ABSTRACT

“The right of self-determination is an inherent right of all peoples and no one can snatch it away. If we are free citizens then we have inherited this right automatically. ...so called “free elections” to decide the issue will not satisfy me.” - Shaikh Abdullah in 1968 in an interview with Urdu magazine ‘Shabistan Digest’ [Delhi].

This study with ample sources affirms that that the movement that was launched against the Dogra State was not communal. It was the nature of the Dogra State that shaped the movement of the Muslims. The Muslims, who constituted the sheer majority of the total population of the State, were lagging behind in every field and were governed like dumb driven cattle. They were discriminated by the Dogra Maharajas for a simple reason that they were followers of a religion different to the Dogras. It is therefore not surprising that the political movement Kashmiris launched in 1930's under Shaikh Abdullah would take the religious colour and mosques and shrines were used as platforms. Initially started for the uplift of the Muslims of the State, the Muslim Conference under Shaikh Abdullah, broadened its outlook and accommodated the non-Muslims, and fought for the ‘Responsible Government. This continuity and change marks the progressive march of the ‘national movement’ in Kashmir.

Transcending the traditional view that the conversion of the Muslim Conference into National Conference was a big step towards the unity of Muslims and non-Muslims of the State, this study affirms that the conversion of the Muslim Conference into National Conference was a mistake on part of Shaikh Abdullah. He transformed the Muslim Conference to accommodate non-Muslims, i.e. elite. The non-Muslim elites had associated themselves with the Dogra rule which had protected their religious and economic rights. As was expected, the non-Muslims did not join the National Conference which they knew; being part of the State was against their interests. But worst was that Shaikh lost his close friends and comrades who were not in favour of conversion.
The study also delves into Nehru-Abdullah friendship and finds that during the Quit Kashmir movement, Nehru’s visit was not to support his [Sheikh’s] movement. It, on the basis of strong sources asserts that Nehru’s motive was to convince Shaikh to end his movement, which Nehru believed would help Muslim League’s two-nation theory. Needless to say the Quit Kashmir Movement was criticized by the Congress.

This division of the Muslims changed the future course of Kashmir history. So when in 1947, India got independence from long British rule and a new country by the name of Pakistan emerged on the world map, Kashmir could not attain its cherished goal. Shaikh Abdullah being the most popular leader of Kashmiris never tried to come to terms with his erstwhile colleagues, to save Kashmir from the partition. Indeed, seeing the impending partition of India, Shaikh Abdullah and Ghulam Abbas tried to form a joint front to prevent their State and to decide its future. But it was beyond their power to withstand the political storm of subcontinent.

In the given surcharged political situation, Shaikh Abdullah’s slogan of “freedom before accession” lost its relevance. Having complete faith in the ‘socialist and secularist’ Nehru, who assured the world that the future of the State would be decided by a plebiscite, Shaikh attested the limited accession in his utterances. The presence of Shaikh Abdullah in Delhi on 26th October made the accession conditional and limited. In the absence of Shaikh it would have not been different as those signed with Junagarh and Hyderabad. Although Shaikh Abdullah had no official status at that time, but being close to Congress and the stand of Congress that accession should be decided by the people not by the ruler; made Shaikh an indispensable part of the of accession. Although it was because of Shaikh’s pro Congress attitude that Kashmir got plunged into another slavery, but he got something [autonomy and promised plebiscite] to show his people the results of their twenty year’s hard struggle. However, when India [read Nehru] retreated from its pledge of protecting the autonomy of the State and conducting of plebiscite, Shaikh also developed
other thoughts - in which an independent Kashmir was not excluded. This led to
the arrest of Shaikh in 1953 by his old friend Nehru.

Shaikh Abdullah took over as the Prime Minister of Jammu and
Kashmir at a time when there were many forces pulling in different directions
and the future of Kashmir was unsettled and uncertain. Nevertheless, he did
commendable work in the socio-economic field of the State. His ‘land to tiller’
reform without the compensation to the landlords was no less than a miracle.
The simple village people could now afford to drink the milk from their own
cows and eggs of their fowls. Mr Eric Tyndale Biscoe who was closely
associated with Kashmir since 1931 sums up that “nowhere else in the world
has one man made such a peaceful revolution during this generation.” For the
first time, a Prime Minister was seen touring villages on foot or horseback;
moving among the people, speaking to them in their language. Under Shaikh
Abdullah, the State got its first university; 35 per cent of the budget was
allocated for education. He got abolished the hereditary ruler-ship of the
Dogras and made the office elective. However, in the political field Shaikh’s
period proved to be the continuation of the autocratic Dogra rule. He ruled as a
dictator and did not allow democracy to flourish in the State for which he was
fully backed by Nehru. Shaikh had no following in Jammu and Ladakh. Just as
the Dogra rulers were foisted upon Kashmiris, so was Shaikh foisted upon the
people of Jammu and Ladakh. They never accepted him as the sole spokesman
of Jammu and Kashmir. They were never reconciled to the abolition of Dogra
rule and self-imposed exile of Maharaja. He was losing his popularity among
the Muslims and non-Muslims backed by Indian communalists, were not ready
to accept his’s rule. Finding himself between the devil and the deep blue sea,
Shaikh started developing the idea of independence.

Kashmir was projected as a show window of Indian secularism. But
the Indian democracy and secularism could not satisfy the Kashmiris who
found subtle difference between the Dogra State and the Indian sponsored
NC’s rule. Really Indian democracy failed in its test in Kashmir. The selected
politicians and unrepresentative leaders received generous grants in lieu of their endorsement to accession. The farce and rigged elections [except of 1977] were deemed as equal to plebiscite. The shame of ‘Indian democracy’s’ shame in Kashmir was so ashamed that it stopped at Pathankot.

Like all personalities of history Shaikh Abdullah too is many persons, much opinion. His achievements and failure are not his alone. They have impacted history and people of Kashmir. Being undisputed leader of Kashmir, his fate became the fate of Kashmir and his decisions right or wrong were taken as the decisions of Kashmir. For 20 years he had stressed on the people to accept nothing short to self-determination. In 1947 his decision was forced by circumstances; but in 1975 by signing the accord [the accord had no constitutional or democratic legitimacy] which was sooner discarded, Shaikh made the worst blunder. Nehru, who was as tall leader as Shaikh, in their respective spheres and regions, had only betrayed and imprisoned him, but Indra Gandhi who was no match to him, humiliated and totally destroyed him. From a tall leader of Kashmir he was reduced to a small politician hankering after the love of office. But it was impossible for educated youth, whom Shaikh had trained and politicized, to accept the status quo. In fact Shaikh had gone so deep and far in inducting among the youth the desire of freedom, from where to get out was too difficult.

Nevertheless, ‘it did not bother Shaikh in his life time till 1982 because of his immense tall stature and unrivalled popularity.’ And also because the people considered him more as a religious leader than seeing him in ‘political terms.’ However, within a decade following the death of Sheik, an armed struggle was started by Kashmiris for their legitimate rights. Thus the present movement that started in 1989 was not all of a sudden but the continuation of the movement launched in 1930 for political rights. Shaikh was accused of treachery. Small wonder, then that the grave of Shaikh Abdullah became one of the main targets of attack in the beginning of 1990s. There is certain irony in present day that his grave near Dal lake at Haazratbal is protected by Indian
soldiers from the very people he had so loved and who virtually worshiped him. There is no gainsaying the fact that the outbreak of armed rebellion in late 1989 was thus an attempt to alter the status quo accepted by Shaikh Abdullah.

This study questions the validity of the Treaty of Amritsar of 1846, after the independence and partition of India. The formation of Jammu and Kashmir State [by the Amritsar treaty] by joining three different regions that differ in their geography, culture and history, itself was and is a problem. So the solution, though not final, lies in this that they may be separated as they were before 1846. Legally also, after the lapse of the British rule, all treaties as per the Indian Independence Act, lost their relevance and hence became obsolete, so why to continue that out dated Treaty of Amritsar? Like then, as now, the people of Jammu and Ladakh have, time and again, voiced against what they call “rule of Valley,” Or “hegemony of Kashmir Valley.” The regional problem is dangerous for the peace of Jammu, Kashmir and Ladakh.

India and Pakistan should give away their stereotypes of ‘integral part’ and ‘jugular vein’ and start peaceful but result oriented talks not only between them but also with Kashmiris. What is needed is sincerity and commitment to world peace; so that the flames of Kashmir are extinguished.

“Don’t tell my father I have died,” he says, and I follow him through blood on the road and hundreds of pairs of shoes the mourners left behind, as they ran from the funeral, victims of the firing. From windows we hear grieving mothers, and snow begins to fall on us, like ash. Black on edges of flames, it cannot extinguish the neighbourhoods, the homes set ablaze by midnight soldiers. Kashmir is burning:

___Agha Shahid Ali