
The notion of political culture in Kashmir

The political landscape of Kashmir has undergone a tremendous change. The occupation rule by the Mughals, Sikhs, Pathans and Dogras left indelible marks on the minds of Kashmiri nation. Kashmiris were forced to submit to rulers' suppressive measures inflicting deep wounds on their psyche. It was then in the midst of 19th century that Kashmir had to witness silently an unsavory turning point in its political life when the British Colonisers sold out this Paradise of Earth for a paltry sum of Rs 75 lakh to a Dogra soldier Gulab Singh in 1846.

The 100-year long Dogra rule did not concede to the subjugated people their basic rights of freedom of speech and expression of their grievances. In 1947, when the Indian sub continent was divided and two free nations, Bharat and Pakistan came into being, the most unfortunate part of this region, Kashmir, got entangled in a dispute between these two neighbors without being resolved for the last 62 years now.

Dogra Maharajas proved no better than earlier foreign occupiers of Kashmir. The 15 March 1846 sale of Kashmir was nicknamed as "Treaty of Amritsar", according to which, in the words of Prem Nath Bazaz, "The British authorities in India did not consult even one of the leaders of Kashmiris. It was altogether a sordid and shameful affair devoid of all sense of fairness, justice and equity. Two million people in the Valley and Gilgit were sold like sheep and cattle to an alien adventurer of the rights, interests of the future of the people".

An independent and sovereign Kashmir had been enslaved for more than 400 years by aggressors from the South and the West. Their living condition had been turned into a pitiful life of animals. The ignominious Treaty of Amritsar offered an impetus to a simmering discontent against Dogra rule among the people of Kashmir. This spark of anger and urge for freedom surfaced earlier than 1931, but the 13 July 1931 proved a watershed for a drastic and epoch making change in the political culture of Kashmir.

The political leadership was taken in hand by a towering Sheikh Muhammad Abdullah who emerged as the tallest of the tall to lead the oppressed Kashmiris out of slavery into a world of freedom. After a tragic division of the sub continent on the basis of two nation's theory, the Kashmiri nation continued with their democratic institutions being demolished one by one as the consequences of an unresolved Kashmir dispute. Elected governments were dismissed. Gradually the legislature, the judiciary and the administration were made to play second fiddle to their masters and patrons giving commands from outside. The most stunning event took place when the State's first Prime Minister, Sheikh Abdullah about whom Jawaharlal Nehru had said that "Sheikh Abdullah is Kashmir and Kashmir is Sheikh Abdullah", was unceremoniously

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dismissed and arrested on the morning of 9 August 1953.

The shocking step taken against the State government by New Delhi, once again plunged the people of Kashmir into the darkness of uncertainty and confusion. They were genuinely compelled to ponder over the shaping of their political future, the wounded culture of which had been further bruised with the sudden removal of Abdullah.

The people, inhabitants of the most peaceful region called the Paradise of Earth, had imbibed into their mindset the philosophy of Lalla Arifa and Sheikhul Aalam which had turned the Kashmir Valley into an abode of godly saints, spiritual ascetics and scholars propagating the ideals of human essence and its grandeur. The advent of Islam in Kashmir during the 14th century AD completely changed the entire political ethos and cultural traditions in the Valley when Hazrat Mir Syed Ali Hamadani converted local Hindus to the most humane religion of Islam. Tens of thousands of Hindus had been living a caste ridden life where the upper class Brahmin was there to exploit them in each and every sphere of their miserable life. They were made to do the menial work of cobblers, scavengers, labourers, sweepers as outcaste people having no right to aspire for a dignified life. Some so called historians with a subjective mindset have termed this change as a forced conversion which a renowned Kashmir researcher and historian, Sir Aural Stein dismisses when he says”, Islam made its way into Kashmir not by forcible conquest, but by gradual conversion. The influx of foreign adventurers, both from the south and from Central Asia, had prepared the ground. Another noted Kashmiri Hindu historian, Prem Nath Bazaz himself states, “Had Kashmir not adopted Islam and the Muslim rule in fourteenth century, it is difficult to say what would have happened to it. It might have perished. Surely the powers that were generated among the people in various branches of creative life, such as learning art and architecture, would not have come to play.

By coming in contact with a new culture and civilisation, Kashmiris extricated themselves from the morass in which they had fallen and in which they were sinking deeper and deeper”. The conversion of a Hindu Kashmir into an Islamic region was the most significant and epoch making historical change in the world of Kashmir’s political culture. The ruthless periods of rule by Pathans, Sikhs and also of Dogras are among the darkest chapters of the Kashmir history. Even now, efforts are on to undermine the concept of the rich history of the Kashmiri people, by way of creating newly orchestrated concept of Kashmiriyat, a laboured term not found anywhere in the chronicles or historical documents for centuries together.

Kashmiri people have proved to be tolerant but a tough nation, and that’s why they are still struggling hard for their better life and the sustenance of those cherished values in their political culture which are acclaimed the world over as good, noble and dignified. During the last 20 years of turmoil and armed resistance, a dark spell was cast undoubtedly on the high morals of the Kashmiri society.

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