

Foreword

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Sometimes in the life of a collectivity—be it a community, a culture, a people or a country—a family comes to play a role that can only be called larger-than-life. Whenever the collectivity is in crisis, the family somehow seems to move close to the storm centre. In happier times the family reflects the mood of the people in almost holographic details. Sometimes it is not the entire family but someone in it who comes to represent the aspirations, hopes, fears and anxieties of the people. Charisma looks less dispersed and more concentrated in a person, whose self gets telescoped into the community's self-definition. Even when the person is no longer physically there, many wonder what he or she might have said or done that would have made a difference.

In Kashmir, for good or for worse, the crucial presence has been that of the Abdullah family and its paterfamilias, Sheikh Mohammed Abdullah. Many summers ago at Islamabad, I had a long conversation with the former president of Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Front, Amanullah Khan. At that time, Khan had become for some reason a critic of Abdullah and had a longish list of grievances against him. I was listening to him patiently when suddenly his mood changed. Driven by nostalgia and a deep, almost palpable sense of loss, Khan began to talk about his childhood and youth, his days at a Srinagar, and his early admiration for Sheikh Abdullah. He began to describe how he would run with other teenagers when Abdullah made one of his public appearances—so that they could kiss the sleeves of Abdullah's sherwani. Then Khan

suddenly stopped and asked me in an accusatory tone, but with a clear touch of sadness, 'If you could not trust even him, how can you trust any other Kashmiri?' I could have asked him if he, a Kashmiri, could not fully trust Abdullah, as was obvious from our talk, how did he expect others to trust him. But I remained silent; my job was to listen, not to debate.

I met Sheikh Abdullah only once in my life, in the 1960s, within a few years after my arrival at Delhi. A friend of mine, whom I knew from Ahmedabad, had got married to the grand-daughter of a famous Gujarati industrialist, known for his philanthropy and closeness to the ruling party since Gandhi's non-cooperation movement. Though the couple, both Jains, had their marriage at Ahmedabad, they decided to throw a reception at Delhi. When, following instructions, we arrived at the right address on the appointed day, the venue turned out to be one of the sprawling, official bungalows of Lutyen's Delhi, in which Sheikh Abdullah and his wife Akbar Jahan stayed. We were surprised, for we had the impression that Abdullah was under some kind of a house arrest. Indeed, when the guests began to arrive, the Abdullahs emerged from the bungalow, looking very regal, to act as our gracious hosts and the foci of all the guests, including a number of politicians of the ruling party. Everyone wanted to meet him and talk to him; he was obviously the main attraction in someone else's marriage reception. India at the time had a different culture of politics with a different set of conventions on how to deal with radical political differences, even when these differences included what the country's political elite have always considered the most dangerous version of dissent, secession.

This book by Nyla Khan, who herself belongs to the Abdullah family, introduces us to an Abdullah whom the Kashmiris might not have forgotten but this generation of Indians have. This distance is a direct product of the artificially promoted ultra-nationalism that has entered the public sphere in India as part of electoral politics. As a full-fledged psephocracy, India now lives from one election to another. everything else is secondary. And there is almost no respite from high-pitched electoral politics. When combined with the rise of aggressive populism this triggers a search for leaders who can be permanently in campaign mode, can meet the demands of mass media, and have the ability to give the public the impression of being tough, no-nonsense leaders who are also decisive, clear-headed, hypermasculine, self-consistent and capable of reconciling the demands of their long-term visions and the realities of short-term *realpolitik*. At the same time, they have to be media-savvy and have impressive oratorical skills capable of sweeping the listeners off their feet.

Strangely, most of the first-generation of free India's political leaders did not have most of these qualities, however desirable. they might have subsequently looked. What those leaders had were experiences of participation in India's freedom struggle and often spending long years in jail. That perhaps gave them more than enough time to think through their political visions and become aware of the tremendous odds they faced in successfully matching their political and ethical values with the demands of competitive politics and being in touch with the people edirectly, rather than through the media. They could not but be often inconsistent, hesitant, insecure, and full of self doubts when making political choices that sought to make dramatic, radical interventions in country's highly diverse cultures and in the algorithms of its myriad ways of life. Fortunately, I now feel, self-consistency, decisiveness and ideological

clarity were not their strong points. Indian democracy perhaps survives because of these shortcomings.

That is also why, if serious political scientists are asked to identify the statesmen and stateswomen from amongst our politicians during the last 70 years, many more will be chosen from amongst the first generation than from the subsequent ones. The absence of certitudes in matters of culture and civilization, the nagging suspicion of what an European-style nation-state can do in a society that has over the century learnt to bypass the state, the ability to delink party affiliations and ideological differences from social relations, and the good sense to keep options open for the future generations—many of the qualities that we have learnt to treat with contempt in recent times—have supplied the basic framework of the culture of democracy in India and the resilience it has shown whenever in crisis.

I say so because, driven perhaps by the fear of producing one of those routine South Asian hagiographies of political leaders, Nyla Khan in her introduction to this book has probably been less than fair to a person who still remains, despite all the ambivalence towards him, the mythic paterfamilias of not only of the Abdullah family but of all Kashmiris. Sheikh Mohammed Abdullah's self-contradictions, inner ambiguities, vacillations and downright compromises seem to me, in retrospect, to be the normal lot of practising politicians who have a humane vision but find it difficult to push the vision to its logical conclusion through the low-brow politics of survival. Abdullah *was* a statesman and so was his friend, fellow Kashmiri and intimate enemy,

Jawaharlal Nehru. (I have never been an admirer of Nehru's Fabian socialism of the 1920s, his Edwardian English that now shows clear signs of age, his naïve social-evolutionist worldview and servile allegiance to scientific rationality, not to speak of his unbridled statism. But he did have some checks against each of these markers of easy progressivism within himself.) Given the new mixes of populism and fanaticism we see all around us, I have begun to look with great fear and suspicion at politicians who are aggressively self-consistent, unhesitatingly clear-headed, and uncompromisingly statist. I do hope future generations of South Asians will look at Sheikh Mohammed Abdullah as one of those who seriously tried to turn the region into a flawed but liveable, human-scale enterprise.

I may have arrived at this position through more tortuous, unexplored, controversial pathway, but I am sure I do not differ that much from Nyla's attempt to do justice to a person who could neither disown his social democratic commitments nor forget that he was a Kashmiri.



<http://www.springer.com/978-3-319-50102-4>

Sheikh Mohammad Abdullah's Reflections on Kashmir
Khan, N.A.

2018, XXXVI, 215 p., Hardcover

ISBN: 978-3-319-50102-4