

Book Review

Discourse on Kashmir: Beyond the Straightjacket

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State, Identity and Violence: Jammu, Kashmir and Ladakh, Navnita Chadha Behera, New Delhi, Manohar Publishers and Distributors, 2000.

The crisis in Kashmir has been a festering wound not only for India and Pakistan, but also for the entire South Asia, since de-colonisation of the region from British imperialism. The violent unceasing Indo-Pakistan contestation over the state has time and again raised spectre of war—even of nuclear war—aside from three and a half (Kargil) wars fought between the two. Obviously, there are any number of pontifications and studies on the subject by scholars from all over the world. A number of solutions to the problem have also been offered over the years to diffuse the crisis and bring succour to people of Jammu and Kashmir, but to no avail. Demand for autonomy, secessionist movement, political uncertainty, terrorism, human rights violations, distress migration, communal tension, et.al., have become the order of the day in the state for over a decade. In the process, the complexities of the issues involved in a permanent solution to the Kashmir tangle have been missed time and again. One of the main issues concerning the tangle is that mostly it is referred to as the 'Kashmir' question. In the process it is missed that the Kashmir valley is only a part of the state of Jammu and Kashmir and one geographical area (within the Indian part of Jammu and Kashmir) with its own distinct socio-cultural identity, that invariably is ignored in the discourse on problem-solving in 'Kashmir,' is Ladakh. The author deserves credit for not only putting Ladakh on the title, but also integrating it in her analysis and discussion.

In the book under review Navnita Chadha Behera makes a bold attempt not only to look at the Kashmir question comprehensively, but also to offer 'Thoughts for the Future,' which are equally comprehensive in scope and bold in nature. Spread over ten chapters the study begins with a brief but analytical exploration of complex theoretical questions dogging social science in comprehending irresolvable phenomena of political claims based on ethnic identity and coexistence in multi-cultural societies. Different shades of identity, ethnicity, socio-cultural diversity, syncretic religious traditions and growing fundamentalism, contested notions of nationhood, demands for autonomy and secession interact with overarching political construct of a secular Indian nation (invariably artificial, though with good intentions) and two nation theory (which again is an artificial political construct with a definite political objective which keeps getting convoluted over the years to add justifications to the initial claim) that divided the subcontinent, leading to a highly explosive mix, always on a short fuse, that the state of Jammu and Kashmir, artificially divided between India and Pakistan, is today. The author deftly puts the questions related to the entire range of issues in a theoretical framework.

Recent contestations over history syllabi in India reflect the political dangers inherent in interpreting the past in a multi-cultural society, particularly with a rich syncretic tradition. Navnita,

however, proves the importance of history in proper understanding of complex contemporary questions, which if dispassionately analysed and not deliberately politicised, may help to strengthen culture of coexistence. Indeed the complexity of the Kashmir question was not created in a day. It was not even created in events preceding and following 15 August 1947. The Maharaja's dilemma on accession only aggravated the intricate nature of political questions that were inherent in his beautiful kingdom, it did not create them. The extension of the Dogra kingdom to the valley and beyond to the Buddhist Ladakh in the north-east and Gilgit in the north brought together an ethno-cultural collage that was kaleidoscopic in view and syncretic in its evolutionary experience and cultural coexistence. As different religious traditions and experiences left their impact, the sedentarised and nomadic people of the region developed cultural ethos of tolerance. However, this social composition in a modern political competitive scenario with the shadow of two (even three) contested nationhoods, if not cautiously handled, is sure recipe for conflict that is visible in Jammu and Kashmir today.

The foundation of the explosive politics in the state was laid during the years of independence and the early 1950s. The role played by Sheikh Abdullah and his National Conference in the accession of Jammu and Kashmir to India had endeared him to the national leadership. Moreover, he enjoyed a special relationship with Jawaharlal Nehru. Naturally, his post-accession politics, aimed at consolidating his constituency in the valley given the emerging electoral compulsions, was ignored by the national leadership. In fact, he was given unstinted support by the national leadership. The emerging power equation, which was in a way reaction to years of Dogra rule over the valley has been perceptively captured by the author:

Constitutionally and politically, the state was without a system of checks and balances. The Sheikh had painstakingly built a 'monolith structure' in a 'one-party state' apparently because the people of Kashmir wanted 'one organisation' (the National Conference), 'one leader' (Sheikh Abdullah) and 'one programme' (Naya Kashmir). Abdullah insisted that 'it was unrealistic to talk of parliamentary opposition in the Assembly when Kashmir itself was going through a critical phase... the National Conference was the only political party which could deliver [the] goods.' Parliamentary democracy, resting on the principle of majority rule, was politically translated to mean 'Kashmiri rule.' Sheikh Abdullah's five-member cabinet reflected the new power equations, with only one representative from Jammu and none from Ladakh. Kashmiri dominance of the state structures denied space for articulating the political aspirations of non-Kashmiris. Representation of Jammu and Ladakh was left to the mercy of the National Conference, a party with a limited mass base in smaller regions, the top leadership of which, including the president, vice president, general secretary and treasurer, was drawn exclusively from Kashmir Valley. (p 83)

In his keenness to empower the *majority community* – the Kashmiri Muslims – the Sheikh used the state apparatus extensively for patronising the National Conference as 'the party and administration were two wheels of the same vehicle and hence were inseparable.' The strategy was a sure recipe for emerging political chaos that is visible today.

The Union government and national leadership too, due to the controversial status of Jammu and Kashmir, developed a valley-centric thinking and neglected, both politically and economically, Jammu and Ladakh. Obviously, while emphasis on political control over the valley led to dissatisfaction there, in Jammu and Ladakh years of apathy and neglect led to reassertion of political aspirations and demands ranging from a separate state of Jammu to regional autonomy and a regional council. The author has been fastidious in her research and incisive in her analysis of this process.

She concludes the study with some loud thinking on the future. Going over a whole range of options available, taking into consideration both the national and international scenario, she feels that only options are available. To quote the author:

In the final analysis, there are only two choices. The first is to provide a healing touch to the Kashmiri psyche, meaningfully address the Kashmiris' social and economic grievances and give them 'political azadi.' Though this may fall short of territorial independence, the hope is that they would voluntarily opt to stay within the Indian union. The second option is for the government to continue using its coercive apparatus to force submission of the Kashmiris despite the blood already shed. I believe that the best way to address secessionist and separatist demands does not lie in fighting or suppressing its manifestations, but removing the *raison d'être*. Our study shows that the successive central governments' imposition of political choices on the Kashmiris, appropriation of their political space by the centralised state structures, and violent repression of local dissent forced the Kashmiris to take the path of secession. Therefore, the ultimate solution lies in creating a political system that allows a healthy social, cultural and political space for the Kashmiris to grow and to help them protect their interests.

The second component of the Kashmir strategy calls for creating a new federal balance within Jammu and Kashmir state. In a deeply heterogeneous society, its unitary state structures have caused fissures in the inter-regional relationships and pitted Jammu and Ladakh against the valley. Successive governments in Srinagar have paid only lip service to the cause of regional autonomy. Farooq Abdullah's government, too, had promised to federalise the state structures with three autonomous units of Jammu, Kashmir and Ladakh and, accordingly, appointed a Regional Autonomy Committee. Subsequently, however, the National Conference has sought to hijack this platform to push its narrow and short-sighted agenda of securing the political interests of only the majority community-Muslims-in the state.

Navnita Chadha Behera brings an air of freshness on the Kashmir discourse with comprehensive research, a non-biased approach and painstaking analysis of various economic and socio-political dimensions that dog the people of the state.

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