



OF GARDENS AND GRAVES

Kashmir, Poetry, Politics **SUVIR KAUL**

— PHOTOGRAPHS BY JAVED DAR —

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Suvir Kaul

Photographs: Javed Dar

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Cover art: A woman mourns in front of her house, gutted by fire,
Frislan Pahalgam, November 2012. Photo by Javed Dar.

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Preface

*From History tears learn a slanted understanding
of the human face torn by blood's bulletin of light.*

—AGHA SHAHID ALI, “Of Light”

For the past twenty-five years, unnatural deaths have spoken powerfully of life in Kashmir. One such death occurred on October 29, 2015, when Abu Qasim, the local commander of Lashkar-e-Taiba, an important militant group operating in Kashmir, was killed in an operation conducted jointly by the Indian Army and Jammu and Kashmir Police. Not surprisingly, police spokesmen celebrated the killing of Qasim, the “terrorist,” whom they held responsible for several attacks in Kashmir and for ambushing and killing a specialist counterinsurgency police officer, Altaf Ahmad. Soon after Qasim’s killing, public protests broke out in parts of Kulgam (where he was killed), and in the adjoining South Kashmir districts of Pulwama and Anantnag, as well as in Srinagar, capital of the state of Jammu and Kashmir. Every time a militant is killed by one of the security forces operating in Kashmir, locals who knew him or knew of him take to the streets to protest and to throw stones at the police. This was not unusual—locals have also been known to throw stones to impede the actions of security forces as they battle militants. At funerals for dead militants, mourners gather in the thousands. They join in anti-India slogans as well as slogans that speak of the martyrdom of the dead man and the certainty that such martyrs will bring *azadi*, freedom, to Kashmir.

The death and funeral of Abu Qasim were no different, even though he was not a local, but, according to the police, a Pakistani from Multan. A vast crowd, more than ten thousand people, assembled for his burial in Bugam village. As on other such occasions, when the crowd dispersed, clashes broke out between some of the mourners and the police and

arrests were made. In retaliation against stones thrown at them, members of the security forces damaged cars and smashed the windowpanes of homes in the village (another response that has become routine in Kashmir). What followed however was comparatively unusual, because so beloved was Abu Qasim to people in the area, that after his death different villages competed for the honor of hosting his grave, and once he was buried in Bugam, villagers from Khandaypora attempted to exhume his body for reburial in their village.¹ That is one version of this event. Another tells us that the Khandaypora villagers who attempted the exhumation claimed that Abu Qasim was in fact their relative, a man called Muhammad Yaqoob Hajam who had left the village as a fifteen-year-old to go to Pakistan for weapons training and had since grown, in careful anonymity, into this leader of the Lashkar-e-Taiba.² Meanwhile in Srinagar, the Kashmir High Court Bar Association, uncertain about just how to respond to this confusion about Qasim's origins, but certain about the importance of his death, issued a statement applauding his "sacrifices": "All the members were unanimous in saying that as to whether the slain militant was Abdul Rahman of Multan or Mohammad Yaqoob Hajam of Khandaypora Kulgam, he was true, sincere and dedicated soldier of the ongoing freedom struggle and it will take a lot of time to fill the void created by his death."³

"Terrorist" or "dedicated soldier of the ongoing freedom struggle": this contrast of language and worldview exemplifies one of the key divides that structure contemporary Kashmir. Terms like these have been used across the world for two centuries now to delegitimize or champion non-state actors who fight in the service of their political ideas against state power. They have a particular salience in our moment, given the rise of Islamophobia and of militants who fight in the name of Islam. It is of course impossible to cordon off discussions about Kashmiri politics from these global debates, especially as they affect the way in which tensions between India and Pakistan are articulated. But even as this book will refer to the imbrication of the global and the local, it will argue that the conflict in Kashmir should be understood on its own terms, that is, by focusing squarely on the specificities of its geographical location and its history. While religious difference is of great and continuing consequence in Kashmir, so too is the state's colonial history. The territories that comprise the state were won in battle by the British and sold in 1846 to the Hindu

Dogra ruler of Jammu, Gulab Singh.⁴ The Dogra rulers were particularly exploitative of their impoverished Muslim peasant subjects, whose labor (often unpaid) enabled royal wealth. Muslims were not the only impoverished people in the state, but they were the majority, which meant that their struggles for less exploited lives were put down with the greatest ferocity. The memory of these struggles continues to irrigate Kashmiri Muslim mobilizations against the dominance of non-Kashmiri rulers; these memories are not shared by non-Muslims in the state or indeed by Indians more generally.

It is safe to say that most Indians and some Kashmiris, and certainly the central government in India and the state government in Jammu and Kashmir, hold that a politically misguided and sectarian secessionist movement, aided and armed by Pakistan (this is why Abu Qasim's Pakistani origins are important to them), has torn apart Kashmiri society for the past twenty-five years. Further, it has done incalculable harm to Kashmir's and India's secular identity by causing the fearful exile of the tiny minority of Kashmiri Hindus. In contrast, for many Kashmiris, the majority of them Muslim, their long-term, democratic aspirations for self-determination have been crushed by an illegal occupation, whose edicts are enforced by local collaborators, particularly the politicians elected to state office. For Kashmiri Muslims who believe that their lives should be shared with their coreligionists in the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, the demographic logic that was putatively the basis of drawing borders between the independent nations of India and Pakistan in 1947 should have resulted in large sections, if not all, of the erstwhile princely state of Jammu and Kashmir being incorporated into Pakistan. Others have no wish to be part of Pakistan—for them *azadi* is just that, political independence. And even those Kashmiri Muslims who are content to remain in India believe that the autonomy of their state, enshrined in Article 370 of the Constitution of India, must be respected at all times. The fact that the state now takes its orders not just from the political and civil machinery in New Delhi, but is *de facto* under the control of the Indian army and paramilitary forces, not to mention its intelligence agencies, is seen as a massive erosion of the freedoms guaranteed by the Indian government as the price of Jammu and Kashmir's "accession" to India in October 1947. (I discuss this contentious history in later chapters.)

As this book shows, the violence that has come to define Kashmiri lives is not one that features only armed fighters and the soldiers of the various Indian security forces. Ordinary people have paid an extraordinary price too, targeted occasionally by militants either because they serve the state (this was the case with several Pandits murdered in 1989 and 1990, or Muslims killed then and now) or because their loyalties are considered suspect. But by far the largest number of Kashmiri Muslims have been killed, or caused to disappear, by Indian soldiers and paramilitaries who do not trust them and who, more often than not, treat them as the enemy. For every civilian killed or missing, hundreds more have known the fear that attends the intrusive cordon-and-search operations of the security forces (“crack-down” is now part of the vernacular) or the abrasive actions of the police and paramilitaries at manifold checkpoints in cities or villages. The overwhelming sense of a community under siege grows stronger as these experiences are told and retold, and shared anger and mortification work to confirm political antagonism. For a decade and more now, observers of Kashmir have noted the high incidence of cases of post-traumatic stress disorder; the psychic and affective wounds of war are visible everywhere.⁵

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The essays in this book were written in an effort to come to terms with the state of affairs in Kashmir by reporting both on the embattled condition of Kashmiri lives in recent years and by turning to older histories and political events that have shaped the present. As I explain later, this book was born out of my disquiet with what I, an Indian and a Kashmiri Pandit, saw on the streets of Srinagar and elsewhere in the valley on visits I made to my family home in Srinagar after 2003. The security forces had an intrusive and demanding presence (the level of surveillance waxed and waned over the years, depending on local situations). It was clear that the soldiers did not treat Kashmiris as fellow citizens possessed of civic and political rights. Over the years, even when spokesmen for the Indian Army or the Jammu and Kashmir Police announced that the militancy had been effectively crushed and that only a small number of militants remained, their procedures and actions on the ground continued to be muscular and unyielding. Yes, public protests had led to the removal of some particularly invasive bunkers, but it remained the case that any protest, particularly those that featured young men throwing stones at the paramilitary

and police, would frequently end with a protestor or more killed. Further, as civil rights activists began to put together dossiers of information on those civilians who had been killed in “encounters” or had disappeared in these years, as well as on the masses of unmarked graves that were being identified across the valley and in the border areas, it became clear just how much damage had been done in the name of national security. Worst of all, there was and is no redress available to the families of those who have been arrested and caused to disappear or have been killed. The Armed Forces Special Forces Act (AFSPA) protects soldiers from civilian courts, and trials conducted by the army routinely find their own innocent of the crimes of which they are accused. A Public Safety Act (PSA) allows the police and civilian authorities to imprison people without trial, for six months in the first instance but renewable up to two years, and thousands have been subject to such detention.

In order to understand better all that I was seeing in Kashmir, which was so at odds with my experience of life there before 1989, I also began to read about the history of the princely state of Jammu and Kashmir, particularly during the vexed period of the Partition of British India into the independent nations of Pakistan and India. As a state ruled by an Indian king with treaty relations with the British, Jammu and Kashmir was outside of the purview of the Boundary Commission headed by Sir Cyril Radcliffe, which meant that its Hindu ruler, Hari Singh, would determine the fate of his majority Muslim subjects by deciding whether to join India or Pakistan. Hari Singh seems to have harbored hopes of maintaining an independent kingdom, but his legitimacy had been weakened by domestic protests against his autocratic rule, and when a column of irregulars from Pakistan entered Kashmir and neared Srinagar, Hari Singh signed an instrument of accession to India (in which he gave up authority over defense, foreign affairs, and communications) and fled south. Indian forces flew into Srinagar and fought off the invasion, a battle that led to the first extended border warfare between India and Pakistan. When a United Nations mediated ceasefire was declared on January 1, 1949, the “lines of control” established during the battles between the Indian and Pakistani armies froze into borders. As a consequence, depending on their location, subjects of the erstwhile state were now—*de facto*—citizens of one nation or the other.

Indian Kashmir (which is the area of the state that is the subject of this book) owes its present territory to this military history, but that does not

in itself provide an explanation of the present-day state of affairs there. While I do call attention to some important events in the years after 1949, this book is not an exercise in political history as much as it is an effort to call attention to the political and civic life of Kashmiris after 1989, which is when an armed secessionist movement transformed life irrevocably. The response of the Indian government, particularly when it became clear that these fighters were being trained in and supported by Pakistan, was predictably vigorous, and Kashmir was transformed into an extended encampment for government forces. The security footprint is now huge and unlikely to shrink any time soon. No matter what other, more pacific, attempts either the state or the Indian government make to weld Kashmir to India, it is clear to them that without the use of force, or the ever-present threat of force, Kashmir will spiral out of their control. Thus, these administrators seem to have decided that some degree of violence is necessary to govern Kashmir, which is why they are unlikely to suspend either the AFSPA or PSA or ask the army or paramilitaries to return to their cantonments in the border districts alone. If there is any one lesson that I have learned in writing this book, it is that Kashmir has been effectively militarized, and that we will live with the consequences of that militarization for a long time to come.⁶

.....

In Kashmir today, and by extension, in discussions of Kashmir elsewhere, there is little agreement about such histories of territory and state formation, of cultural and social organization, of religious and confessional practices, and of intercommunity relations. This is scarcely surprising, for there is no discussion of the political present and future in Kashmir that does not offer its own version of the past. Further, the great alienation of Kashmiri Muslims and Pandits (which is what Kashmiri Hindus are called) from each other means that they have generated increasingly partisan accounts of their past and that of their homeland, *Kasheer*, in order to ratify the political divides of the present.⁷ This historiographical divide, if it can be called that, is mirrored in all modes of public conversation: newspapers in Kashmir report events routinely ignored by Indian newspapers, particularly the myriad conflicts between Kashmiris and the security forces, and their editorials take positions that are anathema to the nationalist press in India. Further, these ideological divisions also play out

between the Muslim-majority province of Kashmir and the Hindu-majority province of Jammu, and to some extent across the Muslim-majority districts and the Buddhist-majority areas of Ladakh (the third province of the state of Jammu and Kashmir).

These polarizations have eroded the memory of shared lives, lives lived across confessional differences but fully aware of common reservoirs of cultural memory. Kashmiris—Pandit or Muslim—shared a language, *Koshur* (more widely known as Kashmiri), which differentiated them from Hindus and Muslims elsewhere in the state or indeed in India or in Pakistan. Kashmiri, spoken and written with provincial accents and variations, drew upon both Persian and Sanskrit vocabularies and literary traditions, and its folklore was shared across religious and ethnic divides. Today, even the term used for this supposedly composite culture, *Kashmiriyat*, is discredited as a retrospective illusion disseminated by a state machinery whose task was to cement Muslim Kashmir to Hindu India. Pandits and Muslims, some now argue, shared little: Pandit ideologues claim that they always lived in fear of the majority who forced them into exile from their homes at several points in the past; their Muslim equivalents remember only that Pandits were the henchmen of the aggressively exploitative rule of a Hindu (though non-Kashmiri) ruler. Within Kashmir today, occasional efforts are made to build bridges between Muslims and Pandits, but few have had any success. Polarization, rather than reconciliation, remains the order of the day. The generations who shared lives are aging and dying, and now young Pandits who have grown up outside Kashmir in conditions of forced exile or young Muslims who grow up in Kashmir experiencing the punitive might of the state apparatus find little reason to empathize with one another. In recent years, Pandits have returned to visit Kashmir, particularly the shrines and temples where they once congregated, but many avoid the city neighborhoods or villages they called home. And in spite of sporadic efforts made by the government to enable them to come home, hardly any one has returned.⁸

.....

The essays will show that even as much changes in Kashmir—elections are held, competing political parties replace each other in government, the Indian government announces different initiatives designed to address Kashmiri demands—much, particularly the alienation of the majority

Muslim population, remains the same. If anything, the passage of time has deepened their alienation and conviction that no political or any other kind of justice is available from Indian rulers, their security services, and indeed the Kashmiri political parties that are elected to office in the state or in the Parliament of India. Today as I write, the state government has blocked the Internet, arrested hundreds of people, including the entire leadership of those political parties that stand for independence, and has imposed a massive security operation to allow the Indian prime minister to fly into Srinagar to hold a public rally (an oppositional political rally has been denied permission).⁹ In the past, the government machinery has coerced people into attending official rallies; this occasion is no different.

There is a major difference though, between this state government and those in the past. In December 2014, state elections were held in Jammu and Kashmir, and the People's Democratic Party (PDP) won the highest number of seats, followed by the Hindu-identified Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), and a coalition government between these parties replaced the National Conference-Indian National Congress coalition that had formed the previous government. The PDP had fought the elections by reiterating its commitment to the constitutional provisions that guarantee Jammu and Kashmir a degree of autonomy within India, a commitment that clashed with the stated objective of the BJP to incorporate the state even more firmly into the Union of India. However, the PDP and the BJP managed to work out a common minimum program, and the government was sworn in on March 1, 2015. Some observers saw in this unlikely alliance the chance for innovative solutions to the political problem of Kashmir; they argued that only a Hindu-identified, hard-line "nationalist" government in Delhi, such as that of the BJP and its allies, would be able to risk political capital enough to launch negotiations with the "separatist" politicians of Kashmir and possibly even with Pakistan. These hopes have since been belied. The electoral dominance of the BJP, far from resulting in any form of innovative governance or strategic planning in India, has entrenched their right-wing, Hindu-centric politics, with the result that Indian minorities, particularly Muslims, are even more fearful for their rights. This polarization has, not surprisingly, ossified existent political divides between a Hindu-majority Jammu and a Muslim-majority Kashmir too.

Indian politicians and policy planners as well as their allies in Kashmir insist that the problem of Kashmir is in essence a problem of regional

underdevelopment, to be ameliorated by offering large financial “development packages” to the state. On this visit, the Indian prime minister has announced a grant of \$12 billion. However, in the protests that accompanied his visit, a college student, Gowhar Ahmad Dar, was killed when the paramilitary fired at protestors, his death a reminder to Kashmiris of the besieged state of their lives.¹⁰ The new funds offered by the prime minister—if and when they materialize into projects that improve public services—will not cause too many Kashmiris to change their political aspirations, or indeed their sense that such central assistance comes at the price of a refusal to address their political demands. Quite simply, “Indian” violence has damaged “Kashmiri” lives for too long now for the latter to think of India as a nation committed to development; for them, India is a state that holds their lives hostage to its international and provincial security strategies. Ironically, more money in the system tends only to enhance one of the key paradoxes of Kashmiri life: even as the social compact between India and the state, between the administration and citizens, between Jammu and Kashmir, between Kashmiri Muslims and Pandits, is broken, houses in Kashmiri cities and towns, and now in villages, grow larger and more opulent, as do the shopping malls and stores. Not all Kashmiris share in these spoils, of course, but it is impossible not to notice the contrast between the everyday civic and political vulnerability of ordinary people and the steadily growing wealth and power of the elites who rule them.

.....

This book is far from the first to call attention to the political, cultural, and existential dimensions of the conflict in Kashmir. I have drawn upon the work of historians, journalists, activists, political scientists and others, as I have the less systematic but no less powerful social media postings of scores of Kashmiris who have learned to archive in the moment their experiences, their anger, their insights, and their frustrations. The work of documentary and feature filmmakers, artists, novelists, and poets has borne urgent witness to these times, and I turn to them for inspiration and understanding more than once. Over the last decade and more, it has become clear to observers that no volume of documentation of the suffering of Kashmiris is going to have any substantial impact on policy planners, and that Kashmir is effectively at the mercy of competing Indian and Pakistani

nationalisms, a pawn in their larger geopolitical calculations. This is a recognition more debilitating for a scholar like me than it is for Kashmiris who continue to struggle for their political rights, and it is perhaps this impasse that led me to the project that is a substantial part of this book. I began collecting poems written in Kashmiri by both Muslim and Pandit poets in the conflict years, hoping to find in them a durable record of the intensities of feeling that I experienced each time I spoke to Kashmiris about their lives in these years. In Srinagar or elsewhere, conversations have a habit of trailing off, or rather, ending in quotations of phrases and lines from poems in Kashmiri or Urdu; when description and analysis fail, or founder in the same ruts, it is as if meaning can be conveyed only the allusive, condensed power of the poetic fragment.

Kashmiri is a remarkably idiomatic language, and even the more formal, seemingly “elevated” practices of poetry are enriched by the turns of phrase, evocative images, and startling metaphors of everyday speech. However much poetic voice is the product of studied artifice, it seems not to stray too far from the language of the community. This is what makes it possible to *read* (and this too is a discipline that has to be learned) in the conventions of poetic compression and repetition, in the cadences of phrases and lines, the trauma, vexations, and conflicted political life of a besieged community. And I use the term “community” in the singular, to include both Muslims and Pandits, no matter that Pandit poets and Muslim poets write of divergent experiences, and seemingly at cross purposes. On occasion they do address each other, but even when they do not, theirs is inevitably the dialogic exchange that results from immersion in a common language and literary history. This is the argument that drives the translations and my readings of poems in this book, and mine is, I believe, an intellectual and critical position demanded by our times. I hope readers will recognize that this method of collecting, translating, and reading poems is as much a performance of the politics and desires of this book as are its critiques of the nation-state that are developed in its more prosaic sections.

A word on the photographs: Javed Dar is a news photographer in Srinagar who has over the last decade compiled an astonishing record of life in a conflict zone. His pictures—printed here in black and white—tell powerful stories of people in motion, mobilized in the service of their political aspirations; or moving more quietly, yet always aware of the surveil-

lance that is now routine; or tranquil in moments of contemplation. He records conflict: the police or soldiers in action, or the eerie silences of public spaces cordoned off from civilians and populated only by uniformed men, or civilians and soldiers locked into confrontation. Dar's pictures follow the rhythms of life in Kashmir, with one important proviso: news photographers turn into the eyes, and on video, also the ears, of the community, for they go to places where no others are permitted, and they enable us to see much that official media ignores. In my visits to Srinagar, Dar's pictures served a similarly enabling purpose for me, for there were many days of curfew and street violence where I stayed home but was able to look closely at, and to learn from, the pictures he had taken. I had hoped to use one of Javed's pictures on the cover of this book, but Asad Zaidi and Tarun Bharatiya, the publishers of this book in India were so moved by his portfolio that they decided that these pictures would be a remarkable counterpoint to the poems in this book as well as to the essays. They were right, and I am grateful for their decision and for the insights made available by Dar's photographs.

NOTES

Epigraph from Agha Shahid Ali, "Of Light," in *Call Me Ishmael Tonight*, reprinted in Ali, *The Veiled Suite: The Collected Poems* (New Delhi: Penguin, 2009), 363.

1. "Where Should Abu Qasim Lie Buried? Villagers Clash in Kashmir," *Hindustan Times*, October 31, 2015. Accessed October 31, 2015. <http://www.hindustantimes.com/punjab/where-should-abu-qasim-lie-buried-villagers-clash-in-kashmir/story-67W9TbiFYmHKoGYSCeyw8N.html>.

2. "Khandaypora Family Still Claims Slain LeT Commander." *Kashmir Reader*, October 31, 2015. Accessed on October 31, 2015. <http://www.kashmirreader.com/News/SingleNews?NewsID=336&callto=Top>.

3. "Rahman of Multan or Hajam of Kulgam, Qasim Was 'True Soldier of Freedom Struggle': Bar." *Kashmir Reader*, October 31, 2015. Accessed on October 31, 2015. <http://www.kashmirreader.com/News/SingleNews?NewsID=828&callto=Area>.

4. The Dogra are Rajputs who migrated from Rajasthan and adjoining areas to the plains and hill tracts around Jammu. Dogras, particularly in India, are largely Hindu (most Muslim Dogras or Rajputs live in Pakistan or Azad Kashmir). They speak Dogri, a language that has more in common with Punjabi than with Kashmiri. The British considered them one of the "martial races" of India and recruited them in large numbers into the British Indian Army.

5. There is now a great variety of writing on Kashmir; two very different forms of writing provide a good introduction to the existential circumstances and political history of contemporary Kashmir: Malik Sajad's *Munnu: A Boy From Kashmir* and a special issue

of the journal *Race and Class, Memory and Hope: New Perspectives on the Kashmir Conflict*, ed. Shubh Mathur.

6. The International Peoples' Tribunal on Human Rights and Justice in Indian-Administered Kashmir (IPTK) and the Association of Parents of Disappeared Persons (APDP), two activist Kashmiri human rights groups, have recently released a detailed report on the military footprint in Kashmir and the circles of violence that eddy out of their encampments. *Structures of Violence: The Indian State In Jammu and Kashmir* (Srinagar: Jammu and Kashmir Coalition of Civil Societies, September 2015) is a powerful demonstration and indictment of the varieties of violence that are precipitated in a conflict zone when militaries are allowed to take over land and operate with impunity among civilian populations. Accessed on November 15, 2015. <http://www.jkccs.net/structures-of-violence-the-indian-state-in-jammu-and-kashmir-2/>. Another recent study also comments pointedly on the army's "land grabs" in Kashmir: Peer Ghulam Nabi and Jingzhong Ye, "Of Militarization, Counter-insurgency and Land Grabs in Kashmir," *Economic and Political Weekly* 46–47, November 21, 2015: 58–64.

7. Chitrlekha Zutshi's *Kashmir's Contested Pasts: Narratives, Sacred Geographies, and the Historical Imagination* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2014), is a sustained and convincing investigation into traditions of historiography and popular belief in Kashmir. The power of Zutshi's analysis comes in part from her recognition of the effect the great polarizations of the present have had in generating discordant accounts of Kashmiri history.

8. Amit Anand Choudhary, "Only 1 Pandit Family Returned to Valley in 25 Years." *Times of India*, Nov. 1, 2015. Accessed on November 2, 2015. <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/Only-1-Pandit-family-returned-to-Valley-in-25-years/articleshow/49613620.cms>.

9. Mudasir Ahmad, "Massive Crackdown in Kashmir to Guarantee 'Peaceful' Modi Visit." *The Wire*, November 6, 2015. Accessed on November 6, 2015. <http://thewire.in/2015/11/06/massive-crackdown-in-kashmir-to-guarantee-peaceful-modi-visit-14890/>.

10. Aijaz Hussain, "1 Dead in Kashmir Protest as India's Leader Promises Aid." *AP News*. November 7, 2015. Accessed on November 7, 2015. <http://bigstory.ap.org/article/a579f72b1f34bdc9773cf4b41923ec9/indian-kashmir-high-alert-prime-minister-modis-visit>.

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PERMISSIONS

Sections of chapter 1 were first published in *The Telegraph* (Calcutta) on September 1, 2003 (“Srinagar, Four Years Later”) and in *Outlook* on September 3, 2008 (“Kashmir’s Sea of Stories”) and August 6, 2010 (“Days in Srinagar”). The last chapter was republished as “Diary of a Summer” in *Until My Freedom Has Come: The New Intifada in Kashmir*, ed. Sanjay Kak (New Delhi: Penguin, 2011, 17–30; Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2013) and elements of the first two chapters were part of “Two Lives, One Home,” in a special issue edited by Ira Pande of the *India International Center Quarterly* 37: 3&4 (2011), 186–197, and reprinted by Pande in her *A Tangled Web: Jammu and Kashmir* (New Delhi: HarperCollins India, 2011).

A version of chapter 2 was published as “An’ You will Fight, Till the Death of It. . . : Past and Present in the Challenge of Kashmir,” in *Social Research* 78:1 (2011), 173–202 and reprinted in *India’s World: The Politics of Creativity In a Globalized Society*, eds. Arjun Appadurai and Arien Mack (New Delhi: Rupa Books, 2012), 161–189.

Sections of chapter 3 and the coda were first published as “A Time without Soldiers: Writing about Kashmir Today,” in *Historical Reflections/Reflexions Historiques* 38:2 (2012), 71–82.

A version of chapter 4 was first published as “Indian Empire (and the Case of Kashmir),” in *Economic and Political Weekly* 47:13 (March 26–April 1, 2011), 66–75.

The author has obtained permissions to reprint and translate poems by all but two of the poets in this volume. The author has not been successful in his efforts to reach them, and we welcome correspondence about this matter from either the poets or their representatives.



Aerial view | Srinagar, August 2011



A house is blown up by government soldiers during a gun battle with militants |
Batpora Kulgam, January 2008

Introduction

This volume is based upon essays written over the last decade in an effort to come to terms with what I have seen and felt during yearly visits to Kashmir. In 2003, after a gap of eight years, my parents resumed living in our family home in Srinagar. My father's professional life as a metallurgist had taken him to Bengal and Bihar, but once he retired in 1980, my parents moved to the home my grandfather built in the 1920s. Like some others who thought of Kashmir as home, they were able to afford a flat in Delhi, where they planned to spend the winter months. They followed that pattern for a few years; in 1989, as in earlier years, they moved to Delhi in November. But that winter Srinagar, and Kashmir more generally, altered unimaginably, and though my father made short trips in the next three years to see how our home fared, the grim situation in the city and the breakdown of civil life meant that they were now forced to live in Delhi throughout the year.

They were of course fortunate: most other Pandits, the Kashmiri Hindus who left Kashmir in 1990 and in subsequent years did not have alternate homes. They were cast adrift, as were the Kashmiri Muslim families who also moved because they feared life in the valley or the higher towns and villages. The Pandits suffered in refugee camps in Jammu and other cities in India; they, and those who had access to other accommodation, began to rebuild life outside Kashmir. Initially few thought that their displacement would last long. They expected that once matters stabilized in Kashmir they would return to their own homes, neighborhoods and communities and resume their occupations. But as the months, and then years,

dragged on, it became clear that the war-like situation that existed in the valley and in the other districts of Kashmir was not conducive to going home. The decade of the 1990s was marked by constant firefights between the security forces and armed militants fighting for independence, and as the security presence became pervasive and intrusive, civilian lives were inevitably drawn into and disfigured by violence.

Kashmiris suffered outside Kashmir, as they did within: not identically, and not at all for the same reasons. These years drove a huge rift between Muslims, the overwhelming majority in Kashmir, and the Pandits. Whether or not particular Muslim communities or individuals supported the struggle for independence—and there were many who did not—they were at the receiving end of muscular, even brutal methods of policing. As the word “crackdown” became part of the Kashmiri vernacular, Muslim alienation from India increased. The more it became clear that the *tehrreek* (movement) was not a simple matter of Pakistan-sponsored *jihadis*, the less Pandits could imagine a place for themselves in Kashmir. Their politics hardened too, and some among them demanded a new homeland carved out of parts of the state of Jammu and Kashmir, one that would be a Hindu-majority province. Another decade rolled painfully by: the largest majority of Kashmiri Pandits rebuilt their lives elsewhere, their language and cultural norms now deterritorialized and in danger of dissolution. In Kashmir, the power of the military, paramilitary, and police decimated the armed *tehrreekis* till only a few hundred remained; in the process thousands of Kashmiris disappeared and many were arrested and held without charge. When they were released, they brought news of torture and the maiming of those incarcerated. Few Kashmiris had any trouble believing these stories. In village upon village, in city neighborhoods, civilians were routinely treated by security forces not as Indian citizens with rights but as the enemy, or at least as aiding and abetting the enemy.

This is not a world that—quite literally—could be imagined in the years when I was growing up. I lived in Bengal but with a strong sense that home was in Kashmir, where both sets of my grandparents lived, and where we spent extended summers each year. Ours was a largely Pandit neighborhood, but my grandparents and other relatives had, not surprisingly, many Muslim friends and colleagues, and they came and went from our home. When the first Muslim family moved into a neighboring house, my grandfather welcomed the family, and said that he was glad

good people had come to live two houses away. (I have often felt that it was a blessing that both my grandfathers, and one of my grandmothers, passed away before 1990—they had lived within a composite society, and would not have been able to comprehend the speed and the ugliness with which their world was ripped apart.) Our aunts and cousins who lived in Srinagar had studied and taught with their Muslim colleagues; for them, confessional differences mattered little or nothing, and that is the world I visited and enjoyed. Were there tensions? I am sure there were, and now my reading has taught me about signal instances of riots and occasional violence going back to 1931, but in the years when I was growing up there was no polarization or systemic separation in everyday life. On the contrary, Kashmir seemed largely free of the communal riots that periodically scarred other parts of India.¹

The essays that have been rewritten into chapters in this volume were written at periodic intervals in response to all that I saw and heard in Kashmir, particularly in Srinagar. Being there—simultaneously an outsider and an insider—was deeply disturbing, for the signs of people’s suffering were obvious. I was struck by the tone in which so many people described their experiences: even as they talked of enormities of one kind or the other—deaths, beatings, extortion, more everyday forms of humiliation—they did so in matter-of-fact terms. Some had stories of renegade militants to tell, and the ugly demands that they made on the civilian population; most spoke of their treatment at the hands of the men in Indian uniforms. Few would reveal their political beliefs, at least not till they learnt to trust you, and trust was hard to come by in Kashmir. There had been too many betrayals, often by those in positions of power, but also within communities and neighborhoods. In any case life was a strange, even schizophrenic, mix of political and civil administration and the ever-present security forces, and people had learned to fear the actions of both. But fear did not mean that they conformed; on the contrary, they remained quick to come out on to the streets, to challenge the government in speech and act, to mourn and celebrate their dead, including those who died fighting the police and the military.

Over these years, putatively democratic elections have been held and elected governments put in place, but their legitimacy and authority is limited by the power of other political groupings (such as the All Parties Hurriyat Conference²) and the myriad Indian security forces. At the same

time, the gaps between democratic governance and everyday life, and the constant, wearying friction between the security-state and the civilian population, have become increasingly visible to even casual observers. This is the case even when things are much calmer, with substantial increases in tourist traffic, including the religious tourists who throng to the Amarnath Yatra. Such outsiders flood through, have a very good time, interact productively with Kashmiris, and go their way, remarking on the “normalcy” in Kashmir, but resentment against and resistance to India and Indian power constantly simmer and occasionally explode. This is the situation today too, and it is unlikely that much will change in the near future.³

Given the paucity of detailed and analytical national coverage of life in Kashmir in the 1990s, it is possible to understand why people outside Kashmir had not quite grasped all that had happened there—which is a complaint made both by Kashmiri Pandits and Kashmiri Muslims. In the 2000s, however, it became impossible to ignore events in Kashmir—you had to look away not to notice. The mushrooming of the internet meant that hundreds of video clips, taken by amateurs, documented events ranging from firefights between militants and paramilitaries, to political protests, including battles between stone-throwing young men and the police, to funeral processions in which the wails of sorrow and anger were interspersed with slogans demanding *azadi* (freedom). Reports from Kashmiri and international human rights groups documented the routine suspension of civil rights in this heavily militarized zone, as did Sanjay Kak’s *Jashn-e-Azadi* (2007). A new generation of Kashmiris—those who had grown up in the “conflict years”—now called attention to their lives, and their testimonials, their reportage, and their creative work made clear just how much loss and sorrow had defined their lives, whether in Kashmir or outside, in Kashmiri villages or in camps in Jammu. The Indian central government produced its own documents as official “interlocutors” and unofficial mediators wandered in and out, but their recommendations too were quietly ignored.

I began writing on Kashmir, as I said before, to try and understand why Kashmir had erupted with the ferocity that it did, and why it has turned into an intractable problem for Indian democracy. This meant reading about the history of Jammu and Kashmir, for like most Indians (or indeed Kashmiris) of my generation, little of that complicated history,

particularly of the Maharaja's accession to India, had been any more than a set of fuzzy tales for me, and until 1990 there had been no real reason to revisit them. In these years, of course, academics and journalists have written on Kashmir, most often in the language of international relations, political science, or public policy (some of the more compelling volumes and essays are footnoted in the chapters that follow). Convincing as such analyses and prognoses might be, they often have too little sense of the texture of people's lives and experiences, which are surely central to their political feelings and aspirations. These chapters, on the other hand, have been motivated by what I experienced and by the conversations I had with people in and outside Kashmir. Of course, even as I reacted to events on the ground I also felt impelled to understand them within a longer historical framework. In particular, I came to believe that the historical analysis of the making of modern nation-states in the moment of European colonialism might offer crucial insights into the formation and practices of a post-colonial nation-state like India (see the last chapter, "Indian Empire [and the case of Kashmir]").

In other chapters I explore elements in the history of Jammu and Kashmir that I came to think had particular bearing on the contemporary conflict. In each case my reading in the past was motivated by events in the present, and often by the despairing sense that not much was getting better in Kashmir. Yes, tourism was up and militancy was down, but there seemed to be no shifting in the political imagination of the Indian state, Indian political parties, or indeed institutions and politicians in Jammu and Kashmir. Years passed, one form of violence was repressed only for another to take its place, interludes of peace were punctured by periods of intense civic unrest—the more things changed the more they seemed the same. How then to represent more fully, with its felt intensities, the political feelings that flooded through Kashmiri lives and conversations?

.....

My enquiries into life in Kashmir also drew upon the questions I explore in my professional life as a teacher and critic of literature, particularly of poetry. In every context I know, and certainly in contemporary Kashmir, poetry offers a rich archive of heightened feelings and desires. Simply put, poems have something important to tell us about lives lived

in the face of extraordinary political disruptions and violence. Political debates, policy prescriptions, and historical analyses are of course crucial to understanding a situation as vexed and complicated as that which exists in Kashmir, but there has to be space, and analytical utility, for the evidence contained in cultural production. Here is an example: one of the first poems I read, “Corpse” by Shabir “Azar,” struck me as a remarkable instance of the power with which a poem can perform disordered subjectivity, but more particularly, subjectivity cleaved and reconsolidated by recurrent violence. I quote it here:

In the mirror of that lake,
what should I see . . . ?

from its depths
that stranger-like corpse
stares

I have often
thrown a stone—
I wished to smash that mirror

ripples formed, spread, dissipated

and

at the furthest reaches of the silent lake
the same corpse kept staring

the corpse!

as if it would steal
my musings today . . . !
or
fold the imprint of my future
into the vastness of the lake!

Why should I pick up a stone
and smash this mirror

if the corpse
is in the lake

the lake too
is in the corpse

or
both are locked in drops of
water . . . !⁴

This is a quiet poem, calm and meditative (“reflective,” to use the idiom of the poem), which makes its internal movement even more compelling and powerful. From the opening of the poem, in which the poet-figure seeks to commune with nature (such moments are a recurrent feature of Kashmiri landscape poetry) but finds in the lake not placid beauty but the floating corpse, to its conclusion, which makes clear that nature (the lake) is itself now transfigured by death, this poem by Shabir “Azar” is an exercise in rewriting poetic expectations. It makes clear that one of the primal characteristics of Kashmir’s natural beauty, its lakes, which have long been seen as spaces of rejuvenation, as mirrors in which the thoughtful self can find spiritual and aesthetic renewal, now provide perverse lessons in the power of violent, anonymous death to reconfigure the relation between the self and nature, and thus, the nature of selfhood itself.

Here, the mirror-surface of the lake reflects not the poet’s face or indeed the natural features that surround the lake but reveal, surfacing from its depths, a “stranger-like corpse” that stares back at the poet. Whose is the corpse? Not that of a stranger, which word would suggest the poet’s certainty that he does not know the dead person. The corpse is “stranger-like,” which emphasizes the poet’s uneasiness about whether or not this corpse is identified or even identifiable, and allows for the fear that the corpse might, after all, not be that of a stranger. Unknown and yet perhaps familiar? Anonymous, but perhaps not quite so? This combination of unknowing and potential recognition is unnerving, and the next three lines delineate the poet’s discomfort: “I have often/thrown a stone—/I wished to smash that mirror.” The mirror-lake reflects not the poet’s pensive isolation but reveals his uncanny double, the corpse. The corpse’s presence is insistent, implacable, and the poet seeks to disrupt it—he throws a stone to break the lake’s surface, but as its ripples swell and dissipate, the corpse stares still, even at those edges where the ripples die into silence. No gesture of disavowal, however violent, will prevent the corpse from staring

back at the poet, for the corpse is the only image that appears in this watery mirror.

In this unfortunate mirroring, poetic subjectivity is reconfigured. For the corpse is not an inert presence, but possesses a violent agency that violates the poet's hoped for communion with nature:

the corpse!
as if it would steal
my musings today . . . !
or
fold the imprint of my future
into the vastness of the lake!

The corpse is a threat and a challenge to the poet. It allows no peaceful resolution, no immersion in nature that is not also an immersion into the political implications of such a sight. The corpse has the power to steal the poet's present, to direct his thoughts, but also, even more forcefully, to imprison the poet's future into a common watery vastness. This is the moment of recognition then, the turn in the poem where the poet recognizes that his future might well be no different from the corpse's present, and that the Kashmiri lake in which the corpse now floats may well contain his end too. In this uncanny, unwelcome communion between poet and "stranger-like" corpse lies community.

This forced recognition changes the poet's awareness. He repudiates his past desire to break free of the mirror in whose surface he finds only death and disquiet. The question he now asks, "why should I pick up a stone/ and smash this mirror," is a prelude to a statement that understands that Kashmir, its lakes, its beauty, its people, have been reconfigured by violence. No one stands apart:

if the corpse
is in the lake
the lake too
is in the corpse
or
both are locked in drops of water . . . !

In this dispensation, the corpse and the lake, that is, unnatural death and natural beauty in Kashmir, inform each other. For a poet, the contemplation of nature that once yielded pastoral poetry and perhaps philosophical reflection now forces this political insight. There is recognition, and sad acceptance, for this is the lesson contained and reiterated even in the finished perfection of drops of water.

The witness offered by a poem like this is also the reason I began collecting poems written in Kashmiri during these years of conflict, a selection of which I, working in close collaboration with others, have translated here. I hope they will allow the reader to see that the power of a poet speaking to and for Kashmiris interrogates not only official accounts of Kashmir and Kashmiris, but often, the decisions and desires of Kashmiris themselves. To this end, two chapters discuss poems that channel public anger or document public hope, and a third reflects upon the capacity of poetry to thicken and complicate our understanding of the political and personal trauma that has marked the last two decades of life in Kashmir.

These poems are not offered as representative of the enormous volumes of poetry being written and sung in these years. I chose them because each of them engages, in direct or mediated ways, with the conflict. There are many more: this is a selection, and, like any selection, limited. While many of Kashmir's best-known poets write in Urdu ("Corpse" is the only Urdu poem included here) I decided to focus on poems written in the vernacular (Kashmiri) rather than in the official tongue (Urdu). Kashmiri possesses an intimacy of idiom, a fusion of the colloquial and the literary, that I found particularly attractive. I have learned enormously from these poems, and it is in that spirit that I offer them to readers. These are the voices that linger after political debates are exhausted and after the shots have been fired and bodies broken. They speak of loss, of anger, of betrayal and compromise, of the ugliness of this time, but even at their most distraught, lines and phrases in them haunt and move as they look toward a future more egalitarian, more democratic, and more humane, than the past and the present. We will do well to read, and to listen.

.....

A word on these translations: attempting them might have been a quixotic enterprise simply because my Kashmiri is poor, and while I can

(slowly and laboriously!) read *nasta'liq*, the Perso-Arabic script used for Urdu and Kashmiri, the extra vowel markers used in the latter represent a challenge. The quixotic became real because of an extraordinary group of collaborators whose expertise and willingness made possible these translations: Nasir Hussain, who did much of the early work of collection and transcription and joined me in initial translations. (He found many of these poems in *Sheeraza*, the Kashmiri literary magazine published by the Jammu and Kashmir Academy of Art, Culture, and Languages—it still remains surprising to me that an “official” journal published, without any editorial comment, so many poems of protest, anger, mourning, and loss). Aijaz Hussain, Parvaiz Bukhari, Arif Ayaz Parrey, Fayaz Ahmed Dar, Idrees Kanth, Gowhar Fazili, and Inder Salim went over drafts, in some cases more than once. Members of my family pitched in: Usha Kak, Urvi Puri, and Kaushalya Kaul clarified for me the register of phrases and images as they ranged from the demotic to the literary. Many thanks to each of them. At a crucial moment, Suvaïd Yaseen put his shoulder to this wheel and moved along a stuck cart, including by calling on his father’s expertise! Finally, I was lucky to be in touch with Arvind Gigoo, professor and translator of poetry, whose selfless generosity and kindness to someone he has never met brought these translations to a finish.

Arif Ayaz Parrey transliterated Kashmiri poems into Roman, a difficult task, and one for which I am especially grateful.

Sadaf Munshi took time off from her own work to read with great care the transliteration and translations. She corrected errors, recommended changes, and alerted me to inappropriate turns of phrase. My gratitude for her commitment to this project. I have similar thanks to offer to Ather Zia, anthropologist and poet, for her editorial expertise.

I should say that these acts of collaboration made these poems come alive in ways that I could not anticipate. It is no exaggeration to say that these conversations allowed me to enter into the intellectual and emotional life of Kashmir in ways that were otherwise not feasible. Read, talk, and discuss, that is what we did: Why would the poet choose to write a particular form or indeed swerve away from its expectations? Why would she choose this or the other startling image or turn of phrase? What do these poems tell us about the ways in which conflict and suffering have been imagined? Answering these and ancillary questions led us into intense and sometimes very personal accounts of life under pressure. The

poems did their work and more as they demanded of us a full engagement with their claims and effects.

But that is not all: once I began to reach out to poets to ask their permission to translate and publish their work, I was not prepared for the outpouring of affection that greeted me. Rather than listen to my thanks, so many poets thanked me, and I was reminded of the passion with which they mourn the shared culture of *Kashmiriyat*. I will quote only one of them: “Thanks a lot for your love towards my poetry. It must be our common pain which I have attempted to describe in my mother tongue,” wrote Zahid Mukhtar *sahib*. That is the power of the poet, to remind even those who have only partial access to a shared tongue that it is a common pain that is spoken, that political and religious divides must not be allowed to sunder a common heritage. To all of these poets—eloquent spokespeople of a calamitous time—I offer my gratitude, and my hope that their work will continue to speak powerfully to all those who suffer and strive for better times.

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Some readers will notice that the title of this volume derives from a phrase in Oliver Goldsmith’s poem *The Deserted Village* (1770). Goldsmith wrote this poem to protest the dispossession of rural communities in Ireland and England by wealthy landowners who developed their country estates and manor houses by enclosing village commons and other agricultural lands. “The country blooms—a garden, and a grave,” wrote Goldsmith, the alliteration emphasizing his desperate plea for public attention. For very different reasons, that dispossession is true of Kashmir today, blooming as it is with gardens and graves.

NOTES

1. For a moving account of shared lives in Kashmir, see Raina 2014.
2. The All Parties Hurriyat Conference is the umbrella organization for “separatist” political parties; they are however not united in their understanding of the territorial aims, political methods or even religious motivations of the *tebreek* and have, since the formation of the Conference in 1993, split into three factions (the most recent split took place in January 2014).
3. In early September 2014, shortly before this book went into production, terrible floods wrecked communities and towns in the Kashmir valley, including Srinagar. The civilian administration collapsed, and rescue efforts were mounted by the armed forces,

which possess both the manpower and the technological resources to deal with such calamity, and by local groups of volunteers and neighbors who helped one another with whatever resources they had at hand. As ferocious as the floodwaters themselves were the political polarizations that became visible immediately. In remarkably ugly demonstrations of predatory nationalism, news anchors from Delhi swooped down on vulnerable Kashmiris to demand that they avow their debt to the soldiers who rescued them, weren't they glad for the army now, they asked? In quick response, locals pointed out that the soldiers were only following orders, as they did when they acted against Kashmiri civilians, and that in any case the army had first evacuated the well-connected and the powerful, and only then had turned their attention to others. As I noted earlier, Kashmiri disenchantment with Indian power, and Indian resentment of Kashmiri "ingratitude," remain close to the surface.

4. Original in Urdu. Published in *Kashmir Uzma* (weekly, published from Srinagar), December 20–26, 2004.