

**Kenneth Iain MacDonald**

## **Kashmir**

*Who has not heard of the vale of Cashmere,  
With its roses the brightest that earth ever gave,  
Its temples, and grottos, and fountains as clear  
As the love-lighted eyes that hang over their wave?*

While Thomas Moore never set foot in Kashmir, Lalla Rookh, his classic poem of romance, intrigue and mystery, provides a canvas upon which future European travelers to Kashmir painted much of their story. Their imagined journeys were often shattered by the reality of their individual experience but the culturally entrenched image of the happy valley persisted until well after the partition of India and Pakistan. Moore, however, did draw on the writings of two early visitors to Kashmir: George Foster who donned the garb of a Turkish merchant to (unsuccessfully) escape the notice of the Maharajah's spies, and Francois de Bernier whose *Travels in the Mogul Empire, A.D. 1656-1668*, (Paris, 1670) is recognized as the first authoritative source on Kashmir. Until the publication of those volumes, Kashmir had entered the European popular imagination as a spectacular distant land through tales relayed to merchants and travelers in the larger Indian cities, and through the letters of two Jesuit priests from Goa published in Antwerp in 1605. These tales and the push of the British north into the Punjab generated an ever-increasing interest in Kashmir, and attracted the attention of William Moorcroft, a British East India Company veterinarian, who, with his assistant, George Trebeck traveled through Kashmir in an attempt to reach Central Asia. Moorcroft and Trebeck never returned from their journey, but their path was soon followed by a number of European elites: the French traveler Baron Charles Hugel, the naturalist Victor Jacquemont, and Godfrey Vigne. The treaty of Amritsar (1846), saw the British gain control of the Punjab, place a puppet ruler in Kashmir, and open the door to European travelers. And travelers came; not only in pursuit of Bernier's earthly paradise, but also in pursuit of an escape from the oppressive Punjab summers. Srinagar, the capital of Kashmir, became a summer hill resort for British civil servants and military officers who carved out a ground for hunters and adventurers. With the arrival of summer travelers, Moore's world came alive, at least textually. The mid 1850s mark the emergence of Kashmir as the Happy Vale replete with the imagery of Moore's verse. Kashmir was not simply a respite from life on the plains but became a place of romance, and for displaced Europeans, the 'Eastern' equivalent of 'Western' places of leisure: "Venice of the East", "Playground of the East", "Switzerland of the East". Descriptions of Kashmir were also often edenic and many pedestrian travel books made mention of one of the mythic biblical associations of Kashmir, citing it as the possible death place and burial site of Christ and Moses, or the home of the lost tribes of Israel. These biblical benchmarks combine with a naturalist emphasis in travel writings to represent Kashmir as a Garden of Eden inhabited by a fallen or degraded people. Moorcroft's representation, for example, finds companionship in racist and Orientalist travel writing up to and beyond partition:

*in character the Kashmiri is selfish, superstitious, ignorant, supple, intriguing, dishonest and false: he has great ingenuity as a mechanic, and a decided genius for manufactures*

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*and commerce, but his transactions are always conducted in a fraudulent spirit, equaled only by the effrontery with which he faces detection. The vices of the Kashmirian I cannot help considering, however, as the effects of his political condition, rather than his nature, and conceive that it would not be difficult to transform him into a very different being.* (129)

These traits, however, were seen to be open to improvement through the moral influence and beneficence of a superior race, one with the capacity to provide a moral education and the intelligence to develop the resources of the state. Within the ideological representations of many European's, Kashmir, then, also became a space of redemption, and travel books through the early 20<sup>th</sup> century consistently remark on the achievements of missionary endeavours in the state and on the potential for the development of resources and infrastructure to contribute to the moral development of the people.

Despite its edenic image, Kashmir had its sinful temptations. A clash of morals perennially lay just under the surface in most works. This was frequently expressed in conflicts between families seeking a moral respite in the Happy Valley, and officers on leave seeking the erotic promises of an 'exotic' land. Happiness, then, was not something singularly defined. Indeed, these conflicts led to a prohibition on women entering Kashmir for a period of time. The potential problems of temptation were addressed early by placing a seasonal British Resident on duty in Kashmir in 1852 and the formation of a set of rules for visitors to Kashmir. These rules governed the behavior of European visitors to Kashmir who came under the jurisdiction of the Resident and regulated their interactions with Kashmiris. They also quickly became an essential part of most early travel writing on Kashmir and remained a fixture in later writings. This early literature was very much prescriptive, describing not just the travels of their authors - largely in terms of the picturesque, but ascribing itself the role of expert in relaying advice to future travelers. Many volumes followed Wakefield (1879) in describing their purpose:

*...to present those who have not visited the country "with a short and general description of the routes to Srinagar; the history, manners and customs of the inhabitants of this beautiful province; and a sketch of the various places and objects of interest to be met with in the space of a short tour.*

These "places to be met with" – the objects of the travelers gaze – are places that Europeans sought out and are remarkably consistent through the history of travel writing on Kashmir. The focus of the gaze falls largely on those objects that accord with Moore's depiction of Kashmir as a conjuncture of nature and civilization. Visits to the artifacts of a glorious civilization loom large in most accounts of Kashmir. After textually situating the region in a rich cultural history, many authors follow a well-worn trail to the ruins of ancient temples, shrines and monuments and to the margs, the meadows that provided a respite to those escaping the heat of the Punjab:

*Here are the race-course, polo ground, golf links, and tennis courts. Here are the church, post and telegraph offices, ballroom and club, library and native shops, while endless wooden huts are dotted about the turf slopes. They are built chiefly by English people.(55) ... With just as great joy as the Mughal emperors and their entourage sought*

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*Kashmir do Englishmen on leave, and ladies with children, order their tongas and set their faces to Gulmarg* (Bruce 1910, 56).

Almost from the beginning of European travel to Kashmir, dual strands of travel narratives emerged. The dominant strand treats Kashmir and the immediate surroundings as destination. The other treats Kashmir proper as a jumping off point for travel into the depths of the Karakoram Mountains or through Ladakh and into the less pedestrian lands of central Asia. The vale of Kashmir proper stood on the known routes into the high mountains of the Karakoram and trade routes into Central Asia, and so became a staging point for all expeditions intent on exploring the inner sanctum of the mountains or venturing beyond into central Asia. These latter narratives encompass a host of motivations but all are constructed against the sedate activities depicted in the majority of travel narratives on Kashmir. Indeed a dissatisfaction with the 'trivial civilized pleasures of Kashmir' seems to mark these latter narratives, and it is this disdain for the pedestrian virtues of Kashmir proper that are deployed to discursively separate the 'explorer' from the mere 'traveler'. Gradually, the strategic importance of Kashmir to the British became evident and travel writing beyond the vale assumed a political dimension, very much concerned with the intrigues of what has become known as The Great Game.

While most of the voices writing on Kashmir were European, the emergence of an Indian bourgeoisie in the mid-1920s is accompanied by the addition of Indian authors to the archive of popular travel writing on Kashmir. In a notable departure from European writings, some of these express an inability to relate to Kashmir as Europeans had represented it. Despite this, Indian authors largely reproduce European prescriptions regarding the people and places of Kashmir. Travel writing on Kashmir reached its zenith in the early years of the twentieth century. By partition of India and Pakistan in 1948, the market was saturated and authors had begun to ground their purpose in challenges to the accuracy and authenticity of previous volumes. With partition, the volume of travelers to Kashmir declined sharply. More importantly, however, the few travel volumes produced after partition became explicitly political but retained an ideological link to earlier writings by bemoaning the failure to actually achieve the redemptive potential of Kashmir constructed within the pages of those earlier works.

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Kashmir (Kashmiri: كٲشٲر; Urdu: كٲشٲر) is the northwestern region of the Indian subcontinent. Historically the term Kashmir was used to refer to the valley lying between the Great Himalayas and the Pir Panjal range. Today Kashmir refers to a larger area that includes Jammu and Kashmir administered by India (comprising Jammu, Kashmir, and Ladakh), the Pakistani administered regions Northern Areas and Azad Kashmir, and the Chinese administered region of Aksai Chin.