

ROLE OF THE MUSLIM CONFERENCE (1932-1938)

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Abstract— History is witness to the fact that freedom could only be achieved after the formation of an organisation/conference and have pro-people agenda. The fundamental cause of people's unrest all over the world had been socio-economic and political in nature. The structure for freedom in Kashmir was also the outcome of economic exploitation, social discrimination and political subjugation. The Dogra rulers who ruled over the state of Jammu and Kashmir for more than a century failed to generate among the millions of their subjects any sense of identity of interest with the ruling class. Because the Dogra rulers considered Kashmir as their purchased property and thus ruled over their subjects as a master rules over his slave.

Index Terms— Conference, Malia (land revenue), Responsible government, Milkiyat rights (proprietary rights), Waddar (Money lender), Khad (fertilizer), Praja sabha (legislative Assembly), Kahchhari (grazing tax).

I. INTRODUCTION

Before the formation of Muslim Conference, a very significant development had taken place. It was the appointment of an Enquiry Commission under B. J. Glancy on November 12, 1931. The purpose of the Commission was to enquire into the grievances of the different communities of the State. In response to the report submitted by the Commission, the Maharaja by and large accepted all the Glancy recommendations of the Commission. However, many of these either remained simply paper-edicts or were not properly implemented. Thus for a long time the focus of the demands of the Muslim Conference was to press for the proper implementation of what was recommended by the Commission. History is witness to the fact that every freedom struggle had reached to its culmination only after proper guidance by its leaders and movement. The movement could achieve its logical goal only if the movement and its leaders are pro-people. The Muslim conference was a pro-people and secular organisation because its programme and goals were the reflection of the former.

A. Political

In its first annual session, the President of Muslim Conference pointed on the non-fulfilment of the promises of the Government which it had made in writing in response to Glancy Commission recommendations. It may be noted that

the Maharaja had issued orders with regard to the freedom of speech, formation of associations and freedom of press, but no orders were issued till then. It also demanded extension of Municipal Committees and District Boards, increase of Muslim members in the Constituent Assembly. Besides, it voiced against the limited powers of the proposed Legislature.

In the second annual session of Muslim Conference, the President demanded the establishment of the Assembly, as after the end of the inaugural session (1932) it was assured by the Government that a declaration to this effect would be made by the end of 1933.

It also expressed its displeasure over the concealment of Franchise committee Report. It demanded that the recommendations of the Committee should be immediately published to give the people an opportunity to point out its draw-backs, as was done in British India, {he President said that as per the information that leaked out, a grave injustice had been done to the peasant class. In the cities, the right to vote was given to rupees 600 property holders, whereas in the villages the property qualification was many times greater. For instance, by giving right to vote to such a peasant who paid 20 rupees as malia (land revenue) means that in the villages property holders worth rupees 10,000 were given right to vote. Moreover, his moveable and immovable property was not taken into account.

It was demanded that before publishing the voter list the Franchise Committee should reconsider its recommendations regarding right to vote, so that 34 lakh population living in the villages was not deprived of the right to vote.

The Conference expressed its dissatisfaction over the recommendations of Glancy Commission regarding District Boards. It particularly condemned the inclusion of Zaildars in the district bodies. It was rightly feared that these Zaildars would become the mouth pieces of the Government. It demanded the establishment of District Boards on Punjab pattern so that 96% village population would be benefited.

The Conference also expressed its dissatisfaction over the given constitution of Municipal Committee (it is to be remembered that there was only one Municipal Committee in the Valley i.e. the Municipal Committee of Srinagar) as, besides its president, more than half of its members were nominated. The election by ward system was unprincipled, as one and a half lakh majority community dominated area was

divided into three wards, whereas a few thousand minority community areas were divided into five wards. The irony of the fact is that when the Muslims raised a voice against it, the Government instead of redressing the genuine grievances gave up election and filled up the seats by nomination. Similar concern was expressed against the constitution of Notified Area Committees .

The Muslim Conference was not in favour that the Maharaja should join the Indian Federation of 1935. They argued that if the Maharaja contrary to the wishes of the Conference seeks to join the proposed Federation, he should send elected representatives to represent the State. The probable reason behind dissuading Maharaja from joining the Federation was their attempt to frustrate the expected British cooperation, the Maharaja would receive in suppressing the nationalist movement in Kashmir. Second probable reason was that the Kashmir leadership did not perhaps like Kashmir to join Federation of Indian States which they apprehended would ultimately culminate in merging Kashmir with India.

The demand for responsible government became the watchword of the Muslim Conference, particularly during its later phase. The most part of the

Presidential address of the 6th annual session was devoted to this demand. The demand obviously received impetus after the passage of 1935 Act which gave internal autonomy to British Indian provinces about which the President also made a reference in this session. By responsible government, the leadership meant transfer power to the elected members. To quote:

In other words by this (responsible government), we mean that we should be given autonomy in managing the affairs of our own home-land and in this, there should not be any external interference. To this, we call demand for self responsible government and this is the goal of our movement for which we have sacrificed our lives.

It may be noted that the administration of the Jammu and Kashmir State was run by the council of ministers who were outsiders. Their ignorance about the problems of Kashmiris and their irresponsible conduct was also high-lighted.

On 8th May, 1936, Muslim Conference observed Responsible government Day. On this day public meetings were held and processions taken out by masses. Resolutions were passed condemning the State Assembly as an inadequate and unrepresentative body. A demand was made for setting up of a powerful Assembly.

B. Economic:

In its first session, the Muslim Conference outlined the socio-economic and political scenario of Kashmir. It pointed out the non-fulfillment of the promises of the Government, like reduction of the magnitude of malia and providing adequate representation to Muslims in Government services, which it had made in writing in response to Glancy Commission recommendations .

In its second annual session (1933), the Muslim Conference took up the cause of the agricultural community of the State.

While expressing its satisfaction over the grant of proprietary rights to the peasants and the exemption of nazrana, the President also pleaded for the grant of milkiyat rights (proprietary rights) over khalsa-i-Sarkar.

It may be noted that in every village there were big areas of uncultivated land over which the Government still exercised its proprietary rights. The Conference also demanded increase in the area of shamilat-i-deh, an area of land over which a village collectively possessed the right to use for common purpose like graveyard or grazing -ground. It also demanded that chakdars and jagirdars should not have right over shamilat-i-deh, as many peasants were evicted from newly cultivated land (nautaud) by the jagirdars and chakdars on the ground that it was nautaud-i-najaiz (illegal fresh broken land). In this context the Conference submitted a detailed note to the Government.

The leaders gave high priority to improvising the lot of the peasantry which was suffering because of the high pitch of land revenue demand and defective method of land revenue assessment. The Conference urged the Government, to change its land revenue policy by arguing:

It was accepted by the Glancy Commission that the method of land revenue assessment should be according to the Land Revenue Amendment Act of Punjab (1928) and also according to the one that prevailed in the Sarhad province. But no action has been taken on it so far. In Kashmir, land revenue was fixed at 1/3 of the total produce because at the time of previous Bandubest (settlement) the relationship between the peasant and the State was that of tiller and the proprietor. But from Samvat 1990 the relationship changed into proprietor and Government. So the previous assessment cannot continue at any cost. Besides this, in the previous assessment one anna per rupee was charged as malikana. In the new circumstances when malikana rights have been transferred to the peasants, ultimately malikana stands remitted.

It may be noted that lending of money on high interest had caused tremendous problems to the peasantry. In fact this was one of the causes of their ruination, as far paying land revenue in cash, they had to part a big portion of their produce with the waddar (money lender), who exploited the hapless peasant. The leaders demanded that the Money lending Bill should be introduced in Kashmir. While pointing out a big disparity between the magnitude of land revenue demand of Punjab and Kashmir, the President of the sixth annual session of Muslim Conference remarked:

Whereas a peasant of Jammu with some bighas of land had to pay 51 rupees, the Punjab peasant with same area of land had to pay only 10 rupees and 08 annas. The condition was further worst in Kashmir where the land revenue was heavier as compared to Jammu.

The leaders also took up other problems of the peasantry like construction of canals and veterinary and cooperative facilities. More emphasis was laid on the apathetic attitude of the State towards providing medical facilities to the villages.

It was also demanded that the peasants needed education about modern techniques of agriculture and the importance of fertilizers (khad) and the means of protection of crops. It was

felt that for this purpose there was need for an arrangement of large scale propaganda. Needless to say corruption was rampant in every branch of the administration. The leadership voiced against this social evil and demanded that the defaulters should be severely dealt with.

Next to peasantry the biggest section of the population of Kashmir comprised of labourers. There were a few factories like carpet weaving factories of Srinagar, match factory of Srinagar and the famous silk factory of Srinagar which engaged thousands of labourers. Besides, there was another category of labourers who were employed by the Public Works Department for the construction of roads and buildings. The Conference represented the grievances of these labourers. For example the Government disengaged the labourers of silk factory for two to three months which caused tremendous problems to them. The Conference urged the Government to run its factories round the year or give some allowances to the artisans during the vacation period.

The fifth session of Muslim Conference again took up the cause of the declining Kashmiri crafts which were at the verge of extinction because of industrial revolution. It was complained that the Government was doing nothing to save these crafts. The session also drew the attention of the rulers towards their non-chalant attitude about exploiting the natural deposits of Kashmir.

According to the leadership, the migration of Kashmiri labourers to different States of India in search of livelihood was the result of unconcerned attitude of the Government, towards this sizable section of the society

The Muslim Conference organized a Mazdoor Union. The leaders who took vigorous and leading part in this connection were Khawaja Ghulam Muhammad, Sadiq Ghulam Mohi-ud-Din Qara and Ghulam Muhammad Bakshi. A Central Mazdoor Union was formed and Khawaja Ghulam Muhammad Sadiq was elected as its president. The union staged huge demonstrations, one after the other, in Srinagar as well as in Jammu. Muslim Conference voiced for the emancipation of the labour class, echoes of which were heard in Praja Sabha (Legislative Assembly) also.

The leadership vehemently criticized the industrial policy of the State as according to them the State was bestowed with rich natural resources but the Government was not doing anything to exploit them. It demanded that the Government should seek the expertise of those companies who were specialized in exploiting the mineral resources. They rightly felt that by paying attention to exploiting the natural deposits the State would not only help the unemployed labourers but it would also add to the revenue of the country.

Jammu and Kashmir is the richest State in minerals. There are various petrol reserves, copper, deposits and coal mines which are unexploited. If the Government is not in a position to exploit them, it is better to give them on contract to some companies on reasonable concessions. The income from this sector will prove helpful to the State in framing its budget and will ensure the socio-economic welfare of the masses. It will

further help in solving the crucial problem of unemployment and the labourers, who go out of the State in search of living.

In its 6th annual session the Conference again invited the attention of the Government towards the pathetic condition of labourers and artisans. While appreciating the increase in the wages of the labourers of Silk Factory, Srinagar, in 1937, the Conference also demanded the fulfillment of other demands of the silk factory workers like fixation of the duration of a week, remuneration for amputation or injury of any organ of the body.

C. Social:

Glancy Commission had recommended many measures for the educational advancement of the Muslims. But as per the statements of the Muslim Conference these recommendations were not implemented. For example the commission had recommended the appointment of Muslim Inspector to look after the educational interests of the Muslim community. But he was not given the powers as suggested by the Commission. The Commission had clearly recommended that he (inspector) would see to it, whether the educational and other policies of the State were practically implemented.

The Muslim Conference fully realized the importance of education and worked for its dissemination among the Muslim community. More important to note is that it attached prominent importance to female education. Under the sub-heading what we should do, the President of the first session of the Conference said:

During this period let us strengthen the press and encourage the Muslims to get education so that the number of reasonable workers increases day by day. Islam and ignorance are two opposite things. Muslims in past have illuminated the world with the light of knowledge. Every nation of the world is highly indebted to those Muslims. But alas! today the Muslims themselves have turned ignorant. We should pay due attention to female education. It is said that women have played a great role in changing the societies and thus decided the future of nations and empires.

The leaders were very much particular about the educational development of the State and the demand was invariably made in almost every session of the Conference. In his welcome address to the third annual session held at Sopore. Khawaja Maqbool demanded the promotion of Middle Schools of Bandipora and Handwara to High Schools on the plea that except towns there was no High School in Kamraz area, where lakhs of people lived. It was also demanded that one intermediate College be opened in Baramullah, as the students of Muzafferabad, Baramullah, Sopore and other places of district Baramullah had to go to Srinagar for higher education which was very difficult. It also urged for opening Middle Schools in the Parganah's of Hamal (Rafiabad), Zainageer, Lolab, Trehgam, Mawar and Titwal. Introduction of the subjects on agriculture and the opening of agricultural schools at Bandipora and Handwara was also pleaded.

Expressing grave concern over the educational backwardness of Kashmir in general and those of Muslims in particular, because of lukewarm attitude of the Government. In the 5th annual session of the Muslim Conference the President said:

The problem of educational backwardness is the most crucial problem of the quum (Muslim community). The progress of nations and individuals is subservient to education. In the present times the spread of education has not remained within the hands of the people. It is the duty of the Government. But the Government of Kashmir has become notorious given its apathetic attitude towards the education of Muslim masses. For last 25 years there has been greater realization among the Muslims in favour of modern education. However, there are many impediments and the Government has never taken any step to remove these. After spending a large amount the Government invited the Education Commissioner of the Government of India Mr. Sharp in 1916 to suggest ways and means to popularize education. One of his suggestions was that in each village with 500 or more population, one Primary School should be opened. At that time (1916) there were 1400 villages with 500 or more population. Today because of increase in population the number of such villages has increased to 2500. But during the long period of 22 years the Government has not even opened 1400 schools. Though according to Sharp Report there should have been a primary school within 10 years in each village with 500 population.

The Muslims had complained before Glancy Commission the indifferent attitude of the Government towards popularizing education among the Muslims. The Commission had endorsed the complaint of the Muslims and forcefully recommended the fulfillment of Sharp recommendations. It also recommended that in order to attract the Muslims to modern schools Arabic knowing teachers and Muslim teachers should be appointed,

but the Government did not taken any worth mentioning step in this direction.

To sum up, it was because of the struggle launched by the Muslim Conference that the Government was ultimately forced to concede the demand of the right to form political Associations and the freedom of press and platform, the Press Regulation was still gagging the mouth of free press. However, unlike the past the circulation of such newspapers, which represented the cause of Muslims could not be stopped.

It was because of the struggle of the Muslim Conference that people got many rights and concessions in the absence of which their condition was extremely bad. By 1933 they got proprietary rights in land, some privileges regarding forests, exemption of tax on milch cow, exemption from Kahchhari (grazing tax) and nazrana, freedom of press and platform, formation of associations and the establishment of Legislative Assembly and District Boards. Not only this but the Conference succeeded in making the Government to accept the payments of land revenue of nautaud (fresh broken land) in instalments. Above all the confiscated religious places were also restored to the Muslims, though the demand regarding conversion was not conceded to.

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