

How paradise was lost



BOOK REVIEW

SHYAM SARAN

Radha Kumar has had a long association with Jammu and Kashmir, initially as a scholar and historian, later as political analyst and eventually as one of the three interlocutors for Kashmir appointed by the United Progressive Alliance government in 2010. Her latest book, *Paradise at War*, is a very readable history of Kashmir, highlighting its hold on the Indian imagination as a land steeped in ancient Hindu and Buddhist myths and legends and later its own unique and accommodating brand of Sufi Islam. The focus is inevitably on the Kashmir Valley as a zone of contestation

between India and Pakistan and whose inhabitants are either courted or targeted by the Indian state in endless cycles of reconciliation and suppression.

It is the Valley that makes the state unique in many ways. It has deep affinities with India's religious and cultural spaces. Less acknowledged is that its innately plural, secular and composite culture stood for what the newly independent India wanted to be. The book makes one realise how much our failure in Kashmir is a reflection of the relentless erosion of cherished values we collectively enshrined in our Constitution. Ms Kumar demonstrates how much the Pakistan factor influenced the responses of the Indian state to happenings in the Valley. Confronting the hostility of Pakistan exacerbated fears that the people of the state could not be trusted to uphold its accession to India.

The book underlines the costly mistakes that Jawaharlal Nehru made in the immediate aftermath of India gaining inde-

pendence and for which the country continues to pay a heavy price. There was no reason to make the accession of Jammu and Kashmir to the Indian Union conditional. No other princely state that acceded to India or to Pakistan was accorded the privilege of ascertaining the Will of its people thereafter to legitimise the accession.

Nehru and other Indian leaders appear to have been easy victims of British connivance and duplicity despite all evidence to the contrary. There may have been risks in continuing military operations against Pakistani forces after the Valley had been secured but surely, there should have been an awareness that the loss of Gilgit and Baltistan would cut India off from its Central Asian neighbourhood quite apart from threatening the Valley itself. Taking the Kashmir issue to the United Nations was another blunder and successive generations of Indian diplomats have expended much time and energy trying to fend off international activism on Kashmir. Ms

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Kumar has shown convincingly how many of the challenges we confront today can be traced back to those early blunders.

Paradise at War brings out the inescapable link between peace in the Valley and peace between India and Pakistan. Hostility between India and Pakistan and armed clashes at the Line of Control (LoC) heighten risk perceptions among security forces operating in the Valley, leading to the imposition of measures that are intrusive and demeaning. This worsens alienation among an already disaffected population. Pakistan then has a more congenial environment to promote cross-border terrorism, spread disaffection in the Valley and an escalating cycle of violence takes hold.

It was in the 2003-2007 period that India and Pakistan were engaged in a serious effort to achieve relative peace and establish normal state-to-state relations. This was also a period of relative calm in Kashmir and a guarded sense of optimism prevailed.

Ms Kumar has written knowledgeably about the back-channel talks that took place during this period and what may have been achieved as a common understanding on the lines advocated by then Prime Minister Manmohan Singh — to establish a soft border allowing a relatively free flow of peoples and goods and allow the celebration of the strong cultural affinities shared by the people on both sides of the border and LoC. In time, the status quo would have become legitimised. This would be possible to sustain only if Pakistan abandoned its reliance on cross-border terrorism as an instrument of state policy. This brief window of opportunity mostly evaporated once Musharraf, the then Pakistani leader, ran into serious domestic political turmoil in 2007.

The author has devoted a longish chapter on her experiences as a government interlocutor interacting with a very broad spectrum of people in Kashmir. Her accounts convey the deep sense of loss of dignity and respect among a people subjected daily to demeaning encounters with security forces. This has to change for any progress to be made.

The concluding chapter considers a "faint hope for a peace process". After rigorously analysing various possible scenarios, she concludes, as one would have expected, that the contours of the understanding arrived at in the back channel talks still represent the most promising way forward. There should be a resumption of the peace process with Pakistan paralleled by an intensive dialogue process with the dissident and separatist elements in the Valley with the hope of arriving at a solution that all three can live with. The problem is that the conjunction of regional and international developments, which enabled the earlier peace process, no longer exists.

The reviewer, a former Foreign Secretary of India, is currently Senior Fellow, Centre for Policy Research

PARADISE AT WAR A Political History of Kashmir

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Aleph,
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