

Review - The Untold Story of the People of Azad Kashmir

Written by Tahir Abbas

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The Untold Story of the People of Azad Kashmir

By: Christopher Snedden

C. Hurst & Co Publishers Ltd, 2012

The study of Azad Kashmiris has recently taken off given the importance of the role of this group as part of the Pakistani diaspora, particularly throughout countries in North America and Western Europe, such as Great Britain. It is estimated that there are approximately one million Pakistanis in Britain today, however this masks a hugely diverse population group, and the reality is that approximately two-thirds of these Pakistanis are indeed Azad Kashmiris. The reason for this masking is that the category Azad Kashmiri often gets subsumed under that of Pakistani; however it is quite clear that it is a distinct ethno-cultural group reflecting linguistic, religious, cultural and political differences that set it apart from others.

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Only in the last two decades or so has the social science literature on the study of British Pakistanis come to the stark realisation that when speaking about Pakistanis, the reality is that people are effectively referring to Azad Kashmiris. Additionally, this social science literature has only realised in the last two decades that Azad Kashmiris have certain migration, diaspora and transnational linkages to the sending regions in Azad Kashmir that make them of special intellectual interest. However, the literature still remains sorely lacking, and it is often difficult to get a sense of what the true picture is in relation to this important and significant body of people. Azad Kashmiris have too often been ignored by historians of Pakistan and by social and political thinkers operating in the West who have tended to adopt the reductionist and essentialist notion of the Pakistani ethnic classification in relation to this group. However, it is quite clear that some Azad Kashmiris do not see themselves as part of Pakistan, while some Kashmiris from Jammu certainly do not regard them as part of Kashmir either.

As such, there is a dearth of literature that specifically focuses on the historical, social and political developments of the region of Azad Kashmir from its birth in 1948 to its importance in understanding the nature of diaspora linkages today. It is striking that little is known of the internal struggle facing this body of people during a traumatic time of political change. It is difficult to obtain independent and analytical perspectives on the range of different issues at play that pulled people and groups in different directions in relation to the choice to be made to accede to Pakistan or India during the time of Partition. What really went on during that time? What was the role of different significant actors of the time, from Hari Singh to Pundit Nehru to Sheikh Abdullah? How has the regional polity of the Azad Jammu Kashmir been shaped over the decades, and what kinds of implications have there been for local communities as part of the political process which can be understood in a wider historical and sociological context?

These and other important questions have not been tackled by scholars or the region's people until the publication of *The Untold Story of the People of Azad Kashmir* by Christopher Snedden. There are few books that prove as illuminating as this excellent tome. While considerable attention on the study of the formation of Pakistan has focused on the partition of the Punjab, little has been given to Kashmir and indeed the region of Azad Kashmir, which saw its own dramatic and often violent tensions during the heady days of partition in 1948. This book is a welcome change and a sharp reminder. The book is split into two sections. The first explores the historical issues pertaining to Jammu and Kashmir leading up to partition. The section analyses the development of the Azad Kashmir region from 1947 to the present, charting its machinations, and set in a sociological, political and historical context. This book is rich in detail, balanced in its analytical approach and comprehensive in its description of events and outcomes. It uses interviews with key actors in the region to discuss the present situation, as well as previously unavailable official letters and documents to provide deeper insights into the past. I was especially encouraged to read details from the United Nations Commission for India and Pakistan (1949) and the Official Census of Azad Kashmir (1951) reports.

The book is likely to be a tremendous value to historians of the region as well as sociologists and political scientists exploring the important developments in Azad Kashmir from the time of partition to the present. The appendixes are immensely detailed, as are the extensive notes to each of the chapters. If there is one criticism of the book, it is that interviews carried out with key political actors of the past and present could have been more utilised to reflect on first-hand accounts of events. This would have complemented the immense secondary statistical data which is incredibly useful. In spite of the limited shortcomings, the reader will find that this book has a wealth of information and insight that is rarely found in the study of the region of Azad Kashmir. This book is likely to remain an important contribution to the literature for many years to come.

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