
“For both India and Pakistan”, writes Owen Bennet-Jones in his book, *Pakistan: Eye of the Storm*, “the symbolic importance of the Kashmir dispute means that they will inevitably follow their own perceived national interests rather than those of the Kashmiri people”. He could not be more right. Indeed, ever since 1947, the views of the Kashmiris have been obscured by the angry altercations between Delhi and Islamabad. Victoria Schofield, however, succeeds in placing the Kashmiris’ diverse and changing aspirations at the forefront of her comprehensive and impartial political history without diminishing the Indian and Pakistani dimensions of the conflict. Of particular interest is her explanation of the profound transformation Kashmiri politics underwent at the beginning of the 1980s, when what primarily had been a striving for autonomy within the Indian Union became an ill-defined struggle for āzādi, or freedom, meaning to some independence and meaning to others accession to Pakistan. Ideologically, this transformation represented the failure of Kashmiriyat, a political discourse derived from the Kashmiris’ unusual pluralistic cultural identity, as a legitimate means of defining the Kashmiri nation. As a consequence, it was superseded by its antithesis, ethnic and religious communalism.

The concept of Kashmiriyat proceeds from the early historical ideal of the Kashmir Valley, when its Hindu and Muslim inhabitants lived harmoniously under the rule of their own Hindu and Muslim monarchs, and became renowned throughout Asia for their artistic and intellectual accomplishments. As an identity, Kashmiriyat is the common cultural ethos that apparently united the peoples of the Valley. As a nationalistic political ideology, Kashmiriyat is the demand for a secular and pluralistic civil society founded upon the legacy of that ethos.

Within the context of the conflict, the most significant proponent of Kashmiriyat was Sheikh Mohammed Abdullah (d. 1982), an Aligarh-educated political activist. Sheikh Abdullah entered into politics prior to Partition to protest the autocratic rule of the Hindu Maharaja of Jammu and Kashmir, to whose great-grandfather the semi-sovereign English East India Company had sold the Valley in 1846, as a means of installing a compliant ruler on British India’s strategic northern frontier. In the early 1930s, Sheikh Abdullah founded a political party, the All-Jammu and Kashmir Muslim Conference,

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which he later renamed the Jammu and Kashmir National Conference so as to better reflect both its secularism and its inclusiveness. He quickly became the popular leader of Kashmir, and when Partition was imminent, he endorsed the state's accession to India on the premise that the secular and democratic principles of the Indian Constitution ensured that Kashmiris would become full and equal members of the Indian Union on the one hand, and provided them the political space to assert lawfully their distinct cultural identity on the other. Given that the British government, which determined the apportionment of power on the Sub-continent at the time of Partition, objected to the princely states seeking independence, accession to India seemed to be in the best interests of Kashmir. More so, certainly, than accession to Pakistan, whose powerful landed gentry were anathema to Sheikh Abdullah and a threat to the reforms he was working to effect, as well as to the rights of the Valley’s non-Muslims.

Before the question of the state’s accession was decided, however, Pakistan found pretext to seize Kashmir by force. The Maharaja’s army was routed and he appealed to India for military assistance. India agreed to grant this assistance on the precondition that the Maharaja sanction Kashmir’s provisional accession to India, where it would be allowed special status as an autonomous republic, and concede only the control of its communications, defence, and external affairs. When order was restored, India promised that a plebiscite would be held to confirm the accession. In late October 1947, amidst circumstances fiercely debated by India and Pakistan — which Schofield clarifies well — the Maharaja signed the Instrument of Accession. India airlifted troops to Kashmir and drove back the Pakistani forces. Fighting continued until the United Nations imposed a ceasefire on 1 January 1949, leaving India in control of two-thirds of the state and Pakistan in control of a third.

Shortly thereafter, in May 1949, the Maharaja, who rankled at the circumscriptions that the accession had imposed on his power, was compelled by the Indian government to leave the state and relinquish its control to Sheikh Abdullah. Immediately, Sheikh Abdullah set about reforming Kashmir while waiting for India to hold the plebiscite guaranteed in the Instrument of

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*The premise of the argument is strange: Sheikh Abdullah is taken as the given in the Kashmir situation, and whatever does not suit his interests and tastes should be sacrificed, including the right of the Kashmiris to decide about their future, about their becoming a part of India or Pakistan. Also, while the retrograde character of Pakistan’s “powerful landed gentry” has been highlighted as the reason for not acceding to Pakistan, the author seems to conveniently ignore the benighted, rapacious and oppressive Dogra regime which both Sheikh Abdullah and the then “progressive” rulers of India — Mountbatten, Nehru and Gandhi — legitimised by accepting, nay manipulating, the hated Dogra ruler’s accession to India. Ed.*
Accession and thrice called for in the United Nations’ resolutions. That
either India nor Pakistan would do what was required to realise the plebiscite
frustrated Sheikh Abdullah, who continued to support Kashmir’s accession to
India, was confident that a plebiscite would deliver it, and hoped that India
would prove equal to its ideals by holding a referendum, at least in that part of
Kashmir that it occupied. Realistically, however, the Kashmiris’ wishes were
no longer of much importance to India or Pakistan. As soon as the Instrument
of Accession was signed and war ensued, the conflict over Kashmir was only
partly territorial. For both India and Pakistan, possessing Kashmir became an
obligation of their own competing national ideologies — secular nationalism
and religious nationalism, respectively — and neither country could, nor can,
hazard the legitimacy of its very *raison d’être* by losing.

India therefore tried to consolidate its power over Kashmir by abrogating
its special status and incorporating it into the Indian Union with little more
than Sheikh Abdullah’s approbation. He refused to give it; rather, he obtained
recognition of Kashmir’s autonomy in Article 370 of the Indian Constitution.
This angered the non-Muslims of the state of Jammu and Kashmir who were
not residents of the Valley, did not sympathise with its cultural syncretism,
and resented that political power lay there simply because it was nominally
more populous than the state’s other regions. Their objections to Kashmir’s
partial sovereignty further incensed the Indian government, which had
become unwilling to tolerate Sheikh Abdullah’s intractability, especially when
he had begun to speak freely about Kashmiri independence. According to
Schofield, it seems unlikely that Sheikh Abdullah truly thought that he could
secure Kashmir’s independence, particularly since he understood that it would
be possible only with India and Pakistan’s compliance and the assistance of an
outside power, and thus his agitation was a political manoeuvre meant to
remind both the Indians and the Kashmiris that Kashmir deserved its special
status until a plebiscite could determine its future. Whatever hopes he
entertained, and considering Sheikh Abdullah’s importance, Schofield should
have treated this topic in more detail, the Indian government decided it could
not now countenance his authority. On 8 August 1953, Sheikh Abdullah was
imprisoned for most of the next twenty years.

After Sheikh Abdullah’s incarceration, India installed a pliable leader in
Kashmir, and in 1954, Jammu and Kashmir’s Constituent Assembly formally
ratified its accession to India, with the intention of silencing the demand for a
plebiscite. Subsequently, India strengthened its grip on the state even further
by defeating Pakistan in the two countries’ 1965 war over Kashmir and, again,
in the 1971 Indo-Pakistani war. In spite of these developments, and Sheikh
Abdullah’s lengthy absence from politics, the spirit of Kashmiriyat and the desire for self-determination still endured amongst the Kashmiris. Indira Gandhi, the then Indian prime minister, appreciated that since Indian measures to integrate the Valley into the Indian Union were regarded with disfavour by its people, a legitimate political solution was still essential, and that only the recently freed Sheikh Abdullah, still the Kashmiris’ popular leader, could deliver this. Sheikh Abdullah’s response was not enthusiastic, but he eventually reached an agreement with the Indian government. Per the Kashmir Accord of 1975, Sheikh Abdullah agreed to confirm the accession of Kashmir to India without reference to a plebiscite, and the Indian government pledged to honour Kashmir’s special status as stated in Article 370. On account of his popularity, Sheikh Abdullah was elected chief minister of Kashmir in 1977, and the state began to enjoy a degree of prosperity under his direction, but opposition was growing.

Many Kashmiris, most notably the emerging young educated class, were very politically astute, and did not look upon the Kashmir Accord as an acceptable resolution of the state’s predicament: they desired the right of self-determination that they felt Sheikh Abdullah had squandered. They did not align themselves politically with Kashmiriyat and its goal of autonomy; instead, they began to turn towards ethnic and religious communalism, which appeared to be proving itself as a viable liberationist discourse not only in Iran and Afghanistan, but also amongst India’s Sikhs; so inspired, they demanded freedom from what they considered not a secular, but a Hindu-dominated India. Until he died in September 1982, Sheikh Abdullah was able to contain the people’s disaffection, but his son, Farooq Abdullah, who was elected chief minister in 1983, was not. Farooq Abdullah was politically naïve and he was unable to avoid being manipulated by the Indian government. He did not share his father’s ambivalence toward India nor did he go out of his way to maintain Kashmir’s autonomy. Regarding him, Schofield quotes Ajit Bhattacharjea, who wrote: “The last symbol of secular Kashmiriyat remained a lightweight” (p. 144). In 1987, he compromised Kashmiriyat altogether.

When state elections were scheduled for that year, Farooq Abdullah agreed to run as part of a coalition government that if victorious, would increase the representation of India’s ruling party in Kashmir. Also contesting the elections was a new party named the Muslim United Front, which attracted the support of a broad range of Kashmiris, including pro-independence and pro-Pakistani activists. The Muslim United Front was poised to do well, but voter intimidation and blatant electoral fraud assured that Farooq Abdullah’s coalition won. The ensuing government lacked
popular credibility, and the events of the election undermined Kashmiris’ confidence in the democratic political process; therefore, they resorted to violence.

In 1989, armed resistance to Indian rule swept through the Valley when young Kashmiris who had crossed into Pakistan-controlled Azad Kashmir to receive arms and training returned to prosecute a political insurgency. Some of the many militant groups to which they belonged sought independence for the state of Jammu and Kashmir while others sought union with Pakistan; nevertheless, at this time the divisions between the groups were overshadowed by their mutual disgust with the Indian government. As the insurgency escalated, Hindus became targets of communal violence and began to leave the Valley in large numbers. The Kashmiri civil administration was unable to impose order on the unrest, but the Indian government was not intimidated. Rather than relinquish control over Kashmir, in January 1990, it imposed its direct rule on the state. Indian security forces were deployed to repress the insurgency, to which end they resorted to tactics marked by serious and widespread human rights violations. The Kashmiris continued to fight. They hoped that India’s actions would attract international attention to their cause and force the Indian government to consent to their demand for freedom.

Throughout the 1990s, while the Indian government’s campaign against the insurgency intensified, the direction of the insurgency changed: the primacy of the pro-independence groups was marginalised by Pakistan’s increasing support for pro-Pakistani Islamist groups. Several new groups composed of Afghan, Arab, and Pakistani fighters — many of them veterans of the jihad movement in Afghanistan — prevailed. The extremely conservative trend of Islamic revivalism that these groups tried to impose on the Kashmiris alienated them, and Kashmiri support for the insurgency began to wane. India attempted to take advantage of this opportunity by reviving the electoral process in the Valley, and in 1996, in what was maybe a last glimmer of Kashmiriyat, Farooq Abdullah was elected chief minister. In contrast to his earlier position, Farooq Abdullah promised to achieve Kashmir’s autonomy, as it existed prior to 1953. This, though, was a vain hope, and the failure of his administration to restore civil society to the Valley demonstrated its irrelevance. The pro-Pakistani militant groups persisted to fight a proxy war for Pakistan against India, which in turn brought more Indian security forces to the Valley, where their presence seems permanent. Once more, India and Pakistan’s conviction that they must seize Kashmir to prove the legitimacy of their nationhood outstripped the interests of the Kashmiri people and attested how unimportant was their suffering.
Schofield does not foresee that the situation will change. At the time of writing, India and Pakistan had both conducted recent tests of nuclear weapons and had just fought an undeclared war in Kargil, a region of India-controlled Kashmir. Their rivalry was more at odds than ever, and their concern for the Kashmiris’ hopes was trivial. Ultimately, any solution to the conflict over Kashmir must meet the improbable order of satisfying the Kashmiris’ aspirations and leaving neither India nor Pakistan discredited by the appearance of defeat. The protagonists of the dispute must needs see it as it is today and not as it was in 1947: “The history of the conflict over Jammu and Kashmir cannot be re-written; an analysis, however, of all the relevant aspects of the struggle makes it easier to understand the depth of the disappointment and, at times, hatred which has been caused on all sides. Once understood, the challenge is to move on” (p. 230). Students of the Kashmiri dispute should anticipate future editions of this work to learn what, if any, progress has been made.

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