

Book Review : The Last Queen of Kashmir (Rev.)

Whether to review the book, *The Last Queen of Kashmir*, by Rakesh K. Kaul, or not, that is the question? Reviewing it would have been a natural exercise for me, but the difficulties the book presents in its substance, scope, and style are strong, though not insurmountable, that one wonders whether it is worth the effort it would entail.

The book is about Kotarani, a 14th century queen of Kashmir, who lived in turbulent times, when Hindu Kashmir turned to Islamic Kashmir. The history of that time is thin and shallow and to recreate comprehensively the life and times of the queen is impossible. The book in question is not a history but a novel about the legendary queen. Therein lies one of the significant problems of the book.

Historical novel is a well-established genre of literature. When history is hard to find novelizing it is not that outlandish. But the writer has to be honest in presenting his story. Nowhere in this book is stated that it is a historical novel, although the notification on copyright page says:

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously,

But author should have talked about the genre of the book in the book's foreword and the methodology he has used.

Only outlines of Kotarani's life and times are known to history. We do not know how she died: whether by suicide or murder by Shah Mir, the founder of the

Muslim era in Kashmir, which has spanned 549 years and continues.

The central theme of the book is the presentation of Kotarani as a very brave, intelligent politician, and the compassionate and loving leader of her Kashmiri people, who valiantly fought for them time and again, risking her life, and finally sacrificed it to save them. She is shown as a crafty leader of courage, a risk-taker, wise, warm, and fervently religious. Now, such a clear picture of her personality and life is not afforded by history, but the book embellishes whatever is known into an epic. Kotarani's admitted weapon of using her sexuality to trap political opponents is not something to rejoice at, except that the author thinks it is part of the Shakti phenomenon of Shaivism. The author claims her to have been perhaps the greatest queen in the history of the world. But such an adulation of the Kotarani is crass addiction, a slap to reason and reality.

Kotarani did many mistakes. She did not have to marry the fleeing Tibetan prince, Rinchana, in order to stabilize Kashmir from a convulsion when the latter murdered her father, commander-in-chief and acting-king, Ramachandra. Rinchana knew that he would not be acceptable to Kashmiris, not only because he was an outsider but also because of his heinous crime. Rinchana by his own admission told Kotarani that without her help he would have returned to Tibet. But Kotarani was so keen to establish her own power quickly that she married in haste the murderer of her father. And this turned the history of Kashmir in such a turbulence that it is still not able to shake it off. History tells us that Rinchana wanted to convert to Hinduism from his Buddhism on account of his acute political sense that he must have a religion that he can share with his subjects, but the Hindu religious establishment would not let him do that. But the book softens the blow on the latter by suggesting that it was willing to convert him but without abridging the full initiation process, which Rinchana considered too slow for his personality and political needs. So, after being told that a fast version of conversion was not possible, he decided to change to the religion of the first man he would see the next day. And it happened that the first man he saw was none other than Bulbul Shah, a popular religious leader, who was a Muslim. It is incredulous. Whatever happened to Kotarani's commitment to her people? How could she have not prevailed on Deevaswami, kingdom's chief priest, to

administer a fast version of conversion to Hinduism to Rinchana. But, perhaps, she did not care. If Rinchana had not converted to Islam the history of Kashmir would have been very different.

When Rinchana died in 1323, he willed Shah Mir to be the care-taker of his and Kotarani's son, Haider, which was another big step towards the Islamization of Kashmir. After marrying Udayandeva, she and the new emperor could have taken Haider back to his mother. Shah Mir did neither have the public support nor the military power to overcome their action. But Kotarani thought that it was good politics not to disturb Kashmir's Muslim community, even though it was meager. Kotarani became the empress of Kashmir for only a few months after the death of Udayandeva, but the book creates an illusion that she was an empress for some eighteen years, discounting the fact it were her two husbands who were the emperors.

Keeping Shah Mir as kingdom's military chief and foreign minister was another foolish move on part of Kotarani. Some people have suggested that she did not want to take away Shah Mir's power because it might have made him to mistreat Haider. That would imply that she wanted to keep Haider with Shah Mir for good.

Her marriage to Udayandeva was wrong as he was not an executive type, therefore, unfit to be the emperor of Kashmir, especially in the politically turbulent times of the Islamic penetration in Kashmir. But she must have married him because of the expediency of elevating herself to emperorship, while her husband would remain an emperor only in name. The continued existence of Shah Mir at high-echelons of power throughout Udayandeva's tenure of fifteen years of emperorship was indefensible from any angle.

There is so much glossing of Kotarani's achievements in the book that one feels turned off by it. She is supposed to have all qualities a human being can possibly have. The book indicates that not only did she design the trap for the Tartar

invader Achala to stop his invasion of Kashmir, but she also physically killed him. The history does not corroborate it. Also, the book indicated that rendezvous with Achala was planned at the site of Khirbhawani. But we know that was created toward the end of nineteenth century when the two persons in Tulamulla area had the vision of the presence of serpent goddess there. But may be the author is referring to another Khirbhavani which existed in the fourteenth century.

The book is one long oration on Kashmiri Pandit ethos – its sublimity, infinitude, and eternity. Every few pages we are deluged by not only its volume but also grilled by its sharpness and repetition. If it would have been a book on Pandit religious foundations and practices, both philosophically and historically, it might have been fine. But these high-level philosophical discourses choke the story of Kotarani. The author's obsessive penchant and protracted pride for Kashmiri ethos is well known. He believes that Kashmir Pandits' knowledge, vision, and practices make them among the greatest people that ever lived in human history. In fact, the greatest, which his modesty precludes him to state. First of all most of the modern Kashmiri Pandits do not live according to Kashmiri Shaivism, the preeminent Kashmiri Pandit religious philosophy. Most of them do not even know what that expression means. It is not taught in schools or discussed at homes or in fast-food restaurants.

The Virasa rasa style of writing the author touts of having used in the book, and that too uniquely, as it has been used only in two other books in India, has not helped it much – in fact, it has taken away some of its naturalness. I do not know Virasa rasa and the author states that it cannot be described in words. But one does not have to judge an actor's work by knowing what style of acting he is using to act a certain role, one simply judges the acting he is performing. The style has fluidity and impetuosity, suddenness and fervor. But that is only good in action items but not suitable in philosophical descriptions, where control and slow-paced-ness helps. Many a description in the book has been marred by the fleeting and looping sentences, which are factitious and mocking. As the author says that the style is such that the writer is so bonded with the subject he is writing on that a mere mention of it makes his emotion rise. And that is why such writer-author relationship snips at objectivity. We have many examples of non-objectively

written sentences in the book.

The book does not have the delicacy and rapture of a novel. A novel is an unfolding of a past dream in future. It is created on the principles of aesthetics in art, where the canvass in front of the writer is a beautiful blankness, which has the potential of infinite possibilities. On it he only writes what he must write and nothing more - not even a word more. So, minimalism is the essence of novel writing. But the author in this book is the very opposite - the maximalist. Because of the heavy adrenaline of philosophy, the personality of the novel chokes quite often. It is truer in dialogs, which are high-flown lectures.

The novel has many descriptions on sex - an authentic and indispensable part of human life. But it is one thing to write on sex as a subject but another to describe it in observations and thoughts. Even vulgarity is included in the book. Brahma's encounter with yogini and Kotarani's first nights with husbands one and two are vividly described. But what is a clincher is Achala's sexual orgy with a woman in Shah Mir and Udyandeva's party, called washerwoman, brought in to seduce him. (Pages 268-270). It could rival pornography available on internet. I believe the author included them because he believes sex is a life-enhancer and not something to be inhibited about. Also, he wants his book to sell well.

The author has given reasons for the unforced conversions of Pandits to Islam, but it is more in an episodic manner rather than historical. He has done a lot of research in different arenas of life in fourteenth century, but I wish it was done in an historical framework, rather than in a literary framework.

The outside characters are well drawn but the main ones are stuffed. The most ersatz character is that of Kotarani, who is portrayed as the world's most perfect human being. If the author had attempted to show her as a human being, he would have created a more adorable personality. And because of it the readers are more skeptical of her legend of perfect purity and absolute infallibility.

I know it has taken the author ten years to write this book, a prodigious effort by any standards. But if instead of writing a historical novel he had gone for history only he would have produced a greater achievement. I know the history on Kotarani and her times is thin, but by the dint of arduous research he could have produced a body of historical speculations. So, history together with historical speculations would have created a book that would have been invaluable to both scholars and laymen.

What lessons does the book teach us on the current predicament of Kashmiri Pandits. Nothing, because they are under the same stupor as they were in the fourteenth century. They could not see the dangers they faced in living in a mental stratosphere detached from the practical life then as they do not now. They saw no problems in letting foreigners come into Kashmir and ignored economics then, as they did not cultivate relationships with New Delhi after 1947 to protect themselves. They did not engage in practical professions of farming, tailoring, plumbing, etc. then as they do not now.

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