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Kashmir: Loss, Memory and a Shared History

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'Is there something in the shared, yet dissimilar, histories of Kashmiris that might yet contain the hope of a more viable future, with all its challenges and difficulties?'

Shaping of collective memory

Great violence, particularly violence suffered over extended periods, changes individuals and communities. Few are able to distance themselves from, or manage, the massive material, psychic and affective damage that ensues when people find themselves unmoored, that is, when they are removed from the coordinates of their daily existence by forces they cannot confront and combat. Even those who 'recover' (whatever recovery might mean to each individual) know that they are forever marked by their experience of violence. They are not the same as they were before; their place in the world, if indeed they have found their footing again, seems precarious and uncertain. The sense of being at home is lost, forever receding into a diminishing past, a past that denies precise reconstruction.

I begin with these reflections in order to return to the continuing problem of Kashmiri lives lived under duress. All that I have written above applies-differently, to be sure-to Kashmiris, whether they are Muslim or Pandit or Sikh, whether they now live in Kashmir or have shifted to lives elsewhere.

Scholars who study traumatic responses, particularly to mass and sustained political violence, have learned that the symptoms of stress linger long enough to shape new realities. Even when they are repressed, their effects are profound, and they exert a structuring force on the present. As the comfort of largely predictable daily patterns and rituals is lost, as the expectations or hopes that energise lives are dashed, as the ease of traversing familiar terrains is denied, pathologies surface. Everyday anxieties, the struggles of existence, are sharpened to a fever pitch, and fear-not only of the traumatic past, but of the unyielding present and of a deeply uncertain future-becomes the dominant mode in which the world is experienced. Accounts of continuing violation radiate outwards from the individual and the family into the community or even the nation. They form new lateral networks of supposedly shared experience that create or confirm particular affiliations while repudiating others.

In these situations, trauma is mobile and collective, which means that even when different people experience the original violence differently (or perhaps do not have any personal experience of violence), the ripple-effects of trauma link them into shared perceptions of what happened, or might have happened. And trauma can be multi-generational, that is, its anxieties and symptoms can linger and transmit across generations, binding into belonging even those who were not born at the time of rupture.

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Memories recounted in personal stories are the intimate mode in which trauma is transmitted, addressed, and occasionally remedied. But memories shift and change, wither or are revived. I remember, or, after a while, I think I remember, till certainties fall away over time and under the pressures of daily life. When I speak of what I remember, the chances are that I open myself up to correction or emendation: no that's not quite right, someone else might suggest, I was there too, and that is not what happened. As the details of individual stories dim, they are reshaped, or replaced, by elements of compelling stories that circulate amongst those similarly affected. Memories are malleable, and their disruptive effects are partially assuaged when they are merged into consolidated stories that, over time, come to define community trauma.

The particularities of 'this is what happened to me' nest into the seemingly more comforting, 'this is what happened to us,' if only because the collective narrative produces an 'us,' a community of suffering. The specificities of personal history slowly meld into, and find strange comfort in, the solidifying certitudes of community memory. In conversations, in print, in assemblages of visual materials, new certainties are brought into being.

A culture built around loss

Since 1990, most Pandits have left Kashmir (4000 or so continue to live there; others visit on occasion), but it should be no surprise that, given the circumstances that obtain, a great many Muslims have left too. The devastation produced by sustained violence has also restructured the lives of nomadic people like the Gujjars and Bakerwals, whose traditional routes and pastures are being curtailed by those who do not want them in their neighborhoods (particularly in Jammu) or by the military and police in the name of national security (in Kishtwar and Kashmir). Thousands of Kashmiris have died in the conflict waged over the last three decades (and some before then), and the agents of death have, more often than not, been those who act at the behest of the state. Armed *tehreekis* have killed fellow Kashmiris, policemen and soldiers, as well as members of rival *tanzeems*, all in pursuit of their political aspirations. Since 1990, such violence has been *the* inescapable feature of Kashmiri life, and no Kashmiri has been or is exempt from its effects.

Have all suffered identically or even similarly? Of course not, but over the last three decades, no one has escaped the life-altering effects of systematic violence. After the rigged elections of 1987, when candidates of the Muslim United Front were denied their electoral victories (many were arrested too), the thin stream of anti-India feeling turned into a flood. An armed militancy spread across large parts of Kashmir, with young men moving to training camps in Pakistan and returning with arms and ammunition.

Events outside Kashmir played a crucial role in energising the *tehreek*: in early 1989, the Afghan mujahideen forced the Soviet army to leave the country, an exit that was read as a hopeful augury for those who fought in the name of Islam to best state forces much more powerful than them. Benazir Bhutto, then Prime Minister of Pakistan, gave incendiary speeches supporting the right of Kashmiris to secede, and Pakistani intelligence agencies trained and supplied arms to militants. On December 13, 1989, militants from the Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Front successfully negotiated the release of five of their members by kidnapping the Union Home Minister's daughter; a large crowd of Kashmiri Muslims took to the streets to celebrate their release. Both in Srinagar and elsewhere, militants emboldened by these events attacked security forces and individuals who they believed represented the interests of the Indian government. The police, paramilitary, and army fought back, but for a few months they seemed unprepared for the task at hand.

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In these months, targeted killings spread fear more generally. Pandits, a tiny but influential community, felt threatened enough, particularly during the winter of 1989-90, to begin leaving Kashmir. Some left precipitously, believing that living in these circumstances was untenable, others left temporarily to weather what they imagined was an intense period of violence that would surely ebb.

January 19, 1990 is a date many claim as a breaking point, a night of speeches demanding azadi amplified from mosques, accompanied by mass protests on streets, with Muslim protestors shouting anti-Pandit slogans. (As we might imagine, such reports are contested: it is arguable that this date is an example of a "memory" consolidated over time, rather than confirmed in recordings and reports from that moment). In each case, over the next few years, more and more Pandits moved out, sold their properties (not all did so), and sought to reestablish their lives elsewhere. They lived in dismal official camps in Jammu, in tenements in other cities, in homes offered by their relatives, or, if they had the means, in rented apartments.

All this while, particularly in the 1990s, gun battles between the security forces and the militants, frequent "crackdowns" (cordon and search operations), the 'disappearance' of hundreds, then thousands, of people, and a massively intrusive surveillance network, upended Muslim (and as a consequence, all non-Muslim) lives in Kashmir. During this decade, the Indian state treated as enemies not just militants, but the Muslim population at large. That remains the case.

Over two decades, different sections of the population faced massacre after massacre, civilians mowed down by militants or by the security forces, or by the latter disguised as the former, or indeed the former disguised as the latter. Mass killings destroyed communities, but so did the less spectacular but routine deaths and disappearances that followed encounters between the security forces, militants, and civilians.

There were moments when violence seemed to ease, and Kashmiris gathered again, not in demonstrations on city streets, but in parks, in gardens, on riverbanks, to resume the lives they once knew. But too many of them were gone, living and dying elsewhere in difficult, life-constricting circumstances, or were dead, killed in violence close to home. Moments of pleasure were shadowed by the sense of those now gone, and so, over three decades, Kashmir became a culture built around loss and conversations about loss.

We live on, people mused, but we don't know how long or how certainly, and the past holds us in its thrall. Pandits mourned homes and neighbourhoods lost, Muslims mourned lost peace and the pervasive militarisation. Occasionally, they mourned each other, but that

sort of community waned as newer generations grew up without knowing of each other, and of their once intertwined lives. Suspicion and even hatred grew-*all* of you threw out *all* of us, said some; *all* of you left so that the soldiers could destroy *all* of us, said others. And there are internal divides: how is it that you chose to stay on, how is it that you were *allowed* to stay on, when we were forced out, some displaced Pandits ask other Hindus who continue to live in Kashmir? How is it that *your* children are doing well elsewhere, when *ours* were killed or are in jail, ask Muslims of each other? In this climate of mutual suspicion and lack of trust, there are no winners, only survivors-how could it be otherwise?

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Kashmir, as we know, is a territory that is subject to an India-Pakistan rivalry so intense that it has warped both nations ever since they came into being. We cannot feed our people, or take care of them when they are ill, or educate them into functional citizenship, but we spend unconscionable sums of money on militarising inhospitable, metabolism-destroying, border areas, and then, in an inevitable form of mission creep, letting military priorities override developmental needs. In recent years, as a bellicose nationalism, or worse, a commitment to majoritarian supremacy, drives state politics in India and Pakistan, there is no possibility that any form of imaginative, democratic, progressive thinking might allow us to ratchet down our hatred. Nor will such majoritarian aggressiveness allow us to imagine structural solutions to the problem of regional self-determination, even when there are possible resolutions available within the terms of the Constitution.

Quite the reverse: in India we have abrogated a Constitutional provision, Article 370, in order to dismember the erstwhile state of Jammu and Kashmir; disable all political activity, including by mainstream politicians; run the administration by fiat and decree; and to act in ways that further alienate Kashmiris. Hundreds of thousands of soldiers and policemen hold down civilian populations, but the militancy does not vanish-a steady trickle of young men, some previously tortured or threatened by the security services, all motivated by their desire for a homeland free of such domination, take to the gun. Once they do, their lives are short, and many die within weeks or months of turning militant. The others know this, but they still join *tanzeems*, which is an object reminder of the desire and despair that motivates them.

Burden and responsibility

There are many ironies to record: as even casual visitors to Kashmir note, the economy seems robust, and certainly poverty is less visible than in most parts of India. Shopping malls and stores in urban centres rival those in Indian cities, and small towns and villages now boast shops of a kind not visible a generation ago. Hotels are built and refurbished, even though periodic violence, the curtailing of life and the internet by the Indian government after the abrogation of Article 370, and the Covid-19 epidemic, have dampened tourism.

Most striking however are the homes that being built on what were once paddy fields and agricultural land: they are large and ornate, built of concrete and brick with a few design flourishes that remind their owners of the heritage architecture that once defined Kashmir. There are good reasons for such building other than the availability of money: concrete offers protection from fire, high walls from bullets during gunbattles. As in other Indian cities, the paucity of public transport means that cars and diesel-belching buses and vans have turned the streets of Srinagar into an environmental mess. The lack of urban planning has also meant that official buildings, encampments, and homes have been built on flood plains, thus restricting the natural flow of our beautiful lakes and rivers, and the consequences are now clear.

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Srinagar has recovered from the ravages of the flood of 2014, or at least its buildings have. So much more precious was lost: books, artworks, museum holdings, and newspaper archives (and my grandfather's academic library, or what remained of it). But that seems apt for Kashmir-material progress masks the thinning out of the materials of memory, of cultural practices, of the promise of the past.

Schools and college are functioning once again, but ideas are curbed. It is possible to debate Kashmir in Indian universities occasionally, but not in Kashmir. (Don't talk about Kashmir, please, I was asked when invited to give a talk at the university there, so I spoke of Partition literature. What, after all, is the difference?). Every cultural institution seems to have been taken over by anti-intellectual bureaucrats wary of ideas. Jammu and Kashmir might be the only territory where the rituals of Independence Day are

mandated for schools. No joyous volunteerism here, only coerced allegiance. And this is supposed to make things better, and to tutor children into becoming Indian.

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But ideas have ways of escaping imposed limits, and the last two decades have seen an efflorescence of writing, music, rap, painting, drawing, weaving, and performance art amongst Kashmiris, both those in Kashmir and those who live elsewhere. They have so many stories to tell now, stories of dispossession, or exile, of despair, but also of determined survival, of regrouping, of recovery. However, these stories or performances are often partisan, and insist on one point of view, shaping into prejudiced coherence scattered and uneven experiences, denying the possibility of collective experiences, of empathy across religious divides.

But there are others that insist that the only survival is in the renewal of ties, and which attempt to paint into bright visibility shared lives that now exist only in the sepia tones of nostalgia. It is not easy bringing to mind the pain of others when you and yours have suffered greatly, particularly when you believe that those who are not your co-religionists are the cause of your suffering. The language of revenge, or of unpaid debts, comes easily: one way to stabilise community memory is to polarise it against the lives of others to produce a politics of hatred.

This is the burden and the responsibility all Kashmiris share now: they must find ways to revive their lost community, regardless of the political future of Kashmir. But any such revival poses great challenges. Will Pandits acknowledge that their historical prominence accompanied the impoverishment of the majority Muslim population (both phenomena being enabled by Dogra feudalism)? Will Muslims recognise that the tiny size of the Pandit population caused them to feel particularly vulnerable to political turmoil and violence? Most Pandits, particularly after Independence, were so identified with *Hindu* India that they suppressed their Kashmiri identity-but a handful of Pandits held that the Partition process should have resulted in Kashmir becoming part of Pakistan, others that Kashmiri cultural difference from both India and Pakistan should have resulted in independence. Can that diversity of political opinion be restored and even cherished?

Major political parties in the state, whether the National Conference, the Congress, the Peoples Democratic Party, derived their legitimacy from their commitment to secular politics-will they be able to revive those values amongst their members? Or will the idiom of religious belonging, whether Muslim or Hindu, be the primary language of political mobilisation? Can political society be restored within the surveillance and policing structures that have disfigured Kashmiri lives for the last thirty years? These are difficult questions, but they define the past and present, and if their inequities are not addressed, there will be no future of mutuality, coexistence, and democracy.

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At this moment, it seems extremely unlikely that an independent Kashmir will come into existence-neither India or Pakistan will allow that, and democratic possibilities have wilted in the face of military might. It might still be possible, however, to renew a shared culture and language, rich in its interdependencies and crossovers, made vibrant by its historic Muslim warp and Hindu woof (with motifs that originate in Buddhist pathways). This fabric is in tatters now, but its remnants hold lessons of tolerance, coexistence, shared learning.

Of course, what I write here sounds hopelessly utopian, and worse, a form of nostalgic hope that suits those who insist on the status quo, rather than those who act upon the Kashmiri right to self-determination. At this moment, it is hard to imagine alternatives, particularly given that Kashmir will increasingly move to the heart of Hindu supremacist politics in India. The Rashtriya Swayamsewak Sangh is clear that they regard it as territory to be reclaimed for Hindus, and that the political process now underway will attempt to shift demographics to allow for the dominance of a Hindu polity. The Zionist dream of a return to Palestine in order to transform it into Israel is now the model for this sort of militarily enforced Pandit return to Kashmir. No timeline is specified, but the implications are clear.

It is possible that the threat of demographic change is not enforceable, and that its only purpose is to fan the anti-Muslim hatred that is central to Hindutva politics in India. But that is bad enough, and dangerous for all Kashmiri Muslims, both those who live in Kashmir,

or who study, travel, do business, or live in India. And if Pandits participate in this polarisation, and many of them do, they are giving up on any possibility that they will find their way back home, for the hope of a return as part of a militarised convoy, to live in fortified compounds, is not the stuff of dreams but of nightmares.

Can shared history contain the hope of a viable future?

I began this essay with a meditation on the shaping force of memory, of the processes by which individual experiences are collectivised over time. Pandits in exile have offered increasingly homogenised accounts of the timing, form, and reasons for their leaving Kashmir. In doing so, they alienate themselves further from their fellow Kashmiris.

However, the separatism of those who once insisted on the need for a Hindu homeland is now muted as they recognise the implausibility of that demand. Many say that they will resume lives in Kashmir, but few seem able to make the attempt (there are some spectacular counter-instances). More visit each year, particularly to celebrate local religious festivals, and in doing so, renew contact with other Kashmiris. Each time they visit, they recognise that life in Kashmir is curtailed by the security grid, and that nothing will be different for them. Does this recognition change the politics of their return, so to speak, shifting it away from a politics of hate and revenge to a politics of amity and renewal? Will they speak up for the return of democracy, if only as a way of preparing the ground for their going home?

Kashmiri Muslims, as internally differentiated by class and confessional practices as any community, know themselves to be uniformly suspect in the eyes of the Indian security and political establishment. They look forward to a different future, one where men with guns and non-local administrators do not rule their everyday lives, but at this moment they are allowed no leeway to enable the return of democracy. That is, there is now no possibility that pro-India Muslim politicians (and there are many) will be able to act upon their commitment to the constitutional autonomy guaranteed to the erstwhile state of Jammu and Kashmir (and in doing so, attempt to shift the larger polity away from the ideal of self-determination). This is the stalemate that now defines Kashmir.

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In conversations with those they trust, Pandits, Muslims, and Sikhs all identify moments in which they became communities shaped by fear and trauma. Today, Kashmiris and non-Kashmiri seasonal labourers continue to be the targets of militant violence, and that is not likely to change if and when more Pandits return home. Nor will the security footprint ease-if anything, it will become even heavier. It therefore becomes crucial to revive a robust culture of community within which suffering can be shared and blame not assigned vindictively to entire communities. Is there something in the shared, yet dissimilar, histories of Kashmiris that might yet contain the hope of a more viable future, with all its challenges and difficulties?

I hope there is, for the sake of *all* Kashmiris, in Kashmir and elsewhere. It seems clear that the Indian politicians and administrators now in power are not going to act in ways that will enable such community. Ordinary citizens might, if they act with forbearance and forgiveness. Finally, as in other intractable, even impossible situations elsewhere, we hope for alternative visions as we founder in darkness, and this is where we turn to Kashmiri writers and artists and musicians, and indeed filmmakers. They need to produce work that will engage with, and remake, the convictions that now fuel suspicion and mistrust. That task is monumental, and necessary.

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