

Book Review

Faultline: Kashmir

By Christopher Thomas
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The mounting literature on Kashmir is marked by bias and prejudice. One rarely comes across a balanced, objective and dispassionate assessment of the problem. The book under review claims to look at the drama from a distant perspective. According to the author the book is written from the perspective of those people, who are the victims and not the cause of the terrible ongoing conflict.

The historic backdrop provided by the author is brilliant. He correctly traces the roots of the conflict to the ideological dispute, which led to the division of the Indian sub-continent. India and Pakistan, he would say, represent two different ideologies. Kashmir represents for India repudiation of the two-nation theory that inspired the creation of Pakistan. For India the inclusion of Kashmir in a secular democratic set up shows that nationalist secularism can triumph over religious separatism. On the other hand, Pakistan emphasises Kashmir as a Muslim issue to demonstrate-to itself as much to others-that partition in 1947 was correct.

One also finds oneself in full agreement with the author's definition of Kashmiriyat. He rightly holds that the essence of Kashmiri Muslims and Hindu Pandits lies not in religion but in culture. It is worth remembering that Islam took over from Hinduism in Kashmir not with conquerors but teachings of Sufism. Islam arrived in Kashmir peacefully and willingly. Hindus and Muslims were thus culturally fused, creating a uniquely Kashmiri approach to life and religion.

It is rightly contended in the book that Pakistan felt in 1947 and it feels even now that religious, political, geographical and economic logic should place Kashmir within its territory. This may be a sound logic but for the crucial fact that it was not what the popular Kashmiri leadership wanted in 1947. Nor is it what the people want today. The undisputed and the tallest of the Kashmiri leaders, Sheikh Abdullah, believed that the unique form of Islam and the separate cultural identity of the Kashmiris would perish in the religious and social environment of Pakistan. Shiekh Abdullah strongly disapproved the idea of joining a country born out of the theory that the Muslims of the Indian subcontinent were a separate nation. What the Sheikh desired, the people echoed.

The author's analysis of militancy in Kashmir is realistic. According to him the rebellion against India, which began in 1987 and turned violent later on was less a separatist uprising than an attempt to save a threatened identity from being subsumed by the Indian mainstream. It is rightly pointed out that the kidnapping of the then Union Home Minister Mufti Sayeed's daughter

succeeded in humiliating India, which freed five imprisoned militants in exchange. Significantly, the militants were released on the specific order of V.P. Singh, the then Prime Minister, over the objection of Farooq Abdullah, the Chief Minister. He had warned that India would pay dearly if it succumbed to the militants' demands and he proved right. The episode was followed by a wave of kidnappings of prominent people. The return of Jagmohan as Governor and his get-tough tactics gave an impetus to the 'Azadi' movement, which became a mass uprising. Governor's rule by Jagmohan had a profound impact both in Delhi and Srinagar. India was now in direct conflict with Kashmiris, without intermediaries.

Jagmohan's period marked a turning point in which popular grassroots revolt grew rapidly into a full-blown movement, fuelled by the brutal tactics of Indian security forces. Azadi became a rallying cry throughout the valley. Soon the nature of militancy itself underwent a change. Locals were being sidelined and Pakistan backed outsiders took over, motivated not by Kashmiri nationalism but by wider strategic objectives. The people's rebellion was being hijacked.

Pakistan misinterpreted Kashmir's cry for justice as a cry for Islam. Kashmiris are different Muslims. They are Sufis and they have always worn their faith lightly. They not only refused to pursue a holy war, they also turned out to be strongly anti-Pakistan despite their tactic of raising the Pakistani flag to bail the Indian security forces. Pakistan tried to embrace Kashmir with Islamic rhetoric but the heat of its language could not survive Kashmir's cool religious climate. Soon Pakistan discovered a determined grassroots resistance by the Kashmiris to its attempt to transform it into an Islamic crusade. Militancy has now moved out of Kashmiri's control and most of those involved in it are directed from across the border. The militancy movement in Kashmir was bound to fail in its objective of liberating Kashmir, not merely because it could not compete with the might of the Indian State but because it could not generate consensus within the ranks of the militant groups on the definition of liberty. Militancy is now dominated by pro-Pakistan groups who were able to steal people's rebellion because of better financing and organization. They are not representatives of the popular desire. These pro-Pak groups have terrorised the people and destroyed the Kashmiriyat.

One may fully endorse author's contention that Sheikh Abdullah was the man who inspired the greatest burst of Kashmiri self-expression ever. Not only was he the first popular Kashmir leader for four centuries to lead them; he was able to express their hunger for dignity by placing it in a religious context that the largely illiterate Kashmiri people could understand. He was such a giant in the eyes of his followers that they would happily suffer the pleasure he took in striking them on the head as they bent in supplication to touch his feet. The reviewer who spent a decade in Kashmir was a witness to such an incident. Once Sheikh Abdullah was coming to Kashmir University to attend council meeting when his car was stopped on the way by people protesting against water shortage. Sheikh got out of his car, took a lathi from a policeman and started beating the demonstrators. People enthusiastically came forward to be beaten by their leader, happily taking the blows and running away laughing. Significantly, this particular incident took place towards the fag end of his illustrious career. This only shows that he was able to retain the love and affection of his people till the end.

An otherwise commendable work, the book is not free from blemishes. It contains several factual errors. For instance Sheikh Abdullah's grave is on the banks of Dal Lake and not alongside Nagin

Lake as has been stated by the author more than once. According to the author when Bakshi Gulam Mohammad died, the Sheikh, then back in power, refused to let him get buried near the Jama Masjid. However, Bakshi died in 1971 while Sheikh returned to power only in 1975. Similarly, another factual mistake: Farooq Abdullah resigned in January 1990 in protest against the appointment of Jagmohan as Governor and not against the imposition of Governor's rule. At that time V.P. Singh and not Rajiv Gandhi was the Prime Minister of India.

Besides factual errors, the author also makes contradictory statements. For instance on the one hand he acknowledges Sheikh Abdullah's immense popularity among Kashmiri people but at the same time he holds that the first elections in Kashmir were held with a farcical result flowing from a farcical process. Sheikh Abdullah's candidates or his allies won every one of the 75 seats contested. He call Constituent Assembly is dubious body. There was hardly any opposition party in Kashmir at that time National Conference led by Sheikh Abdullah was the most popular party with an organization throughout the state. Therefore, in the absence of any opposition worth the name the victory of all National Conference candidates was not surprising. One fails to understand the need for Sheikh Abdullah to indulge in rigging the elections when he was sure to sweep the polls.

However, he highlights Sheikh's secular credentials and his anti-Pak tirade. It is also rightly pointed out by the author in the book that Sheikh believed that secular, socialist India would better protect Kashmiri culture, which had never known grassroots intolerance. In fact, the Sheikh rightly believed that the kind of feudal society that operated in Pakistan, was simply an anathema for the Kashmiri Muslims. Pakistan's appeal to religious unity had little attraction for Kashmiris because it implied the disappearance of Kashmiri's unique brand of Islam. Sheikh Abdullah delivered Kashmir to India. Without him the Valley might have had a different destiny. For all his years in Indian prisons, the Sheikh was never found guilty of anything.

However, on the contrary, the author cites Sheikh's former press advisor Mahmood Amin Pandit that Sheikh received substantial Pakistani funding after 1953. Mahmood Amin would say messages would arrive from Pakistan saying that so many eggs had been sent. An egg meant 100,000 rupees. The questions that automatically come to mind here are: Why did it take so many years for the former press advisor to open his mouth? Why did he not make this revelation during the prosecution of Sheikh in the Kashmir conspiracy case? Such allegations are, in fact, part of the character assassination campaign against the Sheikh. The author's presentation of such facts in the book runs directly counter to his overall portrayal of Sheikh Abdullah as a person who had fought tooth and nail against two-nation theory and in view of his past track record he had no future in Pakistan. His fate would have been no better than Khan Abdul Gaffar Khan there.

On the whole the book is a fairly balanced account of the Kashmir issue. It displays a genuine concern for the plight of Kashmiri people. It is a useful addition to the ever-increasing literature on the subject.

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