



GENDER, CONFLICT AND PEACE IN KASHMIR: INVISIBLE STAKEHOLDERS

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BOOK REVIEW

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Kashmir! Who has not heard or seen the images of violence, trauma, distress and pain. The struggle to maintain autonomy over the princely state began with the partitioning of Muslim India (Pakistan) and Hindu India in 1947 after freedom from British occupation. Kashmir caught in “the boundary conflict” with a Hindu ruler and majority Muslim subjects; Hari Singh decided to go neutral. This was the inception of an ongoing protracted territorial war (almost seven decades) that has claimed the lives of over 100,000 people. Unfortunately, what many do not know today is that this was a war that Kashmiri women and girls claim full participation, ownership and sometimes victory in. No one has been able to fully capture the interwoven complexity of women’s engagement in peace and conflict in Kashmir other than Seema Shekhawat. Shekhawat’s *Gender, Conflict and Peace in Kashmir: Invisible Stateholders* sets a leading trend on the conundrum of the feministic role in politics, violent conflict, and peace-building. A pressing issue forsaken yet in dire need of unravelling in contemporary discourse, will invoke provocation, internal conflict, cognitive dissonance as it pertains feminism premise of gender equality and women’s empowerment, human rights and social justice and fairness, and crime and punishment.

The sleek, green, black and white text is a 200-page hard-back, divided into seven compactly captivating chapters. In chapter one – “Feminism, International Relations and War” Shekhawat opens with the obvious pink elephant in the room, inter alia, Ann J. Tickners question “why have women been conspicuous only by their absence in the worlds of diplomacy and military and foreign policy-making”(p. 1)? In responding, the author reasons that, even though feminist scholars constantly challenge masculinity in theory and practice, gender invisibility still exists in international relations partly due “how women impact war and what kind of roles they [women] play in violent situations”. The rest of the chapter juxtaposes essential feminism in terms of women’s unique perspective as different from that of men i.e., whether women are ontologically, inherently peaceful, or less aggressive than men (p. 9).

In chapter two – “Women Making War in South Asia”, the author advances a thought provoking argument in connection with the issue of women’s role in conflict. She argues that “war is not a male bastion and women are not necessarily peaceful [because] women fight and kill as well” (pp. 24-25). The all women combat unit in Dahomey Kingdom of West Africa in the 18th – 19th centuries and the all-women battalion of suicide bombers in the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) which conducted 378 suicide attacks from 1987 to 2008 were to of many examples the author cites (pp. 25 & 27). Later in the chapter, the author dissects various reasons why women participate in conflict. Whilst some women are pressured by society yet others by the ‘five Rs: revenge, redemption, relationship,

respect and rape', (p. 37) one can securely assume that the reasons for which women engage in battle is not necessarily superimposed on to that of men's. For example, in Palestine, Tim McGirks argues that "for some women becoming suicide bombers seems to be a better option than being married to persons not of their choice and for others it is necessitated 'to restore family's honour'" (p. 37).

Chapter three – "Conflict within Contested Kashmir" drives the objective of the book to its core. With brief historical underpinnings on the Indian States of Jammu and Kashmir (J&K), Shekhawat examines the impetus that pushes Kashmiris (particularly women) to the edges of engaging in combat. Certainly, anything less than secession from India and freedom from its rule is an overstatement. As the crisis peaked in the late 1980s with Kashmir subjection to revolt by its own people, the Valley witness curfews, strikes, and violent demonstrations including a "demand for a ban on Salman Rushdie's book, *Satanic Verses*" (p. 67). Soon, foreign militants took to the land of J&K to assist rebels and advance their extremist agenda (p. 69).

The next chapter – "Engendering the Conflict" paints a picture of women ceasing an opportunity to be visible by participating in the struggle for freedom from an oppressive monarchy and a colonial rule. Women as protestors and caretakers front the pages of newspaper, Shekhawat writes:

More and more Kashmiri Muslim women – mainly college and school students – are decrying the 'Indian occupation' of Jammu and Kashmir and alleged atrocities by security forces against local people. Thousand of them in separate groups, poured onto streets in Srinagar on three days last week and clashed with police or made a determined bid to march to the United Nations Military Observer's office seeking the world body's intervention to help solve the Kashmir dispute.

According to Shekhawat the involvement of women in militancy was crucial to men. Kashmiri women mounted the "resistance podium" by either shielding men, receiving cane blows to protect men, enforced curfew while embracing the ongoing attention they received from male militants leadership. They committed to searching for missing brothers, husbands and sons, providing safety in their homes, as well as preparing food for their male fighters. For example, Naseema married a militant at 16 years and recalled much pride and celebration by her entire village (p. 85). The author quotes Nusrat Begum view of women's participation in the conflict: "those days (1989-90) were a time of pride for Kashmiri women" (p. 81).

The chapter further delve into the rationale for women's role as motivators and facilitators in the conflict. The author argues that, although there are a multitude of reasons (personal, religious, ideological, economic, and socio-cultural obligations) why women supported violence in Kashmir, they were more interested in the "...construction of heroic images of militants and valiant mothers who sent their sons to fight and who rejoiced at their martyrdom" (p. 87). Eventually, since the militant men were actually in control of the show, once they retreated women also did but a significant level of insensitivity and neglect. The author quotes Rabiya Sayeed, who lost three male members of her family, "Pakistan played with our emotions for its own agenda; we had been fooled by Pakistan" (p. 95). Only within a matter of time, fear and intimidation gripped Kashmiri women to escape and protect the honour of their women. These events preceded the dawn of the All-women Separatist Groups (Chapter five). From Dukhtaran-e-Millat (DeM), the most visible all-women militant and fundamentalist organisation in J&K, to Muslim Khawateen Markaz, a professional based Muslim women group which started as a charity organisation but later diversified to supporting the militants, women persisted in defining their roles as equal participants in the J&K conflict. However, Shekhawat hesitation transcends. She asserts that, "[i]n maculinised violent struggles women may be deemed less competent to fight...[t]he primary reason according to them [male ex-militants in Kashmir] which led to the absence of women fighters was because the biological build up of women made them 'unfit to face the austere life of combatant'" (p. 116). It is this inherent belief and constant rejection male militants harbour against Kashmiri women that bred much rancour. At the end of the day, Kashmiri women fate is still straddled between women's perception of gender equality and male militants exclusive domain

of power, control and management of peace and conflict – the crux of chapter six – “Making Peace Sans Gender”.

In concluding, Shekhawat stresses that, “the asymmetrical schema crafted under the male dominated socio-political structure has led to the negligence of gender analyses in conflict and peace” (p.145). But she believes that women matters. Women must count in legitimising the peace process since they not only make up nearly half of the world’s population. So, “when women are not involved in the decision-making process their concerns remain neglected” (p.145). Finally, she exerts,

...a peace negotiated solely among the ‘elites’ excluding the participation of a majority of the people leads to instability. (...) [i]t is imperative to ensure gender parity in peace building not as a favour or a privilege but as a matter of right. Women must be rightfully acknowledged as stakeholders in peace. (pp. 146 & 165).

Gender, Conflict and Peace in Kashmir, a well written book supported by primary sources on the conflict in Kashmir will certainly interest those in gender relations, peace and conflict studies, international relation scholars, UN workers; policy-makers, women’s empowerment advocates and students in political and women’s studies.

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