

# Winds of Change: Political Awakening and Transformation in Kashmir (1925–1947)

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## ABSTRACT

The period from 1925 to 1947 marked a crucial phase in the modern political evolution of Jammu and Kashmir. From the ascension of Maharaja Hari Singh to the formation of organized political parties, the era witnessed a profound transformation in the region's socio-political fabric. The emergence of movements like the Reading Room Party, the Muslim Conference, and eventually the National Conference reflected growing political awareness and demands for reform. This study examines the major political developments of this period, situating them within the broader context of colonial governance, communal dynamics, and democratic aspirations.

**Keywords:** Kashmir; Dogra Rule; National Conference; Glancy Commission; Political Awakening; Secularism; Quit Kashmir Movement

## Review of Literature

Several scholars have addressed the political history of Kashmir during the early 20th century. Studies focusing on legal and constitutional developments, nationalist movements, communal dynamics, and socio-political reforms provide valuable insights into this period [1–4]. Despite these contributions, a holistic narrative that connects grassroots political awakening with institutional transformation remains limited. This research attempts to bridge that gap.

## Methodology

This study adopts a historical-analytical approach, utilizing both primary and secondary sources. Archival records, memoirs, political manifestos, official reports, and scholarly publications form the core of the source base. By critically engaging with these materials, the research reconstructs the evolution of political consciousness in Kashmir between 1925 and 1947.

## Introduction

During the early 20th century, the princely state of Jammu and Kashmir experienced a slow but decisive political awakening. Under Dogra rule, especially during the tenure of Maharaja Hari Singh, the socio-economic and political conditions of the majority population, particularly Muslims, remained dismal. However, this era also gave rise to a new class of educated youth who questioned autocracy, economic exploitation, and political exclusion. Their efforts gradually crystallized into organized political resistance.

## Early Expressions: The Reading Room Party

The formation of the Reading Room Party in 1928 marked one of the first expressions of organized political thought in Kashmir. Composed of a small group of educated youth, this party facilitated intellectual discussions on governance, civil rights, and colonialism.

Though limited in reach, its ideological significance lay in fostering debate and promoting political awareness in an otherwise repressive environment [5].

## 1931 Uprising: A Watershed Moment

The events of 13 July 1931 became a turning point in Kashmir's political journey. The killing of 22 demonstrators during a protest against the arrest of a political orator galvanized public opinion. For the first time in centuries, the people of Kashmir collectively voiced their discontent against authoritarian rule, setting the stage for sustained political mobilization [6].

## The Glancy Commission and the Emergence of Formal Politics

In response to the 1931 uprising, the Glancy Commission was formed to investigate the grievances of the population. Although initially resisted by the monarchy, its recommendations eventually led to the legalization of political associations. This culminated in the formation of the All Jammu and Kashmir Muslim Conference in 1932, which represented the first structured political platform for the region's majority population [7].

## Muslim Conference: A Reformist Platform

Though named after a religious identity, the Muslim Conference espoused a largely secular and reformist agenda. It sought equitable representation, educational reforms, and economic justice for all Kashmiris. Leaders welcomed participation from various communities, fostering inclusive politics that transcended sectarian lines [8].

## Transformation to National Conference

In 1939, the Muslim Conference was reorganized into the National Conference to reflect its broader, secular outlook. This rebranding was driven by a vision to represent all communities of Jammu and Kashmir and to align with the anti-colonial

struggles unfolding across India. The National Conference adopted a progressive stance on democratic reforms, labor rights, and land redistribution [9].

### The 'New Kashmir Manifesto'

The publication of the New Kashmir Manifesto in 1944 marked a defining ideological milestone. It proposed a visionary blueprint for a democratic, egalitarian welfare state. Its emphasis on universal adult franchise, gender equality, economic planning, and land-to-the-tiller policies showcased the radical aspirations of the time [10].

### Maharaja's Limited Reforms and Resistance

Faced with mounting political pressure, Maharaja Hari Singh introduced limited administrative reforms, including the establishment of the Praja Sabha (Legislative Assembly) and the abolition of forced labor. However, these measures were largely symbolic and failed to transfer real political power to the people. The legislative body remained advisory, with substantial authority still concentrated in the monarchy [11].

### Quit Kashmir Movement: A Bold Challenge

The Quit Kashmir Movement of 1946 emerged as the most direct and organized challenge to Dogra authority. Inspired by broader nationalist movements in British India, the campaign mobilized masses across the state, demanding an end to autocratic rule and calling for self-governance. Although it drew mixed reactions from Indian political leaders, the movement marked the culmination of two decades of persistent struggle [12].

### Conclusion

Between 1925 and 1947, Kashmir underwent a profound political transformation. The emergence of organized political thought, inclusive movements, and radical manifestos reshaped the region's trajectory. While the legacy of these movements is still contested, their foundational vision—centered on justice, equality, and self-rule—continues to inform Kashmiri political discourse today.

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