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## Book Review: A Strategic Myth: 'Underdevelopment' in Jammu and Kashmir

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***Book Review: A Strategic Myth: 'Underdevelopment' in Jammu and Kashmir<sup>1</sup>***

By Shazia Malik<sup>2</sup>

Sehar Iqbal's *A Strategic Myth: 'Underdevelopment' in Jammu and Kashmir* (2021) addresses the trajectory of development in Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) in post-independence India. In the book, Iqbal challenges and debunks the perception, assiduously cultivated by the state and the media, that Article 370 was a hurdle in the process of development in J&K, and an important reason for the lack of women development. She makes an important intervention in contextualizing economic development policies and provides an in-depth analysis of state-led drives for 'modernization' in J&K. Overall, *A Strategic Myth* is a diachronic study that critically examines the models of development envisaged in/for Kashmir since the state's accession to the Union of India till as late as 2019. The book has eight chapters, and all along the work retains a coherent and analytic framework.

The first chapter, 'Change as Key', focuses mainly on the 'New Kashmir Manifesto', and discusses the context of its origins, the process of its implementation, and its long term impact on the developmental policies in J&K in the post-1947 period. This phase in Kashmir's development is described by Iqbal as a journey that was both significant and meaningful; in her own words, this was a "unique developmental journey for the state" (22). She begins by tracing the systematic backwardness of J&K under the double tyrannical rule of Dogra rule protected by the British Crown. The book addresses this era of negligible industrial development with a crippled economy alongside dismal education levels (with only a 5% literacy rate in 1941, girls' education being a non-issue). The study makes interesting comparisons in this context with other princely states of India during that period. Iqbal differentiates the formation of the notion of a 'common identity' or 'we-ness' emerging from a common desire for self-government capable of reducing the widespread poverty and unemployment, from the characterization of a common ethno-religious or linguistic identity in the regions of Jammu Kashmir and Ladakh. This notion of 'we-ness' is commonly referred to as *Kashmiriyat*, but Iqbal refrains from using this term because of its association with ethnic or linguistic identities.<sup>3</sup> The major initiative for the drafting of *Naya Kashmir*, a revolutionary document of the time<sup>4</sup>, came from Baba Pyare Lal Singh Bedi and his wife Freda who were both committed socialists. Freda Bedi included the section on the rights of women (which were interestingly accepted by the male members of the

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<sup>1</sup> Iqbal, S. (2021). *A Strategic Myth: 'Underdevelopment' in Jammu and Kashmir*. New Delhi, India: Tulika Books.

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<sup>3</sup>See for example, Chitrlekha Zutshi, *Languages of Belonging: Islam, Regional Identity and Making of Kashmir*, Delhi, Permanent Black, 2003.

Tak, T. (2013). The Term "Kashmiriyat": Kashmiri Nationalism of the 1970s. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 48(16), 28–32. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23527257>

<sup>4</sup> A reiteration of what most of the scholars working on Kashmir have said, for example, Khan, S.K. (2015). Discerning women's discursive frames in Cyber Kashmir. *Contemporary South Asia*. 334-351. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09584935.2015.1040737>

Kanjwal, H. (2018 December). The New Kashmiri Woman; State-led Feminism in 'Naya Kashmir'. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 53(47). <https://www.epw.in/journal/2018/47>

drafting committee, as well), and this was indeed a radical and unique step towards women empowerment in that period. Even so, in quoting Andrew Whitehead, Iqbal calls it a loose act of plagiarism that was largely lifted from the constitution that Stalin had introduced in the Soviet Union. Even so, she references it as revolutionary for its impressive contribution in ending landlordism by giving ownership rights of land to tenant farmers through state-wide land reforms. Guided by a socialist vision, *Naya Kashmir* gave women the right to education, the right to work with equal pay with men, and the right to consent to marriage. It also provided a conducive environment for women development by giving them paid maternity leave, right to medical assistance at childbirth and right to inheritance. Calling *Naya Kashmir* far ahead of its time, Iqbal explains that J&K was the only state in India that was successful in legally implementing radical land reforms, debt conciliation, and universal free education. Article 12 of *Naya Kashmir* guaranteed equal wages for women and men. It was much later that the constitution of India guaranteed such rights to women under the equal remuneration Act 1976. Thus, Iqbal rightly asserts: “*Naya Kashmir* firmly set Jammu and Kashmir on to a distinctive path by providing a strong constitutional basis for recognizing the human being as the main subject of development and redistribution as a major policy objective” (21).

The second chapter discusses the socio-economic impact of state development policies of J&K from 1948 to 1988. The preoccupation with the agricultural reforms led to direct intervention in the traditional system of production through land reforms. The big landed Estate Abolition Act of 1950 transferred land to the tiller without any compensation to the landlords, followed by the Agrarian reforms Act that continue to operate till 1979. To achieve the main goals of the reforms, necessary administrative setups such as an irrigation department and agricultural department were also established, creating ample employment opportunities in the service sector. It also introduced the distressed Debtors Relief Act that enabled setting up of Debt Conciliation Boards which were given sweeping powers. Owing to this Act, the state was able to scale down debts of more than Rs 1 crore by 80%. One major reason for its success was that it allowed debtors easier terms ensuring that the economic gains from land distribution would not be lost to servicing debt. Such legislation was unparalleled in the subcontinent. Based on official records Iqbal has shown that its effects are still visible in the state with 25 percent of its total households in debt, of which only 11 percent have debts of more than Rs 1 lakh. Further, expenditure on education was raised from 7% of state revenue in 1946 to 11 % in 1950. Nonetheless, Iqbal offers the view that successive governments failed to tackle the challenges in acquiring desirable progress in female literacy rates in the initial years. The public health delivery services improved a lot owing to the efforts of the state's developmental policy, as the expenditure on health kept increasing, from an abysmally low 0.04% to 16 % of the revenue in 1952.

Iqbal is right in calling certain state policy interventions unique and ahead of time, one such intervention being that J&K reserved 50% of the seats in medical education across all specialists for women in 1983. It reserved half of all seats in engineering colleges for women, as well. J&K is the only state in India to have implemented such affirmative action for women. However, the chapter lacks an analysis of the fact that the five-year plans based on modernization theory heavily ignored the traditional handicraft sector in the process, negatively affecting the Kashmir artisans in general and in specific the women artisans who were mainly home-based.

The book examines how the state of J&K unlike the other states, used a major part of central assistance (which it clarifies were in the form of loans and not grants) for developmental purposes. In addition, the state government also utilised its domestic resources for the development of the social sector. The contraction of resources later in the period, however, did have a significant impact in putting brakes on the pace of development. Iqbal argues that as a result of revolutionary policies such as land reforms, only 14 percent of rural households in J&K have no land today, and even more commendable is the fact that agrarian reforms among social groups have been equitable. She notes that 87% of Scheduled Castes in J&K in 1961 had received land through the Big Landed Estates Abolition Act of 1950, as in the case with other marginalized groups. As far as the impact of land reforms on women is concerned, Iqbal complains that the exact figures on the number of female beneficiaries are not available. However, drawing from the data from the registrar general of India (2011) she has revealed the number of female cultivators (main and marginal) in the state is nearly 5 lakhs and the number of male cultivators is over 7.5 lakhs. Currently, the share of female cultivators is 38.52 percent of the total number of cultivators. She argues that a part of this share certainly owes to land titles being transferred to women during land reforms, the rest being a result of changing attitudes towards gender as a result of higher levels of education. Owing to the political commitment of the state to socialist ideals and goals, she notes, from 1948 to 1988 the HDI in the state improved significantly as compared to comparable calculations for the colonial period. Interestingly, life expectancy for females at 74.9 years is higher than men (70.9 years). Based on official records, the book points out that J&K is the healthiest state in India as measured by life expectancy and infrastructural facilities. She also notes a rapid increase in the literacy rate (female literacy rate, included). Additionally, J&K ranks first among all Indian states in terms of the low incidence of child marriage.

It is worth noting that the poverty levels in the state are much lower than in the rest of the country. At the same time, women have fallen behind all other social groups in accessing basic opportunities which could be attributed to deep-rooted and unchallenged patriarchal ideologies prevalent in all communities. Iqbal relays her discontent with the decision of the state government for abolishing a matrilineal system and polyandry in Ladakh in the 1950s. Owing to the participation of women's in the resistance against Dogra rule, in 1952 women got voting rights (earlier denied by Dogras in 1934). Yet, women were denied equal access to political participation. In 1972, six women were elected for state Assembly and that formed the largest female representation in the J&K Assembly till today.

In contemporary Kashmir, women's issues have for long remained silent within political debates. The gender gap in education and politics remained unaddressed except for token measures. From her analysis, Iqbal highlights that the initial development policies took drastic efforts to improve the status of women, but they lost their momentum largely because there was no involvement of women at the grassroots level to solve domestic disputes and tackle social problems. Perhaps, it was assumed that the state's efforts were enough and the government schemes and constitutional guarantees would automatically empower women. The post-insurgency phase further widened the gender gap in education. However, the trend seems to have reversed in the last two decades, or so! Though the fall in sex ratio was a matter of concern, this trend also reversed. Referring to the Census of India 2011 and National sample Survey 2015-16 she notes

that the sex ratio improved from 883 females per 1,000 males in 2011 to 972 females per 1000 males in 2016 (94). Citing the National Family Health Survey 2015-2016 data Iqbal notes that the state performed better than the national average in terms of violence against women, and women's access to menstrual hygiene (8.8 percentage points ahead). She also notes, "women's participation in decision-making within the household is in line with the national average. Perhaps the most significant indicator here relates to violence against married women, which is 9.4 percent in J&K as opposed to 28.8 percent as the average in India" (94). Invoking several sociological studies, Iqbal views the low level of spousal violence against women and the increased support women across the state get from parental homes even after marriage as due to the widespread prevalence of endogamy.

To understand the development experience of the state, Iqbal carries out three village-based studies in J&K divisions. The collected data looks at land redistribution within villages in great detail taking into account the intersectionality of religious belief and land reforms. Overall land redistribution had a positive effect on income expenditure literacy and school enrolment and a negative effect on rural poverty and indebtedness.

The unique character of the state's constitution evolved from the underlying principles of Naya Kashmir ensuring a legislative commitment to ending exploitation and a firm grounding of the principles of equity (embodied in a policy preoccupation with redistribution) and equality (demonstrated in the legislative and policy provisions). neither Abdullah nor Qasim (two Ex PMs of J&K before the 1950s) could have pushed through legislation to achieve these aims if not for the provisions of Article 370 of the Indian constitution that gave protected status to J&K (149).

The book is factually correct with respect to the statistical development markers; however it does not take into account the active participation of women in accomplishing the socialist dreams of the state, rendering this aspect of discussion incomplete. Analyzing state development through a number of feminist analytical frameworks would have offered a more accurate analysis of the process through which J&K has achieved the conditions that Iqbal rightly cites as correctives to perceptions of "underdevelopment". Employing feminist standpoint theory that recognizes and incorporates women's specific contributions to J&K's socio-economic development, for example, would provide a deeper and more accurate analysis. The grand narrative on men's political activism particularly regarding National Conference leaders disregards women's perspectives, their agency and inaccurately portrays J&K's achievements through a masculinist lens. Agential activism of the disadvantaged sections, especially the *gujjars* and *bukkarwal*- significant ethnic groups (traditionally cattle herders and shepherds) and their issues of marginalization are largely missing in the discussion. Also, an intersectional feminist approach would have been useful to provide a richer understanding of the deferential impact of state policies on women facing multiple forms of discrimination. A socialist feminist analysis could have showed readers the complexities of patriarchal, state and capitalistic modes of production. The land reform policies seem to have directly elevated the status of men in the community; however, women have only been indirect beneficiaries. There have been remarkable contributions that directly impact women, which a socialist feminist framework would have illuminated. For instance, Freda Bedi's ideas have made an important contribution. Free education up until university and reservations quotas for

women in professional courses are some examples of these structural transformations that have enabled women's personal achievements uplifting the state.

Iqbal in *A Strategic Myth* has attempted, through a comprehensive study of facts and statistical details, to debunk the myth that underdevelopment is the root of conflict in J&K. Sadly, the myth is fed by the state and the media to justify the disenfranchisement of the people of Kashmir. Iqbal challenges this distortion and has convincingly shown that the special constitutional status conferred by J&K granted legal autonomy, economic protection, and entitlements to the people living in the state. In spite of the absence of feminist frameworks, her study offers an important corrective lens. The book is an important contribution in terms of its engagement with historical contours of political and socio-economic development in the post-independence phase in J&K. It is highly recommended as a resource for students of Gender Studies, Sociology, Political Science, Social Work, Economics, and History as well as, journalists, policy makers and social activists.