

Understanding facets of a complex syndrome

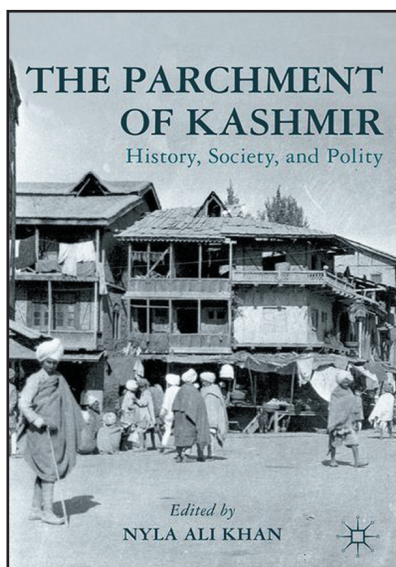
Hari Jaisingh

The beauty of the book under review is its rich cluster of Kashmiri scholars, writers and thinkers who discuss various aspects of Kashmir in idioms and ideas they believe in. Their reading and evaluation of Kashmir of yesterday, today and tomorrow vary but in the process do provide varied insights into the cultural heritage of the people and their civilisational moorings which have kept them emotionally tied in the silken threads of oneness, loosely called Kashmiriat and Sufism, notwithstanding politico-religious differences and occasional tension and conflicts.

Nyla Ali Khan has a rich academic background. She has handled the central theme of the volume with considerable sensitivity and subtlety while giving the contributors the freedom to express themselves freely in areas of their interest or specialization. Her idea has been to create better understanding of the complexities of issues and society caught in the crossfire of different interests.

Explaining her overall perspective on the situation, she says in her introduction to the volume:

“I wanted them (contributors) to highlight the indigenous Kashmiri point of view. I wasn't looking for “dispassionate” or “objective” analyses, but the analyses of subjectivity, which is what the writers have done. In this cross-disciplinary work, some perceptions present the reality of empirical situations, which can be restricting, in some, the theoretical construct of Kashmiriyat is romanticized, but that is the revival of strategic essentialism in these fractured times”.



The Parchment of Kashmir

History, Society, and Polity
Edited by Nyla Ali Khan,

Palgrave Macmillan
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Nyla Ali Khan

She further elaborates: “The concept of Kashmiriyat is not only cultural but political as well, which can be revitalized by the resuscitation of cultural institutions and redressal of political grievances”. She has been honest about the subjectivity of the contributors on the themes they have talked about.

The part one of the book broadly deals with the “constructions of Kashmiri Identity within the overplaying discourses on Kashmiriyat, Islam, Saivism and Sufism. This challenging theme has been dealt with by Mohammad Ishq Khan, former Professor and Head of the History department at Kashmir University, and Rattan Lall Hangloo, now Chief Proctor at the University of Hyderabad.

The subjects of “cultural syncretism and deconstruction of a monolithic culture are competently discussed by M H Zaffar (Director of the Institute of Kashmir Studies, University of Kashmir) and Neerja Mattoo (Professor Emeritus in Srinagar) in which mystic thoughts and their poems figure extensively. We have also analyses of Kashmir's sensitive areas of “sovereignty, democratic governance and regional stability” by Noor Ahmed Baba, (JNU, ND), Gull Mohammad Wani (Associate Professor of Political Science, University of Kashmir) and Rekha Chowdhary who looks at the State from the angle of what she calls the Indian project of nationalism.

The other sensitive themes of sociological dimensions of conflict, insurgency, counter-insurgency, militarization and a monolithic nationalism are handled by Bashir Ahmed Dabla (Professor at the Department of Sociology, University of

Kashmir). Hameeda Naeem (Associate Professor of English, University of Kashmir) analyses “politics of exclusion”.

From this wide-ranging thematic sweep of the volume, the richness of “mosaic portrait” of Kashmir in all its indigenous cultural perspective and political predicament does stand out. Still, there are some missing links in the narration of historical facets, complexities of society and hazardous functioning of the polity. Having myself authored the book: “Kashmir: A tale of shame.” (UBSPD), I find the volume selective in approach while discussing the contemporary setting. It has overlooked certain aspects of pre-Islamic historical period which has provided the state its basic richness in cultural and literary ethos. The Aryan Hindu gave Kashmir its Golden Age. The Nilmata Purana is a goldmine of information on Kashmir’s legends and sacred places which strike an emotional chord with the rest of India even today. Then, great historian Kalhana gives us a fascinating account of how Kashmir became part of the Ashoka Empire and the founding of Srinagara and spread of Buddhism.

Interestingly, Chinese scholar Hieun Tsang found ample evidence of religious tolerance in Kashmir. In the 11th century Al Biruni observed that the land was “the high school of Hindu science”. The Valley then showed remarkable development in such disciplines as medicine, astrology and astronomy etc. The book might help dismantle some myths and prejudices often used and misused by vested interests to serve their purposes. Take, for instance, the concept of Kashmiriyat. It has been given different interpretations by contributors, depending on which side of the political divide they happen to be.

Gull Mohammad Wani has made an honest attempt to explore “accommodative and integrative edges of Kashmir identity”. He feels that this can be reenergized if there is a commitment to address the traumatic past.” He says that “the way forward

for identity politics is not a brutal rejection of the past, but in situating a viable future in a yet distant but evolving regional order”. He believes that only in the larger context of the India/Pakistan détente over the years that “there seems a possible space for Kashmiri identity to reassert itself.”

What is, however, overlooked in such theoretical projection is the harsh fact of Talibanised Islamic terrorism that seems is out to destroy the finer points of Kashmiriyat, enlightened and humanitarian facets of Islam, the silken threads of Sufism

The basic problem in Kashmir actually is one of frozen mindsets of state players as well as non-state players. All the same, Nyla Ali Khan has achieved her purpose by bringing together a cross-section of Kashmiri thinking persons to air their views. The rest depends on how far those in authority wish to learn from their past mistakes and distorted thinking of the current players for a new beginning not only for Kashmir but also for the rest of India as well as the subcontinent, nay, of South Asia and the world at large.

and the liberal face of Saivism which all give a solid base to the concept of Kashmiri identity.

How can “a new order” which “acknowledges its interdependence and tolerate pluralism for “regional stability” be evolved in the prevailing setting of the ISI-sponsored proxy terror war? Who will bell the terror cat? Can we bank on Hurriyat and other self-styled custodians of “Kashmiri nationalism” to stand firm and tell the Pak authorities across the border to leave them alone and not to

play into the hands of China’s territorial grab policy in PoK? We have no ready answers to these questions.

It needs to be said to the credit of Bashir Ahmed Dabla that he has acknowledged that “Kashmir Muslims are not the only stake holders in a viable resolution of the Kashmir conflict.” Rekha Chowdhary has explained how “Kashmiri nationalism happened to be placed “in an antagonistic relationship with Indian nationalism”.

Noor Ahmed Baba rightly says that “there are no shortcuts in Kashmir.

It required a bold initiative to address Kashmir in all its dimensions so that the state is restored to its normal political context for effective functioning of democracy in its essence. He recalls the words of former Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee that in the path of peace and for a lasting solution to the Kashmir problem we need not “traverse only on the beaten track of the past. Mindsets will have to be altered and historical baggage jettisoned”.

Fine. The basic problem in Kashmir actually is one of frozen mindsets of state players as well as non-state players. All the same, Nyla Ali Khan has achieved her purpose by bringing together a cross-section of Kashmiri thinking persons to air their views. The rest depends on how far those in authority wish to learn from their past mistakes and distorted thinking of the current players for a new beginning not only for Kashmir but also for the rest of India as well as the subcontinent, nay, of South Asia and the world at large.

The book is a useful addition towards understanding some facets of Kashmir’s complex syndrome. However, the need today is for a larger objective assessment of the rich past and the turbulent present with an open mind, without the play of extremist thoughts, angularities of non-state players and sponsored insiders who tend to play with the sensitivities and emotions of the people of Kashmir.