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Review of *History of Armed Struggles in Kashmir* by Rao Farman Ali

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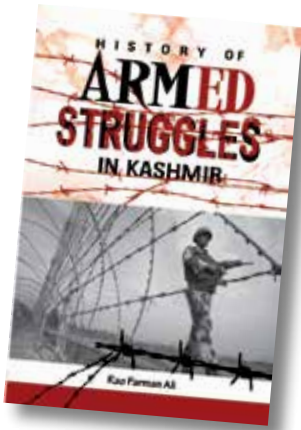
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Reviews



History of Armed Struggles in Kashmir.

Rao Farman Ali. Srinagar: JayKay Books, 2017. 304 pages. ISBN 9789383908646.

Reviewed by Inshah Malik

The idea of presenting a history is to invoke human agency, highlight the changing circumstances of the human condition, and offer an understanding of our existing political order.

Rao Farman Ali's *History of Armed Struggles in Kashmir* rises up to this challenge and explores the political agency of the Kashmiri people and painstakingly catalogues details that achieve an astounding girth. The book attempts to reintroduce and reorganize the historical material on Kashmiri political action to create an indigenous narrative on Kashmir's politics. However, it fails in producing a line of argument that could help us understand our present moment.

Under political occupation, Kashmiri scholarship has suffered

tremendously due to lack of access to information and censorship. A Kashmiri-authored book on the contentious issue of armed struggles is a welcome step in reigniting the passion for scholarship among a new generation of Kashmiris. It is further notable that the book is published by JayKay Books, which is one of the oldest indigenous publishing houses in Kashmir.

The book is divided into six chapters. The first chapter, the introduction to the book, does not prepare the reader for the book's main thesis—namely, that the armed struggle did not just abruptly start in 1989. Ali disputes the scholarly consensus that presents the year 1989 as a historic moment before which Kashmir was largely peaceful. He alludes to the fact that the violent political action in Kashmir is older than 1989 and has its roots in early Kashmiri political consciousness that rose alongside the Indian subcontinent's anti-colonial politics. However, the chapter does not make a case for this argument, but instead offers, first, a description of Kashmir's political geography, followed by a half-hearted attempt to refute the Hindu mythological description of how Kashmir came into existence (which is presented almost as a matter of historical fact). This leads to serious lapses in the organization of the book.

In the second chapter, Ali begins to build a background for his actual subject, that is, the armed struggles. In the shawl weavers' political movement against the

Dogra rule of Kashmir in the early 1850s, we get acquainted with Kashmiri political actors through anecdotes and descriptions of events that demonstrate the Kashmiri people's historical willingness to fight for their rights and assert their need for political autonomy. The biggest contribution that Ali makes here is that he links the Kashmiri consciousness to the idea of political and labor rights, which took incremental steps over several centuries to consolidate into a national political consciousness. Much of this predates modern pan-Islamism and it is here that the book makes a brave departure from looking at Kashmir only through the prism of the "Islamic extremism" problem.

When the Dogra rulers entered Kashmir after acquiring it from the British colonialists through the Treaty of Amritsar in 1809, Ali argues that Kashmiris unified in a protest against an imposed foreign ruler. It took a full-fledged British armed intervention to quash the resistance that greeted Gulab Singh in Kashmir (p. 11). Similarly, artisans' rights were an issue that brought Kashmiri shawls-weavers together to observe a 'first demand day' on April 29, 1865. This marked the beginning of a resistance movement against the *Rahdari* system, which was put in place after Kashmiri artisans started fleeing in large numbers to avoid heavy taxation. The second Dogra ruler, Ranbir Singh, ordered all roads out of Kashmir to be

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Inshah Malik on *History of Armed Struggles in Kashmir*

closed and even ordered the fleeing artisans to be killed by drowning. This movement is the first instance in Kashmir’s history of political organization for demanding rights; it also notably provided an outlet for channeling dissent under an imposed monarchy (p. 15).

Under the third Dogra ruler, Pratab Singh, public education improved through missionary schools and *anjumans* (Muslim organizational schools). By this time, the issue of the weavers’ rights had created a platform to raise a national demand since the level of political education among the masses was gradually growing. However, raising such a national demand resulted in social ruptures along class lines. While lower-class, poor Muslim weavers conceived of a nation free of oppression and exploitation, Kashmir’s upper-class Pandits demanded that their class interests be protected. The Pandits started a parallel demand, namely, the *Roti* (bread) movement, which sought assurance from the king that they would be employed by the state (pp. 16-18). The organization of this national movement was further complicated by the decolonization of the subcontinent. Ali provides a peek into those complications and addresses Kashmir’s accession to India.

Through problematizing Kashmir’s accession to India (pp. 23-8) and the formation of the interim government that brought the National Conference (a secular Kashmiri nationalist party) to power in Indian-occupied Kashmir (p. 29), the author traces the existence,

operation, and politics of armed groups after 1947. These are precisely the aspects of Kashmiri political life that hardly receive any serious scholarly attention. The dispute over a functional constitution, the escalation of violent attacks, arson, and armed rebellion in the Poonch area as protest against disallowing democratic resolution of the Kashmir issue were stark political realities of Kashmir’s post-accession polity.

Chapter Three, although entitled “Second Generation Armed Struggle,” actually focuses on the first generational armed struggle, when most Kashmiris found themselves at a politically opportune moment to demand political change through violent politics. On October 16, 1948, the Mujahid Front was launched to refute the claim of finality and fairness of accession. The group argued that the king had no authority to sign the accession because he was widely unpopular and resented by the majority of his subjects (pp. 57-9). The Mujahid Front engaged in several mass political education drives to educate Kashmiris about the “deceitful” nature of accession (p. 59).

Ali demonstrates how the events and conditions of the early 1940-50s finally consolidated a need to resist Indian rule through a dedicated armed struggle as early as the 1950s. The coup that led to the incarceration of the popular National Conference leader Sheikh Abdullah and replaced him with a Pro-Indian Bakshi regime in 1953 also led to the formation of an organized political front in 1960

that demanded a plebiscite, which Jawaharlal Nehru promised and to which the United Nations committed. Ali argues these conditions were ripe for more leftist groups, like Red Kashmir, to mushroom in Kashmir, and in the early 1960s the Jammu & Kashmir Liberation Front (JKLF) was started by Amanullah Khan (p. 61).

In Chapter Four, Ali details how eventually a Palestinian-style Al Fatah group formed along with the Young Men’s League in the late 1960s. Together, these introduced the Kashmiri polity to strategic armed struggle and guerilla warfare. Ali further unravels the relationship between the Plebiscite Front Movement and Al Fatah through oral anecdotes, the details of which bring to light the complicated relationship between the armed groups and the National Conference in the 1960s and 1970s.

In Chapter Five, the author presents details of the widely known 1980s armed struggle. He focuses specifically on the formation of the Islamic Student’s League, the Jammu Kashmir Liberation Front, and *Hizbul Mujahideen*, documenting their intricate inner details and locating their splinter groups. There is a brief description of women’s institutions and activism in the 1980s and passing references of incidents of women’s participation in various phases. Ali also documents Pakistan’s several interventions into the Kashmiri resistance movement, such as operation Gibraltar. He maintains that Pakistan has been supportive

of Kashmir's freedom cause without any critical engagement with the nature and strategic motivations of that support.

In the concluding chapter, Ali's discussion of the resolution of the Kashmir dispute is generic and incongruous with the actual potential of the book. The lapses in the book are reflected in the absence of both the identification of political actors (besides names) and an introduction to the political philosophy of these organizations, which leaves the reader confused. The book offers encyclopedic information on Kashmiri resistance movements but does so unfortunately with very little argument. Nevertheless, at this stage it has a potential to become a 'go to' resource for students and scholars interested in different phases of Kashmir's resistance history.

Inshah Malik holds a PhD in Political Theory and Gender Studies. She was the Fox International Fellow at Yale University for 2014-15. She is currently working on her first monograph entitled Muslim Women, Agency and Resistance Struggles: A Case of Kashmir, to be published by Palgrave Macmillan.