

Kashmiri Self-Determination Focus of Stanford Symposium

By **SHALINI K. NARANG**
Special to India-West

STANFORD, Calif. — Beginning with a recap of the conflict-ridden history of Kashmir, including the long struggle against colonizers dating back to the 16th century to the present day unrest and continuing call for Azadi, intellectuals and academicians came together for a two-day conference on the issue Mar. 5-6 here.

Thomas Blom Hansen, the new director of the Stanford Center of South Asia, opened the symposium titled "Grounding Kashmir: Experience and Everyday Life on Both Sides of the LOC," cosponsored by the Abbasi Program in Islamic Studies at the university.



The movie "Jashn-e-Azadi" by independent filmmaker Sanjay Kak (above) was partially screened at the event.

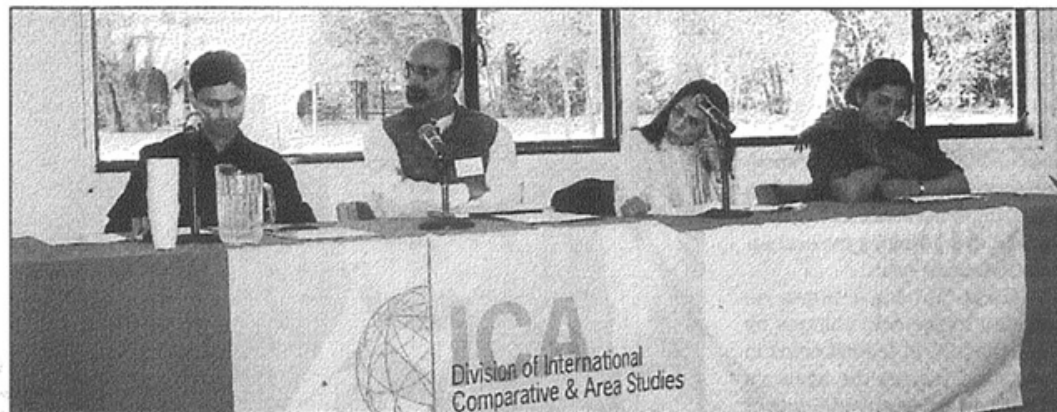
Recognizing that the issue was controversial and emotional, he requested the gathering to handle the discussion with civility.

"There can be no peace in Kashmir if the people of Kashmir are left out. Focus would have to be on human beings and not on territory. Elimination of the deep-seated alienation felt by the people of Kashmir should be the priority of the Indian government," said Ayesha Jalal, professor of history at Tufts University, in the opening panel.

"The problem in Kashmir is the forcible implication of borders. Prime Minister Manmohan Singh came closer to the mark when he said that while borders cannot be redrawn, they can be made irrelevant. Sovereignty would have to be rethought and reconceptualized...Azadi is very much a state of mind, and a sovereign state of Kashmir can exist within the large framework of India and Pakistan," she added.

"Kashmiri nationalists have made clear that their movement is beyond economic betterment, and their goal is political self-determination. Their movement is for Azadi," said Suvir Kaul, a professor of English at the University of Pennsylvania.

He added that economic imperatives provided by the Indian government have not worked in the Kashmir Valley and consequences of forceful suppression have been disastrous.



Seen at the symposium on "Grounding Kashmir" are (l-r): Aishwary Kumar (panel chair), Suvir Kaul, Ayesha Jalal and Mridu Rai. (Shalini Narang photos)

"Even when the prime minister and the home minister speak about the status of Kashmir being unique in the Indian union and the need for a unique solution, their promises lack purpose and conviction," he added.

The panelists agreed that the Mumbai attacks have further perpetuated anger in the Indian populace against Islamic fundamentalists.

Beyond nationalistic, historic, regional, economic, political and religious issues, Kaul touched on the other important material reasons that Kashmir holds importance for India, including geo-strategic links, hydrocarbon, oil and rare minerals deposits, and most importantly, water resources.

"Respect for modes of self-determination, including those at odds with conventional political

wisdom," is important towards a lasting and peaceful solution to the Valley's seemingly intractable issue, Kaul maintained.

The audience members, many to whom had faced personal losses of home and property in the Kashmir Valley during the peak of the insurgency, vociferously challenged the opinions presented by the panelists.

"Most of the speakers seem to support a separatist point of view. All groups of people have a right to a dignified and prosperous life irrespective of their ethnic and religious point of views. Violence in Kashmir perpetuated in the name of freedom ensures that these basic human rights are denied to all people that have a right to live in the state," said Jeevan Zutshi, an audience member.

Given India's multi ethnic char-

acter, "it is important to point out that supporters of separatism, especially thought leaders, are working against the interests of the people at large. Rather than building a tolerant society on principles of coexistence and prosperity for all. How any states can be carved out and where do you draw the line? Where do interests of people lie—in peace and sustained development or in violence and uncertainty?" he added.

"If academicians cannot see this bottom line, how do you expect ordinary people to see it?" Zutshi asked, generating thunderous applause.

In addition to the panels, the symposium featured the partial screening of the movie "Jashn-e-Azadi" by independent filmmaker Sanjay Kak and a book reading of Basharat Peer's "Curfewed Night."