

PARTICIPATION OF WOMEN IN JAMMU AND KASHMIR POLITICS

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ABSTRACT

Political participation is broadly defined as a process through which an individual plays a role in the political life of a society, has an opportunity to take part in deciding about the common goals of that society and the best ways of achieving these goals. Political participation is not just casting votes, it includes a wide range of other activities. In order to understand women's involvement in the politics of Jammu and Kashmir, it is important to analyse it in the context of the history of Kashmir. Since the early decades of 20th century, women in the state of J & K got conscious about their plight due to emergence of political consciousness, expansion of modern education, spread of cultural awareness and deterioration of economic conditions. Women participated in socio-political movements in 1930's and the subsequent years there has been rising pattern of women leadership in the politics of Jammu and Kashmir. The objective of this paper was to analyse the role of women in the political arena of the state of Jammu and Kashmir since the Dogra rule till today. In order to acquire the objective, the literature pertaining to the study was collected and analyzed. The data was collected from secondary sources such as books, journals, research documents, internet resources and other published reports.

Key words: Freedom, struggle, women, participation, State, oppression.

INTRODUCTION

Political participation is broadly defined as a process through which an individual plays a role in the political life of a society and has an opportunity to take part in deciding about the common goals of that society and the best ways of achieving these goals. Political participation is not just casting votes; it includes a wide range of other activities. With this understanding of political participation, the evidence shows that in most of the countries participation of the women is not impressive as the number of the women participating in the active politics is

smaller compared to men. However, from the early decades of 20th century, women in the state of J & K got conscious about their plight due to emergence of political consciousness, expansion of modern education, spread of cultural awareness and deterioration of economic conditions. Women participated in socio-political movements in 1930's and the subsequent years there has been rising pattern of women leadership in the politics of Jammu and Kashmir. Kashmiri women, from different walks of life, have managed against all odds to express their agency during the plethora of political, social, and military transformations in the past nine decades. The perception and manifestation of women's political struggle during the nationalist awakening in the 1930s became a wider part of the politics of democratization and empowerment. During the growing sense of nationhood in the 1930s, and during the political awakening in the 1940s Kashmiri women forged broad coalitions and informal networks to challenge state-centered, feudal, and elitist notions of identity and security. Kashmiri women perceived and articulated cultural and political resistance, during the invasion by Tribal raiders from the North West Frontier Province of Pakistan in 1947, in terms of clear nation-building programs, which involved reviving civil society, resuscitating the shattered economy, and building social and political structures.

Women in Kashmir have played a prominent role in all the spheres of society whether political, social or cultural. But unfortunately their role and contribution has been ignored particularly in the political field or the active politics. From the earlier phase of freedom struggle till today they have got their place in the literature mostly as the sufferers and victims whether in the form of a girl, a mother or wife. Even if it is true but it is just one part of the story. They left the comfort of their homes and joined the movement for liberation of Kashmir from Dogra rule in large numbers. One important point is that they fought Dogras and the colonial state, alongside men, as their equal partners and continue the same in one way or the other against present state oppression. Not only this they were also engaged in the active politics as the representatives of the people. Subsequent to the accession of the former princely state of Jammu and Kashmir to the Indian dominion in 1947, while the Indian subcontinent was reeling from the mayhem of the country's partition, women's organizations attempted to contribute peace-building work at the local and regional levels.

There is no denying fact that there are no front ranking women political leaders in the contemporary Kashmir, but everyday a Kashmiri woman add a page of courage and sacrifice to the history of Kashmir. She writes it when she faces cordon and search or what in common parlance is known as crackdown in her small desolate hamlet, far from the media gaze. She writes it while leading the procession, a protest rally and a demonstration against one or the other form of atrocities. The role played by women in recent Kashmir history has been much more than played by men. It has not been just and honest of our historians to have glossed over the role played by women in our freedom struggle. The names of the women political volunteers of thirties and forties have not been

mentioned even in the footnotes of our history.¹ Women are gaining new rights and increasingly asserting themselves in politics and this momentous shift in traditional relationships opens up new possibilities for the pursuit of democracy and regional peace. Women in civic associations and in government can lead the way toward a peaceful pluralistic democracy and support international negotiations for a sustainable peace in the region.²

The Jammu and Kashmir State is composed of three main cultural units and geographical divisions i.e. Jammu, Kashmir and Ladakh. The state came into existence as a result of the conquest of the Punjab by the British in 1845 which led to the final extinction of Sikh sovereignty in the Punjab and by virtue of the treaties of Lahore and Amritsar the British who had by now become undisputed master of India. After the ascendance of Dogras to power, there ushered a period of oppression and desolation for the people of Kashmir. There was not a single person in Kashmir who did not suffer the brunt of Dogra rule. As such the people of Kashmir launched several movements against this oppression and in all these efforts the presence of women was conspicuous. Perhaps the first armed engagement occurred when the troops of Maharaja Gulab Singh invaded Gilgit which resulted in humiliating defeat for him. During all this women played an important role and provided a stiff resistance to the invaders. Similarly, during the struggle to take over the charge of Kashmir valley from the then governor, Sheikh Imam-u-din who had already declared his independence, dogra ruler again faced the defeat. In all this an important part was played by the women of Kashmir particularly under the leadership of wife of Sheikh Imam-u-din. She became popularly known as the Madar-i-Meherban. But with the help of British army people's resistance was crushed down as was the case with Gilgit. Subsequently, Women continued to play their exceptional role in the freedom struggle against the dogra rule which got intensified after 1931. However, during the early period these women belonged to the weaker, illiterate and uneducated sections of the society. These women of the lower orders were not led and organized by educated women but it was their movement that educated women joined in the later period.³ With the imposition of martial law in state there started a new phase of oppression in the state and freedom struggle gained momentum. Most of the political leaders were arrested including Sheikh Mohammad Abdullah⁴. During this period women precisionists, many of them with suckling babies in their laps, passed through the streets raising slogans against the tyrannical Dogra rule and demanding the release of their caged leaders and for the institution of a democracy in Kashmir. Meanwhile the government handed over the military

¹ Z.G.Muhammad, *Kashmir in War and Diplomacy*, Gulshan Books, 2007.p.56

² Nyla Ali Khan, *How women activists can help Jammu and Kashmir make progress in democracy and peace*, The Milli Gazette Online, Retrieved from <http://www.milligazatte.com/news> on 24/2/2017

³ Mohammed Yasin and Madhvi Yasin (ed.), *Mysteries and Glimpses of Kashmir*, Raj publications, Delhi, p. 197-198

⁴ Sheikh Abdullah was an Indian politician who played a central role in the politics of Jammu and Kashmir and was the founding member of National Conference and thrice served as the head of government in Kashmir.

administration to the command in 1931 which was resisted by the local people and many of them including men and women came out to protest against the oppressive policies of the government. The agitators were lathi charged and most of them received injuries particularly women. Some of the most popular among them died as a result of cruelties like Fazli, Sajida Bano and Jan Begum. One of the freedom fighter named Jan Ded popularized the concept of secularism and shunned the narrow communal loyalties for the success of freedom struggle.⁵ In the city, the processions of women and children had become a common sight and every minute, news of these processions were coming from different parts of the city.⁶ After the launch of 'Quit Kashmir movement' by Sheikh Abdullah, most of the leaders and he himself was arrested. Begum Akbar Jehan, wife of Sheikh Abdullah became active in the politics and led anti-government demonstrations. She not only fought against the Dogra oppression but also collected donations from the people for the victims of the Dogra persecution. On 19 July 1947, The Jammu and Kashmir Muslim Conference held the meeting of its general council and majority of the members supported the accession to Pakistan. At this time a young lady, Miss Nasira Sidiq appeared on the scene to lead the Muslim Conference. She carried a door to door campaign in support of states accession to Pakistan in the entire valley. She travelled all over the state and held public meetings in violation of Kashmir Defense Rules. Notwithstanding the government imposing all restrictions on her she succeeded in reinvigorating the Muslim Conference cadres.⁷

It was on the initiative of the National Conference local people's militia was established and everyone was allowed to join it. Accordingly apart from men several women also joined the group.⁸ The women group was known as Women's Self Defense Corps (WSDC). One of the prominent women among them was Zoni Gujjari who was later awarded title, "*Zoni Mujjahid*" in grateful acknowledgement of her services. With its multifaceted and radical activities, women's self Defence corps was forerunner of social change. Attired in traditional Kashmiri clothes and carrying a gun around her shoulders, zoon Gujjari symbolized the WSDC.⁹ Begum Akbar Jehan was also foremost in the women's wing of peace brigade, which fought the Pakistani invaders.¹⁰ Begum Abdullah was a very intelligent woman and devout Muslim.¹¹ In 1947 when the country was facing the communal wrath, she carried the torch of love and peace to far flung areas of the state. She was awarded the title of "Madar-

⁵ Madhvi Yasin, '*Role of Women in freedom struggle of Kashmir*', In Mohd Yasin and Qayum Yasin(ed.) *History of the freedom Struggle in Jammu & Kashmir*, light and life Publishers, New Delhi, . 1980 p. 203

⁶ Saraf Muhammed Yusuf, *Kashmiris Fight For Freedom* vol.1(1819-1946), Ferozons Ltd, Lahore, Pakistan, 1977 p.382-384

⁷ Z.G.Muhammad, *Kashmir in War and Diplomacy*, Gulshan Books, 2007.p.57

⁸ Sheikh Abdullah, "*Atish-e Chinar*" Ali Mohammad and Son's, 1985, ,p. 94

⁹ Khan Nyla Ali, *Islam, Women and Violence*, p. 116,

¹⁰ Explanation

¹¹ Saraf Muhammed Yusuf, *Kashmiri's Fight for Freedom*, p.495

e-Meherban' (kind mother) by the people of Kashmir.¹² Miss Mehmuda Ahmad Shah, a pioneering educationist and champion of women's empowerment, along with other leading women, was in the forefront of WSDC. During her student days in Lahore she got associated with the '*Punjab Students federation*', which was fighting against the British imperialism. On her return to the valley, she founded '*Free thinkers society*' which was joined by the various intellectuals of the state. Meanwhile she joined the freedom Movement under the leadership of sheikh Abdullah and did great service in bringing normalcy to the state, when sub-continent was infatuated in communal fury. Begum Zainab, one of the important women associated with the freedom struggle from 1930s, was a grass root level leader. She fought against the Dogra rule under the auspices of the NC. She took charge of the political dimensions of WSDC and shouldering a gun she was in the forefront, leading women's contingents.¹³ After the partition of sub-continent and accession of the state of Jammu and Kashmir with India there started a new problem which griped the state into its fold. In the post-Independence period three major developments took place vis-vis Kashmiri women. In the first instance there emerged a mass consciousness among women about their rights within as well as outside their homes. This had a qualitative impact on the family life especially in relation to the status and role of women. Secondly, women achieved a fair degree of social and cultural mobility which also helped in the fast breakdown of institutional structure of their traditional family. In this situation women felt it relatively easy to deviate from the traditional practices and enlarge their role. Kashmiri women at large also developed the motivation and interest in coming out of their homes for various purposes like education and employment.

In the first state election held in 1952, there was only one woman candidate who contested but lost. Similarly in the upcoming elections women in general and as the contesting candidates did not make any breakthrough. However, apart from the mainstream politics women continued to play an important role in political sphere. It was only in 1972 assembly elections women, for the first time, entered the Jammu and Kashmir assembly. Ten women filed their nominations, six of them contested and only four won. They gave the state assembly its highest percentage (5.33%) of women. Unfortunately 44 years on, that record remains unbroken. Since 1972, the number of women in the assembly has never been more than 3%, even though the number of women contesting has been increasing. From 1972 to 1996, women went missing from state politics. Poor participation of women is often linked with the religious and conventional bindings. The available data of past elections reveals that the number of woman contestants has always been very low as compared to the male contestants. For that matter, the electoral politics, per se, see very insignificant participation of women in the state. The visibility of women in electoral politics is limited to their role as voters. Following the trend in other parts of India, women in Jammu

¹² Mohammed Yasin and Madhvi Yasin(ed.) *Mysteries and Glimpses of Kashmir*, p. 206

¹³ *Ibid*,p.117

and Kashmir have not been successful in turning into a political constituency. Gender does not seem to be a factor in determining their voting behavior, nor do they form a constituent of population, important enough to be engaged and pleased. Gender does not occupy the space as significant as religion, caste or community in electoral politics. Hence, even election manifestoes and campaigns during elections by different political parties severally lack gender component.

There has been significant gap between men and women in all dimensions of formal politics like number of contestants, number of women winners and even number of voters and interestingly, with so much modernization and emancipation in society taking place, not much change is taking place at this front. Infact, where the number of female candidates in assembly elections is improving partially, the percentage of female winners to total female candidates has fallen drastically. The majority of the women in the state do not identify themselves with any political party. There is no denying the fact that the woman's wing has been formed in every political party, but with little role in the decision making of the party itself, it assumes a subordinate status in it.

The late eighties and early nineties formed a turning point in the contemporary political history of Jammu and Kashmir. The streets and homes of Kashmir were resonating with a shrill, echoing popular call for freedom from Indian Domination. Life in Kashmir was changing from daily meanderings to a sensitive sense of history and ages of injustices meted out to Kashmiris. This Manifested itself into massive popular protests as well as support for the armed struggle against Indian rule. In this situation, the ethno-nationalist political Movements everywhere impinge on gender roles, and crucially shape the experiences and aspirations of women. Separatist or secessionist Movements, anti-state Movements generally provide greater ideological and political spaces for women to articulate their political agency, and even participate as combatants than do institutionalized state or prostate nationalism.¹⁴ If we analyse the role of women in politics during those years we can come to conclusion that to some extent the above theory holds true in a situation like Kashmir. Women participation in mainstream politics has been very low as compared to their involvement in the separatist politics even if few of them. As the Kashmiri masses were riding high on the wave for freedom, women did not remain resistant to the changed political landscape. They were pushed by circumstance or sentiment of nationalism to engage either as victim-activists, protesters or as separatist politicians. Even the ranks of major guerilla outfits such as Hizb-ul-Mujahideen and Jammu and Kashmir liberation front which turned to non-violent resistance in the early 1990s primarily comprised men. Nevertheless, they also had women's wings "*Binatul Islam*" and "*Muslim Khawateen Markaz*" respectively. Yet, the engagement of these outfits remained primarily political and non-military. All party

¹⁴ Alison Merinda, '*Women as Agents of Political Violence: Gendering Security*', Security Dialogue, 35, 2004, p.447-463,

Hurriyat conference, the umbrella organization spearheading the movement for independence, also has women's organizations such as the Muslim Khawateen Markaz (MKM) and Dukhtaran-e-Millat (DeM) as its constituent members. Most of them has served multiple years in jail for their overt or covert support for the independence movement and are constantly harassed by the Indian security apparatus because of their political involvement. They come from middle class backgrounds and comforts for risk and troubles. A hard choice to make considering separatist politics can be problematic at the familial level, given the risk of state repression that it entails. Women's role has been coming out collectively on the streets and roads to demonstrate against state repression and forces atrocities, killings, arrests, crackdowns, rapes and molestations since 1989 and they have also acted as bread earners for their families while going against cultural taboos, and nurturing life in the midst of death and disruption yet many individuals have not come on the forefront.¹⁵ Anjum Zamruda Habib one of the grass roots level workers dared to come in politics and condemned Indian brutalities. She founded Women Association in Anantnag Kashmir in 1988 in response to a dowry death. After the armed rebellion in the state, she established "*Muslim Khawateen Markaz*" in 1990 in collaboration with other likeminded women. It is affiliated with the All Party Hurriyat Conference (an umbrella movement advocating the independence from Indian dominance in Kashmir) and was the first organization established by women to protect and promote the politico-social interests of the middle class Kashmiri women. She was arrested by Indian authorities for the continuation of her separatist political participation. After spending five years of vigorous Jail term owing to her torturous experiences as a Kashmiri political prisoner in an Indian jail, she founded the Association for Kashmiri Prisoners (AFKP) after her release.¹⁶ AFKP provides psycho-social support to the families of Kashmiri prisoners held in Indian jails, as well as tracking and documenting their cases.

Another important personality in the cue is Parveena Ahanger also known as the "*Iron Lady of Kashmir*", Founder and Chairperson of Association of Parents of Disappeared Persons (APDP). In spite of being illiterate and instead of embracing the passive space of victimhood, she chose to engage in politics actively. She started this organization in 1995 to provide support and mobilize family members of missing persons due to enforced disappearances and to put pressure on the Indian government to investigate the estimated 8-10,000 cases of involuntary and enforced disappearances in Kashmir. She continues to seek justice for the wrong meted out to her ilk, through protest and advocacy. For her unflinching courage, pacifism and human rights activism, she was nominated for Nobel Peace Prize in 2005. She was also nominated by the prestigious Indian media Channel CNN IBN for a coveted award which she rejected on account of the deceit approach adopted by Indian media over the

¹⁵ Aljazeera Anjum, Aaliya, "*The militant in her: Women and Resistance*", <http://english.aljazeera.net/indepth/spotlight/kashmirtheforgottenconflict/2011/07/2011731995821770.html>

¹⁶ Ibid

sufferings and tragedies of Kashmiris. Another important personality, Asiya Andrabi, is one of the prominent separatist politicians of Jammu and Kashmir. She founded the organization “*Dukhtaran-e-Millat*” (DeM), often dubbed as the fundamentalist organization by its critics, which was originally established to fight against the social issues. Like other right wing, fundamentalist organisations, members of DeM are actively involved in moral policing activities. In their role as moral policewomen, women in DeM have often targeted locations they see as ‘centres of immoral activities’. However, after the emergence of armed conflict in the state, Asiya Andrabi came in the forefront in support of it along with other members of the organization. DeM has a political mandate professing separation from India while, in addition, carrying out social and Human Rights activism. The *Dukhtaran-e-Millat* (DeM) was formed in 1981. In 1987, the ‘women activists’ of the organization came on the streets, fought for reservation of seats for women in buses, took action against families that demanded dowry.¹⁷

Even though, Kashmir has seen the rise of some women leaders but most of them belong to one or the other political family. One of them is the daughter of Abdul Gani lone, Shabnam Lone. A.G Lone is the separatist leader of Kashmir but, Shabnam Lone has joined the mainstream politics to contest the elections. Lawyer by profession before joining politics, Shabnam used to represent her father and Yasin Malik in court when no other lawyer was ready to do so and hence, she was in a way associated with separatist politics but, defying her background, she decided to contest elections in 2008. Shabnam Lone is known for her activities in the area of human rights. She fights cases on behalf of other separatists also and holds an image more of a rebel rather than conformist. Another name in politics worth mentioning is of Sakina Itoo who joined politics after her father’s assassination. Her father was a senior leader of National Conference and she too joined same party. She had to leave her career in medical profession to join politics. She became a minister after her 1996 assembly elections win. She again acquired ministry after winning 2008 elections. Though Sakina Itoo had to leave her professional career in order to join politics after her father died, which seems more as a compulsion rather than a choice but she has made her presence felt strongly in the system during her tenures as minister in the state. Sakina Itoo presents another example of resilience and rising to the occasion in Kashmir.

One of the most prominent names in the politics of J&K is that of Mehbooba Mufti. Her father, Mufti Mohammed Syed, has held different positions in the Congress ministries including Home Minister of India. She has been one of the founders of People’s Democratic Party and has largely been responsible for PDP’s success in forming govt. after 2002 elections. Though having a political family background, she is quite a popular figure and leader in her own right. The launch of PDP party in 1999 was followed by the display of pro-people approach in politics of

¹⁷Manisha Sobhrajani, “Jammu and Kashmir *Women’s Role in the post-1989 Insurgency*,” Faultlines: Volume 19, April 2008.

Kashmir and Mehbooba Mufti was instrumental in bringing such an approach to the region. The campaign carried by the party was called “*healing touch*” respectively and presented a much sought after breather to the people of Kashmir who were tired of the continuous violence in the valley. In such a scenario, Mehbooba Mufti has got the distinction of identifying the concerns of people and bringing to light various human rights violations taking place in the valley. Infact, she campaigned her healing touch policy so aggressively that her father, Mufti Mohammed Syed could maneuver clear his name of all the objections over his role as Home Minister of India when the militancy was in its early phase in the State. She has achieved the distinction of being the first Chief Minister of Jammu and Kashmir.

CONCLUSION

Relegating women’s engagement in conflict situations to the passive space of victimhood is an expected outcome of the unequal division of power in gender relations. Kashmiri society being patriarchal and largely conservative is not comfortable with a participation of women in public sphere. Especially where there is a high level of security risk involved as may be the case with the street protests or separatist politics. However, this narrative obfuscates their role as active participants, who are of equal, if not greater, significance and which has increasingly become an accentuating aspect of their participation during the recent years of the conflict. The active participation of women in the politics of Jammu and Kashmir involves the individual struggle by many on varying planes. It demands a counter balance between the private spheres of their home with the public sphere of political action. It demands departing from the gender stereotypes and creating a meaningful political space for themselves.

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