

Book Review
By
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Farhana Qazi, *Secrets of the Kashmir Valley* (New Delhi: Pharos Media & Publishing Pvt Ltd, 2016), 312

Much has been written about Jammu and Kashmir dispute between India and Pakistan, but little literature exists exclusively on the role of women in Kashmiris' fight for freedom. Farhana Qazi documents this aspect of the freedom movement in Kashmir in *Secrets of the Kashmir Valley*. The word "Secrets" in the title aptly describes a reality that seldom gets the attention it deserves, i.e; the struggle of women in the Jammu and Kashmir conflict

The author has narrated her personal experiences of meetings with numerous women involved in the Kashmiri struggle. The inspiration for her venture into the subject comes from her mother and maternal grandmother. The first two chapters, 'Mama's War' and 'Remembrance' are a narrative of the Kashmiri struggle as seen through the eyes of her mother and grandmother, the latter being a Kashmiri herself and the former identifying strongly with the Kashmir cause and was involved in politics in her youth.

In the chapter titled 'Nights in New Delhi', Qazi writes about the dynamics of the dispute as seen by intellectuals as well as common people affected by the situation in Kashmir. The next three chapters, 'Bomb Girl', 'Martyrs' and 'Prisoners' are all stories about women who had directly taken part in the freedom movement or were heading organizations that fought for their rights as women. They organized rallies and led protests. Many of them were arrested or had lost their men due to the high handed tactics employed by Indian authorities. Some women in these stories were also widows or half-widows, or had

sons who were arrested or killed, on sometimes false allegations of involvement in militancy. Despite all their hardships, each one of them had bravely continued to voice their concerns openly.

In chapter 7, the author highlights the fact that though Kashmir is like a perpetual prison, people, especially women, work hard to support their families in the absence of men and occasions such as weddings are celebrated as in any other part of the world. Kashmiris, as a community, are strong-willed and determined to live in the face of difficulties they face on a daily basis. Their poetry and song, however, reflect their deep-felt pains and agony. The chapter titled 'Wives of Militants' are accounts of women who married men whose first love was militancy. They lived in fear but felt the pride of their husbands' fight against occupation of their land.

In chapter 9, Qazi relays the conditions of affectees of the 2005 earthquake living in Pakistan administered Kashmir. Female refugees had suffered the most because female doctors were not available in the affected areas. She quotes some secondary sources, for example Todd Shea, an American who raised funds and came to Kashmir to help improve the healthcare facilities and stayed for ten years, as having said "Others are better equipped, but I'm the one who's here." In chapter 10, 'Siege', the author writes about the massive human rights violations, including rape, killings, forced disappearances and denial of basic facilities such as electricity and how people have learnt to live without them. The author concludes with a discussion about the importance of raising awareness of the Kashmir conflict. She is of the view that people involved in the struggle are striving to do just that. The brief epilogue ends on a bittersweet note as a survivor of the 2014 flood in Kashmir expresses a hope regarding the future of Kashmir, saying "We live in God's shadow."

Several themes are woven through the book's narrative. One is the stoic resilience of the Kashmiri women and their unbound ability to survive and protect their children. Another is a determination to

continue the fight against the occupation of their land. Most importantly, all the people who have struggled and suffered, take pride in their actions as contributions to the cause of freedom. The people interviewed for the book included ex-militants, aspiring militants, those who had ties with or led sundry groups. They included members of the JKLF (Jammu Kashmir Liberation Front), HuM (Hizbul Mujahideen) MKM (Muslim Khawateen Markaz), JuM (Jamatul Mujahideen), JKMM (Jammu Kashmir Mass Movement), DeM (Dokhtran-e-Millat) and SLF (Student Liberation Front). The Kashmiri struggle has not slowed down in the last several decades despite the AFSPA (Armed Forces Special Powers Act) in IOK, which gives immense powers to law enforcement authorities and enables them to use strong armed tactics, including random killings and arrests of innocent civilians on mere suspicion.

The author has taken great pains to collect material for the book. In this pursuit, she visited a low intensity conflict military zone to record heart-rending stories of the people affected by the conflict. However, it is not an academic read of the Kashmir issue, and certainly not for beginners intending to learn about the dispute. The book intertwines personal stories of women with facts, presenting a complex account of the happenings in IOK. It also includes small details, which sometimes seem not directly relevant but give more substance to the narrative.

The book's account is presented thematically rather than chronologically. It is mentioned in the introduction of the book that the interviews conducted for the book took place between 2007 and 2014, but references have been repeatedly made to the periods preceding 2007 as well. It is difficult to ascertain, in some cases, the time frame of the people interviewed. There are also several proofreading mistakes in the text, which could be avoided with a little effort. In several places, punctuation is misplaced and words and names are misspelled. For example, on page 229, a new name

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“Ahmed” is introduced while two persons “Shoaib” and “Pervez” are being talked about in the preceding lines of the same paragraph. However, despite these shortcomings, the book is a compelling read.

Farhana Qazi is a globally acclaimed writer, speaker and researcher. Her previous studies also include works on conflicts and terrorism for which she has received widespread commendation.

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