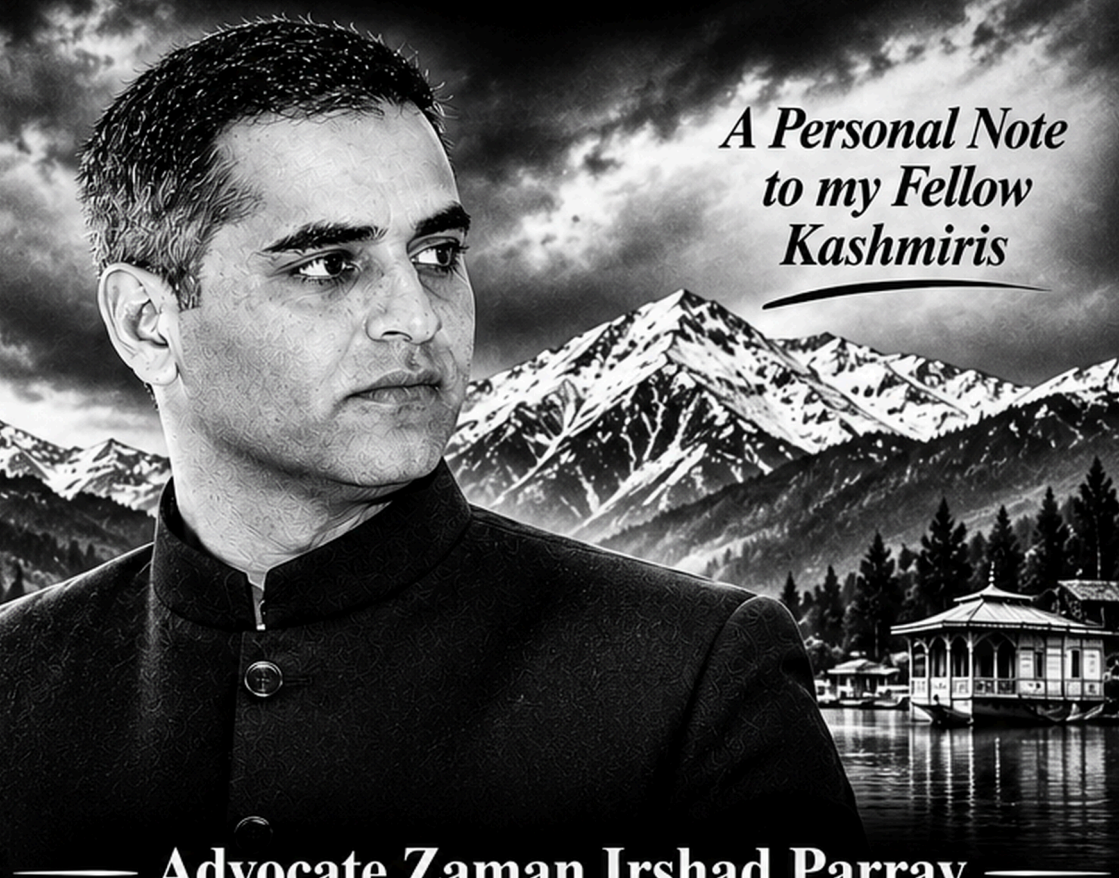
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KASHMIR: *A Call to Think Anew*

An Independent Reflection on our History, Faith, Politics and Future



A Personal Note to my Fellow Kashmiris

Advocate Zaman Irshad Parray

KASHMIR | INDIA | A CITIZEN WITH QUESTIONS

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WHO ARE WE, AND HOW DID WE ARRIVE HERE?

I was born in 1992, in an ordinary Kashmiri family with no political background. I studied at Biscoe School and grew up witnessing a society shaped by conflict, political uncertainty and competing narratives about its past and future. I entered active politics after 2019, carrying with me the questions of a generation that has inherited the consequences of decisions it did not make.

To understand Kashmir, we must first understand that its history did not begin with the conflict of our times.

Our land carries a long and layered civilisational history. Ancient traditions speak of the Nagas, while Hindu and Buddhist periods left deep imprints on its intellectual, cultural and spiritual life. Traditional accounts associate Ashoka with the spread of Buddhism and the early development of Srinagar. Over centuries, Kashmir became known for its scholarship, philosophy, spirituality and cultural traditions.

The arrival of Islam brought another defining chapter. Rinchana's conversion preceded the establishment of the Shah Mir Sultanate in 1339. The influence of the Awliya Kiram, particularly Mir Sayyid Ali Hamadani and of my patron, Awliya Mir Syed Hamza Simnani, and the growth of the Rishi tradition helped shape Kashmir's distinct spiritual and social character. The reign of Sultan Zain-ul-Abidin, remembered as Budshah, remains associated with cultural development and a tradition of accommodation. The Chak period, including the rule of Yusuf Shah Chak, preceded the Mughal annexation of Kashmir in 1586.

Thereafter came Mughal, Afghan, Sikh and Dogra rule. The events of 1947, the accession of Jammu and Kashmir to India, and the political developments that followed introduced another decisive chapter. Political uncertainty, militancy, separatism and successive constitutional changes have continued to shape the lives and thinking of generations of Kashmiris.

This history belongs to all of us. We should neither erase parts of it nor reduce it to a single political interpretation.

FAITH, IDENTITY AND RESPONSIBILITY

I am a Muslim, a Kashmiri and an Indian. I see no contradiction in these identities.

My faith is central to my understanding of life and public responsibility. Islam is not limited to personal rituals; it also offers guidance on justice, authority, public conduct, social responsibility and governance. Ultimately, I believe that all authority is answerable to the authority of the Almighty.

At the same time, I recognise the constitutional framework within which we live. The Indian Constitution establishes secularism as a foundational principle of the State and protects the freedom of conscience and religion. A citizen's commitment to faith need not be understood as a rejection of constitutional responsibility.

There is also an important question concerning Muslims living in countries where they are not the majority. Islamic scholarship has long discussed the obligations of honouring covenants, respecting lawful authority, fulfilling civic responsibilities and practising faith peacefully. The question of Hijrah arises in a specific context where the practice of religion genuinely becomes impossible. These are matters with a long history of scholarly discussion, not subjects to be reduced to political slogans.

We must be able to discuss faith and citizenship honestly, without allowing either to become an instrument of fear or division.

THE QUESTIONS WE MUST NO LONGER AVOID

For decades, Kashmir's political discourse has been dominated by competing promises, ideological positions and claims to represent the aspirations of its people. We must now be willing to examine the consequences of those positions.

Pakistan's role in Kashmir deserves honest scrutiny. Its State policies, political and strategic interventions, and support for militant networks have contributed to prolonged instability and immense human suffering. This criticism is directed at State policies and political decisions, not at ordinary Pakistani citizens as a people. We must distinguish between a population and the actions of the State that governs it.

The separatist movement, too, must be assessed by the future it promised and the reality it produced. Generations were asked to believe in political outcomes that never materialised. Its organisational influence and public reach have diminished, but acknowledging this does not mean pretending that every grievance, wound or unresolved question has disappeared. The human cost of prolonged conflict cannot be dismissed.

We must also ask difficult questions about the selective use of religion in political argument. The Qur'an, in Surah Al-Baqarah (2:278–279), gives a clear warning concerning Riba. Pakistan describes itself as an Islamic Republic, yet conventional interest-based banking has remained part of its financial system alongside Islamic banking.

This is not an argument to claim religious superiority over anyone. It is a reminder that religious principles must be applied consistently. Faith should inspire sincerity and accountability, not become a convenient instrument of political mobilisation.

The traditional political establishment in Kashmir must face the same scrutiny. Political families and parties, particularly the National Conference and the People's Democratic Party, have occupied central positions in our politics for decades. Their record, their promises and their decisions must be judged by their consequences, not merely by their inherited political standing.

We must also remember the complicated history of political engagements and accommodations involving successive national governments and different sections of Kashmir's political spectrum. Mainstream political parties, separatist formations, Hurriyat leadership, JKLF and J&K Justice & Development Front have distinct histories and ideologies; they should not be treated as interchangeable. Yet the history of dialogue, political arrangements and changing positions involving different actors deserves honest examination. We must also be honest about a harder truth: a traditional system that allows and promotes a symbiosis between mainstream and separatist elements, each sustaining the other, will never allow the radicalisation of our younger generation to be corrected. As long as that arrangement is protected, our youth will remain caught between the two.

Successive Congress-led and BJP-led governments at the national level must also answer for their own political experiments, compromises, decisions and failures in Kashmir. No party or institution should be beyond public scrutiny. Security and intelligence institutions, too, must be accountable for failures and lapses that have allowed extremist networks and instability to persist.

Kulgam offers an interesting example of the diversity of political opinion in our society. A constituency that has repeatedly elected a CPI(M) representative demonstrates that Kashmiri political participation cannot be reduced to a single ideological identity. Our people are capable of making choices that cross familiar political boundaries. Yet the same choice, renewed for more than a quarter of a century, must also be judged by what it has delivered to Kulgam's youth: jobs, opportunity and a voice of their own. Long incumbency, whatever its ideology, deserves the same honest scrutiny as any political family.

The question before us is not simply which party should replace another. It is whether we are prepared to move beyond a political order in which the same established forces are repeatedly presented as the only available choices or indispensable alternatives.

THE RESPONSIBILITY OF THE PRESENT GENERATION

I was born in 1992 and entered active politics after 2019. My generation has inherited a political situation shaped by decades of competing narratives, decisions, compromises and failures. We cannot ignore history, nor can we afford to examine it selectively. Every aspect of our past deserves consideration. But we cannot make historical assessment the sole foundation of our present politics.

Our politics must be rooted in the circumstances in which we actually live, the realities on the ground and the choices available to us today. By the present, I mean the period that has followed the evident failure of the policies pursued over decades in Kashmir by the traditional political establishment, by successive governments at the national level and by those who promised outcomes through separatism and violence — policies that have left our society politically weakened, our collective aspirations constrained and our people pushed towards the margins of meaningful decision-making.

This is where the responsibility of my generation begins. We cannot spend our entire lives debating who was right or wrong in the past while neglecting the condition in which we have arrived. Before we can move forward, we must honestly assess our present position, understand what remains of our political, social and institutional space, and consolidate whatever strength, confidence and agency we still possess. In that sense, our generation must become the caretakers of what remains and the builders of what is yet to come.

And this responsibility demands intellectual honesty. We cannot expect a different future by repeating the same political experiments, relying on the same assumptions or placing our confidence in the very political forces that were responsible for implementing the policies whose consequences we are now living with. This is not an argument against any individual or generation; it is an argument against the repetition of failed approaches.

History should inform our judgement, but it must not imprison our choices. The present must be assessed honestly, and the future must be approached with courage, responsibility and independent thought.

A NEW GENERATION, A NEW WAY FORWARD

Our generation stands before a choice. We can continue to depend upon inherited political narratives, established families and familiar political formations, hoping that the same approaches will somehow produce a different outcome. Or we can develop the confidence to think independently, participate responsibly and take ownership of our collective future.

When I speak of youth self-determination, I do not mean a slogan or a call to abandon democratic and civic institutions. I mean the freedom and responsibility of young people to think for themselves, question established assumptions, identify their priorities and participate lawfully in shaping the society in which they will live.

The youth of Kashmir must be more than an audience for political speeches. They must become active participants in public life.

Our priorities cannot remain confined to political arguments alone. We must speak about healthcare, education, roads, municipal services, employment, business opportunities, horticulture, trade and the institutions that directly affect everyday life. We must create meaningful alternatives to unemployment, drug abuse, frustration and social disengagement. We must demand public representatives who are accessible, institutions that are accountable and decisions that respond to the needs of ordinary people.

This responsibility does not belong to young people alone. Our respected seniors carry experience, memory and lessons that deserve attention. But experience should guide the next generation, not prevent it from taking responsibility.

I do not ask my respected seniors to surrender their experience. I ask my generation not to surrender its responsibility.

A PERSONAL NOTE

I do not claim to have every answer. I write as a Kashmiri who has observed, questioned and participated in public life, and who believes that silence and intellectual dependence cannot take us forward.

This booklet is not an appeal to follow me, nor is it an invitation to agree with everything written here. It is an invitation to begin a conversation that we have postponed for too long.

We may disagree on history, politics, faith and the choices before us. That disagreement should not prevent us from thinking together about the condition of our society and the future we wish to build.

Kashmir deserves a public conversation that is honest, informed and courageous. Its people deserve dignity, opportunity, peace and a meaningful voice in shaping their future.

Let us question inherited assumptions. Let us examine our present honestly. Let us find the courage to imagine something better.

Let us begin by thinking.

Write to me with your questions, your disagreements and your ideas. I will read them.

WhatsApp: 7889934753 | Instagram: @adv.zamanirshad | X: @zamanIrshad1

Scan to message me on WhatsApp

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NOTES

Editorial Note

Kashmir is not merely a land, it is a civilisation, a culture, a people and a promise. For too long, its people have been caught in a web of political blame, historical wounds and uncertain futures. This booklet is a humble effort to step beyond slogans and sentiments — to think, to question and to seek a better way forward.

It is a call to our youth to think independently, to engage with ideas, to reject divisive narratives and to build a future rooted in dignity, opportunity and peace. It is also a reminder to all stakeholders — that the people of Kashmir deserve not just political rhetoric, but honest dialogue, genuine development and a vision that inspires.

May this publication spark reflection, encourage discussion and contribute, in its own small way, to a more hopeful and progressive Kashmir.

Let us think anew — for a peaceful, progressive and prosperous Kashmir.

