

Contextualizing Kashmir's Cultural Personality

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Very few ethno-cultural communities in the world today would be so clearly defined with continuity as we find the society within the Kashmir valley surrounded by lofty mountains and inhabited by people with strong identity marks in terms of a common language, values, culture and its symbols and manifestations in dress, architecture, literature, folklore, values, rituals etc. When we talk of the identity of a place defined by multiple factors it is not something that has come about accidentally and happens at a given time of history of a people. Culture in terms of the value orientation of the people, their social attitudes and the expressions as it gets in the folklore, literature, art and architecture is a constantly evolving process in relation to factors that can be internal to a place and are also born out of confluence and interfacing with its physical environment and the surrounding socio-culture communities. In this context when we refer to Kashmir and its cultural personality in terms of history it is an outcome of its evolution as a community that runs into thousands of years of history¹. Its geo-physical structure has reinforced its defined borders in ethno-cultural terms as well. It is generally accepted that the geography and all that constitutes the physical environment of a place plays a very significant role in influencing food habits and dress patterns and even cultural attitudes of a people at a given place². This could be no less true of Kashmir. For example, Kashmiri Pheran and Kangri the unique features of Kashmir are typical of impact of cold weather of the place. Kashmir has been described as the largest valley in the lap of the largest mountains in the world. Stein, in his translation of Rajtarangni, notes that "We find here a fertile plain embedded

among high mountain ranges, a valley large enough to form a Kingdom for itself and capable of supporting a highly developed civilization³." The mountainous surrounding of Kashmir has helped it to shape up differently from its neighboring areas. It is not only the borders but the nature of Kashmir's topography and divinely gifted natural assets that have helped to reinforce and strengthen this uniqueness of Kashmiri culture as reflected in the day to day idiom of common man, folklore evolved through centuries of living together in interface with serene natural surroundings, language and literature. It has all been influenced by the capitulating beauty of its meadows, mighty mountains, forests, water bodies and the general ambience of variety in changing seasons⁴. The symbols used in our poetry in description of beauty is something that could be possible only in the natural context in which we have evolved. Kashmir has every thing that can stimulate a creative mind and a compelling passion. There is a lot of variety in which there is something for every body's interest. It has scenic beauty for artists, high mountains for mountaineers and other adventures and the places suited for specialized sports and every thing that can stimulate the creative genius and the art. It is rich in biodiversity. It also has enough in physical and environmental terms that could sustain a healthy and prosperous community. According to a 19th century geologist and ethnographer Frederick Drew, who had stayed here for a decade long service, "the Kashmiri people are doubtless physically the finest of all the races that inhabit the territories we are dealing with and I have no much hesitation in saying that in size and in features they are the finest on the whole continent of India. Their physique, their character and their language are so marked as to produce a nationality different from all around as distinct from their neighbors as their country is geographically separated⁵." Kashmir has remained the home of learning and creative art and literature from ancient times. It has contributed to the growth of philosophy,

sciences, language, literature and discourses in religion⁶. Within the whole of South Asia Kashmir is the only region that can claim the distinction of possessing an uninterrupted record of history⁷. Rajtarangni of Kalhana Pandit is based on the works of historians who were living much before the monumental work was undertaken in the 11th century⁸.

It needs to be noted that Kashmir for last five thousand years of its history has remained at the crossroads of civilizational interface and a meeting point of Chinese, Central Asian, Indian and Persian civilizations, cultures and economies⁹. In addition, to its links with North and more particularly North Western Indian sub-continent, it has had close trade and cultural relations with places in the present day China, Greater Tibet, a number of cities in Central Asia, Afghanistan, Iran and, via Silk Route, even to Europe. Traditionally Kashmir remained connected to these places at different points through routes in different directions. In addition, Kashmir to this day, retains the imprints of influences of Hellenic and other civilizations borne out in far off places in West Asia and beyond in Europe¹⁰. In fact one of the dimensions of Kashmir issue has been the fact of the Kashmir being pushed to a status of secluded periphery by the 1947 political development. These developments separated Kashmir from its natural surroundings. Thus the 1947 developments pushed Kashmir center to a sort of isolation and seclusion. Almost all of its major connecting points were blocked and Kashmir became dependent on a highway that had never been considered reliable meeting point for Kashmir with the outside world in comparison to roads and connections that historically connected it with the world around¹¹.

Kashmir as we know has been surrounded by some of the most magnificent civilizations that mankind has ever produced in the Indian subcontinent, China, Central Asia and Iran. All these civilizational traditions have had an enriching impact on Kashmir.

There is a lot of evidence to suggest that Kashmir has remained in dialogue with its surrounding civilizations and cultures. People have come and gone from here as travelers, missionaries and for learning and exchange of knowledge. In addition, Kashmir also has been at the crossroads of transition of many important spiritual and religious traditions like Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam, and must have been also impacted by other religious traditions that evolved in its proximity like that of Zoroastrianism in Iran and Confucius tradition in China. This impact has been two way-give and take. Kashmir even up to now continues to be a meeting point of four great religious traditions. Kashmiri society was also in constant economic and social interaction with its surrounding regions¹². Having surroundings is not unique to Kashmir. All socio-cultural communities are surrounded by a different people. But what has been unique about Kashmir is the variety and the richness of these surrounding traditions and the fact that in spite of being surrounded by a number of such rich and dominant civilizations it could retain the uniqueness of its cultural personality as manifested in language, dress, food habits, social moorings etc. It did change with and in relation to changing times, challenges and incoming influences from its surroundings, but it absorbed these changes in a manner that did not fragment its social fabric and did not create cleavages that would distort its unique collective personality with which it is still identified. It has been strongly a consensual society that changed together but without uprooting itself from its inherited socio-cultural possessions and legacy. Kashmir has been truly a melting pot that has absorbed various influences from its surroundings without being undermined or overtaken by any one of these dominant civilizations and instead formed its own uniqueness. The strength of Kashmiri personality has been that with all these influences coming from left and right, north and south, near and far, it has retained its personality as a distinct cultural community.

Today Islam as the dominant religion of its people is a very important component of the Kashmir identity. This is historically vindicated that against the common prevalent notions, Islam has always stood for religious tolerance and interfaith understanding. In this regard, Kashmir has optimised this culture of interfaith, peace and understanding in which the Rishi Tradition of Kashmir has played a very important role¹³. There is tremendous scope for building on this tradition. This is so particularly because Kashmir is a meeting point of four great religious traditions that meet and extend beyond across stretches of land with continental proportions. It is here in Kashmir contiguous Islamic tradition moves from valley in the north into central Asia and in the west across Pakistan into Middle East and beyond into North Africa up to the extremes of Maghrib into Morocco as a contiguous stretch of land dominated by the Islamic faith. In the east Buddhist tradition spreads from Ladakh, Tibet, China into South East Asia and towards east into extremes of the East Asia up to Japan inside the Pacific Ocean. Birthplace of Sikh faith and the place of its largest concentration Punjab is linked to Jammu and Kashmir in its south. Hinduism stretches from Jammu, across India through the Indian Ocean into the Northern Sri Lanka and Mauritius¹⁴. This is a privilege that hardly any other place in the world can claim.

Kashmir in my opinion is unique and has emerged as a brand name for arts and crafts with global recognition and in having stimulated imagination of creative minds as far away as in Europe at a time when technologically the world was not united the way it is today¹⁵. Some people occasionally compare Kashmir with its surrounding regions within the J&K. To me this is to compare the incomparables in terms of the evolution of the cultural genius the Kashmir has come to possess through its creative evolution as a civilization. Kashmiris are special in terms of artistic sensibilities and ingenuity and creative genius, tacit reasonableness and above all

civility of temperament and behavior. It retains these virtues. Kashmir has been historically characterized as a very tolerant, peaceful and even one of the docile societies in the world. Prior to 1989 eruption of militancy, Kashmiris were known for their civility, tolerance, accommodativeness and intrinsic secular character. Kashmir is also characterized by a high degree of social equality and innate humanism. At the core of it Kashmiri society still retains these qualities. Even during the bloodshed of 1947 Kashmiris had exhibited tremendous tolerance and harmony.

We can still trace a lot of the older and outside influences that have contributed to the enrichment of Kashmiri personality that is still visible in our art, architecture, language, literature, technology, food-habits, handicrafts, social moorings, etc. coming from within the Indian subcontinent, Greater Tibet, Central Asia, China, Iran and beyond. But these influences, instead of creating distortions and ruptures in the cultural personality of Kashmir, have been absorbed and integrated into the Kashmiri identity in a manner that defines our distinctiveness even today. In my opinion one of the important factors that has helped Kashmir to retain its distinctiveness is the factor of its well-defined geo-physical personality referred to above. Kashmir even suffered a number of external political and cultural onslaughts under a number of oppressive and repressive regimes from alien communities and groups that subjugated it from time to time. So much so Tyndale Biscoe has noted that it is quite possible that if Britishers had to undergo what Kashmiris have suffered in the past, we (the British) might have lost our manhood¹⁶. But it has been the strength of Kashmiri character that against all odds, it has retained its identity and its distinct cultural personality by and large intact and unscathed. First time in its history Kashmir is facing a serious onslaught to its distinct personality in terms of the following:

1. Assimilationist trends of the Indian Nationalism reflected

- in its opposition to the meaningful autonomy for the state.
2. Assimilationist challenges stemming out of the resurgent Hindutva ideology.
 3. Conflict and abnormally high degree of militarization
 4. Onslaught from Globalisation and its commercial, consumerist and cultural manifestation.
 5. Political marginalization of the valley within the current structure of the state.

However, I am confident that the intrinsic strength of the Kashmiri character shall help it to safeguard its distinctive personality in the face of all the challenges that confront and are straining it today.

Reference

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2. Ibn Khaldun (1332-1406) has been an important propounder of this view. His methodology emphasizes the study of environmental impact on social organization and economic process that define values, prosperity and culture' see. Muhsin Mahdi, *Ibn Khaldun's Philosophy of History: A Study of the philosophical Foundation of the Science of Culture*, (Chicago, 1964)
3. M. A. Stein (Notes on Translation.) *Kalhana's Rajtarangni: A chronicle of Kings of Kashmir*, (Westminster, Archibald C. And Co, 1900). p. 388.
4. For a very good account of how Kashmir, its beauty and physical glory has been variously described see Walter Lawrence, *The Valley of Kashmir*, (Srinagar; Kesar Publishers, 1967) pp. 12-31
5. Frederic Dew, *The Northern Barriers of India and Jammu*

- and Kashmir Territories*, (Reprinted Srinagar: City Book Centre, 2008,) P124. (originally published in 1875)
6. See Prem Nath Bazaz, *History of struggle for Freedom in Kashmir*, (Srinagar; Gulshan publishers) pp. 22-33.
 7. Stein as quoted in Walter Lawrence, *The Valley of Kashmir*, (Srinagar; Kesar Publishers, 1967) p.179.
 8. for a detailed account its sources etc. see Lawrence, *ibid* pp. 179-203.
 9. See Balraj, n.1.
 10. Ajaz A. Bandy, "A Recent Discovery of Hellenistic Image of Gaja-Lakshmi From Kashmir: Style and development. *The Journal of Central Asian Studies*, (Volume XVIII, No. 1, 2009) pp 75-86)
 11. Noor Ahmad Baba, Reconnecting Kashmir: Need for Reopening Traditional Routes Epilogue, September, 2008
 12. *Ibid*.
 13. Noor Ahmad Baba "From Conflict to Reconciliation: The Relevance of the Shaikhul Alam" *Alamdar* (Srinagar, Shaikhul Alam Chair, 2009) pp. 51-58.
 14. *Ibid*. p.57.
 15. For example Thomas Moore's poem *Lalla Rookh* "a Romantic Oriental fantasy" about Kashmir published in 1817, became the most translated poem of its time. See, "Kashmir in English Romantic Literature" in G R Malik, *Kashmir culture and Literature: Some Glimpses*, (Srinagar, Department of Kashmiri, Kashmir University, 2006)
 16. Tyndale C. E. Biscoe, *Kashmir Under Sunlight and Shade* (London 1922, p. 79