

Knowing in Our Own Ways

Women and Kashmir

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When it comes to international conflicts, ignorance is as much an ally as ill-will in their prolongation. The vested interests entrenched in profiting from conflict unsurprisingly seek to limit the range of possible political options that might lead to demilitarisation, dialogue, conciliation, a just peace, and eventually resolution. However, the means by which the conflicts are prolonged relate just as much to the usually effective embargoes on what kind of knowledge can be produced about the conflict, by whom, and with what kind of visibility.

This is acutely so in the case of Kashmir, where ignorance and ill-will work synchronously to produce a simplistic understanding of the region that belies its complexity in terms of its history, politics, competing claims, traumatic memories, divided populations, lack of justice, denial of rights, loss of homes, and cycles of extremism, corruption, and occupation. The mainstream understanding of Kashmir outside the region and globally is predominantly through the prism of an Indian and Pakistani statist narrative. There is little space for Kashmiris and their knowing in their own ways; even less for Kashmiri women speaking about women and Kashmir. In that sense, the present Review of Women's Studies, with all its limitations, provides Kashmiri women this space.

The word "Kashmir" is hypervisible in the Indian discourse today, but in specific and limiting ways. Most Indians and others internationally have a received understanding of Kashmir that is based mostly on media reports, which again tend to be significantly state-centric. Thus, the signifier "Kashmir is a tremendously powerful one in the contemporary Indian imaginary and, depending on the qualifiers attached to it, it can be made to carry different political meanings and messages. For instance, when used in the public discourse, the terms Kashmiri Pandit, Kashmiri Muslim, Kashmiri men, and Kashmiri women will all perform different discursive functions. Kashmiri women, as part of that hypervisibility, are often presented as passive victims of their men and of the overarching political violence. Our remit and motivation, here, is to initiate the reader into a more complex understanding of women and Kashmir—women of Kashmir, women in Kashmir—as a way of further interrogating the significance of gender in questions of prolonged conflict.

At the outset, we reflect on some of the issues of grouping the themes and the challenges we faced in putting together this review issue. As co-editors, being Kashmiris ourselves, our motive for this review issue was to include the "herstories"

of Kashmir. We have, deliberately and with intent included only work by Kashmiri women. We do not claim to be representative of or speaking for all Kashmiri women, but our motivation is to bring a heightened visibility to at least some Kashmiri scholars who are actively thinking about the intersection of gender and the political dispute. The Kashmiri women writing in these pages are scholars, professionals, and activists who present their analysis in light of history, anthropology, law, and feminist studies. No doubt, there will be other endeavours where we can include a more diverse array of Kashmiri scholars and scholars of Kashmir across genders. We consider this review issue as part of an ongoing endeavour that will prioritise Kashmiri voices that have been usually sidelined. We are aware that in this review issue there is relative absence of gender concerns as they relate to Kashmiri Pandits and other Kashmiri minorities, the Kashmiri and Indian economy, as well as the disputed parts of Kashmir administered by Pakistan and China. It is not that we did not try to find some such voices, but it was not possible always to find or to retain them. In that context, much more work needs to be done, and this is only the beginning.

Each paper in this review issue refers to the conflict, and relies on a wide range of narratives and sources. The aim here is not to provide a definitive account of what Kashmiri women think, or say, or want, or experience. Indeed, for us, as editors, selecting and finalising the papers was a tough balancing act. On the one hand, it is not always possible to request a citation for the experience of being marginalised or of witnessing marginalisation, and, on the other hand, scholarly work cannot rely entirely on assertions. We have tried, wherever possible, to walk this line between acknowledging the theoretical feminist insights and making sense of the empirical realities faced in the colonial periphery of the postcolonial nation.


In a protracted conflict as the one in Kashmir, the life of people remains suspended often, in the time between the next encounter, killing, arrest or curfew. When men become direct victims of state violence, it falls to the women to hold the last vestiges of the community together. Samreen Mushtaq's (p 54) paper

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engages with the ways in which Kashmiri women are part of a more overt and wider political struggle, but also part of the everyday resistance where the binaries of home and outside do not hold, and where the home is not an indicator of safety. She looks at the ways in which everyday resistance can be understood through visibility, resilience, and dignity in the reproduction of the daily existence of Kashmiri life. Ordinary life also features in Mona Bhan's (p 67) paper, but in an extraordinary manner. Bhan shows us how the daily life of ordinary Kashmiris is threatened as Indian policies increasingly weaponise nature. Bhan specifically locates her paper in the aftermath of the floods of 2014, when Kashmiris en masse challenged the notion that the flood was natural, and thus apolitical. Kashmiris linked the questions of nature, and ecological and resource sovereignties to their struggle for self-determination against Indian hegemony. Bhan's paper situates Kashmiri women's narratives of dispossession and the proliferation of Indian investments in mega hydroelectric dams on Kashmir's rivers within this context. Uzma Falak's (p 76) paper is a lyrical analysis of affective female alliances—*vyestoan*—and their liberatory potential. She theorises women's mobilisation in friendships that emerge during protests, demonstrations, and funeral processions of militants and civilians alike who are killed by the government forces. She analyses these linkages not just as a form of support, but also as the creation of a gendered resistance. In Inshah Malik's (p 63) paper, we see how funerals have become spectacular sites of feminist resistance. She challenges the myth of the grieving mother as a passive symbol of patriarchal nationalism, and

meaningfully theorises Kashmiri women's agency in the public sphere.

Mir Fatimah Kanth (p 42) excavates the history of gendered resistance, illustrating a continuity when it comes to women. She looks at women, politics, and subjectivity in relation to the state and its arbitrary exercise of power, and in relation to society and its gendered expectations of women. Kanth's tracing of this history makes it clear that resistance to Indian authority is not a post-1989 phenomenon and certainly has not been bereft of women's participation. In the context of the empowerment of Kashmiri women, Hafsa Kanjwal's (p 36) paper takes us back in time, alerting us to how state-sponsored women empowerment programmes in the early years of post-partition Kashmir resulted in feminist projects that were affiliated with the state, and, in time, became deeply contested and politicised. In this context, women's mobility and education were more geared in the service of consolidating the power and legitimacy of the state, rather than allowing indigenous movements—political or social—to grow and flourish. Essar Batool's (p 60) paper tackles the issue head-on by focusing on sexual violence under intense militarisation and patriarchal norms. Batool, who is also a co-author of an important volume titled *Do You Remember Kunan Poshpora?*, analyses the sexual violence against women, men, and transgender persons in Kashmir at the hands of the government's troops, who are emboldened by the legal immunity provided by laws like the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act. While militarisation-related violence works differently on men and women, issues of "shame," "honour," and reprisals mean that fear results in under-reporting of such



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violence for both men and women. Batool also makes the important point of how the structure of patriarchy can act as an ally of state violence and oppression. Alliya Anjum's (p 47) paper makes sense of how militarism and militarisation is linked to a denial and loss of rights, investigating the gendered effects of this in terms of how violence is experienced and why it is perpetrated. She thinks through the conflict-related sexual violence paradigm in the context of Kashmir, calls into question the government response towards human rights abuses in Kashmir, and urges the need for ending impunity, especially in the context of international legal policy, which is stringent and clear with regard to sexual violence in conflicts.

Understanding Experiences of Women in Kashmir

While the structure of a military occupation cracks down equally on all genders, feminist scholarship has shown us that the interlocking nature of militarism and masculinity means that competing patriarchies of oppression and resistance become mutually constitutive, and women are at the sharp end of both. Understanding and analysing the life experiences and agential potential of women in disputed zones like Kashmir becomes difficult as well as crucial. In addition to the complications of the globally ubiquitous patriarchy, there is the question of how war and occupation is an exercise in gendered hyper masculine power in the context of a conflict zone. Against this backdrop, Kashmiri women deserve to be recognised for their tremendous role in challenging the narratives and impacts of occupation; these are generational struggles, at once poignant and powerful. We think of inspirational women like Parveena Ahangar who is the co-founder and chairperson of the Association of Parents of Disappeared Persons (APDP), an organisation that brings together those searching for Kashmiri men who have disappeared in the custody of the Indian armed forces. We think of the 55 Kashmiri women who came together in 2013 under the banner of the Support Group for Kunan Poshpora, and have been key to the annual commemoration of 23 February as Kashmiri Women's Resistance Day. We think of the Kashmiri women of the past, the present, and the future who have spoken truth to power, stood up for their rights, braved all odds and persevered, disrupted both patriarchy and occupation, and have lived to tell their stories, to laugh, sing, and love.

Yet, so many Kashmiris have had their lives brutally cut short by conflict and violence that has been orchestrated to humiliate them and render them bereft of relatives, homes, and hopes. Do you know how Kashmiris remember? Kashmiris, of any and all kinds, map their timelines not merely by running through the years chronologically, but by recalling the years through what they brought: the summers of massacres, months of mass blindings, humiliations of human shields, ceaseless curfews and bans, repeated uprisings, political upheavals, impositions of governor's rule, India-Pakistan border hostilities, rigged elections, mass exodus, and mass rape. Srinagar has flowers that grow on mass graves, lanes that are littered with ruined houses and torture centres that have been turned into official residences. There are soldiers and guns everywhere.

In 2018, the United Nations produced a "Report on the Situation of Human Rights in Kashmir: Developments in the Indian State of Jammu and Kashmir from June 2016 to April 2018, and General Human Rights Concerns in Azad Jammu and Kashmir and Gilgit-Baltistan." The reception of this report in the Indian media was overwhelmingly one of rejection and ridicule. The illegitimacy of the Indian state's actions in Kashmir is aided by a common-sense public opinion of the Indian majority, which only allows for seeing the Kashmiri struggle through the lens of paternalism or jingoism.

What serious scholar of Kashmir could deny the simultaneous existence of human rights abuses and a political problem that needs a political resolution which must involve the Kashmiris themselves? Yet, even something as basic as this is hard to find being reflected in the Indian mainstream media, through which most Indians form their opinions on Kashmir.

We urge the readers of this review issue to move beyond the comfort zone of merely acknowledging the vulnerabilities of the marginalised Kashmiris, by equalising the illicitness of the military and the militants, by thinking past the self-serving machinations of the Indian power brokers at the centre and Kashmiri mainstream politicians at the periphery, and by asking the difficult question: How long must ordinary Kashmiris suffer their traumatic history as endless memory before their calls for freedom and justice are taken seriously enough to warrant a political resolution?

The Kashmiri women herein speak of myriad things: of spectacles and street protests; women's companionships and female alliances; women's movements and imaginaries of resistance; the links between militarisation, militarism, and the creation of impunity by the law; competing patriarchies and sexual violence as they seek to break Kashmiri communities; the infrastructures of control that limit their mobilities, bodies, and experiences; public grief at funerals as a challenge to Indian sovereignty over Kashmir; and autobiographies, oral histories, and the textures of political memories.

In the powerful idiom of postcolonial criticality, the question we should ask is not "Can the Kashmiri women speak?" but rather "Can you hear them?"

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EPW Index

An author-title index for *EPW* has been prepared for the years from 1968 to 2012. The PDFs of the Index have been uploaded, year-wise, on the *EPW* website. Visitors can download the Index for all the years from the site. (The Index for a few years is yet to be prepared and will be uploaded when ready.)

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