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BOOK REVIEW



AZADI KE BAAD

By

DANISH IRSHAD

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Imran Khurshid*



Danish Irshad's book published in 2024 in Urdu, titled *Azadi Ke Baad*, offers a bold and insightful exploration of the political landscape of Pakistan-occupied Jammu and Kashmir (PoJK). The

book critically examines how Pakistan's ruling elite has wielded the Kashmir issue as a strategic tool to serve political interests from the outset. Irshad's work stands out for its unflinching portrayal of the political manipulation and psychological warfare inflicted upon the people of PoJK, as well as their struggle to reclaim their own voice after the so-called 'Azadi' granted to them by Pakistan. Written by a Rawalakot-based author, this rare example of self-critical historiography challenges Pakistan's conventional narratives with remarkable candour.

The book opens with an exploration of how Pakistan's leadership has often wielded Kashmir as a political tool rather than a genuine national cause. Irshad argues that the creation of the Kashmir Liberation Movement (KLM) in PoJK was driven by high-level political maneuvering within Pakistan. He posits that Pakistan's first constitution, enacted in 1956, scheduled general elections for 1958. However, fearing electoral

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uncertainty, Sikandar Mirza and Ayub Khan sought to incite unrest as a pretext for legitimizing martial law. Initially, Ayub Khan attempted to stir instability in Balochistan by persuading the Khan of Kalat, but when that effort failed, he turned to Qudratullah Shahab, instructing him to influence Chaudhry Ghulam Abbas to foment disturbances in PoJK. Furthermore, Irshad contends that the formation of the Kashmir Liberation Movement served as a strategic diversion—shifting public focus away from the struggles and fundamental rights issues in PoJK and instead directing attention to the alleged suffering of people in Indian Kashmir.

One of the most poignant sections of the book chronicles the mass exodus from Mirpur following the construction of the Mangla Dam, vividly capturing the displaced community's struggles and sorrow. Irshad recounts how entire families were uprooted—some left without any compensation, while others received only meager reparations. Many of those forcibly relocated were sent to different parts of Pakistan, but due to widespread discrimination and their inability to fully integrate into mainstream Punjabi culture, they eventually returned to PoJK. This account underscores the systemic neglect and marginalization endured

by the people of PoJK, a region that remains largely overlooked in Pakistan's broader political discourse.

"Logon ko bataya jata hai ke Mirpur walon ne, Azadi ke baad, qurbani di, lekin haqeeqat yeh hai ke hum se bandook ke zor par qurbani li gayi. Humein hamare gharon se nikala gaya, aur Punjab aur Sindh mein rehne par majboor kiya gaya." [People are told that the people of Mirpur sacrificed their lives after independence, but the truth is that we were forced to sacrifice our lives at gunpoint. We were driven out of our homes and forced to live in Punjab and Sindh.] (p. 215)

Irshad also examines the psychological warfare (or psyops) being waged by Pakistan in the region, highlighting how, from the outset, the state has relied on propaganda tools such as 'Radio Azad Kashmir' to shape public perceptions. He argues that the elites in Pakistan have consistently manipulated the Kashmir dispute for their political interest rather than addressing the genuine grievances of the people. A key illustration of this, as the book details, is Pakistan's response to India's revocation of Articles 370 and 35A in 2019. While Pakistan officially condemned the decision, the government primarily

leveraged the event for domestic political advantage knowing fully well that the move could not be reversed. The book describes how widespread protests and seminars were organized across PoJK and Pakistan in reaction to India's move, yet these efforts lacked substantive policy direction—reinforcing the notion that the Kashmir issue is often exploited as a tool for political leverage.

Hukumat-e-Pakistan ne bhi is waqiye ko siyasi point scoring ki had tak hi sahi lekin bharpoor media ke zariye istemal kiya. [The Government of Pakistan also used this incident extensively through the media, albeit only to the extent of political point scoring.], p. 252.

One of the most contentious issues explored in *Azadi Ke Baad* is the case of Ahmed Farhad, a poet who was abducted shortly after participating in a long march in PoJK. His wife filed a petition with the Islamabad High Court, and during the proceedings, Additional Attorney General Manoor Iqbal Duggal referred to Pakistan-administered Jammu and Kashmir as a “foreign territory.” This statement ignited a firestorm of controversy on Pakistani social media, reviving debates over the region's constitutional and legal status. Irshad meticulously dissects this discourse, analyzing how

Pakistan's Constitution—particularly Articles 1 and 257—defines the country's territorial boundaries and its unique relationship with PoJK.

Another critical issue examined in the book is the influence of opportunistic political figures within popular movements. Irshad argues that while such movements often arise from genuine grievances, they are frequently hijacked by leaders who prioritize personal interests over collective goals. He highlights the role of the Awami Action Committee during the 2024 Long March in PoJK, noting how the group established stringent negotiation protocols to prevent individual politicians from securing personal advantages. The committee firmly declared: “No person involved in the movement will negotiate alone with any government figure; only the appointed committee will have the authority to negotiate. The movement will continue under all circumstances until the demands are met.”

Ye Tehreek mein shaamil koi bhi fard tanha kisi hukoomati shakhsiat se muzakraat nahi karega, sirf muqarrar kardah committee ko hi muzakraat ka ikhtiyar hoga. Maqalat ki manzoori tak, Tehreek ko har soorat mein jari rakha jayega.” (p. 264)

This stance reflects a growing political consciousness among the people of PoJK, who have become wary of manipulation by both local and national actors.

A groundbreaking aspect of *Azadi Ke Baad* is its documentation of women's and students' participation in protests. The book highlights how, for the first time in PoJK's history, women took to the streets in significant numbers during the 2024 *Long March*. On 10 October 2023, women staged protests across district and tehsil headquarters, with the largest demonstration occurring in Rawalakot. Despite heavy rains on 17 October, students also organised widespread demonstrations, showing remarkable resilience.

Irshad contends that authorities employed propaganda and direct intervention to suppress the protests. For instance, district officials reportedly pressured educational institutions to discourage student participation. The book also recounts how local communities warmly welcomed the demonstrators, standing in solidarity with their cause. Additionally, Irshad details how radical elements within society attempted to curtail women's protests, yet despite these obstacles, women remained steadfast in their demands.

Furthermore, he observes that during the *Long March* in 2024, over 95 percent of young people between the ages of 18 and 35 harboured anti-Pakistan and anti-military sentiments. This growing unrest posed an increasing challenge for the Pakistani state, prompting authorities to take measures aimed at curbing nationalist and progressive movements in the region.

While *Azadi Ke Baad* presents a compelling historical account and offers a critical perspective on Pakistan's policies in PoJK, it does have some notable shortcomings. One significant limitation is its lack of emphasis on PoJK's cultural dimensions. The book could have explored how Punjabi culture has gradually overshadowed PoJK's distinct identity, contributing to the decline of indigenous languages such as Kashmiri. Today, only a small number of people in PoJK speak Kashmiri, and the phenomenon of *Pakistani Punjabi cultural assimilation* remains an underexamined aspect of the region's history.

Additionally, while the book is rich in historical detail, it could have benefited from a deeper analytical approach. A broader geopolitical perspective—examining how external powers such as China, the United

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States, and other global actors have influenced the region and shaped Pakistan's policies—would have provided a more comprehensive understanding of PoJK's political evolution.

Despite these limitations, *Azadi Ke Baad* remains an essential work that challenges mainstream narratives and sheds light on the struggles of PoJK's residents. Its significance is further heightened by the fact that it comes from an author who is a resident of PoJK and has dared to present a viewpoint often overlooked in popular discourse. The book's neutral stance and meticulous research make it a vital contribution to the study of Kashmiri history. Danish Irshad's documentation of political manoeuvring, human suffering, and the resilience of PoJK's

people ensures that his work will serve as a critical reference for scholars, journalists, and anyone seeking to understand the complex realities of Pakistan-occupied Jammu and Kashmir.

In conclusion, *Azadi Ke Baad* is a bold and thought-provoking work that offers a deep historical analysis of PoJK's political landscape. Despite its limitations, its strengths far outweigh its weaknesses. Irshad's ability to critically examine Pakistan's policies while maintaining an objective stance makes this book essential reading for anyone seeking a deeper understanding of PoJK. Moreover, it stands as a testament to the existence of independent and critical voices within PoJK, setting a precedent for future works that aim to uncover suppressed narratives in South Asian history. ■

Note for readers and subscribers

We are happy to inform you that from January 2009 we have introduced the system of peer review of articles to ensure quality of publications and improve the scholarly value of our journal. We have a renowned group of scholars and academicians associated with our Centre and they are helping us in this process. We are grateful to them for their kind support and cooperation.

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