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Caught in the Middle

Students at the University of Kashmir enjoy a campus with one of the most beautiful locations in the world. At Hazratbal on the outskirts of Srinagar, undergraduates strolling between classes gaze out on the tranquil blue-grey waters of Dal lake shimmering in the mountain sun. On the far shore, the hills sweep up majestically towards the sky. A short distance away, the creamy white marble of the Hazratbal shrine beckons. It is the home of Kashmir's most treasured religious relic, said to be a hair of the Prophet Mohammad. Every now and again, it is put on display to the faithful. At other times, it is carefully guarded. When the relic was found to be missing in the early 1960s, the entire Valley was in ferment until it was returned.

Hazratbal was once the power base of the Abdullah dynasty. The foremost Kashmiri leader of modern times, Sheikh Abdullah, the 'Lion of Kashmir', is buried nearby on the banks of the lake. He was laid to rest in 1982 as a Kashmiri nationalist hero. Hundreds of thousands of Kashmiris took part in the funeral procession. But within a few years, his grave had been defaced by separatists. As a result, Indian security forces now guard Sheikh Abdullah's burial site from Kashmiris who do not share his tolerance of Indian rule. In recent years, Hazratbal has also been a stronghold of more radical Kashmiri organisations. On my first visit to the Valley, I was taken to meet a spokesman for the then-underground Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Front, a pro-independence group that had substantial popular support in Srinagar. The secret venue turned out to be a small, dingy outhouse in the shadows of the Hazratbal shrine. The interview was unremarkable. But emerging into the daylight, I was taken aback to see what I took to be a uniformed Indian soldier casually strolling by. I was amazed at the boldness of the JKLF leader, meeting a conspicuously foreign journalist, TV crew in tow, under the noses of the enemy. Wasn't that, I enquired, a little rash? 'That's not an Indian soldier,' I was told. 'He's from the Jammu and Kashmir police.'

On closer inspection, the khaki uniform bore the initials of the local police force, and the officer sported the severely cropped beard commonplace among Kashmiris enrolled in the security forces. It was a useful early lesson in the complicated politics of Kashmir. A prominent figure in a proscribed separatist organisation which at that time advocated armed struggle against India felt entirely unthreatened by the presence of the locally recruited Indian police.

Most of the students I met on visits to the university would readily have swapped the breathtaking views from their hostels and lecture halls for a more humdrum setting that would allow routine academic activity. Venturing on to the campus during the most difficult years of the insurgency, young men and women would crowd around to voice complaints about the way in which security clampdowns, separatist-called strikes, military search operations in residence halls and informal curfews had cramped their student life. The university maintained an air of academic vitality in spite of the civil conflict all around. But there was also a sense of lives blighted and career options curtailed. One woman student complained that it was impossible to complete courses because the campus was so often closed for one reason or another. A young man described how every day after his lectures he returned to his parents' home, went to his room, and played music until bedtime. There was a common refrain among students on campus. They couldn't venture out after dark, there was no chance to meet up with friends, and they felt that the social life that is so important a part of any student environment had completely eluded them.

Over a cup of kahwa, the spiced Kashmiri saffron tea, one of the leading academics at the university chatted about the difficulties of keeping the all-pervading political tension at bay. He was a Kashmiri, and an expert on Kashmir's history. He did not wish to be interviewed, or to have his name used. That would only complicate an already difficult balancing act. But when I asked how long it was since Kashmiris ruled the Kashmir Valley, his answer was immediate and delivered with a tone of despair more eloquent than a commentary. 1586. For well over 400 years, the Kashmir Valley has been controlled in turn by Mughals, Afghans, Sikhs, Dogras and, since 1947, by Delhi. Underlying the sense of grievance of many Kashmiris is a feeling that they have never in modern times been allowed control of their own destiny. In the post-independence era, the Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir has—for most of the time—had a Kashmiri Muslim as its chief minister. But the manner in which the national government in Delhi has undermined or ordered the dismissal of state



governments and connived in election rigging deprived Kashmiris of any sense of agency in their own administration.

Not all the outsiders who have ruled Kashmir have despoiled it. The Mughal era was in some ways a golden age for the Valley. It was a Mughal emperor who famously declared the Valley to be paradise. They valued Kashmir, visited the Valley and lavished attention on it. Successor empires were not always as well disposed. And the Kashmiri perception of 1586 as the beginning of their enslavement is in part a facet of a universal phenomenon, particularly evident in Kashmir—looking at the past through the prism of the present. The Mughal conquest meant bringing Kashmir into an empire ruled from Agra or Delhi, which in the recent anti-India climate is not likely to be looked on kindly.

The composite and accommodating culture of Kashmir, often known as *kashmiriyat*, pre-dates the Valley's role as an outpost of a succession of alien empires. At its core has been a gentle, mystical and humanist form of Islam influenced by Sufism. The term describes a Kashmiri identity which embraced both the Valley's Muslim majority and its high-caste Hindu minority, the pandits. The concept is often overstated, as if to evoke a political paradise before a biblical fall and the embroiling of the Valley in the rival nationalisms of India and Pakistan. The religious and class divisions between Kashmiri-speaking Hindus and Muslims were always clear-cut. The Kashmiri nationalist current that has proclaimed *kashmiriyat* as its standard has often turned to Islam rather than a more inclusive regionalism as its defining identity. And it seems the term *kashmiriyat* was never used before 1947—it was in part invented as a political rallying cry.¹ Yet its strength has come from a perception that Kashmir has been inclusive in its culture, and that both the Muslim majority and the vastly smaller and more privileged Hindu minority contributed to the language and the culture, respected and honoured the other community's religious festivals and practices, and so shared a Kashmiri identity which created a bond stronger than the differences of faith and belief.

These aspects of *kashmiriyat* have been pummelled and battered in the separatist insurgency that has raged since 1989. Many of the Kashmiri militant groups have promoted a more puritanical and doctrinaire form of Islam, at times explicitly renouncing the notion of *kashmiriyat*.² The shrine of Kashmir's most revered Sufi saint, Sheikh Nooruddin, was burnt down in 1995 as the Indian army tried to evict a large band of militants, many of them non-Kashmiris, who had taken over the village of Char-e-Sharif. Both sides blamed the other for the destruction. And there have

been periodical attempts, generally resisted by young Kashmiri women, to enforce the burqa or full veil.

The pandits never formed more than a small proportion, perhaps about 5 per cent, of Kashmir's population, but they were conspicuous in the professions and in administration. Until, that is, they moved out of the Valley. In 1990, by far the greater part of the Kashmir Valley's Hindu population left. Some went to refugee camps in Jammu and Delhi, while those with professional qualifications embarked on a new life and career elsewhere in India or beyond. Whether this was because the increasingly violent separatist insurgency had taken a communal form, or because the Indian governor of the state, Jagmohan, had encouraged an exodus of Hindus simply to give that impression, is still bitterly debated. A more recent series of massacres of Kashmiri Hindu villagers has almost cleansed the Valley of rural pandits. By the early years of the new millennium, there were at most a few thousand Kashmiri-speaking Hindus still living in the Valley where once their number would have been about 170,000.³ Many of the Hindu temples in and around Srinagar have remained open, and the arduous mountain pilgrimage of the Amarnath yatra has continued to attract tens of thousands of Hindu devotees in spite of threats, and occasional attacks, by militant groups. But those pandits who remained in the Valley sometimes complained that the weddings and other celebrations that reinforce a sense of community no longer took place. They are isolated, somewhat fearful, and waiting for the day they hope for, but don't expect to see—when their fellow pandits return in strength to their Valley.

There is something quite distinct about the Kashmiri style of Islam. The traditional, tiered-style mosque architecture has more in common with Central Asia than with the cupolas of the grand mosques across the plains of north India and Pakistan. The service with its lilting, intoned prayers and responses, has a gentle, haunting air and aesthetic appeal which I've never found anywhere else. Both are evident at Srinagar's main mosque, the ancient Jama Masjid, dating in part to the fourteenth century, an awe-inspiring, cavernous building around a large courtyard, its roof held aloft by hundreds of tree-trunk pillars.

At Friday prayers there, another distinctly Kashmiri institution can be witnessed. Presiding at worship is the mirwaiz, Srinagar's hereditary chief priest. The incumbent, Umar Farooq, is a young man who has matured in his twin roles as one of the most prominent religious leaders in the Valley, and the best-known figure in the All Parties Hurriyat Conference, an umbrella group of organisations demanding self-determination. The



Hurriyat, though hobbled by divisions, walkouts and splits, and weakened by a wary reluctance to risk the outright hostility of the armed militants, has developed into the moderate, political wing of the separatist movement. Umar Farooq was still a teenager when he became the mirwaiz. His father was gunned down at his home in Srinagar in 1990—there are conflicting accounts about who was responsible. The mirwaiz dynasty has tended to the pro-Pakistan side of Kashmir's political spectrum. Nevertheless, the consensus in Srinagar is that pro-Pakistan militants were involved in the killing.

Language is another mainspring of local identity. Kashmiri is widely spoken, has a substantial canon of poetry, story and song, but remains little used in written form. It increasingly borrows a Persian-derived script similar to Urdu, but is otherwise quite distinct. Kashmiri has a low status. It has never been the language of administration or education, and the Kashmiri nationalist movement, though using Kashmiri as its medium at public meetings, has rarely made much of the language issue or indeed used Kashmiri in its own written propaganda. Urdu is the official language of the state. And not one of the many dailies published in Srinagar and Jammu is in Kashmiri. The Srinagar elite tends to discourage its youngsters from fluency in Kashmiri, preferring the more marketable languages of Urdu and English. With several million native speakers, the Kashmiri language is not in danger, but it is certainly not thriving.

Sofi Ghulam Mohammad's paper, the *Srinagar Times*, an Urdu language daily, claimed to be, at the time we met, the most widely circulated title in the Kashmir Valley. When I paid my first visit on Sofi-sahib, an avuncular and thoughtful man, the paper was closed. It had shut down because of threats issued by militant groups—the ninth such interruption because of intimidation by one side or the other in the course of seven years. There have been other such enforced closures, and indeed threats and attacks on the paper's editor, in subsequent years. Sofi Ghulam Mohammad's decades in public life have stretched from the peak of Sheikh Abdullah's popularity to the most turbulent years of the anti-India insurgency. Looking back on his youth, he told me that in Srinagar, there had once been widespread support for Sheikh Abdullah. Most Kashmiris had initially endorsed the Sheikh's support for accession to India. Half a century later, the outlook had changed. Sitting in his well-tended garden a short distance from Dal lake, he told me that most Kashmiris would like to live in an independent country, if only the two regional powers who covet Kashmir would respect their wishes. Indian rule had not been benign, and Pakistan's claim was in pursuit of self-interest.



‘We have got Pakistan and Kashmir, two Muslim states. But both have a difference. We, the Kashmiri Muslims, have our own individuality. Our mode of prayer is different. Our mode of thinking, our colour, our costume, everything is different from Pakistan. And that is the misfortune of Pakistan. They have not been able to understand the Kashmiris. They never thought that the Kashmiri Muslim has got his own individuality and his own culture.’ Rising to his theme, Sofi Ghulam Mohammad delivered a crisp and passionate encapsulation of Kashmir’s distinctiveness. ‘I have been to Calcutta, I have been to Kerala, I have been to Karachi. By my appearance they see that I have come from Kashmir. By hearing me only, they say: you have come from Kashmir. My mode of speaking Urdu is quite different. Culture and religion are two different things. Kashmiris are very proud of their culture. And Pakistan and India have not honoured that. They have tried to dominate and invade our culture. Both countries.’

The dynasty that ruled Kashmir until 1947 had just over a century in harness. Gulab Singh, a shrewd and ambitious Dogra prince based in the city of Jammu just north of the Punjab plains, bought the Kashmir Valley from the British in 1846. His neutrality in fighting between the British and the Sikh kingdom based in Lahore helped to decide the outcome. The Sikhs lost the war and with it the Kashmir Valley. Gulab Singh paid for it the eminently reasonable price of Rs 75 lakh (seven and a half million rupees). Kashmir’s new ruling family were Hindu in religion, Dogra in custom and identity, and Dogri—which can crudely be described as the Jammu variant of Punjabi—in first language (though Persian was, at least initially, the language of the court). The new rulers were not, in any sense, Kashmiri. They were seen in the Valley as outsiders. But they were local, rather than remote, rulers. The princes became known as the maharajas of Kashmir, rather than the full official title of Jammu and Kashmir. The principality revolved around two axes, but while Jammu was home, the Kashmir Valley was the heart of their domain. As well as keeping its palace in Jammu, the royal family also made good use of the palace it acquired in Srinagar. The custom developed—and persists—of the *darbar* move, by which the court (or today, the senior apparatus of the state government) would be based in Srinagar in the summer and in Jammu during the winter.

The Dogra ruling family assembled, by inheritance and conquest—and with the goodwill of the British—a range of territories that had little in common beyond their maharaja. The Australian legal expert Sir Owen Dixon, leading a UN attempt at mediation, accurately reported to



the Security Council in 1950 that Jammu and Kashmir 'is not really a unit geographically, demographically or economically. It is an agglomeration of territories brought under the political power of one Maharaja. That is the unity it possesses.'⁴ The cobbled together princely state of Jammu and Kashmir, as it existed prior to 1947, was 77 per cent Muslim. It consisted of five distinct areas. At its core was the Kashmir Valley, more than 90 per cent (now 98 per cent) Muslim—mainly Sunni, with Shia and Ahmadiyya minorities—and overwhelmingly Kashmiri-speaking. It's a big, flat-bottomed valley, eighty miles long and at places more than thirty miles wide, lying at an altitude of over 5,000 feet, and ringed by high snow-covered peaks. The land is fertile, with fruit, nuts, saffron and willow as well as subsistence crops, though whatever modest wealth Kashmiri cultivators have enjoyed is of recent date. Under the maharajas, and the taxes and feudal landholding system they upheld, the Kashmiri peasantry was both poor and politically marginalised.

The Kashmir Valley is traversed by the river Jhelum which runs through all the Valley's major towns before spilling down a ravine towards the plains of Pakistan Punjab. It has many other expanses of water such as Dal lake and Nageen lake in Srinagar and the much larger Wular lake nearby. These are home to hundreds of holiday houseboats and have helped give Kashmir its reputation as a landscape of bewitching beauty. Although Srinagar now has daily air links to Delhi, Mumbai and Jammu, Kashmir still feels geographically insulated from the rest of India. There are several mountain passes allowing access to the Valley—the most traversable being the route along the Jhelum river. The Jhelum Valley road, a formidable construction project hacking a highway out of a river gorge, took a decade to build. The opening of the stretch between Domel and Baramulla in 1890 made the Valley much more accessible to visitors and to Punjabi traders and greatly reduced Kashmir's political and intellectual isolation.⁵ An English missionary who reached Srinagar by cart and boat just as the road was being completed remarked that there were until then no wheeled vehicles of any sort on the city's roads. On the other hand, the princely state was at the confluence of three great regions—Central Asia, South Asia, and the outposts of the Chinese empire. It was prized for its location as well as its natural beauty, and never so out-of-the-way as to escape the attention of expansionist armies.

Of the other areas under the maharaja's rule, the most important was the city and region of Jammu, to the south of the Valley and largely insulated from it by a formidable mountain range. Much of this was geographically and culturally a northern extension of the Punjab



plains. Before 1947, Jammu province had a three-to-two Muslim majority. The part of Jammu region now under Indian control (slightly smaller in population than the Kashmir Valley) has a distinct Hindu majority but a large Muslim minority. Only a few hill areas adjoining the Valley are Kashmiri-speaking. Jammu has resented its perceived status as the lesser part of Indian Kashmir. The bonds between Jammu and the Kashmir Valley are not exceptionally strong, and indeed in language, culture and religious identity, the cities of Jammu and Srinagar have little in common.

The third part of the former princely state now under Indian rule is the high-altitude and sparsely populated Ladakh area, with its barren mountain landscape. Ladakh is divided between roughly equal numbers of Buddhists in Leh and the adjoining mountain valleys—speaking a tongue that has more in common with Tibetan than with the other languages of the state—and of Shia Muslims around the small town of Kargil. Part of eastern Ladakh is under disputed Chinese administration. These three areas—the Kashmir Valley, Jammu region and Ladakh—constitute the Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir.

The part of the former princely state under Indian rule includes, then, all the Kashmir Valley, and both of the maharaja's seasonal capitals. It's difficult to avoid the observation that Pakistan has control over little more than the trimmings of the principality. Two regions of the former princely state are now under Pakistan's authority. The districts of Baltistan and Gilgit, high up in the western Himalayas, are now known as Pakistan's Northern Areas. They are vast, remote and sparsely populated, and are bisected by the Karakoram highway which leads from the plains of north Pakistan to China. The residents are largely Muslim, and speak a variety of languages, but not Kashmiri to any great extent. The distinct area of Azad (or 'Free') Jammu and Kashmir—what is commonly called Pakistan Kashmir—is a ribbon of territory lying to the west of India's Jammu province and continuing along the western and north-western edges of the Kashmir Valley. This is the area that slipped out of the maharaja's control in 1947, either as a result of local insurgency or of the tribal invasion, and was never retaken by Indian troops. It's not a cohesive area. There is no sensible way of travelling, for example, from the region's capital, Muzaffarabad, to another of its major towns, Mirpur, without going through the city of Rawalpindi in Punjab. To the Kashmiris of the Valley, the inhabitants of Pakistan Kashmir are culturally distinct. Apart from refugees from the Valley and their descendants, few in Pakistan Kashmir speak Kashmiri. But there's no doubt that the population of Azad Kashmir regards itself as Kashmiri, and feels deeply about the fate





of the Valley. So there are many Kashmir—*one within the other*. By its narrowest definition, Kashmir means the Kashmir Valley with a population comfortably above five million. By its broadest definition, Kashmir extends to almost three times the population and to fourteen times the area to encompass all of what were once the maharaja's dominions.⁶

Both India and Pakistan continue to claim sovereignty over the entire former princely state. There is a certain unreality about this. India has no great desire to take control of what is now Pakistan-administered Kashmir, where there is hardly any non-Muslim minority and not the slightest sign of popular support for Indian rule. Similarly, while Pakistan might wish to have the Kashmir Valley, it can hardly have any appetite to rule over Hindu-majority Jammu and the Buddhist segment of Ladakh, which bridle under Srinagar's dominance and would be vastly more restless being administered from Islamabad. The various separatist groups, taking their tone from the public pronouncements of the two governments, also by-and-large argue that the former princely state is indivisible and should be allowed self-determination as one unit. Given the complex political demography of the region, this would be a high-risk strategy, but for the fact that there is no risk of any Indian government agreeing to a plebiscite on Kashmir's future.

There have been occasional rumblings about a re-partition of Kashmir. The attempts at international mediation in the immediate aftermath of India and Pakistan's first war over Kashmir looked at boiling down the former princely state into its main geopolitical constituents, and then giving each separate subregion some form of self-determination. If it had been pursued, this balkanisation of Kashmir might have worked. This option keeps forcing itself back on to the fringes of the agenda. Niaz Naik, Pakistan's informal intermediary in the brief window at the close of the 1990s when it seemed that both governments wished to settle the Kashmir issue, proposed dividing Kashmir along the line of the Chenab river. He has recounted the immediate response of his Indian counterpart—to ask Naik himself for a detailed map of Indian Kashmir. Niaz Naik insisted to me that India did not immediately rule out such a redivision. But that can only be because the Indian side never got as far as spreading out the map sheets. Pakistan's proposal would have deprived India of all of the Kashmir Valley and of much of the outlying areas of Jammu province.⁷

There are some curious anomalies concerning the issue of Kashmiri loyalty and identity. It's difficult to see why Kashmiri separatists should have any great attachment to boundaries established by a maharaja whose

legitimacy they would never have accepted. Yet several prominent separatists have gone to some trouble to seek to spread their message to non-Muslim areas, and have a strong sense of affinity with the entire former princely state. Similarly, the Kashmiri diaspora in Britain, the United States and elsewhere consists largely of migrants from Pakistan Kashmir, and particularly from the Mirpur region, who neither speak Kashmiri nor have any close association with the Kashmir Valley. Still, Kashmiris around the world evidently feel passionately about the fate of the Valley and its people, and have done much to sustain the separatist movement.

The Dogra maharajas made little effort to win over Kashmiri opinion. Valley Kashmiris were subject to high taxes, a punitive system of forced labour, and had virtually no say in the running of the princely state and next to no chance of getting senior posts in the administration. The maharaja's armed forces were closed to Valley Kashmiris of all religions, being the preserve particularly of communities with a stronger military tradition from Jammu and Poonch. 'Maharajah Hari Singh contributed no less than 60,000 first-class soldiers to fight for the Crown in the Second World War,' commented a wartime British representative in Kashmir, 'not a single one of them was a proper Kashmiri.'⁸ The bureaucracy of the princely state consisted largely of Hindus, either Kashmiri pandits, or Dogras from the Jammu area, or—to the annoyance of both these groups—Punjabis from outside the state. The small professional and trading classes consisted disproportionately of Hindus, who also owned much of the most productive land. Muslims with education and ambition often felt constrained to leave the princely state, which is why Kashmiris who had settled in Punjab were of such importance in the initial political awakening.

It was only in the early 1930s that the first stirrings of Kashmiri Muslim political mobilisation became evident. The maharaja's initial response was repression, tempered by modest concessions. Public gatherings for political purposes and the publication of newspapers were permitted for the first time in 1932—after the report of a British-appointed commission set up to inquire into rising communal and political tension in Kashmir.⁹ By the mid-1930s, Sheikh Mohammad Abdullah had emerged as the principal spokesman for the Valley Muslims. He was from a modest background, and graduated from Aligarh Muslim University in north India. He married Akbar Jahan, the daughter of Harry Nedou, who was in turn the son of Srinagar's Swiss-born top hotelier. From the late 1930s, Sheikh Abdullah developed a close personal friendship and political camaraderie with Jawaharlal Nehru, the foremost political leader



in the Indian National Congress who served as India's prime minister in its first seventeen years of independence. Nehru's family were Kashmiri pandits by origin, though they had moved from the Valley many generations earlier. The two Kashmiris, as they were sometimes described in the newspapers, shared a secular, distinctly left-wing and anti-feudal approach to nationalism. Those who met Sheikh Abdullah during his political heyday attest to his enormous charm, considerable presence and unquestioned charisma and authority—though his political wisdom was not always so evident. He was one of the commanding figures of the independence era in South Asia, and spent many years in detention, first in the maharaja's jails and then, after his friendship with Nehru soured, on India's orders.

Kashmiri Muslim politics had fragmented prior to the climax of the Indian nationalist movement. Sheikh Abdullah's party was initially known as the Muslim Conference. In 1939, anxious to avoid any association with communalism, he renamed the party as the National Conference, though it remained overwhelmingly Muslim in membership and continued often to mobilise its support through appeals to religious identity and symbolism. Its main goal was responsible government in Kashmir and an end to the excessive powers of the maharaja and his ministers. From 1944, the National Conference also championed a determinedly left-wing social and political programme, including far-reaching land redistribution (which was enacted under Sheikh Abdullah's auspices after accession to India). The trace of socialist ideology was also evident in the National Conference's choice of flag, a white plough on a red background. A smaller political grouping retained the name of the Muslim Conference, and worked increasingly in alliance with Mohammad Ali Jinnah, founder of Pakistan, and his party, the Muslim League.

The early and mid-1940s were a turbulent time in Kashmiri politics. The popularity of both Sheikh Abdullah and his party, the National Conference, was harmed by an increasingly close association with Congress, which was seen both as an outside force and as Hindu-dominated. In spite of this, the rival Muslim Conference was never able to douse down its own internal divisions or to enunciate a policy platform sufficiently attractive to eclipse other parties. Its areas of strength were in Jammu and Poonch much more than in the Kashmir Valley.

By the autumn of 1947, Sheikh Abdullah's party was the predominant political force, certainly among Valley Muslims. Both main Kashmiri parties, however, refused to be pinned down prior to Partition on the issue of which new dominion they wished Kashmir to join—a

reflection of the lasting uncertainty about the post-Raj dispensation, but still more of the hankering of many Kashmiris for autonomy. The Muslim Conference, in September 1946, stated that its goal was responsible government under the maharaja, without association with India or Pakistan (though the move attracted a lot of criticism from those within the party who wanted an unambiguous statement in support of Pakistan). The National Conference also sought responsible government, but it made explicit in its Quit Kashmir campaign of 1946 (an echo of the Congress's anti-British rule Quit India movement) that it wanted an end to the Dogra dynasty. Neither major political party in the Kashmir Valley made an issue of wanting to join either India or Pakistan prior to Britain's transfer of power.¹⁰

Even by the modest standards of India's main princely families, Hari Singh—who acceded as maharaja of Jammu and Kashmir in 1925—was an unimpressive ruler. A year before he came to the throne, he had become embroiled in a blackmail attempt after falling for the charms of a London bookmaker's wife. Although he gave evidence in a British court disguised under the pseudonym of 'Mr A', his indiscretion became public knowledge.¹¹ He came to power wishing to be an enlightened ruler, and to bring education to his subjects. It was perhaps unfortunate for him that his rule coincided with an upsurge in political mobilisation and with the emergence as a popular leader of Sheikh Abdullah, a much more accomplished politician. Even Hari Singh's son and would-be heir can find little evidence of political foresight in Kashmir's last maharaja. 'I remember sitting around the radio with my father, listening to the fact that the British had withdrawn,' recalled Dr Karan Singh, who became a substantial figure in Indian politics and public life. 'I have a hunch that my father never really believed that the British were going to go in that way. The old princely states were in some ways very insulated from the rest of India. One of the problems of feudalism is that you tend to get isolated.'

Sir Hari Singh's isolation was mitigated by the presence of a British Resident, a representative of the British crown who on occasion exercised great influence and authority, and by a British commander of his army. He had sufficient time and money to indulge his appetite for shooting and sport. He had a habit of becoming indisposed to sidestep any meeting that he might have found uncomfortable. And while he responded to petitions and demonstrations by introducing limited elections and moderating his autocracy, he—in common with most of India's maharajas—showed little sustained interest in developing representative political institutions.



Kashmir was the biggest and among the most populous of India's 560 or so princely states. These were not fully part of British India. This was to a large extent a useful fiction. The maharajas recognised the British crown as their paramount ruler, but retained nominal sovereignty and had very considerable control over their internal affairs. If necessary, London or Delhi could always pull the strings through the Resident, and on occasions deposed uncooperative or unredeemable rulers. With the end of the British Raj, and the granting of independence, the position of the princely states—with a total population approaching 90 million—was anomalous, and the last viceroy, Lord Mountbatten, only turned his attention to this issue late in the process of the British pull-out. The timetable for the transfer of power was made public early in June 1947. The Indian Independence Act was passed in the middle of the following month. This appeared to allow the princely states the option of independence, and left open the possibility that princely rulers surrounded on all sides by one nation could opt to join the other. Within a matter of days, Lord Mountbatten made clear to the Chamber of Princes that he expected them to accede either to India or to Pakistan, and to do so by 14 August, the eve of independence. This was a tough deadline—made all the more unrelenting by the fact that the award of the Boundary Commission about where exactly the new international frontier would run through the partitioned provinces of Punjab and Bengal was not announced until two days after independence. Lord Mountbatten also spelled out that while it was for the princely rulers to decide which nation to opt for, there were 'certain geographical compulsions which cannot be evaded'—in other words, there should be no pockets of Indian territory completely surrounded by Pakistan and vice versa.

Through a mixture of Lord Mountbatten's charm and steely persuasiveness, the well-oiled Indian machine for signing up princely states (there were many fewer in Pakistan's vicinity), and the sheer impracticality for almost all princely rulers of resisting the pull of Delhi or Karachi, the whole process went remarkably smoothly. A few of the states failed to accede to either India or Pakistan for a matter of weeks—in one or two cases, months—after the deadline. But besides Kashmir, only two other substantial princely states became embroiled in controversy over accession.

Both Junagadh in what is now Gujarat in western India and Hyderabad in the south were, in political terms, the mirror image of Kashmir. They had Muslim rulers governing a mainly Hindu population. Neither had a common border with Pakistan, though Junagadh had a

coastline that looked out towards Karachi. Junagadh signed an instrument of accession with Pakistan. Hyderabad's nizam opted for autonomy, indeed, he wanted to be a third dominion alongside India and Pakistan. Jinnah and his colleagues entertained hopes that Hyderabad, by far the most populous of the princely states, would remain outside the Indian Union, or at least would prove to be a sufficiently strong bargaining counter to give them leverage elsewhere, particularly over Kashmir. In the event, India swallowed up Junagadh a few weeks after independence, and took over Hyderabad in the following year, amid much fuss but little lasting political or diplomatic consequence.

Kashmir was the only state that had land borders with both India and Pakistan where the decision about accession was in any real doubt. Faced with a dilemma about which way to jump, Sir Hari Singh did what came naturally to him: he stalled for time. Kashmir sought what were called 'standstill' agreements with both India and Pakistan, so that services such as post and supplies of fuel would continue without interruption. India didn't conclude such an accord, but acted as if it had. The much more important arrangement from Kashmir's point of view, with Pakistan, was signed, but not fully honoured. The maharaja was repeatedly urged to prepare for the future. Lord Mountbatten travelled to Srinagar in June 1947. It's often suggested that the viceroy did Nehru's bidding in seeking to secure Kashmir's accession to India. Nehru had an enormously powerful attachment to Kashmir strengthened by his personal and political alliance with Sheikh Abdullah. He keenly wanted Kashmir to come to India. But although Mountbatten found Nehru much more convivial than the austere and lawyerly Jinnah, his main concern was that Kashmir's maharaja should make up his mind rather than letting things drift. As it turned out, the viceroy's trip to Kashmir was a waste of time. He had no substantial discussions with Sir Hari Singh, who first sent his guest off on a fishing trip and then sidestepped a meeting by saying he was unwell.

This was not simply indecisiveness. The maharaja had a dream of Kashmir as an Asian version of Switzerland, a neutral, independent mountain state enjoying the respect and friendship of its neighbours. He believed that Kashmir was of sufficient size and wealth to overcome the most obvious objection to independence—that an area so far from the coast, most of which was not easily accessible, would always be hostage to its more powerful neighbours. He cleaved to this notion of self-rule even as the storm clouds gathered. As late as mid-October 1947—two



months after the British pull-out and just ten days before the tribesmen entered Kashmir—the maharaja's deputy prime minister, R.L. Batra, was publicly touting the option of independence:

We intend to keep on friendly relations with both Pakistan and the Indian Union. Despite constant rumours we have no intention of either joining India or Pakistan and the Maharaja and his Government have decided that no decision of any sort will be made until there is peace on the plains. . . .

The population depends entirely on exports of wood[,] arts and crafts, also fruit and vegetables for its existence and in all our decisions we must think of this first. No one can lightly say that we will join the Indian Union, or as other wishful thinkers say, that we will join Pakistan.

The situation is extremely difficult. Much of our trade in wood is done with the Indian Union but the river Jhelum which takes the wood down to the plains ends in Pakistan.

The Maharaja has told me that his ambition is to make Kashmir the Switzerland of the East—a State that is completely neutral. As much of our living depends on visitors, we must think of them. Visitors will not come to a State which is beset with communal troubles. . . .

I think this is the only possible future for the State. We are in an extremely important geographical position, as a glance of a map will show. Our borders touch six countries—India, Pakistan, Tibet, Russia, Afghanistan and Sinkiang.¹²

Kashmir's deputy prime minister also remarked in this news interview, a touch prophetically, that 'the only thing that will change this decision is if one side or the other decides to use force against us'. When Jinnah later complained that Kashmir's accession to India was part of a 'long intrigue', Mountbatten's response was to say: 'I knew that [the] Maharaja was most anxious to remain independent, and nothing but the terror of violence could have made him to accede to either Dominion.'¹³

In seeking a sovereign Kashmir, the maharaja did something remarkably rare for him—he gave voice to a popular sentiment among Valley Muslims. It's difficult to assess the level of support, then or now, for an independent Kashmir. The view of Major General H.L. Scott, briefing British diplomats in October 1947 at the close of eleven years as the maharaja's chief of staff, was that the 'vast majority of Kashmiris

have no strong bias for either India or Pakistan and prefer to remain independent of either Dominion and free to earn their living'.¹⁴ The leading Kashmiri nationalist, Sheikh Abdullah—the man whose eventual support for accession to India was crucial—was greatly attracted to the idea of independence at various times in his career.¹⁵ In more recent years, the Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Front has been the most prominent separatist group advocating independence. It hasn't contested elections, and assessments of its popular support have to be based on anecdote and informal samples of opinion. It has certainly at times been substantial. The impression of many who know the Kashmir Valley well is that the idea of independence, however unrealistic, continues to have considerable popular appeal.

Pakistan's courting of Kashmir and of Kashmiri opinion at the time of the transfer of power was not always assiduous. The letter K in the part-acronym Pakistan stands for Kashmir. On the other hand, Kashmir was not as central to the Pakistan project as the Muslim areas of Punjab and Bengal, and so in the frenzied political activity that achieved the creation of Pakistan it was in some ways a marginal issue. The Muslim League seems to have believed, wrongly, that the larger princely states would retain autonomy. Jinnah certainly never imagined Kashmir becoming part of India, but nor did it appear central to his notion of Pakistan. More than that, the more Pakistan-minded of the political parties in Kashmir, the Muslim Conference, had limited grass-roots organisation in the Valley, and did not unambiguously support joining Pakistan until late in the accession crisis.

Mohammad Ali Jinnah visited the Kashmir Valley in the summer of 1944. He spent more than two months there. It's an indication of the complexities of Kashmiri public life and of the fluidity of regional politics in the period before Pakistan took firm shape, that Jinnah was invited to Srinagar by Sheikh Abdullah, routinely described as pro-India. Sheikh Abdullah hosted a mass meeting addressed by Jinnah in Srinagar, and was reported to have described the leader of the Muslim League as a 'beloved leader of the Muslims of India'.¹⁶ Jinnah's mission in Kashmir was apparently to bring about a political reconciliation between the National Conference and the Muslim Conference. He was unsuccessful. Once Jinnah realised that there was no way of harnessing the two local parties, he made it clear that he wanted Kashmiris to show allegiance to the Muslim Conference. Indeed, towards the end of his stay in the Valley, some of Sheikh Abdullah's supporters sought to disrupt his public meetings. Jinnah didn't meet the maharaja, and appears not to have had



formal talks with any of his ministers. There were fitful attempts subsequently to win over Kashmiri opinion, and to establish a dialogue with the Kashmir state government and indeed with Sheikh Abdullah's National Conference, and at the time of the tribesmen's invasion Jinnah's personal assistant was in Srinagar. But as late as 11 July 1947, Jinnah was advising Kashmiri leaders of the Muslim Conference to advocate an independent Kashmir under the maharaja. It was only on 29 July, a little more than two weeks before the transfer of power, that Jinnah's Muslim League gave clear public expression to its wish that Kashmir should join Pakistan. Jinnah apparently was in the habit of saying that 'Kashmir will fall into our lap like a ripe fruit,' but he did little prior to independence to engineer that eventuality.¹⁷ The Muslim League's, and later Pakistan's, diplomatic quietism could well have been a reflection of their assessment that the maharaja and most (but certainly not all) of his senior ministers had little inclination to discuss becoming part of Pakistan.

Yet Pakistan's sense of grievance over the Kashmir issue is intense. At its core, of course, is the issue of religion. Whatever the rubric of the Indian Independence Act, the logic of Partition was that adjoining Muslim majority areas should become part of a new and independent nation state. On that basis, Pakistan's claim to Kashmir was strong. The failure to honour the requirement in Mountbatten's acceptance of Kashmir's accession in late October, that the decision to join India be demonstrated to be 'in accordance with the wishes of the people of the State', has been seen in Pakistan as a deep and abiding injustice.

There is another aspect to Pakistan's case for Kashmir, one hardly spoken of in India—the geography of Kashmir. At the time of Partition, there was only one all-weather route into the Kashmir Valley. It ran from Rawalpindi (now the headquarters of the Pakistan army) through Baramulla and on to Srinagar, for much of the way hugging the Jhelum river. When the tribal raiders closed the road as they advanced towards the towns of Uri and Baramulla, they choked the route taken by Kashmir's trade, fuel, and telegram and postal services. The *Hindustan Times* was prompted to comment: 'The Valley of Kashmir is totally cut off from the rest of the world.'¹⁸ There were other roads into the Valley, but all went through high mountain passes—the Banihal pass which had to be traversed on the road to Jammu was above 9,000 feet in altitude—and none was open all the year round.

If the Rawalpindi–Srinagar road were open today, the journey from Pakistan's capital, Islamabad, to the Kashmiri capital would probably take six or seven hours. For the sake of comparison, the road journey from Srinagar to Jammu takes up to eleven hours, through the Banihal



tunnel which was built in the 1950s. This road remains vulnerable to closure because of heavy snowfall and landslides during the winter. The Indian authorities have announced plans for a rail link to the Kashmir Valley, but while work has started there's no firm date for its completion. From the vantage point of Islamabad, Kashmir feels close at hand—from Delhi, it feels a long way away.

Prior to 1947, most travellers to Kashmir approached the princely state through what became Pakistan. There was no scheduled air service between Delhi and Srinagar. The landing strip at Srinagar, the only one in the Kashmir Valley, did not have a tarmac surface, and had no fuelling or servicing facilities. The most common way to travel was via Rawalpindi. Tourists travelled there by train, and then completed the journey to Kashmir by car or bus. When Nehru headed towards Srinagar in the summer of 1946 after Sheikh Abdullah's arrest, he flew to Rawalpindi, and then drove to Domel with the intention of travelling along the Jhelum Valley road. Even those who approached from the south, through Jammu and over the Banihal pass to Srinagar, would often have travelled through Lahore and Sialkot, both allocated at Partition to Pakistan. Those British expatriates in Srinagar who chose not to be evacuated by air as the tribesmen approached in late October, because the Royal Air Force could not accommodate their pets or their huge quantities of luggage, headed south by road to Jammu, and from there crossed the still permeable new boundary and ended up in Lahore. It was the obvious destination.

There was a road link from Indian Punjab through to Jammu and beyond, but it was not for the faint-hearted. The route, according to an Indian army officer involved in repulsing the raiders, was 'intersected by numerous bridgeless tributaries of the river Ravi and other minor streams, which had to be crossed by ferry or by using the fords over the shallower streams. Not surfaced with tarmac it powdered very quickly, while a shower of rain would make any attempt at speeding extremely dangerous as even light traffic caused severe rutting.' Another Indian military account gave a grim picture of the bottleneck caused by crossing the Ravi by ferry, with only two boats available that could, at the most, carry across one battalion and thirty jeeps in a day.¹⁹ When the Indian military airlift into Kashmir started at dawn on 27 October, some troops, supplies and artillery were despatched by road to Srinagar. While the first planes reached Srinagar within a few hours, the armoured cars and Bren gun carriers arrived nine days later, on 5 November.

The Indian authorities had embarked on improving this road even before the tribal invasion. With the fate of Kashmir in the balance, the work was pursued at breakneck speed. Sheikh Abdullah visited Delhi





late in November to stress how crucial it was to establish a reliable road link—its ‘strategic and trade importance as the main road linking India and the State cannot be underestimated’.²⁰ India’s difficulties in establishing a secure road link would have been much greater but for one of the apparent inconsistencies in the Boundary Commission’s delineation of the international border through Punjab, which has provoked enormous controversy. The commission assigned most of the Gurdaspur district of Punjab—an area with a slight Muslim majority—to India rather than to Pakistan. This permitted India access to the hazardous dirt road to Jammu and gave it control of the rail terminus at Pathankot. Without this award, the Indian authorities would have had no effective road link to Jammu and on to the Kashmir Valley. They would have faced a vastly bigger road-building emergency. And Pakistan’s case for absorbing Kashmir would have been much stronger. There have been allegations from Pakistan that Lord Mountbatten improperly influenced the Boundary Commission to allocate most of Gurdaspur to India. The evidence suggests otherwise, though it seems that Mountbatten did intervene to adjust another section of the Punjab partition line, with no direct relevance to Kashmir, in India’s favour.²¹

Having given full measure to the basis for Pakistan’s claim to Kashmir, it’s necessary to recap the fundamentals of India’s case. There can be no doubt that under the British dispensation for deciding the fate of the princely states, the decision about accession rested with the maharaja. Hari Singh plumped for India, and the decision was his to make. Whether it should have been for princely rulers to consign their people to one nation or the other is not directly relevant. Nor do two controversies which will be discussed later in the book—whether the maharaja signed the instrument of accession before or after Indian soldiers arrived in Kashmir, and why India failed to honour the commitment it entered into to allow an internationally supervised plebiscite—change the basic fact that Kashmir’s ruler decided that his principality should become part of India.

There is a powerful second string to India’s claim on Kashmir. The most commanding Kashmiri Muslim politician of his generation, Sheikh Abdullah, supported accession to India. This may have been a pragmatic decision, made in a moment of crisis, but he took his supporters with him. In the absence of properly representative institutions, his choice could be said to be an indication of Kashmiri opinion. Without it, India’s annexing of Kashmir would have felt much hollower. More than that, whatever the active support for the pro-Pakistan uprising in and around



Poonch, there was very limited local involvement in the fighting, as opposed to tacit support, in the Kashmir Valley. The arrival of the tribal lashkar did not prompt large numbers of Valley Muslims to pick up a rifle and join the forces of liberation. Quite the opposite, Sheikh Abdullah's party, the National Conference, had conspicuous success in drafting hundreds of volunteers in Srinagar to serve as a civil defence militia to resist the raiders. When the Indian troops arrived, and repulsed the invaders from the Kashmir Valley, they were often greeted as liberators. Given a choice between the maharaja's Dogra army, the rampaging tribal lashkar and the Indian army, many Valley Kashmiris would, in late October and early November 1947, have embraced the Indian option. When the first Indian troops arrived at Srinagar's airstrip on 27 October, they were not seen as an army of occupation. At least, not initially.

Taken separately, the Pakistani and Indian arguments for having sovereignty over the Kashmir Valley seem incontrovertible. How could Pakistan have been denied Kashmir, an area with a Muslim majority whose communication and economic links looked west, not east? How can its accession to India, carried out in accordance with the prescribed procedures and with the active consent of both its princely ruler and its most respected Muslim politician, be regarded as in any way illegitimate? But the claims are mutually exclusive. Hence the difficulty of resolving the Kashmir issue, and the agony the people of Kashmir have endured for much of the time since 1947. The people of the Kashmir Valley feel caught in the middle between two giant rival powers, for which the idea of having control of Kashmir has become a key aspect of their sense of identity. As I've heard time and again from the disenchanted citizens of Srinagar: 'They both want the land, but they don't want the people'.

For Pakistan, the claim to Kashmir has become central to how the nation sees itself. Generations of Pakistanis have grown up amid slogans demanding justice for Kashmir, have been asked to give money for the Kashmir cause, and have seen the army grow in political influence largely because of the Kashmir conflict and the resulting tension with India. Pakistan provides political sanctuary to Kashmiri separatist leaders and armed Kashmiri groups, and has at times done much more than that—it has trained, armed and organised men who are then sent over the line of control (the formal name given to the ceasefire line) to fight against Indian rule. Just as with the tribal lashkar of 1947, the impetus to fight arose of its own accord, but that has then been moulded and channelled (though never completely controlled) by the Pakistan army and the ISI, its intelligence service, and become a central part of its armoury against India.





On the other side of the border, the initial determination and active diplomacy to secure Kashmir's accession arose largely from Jawaharlal Nehru's own affinity with the Valley. He didn't go there all that often before independence—after his honeymoon in 1916, it was almost twenty-four years before he went there again—but he wrote to his daughter about how 'the little corner of India which is Kashmir draws us still both by its beauty and its old associations'. And he confided to Edwina Mountbatten that 'Kashmir affects me in a peculiar way; it is a kind of mild intoxication—like music sometimes or the company of a beloved person.'²² He was adamant about ensuring that Kashmir remained a corner of India rather than Pakistan, not simply because of personal affiliation but also because of his keen political alliance with Sheikh Abdullah, whom he saw, rightly, as Kashmir's commanding political leader. Once India had taken control of Kashmir, the idea of relinquishing any part of it to its main adversary was anathema. Jammu and Kashmir is India's only Muslim majority state, and is valued as a symbol of Indian secularism. To accept that because of its majority religion, part of the state would be best outside India, would be to acknowledge that religion is a sufficient basis for national identity. Sheikh Abdullah made the point succinctly in the early 1950s: 'India will never concede the communal principle that simply because the majority in Kashmir are Muslims, they must be presumed to be in favour of Pakistan. If she does that, her whole fabric of secularism crashes to the ground.'²³ This argument still holds sway in Indian political debate. Whatever differences there might be about autonomy, or tackling human rights abuses, across the Indian political spectrum (outside Kashmir, that is) there's close to unanimity that India's sovereignty over Kashmir is not open to question.

In the ten weeks between the independence ceremonies for India and Pakistan in mid-August 1947 and the beginning of the tribal invasion, there was enormous turbulence in Kashmir. An insurgency took root in parts of the principality. The maharaja's security forces were widely accused, by commission or omission, of complicity in the large-scale killings of Jammu Muslims. Thousands, probably tens of thousands of Muslims, lost their lives. But as political passions rose, the most widely supported political figures were in the maharaja's jails. Sheikh Abdullah had been arrested in the summer of 1946 for leading the Quit Kashmir campaign aimed at driving out the Dogra monarchy. Farooq Abdullah has memories of visiting his father in detention at Badami Bagh in Srinagar, now the site of a massive Indian army base. Nehru also tried to visit him, but was initially prevented from entering the princely state, and then

detained at a guest-house in Uri and sent back. The leader of the other main Kashmiri party, Chaudhri Ghulam Abbas of the Muslim Conference, was also behind bars, having been arrested in the autumn of 1946.

For Pakistan in particular, the post-independence task of assembling an army, an administration and a national identity was enormous, and not helped by the animosity of its neighbour. Both new governments also had to deal with the communal carnage in Punjab, and the biggest mass migration outside wartime of the century. By October, the killings had largely subsided, but the population movement—which required considerable logistical and military support—was only just getting into its stride. Some Partition refugees, a small proportion but sufficient to infuse Kashmir with some of the tension of the time, used the Kashmir Valley as a corridor to pass through on their way between the two dominions. Thousands of Sikhs from Peshawar and elsewhere in the Frontier travelled through Kashmir, and there were suggestions that these refugees had deposited arms in gurdwaras, Sikh temples, in towns such as Muzaffarabad and Baramulla. Muslim refugees tended not to travel through the Kashmir Valley, but enormous numbers passed through Jammu district on their way to west Punjab. Indeed, many Jammu Muslims were among the refugees. In early October, *The Times* reported that of the four-and-a-half million Muslims in Indian East Punjab, almost all determined to move to Pakistan, only a little over one million had managed to cross the border. In the last week of October alone, more than 570,000 Muslim refugees were said to have crossed into Pakistani West Punjab, with 471,000 non-Muslims crossing in the other direction.²⁴

To put it mildly, both Delhi and Karachi had more pressing concerns in the first few weeks of independence than the fate of the princely states. The tension provoked by the slaughter on the Punjab plains, and the charge and countercharge of official complicity in the killings or at least of supine inactivity in preventing them, greatly soured relations between the newly independent nations. By mid-September, at least one foreign correspondent in Delhi was picking up ‘talk of war’ with Pakistan.²⁵ By the time the Kashmir crisis erupted, the Indian and Pakistani governments were in the habit of thinking the worst of each other.

In as much as the issue of the princely states made the newspapers in the weeks after independence, the spotlight was on Hyderabad and Junagadh. But there were also important developments in Kashmir. While Pakistan was intermittently active in trying to woo Kashmir, Indian diplomacy was incessant, with Nehru devoting such considerable personal attention to the issue that it annoyed some of his senior colleagues. Nehru’s



deputy Sardar Patel took on the task of seeking to win over the maharaja, who was suspicious of Congress and its alliance with Sheikh Abdullah. The dismissal by the maharaja in August of his Pakistan-leaning prime minister, and his eventual replacement by an Indian judge, was seen as a victory for Delhi.

Indian diplomacy also secured another big success in Kashmir. On 29 September 1947, the maharaja released Sheikh Abdullah after sixteen months of detention. Sheikh Abdullah did not make any grand pro-India declaration on gaining his freedom, indeed as late as 21 October, just hours before the tribal lashkar entered Kashmir, he was pleading for more time to think about which dominion to join.²⁶ But his journeys down to Delhi to confer with Nehru and other Congress leaders—the *Hindustan Times* of 17 October carried a front-page photograph of Nehru and Abdullah side-by-side—indicated where his allegiances lay. The Muslim League's daily newspaper *Dawn* pointedly remarked on the contrast between Sheikh Abdullah's resumption of political activity on the one hand, and on the other the continued detention of leaders of the rival Muslim Conference, the banning of some pro-Pakistan politicians from entering the princely state, and restrictions on Kashmiri publications and journalists seen as sympathetic to Pakistan.²⁷

A grave problem confronting Kashmir was the unwillingness or inability of Pakistan to abide by the terms of the standstill agreement. The Kashmir government complained that supplies of fuel and of some foodstuffs were not reaching the state, and spoke of an economic blockade put in place by the West Punjab administration. The Pakistani authorities replied that the mass movement of population had thrown everything out of gear, but that this was not a deliberate breach of the agreement. It cited the concerns of Muslim truck drivers, some of whom were so alarmed by reports of repression by the maharaja's forces that they were refusing to enter Kashmir. The trucks heading north from Pakistan Punjab towards Kashmir skirted the area where the local rebellion against the maharaja was strongest, and there were many reports of reprisals by the state forces against local Muslims. The journalist Margaret Parton encountered Muslims fleeing from the maharaja's troops when she travelled up the main road from Rawalpindi in mid-October 1947. 'It appears,' in the judgement of one Pakistani historian, 'that the local administration of Rawalpindi on its own, or under pressure from Kashmiri leaders did not exert itself too much to ensure the continuance of supplies. But it was also true that, under the anarchic conditions prevailing in the territories

through which the route in the Valley passed, the truck drivers and traders were reluctant to face the peril to their lives and cargo.²⁸

The Times summed up the dilemma facing Kashmir, and the uncertainty about popular opinion in the princely state. Eric Britter, its correspondent in Delhi, was among the best-informed of the foreign correspondents based in Delhi—he was also the partner, and later the husband, of Margaret Parton. As yet, *The Times* commented, ‘Kashmir has remained remote and silent in its mountain fastness’:

This backward State of more than 4,000,000 people, once the most popular playground in India, has lost its holiday atmosphere. Reports emanating from the capital are few; communications have been disrupted by the Punjab situation, but it is possible some form of censorship has been enforced. The Muslim newspaper *Kashmir Times* has ceased publication . . .

The Maharaja has remained silent about the future of his State, but the recent release of Sheikh Abdullah . . . is significant. . . . The aims of the Maharaja and Sheikh Abdullah are basically dissimilar, but both are anti-Pakistan.

The only other effective political organization is the Kashmir Muslim Conference Party, which until now has been numerically the weaker. However, it is possible that Sheikh Abdullah has lost ground during the past 16 months and the rallying cry ‘Islamic India’ may defeat him. If a plebiscite were held the simple Muslim hillman might well forget newly found political theories and allow the dictates of religious and communal prejudice to influence his vote.²⁹

That’s a far from universal opinion. One historian who has studied closely the political tides in the princely state in the 1940s tentatively concluded that ‘the popular preference was for autonomy under the aegis of the Maharaja, rather than for accession to either of the two Dominions. Failing that . . . the odds are that most Kashmiris would have followed Sheikh Abdullah’s lead and voted to join India.’³⁰ But by mid-October 1947, the air of crisis in Kashmir engendered by the disruption of trade and communication, and the Delhi-focussed diplomacy involving Sheikh Abdullah and the maharaja’s prime minister and his deputy, suggested that a move was imminent to clarify Kashmir’s constitutional status.

That is certainly how it seemed to those across the border in Pakistan. The Kashmir state government complained to Jinnah, Pakistan’s Governor



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General, in a telegram dated 18 October 1947, that with a virtual blockade by Pakistan and continuing armed infiltration, Kashmir 'would be justified in asking for friendly assistance to oppose trespass on its fundamental rights'. Two days later, Jinnah replied by telegram, accusing the maharaja of issuing what amounted to an ultimatum and asserting that 'the real aim of your Government's policy is to seek an opportunity to join the Indian Dominion through a coup d'etat by securing the intervention and assistance of that Dominion'.³¹ Pakistan's perception that Kashmir was slipping out of its grasp and was poised to accede to India in turn influenced the timing and nature of the tribesmen's advance along the Jhelum Valley towards Baramulla and Srinagar.

