

# Progressive Literary Movement in Kashmir It's Formative Years and its Demise

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## ABSTRACT

Freedom from the British in 1947 brought with it political turmoil in Kashmir in the form of tribal raids in October of 1947. But the raids were made unsuccessful with help from India. Subsequently, a popular government under the leadership of Sheikh Mohammad Abdullah was installed in Jammu and Kashmir thus ending the 101 years rule of Jammu Dogras over the Kashmir valley. As the National Conference attained power in Indian part of Kashmir, there was a sense of hope and patriotic fervour growing in the masses. This precipitated a gamut of positive developments in Kashmir some of which were the land reforms of 1950s and the Progressive literary developments. The nationalist poetry of Mahjoor and Azad from 1930s onwards, influenced other writers like Nadim, Arif, Khayal and Rahi among others to mark the beginning of Progressive Movement. These poets and writers were influenced by Marxist thought, the Russian and Chinese Revolutions and the Indian Nationalism. It was only in the aftermath of Sheikh's imprisonment in 1953 that the nationalist and socialist fervour amidst the progressive writers began to dampen and they gradually moved off to romantic and other poetic genres.

**Keywords:** Freedom; Sheikh Abdullah; Mahjoor; Progressive movement; Azad

## INTRODUCTION:

When the Dogra state ceased to exist with the accession of the Jammu and Kashmir state to India in October 1947, National Conference came to the forefront of the politics in Jammu and Kashmir. The political power equation thus began to alter with the Muslim majority in Kashmir now ruling a Hindu minority. Muslim Conference could not survive in Kashmir as many of its leaders left Kashmir during the war of 1947-49. With the expulsion and extermination of a large section of Muslim community from the Jammu province in the partition related riots, the demography of Jammu province altered towards a marginal Hindu majority.<sup>1</sup>

The war of 1947-48 and the resultant division of the Kashmir state stirred the patriotic fervour in the whole region. Patriotic feelings were running high during this period as most Kashmiris threw their destiny with Sheikh Abdullah who supported the Maharaja in his accession decision to India. Sheikh had already antagonized the new Governor-General of Pakistan, Mohammad Ali Jinnah on his visit to Kashmir in 1944. He knew that in a situation of Kashmir's accession to Pakistan, it will be Muslim Conference that would hold the reins of administration and he would be completely sidelined. Therefore National Conference cadres actively supported the Indian forces to push back the raiders in October 1947 to save

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Kashmir from being annexed to Pakistan. Kashmiri Pandits were more apprehensive of raiders taking control of the valley and gave active support to the National Conference. A Kashmiri Pandit, Prem Nath Pardesi recounted the vigour of people through the following lines:<sup>ii</sup>

We will march ahead step by step, And fight on the battle front. We'll fight against plunderers and aggressors We'll fight back oppressors and suppressors Now, there is no question of any special creed This is the question of life and death of a nation, We'll march ahead and fight back the aggressor.

Such poetry often gave courage to the youth who fought alongside the Indian forces against the raiders. It remained an irony that the same liberating Indian army was to militarize the region and suppress any dissent that emanated from Kashmir after Sheikh Abdullah's arrest in 1953. The liberators themselves became oppressors in the course of time. Meanwhile, Nehru took the decision to refer the Kashmir dispute to the United Nations on 1 January, 1948 and thus the issue was internationalized. By the time ceasefire was announced on January 1, 1949, the borders for the next 70 years had been set. Over the years, United Nations and its observers were to propose many solutions to the issue but without concurrence of both India and Pakistan. Any one party accepting a proposal was immaterial. Soon after the accession of Kashmir with India, Sheikh Abdullah was appointed as the Head of Emergency Administration on 30 October, 1947. The Last Dogra ruler left Kashmir, never to return to Kashmir. Sheikh took oath as Prime Minister of Jammu and Kashmir on 17 March, 1948. At the United Nations, Abdullah went on to defend the accession of Jammu and Kashmir with the Indian Union. But he wanted Kashmir to have a peculiar relation and was instrumental in the incorporation of Article 370 in Indian Constitution. By this Article, Kashmir surrendered Foreign Affairs, Communication and Defense to the Indian Union. In all other matters, it had autonomy to legislate its own laws.

As soon as the dust of the 1947-48 political tussle settled, Sheikh Abdullah led National Conference government actively began to clamor for land reforms which proved to be one of their kind in the Indian subcontinent. Over a long period of subjugation by an autocratic rule, a selected class of people had appropriated large lands and property owing to their close associations with the rulers and the government. By passing the Big Landed Estates Abolition Act, July, 1950, the government wanted to end the economic disparity by taking land from bigger estate owners and giving them to landless tillers. This was already promised by National Conference leaders in the manifesto of 1944. The government appropriately made the historic decision of transferring land to the tiller on the 19<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Martyrs' Day, that is 13<sup>th</sup> of July, 1950. It remained one of the important political decisions that catapulted the prestige of Sheikh Abdullah and National Conference in the State.

In 1951, Sheikh announced the formation of Constituent Assembly to replace the 1939 Dogra Constitution. It was also to give a final shape to the relation of the State with the Indian Union. Elections were held in September-October 1951 and all available 75 seats were bagged by National Conference. But the Assembly was yet to arrive at any meaningful decision, when Indian leaders became distrustful of Sheikh's intentions and imprisoned him in August, 1953. Even though he was charged with 'conspiracy against the State', the fact is that he was only averse to total Indian control on Kashmir affairs. Bakhshi Gulam Mohammad became the next Prime Minister of Jammu and Kashmir. He acceded to requests from New Delhi to integrate Kashmir more firmly into the Indian Union.

### **The Progressive Literary Movement**

Progressive literary movement of the 1930s British India slowly developed in Kashmir in late 1940s.<sup>iii</sup> Quit Kashmir Movement of 1946, the collapse and end of autocratic Dogra Raj in 1947, the Tribal Invasion

of 1947 and the Land Reforms of the New People's Government in Kashmir all precipitated the development of Progressive Literary Movement in Kashmir. The nationalist poetry of Mahjoor and Azad had influenced other writers like Nadim, Arif, Khayal and Rahi among others to mark the beginning of Progressive Movement in Kashmir. These poets and writers were influenced by Marxist thought, the Russian and Chinese Revolutions and the Indian Nationalism. Progressive Indian and English writers apart from the Russian poetry were ardently read by this new brand of writers. The socialist tendencies of Azad got new forms and features like in the story by Nadim, Rai (Blight) or in the poem of Rahi, Thahri Kati Jaagirdari (How Can Landlordism survive?) These stories attacked the older social order and aspired for a new one. Above all, an important purpose of Progressive Literary Movement in Kashmir was to secularize and humanize the poets, writers and artists. Till then, most of the writers were only looking towards the past writers for inspiration. Even Mahjoor for the same reason, is not considered by many as a true adherent of Progressive Literary Movement. He participated in its activities because of his already established prestige among the literary figures in Kashmir.

The establishment of Radio Kashmir on July 31, 1948, provided a daily forum and great opportunity for the utilization and development of Kashmiri language.<sup>iv</sup> Radio provided a medium for the use of Kashmiri in news broadcasts, agricultural reports, in dissipation of scientific information and in political commentaries. Apart from that, the nationalist poetry of Mahjoor, Azad and others acquired an important medium to reach the masses. In 1948 a voluntary non-governmental organization of artists and writers, Kashmir Cultural Front, published a booklet titled *Gaye Ja Kashmir* (Sing, O Kashmir). It was an anthology of patriotic and marching songs, poems on exploitation, the tribal raid and over issues like communalism. The compilers of the booklet were Pir Abdul Ahad Shah, Shivdhan Singh Chauhan and Ghulam Rasool Renzu. The editors mentioned in the preface of the booklet, 'the movement of collective singing provides the people with right perception of resistance against tyranny and aggression and this poetry assumes the shape of popular folklore within days.'<sup>v</sup> They highlighted the Chinese example of using collective songs to great effect in their resistance to the Japanese rule. In order to infuse high spirit of progressive ideology and thinking among the Kashmiris, many Urdu and Hindi writers and intellectuals visited Kashmir frequently and held debates and discussions under the banner of Cultural Front.<sup>vi</sup>

In 1949, Kashmir Cultural Front was re-christened as The National Cultural Congress and it started publication of *Kwong Posh*, a monthly which shaped the literary history of Kashmir from 1949 to 1956. The aim of this organization was aptly summarized in its Presidential Address of 1950 by Ghulam Mohammad Sadiq, who said, 'Literature is a weapon to awaken the people. It is both a representative and an architect of the people's culture, an interpreter of their struggles and aspirations. It shall expose imperialist, capitalist and feudal designs of the people's freedom and give leadership and direction to their struggle and fight for world peace'.<sup>vii</sup> Mahjoor remained the Chief Editor of this organization till his death in 1952. Even though freedom brought with it number of changes that these writers celebrated, yet Mahjoor was apprehensive at times and reflected so in poems like 'The Golden Oriole',  
Hawks Have left your garden  
And birds are all in song-  
But if you yourself turn a hawk,  
How futile was this change!  
Naive indeed is your faith to see  
As saviours and redeemers  
Interloping birds that burn  
With envy of your lot.<sup>viii</sup>

Apart from Azad and Mahjoor, it was Dinanath Nadim who symbolizes the progressive literary movement in Kashmir. Nadim's career was intimately linked with political developments in Kashmir after 1946. He wrote and celebrated the freedom movement through his poem *Vwothi Baaguch Kukilee* (Get up, O Nightingale of the Garden). He similarly hailed the land-to-the-tiller resolution in his *Asi Kaashiryev tul*

nov rut Kadam (We Kashmiris Took a New Good Stride). On the imprisonment of Sheikh Abdullah in 1953, he wrote Bomber te Yemberzul (Bumble Bee and Narcissus). The uncertainties of war between India and Pakistan even after the ceasefire in 1949 had prompted Nadim to write his wonderful poem, Me Chumm Aash Paghech (I Have Hope of Tomorrow). Written in free verse form, the poem is wonderfully constructed and restrained. Some of the lines from the poem are as:

Pagah Sholeh Dunya Dapan Jung chu wathvun Pagah goss ne sapdun Pagah sholeh dunya Pagah goss ne sapdun Me chum aash paghech Pagah vadeh chum tas.<sup>ix</sup> Tomorrow, world shall be pleasant They say war is imminent It must not happen tomorrow Tomorrow, world shall be pleasant It must not happen tomorrow I have an anticipation of tomorrow I have the promise of rendezvous tomorrow.

As the National Conference attained power in Kashmir, there was a sense of hope and patriotic fervour growing in the masses. During the turbulent days of 1947-48 war, Maulana Mohammad Masoodi wrote the song of the flag of Kashmir. Kashmir flag was influenced by the Russian Movement, red in colour with a white plough in the middle. Some of the lines from this beautiful lyrical song are as follows:

### **‘Lehra Aiy Kashmir ke Jhandey’**

Let this flag of Kashmir be unfurled, The flag of our people, of young and old alike Of the strong and non-violent, And of our poor peasants Whoever ploughs the land. Let this flag be always flying Over our valleys and our lakes; Till the day of judgment.<sup>x</sup>

Cultural Congress continued to work for literary and artistic progress in the state in 1950s. It was working under three wings: progressive writers association, progressive artists association and progressive painters association. In the first elections to the Conference, Rahman Rahi, Noor Mohammad Roshan and Som Nath Bhat were chosen as general secretaries respectively of the writers, artists and painters wings. The success and appeal of the association soon attracted many budding intellectuals and writers to its different forums. Mention could be made of Abdur Sattar Aasi, Mirza Mohammad Hassan Beig Arif, Ghulam Nabi Ariz, Abdur Sattar Ranjoor, Amin Kamil, Akhter Mohiuddin, Bansi Nirdosh, Taj Begum Renzu, Arjun Dev Majboor, Ghulam Nabi Firaq, Nand Lal Ambardar, Shyam Lal Dhar, Ghulam Nabi Khayal and Abdur Rahman Rahat among others.

During much of 1950s, progressive writers remained united and inspired many through their activities. They used to meet regularly every Friday wherein the participants would read out their creative writings. There often used to be an agenda for every meeting in sight of which the participants had to speak and share their ideas. It was also followed by an impartial and honest discussion and critical analysis of the writings shared in these meetings. The meetings used to last for hours together, sometimes going into quite late into the night.<sup>xi</sup> Often, the general practice in the association was that no participant was to read any poem of death and escapism. Poems and prose writings were appreciated only if they sang of everlasting life and spoke of solidarity for labourers, workers and downtrodden people. Ghulam Nabi Khayal mentions a few incidents involving himself and Rehman Rahi about how they were censured by their senior progressive colleagues when they recited some verses talking about death.<sup>xii</sup>

After Nadim, Abdur Sattar Ranjoor was the most dedicated and committed writer of the Kashmir literary movement. He wrote numerous poems on the philosophy of communism and Marxism and was associated with the Communist Party of India. Among the women writers, Taj Begum Renzu was the first who joined the Cultural Conference and contributed to the movement through her short stories. Her stories bear a sharp satire on our social set up created by exploiters in power whose morals are also torn up by their greed for money, luxury and oppression of their subordinates.<sup>xiii</sup> It was only in the aftermath of Sheikh’s

imprisonment that the nationalist and socialist fervour amidst the progressive writers began to dampen and they slowly moved off to romantic and other poetic genres.

### **Demise of Progressive Movement**

After the imprisonment of Sheikh Abdullah, Bakhshi Ghulam Mohammad became the Prime Minister of Jammu and Kashmir in 1953, promising full support to Indian state with regard to its program in Kashmir. The Cultural Congress soon attracted his attention and his sycophants cautioned him about the social and political implications of the activities of progressive writers. Bakhshi was seen as anti-communist and wanted to remain in power without any hindrance. He soon got off to divide the ranks of the progressive writers. Bakhshi's brother, Bakhshi Majeed had some writer's like Shamim Ahmad Shamim and Amin Kamil defect from the Progressives to form a new outfit called Kashmir Cultural Forum. This Forum did not last for long either and the defectors like Shamim Ahmad Shamim were provided with government employment in order to weaken the Progressive Association. Similarly Nadim was made a member of Legislative Council and Rahi got into teaching at S.P. College, Srinagar. The Association began to disintegrate from 1956 and had lost all its significance by mid 1960s. Some of the poets like Noor Mohammad Roshan became disheartened by the disintegration of the Progressive Movement and stopped writing altogether in 1950s. But most of them continued their literary pursuits though away from the garb of confining themselves to Progressivism. In India also, Progressive Literary movement was fading away in 1950s as the communist movements were losing their significance. The death of Stalin in 1952 was partly responsible for change in such pursuits. Indian National Congress in India and National Conference in Kashmir both continued to be anti-communist in outlook, though both ironically also followed some socialist programs. After the arrest of Sheikh Abdullah, the rule of puppet governments in Jammu and Kashmir –aided and decided upon by the central government at Delhi- again led to the feeling of an external rule thrust upon the people of Kashmir. This in the long run was to prove detrimental to the Muslim majority in the state, especially in the Valley, whose aversion to the Indian state only increased with time.

### **Conclusion:**

The post-1947 political landscape of Kashmir was marked by both optimism and turbulence. The end of Dogra rule and the rise of Sheikh Abdullah's National Conference created a sense of nationalist fervor and hope for socio-economic transformation. The introduction of radical land reforms and the emergence of a progressive literary movement reflected this optimism. However, the arrest of Sheikh Abdullah in 1953 marked a turning point, leading to political disillusionment and the gradual decline of progressive ideals. The Progressive Writers' Movement, once fueled by socialist aspirations and nationalist zeal, crumbled under state interference and ideological shifts. Over time, Kashmir's political trajectory became increasingly shaped by external influences, leaving behind a complex legacy of unfulfilled aspirations and deepening discontent.

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1. The partition riots of 1947 engulfed almost all of India, except the valley of Kashmir. While as the Kashmiri Hindus remained safe, Jammu Muslims were targeted systematically. According to some accounts, around 2 hundred thousand Muslims were killed and an equal number made to leave for Pakistan. For a detailed account of atrocities on Jammu Muslims by the Hindus, see Chapter 22, Saraf, Mohammad Yusuf. *Kashmiris Fight for Freedom Vol 2 (1947-1978)*.
  2. Cited in, Ghulam Nabi Khayal. *Progressive Literary Movement in Kashmir*. 2011. p. 46.
  3. Indian Progressive Writers' Association was set up in London in 1935 and was followed by the formation of All India Writers Association in Lucknow on 10 April, 1936 under the leadership of Syed Sajjad Zaheer. Famous Hindi-Urdu writer Munshi Prem Chand, presided over its first session at Lucknow. The Urdu writers associated with the movement were anti-imperialistic and were left-oriented.
  4. Braj B. Kachru. *Kashmiri Literature*. p. 63.
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  9. Dinanath Nadim. URL: <https://mkraina.com/me-chham-ash-paghuch-dina-nath-nadims-famous-poem/>
  10. Khayal, Ghulam Nabi. *Progressive Literary Movement in Kashmir*. 2011. pp. 48-49.
  11. Khayal, Ghulam Nabi. *Progressive Literary Movement in Kashmir*. 2011. p. 72.
  12. Khayal, Ghulam Nabi. *Progressive Literary Movement in Kashmir*. 2011. pp. 78-79. Khayal once had recited a poem which spoke about death just before the possible meeting of a beloved. Similarly Rehman Rahi had recited the Kashmiri translation of Maxim Gorky's famous poem 'The Death and the Virgin'.
  13. Khayal, Ghulam Nabi. *Progressive Literary Movement in Kashmir*. 2011. p. 97.