

Review - Across the Line of Control

Written by Daanish Mustafa

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DAANISH MUSTAFA, JAN 20 2013

Across the Line of Control: Inside the Pakistani Administered Kashmir

By: Luv Puri

New York: Columbia University Press, 2012

Puri is clearly a seasoned journalist working for a premier progressive Indian newspaper, The Hindu. I am generally much more excited about books written by journalists than academics, being that journalists have the training and the skills to write for a general audience. Journalists like Ahmed Rashid, for example, do an outstanding job of balancing analytical rigor with easy, accessible writing to produce books on the Taliban, Pakistan and Afghanistan. These books are equally valuable for a casual reader as well as specialized analysts and academics. A progressive Indian journalist writing about the Pakistani Administered Kashmir (PAK) is potentially a very timely and important contribution. Unfortunately, the book does not live up to what it promises in the title. There is very little in the book demonstrating the types of personal observations, inflected by analytical insights, that you would expect from somebody from the other side of a contemporary equivalent of the Berlin Wall that separates the Pakistani and Indian administered Kashmir. Very few international travellers let alone Indian journalists get access to PAK. The book is a missed opportunity to educate and enlighten a wider international audience in general and the Indian audience in particular about the society and politics of PAK.

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Puri does a fairly competent job of providing a broader brush treatment of the recent history, politics, demographics and key events in the history of all of Kashmir, with a special focus on the PAK. Some of the observations about the governance structure of the PAK, which militate against meaningful democratic control of the government of PAK by the people of the regions, are very clearly spelled out. Furthermore, the book is also quite useful in understanding the key political stakeholders and pressure groups in the PAK.

One of the sections that I found particularly useful was about the Pakistani diaspora in the UK and the historical and cultural context that facilitated migration to Britain from one specific district in the PAK. The role of the diaspora in PAK politics and society is also discussed in some detail, and could be quite useful for any student of Kashmir or of ethnic politics in the United Kingdom. Furthermore, the heart rending stories of individuals around the time of independence and subsequent violence in Kashmir capture the tragedy of the beautiful land.

Another enlightening segment of the book was a rendition of pre-independence politics in the state of Jammu and Kashmir through the ethnic lens, such as disagreements between valley based politicians led by Sheikh Abdullah and Jammu based interests headed by Ghulam Abbas. The former became a key nationalist figure aligned with India while the latter became an iconic figure in the Muslim nationalist narrative in PAK. It is rare that the two towering personalities in the recent history of Kashmir are contextualized in the ethno-nationalist milieu of their times. Students of Kashmiri history could gain new insights from such a treatment of the two personalities and their actions in the run up to India and Pakistan's independence.

Despite the above strengths, one of the key weaknesses of the book is surprisingly the writing. Perhaps the fault lay in my expectations. Those who are familiar with the works of an impressive array of South Asian novelists and journalists (e.g., Khalid Hassan, Pankaj Mishra, Muhammad Hanif and Vikram Seth to name a few, who have distinguished themselves internationally), have legitimately come to expect a taste and flair of the spicy South Asian English that has characterized the literature emerging from the region. In this case, however, the writing is generally awkward and forced, e.g. on pg. 13-14:

There were protests against the Maharaja's specific policies including economic policies that discriminated against the Muslim community, in particular of the Kashmir region. There were vociferous protests against the inadequate representation of Kashmiri Muslims in the state administration and the army in contrast to other communities of the state, including Jammu Muslims who were fairly well represented in the state [sic] army.

There simply is not the flow and flair that makes for an enjoyable read. Instead what one has is a rather bland, semi-academic English which is soporific in the best of circumstances.

In other instances even grammatical errors seem to proliferate on some pages, e.g. on pg. 25: 'The attack caught the administration unawares [sic], and anarchy prevailed in the region.'

Or on the same page:

By September end, Muslims were rounded up in the villages and in the Jammu city and were told by civil and military officials to depart to Pakistan.

Writing style and mistakes exemplified above are distracting, and tend to take away from the rigor and sophistication of the argument being presented.

But beyond the writing is the subject matter. I barely got a sense that the author has ever been to PAK. I am sure he has, but he does a remarkably good job of hiding that in this book. There are no stories or analysis backed up by observations that could humanize the land being talked about. The title of the book promises us a human journey across the LoC. Instead what we get is a reasonably competent analytical piece about the PAK which could just as easily have been written using desk research. Surely as a journalist Puri understands the value of taking your audience 'there', like they themselves were there with him. That is the fundamental weakness of the book. If it were titled something else, for example 'PAK Present through a Historical Lens', the reader would have gotten what the

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title promises.

When somebody claims to be objective, one can be sure that the person is not objective. Objectivity is something that belongs to 20th century fantasies about humans passing judgement about the messy world out there from some Olympian point. Puri also falls victim to that 20th century fantasy of objectivity when he declares that he is presenting an objective account about Kashmir. If a reader wants objectivity, it could only be found outside of a human world. Those who write and read texts are for better or for worse trapped into this human world of history, culture, emotions and subjectivity. Strong narratives don't try to side track that reality, but embrace and celebrate it—and repose faith in the reader to see the person behind the narrative. Puri would have been well served to put that faith in the reader.

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