

The Parchment of Kashmir

Reviewed by David Taylor

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A whole generation of young men and women has grown up in Kashmir since the beginning of the present troubles in 1989. For them, the omnipresence of security forces on the streets and in the countryside has always been the backdrop to their lives, as has the chaotic situation in neighboring Pakistan, unable to resolve its own internal struggles over its political values and processes. These harsh realities and the accompanying political and diplomatic stalemates have led many, especially but not only outside South Asia, to assume that the only lasting solution has in some sense to be based on the status quo, i.e. on the contingent outcome of the recurrent armed conflicts and present stand-off between India and Pakistan. The line of control may once again be renamed, as it was in 1972, and greater movement from one side to the other permitted, but in essence realpolitik will have determined the outcome. Yet at the same time, all the parties to the conflict, including the Indian and Pakistani states, try to capture and reinvent ideas about the past in order to ground and justify their current positions. Most strikingly, in the last few years there has been a contest to appropriate and own the idea of Kashmiriyat and turn it to partisan advantage. Several of the essayists in the present volume note this, and their pieces refine our understanding of the term and its use and misuse in current discourse. All of the contributors to the volume are Kashmiri intellectuals and writers, and with two exceptions are currently resident in the state. These are the editor herself, who is an expatriate Kashmiri based in North America, and one contributor from the Pandit community who is currently teaching elsewhere in India. The contributions therefore emerge very directly from debates among people who have lived together for centuries and who are trying to find a basis to continue to do so.

Several chapters cover the perhaps familiar ground of devotional religious traditions and their roots in Sufism and Shaivism and, even earlier, in Buddhist thought. Nund Rishi and Lal-Ded are together the focus of the chapters by M. H. Zaffar and Neerja Mattoo. As Mattoo puts it, 'syncretic creativity is the outcome of a reciprocal process of symbiosis', a process exemplified by the long tradition of Kashmiri mystical poetry. A more personal contribution by Mohammad Ishaq Khan pays tribute to the vitality of that tradition in the period before 1989, and to

its twentieth-century exponents whom he had known, men such as Hazrat Mohammad Ahsan Shah of Pampore. In perhaps the most thought-provoking piece in the volume, Rattan Lal Hangloo, conscious that many of his fellow-Pandits reject the concept of Kashmiriyat as a cover for Muslim-majority dominance in the Valley, subjects the concept to a rigorous examination. He shows clearly that there are distinct religious and cultural elements to it. While the former emerge from the mystical traditions discussed by Zaffar and Mattoo, writers such as T. N. Madan see Kashmiriyat as the outcome of quotidian interactions, economic, social, cultural and political, over a long period of time within a constricted geographical and ecological space that have led to a sense of mutual recognition and togetherness. Hangloo prefers the latter approach (which in fact can encompass the first). Strong regional traditions that transcend narrow religious boundaries are of course common across South Asia, but an understanding of the specific historical context in Kashmir helps us to understand why Kashmiriyat, in its various guises, has had such a strong hold on the popular imagination.

Kashmiriyat could also be the basis of a distinctive political approach. Since the 1930s a new middle class leadership emerged in the Vale of Kashmir, typified by Sheikh Abdullah himself. The idea of a strong, indigenous political and cultural identity could easily be used to protest against the arbitrarily imposed rule of the Dogra dynasty. Rekha Chowdhary's valuable piece emphasizes how the relatively radical demands made by the National Conference, including the land reform measures implemented immediately after 1947 which went further than anything contemplated in India at that time, reinforced the sense of the region's distinct identity. Accession to India, in the eyes of Sheikh Abdullah and his followers, was to be a way of facilitating further economic and social reform for the people of the state within a federal union. Kashmiris could move at their own pace and not be held back by less progressive parts of the country.

External ideologies, based on communally constructed identities, have increasingly challenged and undermined the strength and coherence of the concept of Kashmiriyat, and some of the younger generation reject it altogether as a device to reinforce their subordinate status. It has also, as a number of the contributors emphasise, been undermined by the actions of the Indian state, not simply its policy since 1989 of using overwhelming force to repress political dissent, but its earlier attempts to manipulate local political processes, starting from the dismissal of Sheikh Abdullah in 1953 and his replacement by renegade members of his own party. As in other parts of the world, manipulation of the political process for short-term advantage leads in the end to the rise of more powerful and more irreconcilable challengers.