Chitralekha Zutshi, *Kashmir's Contested Pasts: Narratives, Sacred Geographies, and the Historical Imagination.* New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2014, pp 378.

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Kashmir's Contested Pasts: Narratives, Sacred Geographies, and the Historical Imagination authored by Chitralekha Zutshi participates in the larger intellectual process of recovering the historical consciousness embedded in, and manifested through, diverse forms of commemorating the past in pre-colonial South Asia. Zutshi challenges the colonial assumption that pre-colonial India lacked a coherent awareness of its past by showing how Kashmir developed its own modes of remembering and representing history. She traces the *longue durée* of "historical imagination"[1] in Kashmir, examining how texts, oral traditions, sacred geographies, linguistic registers (Sanskrit, Persian, and Kashmiri), religious frameworks, social practices, and political contingency contributed to evolving forms of historical consciousness.

The book is organised into six chapters, in addition to an introduction and a conclusion. Zutshi's principal aim is to resurrect the life of those Persian narrative traditions—from sixteenth through nineteenth centuries—which had been marginalised in favour of Kalhana's *Rajatarangini* and its Sanskrit continuations and were subsequently dismissed as unreliable by the colonialist and nationalist proponents. In pursuit of this, she examines the Indo-Persian chronicles called *tarikhs* and Sufi hagiographical texts, *tazkiras,* many of whose authors were associated with Sufi *Khanqahs* (hospices) and simultaneously maintained close ties with political centres of power. Beyond addressing the political realities of their day, these texts also recorded the prevailing socio-religious convictions. As Raziuddin Aquil has argued, the

[1] Hayden V. White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973), 2.

classification of Sufi texts (*malfuzat* and *tazkiras*) as 'authentic' and 'spurious' is superficial; although tales of miracles contained in them might sound irrational to the modern mind, but, analysing the purpose and the context in which these tales were narrated is relevant for reconstructing the historical consciousness of the period to which these texts belong.[2]

In her first chapter, Zutshi critically engages with four Persian texts: *Dastur-us-Salikin* by Shaykh Hamza Makhdum (c. 1554–55); *Taufat ul-Ahbab* by Muhammad Ali Kashmiri (c. 1560s); *Tarikh-i Sayyid Ali* by Sayyid Ali (1579); and *Baharistan-i Shahi* (completed in 1614) by an anonymous writer (p. 23). In analysing these Sufi texts, Zutshi views them as part of a larger Kashmiri narrative tradition blending with various genres like *tazkiras*, *tarikhs*, oral histories, and performances. In her view, it would be an injustice to consider them merely as translations of the *Rajatarangini* and deny their historical value. Zutshi, therefore, argues that these literary works not only document the Sufis' miraculous acts but also record the important historical processes, including the advent and spread of Islam in Kashmir (pp. 35-43).

The second chapter deals with how the Mughal conquest of Kashmir catalysed the development of the *tarikh* tradition in the region. Abul Fazl's selection of *Rajatarangini* as a suitable source for composing his *Ain-i Akbari* motivated *tarikh* writers to seek legitimacy from *Rajatarangini* and its Sanskrit tradition. Although these writers invoked *Rajatarangini* and its continuations, they preserved regional distinctiveness by incorporating local narratives, oral traditions, and indigenous cosmologies. Tracing the distinctiveness and their interactions, Zutshi examines four other Persian texts: *Tarikh-i Haider Malik*, completed by Haider Malik Chadurah between 1620 and 1621 during his tenure as governor of Kashmir under Emperor Jahangir; *Muntakhab al-Tawarikh* (1710) by Narayan Koul 'Ajiz', *mir munshi* to the Mughal deputy governor Arif Khan; Khwaja Muhammad Azam Dyadmari's *Waqiat-i Kashmir*, and; *Bagh-i Sulaiman* (1778) by Saadullah Shahabadi (p. 75). Subsequently, the formalisation of Persian as the court's literary culture under the Mughals marked the end of the dominance of Sanskrit as the elite cosmopolitan literary language.

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[2] Raziuddin Aquil, *Lovers of God: Sufism and the Politics of Islam in Medieval India* (New Delhi: Manohar, 2017), 115.

In the third chapter, Zutshi discusses the emergence of vernacular histories and the use of Kashmiri as the language of poetry and storytelling, defining it as the "language of the people" (p. 132). Francesca Orsini has shown how pre-colonial India was already a deeply multilingual society consisting of multiple traditions of knowledge and how literary production in specific languages marked diglossia between 'classical' and the 'vernaculars.'[3] Kashmiri, too, evolved under strong Persian stylistic influence. The period roughly from 1750 to 1900 has been termed as the middle period of Kashmiri literary development by Braj K Kachru. During this period, Persian literary forms such as ghazals and *masnavis* were borrowed, and a Persianised style of Kashmiri was developed, parallelling the Sanskritised Kashmiri. Themes from Persia such as *Yusuf Zuleikha, Shirin Khusrao, Laila Majnun,* etc. predominated in literary compositions. Apart from this, folk stories, episodes from the eulogies of the Prophet, the *Bhagavad Gita,* and the *Ramayana* were being translated into Kashmiri. Such endeavours contributed further to the Persianisation of Kashmiri poetic form and content. Gradually, influences of Urdu, English, and Hindi could also be located.[4]

Urdu entered Kashmir as a new vernacular with the strengthening of political ties between the princely state of Jammu and Kashmir and British Punjab. At the crossroads of these developments and transformations, Zutshi examines three Persian *tarikhs* and one Urdu *tarikh* that engaged with written and oral traditions across multiple languages, confronted orientalist claims to textual authenticity, and thereby contributed decisively to Kashmir's socio-political and cultural transformation. These texts include Birbal Kachru's *Tarikh-i Kashmir* (1846); Ghulam Muhammad Nabi Shah Khanyari's *Wajiz ul-Tawarikh* (late 1850s); *Tawarikh-i Guldasta-i Kashmir* by Pandit Hargopal Kaul Khasta (1877), written in Urdu; and Pir Ghulam Hassan Shah Khuihami's *Tarikh-i Hassan* (1880s) (p. 134). By the early twentieth century, the Persian historiographical tradition in Kashmir could not survive effectively except in the form of manuscripts and court petitions. *Tarikh-i Kabir* (1899–1900) by Muhammad Haji Mohiuddin Miskin was its final multi-volume work.

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[3] Francesca Orsini, ed. *Before the Divide: Hindi and Urdu Literary Culture* (New Delhi: Orient BlackSwan, 2011), 2.

[4] Braj B. Kachru, *Kashmiri Literature.* Vol. VIII, Fasc. 4 of *A History of Indian Literature*, ed. by Jan Gonda (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1981), 34-35.

The fourth chapter addresses the late nineteenth century, when colonial and nationalist philological projects came into force. These projects labelled Kashmir's Persian historical culture as "mere interpolations and crude imitations," (p. 238) causing its eventual decline. In response to orientalist assumption that pre-colonial India was historically unconscious, nationalist projects deployed *Rajatarangini* and Kashmir's Sanskrit tradition to recover the early history of India, converting its regional identity into a national one. Kashmir became a contested site for the colonial and nationalist project of knowledge production. On the one hand, orientalist scholars such as Georg Buhler and M. A. Stein endeavoured to establish *Rajatarangini* and related Sanskrit texts as the only authentic history of Kashmir (p. 189). On the other hand, nationalists such as R. S. Pandit and J. C. Dutt considered the unearthing of Sanskrit traditions as a way to locate their classical past in the nation-making imagination (pp. 195-228). Further, through its translations into Hindi, *Rajatarangini* was eventually absorbed into Indian nationalist discourse, thereby disconnecting it from its original Kashmiri politico-contextual setting. The collection of manuscripts, deploying *Rajatarangini* as an important source of history writing, thus, became an integral part of ongoing production of colonial knowledge.

In the fifth chapter, Zutshi explores the formation and persistence of a Kashmiri public sphere defined by narrative practices, oral traditions, and performative modes. Through a study of Kashmiri public discourse in the *longue duree,* Zutshi attempts to dispel the notion that colonialism constituted a historical rupture that politicised religious and regional identities in the late nineteenth-century Kashmir. According to her, Kashmiri popular understanding of the past was both historical and commemorative in nature (p. 262). Kashmiris, despite relatively low levels of literacy, remembered certain events and individuals through repeated retellings and reinterpretations. This was followed by the rise of print culture, which further transformed Kashmiri vernacular literary life. In the early twentieth century, printers, and booksellers such as Ghulam Muhammad Noor Muhammad of Maharaj Gunj, Srinagar, played a crucial role by publishing numerous works in Kashmiri. Beyond facilitating Kashmiri narrative traditions to flourish in print, this also enabled their wider dissemination and survival.

In the sixth chapter, Zutshi examines the discourses surrounding *Kashmiriyat* (state-driven enterprise to create a unique cultural and literary identity) for legitimising the Kashmiri national identity (p. 339).[5] But she emphasises that a nuanced re-reading and re-examination of Kashmir's diverse voices can transcend reductive binary narratives and offer a more comprehensive understanding of the region's complex identity and history. The modern discipline of history in the subcontinent has been shaped by distinctions between "Hindu" and "Muslim" periods and identities, often focused on territorial divisions. In Kashmir, this framework took shape around the turn of the twentieth century and became firmly established in the postcolonial era. Attending instead to the many alternative narratives and voices—rooted in both local memory and wider universals—would, according to Zutshi, enable historians to represent Kashmir's past in less polarising and more contextually grounded ways.

The book thus exemplifies South Asian modes of recording and commemorating the past, whether through *itihas, purana,* public performances, or oral recitations. A central argument contained in this book is the contested status of Kalhana's *Rajatarangini* and how its nationalist reception in the nineteenth and twentieth-century elevated it to the status of a 'national' text (p. 176)[6] while often dismissing or marginalising Persian or vernacular sources. Zutshi situates these debates at the intersection of religious, linguistic, cultural, and political forces, showing how historical practice in Kashmir has always been shaped by overlapping and competing registers of identity. However, Zutshi's ambitious claim about Persian histories as being the representative of Kashmiri historical thinking, and how Persian *tarikhs* gave rise to a distinct regional Kashmiri identity feels somewhat unconvincing. Here, the author attempts to analyse the ideas of identity formation in early modern Kashmir through the lens of modern sensibilities, often risking romanticisation of the sources and inadvertently reproducing the hierarchies she is trying to address. Further, her endeavour to trace a *longue durée* trajectory of 'historical imagination' in Kashmir is not sufficiently theorised, as the category tends to subsume heterogeneous forms of memory and knowledge-making under the same umbrella, without addressing their

[5] Also see, Chitralekha Zutshi, *Languages of Belonging: Islam, Regional Identity and the Making of Kashmir,* (Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2003), 2.

[6] For further details see Chapter 4

internal tensions. Moreover, a critical engagement with her analytical framework and clearer articulation of how specific sources illuminate rather than populate her narrative would have made the book easier to read and comprehend, giving the narrative greater lucidity and coherence. Nevertheless, the book successfully uncovers an underexplored archive of Kashmir's intellectual traditions and invites alternate ways of engaging with the region's past.

References

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