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The Quiet Pluralism of Kashmir's Sikhs

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Kashmiri Sikhs, who are less than 2% of the Valley's population, sustain a quiet pluralism through shared language, ritual, and neighbourly proximity. This fragile coexistence is being hollowed out by targeted violence, political invisibility, and the slow migration of those who remain.

On a winter afternoon in Tral, the light fades early, settling into the dust that hangs along the roadside. A Sikh shopkeeper lowers his shutter halfway, the metal rattling before it catches. Inside, the room is narrow, lined with sacks of rice and tins of oil stacked to the ceiling. A kettle hisses on a small stove in the corner.

Two men step in without knocking, brushing the cold from their *pherans* (woolen gowns). Both are Muslim, from the neighbouring houses. One leans against the counter. The other crouches near the stove, stretching his hands toward the heat.

"*Singh Shaaba, chai chethwa ke na.*" Singh Sahib, did you have your tea or not?

The shopkeeper looks up, half-smiling. "*Walaaz, Dar saub, chai cha garkaan, tul glass tre, phir sarasan khatir.*" Come, Dar Sahib, the tea is still boiling, take three glasses, pour for everyone.

There is no pause, no adjustment. The talk drifts. Apples did not fetch a good price that year. Someone mentions a wedding in a neighbouring village. There is a brief reference to an encounter the previous night, a road closed, a rumour of arrests. It surfaces, then slips out of the conversation. Outside, a motorbike passes. Inside, the kettle is refilled. The shutter remains half down.

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Nothing in this scene asks to be noticed. And yet it is in such unmarked moments that a certain kind of life in Kashmir continues. The prevailing accounts of the region move between insurgency and counterinsurgency, the long shadow of India-Pakistan rivalry, and the displacement of Kashmiri Pandits. These are real histories of violence and loss. But they organise attention in particular ways, drawing the eye towards moments when relations collapse, when communities separate. What disappears from view are ways of life that never rise to the level of crisis.

It is within this gap that the Kashmiri Sikhs come into view. A micro-minority of less than 2% of the Valley's population, scattered across Baramulla, Srinagar, Anantnag, Pulwama, and Budgam, they live in small clusters alongside a much larger Muslim population, often separated by little more than a shared lane or a low wall. They run shops, cultivate land, and drive transport routes. Their lives are organised through proximity, not enclaves. And it is from within that proximity, in its repetitions and its fragilities, that a different view of Kashmir's social life becomes available.

Roots in the Valley

One of the more stubborn misconceptions about Kashmiri Sikhs is that they arrived with Ranjit Singh's armies. They did not. Their history in the Valley stretches more than 500 years, intertwined with the Rishi tradition of syncretic mysticism that shaped Kashmiri spiritual life long before the political borders hardened. Guru Nanak Dev, Guru Hargobind, and Guru Gobind Singh all visited the region and established spiritual centres that drew from, and fed back into, that local tradition. Walk past the Chatti Padshahi gurudwara in Srinagar and you will find Kashmiri Muslim families paying their respects alongside Sikh devotees. The Kashmiri Sikhs speak Koshur at home. They cook *haakh* (leafy greens) and *dum aloo* (spiced potatoes). They are, in their own telling, of the place.

The period of Sikh rule from 1819 to 1846 complicates the picture. Some accounts point to administrative order; others to the disenfranchisement of a Muslim majority under a non-Muslim elite.

After the Dogras took power, Sikhs and Pandits held bureaucratic posts and vast *jagirs* (feudal estates) while the Muslim majority laboured as tillers for a minority landowning class. Sheikh Abdullah's 1952 land reforms broke that structure apart. Land passed to Muslim peasants. Sikhs had to reinvent themselves in trade, transport, and government service. That reinvention was painful. It was also

the beginning of a new economic intimacy with the Muslim majority, one born of shared marketplaces and mutual need.

Wound and Wager

The 1947 Partition was a catastrophe for the community. During the Kabali raids, tribal militias from Pakistan and Afghanistan poured into the Valley. An estimated 33,000 Sikhs were killed in weeks. The violence arrived during the harvest. Paddy fields ready for cutting became sites of arson and massacre. Survivors recall the smell of burning grain mixed with something worse.

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They also recall fighting alongside Muslim volunteers to defend Srinagar, a memory that binds the two communities in ways that are hard to articulate and impossible to forget. In the collective telling, this is the founding wound: violence on an almost annihilatory scale, met with a stubborn, anguished refusal to leave. The dead were mourned. The living stayed.

That refusal resurfaced in the 1990s, when the Pandit community largely departed. The Sikhs, for the most part, did not. Property mattered. Ancestral ties mattered. But something less tangible was also at work: a conviction that the spiritual and historical bonds to the land should not be severed by violence from outside.

By remaining, the Sikhs entered an implicit compact with their Muslim neighbours, a signal of trust that went beyond the communal rhetoric swirling around them. Scholars have called this an "ethics of staying". Staying was not passivity. It was a wager on the local social fabric, placed with full knowledge that the fabric could tear.

My Neighbourhood

In my native village, Kundi, in Budgam district, only one Sikh family remains. The others have, over the years, moved to the city, their houses now locked or slowly falling into disrepair. The village itself is otherwise entirely Muslim, the homes gathered close, their courtyards running into one another without clear boundary.

One evening, an older man in the Sikh household falls ill. By the time a vehicle is arranged to take him to the hospital in town, two men from the adjoining house have already stepped in. One brings a *kangri* (portable brazier), placing it near his feet. The other moves through the kitchen without asking, lighting the stove, setting water to boil.

During periods of active militancy or prolonged curfew, Muslim neighbours have historically shared intelligence about safe passage, stored valuables, and ensured that Sikh families had access to food and medicine.

"Why are you worrying, we're here," one of them says, almost in passing. The family does not respond with thanks. The work moves ahead without commentary: blankets gathered, a shawl wrapped, someone sent to call for transport. Later, when the house empties out, a neighbour returns to lock the outer gate. In the morning, another comes by with bread.

No one marks these visits as assistance. They exist within the expectation of what it means to live next to one another.

This is the informal architecture of the mohalla. During periods of active militancy or prolonged curfew, Muslim neighbours have historically shared intelligence about safe passage, stored valuables, and ensured that Sikh families had access to food and medicine. None of this is formalised. It is carried in memory, in habit, grounded in a shared sense of *Kashmiriyat* (the state's traditional secular-syncretic culture), a word politically contested to the point of exhaustion but still functioning, at street level, as a way of recognising the person across the fence as kin.

Our Market

At a fruit *mandi* (market) on the outskirts of Shopian, the day begins before the light settles. Trucks line the road, their backs open, crates of apples stacked high and covered in tarpaulin. Men move between them, calling out rates, lifting, weighing, arguing over small differences that carry weight over a season.

Among them is a Sikh transporter, known simply as Singh to most of the traders. His truck runs a regular route, moving fruit out of the district towards Jammu. The orchard owners he works with are almost entirely Muslim, many from nearby villages. Rates are negotiated standing beside the truck, a hand resting on the wooden frame. Payments are sometimes delayed, sometimes advanced, depending on the season, the yield, and the trust built over years of working together.

"Load this first," one of the orchard owners says, pointing to a set of crates set aside from the rest. "The rest can wait till evening." Singh nods, rearranging the order in which the truck will be filled. No agreement is written down. The understanding is born from the repetition of such exchanges, carried across seasons.

By mid-morning, the truck is nearly full. Someone brings tea in a steel kettle, passing cups around. The conversation shifts briefly: road conditions, a checkpoint further down. Then back to the work at hand.

These arrangements bind people to one another in ways difficult to withdraw from without cost. When hartals shut the economy down, both communities lose equally. The mandi is not a site of interfaith dialogue. It is a site where dialogue is beside the point. What holds is the transaction, the route, the season, and the debt repaid and extended again.

Shared Aesthetic World

A Kashmiri wedding unfolds over several days, the courtyard strung with lights, a tent stretched across the open space. The Sikh family arrives without announcement, stepping into a gathering already in motion. They are greeted easily, folded into the flow. Someone gestures toward a row of chairs. Tea is brought almost immediately.

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"You came late," one of the older men says, half in jest. "Work held us back," comes the reply. They remain through much of the evening. When the time comes for the inner rituals, they do not move forward. No one asks them to. Later, as food is served, plates are passed to them where they sit, food prepared specially for them keeping in mind their religious practices. A younger man insists they take more, placing an extra piece of bread on the plate before moving on.

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This ease has deep roots in a shared aesthetic world. *Wanvun*, choral singing by women, accompanies weddings in Muslim, Sikh, and Pandit households alike. The lyrics invoke Allah in one home and the Gurus in another, but the melodic structure is a shared heritage.

The *wazwan* feast is common to all communities, while in Muslim households it is served on the *tram/trambi* (a large plate where four people sit and eat together), whereas the Sikh families may substitute *jhatka* (quick-slaughtered) meat or go vegetarian, serving in individual plates.

The *wuri*, a mud-and-brick oven built in the backyard for a feast, belongs to all resident communities; its construction is itself communal, Muslim and Sikh neighbours often help each other with the brick work and in collecting firewood. When the women of a Sikh household sing *geet* (Sikh word for *Wanvun*) and the sound carries across to the Muslim home next door, something is being affirmed that no political settlement or its absence can fully undo.

When the Rhythm Tightens

There are days when the rhythm tightens. News travels quickly, often before it is confirmed: an encounter in a nearby area, a cordon along the road, movement likely restricted by evening. Shops close earlier than usual. People return home before dark.

On one such day, word reaches the Sikh household before it has fully settled in the village. A young man from a neighbouring house steps in, not staying long. "Better you don't go out today," he says, lowering his voice. "Things might turn." There is no elaboration. No questions follow.

By late afternoon, the lane grows quieter. A group of men gather at the entrance to the village, standing without appearing to watch. When an unfamiliar vehicle slows near the cluster of houses, one of them walks towards it, speaks briefly to the driver, and it moves on. Inside, the Sikh household keeps its door closed. A light remains on in the outer room.

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Nothing happens that night. By morning, the place returns to its usual pace. Such moments rarely settle into memory as events. They pass without record, leaving behind only a faint sense of having been held in place.

This is the informal compact at its most effective. It is also, by its nature, contingent. In October 2021, a series of targeted killings struck at the remaining minorities in the Valley, among them Supinder Kour, a Sikh school principal in Srinagar. The assassinations were seen as a deliberate effort to terrorise whatever minority populations remained after the 2019 revocation of Jammu and Kashmir's special status.

Muslim civil society condemned the killings. But many Sikhs and Pandits felt something close to abandonment. Observers described an "eerie silence" from the majority community, shaped by the fear of speaking out under heavy surveillance. For a micro-minority, that silence felt like a failure of neighbourly duty.

The cordon day in the village and the killings in Srinagar belong to different scales of threat, but they test the same thing. A neighbourhood can absorb a tense afternoon. Whether it can absorb an assassination is a different question.

Slow Migration

There was no second exodus in the manner of 1990. What has happened instead is quieter: families leaving the Valley one at a time, often with grief. I call it "slow migration"-an incremental departure with no single decision point, driven by the gradual exhaustion of what endurance can sustain.

The local educational system is perceived as unable to give children a competitive edge beyond the Valley. State protection feels unreliable. Young people watch their peers elsewhere in India settle into careers and raise children without the ambient dread that colours daily life in Kashmir.

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The elders stay committed to their ancestral homes. Their children see things differently. In Kundi, where only one Sikh family remains, the locked houses on the lane tell the story plainly enough. Each departure thins the social fabric further.

The demand for official minority status, long denied despite their microscopic numbers, captures the broader predicament. Before 2019, the region's constitutional arrangement subsumed minority rights under the imperative of protecting the Muslim majority against central overreach. Sikhs fell through the cracks.

Since the abrogation of Article 370, there has been hope that national protections would apply. So far, the community continues to struggle for recognition. The post-2019 dispensation has introduced its own pressures. When governance turns hardline and unitary, it forces communities into rigid categories-loyalist or separatist-with little room for the negotiated identities on which lived pluralism depends.

Communication shutdowns cut directly into the micropolitics of daily life. A minority community that relies on informal neighbourhood bonds cannot function when its members cannot reach each other during a crisis.

What Remains

In the small shop in Tral, the conversation does not resolve anything. It does not bridge histories or soften positions. The men drink their tea, speak of what concerns them, and step back out into the cold. The shutter is lifted. The road fills again.

Pluralism in Kashmir is not an ideological programme. It is a practice, carried in repetition: in the use of a shared language, in the ease of entering and leaving each other's spaces, in the knowledge of how far one can step and where one must pause. It is sustained through the neighbourly watch, the seasonal route, the choral songs that carry across confessional lines into the next courtyard.

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It is also, right now, being hollowed out-by targeted violence, by political invisibility, by the slow cumulative fatigue of a community that has endured too long with too little recognition.

The Kashmiri Sikhs who stayed are not symbols of anything. They are people who made a wager, generation after generation, on the life available to them in the place where they were born. The tea, the mandi, the wedding, the tense afternoon that passes without incident, the locked houses on the lane in Kundi-all of it is the wager being lived out, tested, and carried forward.

What persists is less visible than what breaks: a set of relations held in habit, in speech, in the willingness to step into a neighbour's kitchen without asking. They do not announce themselves. They do not endure unchanged. But they continue, quietly, as part of how life in the Valley is held together. Whether they can bear the weight of all that presses against them is not a question this piece can answer. It is the question the Valley itself is living through.

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