

# Voices of the People: Exploring the Praja Parishad Movement in Jammu and Kashmir

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**Abstract:** *This paper explores the Praja Parishad movement in Jammu and Kashmir, focusing on the voices of those involved and affected by it. Emerging in 1949, the Praja Parishad movement represented the aspirations and concerns of a specific section of society within the Jammu and Kashmir State. Through an examination of historical records, primary sources, and scholarly analysis, this study sheds light on the movement's origin, objectives, mobilization, and impact. By giving voice to those who participated in or were influenced by the Praja Parishad movement, this research offers valuable insights into the socio-political context of Jammu and Kashmir during that period and the movement's lasting significance in shaping the region's history.*

**Keywords:** Praja Parishad, Mobilization, Union Government, Communal Consciousness

## INTRODUCTION:

Jammu and Kashmir, a princely state during British India, became part of independent India in 1947. However, the region's unique demographic and political composition presented challenges for governance, resulting in simmering grievances among certain communities who felt excluded from decision-making processes and state administration. The movement was primarily led by the people of Jammu, who perceived marginalization and discrimination within the State's governance structure. They were disenchanted with the limited accession of the State to the Indian Union and sought full integration with the Indian Union, aiming to safeguard the legitimate rights of the people of Jammu and Kashmir.

## Background of the Movement:

Within a few months of Sheikh Mohammed Abdullah's appointment as prime minister of the state, a crisis emerged between the Maharaja and the National Conference leaders, which subsequently deepened. The National Conference's stance hardened following the Maharaja's complaint to the Government of India regarding the Interim Government's highhandedness (Patel, 1949). Therefore, the National Conference had become severely critical of the Maharaja and openly demanded for his abdication.<sup>1</sup> Despite the State Department's efforts to reconcile the differences between the Maharaja and the Conference leaders, these attempts proved futile. Subsequently, in April 1949, Sardar Patel, the Home Minister of India, requested the Maharaja Hari Singh to leave Jammu and Kashmir and designate his son, Yuvraj Karan Singh, as Regent. Consequently, on June 9, 1949, Maharaja Hari Singh relinquished his office, appointing his eighteen-year-old son, Yuvraj Karan Singh, as Regent, and subsequently left the State, settling in Bombay where he spent the remainder of his life. Thus, Sheikh Mohammed Abdullah had got a free hand to manage the state administration.<sup>2</sup> (Teng, Koul, Bhat, 1977).

The people of Jammu grew increasingly discontented with Sheikh Abdullah's perceived indifference toward the region, which fostered a significant trust deficit between him and the populace of Jammu province. In a speech delivered at Srinagar on August 15, 1949, Sheikh Abdullah openly challenged the people of Jammu, stating that if they genuinely wish to establish a separate and independent Dogra Desh, they are free to do so, as he viewed Jammu as a problem for himself (Puri, 1996)<sup>3</sup>. During this period, it became evident that the state urgently required strong leadership capable of uniting Jammu and Kashmir, articulating Jammu's concerns, and representing

its people's aspirations before the government. It was against this backdrop that the Praja Parishad Party was founded in November 1949 (Madhok, 1974)<sup>4</sup>. The party's main goal was to ensure the complete integration of Jammu and Kashmir with the Indian Union, like other princely states, while protecting the legitimate rights of Jammu's people from what was perceived as Sheikh Abdullah's anti-Dogra administration. The formation of the Praja Parishad Party was warmly received by the people of Jammu, resulting in its rapid expansion. With the inclusion of Pandit Prem Nath Dogra, who quickly emerged as a prominent leader, the Praja Parishad Party soon became the most authentic representative voice of Jammu.

### The Beginning of the Agitation

Upon its effect on January 26, 1950, the Constitution of India included special provisions for the State of Jammu and Kashmir. The state was granted the authority to convene its own Constituent Assembly and draft a separate Constitution. The legislative powers of the Indian Parliament over Jammu and Kashmir were limited to matters specified by the President of India in consultation with the State government, as outlined in the Instrument of Accession. All residuary powers remained with the State.<sup>1</sup> Article 370 established four key constitutional provisions:

- 1) the establishment of a Constituent Assembly to draft Jammu and Kashmir's own Constitution,
- 2) the division of powers between the Union and the State governments,
- 3) the possibility of modifying the operation of Article 370,
- 4) and the procedure for its amendment or revocation.

In May 1951, Yuvraj Karan Singh issued a proclamation establishing a Constituent Assembly for Jammu and Kashmir, predicated on universal adult suffrage and a secret ballot. The proclamation specified that each electoral district would represent a population of approximately forty thousand, and the minimum voting age was set at twenty-one.<sup>2</sup> The Praja Parishad Party subsequently participated in these elections. General elections to the Assembly were held in September 1951, resulting in a decisive victory for the National Conference, which secured all seventy-five seats. Of these, seventy-three were uncontested; the nominations of numerous candidates, including those from the Praja Parishad Party, were rejected during the scrutiny process due to trivial technicalities. Sixteen of the twenty-nine Praja Parishad Party nominations were rejected, and the remaining thirteen candidates withdrew in protest. Accusing the government of electoral malpractice, the Praja Parishad Party decided to boycott the elections<sup>33</sup>, leading to the National Conference securing the remaining two seats as well.

Since the elections were managed solely by the Government of Jammu and Kashmir, without the involvement of an independent election commission, questions regarding their fairness and transparency naturally arose. The disappointing outcome of the 1951 elections prompted the Praja Parishad Party to convene a party delegates' conference in November 1951 to counter the influence of the newly convened Assembly and present its own stance on major political issues. The meeting took place in Jammu from November 10 to 12,<sup>1</sup> 1951. The meeting,

held in Jammu from November, 10 to 12 1951, saw Pandit Prem Nath Dogra challenge each of the four major objectives outlined by Sheikh Abdullah in connection with the Constituent Assembly's agenda. Dogra asserted that there was no justification for a separate Constitution for Jammu and Kashmir, arguing instead that the Indian Constitution should apply uniformly to the State. He criticized Sheikh Abdullah's attitude toward Maharaja Hari Singh and, while supporting land reforms, condemned the limited nature of the State's accession to India, given its dependence on Indian economic assistance. The Praja Parishad Party leadership maintained that Jammu and Kashmir should be governed under the same constitutional framework as other Indian states and demanded the deletion of Article 370 at the earliest. Dogra emphasized that achieving this goal represented the party's foremost duty.

The elections to the constituent assembly had widened the gulf between the Dogras and the National Conference Government and to sensationalize its opposition to the Sheikh Abdulla's administration, the Praja Parishad Party organized a campaign to demand total and unconditional integration. This campaign created an atmosphere of tension, which culminated in a major showdown between the Praja Parishad Party and the State authority in early 1952.<sup>2</sup> The situation worsened at the beginning of 1952, when, on January 15, 1952, approximately 10–15 students at Government College Jammu demonstrated against the hoisting of the National Conference flag at an official function within the premises of Gandhi Memorial College, where Sheikh Abdullah was to speak. Some students were subsequently expelled, further escalating the conflict. On January 29, 1952, three students of the college went on the fast unto death. The students initiated a *satyagraha*, resulting in the arrest and detention of ten individuals in Jammu Central Jail. To protest this arrest, a large procession involving thousands of people was held in the city on February 8, 1952. Demonstrators marched to the secretariat, where they engaged in violence, breaking the wall and entering offices to burn records and furniture. Consequently, the State Government sought assistance from the Indian Military, and a curfew was imposed. The government subsequently released the students but arrested the leading figures of the Praja Parishad Party, including Pandit Prem Nath Dogra, despite their lack of participation in the procession.

In April 1952, Gopaldaswami Iyengar advised Sheikh Mohammed Abdullah 's government to release the Parishad Party leaders and maintain amicable relations with them (Bazaz, 2003, pp. 581–82). Consequently, the leaders of the Praja Parishad Party were released unconditionally while Iyengar was in Jammu, Sheikh Abdullah announced at the public function that **“so long as Parishad Party leaders did not give proof of their adherence to lawful and constitutional methods of action, they would be kept under control.”**<sup>8</sup> (Bazaz, 2003, pp. 581–82) In the meantime, Sheikh Mohammed Abdullah in order to restore his position and trust among the people of the State of Jammu and Kashmir delivered a number of speeches in which he showed his anger towards the Praja Parishad Party leaders and their slogan, ***Ek Pradhan, Ek Nishan, Ek Vidhan***, (Mullick, 1971, p.25) which was being described by him as a new threat to the autonomy and distinct identity

of the State. <sup>1</sup> He further emphasized the nature of the instrument of accession concerning this matter during a speech at Ranbir Singh Pura, Jammu, on April 19, 1952, stating, **"Kashmir's accession to India will have to be of a restricted nature.<sup>2</sup> In another speech, he said, "it would be better to die than to submit to the taunt that India is our bread giver; Kashmir is not eager for India's aid".<sup>3</sup>** (Ibid)

This speech provoked an immediate uproar in India, with Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru and the Indian Press criticizing it. Sheikh Mohammed further said, **"If Jammu and Ladakh so desire, they can decide to integrate with India and leave the valley free to have limited accession".<sup>4</sup>** These statements were viewed with suspicion and apprehension not only by the majority of non-Muslims in the state but also by many in Delhi (Vaid, 2009).<sup>5</sup> In this atmosphere, the Praja Parishad Party capitalized on Sheikh Abdullah's speech and launched an anti-Sheikh campaign. Dr. Shyama Prasad Mukherjee, the President of the *Bharatiya Jana Sangh*, described the episode as a "strangely baleful" occurrence.<sup>6</sup>

In the third week of June 1952, the Parishad Party leaders submitted a memorandum to Dr. Rajendra Prasad, the President of India, asserting the Dogras claim to determine their own future. They desired that the entire Constitution of India be applied to Jammu. They demanded to have the protection of the Supreme Court and to enjoy the fundamental rights as Indians do. Furthermore, they sought the same flag permitted in other states. Referring to the constituent assembly, it was mentioned in the memorandum that it consists of the nominees of only a single party, and the people of Jammu have no voice in it. They have also no representation in the parliament, and there was fear and tension lest something untouched take place.

### Protests erupted over the Delhi Agreement.

The Government of India convened a high-power meeting with the leaders of Jammu and Kashmir. An unanimous agreement was reached between the Kashmiri leaders and the Government of India, commonly referred to as the Delhi Agreement. Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru presented a summary of this agreement to the Indian Parliament on July 24, 1952, and Sheikh Abdullah presented it to the Kashmir Constituent Assembly on August 11, 1952. However, the Praja Parishad opposed the Delhi Agreement and initiated a satyagraha against it in August 1952. The Delhi agreement assured Jammu and Kashmir its special position. The Praja Parishad Party opposed the agreement and launched a violent agitation in Jammu. The Praja Parishad's movement became intensified under the slogan: (Baxter, 1969, p.117)

**"Ek Desh main Do Vidhan**

**Ek desh main do nishan**

**Ek desh main do pradhan**

**Nahin challenge, nehinchallenge"**

They demanded the complete merger of the state with India and the application of the Indian Constitution to the state.<sup>7</sup> Many Muslims in Jammu joined the movement, and approximately seven hundred Ziladars and Lumberdars resigned from their positions. Educational institutions were

closed for weeks, and farmers ceased paying land revenue. In essence, the people of Jammu and non-Muslims generally sought closer association with the rest of India.

The Satyagraha continued until 1953, and in May 1953, Jawaharlal Nehru visited the valley to assess the situation in the State.<sup>8</sup> Nehru's visit was followed by Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, who returned to Delhi feeling overlooked, if not insulted.

They began to observe the political developments within the state and country with increasing suspicion. They came to believe that the State's special status would be eroded over time, and that Jammu and Kashmir, like other states, would become fully integrated into India. Losing its distinct identity within the Indian Ocean was something the Kashmiri Muslim elite were unwilling to accept as a price for peace through accession. Consequently, the political attitudes of both Muslim and non-Muslim residents of Jammu and Kashmir became increasingly polarized.<sup>9</sup>

Events in Ladakh mirrored those in Jammu, with Ladakhis, led by Kushak Bakula, demanding special status for the region due to fears and resentment regarding the dominance of Kashmiri Muslims.<sup>10</sup> These incidents exacerbated the existing tensions between Jammu and Srinagar, and between the state government and the central government. Furthermore, Dr. Shyama Prasad Mukherjee was arrested near Lakhanpur on May 8, 1953, after attempting to enter the state in defiance of permit regulations, which he and his supporters did not recognize. He was subsequently transferred to Srinagar, where he died in confinement on June 23, 1953, under suspicious circumstances. Simultaneously, Sheikh Abdullah was suspected of colluding with anti-national forces and reportedly lost the confidence of his constituents. This further fueled the fire of the anti-Sheikh agitation till the government of India decided to act through the Sadar-i-Riyasat to dismiss the Sheikh's government.<sup>11</sup> (Singh, 1993)

On August 7, 1953, Sheikh was accused by the majority of his cabinet colleagues of generating uncertainty, suspense, and doubt, and distress among the people (Bamzai, 1994). Therefore, on August 8, 1953 Sheikh was deposed and arrested and his successor, Bakshi Gulam Mohammed was appointed as the prime minister of the state in the early hours of August 9 1953.<sup>12</sup> Subsequently, the Basic Principles Committee made specific recommendations regarding the further extension of Indian constitutional provisions to the states of Jammu and Kashmir. The committee recommended applying other agreed-upon provisions of the Constitution of India to the state, as stipulated by the Delhi Agreement. The Committee observed that the State's accession to the Union of India entailed certain responsibilities on the Center for protecting the State's interests and promoting its social and economic development. In order to enable the center to discharge the responsibilities that devolve upon it under the Constitution, those provisions of the Constitution of India that may be necessary for this purpose should be made applicable to the State in an appropriate manner. This should be done while preserving the State's internal autonomy and ensuring that all obligations stemming from accession and the Delhi Agreement are appropriately incorporated into the Constitution of Jammu and Kashmir. Thus, on May 14, 1954, the President of India promulgated the Constitution

(Application to Jammu and Kashmir) Order 1954<sup>1</sup>. However, the application of provisions concerning citizenship, fundamental rights, the jurisdiction of the Supreme Court, and the emergency powers of the President of India to the State of Jammu and Kashmir required a consequential amendment to the existing constitutional provisions within the State. Consequently, on April 8, 1955, the Jammu and Kashmir Constitutional Act of 1939 was amended again to incorporate the changes introduced by the President's Order of 1954. This amendment act was given retrospective effect and was deemed to have taken effect on May 14, 1954, the date of the Presidential Order's promulgation.<sup>2</sup> (Constitution Amendment Act, 1955). The President's proclamation did not fully satisfy the expectations of Hindu and other minority groups, as it envisioned only a partial application of the Constitution of India to the State of Jammu and Kashmir.<sup>3</sup> As a result, the Praja Parishad Party observed a protest day on August 5, 1956, to express public opposition to the proposed Constitution, separate from India.

On September 23, 1956, a party, in collaboration with some rightist groups in Jammu, convened an anti-separate constitution convention. The convention passed a resolution asserting that there should be only one constitutional framework for India and Jammu and Kashmir.<sup>4</sup> Pandit Prem Nath Dogra argued that the proposed Kashmir Constitution differed materially from the Indian Constitution in both its spirit and content, and that it would disappoint the people of the State. His party would, therefore, oppose any provision that created a distinction between Jammu and Kashmir and India.

#### Government response and its impact.

The response from the ruling authorities varied, ranging from suppression and repression to limited concessions. Despite resistance from the state government, the Praja Parishad movement successfully raised awareness regarding the people's grievances and exerted pressure on the political establishment. It left a lasting impact on the political landscape of Jammu and Kashmir. The movement served as a catalyst for political awakening, empowering the politically marginalized sections of society and inspiring subsequent movements for social justice and equitable development in the region.

#### CONCLUSION:

The Praja Parishad Party movement in Jammu and Kashmir exemplifies the power of collective mobilization and the pursuit of political empowerment. Emerging from the grievances and aspirations of the people, the movement challenged the existing status quo and sought to address the perceived marginalization and discrimination experienced by the Jammu region within the governance of Jammu and Kashmir. Throughout its duration, the Praja Parishad Party movement demonstrated the unwavering determination of its leaders and the resilience of the populace. It inspired a sense of political awakening among marginalized segments of society and fueled aspirations for social justice and equitable development. The study of the movement provides valuable insights into the historical struggle for representation and empowerment in the region. It deepens our understanding of the complex dynamics that have shaped Jammu and Kashmir's political trajectory.

Moreover, it serves as a reminder that collective action, driven by a shared vision of justice and equality, can effect tangible change and reshape governance structures.

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