By the end of 1948 Junagadh and Hyderabad had been tackled. Kashmir proved much more challenging. Unlike Hyderabad, or even Junagadh, the contest over Kashmir involved the vital interests of both Pakistan and India. These stemmed from the state’s strategic location atop the plains of Punjab, athwart the trade route from Central Asia, and abutting Afghanistan and China. For Pakistan, Kashmir was also important from an economic perspective, not least because its agriculture was sustained by the rivers flowing through the state. Subsequently, Kashmir came to be invested with the hopes and fears of India and Pakistan. In the Stygian darkness after Partition, Gandhi and Nehru regarded Kashmir’s accession as a powerful affirmation that India would not become a Hindu Pakistan. As Nehru observed, “If Kashmir went, the position of Muslims in India would become more difficult. In fact, there would be a tendency of people to accept a purely communal Hindu viewpoint. That would mean an upheaval of the greatest magnitude in India.”

To the Pakistanis, Kashmir’s accession seemed but a prelude to the eventual annulment of Partition.

The maharaja of Jammu and Kashmir, Hari Singh, belonged to the Hindu Dogra dynasty that had ruled the state since its creation by the British in 1846. Like many of his contemporaries Hari Singh did not

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1 Nehru to Stafford Cripps, 17 December 1948, cited in Brown, Nehru, 213.
take an active interest in governance. Much of his time was spent in hunting and derby. Several months of the year he spent in Bombay, where he maintained a string of excellent race horses. As his son would recall, “my father was much happier racing than administering the state, which chore he largely left to his carefully chosen prime minister and a small council of ministers, mostly from outside Jammu and Kashmir.”3 This aura of feudal shiftlessness could, however, be misleading; for it concealed the prince’s sharp, if inflexible, political intellect.

In mid-1947 the maharaja was on the horns of a dilemma. Geographic contiguity and religious composition suggested that accession to Pakistan would be the natural course to adopt; but Hari Singh was loath to join a self-professed Islamic state. Yet if he acceded to India, his subjects might resent the decision.4 Furthermore, given the Congress Party’s stance on the states, he feared that accession to India would result in a haemorrhaging of his own power. The maharaja procrastinated. He signed a standstill agreement with Pakistan and offered one to India but made no moves towards accession. Hari Singh’s Micawberism stemmed from his hope that Kashmir might yet manage to stay independent.

Outside the palace the most organized political force in Kashmir was the National Conference led by its charismatic leader Sheikh Mohammed Abdullah. Born in 1905 to the family of a shawl merchant, Abdullah took a master’s degree in science from Aligarh University. Despite his qualifications he was denied a position by the state government, which was thoroughly dominated by Hindus.5 Forced to take up a job as a schoolteacher, Abdullah turned towards political activity, speaking out on behalf of his fellow Muslims and against the maharaja. He played an instrumental role in the creation of the All-Jammu Kashmir Muslim Conference in 1932. Seven years later


4 For an excellent study of the formation of a distinctive Kashmiri identity, see Chitralekha Zutshi, Languages of Belonging: Islam, Regional Identity, and the Making of Kashmir (Delhi: Permanent Black, 2004).