Economic & Political History Review, Vol. I, No. IV, May 2026

Prem Nath Bazaz: Ideas, Intentions, and His Place in the Making of Modern India

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Editorial Summary

Prem Nath Bazaz was an important yet often overlooked figure in twentieth century Indian and Kashmiri political thought. Beginning his public career as a nationalist and journalist, he gradually developed a political outlook centred on secularism, democracy, socialism, economic justice, and Kashmiri self-determination. His writings and political work contributed to the transformation of the Muslim Conference into the National Conference and influenced the intellectual climate in which the Naya Kashmir programme emerged. After 1947, Bazaz became increasingly critical of both India and Pakistan over their competing claims to Kashmir and continued to argue for the political rights of Kashmiris. His later engagement with M. N. Roy's Radical Humanism further shaped his critique of communalism and authoritarian politics. This article examines Bazaz's ideas, political activities, and lasting influence.

Introduction

Prem Nath Bazaz (1905–1984) is a unique figure in Indian political thought of the 20th century. People mostly remember him as a journalist and activist in Kashmir. However, his career path from a nationalist close to Congress to the founder of Kashmiri socialism, from a secular idealist to an angry critic of both India and Pakistan's claims on Kashmir, and finally to a "Radical Humanist" influenced by

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M. N. Roy, makes him an interesting example of how India went from being a colony to a democratic and partly socialist state. Bazaz never held a high position in New Delhi and isn't really talked about in Indian political thought textbooks. However, his ideas about secularism, economic redistribution, self-determination, and the dangers of majoritarian religiosity led to debates that are still a big part of Indian politics today. This paper looks at how he became an intellectual, what his main political and economic ideas were, how he got involved in Kashmiri and Indian politics, and how much he changed or did not change India's political and economic path after him. It should be noted at the outset that this is a work of synthesis, drawing together recent secondary scholarship on Bazaz rather than presenting new archival research.

Secular Nationalism and the Making of the National Conference

Born on 13 July 1905 in Kashmir to a Kashmiri Pandit family, Bazaz was educated at S. P. College, Srinagar, and later took his degree from Punjab University[2]. He entered public life in August 1930 by joining the Women's Welfare Trust, and in 1931 was elected president of the Sri Pratap College Yuvak Sabha, a youth organization that became a nursery for the emerging Kashmiri political class[3]. The year 1931 was formative for Kashmiri politics generally; it saw the first large-scale popular agitation against the autocratic rule of the Dogra Maharaja Hari Singh, an event that pushed a generation of young Kashmiris Hindu and Muslim alike toward organized political activity.

Bazaz's chosen instrument was journalism rather than party office. In 1932 he started the Daily Vitasta to advocate "secularism, democracy and freedom," and in 1935, in collaboration with Sheikh Mohammad Abdullah, he founded the weekly (later daily) Hamdard.[4] Journalism gave Bazaz a platform independent of any single organization and allowed him to articulate a political vocabulary communal harmony, responsible government, economic justice before it had settled into party programmes. It also made him a target; he was shot at in April 1947 over his editorial positions, reportedly the first Kashmiri journalist to suffer such

[2]Advocate Asrar Ali, "The Paradoxes of Kashmir," review of The Paradoxes of Kashmir, by Prem Nath Bazaz, Kashmir Pen, 2021.

[3]Ibid.

[4]Ibid.

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an attack for his writing, according to a later journalistic profile.[5]

Bazaz's most consequential intervention was ideological rather than institutional. He was among the principal architects of the transformation of the Muslim Conference a religiously defined party representing Kashmiri Muslims against Dogra rule into the National Conference, a nominally secular party open to all communities. Recent scholarship based on Bazaz's Urdu-language writings in Hamdard argues that he was "one of the chief architects" of this shift, using his editorials through the 1930s to press the case that a movement organized around religious identity could never secure genuine self-government, and that Kashmiri Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs needed a shared, non-communal platform to confront Dogra autocracy.[6] Sheikh Abdullah himself later credited a meeting with Bazaz at Shahi Garden as the moment the idea of a secular, united platform took root[7]. It is worth being explicit about the historiographical status of this claim. The longstanding narrative of Kashmiri politics credits Sheikh Abdullah as the principal author of the shift from the Muslim Conference to the National Conference; Dar (2023) revises that consensus by recovering Bazaz's own Hamdard editorials as evidence of a more central role for him. This paper follows Dar's reading because those editorials predate the National Conference's founding and articulate the non-communal argument in Bazaz's own words, rather than crediting him with it retrospectively. That said, this remains a single-source revision of an established historiography, and it is presented here as a persuasive but contested account rather than as settled fact.

This was not merely tactical positioning. Bazaz's writings from the period repeatedly diagnose communalism on both the Hindu and Muslim sides as the central obstacle to genuine popular sovereignty in Kashmir, and he used Hamdard to argue against the "communal mentality" he believed was being manufactured by vested interests rather than arising organically from religious difference[8]. His

[5] "Prem Nath Bazaz: First Kashmiri Journalist to Receive a Bullet for His Editorials," Brighter Kashmir, July, 2019.

[6] Abdul Maajid Dar, "Kashmiri Politics: Pandit Prem Nath Bazaz and the Struggle for Inclusive Nationalism, 1930–1940," South Asia Research 43, no. 3 (2023): 447–463.

[7] Sheikh Mohammad Abdullah, The Blazing Chinar: An Autobiography, trans. M. Amin (Srinagar: Gulshan Books, 2013), cited in "Kashmiri Politics: Pandit Prem Nath Bazaz and the Struggle for Inclusive Nationalism, 1930–1940."

[8] Dar, "Kashmiri Politics," citing Prem Nath Bazaz's Hamdard editorials, "Firkawarana Zehniyat Kyu Kar Istewar Hogi?" (1936) and "Nationalism Ka Mafoom" (1936).

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slogan "Kashmir belongs to Kashmiris" was meant to displace both dynastic legitimacy (the Maharaja's claim) and confessional claims (Hindu or Muslim majoritarian claims) with a territorial-civic definition of political belonging an idea that prefigures, in miniature, the debates over civic versus religious nationalism that would consume India as a whole after 1947.

Economic Ideas: Socialism, Land, and the Naya Kashmir Manifesto

Bazaz was not only a secularist; he was a socialist, and this economic dimension of his thought is often underplayed relative to his communal politics. He founded the Kashmir Socialist Party and later the Kisan Mazdoor Conference (Peasants and Workers Conference), organizational vehicles through which he sought to attach an explicit class programme to the anti-Dogra movement.[9] This detail is documented primarily in Nagin Bazaz's biography of his father, a valuable source but, as an authorized family account, not a disinterested one. For Bazaz, political freedom from autocratic rule was inseparable from economic freedom from a semi-feudal agrarian order in which the Maharaja distributed vast tracts of land as jagirs to his courtiers while the peasantry remained landless and heavily taxed.[10]

This socialist current fed directly into the "Naya Kashmir" (New Kashmir) manifesto adopted by the National Conference in September 1944 at Sopore arguably the single most consequential policy document to emerge from the pre-independence Kashmiri political movement. Scholars have traced Naya Kashmir to the confluence of Sheikh Abdullah's progressive nationalism (in which Bazaz was a formative influence in the 1930s) and the more explicitly Marxist input of communists such as B. P. L. Bedi and G. M. Sadiq in the 1940s.[11] The manifesto's National Economic Plan called for the "socialization of all instruments of production" and a wholesale "reorganization of property relationships," while its agrarian provisions promised the abolition of feudal land grants and redistribution of land to the tiller without compensation to landlords.[12] This description of the

[9]Nagin Bazaz, Ahead of His Times: Prem Nath Bazaz: His Life and Work (New Delhi: Sterling Publishers, 1983).

[10]D. N. Dhar, Socio-Economic History of Kashmir Peasantry: From Ancient to Modern Times (Srinagar: Centre for Kashmir Studies, 1989), cited in Dar, "Kashmiri Politics."

[11]Tarika Khattar, "Progressive Nationalism and the Making of New Kashmir (1931–1947)," Global Intellectual History 11, no. 2 (2025): 185–211.

[12]"New Kashmir Manifesto & Economic Reforms from 1944–1963," Kashmir Pulse, 2021.

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manifesto's text follows a journalistic summary of it rather than the primary document, and is offered here as corroboration, not as the anchoring source. When Jammu and Kashmir adopted its own constitution in 1956, Naya Kashmir's principles were written into the Directive Principles of State Policy, and the land reforms that followed in the 1950s were, by regional standards, unusually far-reaching.[13]

It matters that Naya Kashmir combined this socialist economic programme with guarantees of religious freedom, a right to (limited) private property, and notably a proposed constitutional monarchy, rather than a Soviet-style single-party state.[14] This hybrid quality mirrors Bazaz's own political temperament; a redistributive economic vision married to procedural liberalism and civil liberties, rather than the vanguardism of the contemporary Communist Party of India. In this sense Bazaz, though never in government, helped seed one of the earliest and most concrete instances of socialist economic planning within the wider Indian Union, a regional anticipation of the "socialistic pattern of society" that the Indian National Congress would only formally adopt as national policy at its 1955 Avadi session, a decade later.

Disillusionment, Self-Determination, and the Critique of Both States

Bazaz's relationship with Sheikh Abdullah and the National Conference he had helped build soured after 1947. As the political battle over Kashmir's accession to India unfolded, Bazaz took an independent and increasingly unpopular position. He opposed unconditional accession to India, was equally critical of Pakistan's claim to Kashmir by right of Muslim-majority demography, and insisted that the Kashmiri people themselves through a plebiscite should determine their political future.[15] This consistency cost him dearly. He was arrested by the "emergency administration" in October 1947 and subsequently exiled from the Valley, spending much of the rest of his life in Delhi.[16] As one retrospective account puts it, "the

[13] Ibid.

[14] Khattar, "Progressive Nationalism and the Making of New Kashmir (1931–1947).

[15] Shahla Hussain, "Kashmiri Visions of Freedom: The Past and the Present," in Kashmir after 2019: Completing the Partition (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2022); Prem Nath Bazaz, Azad Kashmir: A Democratic Socialist Conception (1951).

[16] "Prem Nath Bazaz: First Kashmiri Journalist to Receive a Bullet for His Editorials," Brighter Kashmir, July, 2019.

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Muslims hated him and the Pandits did not love him" Bazaz had positioned himself against the emerging communal consensus on both sides of the new border.[17] This quotation is drawn from a journalistic retrospective rather than a scholarly source and is offered as illustrative rather than authoritative.

From exile, Bazaz continued to write prolifically: Inside Kashmir (1941), Azad Kashmir: A Democratic Socialist Conception (1951), The History of Struggle for Freedom in Kashmir (1954), Kashmir in Crucible (1967), and Democracy through Intimidation and Terror (1978) form the backbone of his published output, alongside numerous pamphlets such as Voice of Suppressed Kashmir (1953).[18] Read together, these works articulate a consistent argument; that neither Indian nor Pakistani nationalism could substitute for the Kashmiri's own right to self-determination, and that the failure to hold the plebiscite promised at the United Nations would eventually radicalize a generation of Kashmiri youth. His 1954 history contains a passage widely quoted by later commentators warning that Kashmiri youth would be "forced to take up guns" if their political aspirations continued to be denied; a prediction read by many as prescient of the armed insurgency that began in the late 1980s, several years after his death.[19]

Bazaz and the Wider Indian Political Debate: Secularism, "Ram Rajya," and Radical Humanism

Bazaz's significance to Indian, as opposed to purely Kashmiri, political thought lies substantially in his later writing, where he turned his secularist critique outward onto the Indian republic itself. His book The Shadow of Ram Rajya over India (and related essays such as Whither India after Independence) extended the anti-communal argument he had developed in Kashmir into a broader warning against the drift of Indian public life toward a majoritarian, Hindu-inflected idiom of nationhood the invocation of "Ram Rajya" as a civic ideal.[20] Much of the biographical texture in this section draws on Nagin Bazaz's biography of his father, a valuable but not disinterested source, being an authorized family account, and

[17]Ibid.

[18]Prem Nath Bazaz, The History of Struggle for Freedom in Kashmir (Srinagar: Kashmir Publishing Company, 1954).

[19]Bazaz, The History of Struggle for Freedom in Kashmir (New Delhi: Kashmir Publishing House, 1954.)

[20]Nagin Bazaz, Ahead of His Times: Prem Nath Bazaz: His Life and Work (New Delhi: Sterling Publishers, 1983).

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its characterizations of Bazaz's motives are treated here as testimony rather than as settled fact. For Bazaz, a state that draped its constitutional secularism in the symbolic language of a single religious tradition risked reproducing, in a Hindu-majority register, the same communal politics he had spent the 1930s fighting in its Muslim-majority Kashmiri form. This makes him one of relatively few mid-century Indian public intellectuals to apply a symmetrical, non-partisan critique of communalism "criticizing Hindu majoritarianism and Muslim communalism with equal vigour, and refusing the more common pattern of treating only the "minority" community's communalism as a problem. In his final political phase, Bazaz gravitated toward the Radical Humanism of M. N. Roy, the former Comintern revolutionary who, after breaking with Marxism-Leninism, developed a philosophy combining scientific rationalism, individual liberty, and a residual commitment to economic planning without one-party rule.[21] This affiliation is telling; it shows Bazaz, by the 1950s and 1960s, seeking an intellectual home that preserved his early socialist commitments while explicitly rejecting authoritarian vanguard politics a position that placed him at odds both with the Congress establishment and with the organized Indian Left. His brief and, by his own biographers' account, uncharacteristic association with the Janata Party in 1977 is generally read as a late, pragmatic alliance against the authoritarianism he associated with the Emergency (1975–77), rather than a genuine ideological conversion.[22]

Bazaz's influence operated less through formal power than through the diffusion of ideas and the concrete example of Naya Kashmir. Three claims can be made with reasonable confidence: First, Bazaz was instrumental in converting Kashmiri politics from a communal to a civic register in the 1930s, a transformation with consequences far beyond the Valley: it produced the National Conference as India's chief secular political partner in Kashmir at the moment of accession in 1947, which in turn shaped the constitutional relationship including the special status later codified in Article 370 between Jammu and Kashmir and the Indian Union.[23] It is plausible that, without a secular Kashmiri political interlocutor of the kind Bazaz helped create, India's own claim to a plural, non-confessional nationhood would have been harder to sustain in the one Muslim-majority region it governed

[21] Ibid.

[22] "Prem Nath Bazaz: First Kashmiri Journalist to Receive a Bullet for His Editorials," Brighter Kashmir, July, 2019.

[23] Yasir Bashir, "Prem Nath Bazaz: Founder of 'Nationalistic' Trope in Kashmir," International Journal of Kashmir Studies, Vol. 1 July-December No.2, 2018.

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directly. This is offered as a plausible counterfactual rather than a demonstrated causal claim; the paper's more confident claims rest on the institutional evidence discussed above, not on this inference.

Second, through his advocacy within the socialist and peasant organizations he founded, and through his early ideological influence on the National Conference before the 1940s Marxist turn associated with Bedi and Sadiq, Bazaz contributed to Naya Kashmir a document whose land-to-the-tiller principle anticipated, by several years, the land reform legislation that most Indian states would attempt (with far less success) after 1947.[24] Kashmir's comparatively thorough abolition of landlordism in the 1950s stands as one of independent India's more concrete instances of the "socialistic pattern" the Congress would only nationally embrace later; Bazaz's early advocacy is part of the intellectual prehistory of that outcome, even though the manifesto's final drafting owed more to others by the 1940s.

Third, and more diffusely, his critique of Ram Rajya-style majoritarianism and his insistence on a symmetrical, even-handed secularism anticipated a strand of Indian political criticism that would recur throughout the following decades, in debates over the Uniform Civil Code, minority rights, and the proper relationship between religious symbolism and the constitutional state. He did not shape policy directly here he held no office and led no mass movement outside Kashmir but his writing forms part of a lineage of dissenting secularist thought that runs alongside, and sometimes against, the Congress's own more instrumental version of secularism.

Against these contributions must be set the limits of his influence. Bazaz's insistence on plebiscite and self-determination for Kashmir was rejected by the Indian state, marginalized him politically after 1947, and left him, in the words of one obituary tradition, betrayed by former friends and persecuted by the government he had helped bring to Kashmir.[25] His economic vision, embedded in Naya Kashmir, was substantially implemented in Jammu and Kashmir but was never adopted as a template for India as a whole; India's own land reforms proceeded

[24] "New Kashmir Manifesto & Economic Reforms from 1944–1963," Kashmir Pulse, 2021; Hussain, "Kashmiri Visions of Freedom."

[25] "Prem Nath Bazaz: First Kashmiri Journalist to Receive a Bullet for His Editorials," Brighter Kashmir, July, 2019.

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unevenly, state by state, shaped far more by the Congress's own compromises with landed interests than by Bazaz's Kashmiri example. He remains, as recent historiography acknowledges, a figure "largely ignored" by the dominant discourse on Kashmiri and Indian politics despite his formative role a case of an intellectual whose ideas outran his institutional power.[26]

Conclusion

Prem Nath Bazaz's career illustrates a recurring pattern in the political thought of the subcontinent's transition to independence; an intellectual working at the regional periphery whose ideas about secularism, economic redistribution, and self-determination proved more durable than his personal political fortunes. His central intention to build a Kashmir, and by extension an India, whose political community was defined by shared citizenship and economic justice rather than religious majoritarianism was only partially realized. It shaped the founding compact between Kashmir and the Indian Union, seeded one of independent India's earliest experiments in land reform and economic socialism, and articulated a critique of majoritarian nationalism that later generations of Indian secularists would echo, often without knowing his name. Yet the same intention, applied consistently to the unresolved question of Kashmiri self-determination, isolated him from every centre of power Kashmiri, Indian, and Pakistani alike and ensured that his legacy would remain that of a prescient but marginal figure: "ahead of his times," as his son's biography of him is aptly titled.[27]

Endnotes

1). Advocate Asrar Ali, "The Paradoxes of Kashmir," review of *The Paradoxes of Kashmir*, by Prem Nath Bazaz, *Kashmir Pen*, 2021.

2). Ibid.

3). Ibid.

4). "Prem Nath Bazaz: First Kashmiri Journalist to Receive a Bullet for His Editorials," *Brighter Kashmir*, July 2019.

[26]Dar, "Kashmiri Politics," abstract.

[27]Nagin Bazaz, Ahead of His Times: Prem Nath Bazaz: His Life and Work (New Delhi: Sterling Publishers, 1983)

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5). Abdul Maajid Dar, "Kashmiri Politics: Pandit Prem Nath Bazaz and the Struggle for Inclusive Nationalism, 1930–1940," *South Asia Research* 43, no. 3 (2023): 447–463.

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18). Bazaz, *The History of Struggle for Freedom in Kashmir* (New Delhi: Kashmir Publishing House, 1954).

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