

Kashmir Identity: Retrospect And Prospect

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Introduction

Kashmir, in the entire South Asia, provides a fascinating subject of study in terms of history, geography, culture, identity, and society. It has the distinction of having a recorded history of over five thousand years. The historical accounts on Kashmir abound. The historical accounts as provided in Rajatarangnis followed by historical enumeration of eminent Chinese, Mughal, Central Asian and European scholars and travelers provide a huge corpus of physical, historical, cultural and social details on Kashmir. A great deal of scholarly studies have been carried out on different aspects of Kashmir during the last more than five decades from within and outside Kashmir. However, the scope and approaches to Kashmir studies need to be further enlarged. Moreover, there is an urgency in critically examining and evaluating whatever has been done in the field of Kashmir studies and identify the deficiency, if any, in such studies. In general terms, most of the studies on Kashmir suffer from the clarity of approach and in some of these studies deficit of objectivity is glaringly discernible. The studies do not appear to have paid adequate attention to sociological, philosophical and ecological perspectives of Kashmir. The dynamics of international relations and global politics and its impact on Kashmir is yet another perspective which is missing in the studies on Kashmir. In absence of these perspectives, the studies on Kashmir would not have appropriate connectivity and shall not have an effective interaction with national or international scholarship concerned with ethnicity and identity. Moreover, new tools of sociological, cultural and historical interpretations and the new methodology of analysis is a *sine qua non* in the understanding of Kashmir and hence to be applied vigorously on the studies of Kashmir.

The Changing Boundaries

In the historical context, the physical boundaries of Kashmir have waned and waxed during different periods of its history. At one point of time, the borders of Kashmir extended up to Central Asia. In the same vein, the trade and commercial activities equally connected Kashmir with the outside world. The historical accounts graphically provide the details of caravans carrying merchandise across to Bukhara, Samarqand, Khotan and Sinkiang in Central Asia through the borders of Kashmir. The extension of borders and trade relations of Kashmir with the outside world enormously enriched its culture and even language. The new study of these cultural and trade routes and their

impact on Kashmir society should form the part of research agenda of 'Kashmir Studies'. The process of arrival and settling down of people from foreign lands in Kashmir during different periods of history further accelerated the process of acculturation of Kashmir. These groups of people brought with them new arts and crafts and introduced them in the Kashmir society. The gradual introduction of new social norms through the behaviour patterns of these groups introduced new elements in the social organisation of Kashmir. The emergence of new social classes due to its close contacts with Central Asia provides an interesting study of social transformation of Kashmir.

Emergence of Identity

The onset of different religious beliefs and practices endowed Kashmir with a unique identity. Buddhism, Shaivism and Islam were synthesised in the value system which is reflected in many social and cultural practices of Kashmir even today. Thus, multiple layers have gone into the construction of Kashmir culture which need to be unfolded in an objective and scientific manner. In this backdrop, Kashmir studies involve the study of the impact of different religious beliefs on society, the interaction among different mystic orders including the social role of Sufis and mystics, the folklore, the architecture, the analysis of historical and political developments and economy. Taking an interdisciplinary approach, the Kashmir studies course should acquaint all those interested on Kashmir with different aspects of Kashmir society and identity.

It may be pointed out here, with some trepidation, that in some reflections on Kashmir, there has been an arbitrary selectivity of sources of Kashmir history. This selectivity has resulted in making sweeping generalisations on Kashmir society and even passing some pejorative remarks on the character of the people. This selectivity has to be dealt with scholarship and within the academic discipline. It is proposed that some source material on Kashmir should be revisited which would place developments and events and the subsequent social responses to them in their proper perspective. In this regard all the three Rajatarangnis, written by Ratna Sagar, Kalhana and Srivra including the fourth part written by Prajaya Bhat along with the travelogues of Chinese travelers Huen Tsang and Okang may be looked into afresh in constructing a new social and political history of Kashmir. These chronicles which cover ancient period until 16th century should be supplemented with the accounts of Alberuni, Abulfazal and Mulla Abdul Qadir Badayuni along with the travelogues of European travelers including the travelogues of Arthur New and Frederic Drew who have reflected on Kashmir society, comparatively, in an objective manner. (It may sound strange though, even these scholars were acting under the directions of the British Government. Hence their empathy with the people of Kashmir has to be comprehended in a broader colonial perspective). Sir Walter Lawrence's account provides an important source material, apart from the projection of social and agrarian structures prevalent in Kashmir at that point of time, in comprehending the ecological changes that Kashmir has undergone over decades.

Decoding the Identity

It is well recognised that identity provides sufficient clues in comprehending the social, spiritual and cultural values of a society. The identity formation, in the realm of Sociology, is the result of interaction between the self and the society. The inner self of a human being which creates self images, although autonomous, is subject to changes and modifications which take place during the processes of its interaction with society. Therefore, an identity has to be analyzed in a particular social context which opens up new vistas in understanding and analyzing it. This perspective equally enables us to comprehend the transformation which a particular identity undergoes through different phases of its social and historical change. In this perspective, Kashmir identity popularly known as *Kashmiriyat* (or *Kashreut*, to put it in Kashmiri language) occupies a centre stage in the studies on Kashmir. This is not to undermine the other aspects of Kashmir studies which are equally important and highly relevant.

Kashmir identity has evolved through the processes of acculturation over the centuries. The geographical location, the historical processes and political developments have contributed to its evolution and advancement. Thus, multiple social and historical processes spread over different periods of time led to the crystallisation of Kashmir identity. However, the identity did not remain dormant in any phase of history and in our reckoning this process is still continuing. In this backdrop, we have some reservations in placing Kashmir Identity in the watertight compartment of primordial identities which has been the reference point of some historians and social scientists, inspired by Western experiences, to analyze the historical identities of the sub-Continent.

The inclusiveness has remained the main characteristic of Kashmir identity. This inclusiveness resulted in the absorption of other spiritual, cultural and social practices within its fold enriching it from time to time. The arrival of foreigners due to varied circumstances introduced new elements in the social structure of Kashmir endowing it with the four broad characteristics of spirituality, inclusiveness, plurality and social consensus. These characteristics have remained the hallmark of Kashmir identity throughout its history.

Kashmir identity, in view of its geographical location, acquired an ethnic profile which transcended religious demarcations in strict sense of the term. In fact, the onset of *Rishi* order particularly in the vast rural landscape of Kashmir provided the basis for a spiritual unity in which there was no scope for social friction. The different modes of religious practices not only co-existed side by side but there was equally an overlap of these practices at the social levels. It needs to be recognised that it is not merely a 'baggage of History which Kashmiris carry on their shoulders', as is held by some scholars. Rather, it is an intrinsic component of their identity. The 'spiritual' component of Kashmir identity has to be grasped distinctly from the 'religious', in literal sense of

the term. Thus, when Shiekh Nooruddin Noorani or Nund Rishi aspired for the spiritual status of Lal Ded, the spiritual icon of Kashmiri Shavism, it was in the realm of spirituality and not in religion. The common language, Kashmiri, cemented the bonds between the people further. Thus, the ethno-cultural-linguistic-spiritual cohesion was starkly reflected in Kashmir identity. The shared historical experiences of foreign occupation, oppression and exploitation further bound them together. That tyranny and oppression of foreign rulers did not make exceptions, except for the collaborators, has received scant attention of scholars. The attempts to impose religious tenets in strict terms were resisted by the people who continued to be guided by the spiritual and social methodology prescribed by the Rishis of the valley.

Emergence of Political Identity

It is important to note that there was a convergence of cultural, spiritual and political components of Kashmir identity. However, with the expansion and consolidation of new political boundaries of Kashmir which was brought about during the Dogra rule in the middle of 19th Century, in which Jammu, Kashmir and Ladakh emerged as a single political entity, new cultural identities emerged on the social scene of Kashmir. These identities have co-existed along with the Kashmir identity for about a century and a half. However, in view of the historical, geographical and cultural significance of Kashmir, the Kashmir identity maintained its centrality in the entire state of Jammu and Kashmir. This identity remained at the centre of the struggle against autocratic Dogra rule in the state. However, the struggle against autocratic Dogra rule acquired new nuances when other cultural identities of Jammu and Kashmir state, cutting across the religious boundaries, joined the struggle. It may be mentioned here that the consolidation of Jammu & Kashmir state as a single political entity expanded the base of social structure in Kashmir and resulted in an interface between Kashmir identity and other identities in the state. Be that as it is, there is no evidence of any antagonism among these identities in the state.

In the post-Independent phase of Jammu & Kashmir state, the people belonging to the state acquired the status of a single political identity in the constitutional terms. In fact, this identity had been bestowed upon the inhabitants of the state legally and politically, in the first place, under the State Subject Regulation promulgated by the last Maharaja of the state, Maharaja Hari Singh, in April 1927. This regulation continues to be in force in the state in its post-independent phase. The recognition of seven languages as the regional languages of the state under the Sixth Schedule of Jammu & Kashmir constitution resulted in the *de jure* and constitutional recognition of seven cultural groups in the state. These cultural groups share many elements with Kashmir Identity. However, they are distinguished mainly by the linguistic differences amongst themselves. These identities have been asserting at the cultural levels for their cultural advancement and development which has been facilitated by the institutional mechanism of Academy of Art, Culture and Languages, which has been set up according to the directive of Article 146 of Jammu and Kashmir constitution. These

identities are equally asserting at the political level for empowerment and participation. Thus, Kashmir identity has been placed in the constellation of other identities in the state. Therefore, Kashmir identity, at least at the political level, has to compete with other identities. In view of the democratic experience of the last about sixty years, howsoever flawed, these identities have cooperated and accommodated each other. They have jointly taken initiatives toward political action. These identities have to expand their area of convergence in which the identity of the Jammu and Kashmir state would emerge as a new composite identity. Kashmir Identity has to devise mechanisms to ensure an equilibrium with other cultural identities of the state.

Status of Kashmir Identity

It is relevant here to have a brief estimation of the status of Kashmir Identity in the present times. The indicators point out that for quite some time now, a process of fragmentation of Kashmir identity has set in. In the course of new processes of planning and economic development, and with the introduction of new administrative system, the process of fragmentation was bound to happen. The new economic and administrative processes resulted in the emergence of new identities, viz.; bureaucratic, professional and commercial, adding new dimensions to Kashmir identity. In the meanwhile, other developments impinging upon the profile of Kashmir identity have been taking place. Due to many local, national and international factors, attempts are being made toward the sharpening the religious edge of the identity. This development has the potential of incorporating the exclusiveness in the identity and ultimately leading to its isolation in the larger national and international context. Another alarming fact is the gradual loss of Kashmiri language which forms the core of *Kashmiriyat*. The empirical evidence suggests that the other languages are gradually replacing Kashmiri as a language of communication even at the personal and domestic levels. The new generation is gradually losing proficiency in Kashmiri language, hence resulting in losing their moorings which are rooted in traditions and social and cultural values of Kashmir. It is axiomatic that language is the carrier and constitutes the basic mode of transmitting traditions and cultural values from one generation to the other. The exodus of Kashmiri Pandits from the valley has further added to the denudation of Kashmir identity.

Kashmir identity appears to be at the crossroads of its history. It has to redefine itself in the existential social realities of its present times. More than that, vigorous attempts have to be made to restore oxygen to it which would provide vital nourishment to its social and cultural survival. This oxygen is the Kashmiri language. In the same vein, the assimilative and accommodative edges of Kashmir identity need to be sharpened in order to restore its vibrant cultural profile. This profile would provide it enough strength for its assertion.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Kashmir studies should not remain oblivious to the emergence of new social classes in Kashmir. It would be interesting to understand the processes of negotiation between the new social classes and Kashmir identity and the vice versa. It is equally relevant to develop an understanding on the interplay between Kashmir identity and civil society. Needless to mention here that Kashmir has a well articulated and vibrant civil society. The emergence of social movements is another important issue in the study of societies. The status of social movements, particularly in the areas of gender, environment and social anomies in Kashmir deserve the attention of scholars. In this era of globalisation, the relationship between market and society has emerged as a new theme. This relationship with specific reference to Kashmir needs to be harnessed adequately. These perspectives would go a long way in filling the gaps in the studies on Kashmir.

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