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The Role of Women in Kashmir politics – from ‘Just Peace’ to Confrontational Politics

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Abstract

The conflict in Kashmir is as old as the independence of India and Pakistan. The people of Kashmir are yet to see the light of the promise made to them by the Indian regime at the time of accession. The uncertainty about the future has perpetuated the conflict to an extent where common Kashmiri has become disillusioned about the Indian state and its democratic values. This has given rise to violence that has taken shape of insurgency and counterinsurgency. The women of Kashmir have been on the receiving end in this conflict. They are the worst victims in the conflict. Nevertheless, they have shown their resilience and carved their niche. They have taken various roles in the changed circumstances balancing between being a mother, wife, daughter and an activist. The paper makes an attempt to understand how women of Kashmir have adapted in the conflict. What are the Kashmiri women organization's active in the Kashmir movement in post 1989 period.

Key words: Kashmir conflict, APDP, Athwas, Article 370, MUF.

Article

Women in Kashmir have been active participants in political movement, whether against Dogra Regime¹ or against the tribal invasion of late 1947 in form of Women Self Defense Corps (WSDC, women's wing of National Militia of Sheikh Abdullah)². The liberal attitude of Kashmiri society towards women was resonated by *Naya Kashmir* Manifesto of Sheikh Abdullah in 1944 which stated that new political government aims at helping women “in attainment of their just, equal and rightful place in the society and enable them to make their full contribution to the task of nation building”. Also, it provided “complete equality with men shall be ensured to women in all fields of life, including, political economic and social” (Lal, Kumar; 2002, 264). This document was of its first kind in subcontinent that clearly asserted political and economic rights of women. Although the successive governments acknowledged women's role in post 1947 period, but there was no corresponding move to accord them political space at the national level. In fact, there have been few like Begum Akbar Jehan and Zainab Begum who rose to some sort of political stature. However, this was result of their stronger political backgrounds – Begum Akbar Jehan was wife of First Prime Minister Sheikh Abdullah whereas, Zainab Begum was sister of GM Sadiq, another Chief Minister of 70's. This reflected the dominant patriarchal structure of Kashmiri society even though it was embedded with syncretic ethos of Kashmiriyat.

Post 1947, integrationist policy of Indian state severely dealt death blow to the special status of J&K, that was maintained by article 370 in Indian Constitution. Almost 273 laws and 28 constitutional orders were passed to reduce the importance of the special status of J&K (Bose: 1999, 203) - a trend that meant clear betrayal to Sheikh Abdullah who had hoped sense of respect for special status of J&K. This approach on part of government from New Delhi aroused feeling of distrust among populace of Kashmir, which was already simmering with anger for being denied the promised Plebiscite by Nehru. Arrest of Abdullah and the accruing political engineering of elections in Kashmir pushed Kashmiris too far, and result – denouncement of any association with political institutions of India that turned much devoid of democratic traditions. The peak reached in 1987, when Muslim United Front lost elections because of heavy rigging, and Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Front (JKLF) along with discontent youth crossed over to Pakistan to seek training for armed struggle. India reciprocated with heavy militarization (one every fifteen civilians) and Kashmir found itself in one of the worst military conflict of the century - a conflict in which about 80,000 people lost their lives.

¹ Dogras ruled Kashmir since 1846-to 1947.

² Both National Militia and WSDC were formed to ward off the onslaught that occurred on 22 October when hordes of tribesmen from Northwest frontier Province, under patronage of Pakistani Army, crossed the border of the princely state of Jammu and Kashmir in order to coercively annex the state.

Kashmiri women became very much part of the movement. They suffered on almost all fronts. The militarization of society brought home daily violence under heavyweight of which they found themselves at the receiving end. Secondly, they lost their bread earners, kiths and kins. As a result, they were forced to live mere subsistence. One of the important fallout of militarization was the sexual violence by armed forces through instruments of rape, loss of husbands and social ostracism after being raped. This was motivated by idea that women of a particular community represent the parchment of their nationalism, and to do violence to them will be a means of collective dishonor to such community. For militants they became the platform on which dominant discourse of nationality was constructed. Their chastity as social collective and community prestige had to be defended against enemy. Thus one could see that women were worst sufferers on both formal and informal nationalist representations. Against this backdrop women were forced to create for them the space to be more than nationalist frames on which national discourse and idea of Victorian purity are created. They protested against every move by Indian forces, shielded militants and served as mothers and wives to take care of household. Women took up multiple roles that preserved family and facilitated the general resistance against state hegemony. Women faltering in support would have seriously crippled the movement. (Manchanda; 2001, 95).

Although leaders of the *Azadi* were ostensibly struggling for democracy, democratic rights did not figure in their agenda; their disinterest and lack of concern within their political outfits reflects the maintenance of gendered status quo, or in words of Rita Manchanda “Kashmiri society restricted women’s self agency”. Protracted conflict demonstrated the in-separability public (interstate) and private spheres of violence (Kazi; 2009, 144). As Eric Blanchard notes:

“Violence at the international, national and family level is interrelated.....and takes place in domestic spaces beyond the reach of law” (2003, 1296). Severe times thus succored the metamorphosis of women from demure to demanding. The collapse of divide between public and private spheres following societal upheaval on conflict pushed women into negotiations of power in public sphere.

Put another way women innovated forms of resistance in cultural space of women as the survival in the private sphere became politicized. The forms of resistance could be peaceful or confrontational depending on the agenda that women have taken up and the circumstance they were in. The peaceful role is the one in which women make use of traditional *motherist* roles to privilege notion of “just” peace from perspective of discriminated or disempowered. It also includes absence of structural inequalities and creation of strategic life choices of women. In case of Kashmir one may add the grievance redressal through constitutional machinery. This concept of peace is based on the assumption that women’s associational quality or ethic of care could bring warring parties to acknowledge the existence of other and accommodate each other and differences within them. It is argued that women, because of their socialization and historical experience of unequal relations, bring different insights into structure of power relations and different values to the process of peace building (Manchanda; 2001, 10).

The second form of resistance is direct confrontation with the structures of power that are either coercive or illegitimate. In such cases, women can either be direct recruits in revolutionary forces, or work in supportive roles to men who are at the forefront of battlefield. These type of organizations draw either from religious or any other source of nationalism – territorial, ethnic etc. Such organizations focus on a homogenous culture thus rejecting accommodation and accumulation. In Kashmir these homogenous cultural tendencies include focus on Kashmiri Muslim Identity or the idea of pan Islamism. These types of organizations reinforce women’s strength and conviction to sacrifice for the family. Thus women are devoid of agency to create their condition of political assertion and political space. They simply become confirming cases to patriarchal structure.

This paper focuses on these two types of organizations in Kashmir – one, those who advocate peaceful ways to seek justice and, two who invoke sentiments of community to achieve their goals of homogenous culture or exclusionary nationalism.

The organizations that focus on women issues through use of constitutional machinery by peaceful means include organizations like Association of Parents of disappeared People (APDP), Kashmiri Women Initiative for Peace and disarmament (KWIPD), Sisters for peace and Athwaas. APDP was formed in 1994 by Parveen Ahangar. It is an association of parents of persons taken into custody by state who have not been heard of since then. It posits itself as an independent group and has forged links with organizations that have similar agenda and program like Parents and Family Members of Disappeared PFMD, and is founding member of Asian Federation against Involuntary Disappearances (AFIN) launched in 1998 in Manila. In Kashmir about 8000-10,000 people have disappeared since conflict started in 1990.

APDP aims at

- Legal redressal of issues of members through writs of habeas corpus and compensation.
- Works with Coalition of Civil Society (CCS) in formation of self help groups.
- Raises the level of awareness and debate about disappeared people by pushing for a greater public presence using public mourning and public memorials.

APDP thus forges links with civil society groups and through its presence by peaceful demonstrations highlight different version of politics that is motivated by peaceful assertion of their democratic rights provided by constitution.

KWIPD (Kashmir Women Initiative for Peace and Disarmament) formed by Asia Jeelani seeks to ensure awareness of rights among women and develop an orientation towards organizing women as a group so that their common rights can better fought for. KWIPD brings out a quarterly "Voices Unheard" that articulates narratives of loss through which mass awareness can be brought forth. KWIPD through self help groups seeks to promote saving and credit activities.

Another organization involved in peace process is Athwaas. This peace organization has been engaged in the bold experiment to break through the barriers of pain, mistrust, and fear that prevail in the region that has been plagued by a tragic conflict for many years. It comprises a group of Muslim, Hindu and Sikh women who work to expand to the constituencies of peace through a range of activities that include active listening, counseling, articulation of the concerns of women to policy makers and government interlocutors, and initiation of programs that facilitate democratic participation and just peace.

In this context, it employs four broad strategies:

It builds **awareness** about:

- a) People who have been affected by political violence
- a) Sexual assault on women by security forces and militants
- b) Coping mechanisms and existing support structures for trauma healing
- d) Areas of action for rehabilitation

It **networks** to:

- a) Build bridges between women at the grassroots and the district administration
- b) Facilitate interaction between local-level bodies and state authorities
- c) Facilitate networking among women's groups in Kashmir
- d) Initiate confidence-building measures, not only within the *Athwaas* group but outside in the community as well
- e) Facilitate women's self-help groups

Its **reconciliation** work involves:

- a) Active listening
- b) Recognizing and accepting differences
- c) Rebuilding trust and friendship
- d) Building co-operation and understanding
- e) Developing potential for sustained dialogue

The *Athwaas* members felt that eventually the process would come to include **advocacy** for:

- a) Articulation of women's issues and concerns to the respective agencies
- b) Communicating information to educational institutions and non-governmental organizations
- c) Publicizing the experiences of the process
- d) Strengthening peace constituencies

On the other hand are the organizations like Dukhtaran-e- Millatz (DM) and Muslim Khwateen Markaz (MKM) who derive their motivation primarily what they call as ideal Islamic faith. Dukhtaran-e-Millat (DM) believes in armed struggle, claims image of women as burqa clad, faceless and voiceless cultural icon, whose chastity has to be protected. Asia Indrabi, head of DM remarks that "we have made them feel secure by making them wear burqa. We are helping widows and destitute women. We organize the weddings of sisters and daughters of martyrs and campaign against dowry system (interview with Sudha Ramachandran). DM denounces Kashmiriyat as un-Islamic and Indianised culture.

Muslim Khawateen Markaz (Muslim Women's Center, known also as the Jammu and Kashmir Muslim Khawateen Markaz) is a women's political group based in Jammu and Kashmir. Its primary activities include protests advocating human rights for the women of Jammu and Kashmir.³ It undertakes humanitarian and human rights work across Kashmir (Kazi; 2009, 144). Organization is currently working on 75 cases of sexual abuse. It has also provided documentary details of 40 women who were allegedly raped by Indian Armed Forces in Kunan Poshpora village of Kupwara district in 1991. Although MKM has a website, little information about its ideology or activities is publicly available. The group's declared goals include "the self-determination and betterment of the women of Jammu and 'Kashmir."⁴ MKM has members in Kashmir's six districts with main office in Srinagar. On the other end is Daughters of Vitasta (Daughters of Jhelum, a river that is lifeblood of Kashmir), mainly operating from Jammu and Delhi. They seek resolution of problems of internally displaced Kashmiri Pandits in terms of separate homeland within geographical space of valley.

Conclusion

One can thus find from the study of these women organizations that women activism in Kashmir through women organizations got oriented around diverse roles. First is the one, in which women fight for justice through self actualization and intervention into patriarchal national history by speaking from their locations current political realities (agency oriented roles). The other is the one in which women are devoid of agency and subscribe to the dominant patriarchal structure and religious scriptures (agency devoid roles), or supportive roles. The two types of the roles that these women organizations take are one sort of pointer to how state has been able to reconcile or alienated the informal nationalism that does not draw from the generally accepted myths and symbols. The sense of 'justice is denied' to women in such scenario under the state sponsored nationalism may result in "inaudible sub-state spheres of representation."⁵ In order to make the peace permanent Indian state needs to delink the discourse of Kashmir with Pakistan so as to foster the local Kashmiri identity based on the secular idea of Kashmiriyat, which will be a definite beginning to address the issues these women organizations raise. This follows from the perception that delinking will help to bring out the issues of human rights violations and forceful disappearances that are subdued under the overarching discourse of foreign sponsored terrorism.

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³"Kashmiris to Take Martyrs' Mission to its Logical End: Yasmeen Raja," *Kashmir Media Service*, Jammu Kashmir People's League, accessed February 7, 2011.

⁴ Jammu and Kashmir Muslim Khawateen Markaz, "About Us," accessed February 7, 2011.

⁵ Mohammed A. Bamyeh, "Transnationalism," *Current Sociology*, vol. 41, no. 3 (Winter 1993), pp. 1-95.