

Farooq Abdullah

At the breakfast table in a friend's house in New Delhi, Dr. Farooq Abdullah was holding forth on the merits of dynastic succession. 'It is only natural for sons and daughters to take to their family business...there is nothing wrong in Rajiv being groomed by his mother to succeed her...' That was in early '81. Farooq, who was then 44, had been called back from London by father Sheikh Abdullah, but he was yet to be anointed as the Baba-i-Kashmir's successor. The Abdullah's had a love-hate relationship with the Nehru's and Gandhi's. Farooq considered himself a member of the Gandhi family. He was on first name terms with Rajiv and Sonia and when in Delhi he often spent his evenings with them.

Months later came word from Srinagar that the ailing lion of Kashmir had formally announced his son as his successor. Sheikh's decision, it was said in Delhi, had the `blessings of Indira Gandhi. Blessings or no blessings, the choice of Farooq as the next president of the National Conference and Sheikh Abdullah's categorical announcement that he would not contest the next elections suited the Congress strategy for Kashmir. It roused new hopes in the hearts of those who had been dashing their heads against the rock)', ramparts of Sheikh Abdullah's personality. The lion's club, they were certain, would be far more vulnerable than the lion himself.

Much as Indira Gandhi had tried to destabilize the Sheikh government, she had realized the futility of it. She knew that Sheikh Abdullah would continue as long as he was around. Many were the tales one heard about Abdullah and his family, tales of corruption and nepotism, and yet nothing seemed to make any difference to the people of Kashmir. Any day, any time, the Sheikh could stand up at one of the Srinagar crossroads and the crowds would flock around him. He could even use his stick on the women and all they would say is that a "father can hit, if he so desires."

Farooq Abdullah had filed his nomination papers for the Lok Sabha elections in 1980 and been returned uncontested. He had then rushed to Rae Bareilly to campaign for Mrs. Gandhi. At that time, both sides thought they would need each other. Indira and Sanjay Gandhi were by no means certain of even a precarious lead in the elections, in which case an alliance with the National Conference could have been useful. Before Mrs. Gandhi's landslide victory, Farooq had even thought of himself as the National Conference nominee in a coalition government at the Centre! He had developed close ties with Sanjay Gandhi and was one of the most ardent defenders of his extra-constitutional position during the Emergency.

All that suddenly changed after the election results. The Abdullah's were no longer needed. Indeed, within months, Sanjay and his brigade were chalking out their Kashmir strategy. Both Mufti Mohammed Saeed, who was then the Kashmir PCC chief, and Ghulam Nabi Azad were men in a tearing hurry. With their mentor Sanjay Gandhi firmly ensconced in Delhi, they thought they would grab power in Kashmir within months. What Mrs. Gandhi and Sanjay did not see was that her party had no popular support in the Valley at all. About the only party leader of Kashmir who had some credibility, namely Syed Mir Qasim, had been pushed into the background.

With the new Congress leaders getting on his nerves, Sheikh Abdullah had started ranting and raving. How long did he have to be on trial to prove his loyalty to the country? How could all these upstarts of the Congress speak for Kashmir? It was inconceivable to him that Ghulam Nabi Azad, who had managed to get a bare 300 votes in his home state, was "carried on the Congress shoulders to Maharashtra and returned to Parliament with a majority of over one lakh votes."

One obvious reason why Sheikh was in a hurry to announce his successor was the realization that it would be very difficult for Farooq Abdullah to make it on his own. Farooq had the image of a playboy and was up against powerful adversaries in the family itself. Most of all, the Sheikh's highly ambitious son-in-law, Gul Mohammed Shah, whom the Congress was to use later to usurp Farooq's gaddi. Sheikh Abdullah's announcement of Farooq's succession had come like a ton of bricks to Shah and his supporters. They started talking about the manner in which Sheikh Abdullah had made his son the managing director of the Sher-e-Kashmir Medical Institute over the heads of more qualified doctors. They talked about the background and antecedents of Farooq. They alleged that while in England he had headed the plebiscite front and that during his visit to Pakistan in 1974 he had openly supported the demand for plebiscite.

Mufti Mohammed Saeed said Farooq had pleaded for a return to the pre-1953 position, that is the position before the dismissal and detention of Sheikh Abdullah. Farooq was accused of demanding the reopening of the Rawalpindi.. Srinagar Road. He later gave a different explanation for why he wanted the road opened. "This would facilitate movement of people living on both the sides of the Actual Line of Control. This must be considered on humanitarian grounds."

At the time when the dying Sheikh Abdullah anointed Farooq as his successor few could imagine that a day would come when he would have to run away from the Valley out of fear for his life. At his peak in the mid-80's, Farooq's popularity in the Valley almost rivaled his father's. Ironically, his high point was when he was dismissed from the chief minister's post in July 1984. It was a political coup engineered by Arun Nehru, who was then the chief factotum of the Indira-Rajiv

darbar, and carried out by governor Jagmohan in Srinagar. But his ouster had made Farooq only more popular in Kashmir and a few years later he seemed all set to make a big comeback. He would certainly have done so if he had not committed the biggest blunder of his political career. In his eagerness to regain his gaddi, Farooq joined hands with Rajiv Gandhi and signed an accord with the Congress. It was touted as the 'accord of accords' between a new generation of young leaders. But from the very start the initiative was doomed to fail. Suspicious as the Kashmiri psyche is of New Delhi, Farooq lost his credibility almost on the day of the accord. He was no longer seen as a Kashmiri hero holding forth against the might of the Centre. Instead he was seen as a stooge of the Central government. Though he did become the chief minister again, popular sentiment in the Valley turned against him. The hour of the pro-Pakistan elements had arrived. This is just what they were waiting for: a discredited Farooq Abdullah. It was during Farooq's second stint as the chief minister that the "azadi" movement assumed menacing proportions in the Valley and armed militancy came into its own.

Under pressure from the Bhartiya Janata Party, the V.P. Singh government once again sent Jagmohan to get a grip on the Valley. Farooq resigned in protest and flew away to London. For years after this he was unable to regain any credibility for himself.

Which is not to say that he ever faded out of the picture. On the contrary, he remained at the very core of it, being perhaps the only leader with whom New Delhi could still talk to — the 'only bridge between New Delhi and Srinagar' as some called him.

Farooq was more like a man caught at the crossroads. It was not hard to understand his predicament. As he once said to this writer, "In Delhi they think I am an agent of Pakistan, in Islamabad they think I am an Indian agent." Farooq said he did not care what Pakistan thought, but he certainly wanted to be trusted by Delhi.

Though Farooq had himself wanted to be a bridge between Delhi and Kashmir, he also knew that he could not regain the trust of the people of Kashmir if they saw him as a lackey of the Centre. For quite a while he tried to tread the middle ground, somewhere between pro-Pakistan Kashmiri extremism and New Delhi's dogged will to wipe out the movement for "liberation". But often enough he found the ground was just not there. Often he felt he was going down the deepening crevice between the aspirations of New Delhi and the Valley. That, among other things, explained why he spent so much time away from both the Valley and New Delhi, in faraway England, where his wife and children had taken refuge. Farooq had become persona non grata in his own home.

Farooq kept telling the leaders in Delhi that if they were really sincere about stopping Kashmir from slipping out of their grasp, they would have to honour and respect the 'lashmiriat' of the people.

Once Delhi realized that a representative government, even with a "made in India" logo, was much more presentable than direct rule through sheer might and repression, it also realized the importance of Farooq Abdullah. He was again under pressure from sections of the Congress to fight the elections together, but he kept away from the "kiss of death". Even so, India stood to gain major advantages from having the Farooq-led National Conference in charge: it could confuse the world public opinion about the crux of the Kashmir problem while it slowly absorbed the disputed state into the Indian Union. It also provided Delhi an opportunity to penetrate the grassroots opinion in Kashmir and divide it by opening the floodgates of concessions and incentives through the government. While Pakistan could claim that the Farooq Abdullah government danced to Delhi's tune, it could not cut much ice. From the point of view of a weary world community, a Kashmir that is seen to be moving towards some sort of stability is better than Kashmir in a state of permanent turmoil. By this token, it would see those who stand for stability, to be standing for peace and those who are demanding freedom, to be only a bit too demanding. As Delhi has experienced, talking to even "pliant" Kashmiri leaders is hugely difficult without a middleman. Farooq Abdullah is just that middleman. Also, for psychological as well as political reasons, Kashmiris would feel more comfortable talking to other Kashmiris than to Delhi itself. This may not mean more credibility for the Farooq government than it already has, which is not much. But does it matter?