

Understanding Kashmir and Kashmiris,

by Christopher Snedden, UK: Hurst & Co., 2015, pp. 288, £20.00

*Priyanka Singh**

Since 1947, the protracted issue of Kashmir has predominantly underpinned the subcontinent's security discourse having dictated the trajectory of unsettling ties between India and Pakistan. As old as India's independence from British rule and the consequent creation of Pakistan in 1947, the Kashmir issue is rooted in the indecisive phase preceding Jammu and Kashmir's (J&K) formal accession to India. Before the Maharaja of Kashmir could finally sign the accession in India's favour, a tribal raid orchestrated by Pakistan army caused colossal damage in terms of loss of lives and property in parts of the erstwhile princely state. Premised on close geographical proximity and a predominantly Muslim majority population in the Kashmir valley per se, Pakistan, since its formation, has been unrelentingly claiming the entire state of J&K. Pursuant to its unfounded claims, Pakistan's errant proxy war in J&K has pegged the territory as the virtual flashpoint in the bilateral equations between the two.

Recapturing the genesis and causes of the hotly debated Kashmir issue, Christopher Snedden's *Understanding Kashmir and Kashmiris* comes across as a refreshing addition to the existing discourse. Well regarded as one of the foremost experts on Kashmir, Snedden in this book draws a detailed, involvedly researched account on a perennially debated enigma, that is, Kashmir. The book title is reflective of the author's primary

* The reviewer is an Associate Fellow at IDSA, New Delhi.



intention-getting down to explain the rudimentary fundamentals of a rather complicated issue. While doing so, Snedden collates all possible annotations for Kashmir (for J&K as a whole as well as its constituents), that are quite often loaded with politically driven geographical references—as ‘occupied’, ‘held’, etc. The Kashmir problem is one that is peculiarly characterised by a constant juggle with terminology on either side—India and Pakistan—with each asserting the ones that more aptly complement their political line of position. Though the bilateral conflict on Kashmir has a tendency to recede intermittently, it has largely persisted to haunt ties between the two neighbours for nearly seven decades now.

The book is divided into five parts: Important Antecedents; Jammu and Kashmir 1846-1947; From Princely State to Disputed State; Contemporary, and Divided J&K; and Resolving the Kashmir Dispute. It reveals how the British, in view of the imperial Great Game, sold a cluster of territory to the Dogra rulers. Nestled between the mighty Russian empire, China, and the strategically crucial region of Tibet, the newly formed princely state was geopolitically pivotal for the British. In this book, Snedden has, in broader terms, furthered the premise previously argued in his book *The Untold Story of the People of Azad Kashmir* (2011), where he attributed the violence, fury and instability surrounding the erstwhile princely state’s accession to India more to an internal outbreak of rebellion, and not propelled as much by the external factors as is commonly understood, that is, tribal plunderers/looters from the other side. The book traverses the history of several parts of the former princely state—that are considered to be extremely disparate entities—to present a uniform narrative that covers the afflicting political complexities at the time as well as the challenges in arriving at possible solutions in future. Also, the author deftly cobbles together a holistic account incorporating finer details concerning parts of Kashmir under Pakistan’s control since 1947, that is, the so-called Azad Jammu and Kashmir and Gilgit Baltistan regions.

Having caused wars and bloodshed, the Kashmir problem has engendered a burgeoning discourse in the subcontinent and beyond. Short of objectivity, the debate on Kashmir is soiled by competing, politically-coloured narratives as reflected in both India and Pakistan. Snedden’s work largely breaks barriers of bias to bridge critical gaps in the debate involving Kashmir. Despite this, certain affirmations contained in the book are bound to be contested and disagreed upon on either sides of the Line of Control (LoC). But this does not make a material

difference either to the quality or the wealth of information laid out in the book. The book comes across as a vital blend of geopolitics, history and complex strands militating against the trajectory of a beleaguered former princely state.

Snedden captures the post-1947 British withdrawal phase, during which Hari Singh's 'vacillation' (p. 163) thrust the princely state into violent chaos and uncertainty emanating from Pakistan-aided military aggression. Prior to receiving armed assistance, Hari Singh signed the Instrument of Accession in India's favour, a fact that is constantly contested by Pakistan. Since 1947, both countries have upheld their respective positions—while India controls substantial parts of the former princely state, Pakistan continues to illegally occupy parts of J&K on the western and northern sides, despite India's extant claim over these. Similarly, the book also dwells into cartographic aggression as a significant leg in the Kashmir discourse. This involves anomalies reflected in the cartographic representation of the erstwhile princely state and/or its parts by Pakistan, China and India, countries that continue to hold various fractions of the J&K territory (pp. 120–23).

The crux of the book lies in the set of innovative measures brought out by the author that could lead to a possible solution of the Kashmir issue. While Snedden indulges in drawing up a wide-ranging canvas of future projections through scenario building, the 'Let the people decide' option to be exercised by the J&K-ites is pitched by him as the desired way ahead. However, the massive demographic transformation in PoK and fleeing of minorities from J&K over the past seven decades make this proposition less than pragmatic. In the contemporary context, it may be a formidable task to ascertain as to who would constitute what the author refers to as the 'J&K-ites'. The J&K state acceded to India under a provision offered by the outgoing British administration. Contrary to this, Pakistan's intervention in Kashmir is based on dated, superfluous grounds of a Muslim majority population and geographical contiguity. Rising Chinese stakes in the surrounding geopolitical environment, brewed up with the multi-billion China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) further undercuts the popular imaginations regarding the peoples' choice as a plausible option. China is maintaining a strategic niche in the region that has grossly consolidated with time. Re-imagining an alternate future course of Kashmir, therefore, is undeniably contingent upon dealing with China's economic prowess, on one hand, and simultaneously coping with the perils of Pakistan's distressing internal security situation on the

other. Hence, uber-complex challenges stare down the much-advertised people's choice option.

The book would benefit readers with its more than adequate focus on the geopolitics of Kashmir, expanding the study's ambit beyond a purely political lens. After Navnita Chaddha Behera's *Demystifying Kashmir* published in 2007, Snedden's book ably fills a critical gap with a credible, updated and well-qualified account on the strategically challenging Kashmir issue. Hence, it affords a much needed fillip to the Kashmir discourse. As one of the foremost experts on the subject, Christopher Snedden bears the distinction of being an authoritative voice on Kashmir issue in entirety—his previous work on the so-called Azad Kashmir is considered path breaking in terms of meticulously exploring a region subjected to gross academic neglect over the decades. However, considering the overall sensitivity of the Kashmir problem, readers in the subcontinent could be divided on certain issues and projections presented in Snedden's narrative. For instance, within India, drawing a geographical distinction between J&K and India may not find receptivity (p. 9).

The book comprehensively chronicles the history and politics of the erstwhile princely state in both the pre- and post-1947 periods, roving through broad phases of chronic conflict and instability. The expanse of the watershed in the post-1947 phase is much wider considering the Kashmir issue is inextricably intertwined with the British withdrawal from the subcontinent and the consequent infusion of mutual hostility and distrust between independent India and newly formed Pakistan. Concurrently, the book ably mirrors the fundamental concerns and aspirations in the non-Kashmiri belt within J&K, as to how their valid concerns have been hijacked by the larger Kashmir question.

Snedden's book stands out in the prevalent narratives dominating the political and military discourse on Kashmir. The subcontinental debate Kashmir is tarred by confictions and lop-sided political bickering, fed massively by propaganda/agenda driven literature. Snedden's account, evolved from an impressive bibliography, thus comes across as an incisive, alternate perspective invested with a great deal of academic credibility.