1984, the state's politics was divided between two secular and nationalist parties. Those dissatisfied with the police state government's policies supported the Congress (or the Janata for a while). In contrast, those dissatisfied with the policies of the Union Government opted for the National Conference. There was little space for the secessionist forces during this time.

The dismissal of the duly elected Government in 1984 by Governor Jagmohan under central Congress leadership's direction was a significant blow to the centre state-relations. It outraged the sentiments of the local population, who saw Farooq as being wronged by New Delhi. But what outraged the feelings even more was Farooq's accord with Congress and the decision to join hands with the centre. Noorani (1989) argues that the honourable course for Farooq would have been to stay in the opposition, build up his party National Conference and articulate protest through a committed political party. Instead, he discredited himself, and so did the Congress.

Additionally, Farooq Abdullah blamed his father for what he inherited, a "rusted administration" from him, which exhausted him of any goodwill he otherwise enjoyed. During this time, Maqbool Bhat, an influential JKLF leader, was hanged in connection with a case of the killing of an Indian diplomat in the United Kingdom. The hanging marked a significant shift in the landscape of Kashmir and paved the way for the transformation of nationalism from political to militant terrain.

Kashmir observers unanimously assert that the militant nationalism could not rear its head if the March 1987 elections were not rigged. Many political groups formed in the mid-1970s against the Indira-

Abdullah accord came under a Muslim United Front (MUF) coalition to contest elections unitedly. In a way, the politics of the Muslim United Front represented the expression of the non-elites who were contesting against the dominance of the centralised institutional control. MUF was widely expected to emerge as a significant contender after the elections. However, alleged collections were massively rigged in favour of the National Conference-Congress alliance. The election results met with massive outbursts and mass protests against the subversion of the democratic process.

MUF was a manifestation of moderate old-guard leadership ready to work within the confines of the Indian constitution. Political mobilisation was reflected in broader and underground formations, some blanket-banned by the National Conference. The other underground groups devised radical measures to mobilise against the state. Splinter groups regularly spoke in favour of armed struggle as the only logical tool for resolving the conflict.

The last blow to the tower of democracy was rigging in favour of the National Conference. As a veteran leader, Abdul Ghani Lone said in one of his interviews, “The sad part is that moderate leadership is now being finished. Our youth now prefers to listen to the sound of the gun rather than even to my voice.”²⁰ It is also argued that had there not been rigging of elections, the MUF would not have bagged more than 15 seats at most in the House of 76. The National Conference-Congress coalition would have sailed through with ease.²¹ The result declared the National Conference the winner of forty seats, Congress of twenty-six, MUF secured only four seats, and the Bharatiya Janta Party and the Independent candidates secured two.

The results were declared after an unprecedented five-day delay, and there was a complete curfew during the counting. Worse, the police threw out MUF counting agents from the counting stations. As soon as the results were declared, MUF candidates were arrested, detained under the Public Security Act, and shifted to various jails. Cash awards

²⁰ The Srinagar Times, dated 29 September 1990.

²¹ Ibid.

of Rs 25000 were placed on MUF polling agents Abdul Hamid Shiekh, Ashfaq Majid Wani, Muhammad Yasin Malik, and Javed Ahmed Mir.

One particular group, the Islamic Students League,²² emerged powerfully with a considerable member base. This group had actively campaigned for MUF, and as a result of the rigged elections, a number of its cadres defected towards armed militancy. A senior member of the Islamic Students League, in an interview held in 2017, stated, “Islamic Students League (ISL) had become the street power in the 1980s. Every political actor wanted to utilise this street power for their gains.” Muslim United Front, a coalition of various small groups against the elite politics of the National Conference, also sought to utilise the resources of the Islamic Students League for campaigning in the election. However, ISL differed from MUF fundamentally vis-a-vis its approach to electoral politics. Ahmed (2017) remembers that though it agreed to campaign, ISL essentially tried to change the character of the struggle. It was trying to replace political nationalism with more radical options. As time passed, political nationalism was manipulated in favour of electoral gains.

Many of the MUF candidates and ISL members ended up crossing over the line of control to acquire armed training. Another senior activist (2017), preferring anonymity in an interview, recalls, “1989 elections were not an answer to those who had any hopes from the state; it was a reality check for those who were thinking in terms of Indian constitutional framework.” This remark asserts that political mobilisation had changed the paradigm with the advent of organised acts of anti-government violence. Armed militancy was initiated formally by the HAJY group, which returned from receiving armed training in Pakistan.

22 On October 13, 1983, the West Indian cricket team was playing against the Indian team at the Polo Ground Srinagar. The spectators involved many Islamic Students League members and they openly cheered for the West Indian team. Some people from the crowd dug the pitch in anger as to how India could host a cricket match in a disputed region. The event became quite a sensation and brought Kashmir into international focus quickly.