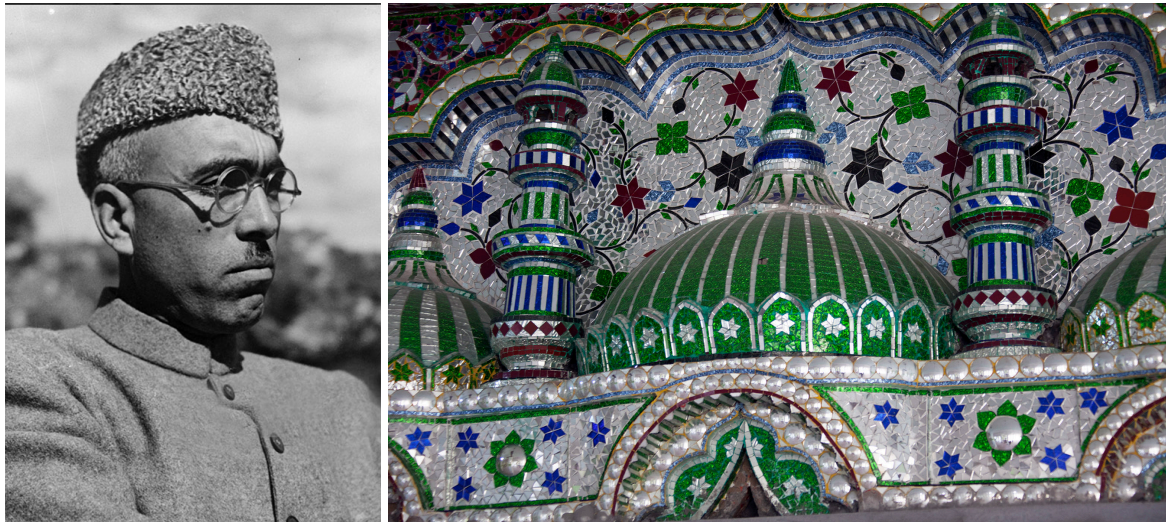


# X- The Islamization of Politics

## Enter the Lion of Kashmir

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The emergence of Sheikh Mohammed Abdullah in the early 1930s would play a crucial role in the politics of Jammu and Kashmir. Having been instigated to play the Islamic card, even the Lion of Kashmir would subsequently find it difficult to put the genie back in the bottle. A Muslim dargah in the Poonch region of the state. (Shiv Kunal Verma/ KaleidoIndia).

‘Papa’ John, aka Colonel John ‘Wakefield loved to tell stories, especially about World War II where he had no clear defined role to play, since the battalion he was commissioned into surrendered to the Japanese in Singapore before he could join it. He was assigned odd jobs by the ‘intelligence guys’, and he kept getting promoted eventually finishing off as a ‘Colonel’. But his stories were always interesting, so when he said one day that his uncle had been the Prime Minister of Jammu and Kashmir and had played a significant role in the emergence of Sheikh Abdullah as a major player immediately after the First Round Table Conference in London, I was all ears. ‘George Edward Campbell Wakefield was my father’s brother. Their grandmother was a Bengali lady who had converted to Christianity, but the family was considered to be ‘blue-blooded’ Anglo Indians. As part of the British Indian Civil Service, my uncle had earlier served with distinction in the Punjab and Rajasthan where he was awarded the coveted ‘*Kaiser-i-Hind*’ medal, before moving on to Hyderabad, eventually becoming the personal secretary to the Nizam himself. He was then moved to the government of Jammu and Kashmir in 1921 and eight years later became the Prime Minister under Maharaja Hari Singh.’

Wakefield’s appointment in 1929 had coincided with Hari Singh’s speech at the Chamber of Princes where he had spoken in favour of an all-India Federation which had taken all the other states by surprise, since the British had always expected the princely states to band together purely to retain their individual power and perks.

Categorically stating that isolation of princely states was a lesser ideal, Hari Singh had placed the cat amongst the pigeons. Also, as a matter of policy, the British Raj by and large preferred to keep the rulers of the various states away from their subjects, instead actively projecting British Residents as the initiators of all reforms for the 'betterment of the people'. To make matters worse, in the case of the 'hands on' Hari Singh, this policy was being severely tested as the young Maharaja, despite his feudal upbringing and sometimes unpredictable temper, seemed to have the courage of his convictions to bring about radical changes.

George Edward Wakefield, Papa John's uncle, was the man chosen to clip the wings of Hari Singh. It was an ironical quirk of fate that the man who had courageously stood up and taken on the British Empire and spoken in favour of a united and Independent India, who in those days talked of neither caste nor creed at his coronation, would then face those very weapons aligned against him. Post November 1930, Pax Britannica would play a different tune indeed.

Sheikh Mohammad Abdullah was probably born towards the end of January 1903 into a middle class family in Soura which was a suburb of Srinagar. His father, Sheikh Mohammed Ibrahim who was a descendent of a Kashmiri Pandit, Ragho Ram Kaul who had converted to Islam in 1722, passed away just eleven days later, leaving the family in dire straits. His mother, Khair-un-Nissa, though from a family of goldsmiths had no source of income and had to bring up her son in abject poverty, also enduring the abuse and taunts of her step sons who treated her shabbily. A remarkable woman, she was determined that her son be educated and she initially admitted him to a *Mahtab* where he learnt to recite the Koran and was made familiar with basic Persian texts. As an eight-year old, he was shifted to a primary school but after a couple of years his step-brothers stopped further studies and put him to work in the family business embroidering shawls and later he was asked to sit in the grocers shop as a sales boy.

Fate intervened in the form of the local barber who prevailed upon Sheikh Abdullah's uncle to send him back to school. Having passed his 5<sup>th</sup> class exam he then obtained admission in the state-run Government High School in the locality of Fateh Kadal, which meant walking almost sixteen kilometres daily back and forth which left little or no time for sporting or any other activities. A studious student who was fully aware of the need to educate himself, Sheikh Abdullah was to pass his matriculation examination from the Punjab University in 1922. Motivated to pursue higher studies, he sought and got admission into the leading college in Kashmir, the Shri Pratap College, from where he did his Intermediate in 1924. During this period he was exposed to the Silk Factory Workers Agitation where the Muslim labour had taken to the streets agitating for better wages. He then applied to the Prince of Wales College in Jammu but was rejected in the interview where he talked on Muslim youth being discriminated against. However, he then got admission at the Islamia College in Lahore from where he obtained his Bachelor in Science.

His application for a scholarship for further studies to the State Government was turned down so he marshalled his own resources and got enrolled at the Aligarh Muslim University where he was exposed to other students who were political activists

all brimming with liberal and progressive ideas. Sheikh Abdullah finally returned to Srinagar in April 1930 with a Masters' degree in Chemistry, later claiming to be the first Kashmiri to have obtained that honour, even though he had passed in the 3<sup>rd</sup> Division. Once again, he applied for a scholarship to pursue higher studies in England, but was once again turned down, this time on what he considered rather flimsy grounds that he was overage. In actual fact, Sheikh Abdullah's classmate, Hakim Ghulam Murtaza, who had also graduated with him did go on to London but that did little to assuage the feeling of persecution that was building up within. Each and every time, Kashmiri Pandit boys who applied with him, invariably got the scholarships which convinced the young Sheikh Abdullah that the feudal system with its deep prejudices against Muslims was at the heart of all that was wrong with the world.

Jobs in the Maharaja's government were at a premium. With the scholarship denied, Sheikh Abdullah next applied for a teaching job at the Shri Pratap College. Applying for the same post was another applicant, NN Kak who was a gold medalist in Chemistry from the Banaras Hindu University. Once again Sheikh Abdullah lost out and was instead offered a less glamorous post at the Islamia School as a teacher.

In the 1920s, the world was changing rapidly and the insular life styles were fast becoming a thing of the past. Educated youth, both Hindus and Muslims in Srinagar were forming small associations called 'Reading Rooms' where they could get together, read and discuss issues of 'academic interest'. The State Government, mainly controlled by the British Regent, mandated that for any such association to be formed, it was necessary to get clearance from the District Magistrate. This meant there would be 'police verification' and sometimes it would take a few years before permission would be granted. According to *Sheikh Abdullah – A Biography* written by Syed Taffazull Hussain, three youngsters, Mohammed Sikander, Mohammad Yahya Rafiqi and Ghulam Ahmed Zahena had put in an application in 1922 to start their own 'Reading Room Party' for the exclusive benefit of Muslim boys to study religious subjects. Permission was finally granted in 1930 that allowed the group to operate in the Fateh Kadal locality of Srinagar.

Though not a founding member, within a year new office bearers had to be elected and Sheikh Abdullah became the General Secretary while Mohammad Rajab was the President. Not surprisingly, almost all the members of the new group were united by their opposition to the autocratic feudal system and the perceived bias against Muslims which in their eyes had created an unequal and unjust society. It was then a matter of time before the group began to look at ways and means of making their voice heard. After initially writing a few articles that were published by the Lahore Urdu newspapers mainly about the oppressive Dogra rule, the group got more and more emboldened. Though they were by then under surveillance and had two inspectors from the state's Intelligence tracking their activities, at Sheikh Abdullah's suggestion, Ghulam Ahmed Ashai had drafted a memorandum to the Regency Council that highlighted the unjust recruitment rules that they felt were loaded against the Muslim community.

Maharaja Hari Singh was away in London and the Cabinet Government was headed by George Edward Wakefield. Sheikh Abdullah and the members of the Reading Room Party could hardly believe their eyes when in the first week of October they

received an acknowledgement of the memorandum and an invitation to send two members to come and meet the Regency Council to discuss their grievances. The letter, signed by the Cabinet Secretary Thakur Kartar Singh, was by itself a landmark of sorts and a large gathering got together to nominate two representatives. The choice fell on Sheikh Abdullah and a young lawyer, Abdul Aziz Fazili.

The four-member Regency Council, apart from the Prime Minister and the Secretary, also included Raja Janak Singh and the Revenue Minister, PK Wattal. The momentous meeting, held at the State Secretariat on 16 October, started with the two men being subject to a barrage of intimidating questions. This was then followed by a sermon from Wakefield himself who spelt out 'the beneficence of the government towards Kashmiri Muslims' and an example was trotted out of three Muslim candidates that had recently been employed by the State Government in the accounts department. Sheikh Abdullah, however, stuck doggedly to his guns, reeling off statistics to reinforce his points. Finally, the Revenue Minister lost his temper and threatened to teach the two youngsters a lesson if they continued in this vein. Sheikh Abdullah, somehow maintaining his composure despite the onslaught from Wattal, calmly replied that unless the government changed the recruitment policy in the Valley, they would have to face the consequences. The interview was terminated on that note by the Regency Council. However, the very fact that the memorandum had propelled Sheikh Abdullah and Aziz Fazili into the presence of the 'high and mighty' was enough to mark the former's presence in the state. Quite literally, a star had been born!

A few days later Maharaja Hari Singh would stand up in London and make his Empire-defying speech. Wakefield, under pressure from the Resident who had by then shifted to Jammu for the winter to 'stir up the pot' let it be known through his personal assistant, Khalifa Abdul Hakim, that though the Regency Council had taken a grim view of Sheikh Abdullah's seditious utterances, the Prime Minister himself was extremely impressed by the young man's composure and conduct. Hakim, then contacted the Jammu-based organization called the 'Young Men's Muslim Association' (YMAA) that boasted quite a few prominent names. By and large, the Muslim population outside the Valley was allowed a much greater deal of freedom, and they in turn then nominated their representative, Abdul Majeed, who then went to Srinagar and met with the members of the Reading Room Party. With the tacit approval of Wakefield, it was then decided to intensify the struggle against the state.

Since at the time there were no newspapers in the Valley per se and the *Ranbeer* published from Jammu by Mulk Raj Saraf was a pro-establishment paper, contact was made with the Kashmir Conference in Lahore that consisted of Kashmiris living in the Punjab. Sheikh Abdullah, by then had been galvanized into action and he was feverishly collecting statistics from across the state to highlight the anti-Muslim bias of the Maharaja's government, which was then given shape as articles with the help of Ghulam Ahmed Ashai. Typed in English, these were then routed to the YMAA in Jammu where they were translated into Urdu by Abdul Majeed Qureshi. In Lahore they were printed in a paper called '*Inqlab*' that was edited by Ghulam Rasool Meher and Abdul Majeed Salik. Hari Singh's government, extremely wary of what was being published, would then ban the paper but in a cat-and-mouse game that unfolded, the editors would change the paper's name. Once *Inqlab* was banned, it appeared in quick

succession as *The Kashmiri Musalman*, then *The Mazilum-i-Kashmir* and finally as *The Maktub-i-Kashmir*. The voice of Sheikh Abdullah had, with a little help from Wakefield, turned into a roar!

Maharaja Hari Singh on his return from England then faced one of the worst phases of turbulence in his state. The Kashmir Conference, by then also fully activated by the British Indian Government under the direct control of the Governor General, wanted to present a memorandum of demands to Hari Singh who however, refused to meet the Lahore-based leaders on the grounds that they were non-state subjects who had no right to intervene in the internal affairs of the state. Hari Singh was also furious with Wakefield, for it did not require rocket science to deduce the devious role played by the Prime Minister to realize he had played the Islamic card to mobilize political dissent in the Valley. Wakefield was asked to leave by Maharaja Hari Singh and he was replaced by Hari Kishan Kaul. But the gene was out of the bottle, and though Sheikh Abdullah himself would try to put a lid on it later, the damage had been done!



An aerial view of the Char Chinari within Dal Lake in Srinagar. This long lasting tree, photographed during the winter months when it is devoid of leaves, awaits a new spring when it comes to life again. (Shiv Kunal Verma/ KaleidoIndia)

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