

HOW J&K's ACCESSION GOT DELAYED

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It is generally believed that the delay in the accession of State to the Indian Union was caused by the inability of Maharaja Hari Singh to take a timely decision in the matter. The belief, however, would not appear to have been based on the facts of history. It has, evidently, adhered because of the political support that it received from those in power then while they looked for a scapegoat for their own bungling of the Kashmir issue. Maharaja Hari Singh had, on the other hand, taken his exile gracefully and his legendary pride and dignity prevented him from indulging in mudslinging even for refuting false charges levelled against him. Now with the publication of *Sardar Patel's Correspondence*, edited by Durga Das evidence has come to light, which clearly shows that there were others who were more responsible for that fatal delay than the Maharaja.

The Charge of indecisiveness was first levelled against the Maharaja by Lord Louise Mountbatten after he met him in June 1947 to discuss the issue. Writing about the visit in his book *Mission with Mountbatten*, Allen Campbell noted that when Mountbatten got there, "he found the Maharaja very illusive even as he urged him and his Prime Minister not to make any declaration of Independence but to find out in one way or the other the will of the people of Kashmir as soon as possible and to announce their intention by 14 August ...He also told them that the newly created States Department [under Sardar Patel] was prepared to give an assurance that if Kashmir went to Pakistan, this would not be regarded as an unfriendly act by the Government of India". This advice read in conjunction with Mountbatten's stand that the discretion of the Ruler in respect of the accession "should be qualified by the geographical contiguity of the State to the successor Dominion, the communal composition of the State and a plebiscite if necessary to ascertain the will of the people", quite obviously closed all options for the Maharaja other than that of joining Pakistan. The Maharaja is accused of pretending to suffer a bout of colic to avoid conveying his decision in the matter to Mountbatten.

This charge was picked up by all the writers who have since written on the subject without analysing the implications of Mountbatten's advice, more as a matter of repulsion or indifference towards the dying institution of Rajas and Maharajas than service to the cause of history. With Mountbatten's advice being so brazenly loaded in favour of an accession to Pakistan and his suggestions totally impractical of implementation, one wonders what could there have been for the Maharaja to discuss with him. How was he to, in practical terms, find out the will of the people? Was ascertaining the will of the people "in one way or the other" as simple as Mountbatten had made it out to be? Could Mountbatten have extracted an assurance from Pakistan to the effect that it would accept Kashmir going to the Indian Union on the basis of the Maharaja's assessment? Besides, what if the Maharaja had found that the majority was in favour of the State remaining independent? There is plenty of evidence to show that there existed, at that time, a strong pro-independence lobby in the State which included leaders from both the Muslim Conference as well as the National Conference. Chaudhry Hameed Ullah, the acting president of the Muslim Conference had even issued a statement at a Press Conference on 28 May, 1947 in which he urged the Maharaja to neither accede to

the Indian Union nor to Pakistan but to opt for independence as a solution to the complex situation created by Muslim majority state ruled by a Hindu Maharaja. Some of the Rajas and Mirs of Gilgit were also known to have been in favour of independence.

Interestingly, Sheikh Abdullah too seemed to have been in favour of independence though of a different type. He was willing to join any Dominion which was prepared to, firstly, recognise him as the sole leader of the Kashmiri Muslims, and secondly, allow to the State maximum autonomy, bordering on independence, and yet accept full responsibility for its security from external aggression. This is evident from the fact that he put his weight behind an accession to the Indian Union only because it accepted his conditions while Pakistan had refused to do so.

With such a strong lobby favouring independence, it is possible that the Maharaja too toyed with the idea of independence for some time. In fact, at the time of Mountbatten's visit, independence seemed to be the only choice available to the Maharaja. Pakistan was a theocratic state and he could not have thrown his Hindu population to the wolves by acceding to it. On the other hand while tremendous pressure was being exerted on him for deciding in favour of Pakistan, the Indian leaders, whatever their compulsions, had thus far been very cold towards him. Far from making efforts to seek his hand they had had it conveyed to him that they would not take it amiss were he to join Pakistan. He also, probably had personal fears of ill-treatment at the hands of Jawaharlal Nehru and Sheikh Abdullah - the former because of his hurt ego over the Kohala incident in 1946, and the latter in fulfilment of his life long ambition of setting up something like an independent Sheikhdom in Kashmir in which the Maharaja would have no place. Today we know how true his fears were.

Be that as it may, even with his heart leaping towards the Indian Union, wherein both his Muslim and Hindu subjects would be safe and free, Maharaja Hari Singh could make no move towards an accession to the Indian Union, without any encouraging signs emanating there from. Consequently the Maharaja remained undecided and wavering, (like any body in his place would have), till about the end of June 1947 when he spoke about his dilemma to one Rai Bahadur Gopal Das, a Congressman close to Sardar Patel, who happened to visit him at that time. On being apprised of the true situation by Gopal Das, Sardar Patel wrote a letter to the Maharaja on 3rd July, assuring him that the Congress as a party harboured no ill-will towards him and if he were to join the Indian Union he would be treated the same way as other Princes joining before him. This decided the issue as far as the Maharaja was concerned and the State began to drift towards the Indian Union thereafter following the dictates of Sardar Patel. Consequently, Prime Minister Ram Chandra Kak was removed and stop-gap arrangement made till the arrival of the new incumbent, Justice Mehar Chand Mahajan duly approved by Sardar Patel. General Amnesty was announced and Sheikh Abdullah was released from Jail.

The only hitch that now remained in effecting the accession of the State to the Indian Union was to bring Sheikh Abdullah around to agree to it, so as to meet India's self imposed condition of accession only in accordance with the wishes of the people. Overcoming this hitch was, however, to take time and precious one at that. The Sheikh who had tendered a written apology to the Maharaja for all his acts of omission and commission of the recent past for securing his release from jail changed suddenly when he realised the premium that the Indian Government had laid on his consent in the matter of accession. As a hard bargainer he would not give his consent without extracting the

maximum price for it. The prime condition that he set for giving his consent was that sovereignty be first transferred from the Maharaja to the people i.e. himself. This demand proved to be the main stumbling block in the negotiations over the accession issue.

In its final analysis, therefore, the delay in the accession of the State would appear to have been caused by the following set of circumstances: -

- (a) The failure of the Indian leaders to establish contact with the Maharaja on the accession issue before 3 July 1947.
- (b) The insistence by Indian leaders on the wishes of the people being considered for deciding the issue.
- (c) Sheikh Abdullah's insistence on sovereignty being transferred to the people before accession.
- (d) The State remaining without a permanent Prime Minister during the crucial period of nearly two months between the dismissal of RC Kak and take over by Mehar Chand Mahajan.
- (e) Maharaja's pre occupation with more pressing situations created by Pakistan's economic blockade of the State, the border war and the refugee problem.