
The Story of Kashmir and Its People Beyond the Metanarrative of Political Conflict

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The edited volume *Kashmir: History, Politics, Representation* brings together 14 essays on the region of Kashmir, ranging from the 14th century into the present day. The collection features interdisciplinary work from a wide range of fields, including literature, film and media studies, gender studies, history, political science, anthropology, religious studies, and sociology. Shifting the lens from the high politics of the Kashmir “conflict,” to “less well-known aspects and areas of Kashmir,” it seeks to destabilise the notion of Kashmir as simply a disputed territory (p 3). In doing so, it aims to

illuminate the diversity and range of experiences, ideas, institutions, individuals, forms of resistance and interactions with the outside world that have shaped, and continue to shape, Kashmir and its people. (p ix)

The study of Kashmir has made substantial progress from the time when it was mired in scholarly disputes over the nature of events in 1947, or analysis of the multiple causes of the armed uprising against the Indian state in the late 1980s. As a result, the sheer range of scholarly possibilities that the volume as a whole considers, is promising.

Diversity in Perspectives

The volume reflects a number of recent developments in the historiography of Kashmir. One, the essays expand the geographical focus from the Kashmir Valley to the other regions of the princely state of Jammu and Kashmir that are “very much a part of the Kashmir dispute” (p 3). In situating the importance of Azad Kashmir in instigating the Kashmir dispute through the little examined Poonch rebellion against the Dogra rule, Christopher Snedden’s work depicts its

BOOK REVIEWS

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contested relationship within Pakistan; Azad Kashmir is highly dependent on Pakistan, and therefore “lacks integrity as a genuinely autonomous entity.” Martin Sokefeld’s work in Gilgit–Baltistan shows the antagonistic political aspirations of the people of the region, who wish to fully integrate into Pakistan, but continue to be treated as part of a “disputed territory” and thus do not enjoy the full merits of citizenship. Mohita Bhatia’s compelling look into caste politics in Jammu reveals how everyday Dalit assertion against the upper castes can still coexist with their participation in a pro-Hindu and nationalist politics that stands in contrast to Kashmiri Muslim aspirations for freedom in the Valley (p 11). Here, regional/religious identity overshadows broader caste identities and solidarities.

While attention to the multilayered politics of the entire state is important in understanding the diversity within the state, one must note that it has often been misappropriated by particular political agendas that seek to undermine the demand for self-determination—not just in the Kashmir Valley—but also throughout the state. Indeed, in an article for *Kindle Magazine* anthropologist Mona Bhan asks, “To what extent is this narrative meant to detract from the foundational question of Kashmir’s disputed political status in order to reinforce the justness and legitimacy of India’s rule over Kashmir?” While the edited volume calls for a multipronged approach

to address this diversity in any solution to the Kashmir dispute, it is crucial that this diversity not be utilised to showcase the “intractable nature of political divides in the state,” or to undermine legitimate demands for self-determination, from wherever they may arise (Bhan 2016). Furthermore, it is equally important to foreground the role of the state and other institutions in crafting or manipulating existing divisions along religious/regional/or linguistic lines.

Second, these essays also show how particular manifestations of religious identity as well as relations between diverse religious communities come to be constructed over a historical period and in response to specific socio-economic developments. In doing so, they shift our attention away from essentialist understandings of religious identities and their interactions. Mridu Rai’s essay examines how Kashmiri Muslims used the colonial archaeological project in Kashmir as a means to demand control over religious spaces, as well as political rights as a community. Not unlike colonial practices of statecraft such as the census, “archeology ended up amplifying religiously defined identities within communities” (p 27).

Chitralkha Zutshi’s essay foregrounds contestations over urban space—in particular, shrines—under the Dogras, how these contestations came to shape how Islam in Kashmir would be defined, and how Kashmiri Muslim protests against the state would take form. Haley Dushinski’s article on Kashmiri Hindus showcases how homogenising community discourses by Kashmiri Pandit organisations after 1990 “reflected and refracted right-wing majoritarian projects of the saffron wave of Hindu nationalism” (p 172). This affinity was constructed over a series of events; it was not a teleological given at the time of Pandit migration to Jammu. In addition, Ananya Jahanara Kabir’s essay on the changing representations of Kashmir in popular Indian cinema since the 1960s highlights how India’s anxieties about its own Muslim population, especially in the context of the war on terror, are able to ideologically co-opt the Kashmir issue,

and portray Kashmiri Muslims as violent terrorists. All of these essays underscore how colonial practices of statecraft, contestations over religious space, migration, and cinema shape particular manifestations of religious identities, and their relationship to the state.

Third, these essays also situate Kashmir in a longue durée of relations, politics, and identities. Using a number of different texts, including hagiographies, across centuries, Dean Accardi's essay shows how the indigenous medieval mystics, Lal Ded and Nund Rishi, were deployed for diverse political ends by the writers of these texts. In the act of narration, however, they became embedded in the Kashmiri spiritual landscape. The "cumulative result of these retellings is a weaving of these saints deeper and deeper into the fabric of Kashmir, and Kashmiri identity, thus rendering them synonymous with Kashmir itself," Accardi concludes (p 262). Vanessa Chishti's work examines the Kashmiri shawl as central to European representations of Kashmir in the late 18th and 19th centuries. When Kashmiri shawls were deemed exclusive and authentic, Kashmir was posited as an untouched paradise in European narratives. As Europe began to mass-produce shawls, the desire for Kashmiri shawls fell, and the representation of Kashmir shifted. As Chishti argues, the "Valley came to be seen as a frontier of the British empire and the theater for British capital and enterprise" (p 280).

Contemporary Politics

The remainder of the essays directly confront the politics of the present. Andrew Whitehead's essay uses the story of *Naya* (New) Kashmir to show how "there has been no enduring settlement between Kashmiri and Indian nationalisms, no agreement about the extent of autonomy for the state, and it is not hard to see why such a resolution has proved so elusive" (p 86). Shehla Hussain writes of the shifting meanings of the term *azaadi* from the 1930s to the present. She dispels the notion of freedom as a recent construct, and argues that its meaning must be broadened from political emancipation to a "concept informed by human dignity, economic equity and social justice" (p 90).

Reeta Chowdhari Tremblay asks whether good governance can mitigate people's demands for freedom. She argues that it cannot, as it does not address "the deeper demands for dignity and social justice that are integral ... to Kashmiris' sense of religion and regional identity" (p 11). In the last chapter, Suvir Kaul looks at a number of poems to explore trauma and resistance. He argues that these poems are not just a means of resistance, but also challenge tropes of loss, discord, and dispossession itself, in an attempt to build towards a more ethical future and serve as a conduit of political mobilisation.

While the chapters each push the direction of Kashmir Studies in the aforementioned directions, the introductory chapter by Zutshi entitled "New Directions in the Study of Kashmir," fails to truly break ground in articulating the "newness" in approaches to studying Kashmir. This is especially surprising in light of Zutshi's own previous works, *Languages of Belonging: Islam, Regional Identity, and the Making of Kashmir*, as well as *Kashmir's Contested Pasts: Narratives, Geographies, and the Historical Imagination*, which tread similar ground. The introduction also upholds a number of (Indian) statist perspectives, not dissimilar to an earlier round of historiography that sought to reclaim Kashmir for India.

In the introduction, the region of Kashmir is defined in reference to historical literature—in both Sanskrit and Persian—as well as Kashmir's incorporation into the princely state of Jammu and Kashmir in the colonial period. However, the scope of Kashmir Studies itself is not examined. Why is it important

to even have "Kashmir Studies" and what are some of its important thematic and theoretical contributions? While the introduction makes reference to how the set of essays reflect the failures of the postcolonial era, more could be said in interrogating the use of both "colonial" and "postcolonial" in relation to Kashmir.

Further, the introduction argues that the set of essays transcend the meta-narratives of political conflict, to probe other, equally significant, arenas of conflict that inform the Kashmir dispute (p 3). What is seen a "political conflict" is not clarified—indeed, a vast majority of the essays do touch upon politics, broadly defined—and the political conflict is implicated and plays a crucial role in the types of questions a vast majority of the essays examine. Thus, it is perhaps not useful to "transcend" political conflict, but rather, foreground it as working alongside other arenas of conflict. For example, it would be difficult to imagine the extent of gender violence in Seema Kazi's essay without foregrounding the political conditions upon which Indian forces are able to exercise complete impunity.

Challenging 'Conflict'

In addition, when speaking of Kashmir, the language that scholars use is laden with particular meanings and political intent. For there to indeed be a new direction in Kashmir Studies, we must be, first and foremost, ready to shed the burden of nationalist discourses that continue to idealise the nation state, and Kashmiri aspirations as being simply "alienated" from this ideal. This begins with challenging the use of the term

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“conflict” as it foregrounds Indian and Pakistani nationalist narratives over those of Kashmiris (which the volume purportedly seeks to do). At what point, then, do we shift our frames from seeing Kashmir more accurately as a military occupation instead of an interstate “conflict?” In the introduction, and elsewhere, there are also repeated references to the “insurgency,” and “secessionist” politics which once again foregrounds Indian statist narratives, and frames the issue exclusively from a security lens.

Indeed, there are a number of times in the introduction where an attempt is made to reclaim Kashmir, in particular for the Indian state, by asking how national movements can be accommodated within states instead of being seen as threats to the national interest. Zutshi states, “Kashmiri

nationalism, which at one time seemed perfectly aligned with the narrative of Indian nationalism, now seemed irreconcilable with it” (p 9). A cursory look at Kashmiri nationalism will reveal how it was always deeply fractured and contested; while a particular elite group of Kashmiri leaders may have identified with Indian nationalism, there is no evidence to suggest that “Kashmiri nationalism,” as a whole, did so. Even this elite group had their own qualms about Indian nationalism, as we can see in the case of Sheikh Abdullah.

Zutshi also argues, “Kashmiris seek to distance themselves from India and claim a greater identification of Kashmir with the Islamic world, defined increasingly in West Asian rather than South Asian terms.” One could of course question why Kashmir needs to be reclaimed

exclusively on South Asian terms; surely a region such as Kashmir, which existed at the confluence of multiple civilisations can go beyond the contours of South Asia. Furthermore, why is a greater identification with the entity known as the “Islamic world” immediately seen as a negative development? Perhaps a more critical question would be to examine exactly how Kashmir came to exclusive fall within the ambit of “South Asia.”

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