



Chitralkha Zutshi. *Kashmir's Contested Pasts: Narratives, Sacred Geographies, and the Historical Imagination*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2014. xv + 360 pp. \$49.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-945067-1.

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Sacred Space, Historical Space: Kashmir's Histories

Chitralkha Zutshi's *Kashmir's Contested Pasts* is a magisterial survey of Kashmiri historiography over the last several centuries, a history of the writing of histories in Kashmir. This is an intricate task: Zutshi posits an indigenous, Kashmiri mode of historiography that spans both Sanskrit narratives—beginning with the *Rajatarangini* by the twelfth-century poet-historian Kalhana—and Persian texts (both religious *tazkiras*, or hagiographies of Sufi saints and mystics, as well as *tarikhs*, the more straightforwardly historical chronicles, although the line dividing them is hardly set in stone) that engage with and build upon Sanskrit forebears, even as they reconfigure Kashmir as sacred (Islamic) space. Indeed, as Zutshi demonstrates at length, the imagining of Kashmir as sacred space is in large part what makes this tradition specifically Kashmiri. Beginning with the colonial era, however, Zutshi argues that a double move remakes this tradition, at once eliding the Persian aspect of the tradition as later than, and hence imitative of, the *Rajatarangini*; and in time also deracinating the *Rajatarangini* (The River of Kings) itself, as an example of Indian/Hindu historiography that was “subtracted” from Kashmir, precisely so that it could “add” to the emerging concept of India as a whole. The book ends with excellent chapters on the Kashmiri narrative public and its engagement with performative modes of history and collective memory, followed by a look at contemporary battles over history in Kashmir, a legacy of the growing communalization of Kashmiri identity characteristic of the last two centuries.

Kashmir's Contested Pasts does at times appear to downplay precolonial communal fault lines. While Zutshi surely is not wrong about the difference that nineteenth-century colonialism made to the Kashmiri narrative tradition, colonial modernity by itself did not “crystalliz[e] the idea” that Kashmir's people were “identified primarily as members of distinct religious communities” (p. 182). Zutshi cites Muhammad-din Fauq's *Tarikh-i Akhwam-i Kashmir* (History of the Peoples of Kashmir, 1914) as symptomatic of the trend, but her book's own long first two chapters contain numerous examples indicating that this sort of perspective was long established in the Kashmir narrative tradition. Both *tazkiras* and *tarikhs* are repeatedly cited for the proposition that Kashmir continued to be reconfigured as sacred space across the Sanskrit and Persian chronicles, and that together these constitute an authentic Kashmiri narrative tradition. But the manner in which *tazkiras* and *tarikhs* assimilated Islam to Kashmir itself depends upon acute awareness of sectarian difference. Thus, whether it's the mystic Shamsuddin Iraqi, who “goes through the [sixteenth-century *tazkira* titled *Taufat ul-Ahbab*] razing dozens of temples” (p. 48), or “his activities in removing infidelity from the land” (p. 106) in the sixteenth-century *Tarikh-i Haider Malik*, it is hard to escape the notion that if imagining Kashmir as a sacred space is one of the uniquely Kashmiri aspects of this tradition, that tradition seems to depend on, at a minimum, the imagining of great violence on the Other.[1]

The above might seem obvious, but Zutshi's textual

formalism in the first third of her book seems to slide past it. In these sections of the book Zutshi seems to almost reflexively take precolonial texts at face value in a manner denied to Raj-era counterparts. At one level this is understandable—Zutshi clearly wants to let the relevant texts speak to us through her work, rather than bludgeon them to fit a theory—but it does lead to a curiously schizophrenic result. Late nineteenth- and twentieth-century writers do not just write history, they clearly also engage in politics beyond those evidenced in the texts themselves; the motivations of their Mughal and Kashmir Sultanate counterparts are not similarly interrogated—these texts end up testifying to the contours and character of Kashmir’s sacred space, but to not much else, and Zutshi hardly ever explores the unstated agendas of precolonial writers.

Thus, *Muntakhab al-Tawarikh* (1710) “is the only Persian history of Kashmir that does not include a section on Sufis and other mystics of Kashmir,” and thus “reclaimed Kashmir as a political entity in its own right, whose historical narrative was driven by temporal concerns rather than religious affairs” (p. 108). The notion that this might have had something to do with the fact that the author, Narayan Koul ‘Ajiz’, was (unlike the Muslim authors of the other Persian histories discussed in this chapter) a Kashmiri Pandit, does not seem to be relevant. Zutshi does not pause to consider that his reticence might in part have been a function of the fact that as the “*mir munshi* of the Mughal deputy governor Arif Khan” (p. 75), and writing in a language with wide cultural currency in court circles, Koul might have felt the need to pull more punches than those writing in Sanskrit (p. 5n7). As goes without saying, I do not know whether Koul was in fact reticent or defensive, but the specter problematizes Zutshi’s reading of *Muntakhab al-Tawarikh* (Select Histories).

Conversely, if in the nineteenth century Pir Ghulam Hassan Shah Khuihami’s history acknowledged the role played by “mature and renowned scholars of Sanskrit” and the “deep imprint on the Persian language” that “allowed it to flourish in Kashmir” (p. 173, quoting Khuihami), it is no insult to Khuihami’s openness to note that he was also writing under the auspices of the Dogra court and its prime minister, Anant Ram (p. 172), complicating the extent to which we can see this as an instance of Kashmir “imagining its own literary past, the distinctiveness of which was rooted in the continuous thread between its Sanskrit and Persian literary traditions” (p. 173). Even prior to the strident communalism of twentieth-century politics, there seems to be

scant evidence that notions of such distinctiveness transcended Hindu and Muslim fault lines, as those intersected with the sensitivities of Kashmir’s various ruling dispensations—Sultanate, Mughal, Afghan, Sikh, and Dogra.

Perhaps the problem lies in the way *Kashmir’s Contested Pasts* is organized: one has to wait until its superb fifth chapter towards the end of the book for a possible, and suggestive, resolution. Building on Farina Mir’s work on Punjab, Zutshi argues for “the existence of a fluid line among print, scribal, and oral cultures” in Kashmir as well, with narratives “consumed by diverse audiences not only through reading, but also through the pleasure of listening and responding to them as they were orally performed in musical and other sacred and secular assemblies” (p. 246). That is, a reading of the Kashmiri tradition that focuses on the Persian *tarikhs* and *tazkiras* in isolation misses the point of the narrative public as “a complex space created through reciprocity among a textual historiographical tradition in Persian ... a poetic tradition in Kashmiri, partly in manuscript, partly in print, and partly in oral form; and the Kashmiri storytelling tradition, which existed wholly within a variety of oral performance genres” (p. 247).

Zutshi is referring here to the nineteenth-century Kashmiri-speaking public, but her work offers a basis to extend this back to earlier times as well. The public’s consumption of the Persian historiographical narratives as one among many genres, in conversation with other modes and genres, is necessarily an aesthetic one, enabling the public to engage with often contradictory, painful, or ambiguous ideas and conceptions of Kashmir’s past, in a way denied to professional historians. One might go further: perhaps only an oral tradition enables such a stance, imagining not a synthesis of irreconcilables into a new orthodoxy so much as the ability of the narrative space to enable irreconcilable ideas (of Hindu gods, of Islam, of Kashmir as sacred space before Islam and as sacred space *because* Muslim) to be held in aesthetic suspension. Zutshi knows full well that the “textual and oral traditions ... mutually constituted each other” (p. 249) (the fifth chapter is suffused with her keen appreciation for this dynamic), but the crucial second and third chapters on the Persian narrative tradition are written as if she does not, and are weaker for it.

As a general matter, *Kashmir’s Contested Pasts* is excellent as its focus shifts to the last two centuries, beginning with Zutshi’s study of the uses colonial and nationalist discourses made of the *Rajatarangini*. Thus

we see the double move effected by colonial scholarship, followed by the (somewhat differently inflected) discourses of nationalism: in the nineteenth century the *Rajatarangini* was held up as an example of “the idea that unlike other regions of India, Kashmir was not a historical *tabula rasa*, since it possessed a connected narrative of its past” (p. 191). But this story only mattered if it was a pan-Indian story (as opposed to a local/regional one): that is, the price to be paid for admission of the *Rajatarangini* into accepted historiographical standards was that the text needed to be de-regionalized, “decontextualized and hitched to the service of colonial and national master narratives regarding India’s past” (p. 185). Simultaneously, the text could be absorbed into the growing communalization of Indian history, conceived in terms of a classical Hindu epoch (with Sanskrit its linguistic sign) followed by a Muslim period (with Persian its linguistic sign), and so on. A communal story, a tale told of Hindus and Muslims, could be assimilated to a wider frame than the merely regional. Local politics could also be enthusiastically complicit in such endeavors: the *Rajatarangini* “established a direct link between Kashmir’s ancient Hindu past and its Hindu present (as exemplified by Dogra rule)” (p. 200), and the focus on a glorious “Hindu lineage” (p. 188) served as a legitimating device for the region’s Dogra rulers, bereft of any long history or glorious founding myth given the sordid circumstances of the region’s transfer to them after the British conquest of the Sikh kingdom.

But, as Zutshi reminds us in an excellent section at the intersection of scholarship, nationalist politics (both Indian and Kashmiri), and conflicts to come, nationalizing discourses are hardly monolithic: Zutshi’s survey of the work of R. S. Pandit and his recasting in the 1930s of *Rajatarangini* as literature over history, is an analysis of a very different sort of pan-Indian story, expressly noncommunal, and critical of orientalist privileging of dry historical fact in the *Rajatarangini* over literary truth. Consistent with the “German romantic-nationalist conception of literature” (p. 224), this truth is, in rather circular fashion, the articulation of “the deepest and most valuable ‘expression’ of the spirit of a race, people, society, or nation, or of national character” (p. 225). Zutshi does well to remind us that these were not merely

abstract, esoteric notions: Pandit was brother-in-law to Jawaharlal Nehru, and the latter wrote a foreword to Pandit’s book, citing the *Rajatarangini* as “evidence of Kashmir’s ties to India,” and the region as “essentially ... a part of India and the inheritor of Indo-Aryan traditions” (pp. 230-231).

Zutshi’s keen appreciation of textual nuance, and her sense of the tradition as a whole, serves her better here than in her reading of the Persian *tarikhs*. Even within the broad sweep of the nationalization of *Rajatarangini*, she is able to spot continuities between the colonialist and indigenous Kashmiri tradition, such as in her discussion of M. A. Stein’s scholarship and writing on Kalhana’s text: while Stein’s work is “squarely located within the orientalist enterprise” (p. 211), he nevertheless saw the *Rajatarangini* as “foremost a Kashmiri narrative that illustrated the ‘peculiarity’ of Kashmir’s ‘geographical position’” (p. 214), that concern with geography hearken back to Kashmir’s long tradition of *tarikhs*, Sufi and Sanskrit texts. This paragraph is characteristic of *Kashmir’s Contested Pasts*, in that it is not content with charting the sweep of history, but is alive to the possibility that the old, seemingly extinct, might yet survive as a trace. That will have to do as far as hope is concerned: imagining “a more inclusive future for the region and its people” (p. 316) has never been so necessary, nor seemed more remote.

Note

[1]. To be fair, Zutshi might be drawing a subtle distinction between the (pre-nineteenth-century) notion of Kashmir as a sacred space, that space itself either “Hindu” or “Muslim”; and a later notion (one she identifies with nineteenth- and twentieth-century writers like Hargopal Kaul Khasta and Fauq) that the “Kashmiriness” of the people was inseparable from, and subsidiary to, their status as Hindus and Muslims. But even this change—and change it certainly is—underscores a certain continuity with the tradition, albeit one Zutshi does not highlight: the communalization of narratives about Kashmiris in the colonial era did not arise in a vacuum, and must be seen against the backdrop of the earlier *tarikhs* and *tazkiras*, heavily invested in claiming Kashmir’s sacred space for one or another tradition.

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