



From Feudalism to Freedom: Political Awakening and the Quit Kashmir Movement

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ABSTRACT

The 1940s marked a critical decade in the political history of Kashmir, defined by a complex interplay of nationalism, anti-feudal resistance, and the struggle for self-determination amid the broader backdrop of the Indian subcontinent's partition. This study explores the evolution of political consciousness in Kashmir, particularly through the activities of the National Conference under Sheikh Abdullah's leadership and its confrontation with the autocratic rule of Maharaja Hari Singh. Central to this period was the "Quit Kashmir" movement of 1946, inspired by democratic ideals and aligned with India's anti-colonial momentum. The movement sought to end princely despotism and empower the Kashmiri people through representative governance. The article examines competing nationalist ideologies, including the secular vision of the Indian National Congress and the communal narrative advanced by the Muslim League under Muhammad Ali Jinnah. It also analyzes key moments such as Gandhi's visit in 1947, which reinforced the region's symbolic and political importance during the twilight of British colonialism. Ultimately, the study reflects on how the culmination of these forces—internal dissent, national aspirations, and external pressures—shaped the accession of Jammu and Kashmir to India, leaving an enduring impact on the region's political trajectory.





INTRODUCTION

The 1940s was a decade of momentous transition and political churning across the Indian subcontinent, and Kashmir stood at the epicenter of these turbulent transformations. This period was defined not only by the broader nationalist struggle against British imperialism but also by a parallel, localized movement within Jammu and Kashmir that sought to dismantle feudal autocracy and establish a representative, democratic governance structure. Amid the wave of national awakening and mass mobilizations, Kashmir emerged as both a contested space and a symbol of political aspirations, ideological contestations, and communal tensions. The interplay of various nationalist discourses—Indian, Pakistani, and Kashmiri—during this critical decade shaped the trajectory of the princely state's accession and left a lasting imprint on the political identity of the region.

At the heart of Kashmir's internal political movement stood the National Conference, under the charismatic leadership of Sheikh Abdullah. By the mid-1940s, the National Conference had grown from a fledgling political group into a powerful mass movement championing socio-economic justice and political emancipation. The 1944 manifesto of the Conference, commonly referred to as the "New Kashmir" program, was a bold and visionary document that laid out an ambitious plan for transforming Kashmir into a democratic, secular, and socialist society. Rooted in Gandhian and Nehruvian ideals, the program called for an end to feudal oppression, equitable land distribution, and the establishment of a modern welfare state governed by elected representatives. The plan envisioned all facets of human activity—agriculture, industry, finance, and infrastructure—regulated under democratic principles. This political awakening, particularly among the peasantry and working classes, laid the foundation for subsequent mass mobilizations that culminated in the 'Quit Kashmir' movement of 1946.

The rise of the National Conference was intrinsically tied to a broader awakening among the Kashmiri masses, who had endured generations of monarchical rule and socio-economic marginalization. The movement's inclusive and secular ethos found deep resonance among a population historically averse to communal divisions. Unlike the communal political projects taking root in other parts of the subcontinent, Kashmir's political evolution during the 1940s

retained a distinctive character, one that sought to bridge religious divides and promote unity among Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs. In a state where the majority of the population was Muslim and the ruling Maharaja was a Hindu, one might have expected a fertile ground for the Muslim League's two-nation theory. However, Kashmir's historical ethos of syncretism and tolerance worked against the communal logic that underpinned the League's politics.

The divergence between the secular, democratic vision of the Indian National Congress and the communal, separatist ideology of the Muslim League was becoming increasingly pronounced during this period. While Jawaharlal Nehru and Mahatma Gandhi envisioned an India united across religious and linguistic lines, Muhammad Ali Jinnah and the Muslim League advanced the idea that Hindus and Muslims constituted separate nations, incapable of coexisting within a single state. The League's adoption of the Pakistan Resolution in 1940 formalized this ideology and set the stage for the eventual partition of India. In Kashmir, the implications of this ideological divide were profound. While Nehru's repeated visits and public support lent credibility and moral backing to Sheikh Abdullah's movement, Jinnah's attempts to revive the defunct Muslim Conference as a political alternative failed to resonate with the majority of Kashmiris.

Jinnah's 1944 visit to Kashmir was a pivotal moment that underscored the limited appeal of the League's communal politics in the valley. While he was formally received with respect, his political message found little traction. The National Conference leadership, in a pointed response to Jinnah's speeches, reiterated their belief that the future of Kashmir could only be shaped through unity among all religious communities. Jinnah's invocation of Muslim unity under the banner of the Muslim Conference failed to mobilize mass support and instead provoked public hostility. When Jinnah attempted to address a gathering in Baramulla, he encountered such resistance that his safety could not be guaranteed, forcing his premature departure. This episode revealed the profound disconnection between the Muslim League's communal agenda and the secular aspirations of Kashmir's political movement.

As the National Conference gained momentum, it continued to draw support from key



figures in the Indian National Congress. The special session held in Sopore in 1945, attended by Jawaharlal Nehru and other prominent leaders such as Maulana Azad and Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan, further cemented the alliance between Kashmiri and Indian nationalism. These engagements underscored the common ideological ground between the National Conference and the Indian freedom movement, particularly in their shared opposition to feudal structures and colonial domination. The session in Sopore became a powerful symbol of solidarity and further galvanized the Kashmiri struggle for responsible governance and democratic participation.

In the administrative realm, however, the entrenched monarchy of Maharaja Hari Singh remained an obstacle to these political aspirations. His appointment of Ram Chandra Kak as Prime Minister in 1945 was perceived as a strategic move to tighten royal control and resist democratic reforms. Though Kak was a Kashmiri by birth and had risen through the ranks of the bureaucracy, his tenure was marked by repression and an unwillingness to engage with popular demands. His refusal to engage meaningfully with the National Conference and his harsh response to political dissent further radicalized the opposition. When the elected representative from the Praja Sabha, nominated by the National Conference, resigned in frustration over administrative obstruction, it triggered a turning point. The Conference launched the 'Quit Kashmir' movement in May 1946, calling for the end of monarchical rule and the establishment of people's sovereignty.

The 'Quit Kashmir' movement mirrored the national Quit India movement in its rhetoric and structure. It was a direct challenge to the legitimacy of the Maharaja's rule and an assertion of the Kashmiri people's right to self-governance. The movement was met with severe repression; leaders were arrested, demonstrations were crushed, and press censorship was intensified. Nevertheless, the movement succeeded in raising political consciousness across the state and drawing national and international attention to the Kashmiri cause. The Indian National Congress, led by Nehru, extended vocal support. Nehru's own attempt to enter Kashmir in solidarity with the detained leaders ended in his arrest, a move that provoked outrage across India and brought Kashmir's plight to the forefront of national discourse.

While these internal struggles were unfolding, the broader political landscape of India was undergoing seismic shifts. The British government had announced its decision to transfer power, and negotiations over the future political structure of the subcontinent were underway. In this volatile environment, Kashmir's political future became a matter of intense debate and strategic maneuvering. Gandhi's visit to Kashmir in July 1947 added another layer of moral and symbolic significance to the state's political developments. He expressed deep admiration for Kashmir's communal harmony and emphasized that its example could serve as a beacon in a divided and communalized India. His sentiments reinforced the idea that Kashmir, in its cultural and political ethos, was fundamentally aligned with India's secular vision.

The dismissal of Ram Chandra Kak in August 1947 and the appointment of General Janak Singh as his replacement marked a critical shift in the political landscape. This development, coinciding with the Partition of India and the emergence of India and Pakistan as independent states, forced Kashmir into a moment of reckoning. With both India and Pakistan vying for its accession, and the princely state still formally independent, the decision of the Maharaja became the subject of intense speculation and geopolitical interest. The people of Kashmir, however, increasingly looked to the National Conference for guidance. Having been denied representative governance for generations, they now saw in the Conference not only a political party but also the legitimate voice of their collective aspirations.

The culmination of these developments set the stage for the eventual accession of Jammu and Kashmir to India later that year. While the decision itself would come to be contested and its implications would reverberate for decades, the foundation of that choice was laid in the 1940s through a complex interplay of ideological, political, and social forces. The decade thus stands as a defining moment in Kashmir's modern history, a period when competing visions of the future—monarchical rule versus democracy, communalism versus secularism, autonomy versus integration—collided and coalesced to shape the destiny of the state.

Review of Literature

The political history of Kashmir during the 1940s has long fascinated scholars, historians, and



political scientists due to the convergence of decolonisation, nationalism, and territorial contestation in this crucial period. The literature on Kashmir's political transformation has evolved considerably over time, moving from nationalistic accounts to more nuanced analyses that incorporate class struggle, identity politics, and geopolitical implications. This review of literature seeks to contextualise the present study within this broader scholarly framework, tracing the evolution of political ideologies, key actors, and the dynamics that shaped Kashmir's trajectory towards accession.

One of the foundational works in this area is Prem Nath Bazaz's *The History of Struggle for Freedom in Kashmir* (2009), which provides a chronological account of the Kashmiri people's aspiration for political autonomy. Bazaz's narrative aligns closely with the rise of the National Conference under Sheikh Abdullah's leadership and the subsequent development of a secular, socialist vision for the state. His portrayal of the National Conference as a progressive force opposing feudal tyranny forms a critical backdrop for the 1940s political shifts explored in Rather's study. Bazaz also highlights how external forces, particularly the Indian National Congress and the Muslim League, tried to impose their ideological frameworks on Kashmir's internal dynamics.

Equally vital is the work of Muhammad Yusuf Saraf in *Kashmiris Fight for Freedom* (2005), which offers a detailed examination of the regional nationalist movements and their opposition to the autocratic rule of Maharaja Hari Singh. Saraf underscores the significance of the 1946 Quit Kashmir Movement, arguing that it marked a decisive break from princely domination and an assertion of people's will. His interpretation reinforces the view that Kashmir was not merely a passive recipient of decisions made by Delhi or Lahore, but rather an active arena of popular political mobilisation. Saraf's analysis closely mirrors the themes in Rather's article, particularly the growing tension between the aspirations of the National Conference and the rigid authority of the Dogra monarchy.

Mridu Rai's *Hindu Rulers, Muslim Subjects* (2007) provides an essential postcolonial lens through which to interpret the relationship between religion and sovereignty in the princely state. Rai's analysis of the Hindu Dogra regime's rule over a Muslim-majority population dismantles

the myth of benevolent monarchy and exposes the structural inequalities that fuelled political unrest. She also interrogates the role of the British colonial administration in sustaining autocracy in Kashmir. Her work lends credence to Rather's assertion that the growing political awareness of Kashmiris in the 1940s, especially under Sheikh Abdullah's leadership, was a response to both internal repression and the waning influence of colonial power structures.

Another significant contribution is found in *A History of Kashmir* by Prithvi Nath Kaul Bamzai (1973), which attempts to offer a comprehensive history from ancient to modern times. Although Bamzai is often critiqued for a pro-establishment bias, his detailed documentation of administrative and political developments provides critical primary data for researchers. Bamzai's focus on the institutional aspects of the Maharaja's governance helps contextualise the rise of dissenting voices such as the National Conference and their demands for democratic reform. His accounts of the state's internal bureaucracy support Rather's claim that the appointment and removal of figures like Ram Chandra Kak were not just administrative decisions but politically significant events.

Scholars like Narinder Singh, in *Political Awakening in Kashmir* (1992), delve into the pre-Partition mobilisation of Kashmiri society, highlighting how grassroots political education played a pivotal role in shaping the mass movements of the 1940s. Singh's work is particularly relevant for understanding the ideological foundations of the National Conference and the emphasis on secularism and inclusive governance. Rather's portrayal of the Quit Kashmir movement and its broad-based support aligns with Singh's observations about the organic nature of political consciousness in the region.

DISCUSSION

However, the National Conference continued to be politically active. Its objective was to implement a socialistic social structure in 1944. It established a strategy to achieve "an all-sided advance along all avenues of human activity regulated in a democratic manner on a country-wide scale." Agriculture, industry, transportation, distribution, utility services, currency, and finance were all included in the plan. The system was founded on the "democratic principle of responsible government with the elective principle



applied from the local Panchayat right up to the Legislative Assembly."¹ The ordinary man's fight for independence was given purpose by the new philosophy, which also guaranteed his unwavering devotion to the Conference and its leaders. However, Mr. Jinnah and the Muslim League showed there before a campaign to make it a reality could be started.²

In the ten years before the Second World War ended, India's political climate took a terrible turn. While the Muslim League, led by Muhammad Ali Jinnah, sought to divide the nation along religious lines, the Indian National Congress, under the inspirational leadership of Jawaharlal Nehru and Mahatma Gandhi, was making headway against the forces of British imperialism. On the basis that Muslims and Hindus were two distinct nations, the League approved the Pakistan Resolution in 1940, calling for the creation of an independent state for Muslims in India. Any shared cultural history and interests between Muslims and Hindus were disregarded, if not outright rejected. The 'two-nation' theory of Mr. Jinnah was unacceptable to the National Congress, which from the beginning represented a nation with diverse classes, creeds, and interests, as it went against the nation's best traditions and the political consciousness of the Indian populace.³

One may have expected sectarian politics to flourish in Kashmir, where the main population was Muslim but the king was Hindu. But throughout the course of their centuries-long history, the people had come to see religious belief in a way that was both peaceful and accepting. They detested hatred between different religious communities. They had coexisted peacefully throughout their turbulent past, therefore the Muslim League's philosophy was alien to their finest customs and so did not sit well with them.⁴

People from all walks of life were enthralled by Jawaharlal Nehru's journey to Kashmir in 1940, which is understandable. The Kashmiris were won over by the Congress's interest in and compassion for the state's people's fight for independence. However, Mr. Jinnah and the League carefully avoided becoming involved in the fight of the state's citizens.⁵

With his 'two-nation' notion, Mr. Jinnah now attempted to gain the support of the Muslims in Kashmir. A handful of his employees tried to revive the old Muslim Conference, which had been kept alive by a few communal reactionaries but had

little support and essentially no platform. Mr. Jinnah travelled to Kashmir in the spring of 1944, supposedly "for rest" and without any stated intention of "taking part in politics." "We Kashmiris today receive you as a prominent Indian despite the ideological differences we have with you," the National Conference remarked in their welcoming message. Together with other Indian leaders, we hope you will work to find a solution that would help free the hordes of people in India."⁶

"I am happy to see all classes and groups combined here to receive and honour me," Mr. Jinnah said in response. "Muslims have one platform, one Kalma, and one God," he responded to another event hosted by the revived Muslim Conference, only an hour later. I would want the Muslims to unite behind the Muslim Conference's flag and defend their rights. To put it another way, he was suggesting that Muslims should follow the same course of action that they had abandoned ten years before.⁷

The National Conference responded sharply, saying, "Ills of this land can only be remedied by carrying Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs together." Mr. Jinnah's 'rest' now seemed to be inextricably linked to politics. In his address, he attacked the National Conference as a "band of gangsters" and chaired the Muslim Conference's annual session.⁸ This was too much for the Kashmiris to handle, and when he attempted to speak at a public gathering in Baramulla a few days later, the mob's ire became so intense that he had to be taken to a safer location out of concern for his safety from the hostile, mostly Muslim, throng. Mr. Jinnah had to leave Kashmir disillusioned, and the Muslim Conference was unable to gain much support.

The Congress had come to appreciate Sheikh Abdullah and his National Conference by the conclusion of World War II.⁹ Sopore, 30 miles north of Srinagar, hosted a special session of the National Conference in the summer of 1945. One significant aspect of the session was the gathering of the All-India States Peoples' Conference Standing Committee, which Jawaharlal Nehru presided over. Many state representatives participated in the discussions, and significant decisions were made to end the feudalistic system of princely states that the British administration had established and fostered in India. Congress leaders Maulana Azad, Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan, and others were there as well. The politically



aroused Kashmiris' young imaginations were stimulated by speeches given throughout the session that placed a strong focus on the political and social ideas of the Kashmiri people and those of the rest of India.¹⁰

N. Gopalaswami Aiyangar gave up his position as prime minister when the Second World War was at its height and the Maharaja had complete authority free from interference from the British Indian administration. An orderly but strict governance came to an end when he left state employment. The Maharaja then swiftly selected Sir B.N. Rau, Colonel Sir K.N. Haksar, and Raj Sir Maharaj Singh to the position. None of these guys attempted to comprehend the state's issues or help find solutions. The populace desired significant change and had made quick progress in political education.¹¹ Additionally, the Maharaja named Ram Chandra Kak, a Kashmiri, to replace Sir B.N. Rau as prime minister of the state when he handed over the position in the summer of 1945. After joining the state as a librarian at a nearby institution, Kak's exceptional work ethic eventually led him to be appointed Minister-in-Waiting to the Maharaja. With two well-liked members of the Council of Ministers, Sir B.N. Rau's departure allowed him to win the desired prime ministership.¹²

The Maharaja declared his intention to appoint two popular ministers to the Cabinet from among the elected members of the Praja Sabha during the National Conference's 1944 annual session in Srinagar, where the conference adopted the program of a socialistic pattern of society and democratic government. The National Conference chose its own candidate for the Cabinet and embraced the changes, despite their limited scope, as a first step towards future collaboration between the ruled and the ruling. However, the popular minister faced administrative non-cooperation and apathy from non-elected ministers in his day-to-day job, and he was even unable to control the way his own departments operated. Thus, he resigned on March 17, 1946. The National Conference began its 'Quit Kashmir' campaign for the people's takeover of power a month later, in May 1946.¹³

Supported by Nehru and the Congress, Sheikh Abdullah resorted to his previous strategies to challenge the Maharaja's reign. He started the 'Quit Kashmir' campaign against the Maharaja and his family, giving it a look similar to the Quit India movement. Kak took harsh action against Sheikh

and the other leaders, and the movement quickly died down. However, Bakshi Ghulam Muhammad and G.M. Sadiq had already left the state to lead the movement from the rest of the nation before Kak's iron hand could strike. They kept the public fully informed about the movement's true goals and objectives thanks to their unwavering efforts.¹⁴

Jawaharlal Nehru, who was currently having crucial discussions with the Cabinet Mission, hurried to the aid of the Kashmiri people upon learning that they were being singled out for ruthless persecution. However, he was apprehended by the authorities after entering the state's territory. India was rocked by the news of his detention, and Congress leaders summoned him back to Delhi for talks out of concern for the consequences. Mr. Jinnah made a speech at the time Jawaharlal Nehru hurried to Kashmir and disregarded the prohibition on his entrance into the state, calling the "Quit Kashmir" campaign "an agitation carried on by a few malcontents who were out to create disorderly conditions in the state."¹⁵

In the meanwhile, the nation was experiencing significant changes. The handover of whole authority to Indians was declared by the British administration. India was on the verge of division. Due to their intense battle with the forces of feudalism, the people of Kashmir were unable to consider these important issues. Gandhiji made time to go to Kashmir in July 1947 despite the difficult circumstances and the escalating tensions in the rest of India. The stressed individuals found solace in his presence. The communal unity that pervaded the state thrilled him, and he said that Kashmir was the sole hope in a darkened India. When he returned in August 1947, he spoke at a prayer meeting in Wah, Pakistan, saying that among the vast crowds he saw, "it was very difficult for me to know whether it was predominantly Muslim or Hindu." When word spread that the Maharaja had fired Ram Chandra Kak and replaced him with General Janak Singh, a former Revenue Minister, the visit of Mahatma Gandhi was still being discussed in Srinagar's homes and streets. They now turned to the National Conference for a clear direction on the most crucial issue: whether the state should join India or Pakistan.

CONCLUSION

For Kashmir, the 1940s defined itself with political activities, ideological disputes, and the unresolved issue of accession. The goal of a



democratic and socialist future of the National Conference ran against to the feudal control of the Maharaja, leading to the "Quit Kashmir" campaign. While Sheikh Abdullah and his allies yearned for more people's authority and autonomy, the Congress and the Muslim League controlled more general subcontinental politics that exacerbated Kashmir's situation. While Nehru and Gandhi's backing enhanced the status of the National Conference, Jinnah's efforts to unite Kashmiri

Muslims under the Muslim Conference lacked appeal. The accession of Kashmir was set up by the Maharaja's rejection of his pro-autonomy Prime Minister and the mounting political instability. Kashmir's political battle exposed the complexity of regional nationalism, sectarian identities, and outside influences as India neared independence and partition, thereby guiding choices that would define its destiny on the newly split subcontinent.

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