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IMPACT AND ROLE OF INDIAN NATIONAL CONGRESS IN THE POLITICS OF JAMMU & KASHMIR.

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Abstract:-Congress has played a significant role in the politics of the state even when it did not have its independent unit operating within the state. Its contribution in secularisation of politics within the state has proved very decisive especially during 1947 partition. In Post 1947 it played a very significant role in shaping the politics both in positive as well as in its negative dimensions. Congress also played a very vital role in granting special constitutional position and abrogating the same. It has a very paradoxical role in both of promoting and undermining the democratic functioning within the state. While as on the one hand it showed magnanimity by inviting Sheikh Abdullah to form government in 1975 at the cost itself losing power. It is generally believed that at times party's policy was very much undemocratic towards the functioning of the state institutions. The paper further argues that this undemocratic interference has been very immediate cause of the breakdown of the main institutions of the state.

Keywords:Indian National Congress, Colonialism, Muslim Conference, Autonomy, Indira-Abdullah Accord, Militancy, PDP, Coalition, Praja Pariishad, BJP.

INTRODUCTION:

The Indian National Congress founded in December 1885¹ is the political party under which the Indian National freedom movement was carried out against the British colonialism. It was not a sudden development but an outcome of those forces which were at work before its birth. Actually the growing National consciousness was finding its expression in the ranking local, regional and a few national organisations.² Many felt the need for an All Indian Association/organisation and the Indian National Congress appeared on the scene to play its destined part.³ Allan Octavian Hume a retired member of the Indian Civil service proved a good supporter and sponsor of the India's thought for committed action to the growing unrest. The deep dissatisfaction of the ruled and ruthlessness of the rulers, he thought was, not in the interest of the both. It was within this context of the political scenario that he connived with the Indian leadership which paved the foundation of an All India National Congress on December 25, 1885 and its first session was held on December 25, 1885 at Bombay. Womesh Chander Banerjee was elected its first president. The first session of Congress was attended only by 72 representatives and the delegates representing different parts of India.⁴ However, its operation remained mainly confined to the areas that were directly under the British control known as the British India. It was considered politically inexpedient to get into the princely states. However, the party helped the political forces and parties operating within the Princely states working for agendas of socio-political emancipation in their respective states. This is how congress started getting involved in Jammu & Kashmir as well. The state was under the autocratic rule of Dogra Shahi. With the beginning of the freedom movement in Jammu & Kashmir the leadership in party particularly Nehru and Gandhi started developing interest in the areas of the state particularly in relation to its freedom movement. This role and influence became more pronounced through the proximity that Nehru as an important figure in Indian National Congress developed with the Kashmir freedom movement particularly its leader Sheikh Mohammad Abdullah. It is generally believed that through the influence of Nehru, the freedom movement in Kashmir started gaining greater ideological proximity with that of Indian National Congress.⁵ This gradually prompted Muslim Conference leadership to change the

nomenclature of Muslim Conference into the National Conference.⁶ This had far-reaching impact on the politics in Kashmir particularly when British decided to leave the sub-continent and India got divided into two independent states of India and Pakistan.

Thus, the greater proximity of leadership of Indian National Congress with the local leadership on issues in ideology and politics allowed Congress to play quite important role in the politics of Jammu & Kashmir. This proximity turned to be very significant when an abnormal situation was created in Kashmir as a result of tribal invasion of the state and the resultant accession of Maharaja Hari Singh with Indian dominion.⁷ It is because of this proximity that the accession was endorsed by the popular leadership particularly Sheikh Mohammad Abdullah.⁸ This was particularly required because the congress position on the issue of accession of the princely states was that the choice of the people of princely states has to be paramount on issues of accession with either India or Pakistan.

After the accession Congress government in Delhi played cardinal role in negotiating the relationship with the state and in working out a special provision in the constitution of India that in a way granted special position to the state under the article 370 in consultation with the newly installed popular leadership in the government of Jammu & Kashmir.⁹ The Congress being the only dominant party in Delhi had significant role in dealing with a number of forces activated for and against the special position granted to the state. This added to its complex process of balancing divergent positions on the issue. The opposition to the Article 370 gradually vitiated the relationship between the Indian National Congress and the state leadership headed by Sheikh Abdullah. In 1952 when Sheikh Abdullah was provoked by a Praja Parishad agitation in Jammu for total elimination of state's autonomy,¹⁰ he publicly resurrected the idea of plebiscite already promised by the Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru. This vitiating of relations ultimately resulted in the dismissal of Sheikh Abdullah as Prime Minister of the state. Accordingly a rift was engineered in the National Conference leadership, Sheikh Abdullah was arrested and his lieutenant Bakshi Ghulam Mohammad was sworn as the new Prime Minister in 1953.¹¹ The Congress also did not allow to gamble with Jammu & Kashmir at international level because Jammu & Kashmir served an important nerve in the Euro-Asian politics. It allowed National Conference with the changed leadership to stay in power but was closely regulated from Delhi. It was in Bakshi's period that the custom barrier was removed in April, 1954, and therefore making the state economically integral part of India. At the same time the process of erosion of Jammu & Kashmir's autonomy started with active persuasion from New Delhi. On February 6, 1954 the Constituent Assembly ratified the state's accession to India. Various articles of the Indian constitution were extended to Jammu & Kashmir.¹² It was in G. M. Sadiq's rule that on January 26, 1965 the National Conference was changed into an official unit of Jammu & Kashmir Pradesh Congress Committee with Syed Mir Qasim as its president. The drastic and festered step the Congress regime resorted to was the sixth amendment to the constitution of Jammu & Kashmir in April 1965. It abolished the office of Sader-e-Riyasat and Prime Minister, replacing it with Governor and Chief Minister respectively. Articles 356 and 357 were also extended to the state.¹³ The party ruled over the state for eleven years. The local leadership in one way or other way was the extension of central government in the state, as they were working under the close scrutiny and supervision of the centre. However it also meant continuation of political uncertainty in Kashmir because Sheikh Abdullah continued spearheading plebiscite politics in the state. The Indian National Congress with its dual role as a political party heading the national government would have to address the issue of political uncertainty. The changed political context after the defeat of Pakistan in Bangladesh war of 1971 allowed it this opportunity. Abdullah came round in favour of India. With the Fresh parleys between the Indian government and Sheikh Abdullah including Mirza Mohammad Afzal Beg who was the head of the Plebiscite front were conducted after the Indo-Pakistan war of 1971. The Protracted talks extending up to about three years which were held between Mirza Afzal Beg, G. Parthasarthi,¹⁴ S. Swaran Singh¹⁵ the respective representatives of Sheikh Abdullah and the Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. The reconciliations and dialogue resulted into an accord on November 13, 1974 between Sheikh Mohammad Abdullah and Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. On February 25, 1975 Sheikh Abdullah was sworn in as Chief Minister of Jammu & Kashmir State after Mir Qasim stepped down on the advice of central leadership. Thus Sheikh Abdullah was reconnected to the mainstream politics of India.¹⁶ This positively changed the context of politics in Jammu & Kashmir. However it meant that Congress as a party was on the losing side. It had given up power for a larger national cause. Political consolidation of revived National Conference under the leadership of the Sheikh meant shrinking of the political space for the Indian National Congress in the state.¹⁷

Thus in the post 1975 Indira-Abdullah Accord, the cordial relations between Sheikh Abdullah and the ruling Congress party at the centre started souring around 1977. Mrs Indira Gandhi perhaps believed that Sheikh Abdullah and his group in the post-Accord period would join the Congress party and act in line with the centre. But he instead revived his National Conference in April 1975 and also wanted that Congress in the state should be merged with the former on the line existing prior to his arrest in 1953. Besides this, the Sheikh after assuming power had hardly acted in conformity with the centre's line. He even did not consult Mrs Indira Gandhi in matters relating to ministry-making, though his government before 1977 was totally dependent on the Congress's support in the state Assembly. In fact he never liked to be treated like any other Chief Minister, nor did his supporters refrain from making controversial statements in relation to the events that took place in the state between 1953 and 1975. All these

factors resulted in worsening of his relations with the Congress both within the state and Delhi. The situation soon reached such a pass that the Congress's legislators decided to withdraw their support to Sheikh Abdullah resulting in the resignation of his government in March 1977.¹⁸ They also staked their claim for power. However, the Governor Mr. L. K. Jha did not agree to their claim and decided to dissolve the Assembly and ordered fresh elections in which the Sheikh's National Conference trounced the Congress as well as the newly formed Janta Party. The Congress's withdrawal of support to Sheikh Abdullah was considered in the valley as a stabbing in his back. Relations between the new ruling party at the centre and the Sheikh's government remained largely strained. Thus Sheikh Abdullah came to power again after 1977 elections and he remained as such till his death on September 8, 1982.¹⁹ Before his death however he nominated and got elected his son Dr. Farooq Abdullah as president of All Jammu & Kashmir National Conference in August 1981.²⁰ After his father's death Dr. Farooq Abdullah was invited to form the government. Consequently, he took over as the new Chief Minister of the state on September 9, 1982. But the coming days witnessed open confrontation of Dr. Farooq Abdullah with the centre particularly with Mrs. Indira Gandhi. The 1983 elections were hotly contested between the Congress and NC in the State.²¹ The National Conference won a strong mandate. But this was followed by further straining relations between the Congress and the National Conference. Hence forth while as Dr. Farooq took an open front against Mrs. Gandhi's Government at the centre by aligning with the National opposition to her Government, congress began to conspire to destabilise his government. For this it had to shift BK Nehru as Governor of the State and bring in a more pliable Jagmohan to head the State. It was with his help that in the year 1984 political events in the state took dramatic turn when Ghulam Mohammad Shah, M.L.C, the brother-in-law of Dr. Farooq Abdullah succeeded in splitting the National Conference and becoming the Chief Minister of the state with the support of Indian National Congress.²² Twelve members of the Legislative Assembly belonging to the National Conference split the party and formed a new party namely, National Conference (Khalida) group.²³ G.M.Shah formed the government with the support of 26 MLA's from the Congress. Within four months of G. M .Shah's rule in J & K, Mrs Indira Gandhi was assassinated on October 29, 1984 and her son Rajiv Gandhi succeeded her as the next Prime Minister of India on October 30, 1984. Whatever the theory, the reality was that the G. M. Shah administration remained dependent on Congress within the state and New Delhi. It completely failed to control the rising tide of dissent and violence which by early 1986 attained a new intensity in a series of highly structured communal clashes. G.M Shah therefore, could not carry on with the Congress party due to which he had to step down in November 1986, when the Congress party withdrew its support to his Government. Consequently the Assembly was dissolved and Governor Jagmohan announced the imposition of Governor Rule in the state. Later fresh elections were held in March 1987. This time Dr. Farooq Abdullah acted cautiously and to regain power he entered into an election alliance with the Congress-the alliance popularly known as Rajiv-Farooq Accord was entered into with the claim 'to give stability to the state and ensure economic progress.'²⁴ It was suggested that both National Conference and Congress would fight the decisive communal and secessionist forces in-order to strengthen the national integration and age old ties of communal harmony and brotherhood. It was another alliance relating to the state's relation with the Indian Union. Interestingly enough all the alliances were jointly finalised by the two ruling families in Srinagar and Delhi.

Somehow the Rajiv-Farooq accord failed to prove as effective as expected. Most of the opposition groups called it as unholy and opportunistic alliance. The opposition in the valley termed it as a sell-out and surrender to Delhi. The prestige and image of Dr. Farooq Abdullah suffered very badly. The situation went on sliding down and reached a nadir in the wake of the Assembly elections of March 1987 that most people agree were rigged. Techniques of booth capturing, rigging and misuse of police force and administrative machinery were used as before.²⁵ Thus Dr. Farooq Abdullah again became the Chief Minister of the state, this time he head a coalition Ministry of National Conference and Congress. This election as a matter of fact may be regarded as precursor of the current turmoil in the state. The rival groups believed that this election was thoroughly rigged by the ruling party. The top JKLF leader late Ishfaq Majid Wani who had campaigned along with other fellow students for the "Muslim United Front" (MUF) in 1987, while recalling the stunned shock that was felt following the declaration of the results, said, "The MUF had grossed the maximum votes when the counting was done but it was Farooq Abdullah's National Conference that was declared the winner."²⁶ Subsequently, the valley was overtaken by militancy, bomb blasts firing, bandhs etc.²⁷ The law and order machinery was demoralised. In the year 1989 internal security of the state was threatened by militant activities²⁸ due to which Governor's rule was imposed in the state which remained in force till 1996.²⁹ In order to take some remedial steps to control the effects of the repression by the Central Government appointed George Fernandes as minister for Kashmir who was well known both in India and in the rest of the world for his concern for human rights. After less than two years in office, V.P. Singh was replaced as Prime Minister in 1991 by Narsimha Rao- the new leader of the Congress party after the assassination of Rajiv Gandhi in May. Although the BJP no longer wielded the same influence on Jammu & Kashmir policy, Hindu communalism remained a factor during this period. It reached alarming proportions at the end of December 1992 with the destruction by Hindu extremists of the mosque at Ayodha in Uttar Pradesh, South of Nepal.

In March 1993 Girish Chander Saxena was recalled and replaced by retired General Krishna Rao for a second term of office.³⁰ In July 1993, Rajesh Pilot, minister of state of internal security, reiterated that the

government would respect human rights in its efforts to curb the separatist movements in Jammu & Kashmir.³¹ Thus the congress government under the leadership of Narsimha Rao set up a cabinet committee to oversee Kashmiri policy with a view to starting a political dialogue. Political process and normalisation became the key phrases of the Indian Government's discussions on Jammu & Kashmir in order to hold elections to Jammu & Kashmir's state legislative assembly dissolved by Jagmohan in February 1990.³² The militant's response to such initiative was negative, but the government pressed on with its initiative. Rajesh Pilot talked about rehabilitation³³ of the Kashmiri youth, Karan Singh returned to the lime-light for calling for a Kashmir Affairs Ministry to be set up in order to begin a process of reconciliation.³⁴ On 15th August 1994, Prime Minister Narsimha Rao formally announced that a political process would be initiated for the normalisation of affairs in the valley. It was in this improved context that 1996 elections were held.³⁵ The mandate given to the National Conference in 1996 was unprecedented in the parliamentary history of Jammu & Kashmir. For the first time in Jammu & Kashmir it emerged as the single largest party in all the three regions of the state and on October 9, 1996 Dr. Farooq Abdullah was sworn in as the Chief Minister of Jammu & Kashmir State.³⁶

The 2002 and 2008 State Assembly elections, in spite of these becoming instruments of change in government, still restricted competition among only those who at one time or another had been a part of the ruling/governing elite.³⁷ The 2002 State Assembly election is different in this sense that in the history of the State it has been the first election that has resulted in the change of government through the electoral process.³⁸ The 2008 State Assembly elections have been similar in this respect. The two elections were held in the context of the improved security situation in Kashmir. The people, who had become weary of violence and its traumatic consequences, were looking for a change to peace, healing, and reconstruction. It introduced a younger leadership to the scene that has introduced a relatively newer idiom into state politics, defined by their own assessment of the ground situation in the State, and does not necessarily repeat and parrot the language of the masters in New Delhi.

Thus, to conclude we can say that in the politics of Jammu & Kashmir there were some positive changes that have been initiated and which were likely to contribute a positive element to the politics and governance of the State. But all this did not mean a substantive change in the basic context of politics in the state of Jammu & Kashmir. We still have some fundamental political questions unresolved. All major political formations in the State have admitted to the limited nature of their mandate while seeking support of the people. We continue with laws that are not in tune with democratic theory and practice. Both resulted in a sort of coalition politics within the State which many people believe has contributed to certain kind on regional equations that resulted in further disempowering the Valley of Kashmir. Since 2002, the Indian National Congress representing mainly the Jammu has remained a constant factor in the government as a kind of king maker with backing from Delhi while as the political divide in the valley between the PDP and the NC has in a way marginalized both in terms of their capacity to bargain from a position of any strength. It is because of this factor that the NC in spite of being single largest party in the Assembly remained outside the power between 2002 to 2008, After 2008 elections the Congress entered into an alliance with the NC leaving the earlier coalition partner PDP to fend as the main opposition within the legislature. Because of this a sense of powerlessness, marginality, deprivation and neglect has deepened in the valley. Thus in the emerging context the INC as a National party has gained greater significance in the politics of the State. This increased significance of Congress in post 2002 scenario has also a regional dimension; the Congress by and large has been represented Jammu region. It was in this context that Gh. Nabi Azad assuming power in 2005 was taken as Chief Minister from Jammu region first time in the history of the state. People have a different perspective on the phenomena depending on the perspective that they represent. This in a way also represents a certain balance of power sharing arrangement between Jammu & Kashmir regions.

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