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BOOK REVIEW


--- Yogesh Mishra

Kashmir conflict is one of the prolonged conflicts in the South Asia region. The history of Kashmir has always been seen with a distinctive cultural and historical consciousness. Though the sociological studies and literature on history and politics of the region abounds, ethnographic research on Kashmir is very limited. As Lorraine Dowler writes, ‘We need first-hand research, not filtered, received material. We must conduct work in places where conflicts are occurring’ (Dowler, 2001, p. 421). In this direction, Resisting Occupation in Kashmir (2018) offers a range of perspectives to fill the gap by contributing essays from a wide range of fields grounded in ethnographic tradition.

The Introduction chapter opens up with a poem, a poem of resistance, setting the tone of the book and charts out the trajectory of the conflict. The editors (Bhan, Duschinski, and Zia) nicely weave the historical facts with contemporary images of protests and culture of resistance. They have worked towards detailing the complex nature of the conflict, informing the readers about a ‘new generation that has pursued the freedom movement through hybrid forms of opposition, combining local poetry, art, fiction, and literature with global models of cultural production and resistance’ (2018, p. 3). As the authors seek to ‘point towards alternative ways of conceptualizing the past, present, and future of Kashmir’ (ibid., p. 5), each chapter in the book examines different aspects of the Kashmir conflict. The novelty of this book lies in theorising the experiences embedded in the quotidian that provides an important entry point into the everyday lives of Kashmiri people.

Duschinski and Hoffman, in the first chapter, open the discussion with reference to judicial-legal system. The essay analyses the emergence of legal spaces like Majlis-e-Musawarat and its role in contemporary Kashmiri society. The authors write about the changing landscape of Kashmiri struggle in terms of newly emerging forms of legal agency and the rise of legal consciousness (ibid., p. 68).

Extending the analysis of militarised spaces and a presence of ubiquitous violence, Saiba Varma, a medical anthropologist, critically examines the paradigm of psycho-social trauma, suffering, and PTSD, analysing
political claims. She shows how politics of language in the construction of trauma plays a crucial role in blurring boundaries between victims and perpetrators.

Mona Bhan’s analysis of Orientalist colonial discourse weaves its linkage with the nationalist project of Hindu India. She writes about racialised politics, obsession with pure race and its connection with Ladakh, a part of Jammu and Kashmir State. This article connects imagination of a Hindu nation through hegemonic discourses of RSS campaign, a strong proponent of a Hindu India. Perhaps, the author could have added another layer by referring to politics of marriage in Leh (Smith, 1990) to further complicate the notion of body politics in this region.

The chapter by Ershad Mahmud offers a general view on Azad Kashmir, reminding us that Kashmir extends beyond the ‘Line of Control’. Some narratives echo Partition memory and pain associated with it, as some scholars note how the ‘unfinished business of Partition’ (Ali et al., 2011) continues to haunt both the nations, India and Pakistan. The author rightly points out that the stories of family reunion and separation generate a new kind of discourse about the relationship between people on both sides of the line of control (2018, p. 212). The chapter asserts a need to comprehend this issue in its entirety and not in parts.

The notion of body politics emerges in the thoughtfully crafted chapter written by Ather Zia. She draws attention towards normalisation of violence and deconstructs the role of martyred bodies of Indian civilians and soldiers by drawing parallel with killable Kashmiri bodies constructed as traitors. She argues that the martyr’s body becomes a literal and metaphoric vehicle invoking different emotions (ibid., p. 106).

Similarly, evoking the image of martyr graveyard in Kashmir, Mohamad Junaid takes forward the idea of collective memory and commemoration. He discusses the role of martyr’s graveyard as markers of violence and also repositories of collective memory. According to the author, martyr’s graveyards mark violent social disruption in Kashmiri society producing powerful political effects and ‘establish new forms of sociality and community among Kashmiri subjects’ (ibid., p. 249).

The chapter by Seema Kazi situates the importance of body politics and militarisation process in Kashmir. Her analysis shows how militarisation has come to be embedded in the social fabric of Kashmir, and the body of a woman becomes a ‘site for political intimidation’ and is used to humiliate the community. Her analysis, from a gender perspective, reveals gender implication of militarisation and rape as a weapon of counter-insurgency.

Wherever the authors in the volume discuss violence perpetrated by various actors, in chapter six Gowhar Fazili takes a different turn and describes the life of a policeman in
Srinagar city. The chapter talks about the subjective shift and what it is like to be an army personnel or police personnel in a contested space. The author rightly points out that dialectic between professional and ideological police training, and personal and communal experiences shapes police subjectivity in Kashmir (ibid., p. 185). Further, at the same time, the author highlights the role of reflexive practices in research which has been recognised as an important aspect of ethnography.

This volume significantly speaks about ‘experiential realities of Kashmiri people’ and attempts to theorise the everyday experiences. The chapter titled Interrogating the Ordinary argues that azadi mobilisation in Kashmir in the early 1990s was shaped by everyday experiences of politics in Kashmir. In the subsequent chapter, Farrukh Faheem highlights the ways in which individual narratives, collective memory, and popular consciousness are linked. The author substantiates his argument by using rich material from field interviews and archival material like films and underground literature. This chapter, including others written by Kashmiri authors in this book, signal a need to include more voices like theirs addressing the multiplicity of local narratives, and adding more stories to counter the hegemonic views. For example, as examined in this book, the role of popular vernacular slogans, lines of a novel, profound impact of a movie on youngsters or access to underground literature help to understand multi-layered narratives grounded in local contexts and spatial settings.

Towards the end, Cynthia Mahmood’s concluding remarks binds all the parts in one whole and reiterates the value of grounded lived realities and urges to put human experiences at the centre of research. She reasserts the importance of ethnography, its emancipatory potential to challenge hegemonic narratives. Resisting Occupation in Kashmir is an important addition to the existing literature on the Kashmir issue, and its engagement is promising. Each chapter contributes significantly, dwelling upon various aspects like morals, subjectivity, collective memory, body politics, and how individuals navigate their ways through multiple, contradictory and conflicting identities. This is the strength of this volume. However, at some places, a linear account of Kashmir’s history seems repetitive and overlooking the nuances of historical complexity of this region. At a few places, the notion of ordinary or everydayness has been evoked; however, the authors could have problematised the understanding of ordinary by questioning what constitutes every day in a contested land.

A re-reading of the Kashmir conflict, through a mix of theoretical and empirical cases makes this edited volume a significant contribution to the discussion on Kashmir conflict. It is an important addition for anyone interested in ethnography of contested spaces and especially for those
interested in ‘ground realities’ of the Kashmir conflict.

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REFERENCES:


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