[**Erasing history**](https://www.dawn.com/news/1693063/erasing-history)

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THE people of Kashmir and their representatives face yet another dire threat of the erasure of their history as well as their Kashmiri identity, with the administration’s decision to replace the image of Sheikh Mohammad Abdullah on police medals with the national emblem. This was only to be expected from Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s government.

Newspapers in India have quoted the angered representatives of political parties. According to the National Conference spokesperson Sara Hayat Shah, efforts were on “to tamper with the rich history of Kashmir. Dropping Sher-i-Kashmir’s name from the gallantry awards in the absence of an elected government would mean imposing laws without the consent of the people”.

The protests cut across political lines. The Peoples Democratic Party president Mehbooba Mufti said the “narrow-mindedness of the rulers” had been exposed. Others said replacing his name and attempting to rewrite history would not erase the contributions of Sheikh Abdullah, whose memory would continue to “rule the hearts” of the people of Kashmir.

This modification to the Jammu and Kashmir Police Medal Scheme is no less than an attack on Kashmir’s history, in keeping with New Delhi’s actions in Kashmir ever since it robbed it of its autonomy a few years ago.

Parties are angered by the attempt to destroy Kashmir’s identity.

It is also a move that is in line with the steps taken in New Delhi to erase the names of roads which bear the names of the Mughal emperors. It was the British who gave those names to roads in New Delhi. The name of Aurangzeb Road where Quaid-i-Azam Mohammad Ali Jinnah lived in a bungalow at 10 Aurangzeb Road, a historic place, was changed to bear the name of one of the worst and most ridiculous presidents India has suffered, one A.P.J. Abdul Kalam. The names of Ahmedabad and Aurangabad are also under threat.

The case of Sheikh Abdullah is unique. At the height of the unrest in the early 1990s, his grave had to be protected against vandalisation by those who rejected him, because in 1947 he advocated accession to India.

On his part, Sheikh Abdullah wanted Kashmir to remain independent. As recorded in his memoirs An American Witness to India’s Partition, Phillips Talbot, who became a US assistant secretary of state, said that Sheikh Abdullah told him before independence that “Kashmir would be finished if it had to join one dominion and thereby incur the enmity of the other”. He wanted normal relations with both countries and had resolved to visit the new states after the partition of India. However, the tribesmen arrived while he was in New Delhi.

Sheikh Abdullah’s plan was to leave for Karachi after his visit to New Delhi where he met Jawaharlal Nehru. His stand was clear — ‘freedom before accession’. Sensing the mood of the people, he said at a public rally, that the priority was to throw off the yoke of Dogra rule, and if after that the people wanted to join Pakistan, he would be the first to support the decision.

In the event of the tribesmen entering Kashmir, Sheikh Abdullah decided to support Kashmir’s accession to India. But he was still in two minds as Patrick Gordon-Walker, the Commonwealth secretary, recorded. “…Sheikh Abdullah said he thought the solution was that Kashmir should accede to both dominions. … The solution therefore was that Kashmir should have its autonomy jointly guaranteed by India and Pakistan and it would delegate its foreign policy and defence to them both jointly but would look after its own affairs. The two dominions share a common interest in Kashmir and it would serve to unite and link them. I asked whether Nehru would agree to this solution and he said he thought so. ... Sheikh Abdullah had no idea whether Pakistan would agree to this solution, but he said it would avoid a plebiscite which he did not really want.”

It was a grim situation. Communal feeling was growing in India. Sheikh Abdullah decided to put the issue before the working committee of the Kashmir National Conference. The committee, after undertaking lengthy discussions on the subject, decided that internal stability would be difficult to achieve as long as the future was uncertain. It went on to appoint a committee consisting of eight members, including Sheikh Abdullah himself, to take the matter to a conclusion.

Some alternatives were proposed in order to resolve the matter in an honourable and peaceful way. These included a) a general plebiscite, b) independence of the entire state of Kashmir, c) independence but with joint control of foreign affairs, d) “Dixon Plan with independence for the plebiscite area”.

Unfortunately for Sheikh Abdullah, very soon after, Nehru put him in prison where he remained for 11 years. Sheikh Sahib had grave flaws but also great qualities.

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