

Interview – Chitralekha Zutshi

Written by E-International Relations

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Chitralekha Zutshi is Class of 1962 Professor of History at William & Mary. She has written widely on nationalism, religious identities, and historical traditions in South Asia, primarily in the context of Kashmir. Her books include, *Languages of Belonging: Islam, Regional Identity, and the Making of Kashmir*; *Kashmir's Contested Pasts: Narratives, Sacred Geographies, and the Historical Imagination*; *Kashmir: Oxford India Short Introductions*, and the edited volume, *Kashmir: History, Politics, Representation*.

Where do you see the most exciting research/debates happening in your field?

Since my graduate student days, I've been part of a cohort of scholars seeking to define the region in South Asian history. Our primary objective was/is to disaggregate the region (and also religion) from its appropriation and disappearance into the history of the Indian nation. The resultant works on Maharashtra, Punjab, Kashmir, Bengal, and Gujarat, among others, were designed to help us understand how regional ideas and religious affiliations shaped the history—as well as the successes and failures—of the nationalist project and indeed the idea of South Asia, as well as that of India and of Pakistan. The study of regions continues to be a vibrant field; more recently, we have turned our attention to the processes that have contributed to the drawing of the contours of what we have always accepted as stable, established regional communities. This has yielded ground-breaking research into regional historical traditions and interactions among multiple linguistic and script communities.

How has the way you understand the world changed over time, and what (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?

When I initially began researching the history of Kashmir in the mid-1990s, the conflict did not particularly interest me on a scholarly level, although the insurgency against the Indian state was raging at the time in the Kashmir Valley. I was more interested in returning Kashmir to the mainstream of South Asian historiography, from which it had been absent. I became steeped in excavating Kashmir's past, perusing government documents in state archives during the day, going door to door in the evenings collecting documents (letters, newspaper cuttings, prose treatises, poetical tracts, photographs, and so on), while also recording people's memories of their forebears. Most of these materials had never before been seen or analyzed by any scholar; in fact, nobody, not least myself, had realized the existence of such a diversity of sources, especially in the regional vernacular Kashmiri, in Kashmir. It appeared that I had unearthed a completely new archive.

It was only after the publication and reception of my first book, *Languages of Belonging*, which stitched together these sources to produce a new narrative of Kashmir's past, that I recognized the value of engaging with the conflict. Besides the complimentary academic reviews, I was pleasantly surprised to discover that a range of people—laypeople, policy makers, diplomats, and others—had benefited from the book's long historical perspective and its insights on Islam and nationalism. Within Kashmir itself, the book had sparked intense debates over belonging and identity that were carried out in seminars and symposia. I realized that Kashmiris held the book in such high esteem because it helped them to understand themselves and brought some clarity to their past over the din of relentlessly competing narratives on their homeland that saturated public discourse in South Asia. Since then, I take my responsibility as a historian of a conflict zone much more seriously. This is reflected not only in my research and role as a speaker at academic and community events around the world, but also in the courses I teach.

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What role do colonial history and historical memory play in re-imagining democratic institutions in South Asia?

History in general and historical memory contribute in both positive and negative ways towards re-imagining democratic institutions, since both can be deployed to sustain ideologies and further claims in the present. As historians we bear the responsibility to not allow history to become politics by another means, whether that is in service of ideologies on the left or the right. This is the only way that we can ensure the continuation of civil debate that will strengthen democratic institutions in South Asia.

What inspired you to study the historical narrative of the making of Kashmiri identity? What challenges did you face when conducting this research?

As I mentioned earlier, my work engages with the region as an object of study in South Asian historiography, and it is from this perspective that I approached the study of Kashmir, exploring its historical and historiographical constitution from a variety of social and intellectual locations and bases. The making of Kashmiri identities, regional and religious, was critical to the articulation of the idea of the region.

The initial challenge I encountered after I decided to work on Kashmir was that there was a paucity of scholarly literature on the region, which meant that I did not have access secondary sources that would provide the critical socio-economic and political contexts for the articulation of identities that I was interested in writing about. But this also meant that I had to provide this context myself, thus making the end product far more comprehensive and textured.

The conflict itself proved to be a serious challenge in terms of safely conducting research and accessing sources. The endless curfews, closures, and strikes, along with the neglect of archives and libraries, as well as the politics of the conflict were all major roadblocks that I had to surmount to be successful as a researcher.

How do regional politics, particularly relations between India and Pakistan, impact the narrative of the Kashmir conflict?

Regional politics between India and Pakistan have a major impact on the discourse about the Kashmir conflict, primarily because the two states have always deployed their nationalist narratives to assert their territorial claims on the region. For both India and Pakistan, their claim over Kashmir is tied in significant ways to their own nationalist self-imaginings—either as a secular (now Hindu) nation or an Islamic nation respectively.

Could you outline the constitutional changes made by the BJP in relation to Kashmir and Article 370 in 2019? What is the significance of these changes?

On August 5, 2019, the newly reelected BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party) government, by presidential order, abrogated Article 370 of the Indian constitution, which gave special status to the state of Jammu and Kashmir (J&K). In addition, they pushed through a bill that stripped J&K of its status as a state, partitioning it into two union territories—Jammu & Kashmir and Ladakh— to be ruled directly by the central government.

In 1949, Article 370 was enshrined into the Indian constitution as a means to explicate J&K's relationship to the Indian Union. Like all princely states—as it was at the time of Indian independence in 1947—J&K acceded to India in only the three subjects of Defence, External Affairs, and Communications. In part because it was disputed territory and in part because its leadership negotiated for autonomy during constitutional talks, Article 370 allowed it special privileges. One such privilege was the establishment of its own constituent assembly, which had the power to frame the state's constitution as well as make the decision about whether it wanted to accede to India in any further subjects.

Article 370 represented the federal, plural, and secular character of the Indian polity, which claimed Jammu and Kashmir precisely because it was a Muslim-majority state and was willing to make concessions to allow Kashmiri

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Muslims to feel secure in a Hindu-majority India. Article 370, however, became a shell of itself soon after it was promulgated. The Bharatiya Jan Sangh (the earlier incarnation of the BJP), joined hands with a movement in Jammu that emerged in the early 1950s to abolish the state's special status and integrate it completely into India. This movement eventually led to the downfall of the first government of J&K—that had negotiated its special status—in 1953. Subsequent state governments in the 1950s and 1960s were willing to join hands with the central government to erode the Article. It nonetheless remained a powerful symbol of the pact between India and one of its constituent units that the BJP has consistently campaigned against.

The recent presidential order that extends all provisions of the Indian Constitution to Jammu and Kashmir has also rendered unconstitutional Article 35A of the Indian constitution. This article was introduced into the constitution through a 1954 presidential order, under Article 370, which gave the J&K state legislature the right to define permanent residents of the state. In effect, this article prevented outsiders from settling in and buying property in Jammu and Kashmir.

The BJP's explanation for its move was that the special status has prevented the state's economic development and thus encouraged disgruntlement among the local population. In this logic, the BJP is no different from earlier central governments, which have been throwing economic aid at J&K in the hopes that its population will be pacified. But this has not solved the underlying political grievances of the Kashmiri Muslim population, which has felt increasingly disenfranchised in and alienated from India, precisely because of the center's high-handedness. The insurgency against the Indian state, which began more than thirty years ago, continues to rage, and is likely to strengthen as a result of this latest incursion. It confirms what Kashmiris have known for decades—that for India, Kashmir is a territory devoid of people.

You have always maintained that Kashmir should not be viewed just through the lens of conflict and security studies, given its interconnected past and diverse cultural identities. What would you want the global community to know about Kashmir?

Well, as a historian, I do not want Kashmir's past to be read through its present. For that, one has to set aside the dispute between India and Pakistan, and the insurgency against India, so that one can study Kashmir's history on its own terms. I want the global community to understand that there is nothing inevitable about the conflict in Kashmir, that there is nothing specific to Kashmir that predisposes it to being a disputed territory. Despite being the inhabitants of a small realm, Kashmiris have historically managed to negotiate a place for their realm within far mightier political entities. Given the right political conditions, that is possible to achieve in the future.

What is the most important advice that you would give to young scholars?

I would say that if you want to conduct serious research and produce textured scholarship, then you cannot rely simply on digital sources. Nothing can replace actual fieldwork and research in archives and libraries with a variety of sources in multiple languages.