

Jammu Province and National Conference

The secular fringe movement in Jammu for political democratisation, a responsible government, fundamental rights and land to be tilled pre-dated the birth of the National Conference. Sardar Budh Singh formed the Kissan Party in 1925 for political democratisation. Puri (1981) writes that Singh tried to give the Kissan Party a forceful outlook against the Dogra outlook. During his tenure as the elected president of Dogra Sabha, the first secular organisation of the state, he tried vigorously to politicise the political organisation. It enabled him to extend the movement to all sections of the society in the state, too. Eventually, when the National Conference was formed, Budh Singh was the only person other than Abdullah and the only non-Kashmiri and non-Muslim to be elected the president twice. The accession to India and retreat of Dogra rulers made Sheikh Abdullah's position unassailable. However, the reasons that made the National Conference a formidable force in the valley proved to be a major significant block towards the non-establishment of the National Conference in other parts of the valley, particularly in Jammu. As the National Conference-led Quit Kashmir movement was directed against the Dogra Raj, the Kashmir leaders could not endear themselves and their movement to the Dogras—the central community of the region. Secondly, the conversion of the Muslim Conference into the National Conference inhibited any chances of growth of the National Conference, which was the epitome of Kashmiri nationalism. Many prominent Hindu, Sikh and Muslim leaders and young intellectuals joined the National Conference when it was formed in 1939 but could not acquire emotional, regional and religious appeal in Jammu.

Moreover, Jammu lacked a homogenised regional personality like the Kashmir valley, symbolically united culturally and emotionally. Jammu's various communities, castes and cultural sub-groups could not emerge unanimously in the face of the common danger. Given the situation, the reaction against

Kashmir-oriented character of the National Conference was expressed in a communal vocabulary, further dividing its people. The absence of a secular party to voice angst over the Kashmir-centric vision

of the National Conference always worked in the right's favour. At the time of the partition, this sentiment was captured by the Muslim League and the Hindu Mahasabha, respectively. Post-partition, this sentiment was entirely subsumed by the right wing. The base of the communal movement initially was the urban middle-class intelligentsia, the traditional aristocracy, landlords, and jagirdars because they were the ones who suffered most from the transfer of power. The National Conference was better situated in other areas of Jammu Province than Jammu city. However, the geographical divisions at the time of the partition didn't work well for the National Conference. The amalgamation of Poonch Jagir with the state had considerably hurt the local sentiments and attracted its people to the state-wide movement against the autocratic regime of the Maharaja. In Chenaini Jagir, the National Conference aligned itself with the revolt against the excesses of the local Raja, protected by the state's ruler. In the Mirpur region of the state, the National Conference again made inroads, aligning with the local struggle in the area.⁵

A group of Dogra patriots formed the All-Jammu National Youth Conference in 1948, asserting that the institution of monarchy was the biggest stumbling block to satisfying the popular aspirations of the Jammu region. The organisation specifically proclaimed that political power had to be transferred from the autocratic ruler to the people of Jammu. It also alleged that a section of Kashmiri leadership did not allow the people of Jammu to stand on their own and had imposed reactionary elements and government puppets in the Jammu National Conference.⁶

The *mohalla* committees operating under the All-Jammu National Youth Conference attacked the National Conference on the pretext of attacking the ruler's personality rather than the institution of monarchy. A convention of Jammu District National Conference workers was held

5 Interview with Mustafa Kemal, senior politician National Conference. Interviewed In June 2017.

6 Poster published by Ram Nath Mengi, General Secretary, All Jammu and Kashmir National Youth Conference.

at Parmandal in March 1949, which not only demanded the abdication of the Mutharaja by amendment of the party manifesto Naya Kashmir to delete provision for a constitutional ruler of the state.⁷ However, no constitutional, institutional or political arrangements were devised to uphold inter-regional and inter-communal harmony. The impact of a political vacuum in Jammu was precipitated again by the inexplicable expulsion of senior leaders like Om Nath Saraf and Amarnath from the primary membership of the National Conference by the party president Shiekh Abdullah, a day before they had proposed to celebrate Maharajas proposed abdication as a deliverance day under the auspices of Jammu district National Conference committee. Instead of allowing this leadership to flourish, the Kashmir leadership of the National Conference preferred to project Karan Singh, the new regent of the state, to get the support of the people of Jammu. The Jammu leadership felt betrayed that the National Conference negotiated with the Dogra royal house to retain power. Bhasin (2016) notes that the power transfer from the Jammu-based ruler to the Kashmir-based National Conference had reversed Jammu's regional power and psychological vacuum. After removing the sponsors of the abdication moves from the leadership of the Jammu National Conference, no other regional leadership could stabilise itself owing to repeated and arbitrary changes in the local functionaries of the party. The debate on the future of the Maharaja and the institution of the monarchy could not thus be confined to what could be called the radical and conservative wings of Jammu politics. It inevitably became a Kashmir versus Jammu issue, aggravating the tensions. The abdication of Maharaja was followed by an irregular share of Jammu in the state's political power. With numerical confusion over the numbers, the Jammu leadership always felt a lopsided power-sharing arrangement was at work. To raise the level of Jammu leadership and harmonise it with Kashmir, Balraj Puri made the following suggestion in 1950:

If Shiekh Abdullah is unwilling to permit the evolution of local leadership in Jammu democratically as he does not trust his people, let him

7 Interview with historian Om Prakash Saraf, dated January 2017.

nominate a leader from Jammu. This leader should be consulted for all Jammu affairs and have as high a status as any other Kashmiri leader. We should try to rally around such a leader. This might not be a democratic way. But in the present undemocratic system, if Sheikh Abdullah's leadership is indispensable and the integrity of the State is to be maintained, this is the most feasible way to defend the self-respect and honour of Jammu.⁸

Jammu and the Pandit Migration

In the late 1980 and early 1990, the Kashmiri Hindus, known as Kashmiri, fled from the valley towards the southern part of the state and the rest of the cities in India. The Pandit migration coincided with the resurgence of Hindu rights in India. Thus, the Kashmiri migrant Hindu community emerged as an important factor in the 1990s as the Bharatiya Janta Party and its affiliate members increasingly used the issue of Kashmiri Pandits as a political mobilisation tool and quickly associated it with the Hindu nationalist project. After the Pandit migration, Hindu-right wing leadership constantly raised the issues of Kashmiri Pandits in their speeches. The then BJP president L K Advani, in response to the Pandit migration, said, "None raised the voice when 40 odd temples were desecrated in Kashmir. Why these double standards"? According to Nandudar (2006), the BJP's Hindutva politics worked on the perception of a 'Muslim threat' to the Hindu majority, which, given the departure of Pandits from a Muslim majority state, served their ideology. In one of their publications, the Hindu right-wing political group RSS, documenting the 'genocide' of Kashmiri Pandits, claimed that 600 Pandits were murdered and 36 temples desecrated.⁹ The Sangh Parivar situated itself in hostility against the secular nationalist position as it said it ensured minority appeasement at the cost of the majority. Thus, Hindu nationalism was becoming a reservoir for middle-class

8 Desh Sewak, Jammu, 23 March 1950.

9 Speeches by senior Bjp leadership as recorded in Anand Patwardan's documentary Final Solution made in 2012.