

The New Kashmiri Woman

State-led Feminism in 'Naya Kashmir'
HAFSA KANJWAL

Vol. 53, Issue No. 47, 01 Dec, 2018


Hafsa Kanjwal (hafsa.kanjwal@gmail.com) teaches South Asian history at Lafayette College, Easton, Pennsylvania.

Influenced by the leftist ideals of the *Naya Kashmir* manifesto, the post-partition state governments in Kashmir sought to empower its women. Scholarly work on this period covers how it was a particularly liberating moment for Kashmir's women. Using an autobiography and oral history, the existing scholarship on the meanings of the "Naya Kashmir" moment for Kashmir's women is critiqued. Even while Kashmiri women were able to benefit from a number of economic and educational opportunities, we must be cognizant of the ways in which the state became the purveyor of patriarchy. One of the shortcomings of this period of state-sponsored feminism was that no indigenous, grass-roots women's movement emerged in Kashmir, given that those working on women's issues in Kashmir were exclusively dependent on the state, which was becoming deeply contested and politicised.

In the last decade of the 20th century, as Kashmir Valley was in the midst of an armed uprising against the Indian state, Shamla Mufti (1928–2008), one of the first female Muslim educationists in Kashmir, published her autobiography, *Chilman se Chaman* (From Darkness to Light) (1994). Mufti was the former principal of the premier Women's College in Srinagar, and was also one of the first Muslim women to receive her master's degree from Aligarh in the 1950s. In the beginning of the autobiography, Mufti states that her target audience is the new generation of girls in Kashmir, a generation whose experience of Kashmir has been refracted primarily through the prism of armed conflict. She desires that this generation learn about their recent history and is afraid that they are being raised without an understanding of the sacrifices and struggles of their predecessors.

Mufti's autobiography is structured alongside three important moments in the history of modern Kashmir. The first, which encompasses the final two decades of the repressive monarchical rule of the Dogras in the state, describes her family background, childhood, and early marital and home life, and speaks to the multiple ways in which she, as a young Muslim female, was restricted both in relation to the Dogras as well as the prevailing conservative norms of the emerging urban, middle-class Kashmiri Muslim society at the

time. Mufti was married at an early age, before she completed her schooling, and much of her narrative revolves around how she continued her education and gained employment, despite criticism from her family and her in-laws. The second moment, which arises in the immediate aftermath of partition and Kashmir's disputed accession to India, as well as the rise of the Kashmiri-led National Conference (NC) government, narrates her experiences of obtaining higher education and working in a number of schools and colleges. It traces an "opening" that existed for a number of Kashmiri women, who were able to leave the confines of their homes under the new policies of the state government. Finally, the third moment, which is not covered as much in depth as the other two, provides a brief overview of increasing political instability in the state and its implications for everyday life, including the closures that it enforced on the period of "opening."



Dear Reader,

To continue reading, become a subscriber.

Explore our attractive subscription offers.

CLICK HERE

Economic & Political WEEKLY

ISSN (Online) - 2349-8846

Or

To gain instant access to this article (download).

Pay INR 50.00

(Readers in India)

Pay \$ 6.00

(Readers outside India)