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Kashmiri Visions of Freedom

The Past and the Present

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We want– Freedom!
It's our right– Freedom!
Say it aloud! Freedom!
Shout it out! Freedom!
Beat us down! Freedom!
Here she comes– Freedom!
Beloved one – Freedom!
That scented one– Freedom!
We'll take it– Freedom!

Selections of Slogans
(*Jashn-e-Azadi*, 2007)

Introduction

In the winter of 1990, the Kashmir Valley was in the throes of a full-fledged insurgency against the Indian state. Kashmiri passions reached a fever pitch as the mass upsurge took the form of a pro-independence movement. Streams of Kashmiris poured onto the streets of Srinagar chanting slogans of *'aazadi'* (freedom). The idea of freedom received almost universal support in Kashmiri Muslim public opinion, even by those who had once been ardent supporters of Sheikh Mohammad Abdullah, the Kashmiri nationalist leader who had tied Kashmir's fate with India in 1947. The word *aazadi* ultimately became an inherent part of Kashmiri Muslim political discourse. Its meaning has been the subject of an acerbic debate among politicians and policymakers in South Asia, as the concept is constructed and deconstructed to fit in with the nationalist perspectives of Pakistan, India and Kashmir. In these debates, the idea of freedom has been defined in a limited fashion – either as Kashmir's accession to Pakistan, its greater autonomy from the Indian union, or its complete political independence.

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Most scholarship on the region views the Kashmir issue through the prism of Indian and Pakistani claims on the state, and the threat that Kashmir presents to the nation-states' strategic security, thus turning a political issue into a national security issue (Ganguly, 2003; Swami, 2007). Another strand of scholarship, mostly by political scientists, has focused on the Kashmiri right of self-determination and placed it within the framework of United Nations resolutions, which limited Kashmiris' right of self-determination to either joining India or Pakistan. Some have foregrounded the plurality of the state and highlighted the contested allegiances that complicate granting self-determination to Kashmiris (Behera, 2006; Puri, 1983). Others have suggested that the concepts of democracy and self-determination converge as the focal points of Kashmiri Muslim political aspirations (Bose, 2003). Although recent scholarship led by anthropologists has documented how violence, both state and insurgent sponsored, has complicated the meaning of *aazadi* for Kashmiris (Duschinksi, 2009, 691–717; Robinson, 2013), no serious attempt has been made to historicize the idea of *aazadi* and place it within the context of Kashmir's social-political culture and popular discourse.

This article explores the key shifts in the Kashmiri definition of freedom from the early twentieth century to the present. Without denying the importance of political freedom for Kashmiris, I demonstrate that it is essential to examine Kashmiri imaginings of freedom in a historical context, not only to dispel the notion of freedom as a recent construct, but also to broaden its meaning from political emancipation to a concept informed by human dignity, economic equity and social justice. In fact, I argue that in shaping their idea of freedom, Kashmiris liberally borrowed from the ancient texts and mystical culture of Kashmir, while at the same time remaining open to new international ideas that could improve human relationships and lay the foundations for a strong society. However, there was not a single united vision of freedom, since schisms within and between communities and classes added complexities to the Kashmiri discourse on freedom.

Through a discussion of Kashmir's socio-political history, this chapter shows how pre-existing ideas of freedom became more prominent in public discourse in the postcolonial period, informing political debates and instances of popular resistance. The partition of the subcontinent generated animosities between the two nation-states that made Kashmir a symbol of national pride, a territory that had to be retained or gained regardless of the consent of its people. In the process, India and Pakistan utilized coercive instruments – the police, army and intelligence networks – to assist state-sponsored regimes in securing

central authority. They allowed misgovernance and denial of liberties to keep Kashmir politically quiescent. As a result, Kashmiri understandings of freedom merged with the Wilsonian concept of self-determination in the postcolonial era, politicizing its meaning and bringing into sharp relief the contested nature of *aazadi*.

Kashmiri understandings of freedom: Late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries

Freedom was an important component of Kashmiri socio-political discourse in pre-colonial and colonial times. The geographies, histories and ethical treatises of the pre-colonial era are replete with notions of freedom. Kalhana's *Rajatarangani* (River of Kings) – labeled the earliest recorded history of the Indian subcontinent by orientalist scholars – provided a message to Kashmiri society about efficient, ethical and moral governance. The twelfth-century text sketched a picture of a good king – one who ensured social peace, encouraged productivity of the land and governed wisely, in the process creating a harmonious society that could lead individuals toward freedom from injustice, ignorance and selfishness (Stein, 1900).

Through their poetry, the Muslim mystics of the fourteenth century explained emancipation as the struggle to attain good social relations, end economic injustice and create humanistic traditions that considered all human beings as creations of God (Kotru, 1989; Mattu, 1982). These imaginings of freedom, transferred from one generation to another through poetry and folklore, defined the way that Kashmiris perceived of emancipation. However, Kashmir's momentous pattern of repressive dynasties in the eighteenth century, for instance the Afghans, prevented them from attaining this vision of freedom. Regional narratives and European travelogues from that period document heart-wrenching stories of injustice and persecution meted out to Kashmiris to keep them in constant awe and terror (Jacquemont, 1936; Gadru *et al.*, 1973). This poverty and misgovernance continued into the nineteenth century, especially during the Sikh regime and the early decades of the despotic Dogra regime.

In the early twentieth century, social, economic and political transformations allowed Kashmiris to initiate a movement for emancipation based on conceptions of the rights of the ruled, the obligations of the rulers and general notions of good governance. Even then, the idea of freedom was not monolithic, but meant different things to different people; class and religious differences shaped the myriad meanings of freedom. The state of Jammu and Kashmir was created by the English East India Company in 1846 by patching together culturally diverse

regions and placing Gulab Singh, a Dogra chieftain from Jammu, as ruler of the state. This was a reward for his services during the Anglo-Sikh wars of 1846, when he played a vital role in helping the colonial power to undermine and eliminate the Sikh empire. Regional narratives of Kashmir label this transfer of territory as a 'sale-deed' that stripped Kashmir from the Sikh kingdom of Punjab and placed it under a Dogra Hindu ruling house, without consideration for the wishes or interests of the vast majority of its people, who happened to be Muslims (Rai, 2004, 18–21). Although it was not uncommon for rulers to belong to one religion while the majority belonged to another, the state of Jammu and Kashmir was different in that the majority of its Muslim subjects were excluded from power-sharing arrangements.

Furthermore, the socio-economic conditions in the princely state of Jammu and Kashmir ensured the dominance of the ruling elite over the vast majority of its subjects. Although hierarchal social divisions already existed within Kashmiri society, the Dogra state created a new group of landed elites, mostly Hindus, who were bestowed lands in compensation for services rendered – real or fancied. The landed elite had exclusive rights over tillers and few obligations to the primarily Muslim cultivators. Additionally, the peasantry faced exploitation from the Muslim religious elite (*Pirs*), especially the custodians of the shrines, who exerted their religious power to extract food grains from the peasantry (Zutshi, 2004, 77). Ties of obedience to the shrines prevented an agrarian revolt and the complicity of the Muslim elite with the Hindu bureaucracy ensured the dominance of the upper classes. This imbalance in power dynamics was echoed in Kashmir's urban centres.

Furthermore, throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, natural calamities like famines and epidemics made life unbearable for the poor strata of society. This encouraged migrations as Kashmiris sought a better life outside Kashmir's boundaries (Foreign and Political Department, 1879). However, Kashmiri migrants who settled in other parts of India, especially the Punjab, had to confront negative stereotypes due to their poverty and oppression. Often labeled as 'cowards without dignity', who lacked the courage to stand up for their rights, Kashmiris struggled to adapt to their new environment (Sufi, 1949, 683). In time, many of these Kashmiri families distinguished themselves in different fields. This gave them the confidence to embrace their regional identity and encourage future generations of Kashmiris to take pride in their heritage. In the early part of the twentieth century, writings by Kashmiri Muslims who had settled in Punjab emphasized the need to create a response of resistance instead of

hopelessness. Two prominent individuals living in Punjab – Munshi Muhammad Din Fauq, the editor of *Kashmir Magazine*, and Mohammad Iqbal, the famed poet-philosopher – articulated a discourse that called into question the negative depictions of Kashmiris. They emphasized the greatness of Kashmir's past history and attributed any Kashmiri servility to foreign domination. The goal was to make the Kashmiri Muslim community realize that despite their disadvantages, with education and opportunities they too could escape from this pitiable state and change their destinies (Fauq, 1911, 113; Arberry, 1966, 117–18).

Clearly, within the Muslim community in the early twentieth century, freedom meant improving socio-economic conditions through education and regaining their dignity and self-confidence after cycles of oppression. Putting their ideas into practice, expatriate Kashmiri intelligentsia, based in the Punjab, worked with the religious elites of Kashmir, who had a foothold within the Kashmiri community, to introduce social reforms and education that could improve Kashmiri Muslim social standing. They not only set up scholarships and grants for deserving Kashmiri students, but also initiated the trend of submitting petitions to the Maharaja demanding increased education facilities for the state's Muslims and the induction of far more Muslims into state structures (Muslim Kashmir Conference, 1925, 9–15). By the late 1920s, their efforts had proved successful in creating a new class of Kashmiri Muslims well versed in English education.

In the early twentieth century, while the Muslim community was clamoring for rights from the Dogra regime, the Kashmiri Pandits, an educated but minority community, faced discrimination in securing higher positions in the Dogra administration, since the state reserved the top-ranking jobs for Punjabi Hindus. In an attempt to seek equality in government employment, the community movement 'Kashmir for Kashmiris' demanded reservation of state employment only for *mulkis* (inhabitants of the state). In 1927, the Dogra Maharaja, in an effort to placate the disgruntled Pandit community, passed the Hereditary State Subject Act, later retained in postcolonial Kashmir, allowing only residents of the state to purchase land and seek employment in Jammu and Kashmir (Political Department, 1935).

This act was of significant consequence; it entitled the rising educated Kashmiri Muslim community, smarting under the discriminatory policies of the Dogra state, to demand employment, including representation in state services according to their numbers. The rising political awareness among the Muslim community added a new tone to the Kashmiri discourses on freedom in the 1930s and 1940s and brought into sharp relief the conflicting visions of freedom.

Varied universalisms and Kashmiri freedom: The decades of the 1930s and 1940s

Across Kashmir, simmering discontent among the Kashmiri Muslims created a volatile situation that erupted in 1931 as a mass revolt. Ordinary subjects of the Maharaja came out on the streets challenging Dogra despotism. The state met Kashmiri Muslim resistance with brutal suppression and the Dogra forces killed almost twenty-one innocent civilians (Taseer, 1973, 95–99). This unprovoked firing not only galvanized demonstrations on a large scale, but also provided space for the new middle-class leadership to take over the movement from the old landed and religious elites.

One individual making his presence felt among the elite Muslim leaders was twenty-five year-old Sheikh Mohammad Abdullah. Born in 1905 to a middle-class family of shawl merchants, Abdullah's early education was in a traditional Muslim *maktab* (religious school), where he learned to read the *Quran*. He resisted pressure to join the family business, instead gaining admission to a medical college. His first experience of discrimination occurred when the state refused to provide him with a scholarship for medical school because of his religious background. As one of the first Kashmiri Muslims to obtain a master's degree in science, he hoped to get a scholarship from the Dogra government to study abroad, but was unsuccessful. This marginalization convinced him to initiate a campaign, along with likeminded Kashmiris, to remove the grievances of the Muslim majority (Abdullah, 1985, 20–22). Abdullah's boldness in expressing his views against the despotic Dogra state without fear made him extremely popular among Kashmiris, who fondly referred to him as *Sher-e-Kashmir* (Lion of Kashmir).

In October 1932, he and other upper and middle class Kashmiri Muslims formed their first political organization, the Muslim Conference, with the intention to protect and promote the interests of the Kashmiri Muslim community. Although the organization passed resolutions demanding proprietary rights for the peasantry and a reduction in taxes for the labour class, for the most part their focus was on constitutional reforms and a share in services for the Muslim community proportional to their population (Hussain, 1991). However, the unity among Muslim Conference members did not last long. Personal egos and ideological differences led to a split within the party, as leaders disagreed on strategies to counter outside influences, especially from the Punjab. Furthermore, the contrary positions adopted by the Muslim Conference members on an important debate within the Muslim community – the relationship between shrine worship and Islam – prevented them from uniting and utilizing the initiative provided by the mass upsurge of the 1930s.

As a result, Abdullah's Muslim Conference adopted a 'moderate' stance of presenting memorandums and recommendations to the Dogra state.

In 1934, the Maharaja established the Franchise Commission to give his disgruntled subjects representation in the legislative assembly. Made up of thirty nominated and thirty-three elected members, it provided space for the Muslim Conference members to broaden their organization. However, the Franchise Commission restricted franchise to men paying at least ₹20 a year in land revenue, thereby 'leaving out a large number of the poor, among whom the Muslim Conference had been mobilizing' (Rai, 2004, 274). For the Muslim Conference to win a majority in the assembly, they needed the support of affluent minorities and Muslim elites. The formation of the assembly helped the Muslim Conference to build bridges of understanding with sections of Hindus and Sikhs who were willing to work together with Muslims on a strategy of regional mobilization.

This decision posed new challenges. Throughout the 1920s and early 1930s, the minority Hindu community, comprising 5 per cent of the total population of the Valley but dominating the state services, had viewed with apprehension the political mobilization of the Muslim community. They expressed unhappiness with the Glancy Commission of 1931, a committee established to probe Kashmiri grievances, and its recommendation to increase the number of Muslims in government employment. Their leaders worried that any concessions to Muslim demands would come at the expense of their jobs. As such, Kashmiri Hindu organizations like the Santantan Dharma Young Men's Association and the Yuvak Sabha initiated a Roti Agitation (agitation for bread) that made the preservation of jobs from Muslim encroachment their main priority (Khan, 1980, 463–73). Their hostile stance towards Kashmiri Muslim demands for equal rights caused some internal concern that this move could create an unbridgeable gulf between the two communities. The dissenting voices believed that creating bridges of understanding with the majority community, rather than distancing themselves, was in the larger interests of the Kashmiri Hindu community. The minorities who sought co-operation with Muslims played an influential role in shaping Kashmiri discourses on freedom.

In the late 1930s and early 1940s, the idea of freedom emerged in conversation alongside various internationalisms popular at that time, i.e., nationalism, communism and socialism. Kashmiris well-versed in English education sought to replicate these ideologies in the political fabric of Kashmir to usher in an era of responsible government. One particular individual who was key in

reorienting the Kashmiri Muslim resistance discourse was Prem Nath Bazaz, a prominent Kashmiri Pandit political activist who faced excommunication by his own community, because he decided to support Kashmiri Muslim demands during the Glancy Commission (Bazaz, 2003, 154–55). He established a close friendship with Sheikh Abdullah and his associates and advised them to make their movement broad-based.

This group of 'progressives' created a new discourse on freedom that emphasized class differences rather than communitarian divisions. The focus was on promoting ideals of socialism that could improve the indigent situation of the subordinate social classes, lower poverty, improve agricultural development and provide safeguards to the labouring classes. These activists wanted Kashmiris to understand that other resistance movements stemmed not from religious differences, but from the forces of imperialism that curbed the powerless. They believed that a strong focus on the economic issues that confronted poor Kashmiris could relegate religion to the background (Bazaz, 1967, 178). During this period, progressives from both communities made constant efforts to paper over the political, cultural and religious differences that existed between communities.

The influence of secular progressive discourse was not confined to implorations for Hindu-Muslim collaboration. Many educated Kashmiris with leftist orientations, both Hindus and Muslims, wanted to mold the regional struggle based on the secular-socialist ideas of the Indian National Congress. The close contact established between Abdullah and the Indian Congress leaders came to fruition in the late 1930s, as Abdullah wanted to emerge as a 'nationalist' leader representing all communities. In 1939, Abdullah decided to change the name of the party from 'Muslim' to 'National' to widen the scope of his movement and include all religions and classes in its fold. Whereas the old Muslim Conference had demanded rights for Muslims from a Hindu government, the National Conference would couch its demands in terms of class (Hussain, 1991, 445–72).

Nationalist ideology was introduced into public debate to ensure responsible government and the proper representation of all communities in the state administration. Yet, the demand for a responsible government failed to bridge conflicting political positions. Although nationalism in Jammu and Kashmir drew on Western democratic ideals of responsible government, to popularize the concept outside the circle of Western-educated elites, the Muslim leaders continued to associate with religious festivals, shrines and mosques. As C. A. Bayly has argued, Indian nationalism was widely rooted in society and 'molded by ideologies, political norms and social organizations which derived from deeper

indigenous inheritance' (Bayly, 1998, 116–19). Similarly, Kashmiri discourse on nationalism was built on the region's social complexity more so than derivative discourses on Western nationalism.

Abdullah not only used verses from the *Quran* to mobilize the people, he also drew on older Kashmiri mystic religious traditions to spread his message in rural areas. One of his speeches, published in 'Cry for Justice' (*Elan-i- Haq*), linked the idea of freedom with ethics, humanism and brotherhood: concepts inherent in early texts of Kashmir and integral to a society greatly influenced by the mystic tradition of Islam. He projected the Kashmiri struggle as a war between the forces of good and evil. Evil was defined as, 'all undesirable elements of human life such as slavery, poverty, ignorance, illiteracy and various other causes of human miseries'. This struggle for freedom, he wrote, could only succeed if ordinary men developed strong character, expressed love toward humanity, and endured suffering patiently. The spiritual struggle to be human was explained as one of the key components of Kashmiri freedom (Abdullah, 1942, 3–6).

Additionally, Abdullah used Friday congregations for political mobilization and participated in religious festivals like *Milad-ul-Nabi* (the birthday of the Prophet) and *Miraj-ul-Alam* (the day commemorating the heavenly journey in which the Prophet reached the presence of God) at the Hazratbal mosque to establish ties with both urban and rural Kashmiris (Khan, 1992, 172–87). This element of nationalist ideology firmly rooted in Kashmiri society drew from older regional traditions. Abdullah's instrumental adaptation of nationalism to touch cultural and religious sensibilities was aimed at reaching a wider audience.

The ideology of nationalism, instead of uniting Kashmiris in forging a responsible government, exposed the tensions within and between communities. The minority community raised questions about Abdullah's commitment to nationalism and secularism, as a result of his continued association with Muslim symbols, mosques and shrines. Hindu members of the National Conference wanted Abdullah to disassociate himself from the maintenance of shrines, as he was leading a 'National' organization and not a 'Muslim' organization (Bazaz, 2003, 178–80). Fearful that the nationalism of the National Conference was a facade to ensure majority rule, Kashmiri Hindus came to see the Dogra ruler as the protector of their communitarian interests and disassociated themselves from the National Conference (Bandhu, 1998, 34–37).

The criticism leveled against the National Conference was not restricted to non-Muslims; a section of the urban Muslim community in the Valley and Jammu also disagreed with Abdullah's politics and strongly resisted the 'nationalist' creed.

They saw it as a move to bring Kashmir's politics into the wider orbit of the Indian National Congress and felt that it would ultimately lead to Hindu domination. Many disgruntled state Muslims who had resisted the formation of the National Conference decided to revive the old Muslim Conference after Abdullah failed in uniting the various religious communities within Jammu and Kashmir (Abbas, 1951, 186–87). The leaders of the newly revived Muslim Conference were landed elite and educated middle-class Kashmiris, with very few, if any, rural members. The party pamphlets focused on protecting Muslim elite interests. Conversely, Abdullah, influenced by the communists, reached out to rural Kashmiris to address the economic and social issues faced by the masses.

In the mid-1940s, the feudal structures of the state shaped agrarian Kashmir's response to the rhetoric of freedom. Under the influence of the Indian communists, the National Conference developed the 'Naya Kashmir' manifesto to explain the concept of freedom to peasants and labourers. The manifesto laid out the concept of popular sovereignty, noting that sovereignty lies with the people and states cannot ignore the aspirations of the masses. Its most significant points related to the agrarian economy. The manifesto called for the abolition of feudal structures, especially land grants. It promised that land would be taken from landlords without compensation and distributed among peasants. Essentially, this document defined emancipation as political rights, economic freedom and social justice. However, the manifesto drew criticism from both Muslim Conference elites and Kashmiri Hindus, who opposed the socialist orientation of promising land to the tiller (Abdullah, 1951, 1–44).

Throughout the critical decades leading to the partition of the subcontinent in 1947, the public discourse in the Valley focused on the economic and social aspects of freedom, rather than harping on a political association with either India or Pakistan. An editorial in *Hamdard* defined freedom as building self-reliance and fighting ignorance, superstition and prejudice. The author hoped that with emancipation, Kashmiris would show patriotism toward their homeland but distance themselves from the nationalist ideology that bred inequality, excluded minorities and deprived people of legitimate rights (Bazaz, 12 April 1947).

Even on the question of political freedom, Kashmiris did not have a united vision. The new Muslim Conference had articulated a vision of responsible government under the Maharaja, without association with India or Pakistan (Saraf, 1977, 709–11). The National Conference had been similarly undecided about joining either of the newly created nation-states. In October 1947, Abdullah was speaking in terms of 'freedom before accession' – seemingly unable to come to

terms with the two separate dominion states (*Khidmat*, 1947). However, Indian military intervention in Kashmir that month, in response to a tribal invasion aided by Pakistan, decided the fate of the princely state of Jammu and Kashmir. The Maharaja signed the accession document with India, while Pakistan claimed Kashmir on religious grounds.

Freedom failed: Postcolonial Kashmir, 1947–53

For the inhabitants of the former princely state of Jammu and Kashmir, freedom came at a price – the sovereignty dispute between India and Pakistan turned Kashmir into an international conflict and led to the drawing of an arbitrary cease-fire line that divided Kashmir. Both nation-states claimed legitimacy to rule their side of Kashmir and local political elites offered them support. In the case of Indian-administered Kashmir, Sheikh Abdullah's National Conference supported Kashmir's provisional accession to India, with hopes that India would allow Kashmir to retain its autonomous status. Even though there were different visions for Kashmir's political future before 1947, the National Conference regime claimed to be the sole representative of all Kashmiris, brought to power by the will of the people. This moment of freedom was not what Kashmiris had dreamed of. Challenged by the voices of dissent that disagreed with its ideology, the National Conference created a political culture with zero tolerance for opposition. The party leaders equated freedom with power, denying rights, equality and justice to Kashmiris (Bazaz, 2003; Vaishnavi, 1952).

The chaotic political-social scenario was clearly visible in Kashmiri poetry of the time, which highlighted the broken promises of its leaders. Ghulam Ahmad Mahjoor (1885–1952), who had strongly supported the National Conference prior to 1947, expressed his disappointment at the failed freedom. He was arrested for his poem *Azadi* (Freedom), a satire on the political culture of Kashmir (1972, 74–77):

> Freedom being of heavenly birth
> Cannot move from door to door
> You will find her camping in the homes
> Of a chosen few alone
>
> There is restlessness in every heart,
> But no one dare speak out –
> Afraid that with free expression
> Freedom may be annoyed.
>
> (Selections of the poem)

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Kashmiris who had actively supported the progressive National Conference during the 1940s started distancing themselves from the echelons of power. Throughout this period, the Indian Government not only ignored popular resentment, but also aided Abdullah in suppressing free expression, as his support was critical to legitimizing India's claim over Kashmir, especially at the United Nations.

Aware of his growing unpopularity, Abdullah prioritized placating the Kashmiri Muslim community and stemming the loss of his social base. In the early 1950s, he decided to transform rural Kashmir by implementing revolutionary agrarian reforms that would empower the peasantry and fulfill his vision of Naya Kashmir (New Kashmir) – a society without class disparities (Government Report, 1948, 9–11). These reforms had a far-reaching impact on communitarian relations, and on Kashmir's relationship with India. As these reforms affected landowners, the majority of whom belonged to the Hindu community, they considered the compulsory acquisition of land without compensation a deliberate ploy to alter their socio-economic status and ensure the domination of the Muslim majority (Ministry of States. 1948). Even though the Home Ministry of India pressured the National Conference to reconsider the land confiscation, as it was contrary to the fundamental rights of the Indian Constitution, the pressure failed to yield any results. Abdullah easily dismissed these requests because Kashmir enjoyed an autonomous position within India.

Meanwhile, the disputed nature of Jammu and Kashmir and the promise of self-determination by the United Nations added to minority insecurities, as they feared that in the event of a plebiscite, the Muslim-majority Kashmir would vote for Pakistan and this would jeopardize their political future. Hindu rightist groups with a strong presence in Jammu played up these fears and launched a virulent agitation under the leadership of the Jammu-based political party, Praja Parishad, against the National Conference, its demand for autonomy and its resulting political partnership with India. The Praja Parishad agitation demanded Kashmir's full integration with India and the abrogation of Article 370, a special article in the Indian Constitution that limited the powers of the Indian Government in Kashmir to three subjects – defense, foreign affairs and communication (*Report Praja Parishad*, 1952, 2–4). In the mid-1950s, India moved toward a centralized state structure that would facilitate national integration, bringing the state ideologically closer to the Hindu rightist parties that advocated complete accession. Tension between the centre and the region exacerbated as Delhi tried to bring Kashmir within its constitutional structures, with the Kashmiri leadership responding by resisting full integration.

Abdullah expressed his frustration against forces of integration in a series of speeches from 1952 onwards, in which he questioned India's secularism and expressed his doubts about Congress' intentions and integrity vis-à-vis Kashmir. In large gatherings, he confessed to Kashmiris that he had committed 'mistakes and blunders in [the] past' but he was not 'prepared to betray his people' (Dominion Office Files, 1947–53). On many occasions, he made it clear that instead of serving as a satellite to either Pakistan or India, Kashmir should follow a path that would lead the state to prosperity. Although he never directly defined freedom, nor gave a definite plan for independence, his pointedly vague statements allowed people to draw their own conclusions. What worried India most was the defiant political atmosphere in the Valley. Dissident groups and the public openly discussed viable solutions for Kashmir, including possibilities of partition with independence for the Valley. The Indian Government decided to take no further risks with their Kashmir policy. On 9 August 1953, under the Public Security Act, Abdullah was dismissed and arrested on charges of corruption, malpractice, disruption and dangerous foreign contact.

This episode in Kashmir's postcolonial history set the tone for Kashmir's future relationship with India. Delhi and Kashmir no longer remained equal partners – from here on, any defiance of New Delhi's absolute authority 'guaranteed political oblivion' (Bose, 2003, 67). Most importantly, Kashmiri Muslims interpreted the undemocratic dismissal of Abdullah, who had challenged Indian might, as an assault on their identity. It was a painful reminder that freedom had failed and India's covert authoritarianism had replaced Dogra despotism. The disappearance of Abdullah, however, left Kashmiris with no choice but complete subservience to Indian interests.

Plebiscite or autonomy: The changing discourse on freedom, 1960s–80s

During the mid-1950s through the 1960s, to ensure the complete integration of Jammu and Kashmir, the Indian state introduced an era of unrepresentative governments in the state, providing them with endless funds to create a supporting structure, thereby producing a class that would profess loyalty to India. State-sponsored regimes in the Valley monopolized all economic benefits and excluded the vast majority, mostly middle and poor classes, from networks of patronage. While the political elites misused government funds to gain riches (Home Department, 1967), the Indian state ignored nepotism and corruption, so long as Kashmir remained economically dependent and politically quiescent.

Marginalized within political structures, the new generation of middle and lower class Kashmiris, educated in universities and colleges, found it difficult to accept the politics of the elites, who practiced misgovernance and equated freedom with personal power.

In the 1950s and 1960s, marginalized Kashmiris launched a plebiscite movement that challenged the tacit assumption of Indian control over Kashmir in Indian nationalist narratives. The Plebiscite Front, formed in 1954 by Mirza Afzal Beg, a lawyer and close lieutenant of Sheikh Abdullah, in league with other 'rebel' members of the National Conference, maintained that the accession of Jammu and Kashmir to India was provisional. The party popularized the slogan of self-determination and encouraged peaceful settlement of this dispute according to the free will of the people through an impartial agency: the United Nations (Beg, 1964, 6).

The support base of the Plebiscite Front comprised poor and middle class Kashmiri peasantry, labourers, custodians of shrines and a few urban families that had been die-hard supporters of Sheikh Abdullah. However, individuals who openly expressed their support for the Plebiscite Front faced persecution. The new regime added stringent laws to its armory of repression. The state could detain citizens for up to five years without informing them of the grounds of detention. The state expanded the police department, creating new police battalions trained in brutal methods of torture. A mafia-style group of thugs called the Peace Brigade assisted the police in inhuman interrogations to silence opposition (*All India Congress Committee Papers*, 1957).

Given this oppressive environment, the Plebiscite Front activists linked the Wilsonian idea of self-determination to the concepts of *haq* (rights), *insaf* (justice) and *izzat* (dignity) inherent in earlier Kashmiri discourses on freedom. Pamphlets and newsletters circulated by the activists defined freedom as the birthright of every individual and implored Kashmiris to sacrifice their lives to attain the dignity denied to them by India and its plaint regimes in the state (Noorddin, 17 October 1964). Demands for civil liberties, the valuation of human life and the restoration of Kashmiri dignity resonated with those who risked state suppression to join the plebiscite movement.

Meanwhile, a shift in the political climate of the subcontinent in the 1970s brought about a complete change in the political scenario of Jammu and Kashmir. The India-Pakistan War of 1971 led to the dismemberment of Pakistan and the creation of a new state, Bangladesh, and changed the dynamics of power in South Asia, with India emerging as a dominant power. This had a profound impact on the Plebiscite Front, convincing its leaders that the regional balance of power had

swung decisively in India's favour. With these new developments, the primary issue became not whether accession was final but what the status of Jammu and Kashmir would be within India. In 1975, Abdullah signed the Accord with Delhi, which legitimized all measures taken by previous governments to integrate Kashmir with India and negated 'twenty years of intense struggle that Abdullah had led for securing right of self-determination' (*Azan*, 5 February 1973). Delhi invited him to return as Chief Minister of Kashmir, and Abdullah disbanded the Plebiscite Front and recreated the National Conference, a new party acceptable to all three regions of the state – Kashmir, Jammu and Ladakh (Najar, 1988, 51). Although it was a pragmatic political move, this seemingly self-serving power grab tarnished Abdullah's image as a self-sacrificing leader who put the interests of Kashmiris before his own.

In the 1970s and 1980s, the idea of self-determination ceased to be of any relevance – the new slogan of autonomy dominated state politics. Although Kashmiri leaders accepted the reality of Indian sovereignty over Jammu and Kashmir post-1975, the National Conference was keen to retain a separate Kashmiri identity. While Delhi allowed Kashmir to retain the outer shell of Article 370, they expected the National Conference to align with the Congress and share common aims. The political dynamics in the rest of India influenced the treatment of Kashmir. As the Congress grew more insecure in the face of growing regionalism, it became more insensitive to Kashmiri demands. Delhi met the regional dissidence by undermining state governments to ensure that only parties or leaders who toed Delhi's line held power (Abdullah, 1985, 21). The centre-state confrontation exacerbated the problem of bringing the state of Jammu and Kashmir closer to India.

Frustrations among politically excluded Kashmiris increased in 1986 after the National Conference entered into an electoral alliance with the Congress party, which wanted centralization of power. The National Conference chose to give up its traditional role as protector of Kashmiri identity, and Farooq Abdullah, the leader of the National Conference, damaged the party's image as an instrument of Kashmiri protest (Puri, 1993, 52). In the 1987 elections, many disgruntled Kashmiri Muslims – the educated and unemployed youth and the petite bourgeoisie, i.e., owners of small businesses and orchards – offered their support to the Muslim United Front (MUF), a religio-political organization set up to resist unwarranted interference by the Indian Government in affairs of the state. The National Conference–Congress alliance, in collaboration with the bureaucracy and the police, subverted the democratic process and rigged the

elections. Thereafter, the government chose to gag the opposition on grounds of secessionism and suppressed every form of protest, even those related to administrative and economic issues (Rehmani, 1982, 263–65).

The cry for *aazadi*: Kashmir in the 1990s

In the late 1980s, a small group of Kashmiris who had lost faith in Indian democracy decided to take the long-standing conflict between India and Pakistan to a new level. These individuals, mostly jailed MUF political activists, collectively decided to go to Pakistani-administered Kashmir in search of training and weapons. Inspired by the ideology of the Jammu Kashmir Liberation Front (JKLF), a party that advocated for an independent Kashmir, these individuals, with the support of Pakistan intelligence agencies, initiated an armed rebellion in the Valley and popularized the slogan of *aazadi* (Khan, 1992, 131–41).

In the early stages of the insurgency, ordinary Kashmiris who had suffered decades of political suppression admired the JKLF insurgents, who were willing to stake their lives for Kashmiri rights. This new feeling of empowerment was evident from the public discourse of that period. An editorial published in *Srinagar Times* emphasized that Kashmiri Muslims were neither cowards nor terrorists. Their resistance, the author claimed, was not terrorism, but an expression of dissent against authorities that had for generations suppressed political expression. The editorial suggested that the only way India could restore the confidence of Kashmiri Muslims would be to provide them with rights and treat them as equal citizens (*Srinagar Times*, 11 March 1989).

The Indian state, however, adopted draconian laws such as the Armed Forces (J&K) Special Powers Act and the J&K Disturbed Areas Act, which provided the military with extraordinary powers to crush any form of resistance. The failure of the armed forces to differentiate between insurgents and civilians while protecting national security alienated Kashmiri Muslims. The killing of almost a hundred unarmed civilians, including women and children, protesting the excessive use of force during search operations at Gawkadal in Srinagar city, had a deep impact on ordinary Kashmiris (Hasan, 1992, 80–85). Basharat Peer's *Curfewed Night*, an autobiographical narrative, captures how stories of rape, violence and killings radicalized teenage Kashmiris. It provides insights into how young boys, deeply shaken by these atrocities, 'crawled past bunkers of the Indian troops' and trekked past Indian check-posts to reach the training camps in Pakistani-administered Kashmir. A new euphoria had gripped the youth and the notion of restoring 'honor' and 'dignity' became intertwined with the concept of *aazadi* (2010).

The rhetoric of *aazadi* did not hold the same appeal for the minority community. The rise of insurgency in the region created a difficult situation for the Kashmiri Hindu community, which had always taken pride in their Indian identity. Self-determination was not only seen as a communal demand, but as a secessionist slogan that threatened the security of the Indian state. The community felt threatened when Kashmiri Muslims under the flag of *aazadi* openly raised anti-India slogans. The 1989 targeted killings of Kashmiri Hindus who the insurgents believed were acting as Indian intelligence agents heightened those insecurities. In the winter of 1990, the community felt compelled to mass-migrate to Jammu, as the state governor was adamant that in the given circumstances he would not be able to offer protection to the widely dispersed Hindu community. This event created unbridgeable differences between the majority and the minority; each perceived *aazadi* in a different light. This is evident from the verses of Lalita Pandit, a literary scholar, who summarized her understanding of *aazadi* in the following selected verses (1995):

> To the women who love them [insurgents]
> they tell nothing except that
> one day Aazadi will arrive
> at everyone's doorstep.
> Life will become prettier, more
> honorable, more pious.
>
> Who are these men?
> I would like to ask you.
> why their dream of Aazadi
> excludes me, and my people
>
> (Selections of the poem)

Facing homelessness, the Hindu community regarded *aazadi* as an exclusionary slogan, supported by a majority community, and one that left no space for their aspirations.

Meanwhile, by the mid-1990s, the Muslim community, drawn into the armed insurgency against India, found themselves squeezed between India's counter-insurgency machine and Pakistan's strategy to mold the insurgency to their own interest. The counter-insurgency operations unleashed by the Indian army led to extra-judicial killings on a large scale (Report, 1996, 1–10). At the same time, Pakistan abandoned JKLF, a group that advocated for an independent Kashmir,

to support Islamist militant groups that would provide a religious rationale for Kashmir's accession to Pakistan and define the armed struggle against India as a holy war – a *jihad*. This gave a new twist to Kashmiri resistance (Sikand, 2001, 165–204). Furthermore, many anti-social elements from the 1970s' and 1980s', rackets of drug dealers joined the insurgency to make quick money. The criminalization of the movement made life unbearable for Kashmiris, as many militants subjected civilians to intimidation and extortion (Schofield, 1996, 267–68). An element of fatigue and war weariness crept in among the people. Interpreting Kashmiri disillusionment with insurgency as their rejection of *aazadi*, Delhi held several elections in the state that witnessed a high voter turnout in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Although the Kashmiris saw the election as a way to use the government to gain roads, schools, health centres and jobs, the Indian media projected it as the Kashmiri Muslim reconciliation with Indian rule (Navlakha, 2009, 10–12).

This conclusion conveniently overlooks the presence of the 6,00,000 to 7,00,000 security forces currently in the Valley – armed with the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) – that allows the Indian military to carry out unrestrained detentions, surveillance and torture of its own citizens. The militarization of the Valley produces a strong reaction among Kashmiri youth who challenge India's presence in the Valley not just through demonstrations but also through their art and music. This is evident from the following verses by Roshan Illalhi (aka M. C. Kash), a young Kashmiri rap artist (Kash, 2012):

> Wounded and hurt, forgotten since birth
> I'm dreaming and living for freedom and worth
> Gagged by the boots yet my cries still resonates
> Dragged in the fields yet my heart still levitates
>
> I choose the cause over a life of lies
> And no matter what it holds my struggle won't die.
>
> (Selections of the Song)

The human rights violations in the Valley reinforce a perception among Kashmiri youth of India as an occupying power and further alienates them. This has not only strengthened the Kashmiri demand for *aazadi*, but has also led Kashmiris to link it to the value of human life and dignity – concepts that defined the earliest Kashmiri discourses on freedom.

Conclusion

Tracing the key shifts in the meaning of *aazadi* from the early twentieth century to

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the present reveals that Kashmiris had myriad visions about their political future, but they always imagined freedom as the presence of justice and rights that could improve human relationships and lay the foundation for a strong society. Freedom as defined prior to 1947 remained unfulfilled as the postcolonial nation-states of India and Pakistan focused on territorialization and putting into place a socio-political system that not only failed to redress the economic, political and cultural grievances of Kashmiris, but also went out of its way to suppress free expression.

Although the idea of freedom became linked with the political demands of plebiscite or autonomy between the 1960s and 1980s, the concepts of justice and honour remained an important component of Kashmiri discourse. These ideas gained strength after the rise of armed insurgency in the state and the human rights violations that followed thereafter. Furthermore, the insistence in Indian nationalist narratives on deconstructing the sentiment of *aazadi* by highlighting the ideological divisions within Kashmiri voices of resistance only produced a counter-nationalist response; Kashmiri Muslims interpret the denial of *aazadi* as a callous disregard for the hundreds and thousands of human lives lost in pursuit of this ideal. An analysis of Kashmir's social-political history reveals that the slogan of '*aazadi*' for Kashmiris has a much deeper meaning than mere political freedom. The concept of *aazadi* stems from the desire to live freely with dignity in one's homeland, without constraints or impositions. It is a sentiment that envisions a society free from social hierarchies and economic disparities, a society based on faith and trust – one that respects differences, allows criticism and values human dignity.

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