

## The Proliferation of Youth Groups: Al-Fatah and Other Organisations

In response to the restrictions of the local parties and the shrinking of legitimate avenues for democratic political participation, several youth groups emerged to call for self-determination. Other than the Plebiscite Front, several other smaller organisations had also actively advocated for the right to self-determination. Organisations like the Jammu and Kashmir Youth League, formed in 1964, provided the first avenue of political activism for self-determination.

The failure of Operation Gibraltar 24 also led to a change in strategy regarding how the resistance was activated. Jagmohan (2006) writes about eighty underground cells that were active in the Valley of Kashmir between 1965 and 1971, and the ISI did succeed in winning over some of these cells during the late 1960s.

Correspondingly, a network of youth organisations had cropped up across the Cease Fire Line (CFL) in Pakistan-controlled Kashmir. Jammu and Kashmir Independence Committee was formed in 1963 by Amanullah Khan, Mir Abdul Aziz, G.M Lone, Mir Manan, and Mir Qayoom to channel the resistance movement towards the independence option. Other organisations like Jammu Kashmir Liberation League, Jammu and Kashmir Plebiscite Front, Jammu Kashmir National Liberation Front, and Jammu Kashmir National Students Federation were also formed, espousing the same cause. This proliferation paved the way for the formation of Al-Fatah in 1966, an embryonic Indigenous armed movement that was neutralised in the early stage during the 1970s.

In December 1966, a political project called Al-Fatah was launched. Posters showing a map of India with Jammu and Kashmir depicted as separate entities marked in red ink were sent to government officials, politicians, and influential private individuals. The red ink posters stirred as the general elections to Jammu at the end of the Kashmir assembly were to be held soon after. An article published in *India Today* in 1984 notes that AlFatah was the biggest of all the subversive and

espionage groups in Jammu and Kashmir.<sup>6</sup> It was a guerrilla outfit comprising over 200 people, which began operating around the middle of 1970.

The group was formulated to launch an indigenous armed struggle like Al-Fatah in Palestine. With support from organisations espousing similar politics across the ceasefire line, the movement was ready to launch its guerrilla operations. However, there was clarity that the organisation would run in an autonomous pattern. The group was formed to highlight the Kashmir issue internationally by giving it an indigenous shade without the involvement of Pakistan. To maintain its individuality, it made its preamble and maintained independent finances. By September 1967, Al Fatah had recovered enough confidence to initiate militant operations. Some members crossed the ceasefire line and started recruitment, too. Ali (2012) writes that after 1968, unarmed resistance groups, like Al Fatah of Palestine, were indigenous and emerged under Ghulam Rasool Zehgeer's (GRZ) commandership. Zehgeer operated under several assumed names like Rehman, Maqbool, and Gaznavi. The headquarters were located at Binsoo, Awantipora, in Kashmir.

An excerpt from the preamble of Al-Fatah reads, "The freedom struggle in Jammu and Kashmir is having peculiar character, embedded with religious, cultural, geographical and nationalist maxims to upkeep our prestige and honour as Algerians, Palestinians, and others have done. The preamble draws an analogy between the battle between India and Kashmir, like between an elephant and a mosquito. The minute nature of the mosquito does not deter it from engaging the elephant. In the case of guerrilla warfare, the main objective of the guerrilla is to engage the enemy and secure political motives, which may include political ideology, re-establishment of lost nationhood, or fight against oppression and exploitation. The guerrilla tries to win his political motives by operating and acting on three fronts: political, military, and economic".<sup>7</sup>

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6 <http://indiatoday.intoday.in/story/al-fatah-is-biggest-espionage-groups-united-in-jammukashmir/1360540.html> [Accessed 10 February 2017].

7 For more see Al-Fatah Constitution 1971.

Al-Fatah imagined the guerilla warfare in Kashmir as a four-staged process. The first stage was conceived as a critical stage where processes like recruitment, training, information collection, and setting up the organisational structure were involved. The complete realisation of this stage could historically realise the triumph or loss of guerilla warfare. This stage would also involve civil disobedience, nonpayment of taxes, and a campaign for economic breakdowns, such as targeting airports, railway lines, and industrial states. Simultaneously, a political party would form to pressure New Delhi-based forces.<sup>8</sup>

The second stage was to create panic among the armed forces in Kashmir in terms of laying light ambushes and throwing hand grenades occasionally but without causing any civilian damage.<sup>9</sup> Swami (2014) writes that Al Fatah urged the cadres to know alternate roadways from an aggressive point of view and said that targeting these could structurally paralyse the enemy at any point in time. In the third stage, the blueprint of raids was to be prepared. In the fourth and final stage, attacks targeted military convoys, depots, and armed garrisons.<sup>10</sup>

The training pattern of Al Fatah was unique; sometimes, the recruits were taken to watch Hindi films like *Aankhein* and *Shaheed*. This was part of the training to inculcate nationalism among Kashmiri youth. The recruits were also asked to read books like *Jehad-e-Islam* written by *Khalil Hamidi*.<sup>11</sup>

As part of the planning infrastructure, recruits were asked to collect or drop material at specific places, which at times was done to check the integrity of the recruits. A specific organisational order was followed, and every recruit was codified. These codes were read in reverse sequence A as Z, B as Y, C as X, D as W, E as V, F as U, G as T, H as S, I as R, J as Q, etc. The recruitment was done only after a thorough check of

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8 Interview with Zahid Chulam Ahmed, senior political columnist, dated 30 June 2017.

9 Ibid.

10 Interview with Bashir Ahmed Bhat, former Kashmir University student's union president (1973–1975) dated 30 April 2017.

11 Interview with Fazal ul Haq Qureshi, former student leader, dated 15 April 2017.

personal background, and preference was given to recruits with other male siblings. This was done to ensure the family's financial stability in case the recruit was arrested. One of the strategies was to write with lemon water so that the words could only be read under the illuminated tube lights.

Some writers, like Jamal (2009), establish that Al Fatah was the first organisation to develop formal links with ISI, but not directly. ISI provided weapons, training, and sanctuaries to the fighters but had no direct control over their militant actions. However, they did not financially back up Fatah. The funds were raised by looting government departments and banks.<sup>12</sup>

However, Al-Fatah was exposed much before it emerged as a full-grown organisation when the members of the latter were identified as committing a bank robbery to generate revenue for the organisation. Sahni (1999) records that the Al-Fatah militants looted around 70,000 rupees from the sub-divisional education office in Pulwama and 100,000 rupees from a local bank. The police arrested a handful of Al-Fatah fighters, which led to a crackdown on its entire membership. It was in 1977 that the cases against Al-Fatah were withdrawn. Thirty members of the organisation were charged with sabotage, subversion, and dacoity.

Besides Al-Fatah, several other organisations espousing the exact cause also cropped up. *Awami Inqelabi Mahaaz and Jammu Kashmir Mahaaz-e-Azaadi* were other votaries of independent Kashmir. Later, a military wing of *Mahaaz-e-Azaadi* called "Operation Balakote" was formed to pursue the same demands aggressively.

Jammu Kashmir Liberation Front (JKLF) was formed around the same agenda in 1977. In one of the official brochures<sup>13</sup>, the organisation traces the independent status of Kashmir to 1586, when the Mughals forcefully annexed Kashmir. Contrary to the popular belief that complete independence arose as an option in 1989, JKLF holds a contrary view. JKLF claimed in one of the initial proceedings of the Muslim

12 Interview with Muhammad Ashraf, trade unionist dated 15 April 2017.

13 *Baba-e-Kashmir Aman-u-ullah Khan, Ek Ahd Saaz aur Tareeq Saza Shakisiyat*, Information and Communication Wing Jklf, Rawalpindi, Pakistan.

Conference held on 19 July 1947 that the Muslim Conference ultimately acknowledged the option of independence. However, the very next day, the decision was rolled back<sup>14</sup>. In a way, the autonomous sentiment of Kashmiri nationalism that always existed was manifested in one way or another on both sides of the Line of Control.

In 1962, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto held several talks with Swaran Singh, the Indian foreign minister, where India proposed giving away 1500 sq. miles to Kashmir valley. Unfortunately, the talks failed due to Pakistan's provisional agreement with China. Aman Ullah Khan, who later emerged as one of the prominent faces of Jammu Kashmir Liberation, used his *Voice of Kashmir* journal to generate a consensus around the same. Consequently, a meeting was called at Rawalpindi on 12 May 1963, which was attended by G.M. Lone, Qazi Khurshid Alam, Abdul Khaliq Ansari, Abdul Majeed Malik Mir Abdul Aziz, Majid Ahmad Bhat, Ghulam Nabi Gilkar, Mir Abdul Qayoom, Mir Abdul Farooq, Syed Shah Nazki, Ghulam Ahmad Jarrah, Ali Muhammad Malika and Mir Abdul Rashid to form a committee called Kashmir Independence Committee. The committee resisted the Bhutto-Swaran Singh talks and the dissection plans of the valley.<sup>15</sup>

In his book *Jehd-e-Musalsal*, Aman-ullah Khan (1992) writes that as soon as the organisation was formed, the members boarded buses and travelled to an unguarded India-Pakistan boundary at Suchetgarh, twenty kilometres from the city of Jammu. One crossed the no man's land and bought back soil from across the working boundary. With the soil from the other side of Kashmir in their hands, the members took an oath to work for the liberation of Jammu and Kashmir extensively. Abdul Khaliq Ansari was made the president, Aman-ullah Khan the secretary general, and Maqbool Bhat the publicity secretary.

Aman Ullah Khan had already started thinking about guerrilla warfare, which many other party members did not receive well. The younger lot of the party agreed with the principles of guerrilla warfare, while the

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14 Ibid.

15 *Maslae Kashmir ka Behtareen Hai*, JkIff, Rawalpindi, Pakistan.

elders categorically rejected the formulation, leading to the ranks split.<sup>16</sup> The younger crowd favouring guerrilla warfare formed the National Liberation Front (NLF) in 1965. Guerrilla warfare was considered the only way forward as it was the only way to establish the point of Kashmiris, which otherwise got buried under the ideological structure of India and Pakistan. The single-point program of NLF was to create conditions in which the people of Jammu and Kashmir could determine the future of their motherland. All the members were required to sign an oath in blood that they would not hesitate to sacrifice their lives to achieve the NLF objectives.<sup>17</sup>

National Liberation Front decided to step into Kashmir Valley to introduce guerrilla ideas. This way, two groups, one headed by Maqbool Bhat and another by Major Amanullah, entered the valley to create various hideouts and provide military training. The two groups were successful in setting up in Srinagar, Sopore, Baramulla, Bandipora, and vulnerability, NLF workers pre-emptively kidnapped and subsequently murdered a police inspector. Soon, Bhat was arrested and sentenced to death for the murder of Inspector Amarchand and for inciting the people against the state of India. However, Bhat escaped, and the organisation began looking for ways to escalate its action to draw the world's attention to the Kashmir issue.<sup>18</sup>

Subsequently, Hashim Qureshi and Ashraf Qureshi planned to hijack the Ganga flyer to bring the Kashmir issue to the forefront. The hijackers demanded the release of 36 political prisoners and claimed allegiance to an organisation called the Kashmir National Liberation Front. The high-voltage drama ended with hijackers setting the aircraft on fire after taking out the passengers. In May 1976, Maqbool Bhat re-entered the valley

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<sup>16</sup> Interview with Ghulam Mustafa Alvi, octogenarian political worker and member of NLF, dated 30 May 2017.

<sup>17</sup> Interview with Muhammad Altaf Hussain, a political worker, dated 3 April 2017.

<sup>18</sup> In September 1970, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine hijacked four jets bound for New York and successfully landed two of them at Dawson Field in Jordan. The operation was successful, attracting international media attention with the detonation of three jets at Dawson's Filed.

to impart military training to recruits. To manage the shortage of funds, Bhat robbed a bank. The employees resisted, and in a shootout that followed,<sup>19</sup> the bank manager was killed. It soon led to Bhat's arrest, and he was subsequently sentenced to death.

From the time of Bhat's arrest in 1976, the National Liberation Front changed its strategy towards advocacy and lobbying as practical techniques for bringing Kashmir to the forefront. This way, JKLF was formed in London, and a journal called *Voice of Kashmir International* was started. The lobbying mechanisms included booking the visitors' gallery of the United Nations General Assembly and raising slogans against the stalemate.

Plebiscite and for endorsing the independent claim to Kashmir. On behalf of JKLF, Amanullah Khan started holding press conferences to discuss the historicity of Kashmir and complete independence as an option. The lobbying continued from 1979 to 1984, and there was a lot of press and media publicity around this time. While the total number of people working for JKLF was not more than a few dozen, the organisation would quickly become the largest and most influential group working for Kashmiri independence. Soon branches were set up in New York, Holland, West Germany, Denmark, France, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates.

## **Understanding the Impact of Youth Groups on Kashmiri Nationalism**

The Plebiscite Front movement and the proliferation of youth groups became part and parcel of everyday life in Kashmir. These everyday experiences and events shaped the Kashmiri nationalist narrative. Faheem (2018) notes that the Azadi movement of the 1990s provided a context through the broken promises connected with other narratives, producing a collective narrative and thereby giving birth to sustained collective action.

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19 *Main Kaun Hun*, Muhammad Maqbool Bhat.