



## *Book Review:*

**Identity Politics in Jammu and Kashmir (2010).  
Edited by Rekha Chowdhary. Vitasta Publishing. New Delhi.**

*Review by: Navanita Sinha*

## *Reviewer's Profile*

Navanita Sinha is currently Research Officer, Centre for Budget and Governance Accountability, New Delhi. She has previously worked at Women in Security, Conflict Management and Peace (WISCOMP) an initiative of the Foundation for Universal Responsibility of his Holiness the Dalai Lama. She has a M.Phil. and MA from the Centre for Political Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, and a Bachelor's degree from Lady Shri Ram College.

*Where should we go after the last frontiers,  
where should the birds fly after the last sky?*

Mahmoud Darwish

This melancholic cry of the Palestinian poet about his people could well reflect the predicaments of the people of Jammu and Kashmir. Captives of both history and geography, the last six decades have seen the state converted into a war zone over which two belligerent nation-states seem to have constructed their *raison d'être*. Assertions of legitimate claims have been made by both India and Pakistan, leading to a protracted row that has frustrated most attempts at friendship between the two countries.

Like most conflict societies, the story of Kashmir is anything but simple. The enormous literature on Kashmir has attempted to capture some of these complexities. However a majority of published works have focused on the 'Kashmir problem' as an extension of an international relations debate between India and Pakistan. The Kashmir issue has come to be seen – as have the Kashmiris – in terms of a larger regional conflict or dispute alone. Another prominent cluster of writings has been historical or personalised accounts of Kashmir. But few, if any, contemporary writers have bothered to go beyond the 'conflict in the valley'. In the welter of writings on the subject, very little attention has been paid to the way Kashmir's internal dynamics have influenced the inter-state dispute and vice versa.

'*Identity Politics in Jammu and Kashmir*' edited by Rekha Chowdhury is a worthy attempt to shift the focus back onto the internal dynamics of the state as manifested in its identity politics.

While focusing on the identity politics of Kashmir (which remains at the root of conflict) it "goes beyond its homogenized exterior and points to various internal tensions." More importantly, it goes beyond Kashmiri identity politics and focuses on various other manifestations of identity including religious, regional and sub-regional identity politics within the state.

This edited volume of essays critically examines the socio-cultural diversity and political divergence within the state and talks about multiple contexts of deprivation and neglect including those defined by the categories of gender, caste and tribe. The central thread running through it, spotlights the formation of separate identities at different moments in history and how they impact on its contemporary reality/realities.

The twenty odd papers which form this volume, together portray a 'multi-layered' problem of identity politics lost on those with eyes set on cartography and territoriality rather than people. As the editor points out,

“Such complexities assume importance both in understanding the conflict situation of the state as well as in contextualizing the peace process. However the importance of the book lies in its attempt to go beyond the context of conflict and peace process. Its aim is to locate the politics and society of Jammu and Kashmir in the perspective of the plural and multicultural politics of the state.”

Bearing in mind the multiple identities of a community in terms of language, religion, caste, culture, ethnic and religious affiliations, why does a particular aspect become politicized at a specific moment in history? In her introduction, Rekha Chowdhury also makes a valiant attempt to answer this comprehensive question.

The introduction posits a few overlapping themes that weave together the collection. Firstly, the diversity/divergences within the state cutting across religious, regional, ethnic, caste, gender lines. Secondly, the multiple contexts of deprivation and neglect in the state, which lead to multiple contexts of minority perception—i.e. those configured as minorities in one context and space become majorities in another. Thirdly, overlapping contexts make each identity internally differentiated. Lastly, the multiple and layered identity politics of the state, i.e. the complex nature of diversities determines the nature of politics as well. Given the immense and varied sweep of the different essays, Chowdhury’s overview is laudable in its ability to weave together the diversity of information to put forth a cohesive argument.

The strongest statement that this book makes is that while the conflict is undoubtedly Kashmir-centric, its resolution has to go beyond Kashmir. “The multiple identity politics within the state provides a challenge to the peace process and therefore it is important to locate the whole issue of conflict and its resolution in the internal politics of the state.”

The book is divided into five sections: *Identities and Politics in Jammu and Kashmir*; *Religion, Identities and Inter-community Relations*; *Exodus and Identity Politics of Kashmiri Pundits*; *Identity Politics of Women and Dalits* and; *The Other Kashmir*.

### **Identities and Politics in Jammu and Kashmir**

As its name suggests, the first section *Identities and Politics in Jammu and Kashmir* seeks to map the plurality of the state, with a focus on the identity politics of the Kashmir region.

The pronounced diversities and plural identities of the people of Jammu and Kashmir, form the theme of Balraj Puri’s article . ‘*On Identities, Ideologies and*

*Politics'* begins with posers related to the multi-layered reality of the people of the state. For instance, Puri asks: "Why could the National Conference, of Sheikh Mohammed Abdullah, a movement against a Hindu Maharaja not gather much support in Jammu...a Muslim-majority region and more populous than the [Kashmir] Valley?...Why Prem Nath Bazaz...the most vocal voice for Pakistan in 1947...[did not] get any Muslim support and almost all his followers belonged to his own Kashmiri Pundit community?"

Puri goes on to talk in some detail about different identities – Kashmiri, Jammu, Ladakhi, Muslim, Pundit, Buddhist, Dogra, Gujjar, Pahari, and so on. Each of these identities, in turn, is examined along with its contribution to the composite identity referred to as 'Kashmiriyat'. He argues that identities, are overlapping and cross-cutting, and thus cannot be reduced to anything singular.

Making a strong case against proposals for division of the state on grounds of religion, he fervently argues for the need to establish a democratic, federal, plural and non-centralised system. Only such a system can resolve the tensions of plural identities and harmonize them in the politics of the state, he asserts.

The evolution of Kashmiri identity, as perhaps the most important political factor, forms the theme of Riyaz Punjabi's article titled '*Kashmiri Identity in a Universe of Competing Identities*'. This article seeks to unravel why even after political unification, Kashmiri identity remained the predominant identity of the state. Tracing the historical evolution of Kashmiri identity, he notes that it was the specific geographic location of Kashmir and the use of a common language which bound the people of diverse faiths together in the region. On the basis of this specific identity expressed as Kashmiriyat, the Hindus and Muslims of Kashmir distinguished themselves from their co-religionists in the rest of the country. This identity thrived within the cultural domain and provided a vital source of social cohesion.

However shifting of these identities from the cultural to the political domain over time, led to the creation of fissures. The secessionist political phase in the state created a space for sharpening its religious edge, subsequently leading to communal mobilization and polarization of different groups on religious lines. While Punjabi acknowledges that in most societies similar processes of social cohesion and disintegration are visible, Kashmir, for him, is a peculiar case in this regard. Unlike other societies, the presence of various local, national and international factors in Kashmir, created certain conditions whereby mechanisms to reconcile the new components could not emerge.

Neera Chandhoke's paper is an exploration of the theoretical debates concerning nationalism and ethnicity. Here, Chandhoke examines the social contract in Kashmir, both historically and more recently. Tracing the

politicization of identity to processes that are internal to democracy and federalism in India, she argues that the main reason for political discontent and violence in Kashmir can be attributed to the repeated infringements of the social contract by the central government of India, (often acting in tandem with the state government). This was accompanied by the erosion of the democratic space which permits the articulation of political discontent.

Elaborating on the process of formation and assertion of Kashmiri identity, Gul Mohamed Wani in his *'The Labyrinth of Kashmiri identity'* maps the emergence of Kashmiri nationalism. Locating its roots in the history of oppression, Wani highlights that Kashmiris had not participated in any important way in the governance of their state ever since the Mughal conquest. It was this history of oppression which created in the minds of the people an intense desire for self-government and independence. However, Wani argues that what was particular about the emergence of national awareness amongst Kashmiris was its secular nature. It was around this popular consciousness that Kashmiriyat as a concept came to be invoked.

Most papers in this volume focus on the fundamental challenges to the secular tradition of politics in Kashmir—namely the growing power of religious fundamentalism on the one hand and escalation of violence on the other. The Islamization of Kashmir in the early 1990s is put to intense scrutiny by Ishaq Khan. In *"Kashmiri Identity during 1990-1994"*, he argues that the politico-religious consciousness that became visible during the early period of militancy, was not so much a manifestation of a desire to establish a Muslim state, but a marked reflection of the resentment amongst Kashmiris towards the Indian state. Highlighting the failure of the Kashmiri leadership, Khan argues that, "the idea of launching a militant struggle was not simply implanted in the minds of the Kashmiri youth by any outside agency, but ... was a logical corollary of periodic political instability characterising J&K for the greater part of this century."

This article provides an engaging account of how the militant upsurge swept the valley in 1989, how and why Kashmiri youth were drawn irresistibly into the maw of violence, and the manner in which the entire machinery of the state of India seemed to have collapsed in Kashmir in the face of the unprecedented uprising of the people.

The last two papers of this section shift attention from the valley to look at the other two regions in the state: Jammu and Ladakh.

In her insightful article, Rekha Chowdhury, explores the nature of regional identity politics in Jammu. She begins the article by mapping the tremendous heterogeneity which marks the region—from religious to linguistic, cultural, tribal and caste. Further, elucidating the nature of identity politics in the region, Chowdhury argues that the logic of identity politics of Jammu is quite

different from that of the Kashmir valley. While the latter is evidently India centric, the politics in Jammu is Kashmir centric, i.e. the issues that are raised here are within the context of inter-regional or intra-regional relationships. A feeling of political neglect has persisted since the early 1950s. Much of the politics of regional discontent, she argues has been related to the context of the power politics of the state. Furthermore, the specificity of the conflict situation of Kashmir and the political responses of the centre vis-à-vis the state has generated a feeling of 'political neglect' of the region.

Chowdhury also engages with the politics of the peripheral areas. Pointing to a paradox of sorts, she notes that, while issues of regional discrimination and imbalances have been consistently raised, it has been done so from the perspective of the most developed parts of the region. What has been left out from this discourse is the real backwardness of the region- represented by poverty, illiteracy and backwardness of the marginalized sections of society mostly situated in the peripheral sub-regions. Over time, therefore signs of growing alienation in these peripheries as well as increased assertion of sub-regional identities have become visible. She concludes by stating that "the heightened sensitivities promoted by multiple levels of identity politics, may generate an environment which might be unsettling at times."

In the last paper of this section, '*Beyond Kashmir: Understanding Ladakh*', Sonam Chosjar assesses the factors leading to regional discontent in the Ladakh region. Lamenting the complete absence of Ladakh from the official and academic political discourse of Jammu and Kashmir at any level, she draws attention to the political articulations of the region vis-à-vis the state and national mainstream as well as its internal dynamics. While dealing with internal intricacies of the identity politics of the Ladakh, specifically the political divergence that has evolved over time between the Buddhists and Muslims, this article highlights the dangerous implications of fragmentation of Ladakhi identity on religious lines.

### **Religion, Identity and Inter-Community Relations**

Section II begins with the editor's second contribution to the volume. In her paper '*Religion, Conflict and Peace Building*', Chowdhury argues that religious identity is but one aspect of the multiple and overlapping identities that are invoked in the state. For the author, pluralism defines the reality of the state, and also establishes secularism a living ethos. Despite the manner in which religion came to be implicated during the years of militancy, it has not succeeded in becoming the primary identity of people. There are many other contexts and markers of identity which make it difficult for such homogenising tendencies of a religion-based politics to assert themselves.

Ashraf Wani in '*Religion, Economy and Political Crisis in Kashmir*', engages with the religious and economic factors which led to the emergence of militancy in

the region. While religion divided Kashmir into two broad identities with diametrically opposite extra-territorial political loyalties after 1947, Wani argues that religion did not inspire militancy, but only fuelled it. Militancy was basically the handiwork of secular factors and agencies, and religion came into play only when militancy broke out. With regard to economic factors, he highlights the failure of the state to accommodate the rising aspirations of the educated middle class. The growing problem of unemployment led to the birth of economic nationalism which provided a stronger ideological basis to the militant movement than religion, he notes.

In one of the most fascinating articles of the volume, *'Hindu Muslim Relations in Jammu'*, Yogendra Sikand highlights some alternative voices on peace, inter-community relations and *jehad* in the state. The article unravels the space of the Sufi shrines in the Jammu region, as the most influential local religious institutions for promoting inter-community relations in the region. Through his exploration of religio-cultural practices within these shrines, Sikand also draws attention to the diversities within the Muslim community in the state, specifically the distinct ways in which they see the Kashmir problem, as well as its possible solutions.

Lalit Gupta's paper *'Jammu Muslims'* draws attention to the disconnect in the relationship of Muslims in the Jammu region with those in Kashmir. For Gupta, it is the political divide between Muslims of the two regions, which in spite of the political transformation in the state, has failed to generate a sense of security among the Jammu Muslims.

In *'Religion and Identity Politics of Sikhs in Kashmir'*, Ravinder Jit Kaur analyses the identity politics of another significant ethnic minority—the Sikhs. She examines the assertion of the Sikh identity through various phases of Kashmir's politics.

### **Exodus and Identity Politics of Kashmiri Pundits**

The identity politics of Kashmiri Pundits comes in for rigorous investigation and analysis in the third section of the book. The story of the community, from the early years of peaceful coexistence, to their exodus in 1989-90, is told – with some emphasising an enduring sense of belonging, others a bitter feeling of loss and betrayal.

In *'Identity Politics of Kashmiri Pundits'*, Shyam Kaul argues that the mass exodus of Pundits from Kashmir in 1989-90 had many precedents. Kaul's paper chronicles the "persecution complex" of the Kashmiri Pundits in the state. Beginning with the rule of Sultan Sikander in the 14<sup>th</sup> century, to the end of Afghan rule in early 19<sup>th</sup> century, he presents various accounts of how the Hindus from one era to another, fell victim to the sadistic bigotry of the despotic monarchs who ruled the state.

What was markedly different about the exodus of 1989-90 was that “this time the perpetrators were not non-indigenous monarchs.” Instead it was handiwork of those “who struck at the root of Kashmir’s secular and pluralistic culture and Islamize the Valley completely”, he notes. The Kashmiri Pundits were the symbol of the pluralistic culture of Kashmir, but the terror unleashed during these years, (leading to the exodus of the hundreds of Kashmiri pundit families from the valley), dealt an irrevocable blow to the plural and secular ethos of the state. Their displacement from their homes, the harsh living conditions in the migrant camps, and reports of encroachments and forcible occupations of Pundit properties in the valley further led to the erosion of trust between the communities.

Pramathesh Raina’s paper ‘*Roots of Kashmiri Pundit Identity*’, seeks to answer a seemingly simple question: who is a typical Kashmiri Pundit? Raini notes that no region or people can lay claim to a distinctly typical identity. For every type, there is an exception. Reflecting on the crisis that envelopes the state, the author avers that every group today finds its identity under siege—for some the presence of security forces threatens their identity; for some the migration of the Kashmiri Pundits threatens their identity; while for others it is mindless violence and killings and the challenge it poses to Kashmiriyat. For the Kashmiri Pundits however, it is not so much the loss of identity but the loss of roots, the loss of home which constantly haunts them.

Raina proceeds to talk of his own multiple identities — as a translator of Urdu poetry, a freelance journalist, an erstwhile domestic Ranji Trophy cricketer , among other things. He argues that despite his strong religious affiliation, it does not override his Kashmiriyat. He writes:

*“...I internalise a Kashmiri Hinduism, which is as often revolted by Gangetic forms and practices of the faith as by the most brainless Christian evangelism or Wahabi political Islam, feeling far closer to a composite Kashmiri spiritualism than to anything else...it is in the Valley that I feel at ‘home’ rather than either in heartland India or in a preponderantly Hindu-majority Jammu province.”*

He proceeds to illustrate how identities, in Kashmir as elsewhere, are not “just the givens at our birth” but “processes and unfoldings”. There seems to be a widespread agreement that identities are constantly being wrought. It is not just identities of the hitherto deprived groups that are being made and re-made, but of the privileged groups as well. Arguing in a similar vein, Badri Raina in his ‘*Conundrum of Identity*’, explores the new dialectic of identity formation in Kashmir. He locates his analysis, in the context of the conflict situation in Kashmir, specifically the exodus of Kashmiri Pundits. Making a case against systematic or homogenizing projects of identity, Raina argues, that though such processes seek to establish the hegemony of uni-linear identities, group identities even at their most cohesive, are never monoliths of opinion or preference, but riven with internal debate and dissent.



## Identity Politics of Women and Dalits

Many scholars have drawn attention to the gendered nature of insecurity. In the Indian context, this has been repeatedly illustrated from the time of Partition to the more recent evidence during the Gujarat pogrom. All these and many others recount the ways in which countless women have been raped, abducted, or killed to dishonour or to save the honour of a religious community.

The fourth section of this volume focuses on this particular aspect of the Kashmir conflict. The first three papers in this section throw light on the manner in which gender affects the narration of insecurity and the construction of collective memory in specific ways.

Noting that women have generally been under- or misrepresented in stories of Kashmir and its people, Krishna Misri's paper makes an attempt to map the complex and variegated picture of women's identity. Tracing the history of the social position of women in Kashmir, Misri analyzes the "relative emancipation of women in the modern period, especially in the context of the mass political consciousness in Kashmir." However the entry of women into the public sphere, was severely impacted by the onset of conflict, which among other kinds of insecurity, brought to fore the gendered dimensions of insecurity.

Anuradha Bhasin Jamwal, in her paper, *'Women's Identity and Politics in Jammu and Kashmir'* argues that hegemonic identities within communities (encouraged by the political tendencies of the state) marginalize women. Jamwal attempts to fill the gap with respect to the fears and experiences of women in Kashmir who have endured, and continue to endure, the brutalizing consequences of conflict. In re-acquainting us with Kashmir's scar marks, whether it is the 'raped village' of Kunan Poshpara, or the myriad stories of individual women, this article uses the diversity of women's experiences to illustrate how women have struggled/coped against the backdrop of extensive militarization and human rights violations.

Both Misri and Jamwal familiarize the reader with the terrible vocabulary of Kashmir -its 'half widows', mothers with missing sons and raped women, both Hindu and Muslim - and how violence against women always takes on a specifically sexual form in situations of conflict.

Another important dimension of this debate is also brought out, i.e. the presence of women in public spaces. Both articles draw attention to the manner in which experiences of women as spectators or victims of violence have propelled them to form their own organizations, such as the banned

women's outfit *Dukhataran-e-Milat*, the *Muslim Khawateen Markaaz*, or the Association for the Parents of Disappeared Persons (AVDP), a civil society rejoinder to state-sponsored terrorism which has mostly women as members.

The recent turmoil in Jammu and Kashmir has brought greater visibility to women in the public space, leading many to argue that women have become the face of protest politics both in Jammu as well as in Kashmir. Vibhuti Ubbot's paper '*Gender Identity and Participation of Women in the Amarnath Agitation*' analyses the role of religion in mobilizing women for political purposes. Like many before her, Ubbot argues that women's presence in the public sphere is often interpreted as a sign of women's emancipation and empowerment. However as women's participation in the Amarnath agitation illustrates, the issue of empowerment and emancipation of women, has no easy answers. At a deeper level, this provocative article also points to the contested relationship between women, state, and nationalism and transformation of women as objects as well as subjects of state policies.

Moving away from gender, the last paper in this section, '*Dalits in Jammu and Kashmir*', analyses the impact of land reforms and other policy changes in the lives of Dalits. Besides focussing on the internal differentiation among the Dalits, this paper by P. S. Verma also deals with the dynamics of Dalit politics - it highlights the consolidation of Dalit identity - as well as its assertion through alliance with other underprivileged groups.

### **The Other Kashmir**

While most of the book deals with the people of the India-administered part of the disputed territory, '*Socio-Political Realities of Pakistan Administered Kashmir*' gives the reader a glimpse into the complexities and political dynamics of the Other Kashmir. This article by Ershad Mehmood, introduces the idea of the cultural continuity of the former with Pakistani-administered Kashmir.

### **Concluding Remarks**

Romila Thapar states that to comprehend the present and move towards the future requires an understanding of the past: an understanding that is sensitive, analytical and open to critical enquiry.<sup>1</sup> In that sense, this book is a definite value addition to the study of identity politics, as it does not fall prey to the somewhat naive assumption, that identities come up unproblematically, or that a new identity unites the ranks like never before.

Given this premise, the unproblematic use of the much vaunted term "Kashmiriyat", manifests as the only sore point of this volume of essays,

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<sup>1</sup> Romila Thapar, "In defence of history," *Seminar* 521 (2003).

otherwise well researched and written. For most contributors, it is Kashmiriyat, which explains the old tradition of religious tolerance, almost of syncretism, and the historical absence of tension between Kashmiri Muslims and the small but prominent (and now displaced) Kashmiri-speaking Hindu minority – until, that is, India and Pakistan started to interfere. Barring a passing reference to Chitrlekha Zutshi and Mridu Rai in Gul Wani’s paper, there is a glaring omission (on the part of most of these authors) to engage with the writings of other contemporary authors on the subject. A critical look at the notion of Kashmiriyat would have only added greater value to this effort.

*Identity Politics in Jammu and Kashmir* is definitely a timely addition to the growing scholarship on Kashmir. What it does most assiduously is to map the complexities of Kashmiri politics and identity; in the process, it captures the varied experiences of grief, pain, humiliation as well as the hopes and aspirations of the people in the state. It is an important book, for those who endorse a people-centred view of the conflict, and perhaps, a people-centred solution.

When Edward Said published *After the Last Sky* – a book on Palestinian lives without a single violent image, many readers were stunned at this seemingly romantic, somewhat nostalgic rendering of a troubled land and its people. Only later did they recognize the significance of bringing ordinary people in their everydayness into discussions of diplomacy and geo-politics.

As the articles in this volume suggest, the internal dimensions (in addition to the more obvious external factors) of the Kashmir conflict are so complex and variegated, that no simple or single framework for peace is available. There are no given answers or even paths. However failure to build on the few and fragile windows of opportunity or bring in the widest gamut of actors, would reduce hopes for peace to just that, hopes.

Andrew Whitehead notes that, “Historians can’t solve conflicts, but at least they can chip away at some of the accepted narratives that obstruct a broader understanding of the issue, and by so doing make a settlement that little bit easier.”<sup>2</sup> *Identity Politics in Jammu and Kashmir* is a step in that direction.

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<sup>2</sup> Andrew Whitehead, “Kashmir’s Conflicting Identities,” *History Workshop Journal* 58 (2004): 340.