

Speaking Peace Women's Voices from Kashmir

Review >
South Asia

Kashmir has followed a model of 'development' that has bred a generation of children who ask for AK 47 guns as birthday gifts. This is but the logical fall-out of the military presence and a level of violence that has already claimed some 70,000 lives, left 4,000 missing and a million displaced, and bequeathed a 'widow population' of more than 15,000. *Speaking Peace: Women's Voices from Kashmir* is a collection of essays depicting the world and the lives of the women of Kashmir, torn apart by politics, militancy, and war-like violence.

By Biswamoy Pati

Lack of proper health care, education, irrigation, and industry; the legacy of Partition, human rights violations, displacement, and resurgent conflict, these are among the daunting problems that plague the state of Jammu and Kashmir, to which Urvashi Butalia draws attention in her introduction. The essays of this book illustrate the way violence has disrupted the lives of common people and affected women, irrespective of their religious identities.

Pamela Bhagat's essay focuses on women's health issues in the Kargil district. For women who face under-nourishment at home and have to depend on women's healthcare systems (in the Kargil district hospital, *without* women doctors until 1984), the dividing line between life and death can be razor

thin. As stated by a female doctor, pregnancies are the most serious health problem faced by women. The lack of basic knowledge on natal/post-natal care and family planning methods leads to multiple pregnancies, misery, and even death for a large number of rural women. Sahba Husain's chapter complements Bhagat's essay by focusing on the way personal traumas have impacted upon women. Interviewing doctors and patients at two government psychiatric hospitals in Srinagar, she chronicles cases of depression, sleep and anxiety disorders, and heart-related problems. Despite the increase in the number of patients from 1,700 in 1971 to 32,000 in 1999, the number of psychiatrists in the hospital (five) has remained the same.

Neerja Mattoo's chapter discusses the women's college (Government College) set up in 1950. She examines the shift-

ing profile of the institution where she studied and, later on, taught. The built-in structure of discrimination ensured that before 1950 even very talented women were barred from higher education. Mattoo recounts the sheer vibrancy of the institution and how religion was absent from college life until 1990. After 1990, grenades, bombs, and religious extremism/fundamentalism frightened away many female students.

An extract from Krishna Mehta's *This happened in Kashmir* recounts the brutalities that visited Kashmir during the 1947 Partition. Shakti Bhan Khanna and Kshama Kaul continue on this theme, focusing on the 'second partition' of Kashmir that led Non-Muslims, such as Kashmiri Pandits, to leave the Valley. Woven around the authors' personal experiences, these chapters focus on forced displacement and the scars it

can leave on women. Their essays also illustrate how little people learn from the past. Sonia Jabbar's chapter outlines the massacre of Sikhs at Chittisinghpura, and the brutalities that so often accompany the stigmatization of 'otherness'.

The chapter by Uma Chakravarty raises vital issues related to human rights violations and the way these have devastated families and traumatized those women who have survived. These brutalities raise questions about the identity of women, aspirations of a people and the hopeless rot that can set into any region where civil society breaks down and military solutions and crisis management techniques are resorted to.

A report reproduced from the *Indian Express* written by Muzamil Jaleel recounts how the Bharatiya Janata Party grabbed hold of the home of Krishna Kotru, a Kashmiri Pandit, and converted it into its party headquarters after she was forced to flee Srinagar. For two years she petitioned government officials, including the Union Minister L.K. Advani, but to no avail. The local party leader, the Minister of Civil Aviation,

even told Krishna that were the Bharatiya Janata Party to remove its signboard from her house, it would appear as if the party had vanished from Kashmir. Such vignettes not only illustrate little-known aspects of the displacement of Kashmiri Pandits, but also reveal the real face of political parties that claim to represent 'Indian nationalism' in Kashmir. Taken together, the chapters of this socially engaged book comprise a laudable effort to give space to the voices of women, voices that are normally difficult to 'hear' and that are now further 'veiled' by the near war-like situation. ◀

- Butalia, Urvashi (ed.), *Speaking Peace: Women's Voices from Kashmir*, London: Zed Books (2003), pp. 314, ISBN 1-84277-209-0

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