

The Shifting Nature of Kashmiri Identity Politics and the Need to Reinvent the Past

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Kashmiri identity politics has played an important role in defining the context of conflict in Jammu and Kashmir. This state has been in conflict ever since 1947, both externally and internally. While the external dimensions have been characterized by Pakistan's contestation of the state's accession with India and the resultant hostility between India and Pakistan, the internal dimension of conflict has been driven by the response of Kashmiris toward the Indian state. This response is defined by identity politics, the contours of which evolved in the pre-accession period. Kashmiri identity politics, however, has not remained static. It is quite dynamic and has shifted in nature depending on the context and situation in which Kashmiris have found themselves at different times.

The evolution of Kashmiri identity politics can be traced back to the 1930s and 1940s, when common Kashmiris were politicized in their struggle against feudal rule that had not merely rendered them economically oppressed but also politically disempowered. The period is significant for a number of reasons. In addition to the mobilization of the common masses comprised of peasants, artisans, and the working class, it saw the emergence of a mass-based political organization called the National Conference, whose outreach extended across the valley. It also witnessed the evolution of dynamic leadership in Kashmir. The charismatic Sheikh Abdullah and a number of other leaders of the National Conference rose to power in this period. Most importantly, however, it was during this period that the contours of Kashmiri identity politics evolved and its basic logic took a concrete form.

Inclusive Identity Politics and Reconstruction of Society and Economy

Though initially a response of the emerging middle class to feudal rule, Kashmiri identity politics eventually took shape as a mass movement. In 1932, when a political response had started to emerge through the All Jammu and Kashmir Muslim Conference, it had limited goals linked with the class interests of the middle class Muslim intelligentsia—mostly related to educational and employment opportunities as well as those related to control over religious places. The Kashmiris' religious sense of

belonging formed the crux of identity politics. The Muslims of the state were seen as a part of the unified group of people struggling against the Hindu ruler and the Hindu state.

The movement, however, was gradually changing and shedding its religious character. By 1939, it had sufficiently broadened itself to accommodate significant changes in the organizational structure of the Muslim Conference. Rechristened as the All Jammu and Kashmir National Conference, it opened up to non-Muslim communities and was reorganized on the basis of secular principles. Most importantly, it reimagined and redefined its political agenda to incorporate the interest of the most marginal and oppressed members of society. Since the feudal economic structure severely impacted the mass of impoverished Kashmiris, the new goals of the organization were directly aimed at attacking this structure and reconstructing the economy of the state.

Catering to the interests of peasants, artisans, and the working class, the National Conference soon assumed status as a mass movement. In 1944, it adopted the *New Kashmir Manifesto*, which not only provided an agenda for the future constitution of the state but also a vision of the socio-economic restructuring of the state. It called for complete reorganization of the agrarian structure, eliminating its parasitical and feudal components, and empowering the peasantry, artisans, and other working classes. It also advocated for compulsory work for all residents of the state, the right to unemployment, the right to rest, the right to education, and a minimum wage, among others. Elimination of economic inequalities and an adequate standard of living for all people were the major goals of the manifesto. Among the most important parts of the manifesto were a peasant's charter, a worker's charter, and a women's charter.

On the political side, the National Conference adopted the goal of representative government and participation of the Kashmiri masses in it. The political goals followed the strong sentiment during this period that Kashmiris had lost their political dignity due to the continued alien control over Kashmir since the arrival of Mughals in the latter part of the sixteenth century. Though the Mughals were succeeded by Afghans and Sikhs, it was the transfer of power from Sikhs to Dogras that was particularly perceived as humiliating for Kashmiris. The Amritsar Treaty, under which Kashmir had come under the control of the Dogra rulers, was termed a "sale deed" since it had a provision for the transfer of the territory of Kashmir to Maharaja Gulab Singh and his heirs through a payment of seventy-five lakh rupees. Restoration of political control over Kashmir and in turn the dignity of Kashmiris was therefore the first major goal of the National Conference. This goal later evolved into the goal of political autonomy for Kashmir.

In pursuit of these twin goals—the reconstruction of the Kashmiri economy and political autonomy—the Kashmiri leaders did not place much importance on the question of accession to either of the two dominions of India and Pakistan. Rather, they insisted on the goal of freedom before accession and therefore rejected the supposed inevitability of joining Pakistan despite its status as a "Muslim Homeland." Despite the fact that Kashmir was predominantly Muslim, Sheikh Abdullah and his colleagues felt

that neither the political autonomy of Kashmir nor radical economic transformation would be possible in feudal Pakistan. Rather, there was a danger of Kashmiri identity being subsumed by the larger Muslim identity. Negotiation with India, in his opinion, was a better option, and therefore he and other leaders of the National Conference approved of accession to India. They negotiated an asymmetrical federal system with a special status guaranteed by Article 370 of Indian Constitution that provided a nearly perfect scenario for fulfilling the twin goals of autonomy and radically transformative economic policy.

The principles of autonomy, dignity, and negotiability governed the logic of Kashmiri identity politics. So long as this logic governed Kashmir's relationship with India, there was a smooth relationship between Kashmiri and Indian nationalism. The Kashmiri leadership had enough freedom to pursue radical land reforms and empower the vast class of peasantry by acquiring surplus land from big land owners and redistributing it to cultivators.

Growing Difficulties between Kashmiri Leadership and India

Problems started erupting with the state's relationship with India as challenges to the logic of Kashmiri identity politics arose. The removal of Sheikh Abdullah from the political scene, his long incarceration, the intrusive politics of the center, as well as the stifling of the democratic space, changes in center-state relations, and the erosion of autonomy—all of these developments led to the crisis of Kashmiri identity and caused it to begin gradually changing its character. Unlike its original aim of the emancipation of the most marginalized people, it started to assume a more inward-looking, homogenous character, and continued to be contested.

In the first shift that took place in 1953 following the removal of Sheikh Abdullah from politics and his long incarceration, the social aspect of Kashmiri identity politics dissipated. Fixed on the political question of Kashmir's relationship with India, and plebiscite being the primary demand, there was no way that the question of economic justice and the class interests of the marginalized could be articulated or raised. From 1953 to 1975, Kashmir saw the emergence of an affluent class who were beneficiaries of a development bonanza for the state by the central government in a bid to counter the political crisis; yet, a majority of Kashmiris remained at the subsistence level. However, the question of class contradictions was not raised at any point of time.

When Sheikh Abdullah returned to politics in 1975, the core issue underlying Kashmiri identity became autonomy. Rather than resistance against the Indian state, it was now a movement in the context of center-state relations that defined Kashmiri identity politics. The major demand of the mass mobilization was related to restoration of the pre-1953 constitutional status of the state. The issue of autonomy continued to inform Kashmiri identity politics even after the death of Sheikh Abdullah. Farooq Abdullah, his son and successor, aggressively tapped into identity politics to mobilize Kashmiri voters in the 1983 Assembly election. However, his failure to sustain this led to a political vacuum in which the Muslim United Front, a combination of the religious-oriented

political organizations, emerged and brought religion to the center stage of Kashmir's identity politics.

Despite the fact that the social aspect was missing from Kashmiri identity politics after 1953, it retained two important elements that evolved from the pre-1947 period—it completely shied away from religious and communal elements of Kashmiri identity, and its roots were firmly indigenous. These two elements had a major impact on the years following 1986.

Militancy and Externalization of Kashmiri Identity Politics

While religion assumed centrality with the emergence of the Muslim United Front, Kashmiri identity politics became exposed to external factors with the onset of militancy in the post-1989 period. Though militancy was caused by purely internal factors and the first generation of militants were all local Kashmiri recruits, the fact that they sought Pakistan's support for training and financing indicated a new external factor in Kashmiri identity politics. After training the first generation of militants, most of whom belonged to Jammu Kashmir Liberation Front (JKLF), Pakistan started controlling militancy by launching parallel militant groups, such as Hizbul Mujahideen. In the process, Pakistan started putting pressure on JKLF and eliminating a large number of its cadres. By 1993, militancy had changed, not only because Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence controlled it in a major way, but also because of the large number of foreign militants and jihadis. The entry of jihadis introduced religion in Kashmiri politics, and the conflict—which was originally seen as indigenous—was now perceived as a part of global jihad. By the mid-1990s, the majority of the militants came from outside Kashmir. With the entry of Harkat-ul-Mujahideen and Jaish-e-Mohammed, the militancy acquired not only a very heavy foreign character, but also the element of religion.

The externalization of Kashmiri identity politics and its Islamization led to internal contradictions. While on one hand it brought Jamaat-e-Islami and various other Islamic separatist and militant organizations to the forefront, on the other hand, there was also an attempt to reclaim the indigenous and secular nature of Kashmiri identity. This contradiction could not come out in the open for quite some time due to the prevalence of violence. However, by the late 1990s, Kashmiri society strongly indicated its uneasiness with both the centrality of religion in Kashmir's movement politics as well as the role of jihadis in it. Women specifically played a very crucial role in de-legitimizing the role of various fundamentalist organizations that had insisted on imposing religious and moral codes on society and restricting freedom. Silently but forcefully, women defied various efforts at veiling them or restricting them to the confines of the four walls of their homes.

It was during the late 1990s that the debate around the question of religion in Kashmiri identity politics was brought to the public domain. Representing two different sides of the debate were the two stalwart leaders of the All Party Hurriyat Conference, the major separatist organization of Kashmir, Syed Ali Shah Geelani and Abdul Gani

Lone. Geelani represented the view that religion was the core of the Kashmiri identity politics and that the movement was part of the global jihadi politics, with that being the reason for the presence of foreign militants in Kashmir. Lone, on the other hand, argued that the movement was purely political and had indigenous roots and had no connection whatsoever with the global jihad. He even argued that jihadi militants in Kashmir were irrelevant. He stated that “we are thankful to [the foreign militants]. But when it comes to the settlement of the dispute it will be the Kashmiris—their militants and their political leadership which will have to represent the people of Kashmir.”¹ On the whole, he rejected the argument of the prevalence of religion in Kashmir’s identity politics. A religion-based argument, according to him, ignored the distinct nature of the movement and overlooked the diversities of Jammu and Kashmir, which had religious, cultural, and regional differences. Lone paid a heavy price for making this argument—he was assassinated soon after.

Crisis-Driven Identity in Post-Militancy Period

Externalization of Kashmiri identity politics has been a major question for Kashmiris in more recent years. Though Pakistan has been perceived as a major supporter for Kashmiris in their struggle during the recent period of *azadi* politics—and at a symbolic level one can see extension of pro-Pakistan elements in Kashmir—there is an increasing assertion of the indigenous element of politics. This is more clearly reflected in the post-militancy stage of separatist politics.

Popular protests characterized the post-militancy stage of Kashmiri identity politics. With the decline of militancy, separatist assertions have arisen through massive and prolonged demonstrations. The years of 2008 to 2010 was particularly noted for such mass assertions which took place for several months. More recently, in the summer of 2016, such assertions took place. During all these assertions, one point that is overtly emphasized is that the protest forms a part of the indigenous resistance politics and stems from local sentiments.

What is particular about these mass assertions is that they are driven by a sense of cynicism and anger among the youth rather than purposive politics. One can see a generational shift with younger men born and brought up during the peak of violence taking center stage. The protests of these stone-pelting youths have been mostly spontaneous, with the separatist leadership following their emotions on the streets instead of giving direction to the movement politics. The politics have been mostly nihilistic, with many youths losing their lives or becoming injured in the process.

Such cynicism represents the general mood in Kashmir that followed the failure of engagement politics that took place from 2000 to 2007. It was during this period that sufficient movement forward took place in the peace process. The Vajpayee government

¹ Rekha Chowdhary, “Lone’s Liberal Legacy,” *Economic and Political Weekly* 37, no. 25 (2002): 2398-2400.

took the initiative of simultaneously engaging Pakistan as well as Kashmiri separatists in order to resolve the conflict. In the process, a hope that the conflict would be resolved and that Kashmiris would have an “honorable exit” was generated. However, with the internal disturbances in Pakistan since 2007, the peace process collapsed and hope gave way to cynicism.

The present phase of identity politics is peculiar in that the centrist space is shrinking. Extremism, hardline positions, and rigidities have become the hallmark of Kashmiri identity politics, and a sense of religious belonging is overtaking centrist politics in a significant way.

The Need to Reinvent the Ethos of Kashmiri Identity Politics

To conclude, one may say that Kashmiri identity politics has come a long way from the socially purposive politics of 1940s, during which it had taken a progressive turn in the direction of an inclusive politics and had redefined its purpose as the reconstruction of the economy, society, and politics of the state. At the present moment, however, it is much more of a crisis-driven identity which responds to emotive issues related to demography. There is a strong feeling that the Muslim-majority character of the state is under attack.

While one can attribute the reasons for this sense of crisis to the changing nature of Indian politics, particularly the Hindu rightist assertions, there are internal reasons for this crisis as well. Over the years, the leadership has lost the initiative and has been engaged in self-perpetuation. Because of this, the common Kashmiris find themselves in a difficult position.

There is, meanwhile, a lot of internal questioning. While there is ongoing criticism of the leadership, there is also a demand for rethinking the strategies of the movement. Following one of the statements made by Syed Ali Shah Geelani in late 2015 that people have failed the leadership in Kashmir, there was a prolonged debate about the role of the leadership and the need to reimagine the direction of separatist politics. This kind of critique has emerged again after an extended agitation during the summer of 2016. This conflict saw the loss of young lives as well as numerous gun injuries. While the agitation reflected the general mood of desperation that has overtaken the youth since the collapse of the peace process and the sense of political marginalization due to disengagement of Kashmiris, the immediate reason for it was the killing of Burhan Wani, a young Kashmiri militant of Hizbul Mujahideen. Wani, who symbolized the renewed interest of Kashmiris in armed militancy, had attained an iconic stature among the youth in a very short time period. Widespread protests all over the valley followed his death.

While the conflict lasted throughout the summer, during which there was a complete shut down because of calendars issued by the joint separatist leadership of Syed Ali Shah Geelani, Mirwaiz Omar Farooq, and Yasin Malik, there has recently been a renewed questioning of the leadership. There is not only a scathing critique of the

leaders, but also a demand for placing the responsibility on the government. There is also criticism of the separatist leaders regarding the huge loss of lives, livelihood, and education during the five months of government shut down. Once again, this is a call for reinventing the identity politics of Kashmir.

In this call for reimagining and reinventing the identity politics of Kashmir, one can refer to the past, especially the 1930s and 1940s when the foundations of this identity politics were laid and when this identity had acquired a broad, inclusive, and socially meaningful character. Can Kashmiri identity politics again include those past essential qualities?

On the whole, a study of the trajectory of Kashmiri identity politics clearly indicates that it is the urge for political dignity, autonomy, and control over political destiny that informs Kashmiri identity politics. This urge, as this analysis informs, is not contradictory to the goals of Indian nationalism. In fact, the journey of identity politics started with an emphasis on the kinship of ideas between Kashmir and India—particularly the ideas related to democracy, secularism, and federalism. It is during this period that a harmonious construction between Kashmiri and Indian nationalism evolved. It is in the similar construction of the relationship between Kashmiri identity politics and Indian nationalism that the possibility of conflict resolution can be explored. The key, therefore, lies in the strengthening of the democratic, secular, and federal ethos and in locating Kashmir's relationship with India in this ethos. Only such an ethos will restore the internal strength of Kashmiri identity politics and reinvent the progressive tilt that is reflected in the New Kashmir Manifesto.

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