

A Granddaughter's Tribute

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Sheikh Abdullah's grave continues to remain under tight security, since the very people for whom he had once been a messiah, now believe that he betrayed Kashmiri aspirations for self-rule and justice. That his grave became a magnet for attack is a testimony to the highly contested legacy of the "Lion of Kashmir", the homespun Kashmiri leader who shaped Jammu and Kashmir's post-monarchical democratic polity, underpinned by the syncretic cultural ideology of *Kashmiriyat*. It is a legacy of radical socio-economic reform combined with democratic political decay that his granddaughter Nyla Khan unproblematically hails with more nostalgia than rigour in her dispersed essays in *Islam, Women and Violence in Kashmir*.

At one level, the book is a granddaughter's tribute – a mourning for the loss of paradise nearly gained in the 1940s and 1950s, via the Quit Kashmir movement and inspired by the Naya Kashmir manifesto promising rights to all the former princely state's diverse peoples. Khan focuses on Kashmiriyat as embodying that faith and the poet-saint Lalla Ded, revered by Kashmiri Pandits and

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Muslims, as internalising that spirit. She writes, "The notion of Kashmiriyat forged – by my maternal grandfather – was not handed down to me as an unachievable and abstract construct. On the contrary, it was crystallised for me as eradication of the feudal structure" (p 37). For Khan, Kashmiriyat was a catch-all notion that embraced the Sheikh's radical land reform, gender equality and the availability of educational and medical facilities. Paradise is relost by Kashmir's physical entrapment in the competing nationalisms of India and Pakistan, and further complicated by international power games. Historically, the tragedy of the Kashmiri people has been its "foreign" rulers, and "Indian administered Kashmir" is part of that long line.

As for the contradictions inherent in the Kashmir polity, Khan plucks from Mridu Rai's scholarly work (*Hindu Rulers: Muslim Subjects*: 2004: 284-85) the salience of the political strategy of the Sheikh and the

National Conference, of fostering the notion of Kashmiriyat. That is, a distinct syncretic cultural ethos that transcended the otherwise regionally and ethnically divergent J&K state. She takes a leaf from Rai's thesis – Kashmiriyat is a well-crafted theoretical fiction, derived from a selective reading of community histories and culling cultural fragments from an imagined past that enfolds the Pandits, Muslims, Dogras and the Ladakhis (p 37). It was designed to keep at bay the centralising strategies of the successive regimes of India. Khan readily acknowledges, however, the weakness of this "sub-nationalist" project. "The various communities in the state – Muslims, Pandits, Dogras and Ladhakis – have tried to form a national consciousness in order to name a cultural alterity through the nation", she states. However, "due to regional sentiments that are so well entrenched in the psyche of the people, this attempt is still in a volatile stage" (pp 8, 37).

Khan's discursive narrative which randomly plucks at scholarly and journalistic writings on Kashmir offers no scope to tease out the contradictions as well as the warts within the contemporary Kashmir polity. However, the bitter lesson learnt by Sheikh and later his son Farooq Abdullah is writ large: political survival predicates securing Delhi's support, thus losing the mass support base of the erstwhile National

Conference (NC). Khan's narrative is a highly selective "remembrance". Delhi is lashed at for suborning democratic processes with its proxies manipulating elections, except for the 1977 elections. But Khan chooses not to mention that in the 1987 election which tipped the balance towards armed rebellion, it was the ruling NC and Farooq Abdullah who could not tolerate the opposition alliance Muslim United Front (MUF) walking away with eight seats in the assembly elections. MUF candidates including their aides were beaten up in police stations. It pushed polling agents Yasin Malik, Hamid Sheikh and Javed Mir to cross the border and remerge as leaders of the Jammu Kashmir Liberation Front (JKLF). Khan demonstrates little awareness of the need to critically review the contribution of the Abdullah legacy in the makings of the Kashmir insurgency or why the middle class support base of the NC initially tilted towards the JKLF.

Access of Kinship and Heritage?

This book seeks to carve out space for itself amidst the huge outpouring of writings on Kashmir not by professing any fresh interpretation of already well-turned over material, but by the author's promise to interpret the myriad socio-political discourses in Kashmir through the prism of her Kashmiri heritage and her kinship access as the daughter of Suraiya Ali, Sheikh Abdullah's youngest daughter. In addition, Khan promises to foreground women's perspectives by exploring issues of nationalist ideologies, religious freedoms, and judicial and legal structures.

Khan writes, "I draw from the cultural and ideological spaces I was raised in, the cherished verses of the Sufi poet Lalla Ded ... the conversations with my maternal grandmother are etched in my memory" (p 12). What emerges though is a striking poverty of kinship access and the limited nature of her personalised sources of information. The stray references to her grandmother Begum Akbar Jahan being pained at the power-driven rifts in the family reflect no fresh insights through a privileged access or liveliness of anecdotes. Even the brief reference to the Begum's role in the women's militia – Women's Self-Defence Corps (WSDC) raised against Pakistan-backed tribal raiders is derived from an e-mail communication of Krishna Misri, a fellow militia member (pp 116-17).

Moreover, what is one to make of Khan's impressive range of readings on Kashmir, when it gets distilled into a superficial understanding of Nehru's stance on Kashmir as his "blind spot"? She uncritically quotes Michael Brecher's assessment that Nehru was driven by "sentimentalism and vacillation", ignoring the complex backdrop of the integration of Indian states entrusted to Sardar Patel (p 33).

Where Khan's heritage does eloquently speak is in her invocation of Lalla Ded, whose life and sayings represent a watershed in the cultural and spiritual development of Kashmir (p 41). Lalla embodies the pride of Kashmiris in inhabiting a cultural space between Vedic Hinduism and Sufi Islam, the foundation of its traditional communal harmony, so nostalgically captured in Rushdie's *Shalimar the Clown*. It symbolises the possibility of transcending barriers of religion, caste, gender and hierarchy then and now.

Ashis Nandy in an Afterword titled "Negotiating Necrophilia" evocatively captures the spirit that inspired Khan. "Lalla Ded who can be considered the protagonist of the following narrative directly in some ways and indirectly in others, is significant by virtue of being a surviving symbol of what Kashmir was and still could be. Nyla uses her as a possible key to a future that contemporary politics chooses to see as only a red ribboned fantasy produced by a fevered imagination" (p 153).

However, as Khan sets herself the task of analysing Lalla Ded's poems and paradigmatic sayings and their continuing impact on Kashmiri Muslims and Pandit communities, an e-mail communication by Neerja Mattoo brings her down to earth. It is not the poet's profound challenge of exclusivist beliefs but her stoicism and self-suffering that is remembered, in the common recollection of her *vaakhas* or verses (pp 48-49).

Bringing in the Margins

Khan makes much of oral historiography and the importance of preserving it for posterity. But her narrative of "Negotiating the Boundaries of Gender, Community and Nationhood" barely shows a nodding acquaintance with the rich vein of feminist scholarship – international as well as focused on Kashmir. Or with the international policy discourse on gendered narratives, conflict and sexualised violence

that has crystallised in UN Security Council Resolutions 1325 and 1820, and in the International Criminal Court's recognition of rape as a weapon of war.

Khan criticises first world feminists but in her treatment of the burqa/hijab issue shows little depth of awareness of the history of resistance and assertion around the question in Kashmir. To accept the burqa-clad Asiyah Andrabi and her *Dukhtarane Millat* cadres as "faceless and voiceless – devoid of agency to pave a path of their own choosing" (p 104) is to be blind to a distinct assertion of agency, albeit in an undesirable direction. Similarly, it may be cute to say that Parveena Ahangar, "shed her veil and her inhibitions" (p 102) to demand justice for her son and thousands of missing persons, but then Ahangar was never veiled in the first place. Curiously, Khan does not locate the impossibility of securing justice in the widespread social and legal culture of impunity that is the root of human rights abuses.

Khan has to be credited for reminding us of the early history of women's activism as embodied in the WSDC in the 1940s. It has been a nagging question for many of us researchers and activists: why the few initiatives at organisational activism on the women's question in situation of conflict have been characterised by rupture and not continuity as evinced in, for example, the North-East. Also, I am indebted to Khan for recovering the story of Mubeena Bano, the bride who was gang-raped by security forces, while the bridal party was fired upon. The international media splashed this news story widely in 1990. Mubeena was rejected by her in-laws but her husband Abdul Rashed stood by her and she is now the mother of three (p 109).

For the initiated this prodigal daughter's tribute offers little that is not known or fresh in understanding to make it compelling reading, and for the uninitiated, it presumes a deep level of familiarity with writings and events to render it bewildering. Moreover, her dream of regaining the "Camelot" of the 1940s-1950s seriously calls into question her partisanship.

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