

Insecurity, Identity and Resistance

Contours of Shia Political Discourse in Kashmir

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Shias constitute an influential minority of the Kashmiri population, having a considerable influence on the nature of sociopolitical changes in the state. Ranging from external influences to contested histories, there are several reasons behind the Shias' ambiguous political outlook regarding the overall Kashmir question. The analytical category of "perceptual ambivalence" is proposed to understand the nature of contemporary political discourse of Shias in Kashmir and their political disposition.

Plurality has been an intrinsic feature of Kashmiri life for centuries. This includes ethnic, religious and linguistic plurality. However, socio-economic variables and the overall political leverage of communities have kept on changing from one period to the other. This has defined not only the respective roles of communities in Kashmiri society at large, but has also been responsible for defining the parameters of politics and the way history is viewed by each of these groups. This explains why the narratives of shared history of all the diverse groups in Kashmir are so contestable and often polarising.

This disagreement runs deep in both the oral histories and their written accounts that is not only visible in the historical narrative of the majority and that of one particular minority, but this "malaise of contestability" is also prevalent in several minority histories of different communities. For example, though both Pundit and Shia historical narratives are underlined with a strong tone of victimisation, their understanding and interpretation of the same periods of history are not only in contestation with that of the majority Sunni narrative, but also in conflict with that of each other.¹ This has prevented a broader consensus on the nature of Kashmir's pluralistic history that affects its politics even today.

Since historical narratives—both oral and written—act as a prism through which contemporary politics is understood, analysed and interpreted, it is important to understand such minority narratives to make sense of the minorities' political affiliations and aspirations today. The two important religious minority groups that have affected both the politics and the "imagination" of a Kashmiri nation, especially in the 20th century, are the Pundits and the Shias. Both these groups have an unpalatable disagreement with the majoritarian historical discourse, yet both have increasingly looked at the "imagined nation" of Kashmir from a fundamentally different perspective. This difference in their respective standpoints has defined their contrasting approaches to a new unfolding of the Kashmir issue after the tectonic partition of the subcontinent in 1947.

This paper tries to extrapolate the major factors that affect the nature of Shia politics and differentiate it from that of other communities. The paper proposes the analytical category of "perceptual ambivalence" to understand the contemporary political discourse of Shias in Kashmir that defines their response to the larger Kashmir question. This paper does not attempt to narrate the general political history of Shias, but is

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