

## A note on gender and *Kashmiriyat*

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Discourses of *insaniyat*, *Kashmiriyat aur jamhooriyat* (humanism, “Kashmiriness,” and democracy) have resurfaced in Indian discussions on Kashmir since 2016. The phrase was originally coined by the former prime minister of India, Atal Bihari Vajpayee, after a visit to Kashmir in 2003, and is regularly evoked by actors across the political spectrum as central to resolving the “Kashmir issue” (Hindustan Times 2017). This piece focuses on *Kashmiriyat*, a contested term with disputed roots, and highlights its gendered nature.<sup>1</sup> The portrayal of *Kashmiriyat* as a unified cultural identity draws on narratives of a “happy valley” fashioned by religious syncretism and harmony (Zutshi 2004). Yet, *Kashmiriyat* as a discourse has served varying political projects throughout history, and the widespread usage of the term denotes that, “*Kashmiriyat* acts as [...] a truth beyond representation and falsification which reflects an imaginary rather than actual phenomenon” (Aggarwal 2008, 231).

*Kashmiriyat* was articulated in interviews and focus group discussions I conducted with women activists during fieldwork in Kashmir in 2011. Many of the participants emphasized their strong attachment to a gendered understanding of the nation. For instance, when asked what Kashmir means to her, Farida<sup>2</sup> referred to Kashmir as *Mouj Kashir* (Mother Kashmir), remarking that, “[I] feel like [Kashmir] is my mother.” This is not a new construct but builds on a long history of portrayals of Kashmir as motherland. As *Mouj Kashir*, Kashmir is imbued with feminine characteristics, playing a motherly role nurturing and caring for its inhabitants, and denotes an emotive belonging to the land. Indeed, Nitasha Kaul (2018) argues that the Indian state actively feminizes Kashmir through romanticized discourses that compare its beauty to that of a woman, which legitimizes “possession and control [of the region] by the masculinist Indian state” (Kaul 2018).

The quest for possession is also played out in mainstream media and international discourse, where Kashmir is presented as a region contested by foreign powers, with little attention paid to the will of the Kashmiri people. For instance, the 1972 Simla Agreement clearly holds that the issue is to be solved through negotiations between India and Pakistan, excluding external actors and Kashmiri stakeholders. This was highlighted by some of my interview participants who noted that Kashmir’s identity was established by its relationship to both India and Pakistan. According to one woman, Haleemah, the competing claims for Kashmir by the Indian and Pakistani states have created a binary between taking either an Indian or a Pakistani identity position, subjugating the option of identifying with Kashmir. Hence, *Kashmiriyat* as an identity was deemed weaker than the two stronger options.

Consequently, in response to the feminization of Kashmir, the resistance movement has sought to masculinize Kashmiri identity. As Inshah Malik points out in this forum, the Kashmiri independence movement idolizes the militant man, and funerals of killed *shaheeds* (martyrs) become masculinized locations for resistance. Interestingly, in the accounts presented in this forum, we see how women play a central part in this. As the literature on gender and nation has underscored, women play a key role in both the biological and cultural reproduction of a gendered construction of the nation. By falling back on emphasized notions of femininity, women both subvert and uphold gender norms in the name of the nation. A discourse celebrating motherhood encourage women to sacrifice their sons for the movement, as Amya

Agarwal argues in this forum. Hence, a nationalist duty falls on mothers to ensure militaristic ideals are upheld. Similarly, organizations such as the Association for Parents of Disappeared Persons (APDP), led by Parveena Ahangar, have mobilized around the notion of an agential motherhood. However, it is also important to note how women have rallied in support of the resistance movement outside organizational structures, for instance Seema Kazi, in this forum, demonstrates how women and girls have been pelting stones and participated in the attacks on the Indian army. Yet, by engaging in masculinized violence, these women do not subvert the gendered narrative of Kashmir.

Swati Parashar argues in this forum that Kashmir “is a site for competing and contesting masculinities embedded in a history of emasculation and postcolonial anxiety.” I would add that it is a *feminized* site. As the accounts in this issue demonstrate, the movement relies on as well as reproduces gender norms and practices. This indicates that any discussion of *insaniyat, Kashmiriyat aur jamhooriyat* must address historical and contemporary gendered articulations of identity and agency to fully understand the political situation in Kashmir.

### References

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<sup>2</sup> Participants’ names and biographies have been changed to maintain anonymity.