

Mainstreaming the Marginalized:

Perspectives in Humanities, Commerce and Science

Book I
(English)

Editors

Dr. Kalyan Gangarde

Dr. Shamrao Waghmare

Militancy and its Impact on *Purdah* System in Kashmir

Harpreet Kour

Assistant Professor

Department of English

Govt. SPMR College of Commerce, Jammu

Though a majority Muslim state, Kashmir in India is an exception regarding the veiling or *purdah*. Overall, in Kashmir there has not been any hard and fast rule for strict observance of *purdah* or *hijab* and only a minority of women there observed it and proclaimed that they truly feel empowered and confident and are also liberated from "Slavery to physical perfection by observing this commandment of Allah" (Sikandar 2008). In the year 1752 AD, the Afghan adventurer Ahmad Shah Abdali, captured Kashmir from Mughals and with the Afghan invasion, the peace loving people of this land passed through several trials and hardships. The women were the worst sufferers. P.N Bazaz writes in his *Daughters of Vitasta*, "Horrifying are the tales related of the barbarities, which were perpetrated on women whose very fault was that they happened to be handsome in appearance and graceful in form." To save womenfolk from the wild behaviour of the cruel masters, the Kashmiris introduced the practice of wearing veils.

In the early twentieth century, the practice of *Purdah* was confined to upper classes like *Sayeds* and *Afghans*. The professional groups like the *Kandars* (Bakers), *Dandars* (Farmers), *Gor* (milkman), *Dhob* (washerman), *Hanji* (fishermen) did not observe *purdah* as their economic activities encouraged mixing of sexes. In the urban areas, while women of *Sayyid* and *Hojja* families were confined to their homes and were not allowed to perform any manual labour outside their homes, women belonging to various occupational groups worked with their men within and outside their homes.

Thus it can be said that Kashmiri tradition does not require women to wear the *burqa*. The Islam that has been practiced in the region is liberal Sufi Islam, quite different from the kind of militants from Afghanistan or Pakistan which have been imported into the state. Kashmiri women used to cover their heads with a headscarf or a *hijab*, but even that was not widely practiced in Srinagar in the 1980's. The upper-class educated women like Zainab Begum, Begum Zehan Abdullah, Mehbooba Ali Shah and Shyamala Multi came out in public life and cast aside their *burqa* in 1930's and 1940's.