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Seeking Sanctuary, Remembering Jammu

Cosmopolitan Ethics Outside the Metropolis

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A discussion of the idea of sanctuary for migrants in smaller cities like Jammu, each with a unique history. Based on fieldwork and drawing on memory fragments of a non-metropolitan city, an exploration of how a place like Jammu helps us revisit the cosmopolis

I am trying to remember a scene from a decade ago in the city of Jammu. I remember sitting in a snack shop at Raghunath Bazaar just across the gates of the prominent Raghunath Temple.

1. A Procession

Sipping on lukewarm tea, I watched visitors enter the gates guarded by armed policemen, while others walked by on the road along the temple leading deeper into the bazaar. Tourists walked with a tentative gait, looking around, stopping at shops selling souvenirs, walnuts and, almonds and shawls from Kashmir, searching for a bargain. Others walked with the confidence and the habit of the "local", or had become part of the rhythm of life in town.

What I loved most about the bazaar were the wires that ran across from building to building above the street, festooned with gold and silver ribbons that fluttered with the breeze, providing a sense of another kind of movement of shifting colours. If I remember clearly, this moment took place a few weeks after I had arrived in Jammu in late 2005 to carry out doctoral research in the city. Having spent time settling down and following up on leads for fieldwork, I had decided to take the day off and head to the bazaar in the old part of the city.

Just as I finished my tea I heard a sound. Something like a murmur. The murmur gradually gave way to voices and footsteps, then to words coming together and acquiring rhythm into slogans that got louder and louder. I finished what remained of my tea and left the shop, and stood just outside on the pavement. Further down the road I saw a gathering of men and women in worn khadi marching towards the temple holding banners that proclaimed they are 'West Pakistani refugees', refugees who had come to Jammu from Pakistan after the partition of India in 1947. As they came closer I could hear the slogans more clearly about how they had been denied their *haq* or rights. The procession moved past the shop and the pavement where I and many others stood watching them as they turned at the junction in front of the temple and walked towards Residency Road. Once the tail had left and the slogans slowly receded into the distance, every onlooker broke out of the moment, walking away or returning to a bargain at the shops.

> I realised that there was more to the city of Jammu, especially in its relationship with a world marked by difference and movements of all kinds.

This was but one incident from the time I had spent living in Jammu from 2005-2007. I had come to the city with the purpose of studying the Kashmiri Pandits, the Hindu minority of Kashmir who were displaced from their homes in 1990 with the outbreak of conflict in Kashmir. While my attention lay mainly with the Kashmiri Pandits in Jammu, exploring how they remade their lives after displacement, I have begun to think of other experiences of the city and of other migrants I encountered there. I realised that there was more to the city of Jammu, especially in its relationship with a world marked by difference and movements of all kinds.

Apart from the Pandits, the displaced who relocated to Jammu include Kashmiri Muslims, people from the Pahari or the mountainous region between the plains of Jammu and the Kashmir Valley, and 'the border migrants who come from villages on the border between India and Pakistan where they were caught in the frequent crossfire between Indian and Pakistani military forces. I was also to hear much later about the massacre of Muslims in Jammu during Partition (Snedden 2001).

Other groups of migrants were to be found in the city as well. Many young people from across the state come to Jammu to study in institutions of higher learning or for work. I also encountered labour migrants. Coming from regions such as Bihar and Chhattisgarh, many of these migrants and their families provided cheap labour on which the city's economy depended. There were also older groups

of seasonal labourers from within the state who were visible in Kabuli suits with thick ropes wrapped around their bodies, working as coolies.

Jammu is an unusual city. The historic capital of the Dogra chieftains and kings, Jammu is a city that speaks for a larger region. Since the establishment of the kingdom of Jammu and Kashmir, it has had the unique distinction of being the 'winter capital' of the state, while Srinagar is the 'summer capital'. Since 1847 the official calendar of Jammu and Srinagar is marked by the *durbar* shift when the state administrative authority travels between Srinagar and Jammu. The sense of flow can be felt in other ways. For travellers, Jammu has been a junction town, especially for those travelling to and from Kashmir, the Pahari regions of Poonch, Rajouri and Doda and the pilgrimage destination of Vaishno Mata in Katra. The city is marked by the flow of people and goods passing through. With the conflict in the region, the city is also a transit point for military personnel and material, and other forms of the state's might. This does not mean that the city lacks a sense of settledness. While the region is not as well-known in popular discourse as Kashmir or Ladakh, historians from Jammu point to a long history of chronicles and folklore to present its long presence as a place (For example Charak 2011).

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Jammu as a city constantly struggles to frame its identity as a major political and economic urban space, accommodating migrants as well, as being a place where many claim to have their roots. The city is home to many: Dogras, Paharis, Kashmiris - Hindus and Muslim, Sikhs, Punjabis, Gujjars and Bakerwals. There was even a 'Gurkha' neighbourhood in the city, where the residents are descendants of migrants from Nepal. All these groups have lived side by side through times of violence, discord and times of peace. Most residents are bilingual or even trilingual. This city is not a metropolis but has a history and vocabulary of diversity.

Cities are often imagined to have a quality distinct from a larger landscape. Yet cities have also always been associated with letting those on the move, those travelling and those escaping with no place to go, a chance to be let in or to at least pass through on their journey. In recent years while western nation-states take great pains in keeping migrants out through violent action and rhetoric, it is the city that challenges violence, especially in the emergence of 'sanctuary cities', where migrants of all kinds, particularly those made illegal can be provided shelter and some safeguards against persecution by any state.

The idea of the city as a place of sanctuary is an old one. The expulsion of Jews from Spain following the assertion of Catholic rule in 1492 saw many migrate to cities such as Salonica and elsewhere in the Mediterranean where they flourished. Moving to our time, Jacques Derrida criticises the nation-state as the form that permits the persecution of individuals who become migrants, refugees or asylum seekers. Instead he extols the virtues of 'cities of refuge' that draw on an ethics of hospitality, facilitated by the sense of a city with its own sovereignty and hence able to enact such an ethical system (Derrida 2005: 17-20).

Consequently, cities are imagined as guarantors of the cosmopolitan ethic and diversity. Large metropolises are especially imagined as cosmopolitan, permitting diverse groups to survive and thrive. In India, cities such as Mumbai, Delhi and Kolkata are often identified as cosmopolitan cities, marked by large diverse populations from different places and across ethnic, religious, caste and class lines. Yet the city especially promises a future for migrants seeking to build a new life. This tension is seen significantly in a city like Mumbai where the value of work unites relative natives and new migrants into an ethic of belonging. If we revisit Partition and the bloody birth of India and Pakistan, refugees found sanctuary and future lives in cities such as New Delhi, Kolkata, Dhaka, Lahore and Karachi, though these cities were also sites of significant acts of bloodshed, loss and departure for others.

This is not to presume that metropolitan spaces are kind to migrants. The well-known right-wing nationalist party Shiv Sena built its constituency in Mumbai by blaming the hardships of Marathi speakers in the city on the large waves of migrants from outside, initially from southern India and later northern India, who apparently took away jobs from sons of the soil. Alongside outsiders, the Shiv Sena also privileged attacks on minorities such as Muslims and Dalits. Accounts of migrants from the north-east India reveal incidents of how racism shapes everyday life in cities such as New Delhi.

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The vast majority of migrants often tend to occupy the socio-economic margins of a city and it is only a small proportion of a certain class, usually in high end white collar work, who can enjoy the freedom a cosmopolis has to offer. Nevertheless, as mentioned by a displaced Kashmiri Pandit I had met in New Delhi many years ago: 'Dilli sab ke liye hain (Delhi is for everyone)'.

What of the non-metropolitan world? Smaller towns, sometimes spoken of as *moffusils* are caught in a strange tension. They are seen as inextricably tied to the parochial and the vernacular unlike the metropolitan city. Yet industrial towns like Jameshedpur and Bhilai come to mind, where people of different linguistic groups, castes, religions and ethnicities come together and negotiate difference, violence and inequality (See Parry 1999, 2008, Sanchez 2016). As Pnina Werbner suggests, cosmopolitanism is not just about place or movements, but rather is an 'ethical horizon' of aspirations and practices (Werbner 2008: 3). Others have explored how people lead lives marked by movements across various places in their lifetime, developing their own 'vernacular' form of cosmopolitanism which bypasses the big city (Sivaramakrishnan and Gidwani 2003).

Jammu becomes especially interesting if cosmopolitanism is located in an engagement with difference. Yet the term cosmopolitan itself or related words in other languages were not really spoken of in everyday parlance. While some differences of ethnicity and religion matter, given the complexities of regional politics difference was a part of everyday life. While 'locals' or those who claimed home and origin in Jammu struggle with what the city meant, the city provided sanctuary and space to so many others, like the Partition refugees and like the Pandits who I have worked with. Are there other ways to explore the ethics and practices of living with difference in Jammu?

2. A University Life

One of the places I had become familiar with was the University where I stayed as a guest in the senior students/ hostel. I was unable to find the ideal anthropological solution of living in a Pandit camp for various reasons. However, staying at the University gave me an understandable identity in the city. Anytime I was stopped by a member of the paramilitary on visits to Residency Road, I was often let off after telling them I was at the university.

The university represented the region, with students from across Jammu and Kashmir. For some who came from rural parts of the region, the University provided a safe place in a city. I am reminded of one young student Krishen, who came from the Pahari region. Krishen once spoke of how afraid he was when he first moved to Jammu and that he would take short walks for no more than a half an hour and quickly return to the campus, lest he became lost in the city streets. Over time as he came to know the city and became involved in university life, he felt the city become his.

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I spent my days with the Pandits; my evenings with Dogras, Paharis, Kashmiri Muslims from the Valley and a few students from the rest of the country. While this experience made things uncertain as I encountered different and opposing political sentiments on a daily basis, it kept me aware of a larger world in the region. Differences of course mattered. The Kashmiri students at the university who I knew were curious about my work with the Pandits, just as the Pandits I would meet earlier in the day would ask what the university students I knew would have to say.

The students from Jammu who I came to know, uninterested in work on 'Kashmiris', would make their differences with their Kashmiri university mates quite clear regarding questions of self-determination in the region. Yet they could be friends as well. My introduction to members of the Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad (ABVP) in the university was made by a Kashmiri student, a believer in Kashmiri independence, whose friend, a Dogra, was an organiser for the ABVP. They disagreed immensely on regional politics, nevertheless they were friends and could work together when they needed to organise on an issue that affected all students.

There was an awareness of the political polarities that distinguished Jammu from Kashmir and which eventually would begin to be openly expressed. The protests of 2008 in Kashmir, which was covered in the news, had a response in Jammu: a blockade of the Valley and counter protests in Jammu.

While I left Jammu shortly before these protests, in hindsight certain forms of political sentiment were becoming apparent. There was an obvious churning of Dogra politics. As the writer Shivanath (2005) points out, during moments of dramatic change as witnessed

with decolonisation in the late 1940s and 1950s and in other periods of political and economic upheaval, the inhabitants of Jammu, especially the Dogras, have often wrestled with the question of who was an inhabitant of Jammu.

When I was conducting research on the Pandits and following up a column called 'Jammu Jottings' which dealt with everyday life in the city, in the back issues of the *Kashmir Times*, it was fascinating to see how Dogras and Kashmiris discussed the changes in city life with the arrival of large numbers of Pandits in the early 1990s. But in its less benign form, the walls in the city bore the marks of political organisations speaking for the region, a space now occupied by parties such as the Shiv Sena and the BJP. In that sense the space the university offered to recognising and respecting difference becomes even more significant.

3. A Dhaba at a Crossroad

Just outside the university, near one of the back gates of the campus where the hostels and a large auditorium are located, was a small building that housed both a dhaba and a canteen run by two brothers. While there were other dhabas close by, many students would come to these joints for regular meals. They also attracted a large clientele of soldiers from the army transit camps close to the university. The dhaba, which was on the ground floor and open to the road attracted a steady stream of customers from the street.

> I had realised that the dhaba made its business by serving transients, like the university students, like workers passing through and, like the soldiers, drawing on footloose labour in turn to work as waiters.

I remember on one occasion a traveller from Nepal coming to the dhaba to eat and then asking the dhaba owner if he could display some stones he was peddling, attracting the interest of the owner and diners who had finished their meal. As he demonstrated how the stones could be ground into powder to cure various ailments, the dhaba owner called one of his workers who happened to be Nepali, to watch the performance telling him that someone from his *desh* or country had come. By then I had realised that the dhaba made its business by serving transients, like the university students, like workers passing through and, like the soldiers, drawing on footloose labour in turn to work as waiters.

Just above the dhaba was the canteen run by the owner's brother. This man was a retired soldier and kept a cleaner business with proper furniture, unlike the dhaba where customers sat and ate off rough wood benches. The canteen also served plated meals closer to home cooked fare, snacks and drinks. Apart from omelettes, the food served was vegetarian. The owner once chatted about his time when he was posted to the Kashmir Valley on active duty and said how the sight of butcher's shops would make him sick. Like his brother he ran a business with the help of a floating group of waiters and cooks who consisted of migrant labourers from outside the state.

For a few weeks, one waiter would chat with me in the middle of serving customers. He was a Bengali Muslim from Assam who ended up in Jammu, and who was happy to meet someone who could speak Bengali. The few short conversations we had in Bengali, even though we came from different worlds, was the closest he said he felt to home. Yet after a few weeks he was gone and when I asked about him, the canteen owner revealed that he had been paid for the month the day before and had not shown up. 'Aur ayega!' (More will come!) he said.

A few days later, another worker had arrived who was Bengali speaking, from West Bengal and who was again happy to meet another Bengali. This man was a stone mason who also had been travelling for work, moving from site to site until he arrived in Jammu with a group which had heard that there might be work available further north at dam construction sites. When he had arrived in Jammu one evening, he and his companions had become horribly drunk. When he recovered the next day, he discovered his companions had left him behind and had run away with his money and possessions. He bumped into the canteen owner who offered him a place to stay and some money in return for work. In his case, however, his unhappiness over the next few weeks became apparent when he was not paid and he felt trapped. He would grumble each time he served my order, 'I am a *mistri*, I don't do this work. What will I do, Dada?' It was then that I noticed the canteen owner keeping a watch on us whenever we spoke. Eventually the *mistri* too left.

4. The Smartest Man in Jammu

"Tell me bhaiya, do you believe in *Swarg* (heaven) or *Narak* (hell)?" asked Arun. Before I could reply, he continued "You might not. You are *pare likhe* (literate/educated). I am not. People like me believe in Heaven and Hell and it is all here. The lives of the rich are heaven and our lives are hell. That will be Rs. 10 for the bananas".

This was one of many conversations I had with Arun Kumar, a young man who sold bananas and other fruit from his cart just outside the side gate of the university, across the dhaba. If there was anyone I met daily it was Arun Kumar. He had a steady stream of customers who would come to buy bananas. Like the dhaba, his customers included university students or anyone else passing through looking for a quick and cheap snack.

The son of labour migrants from Bihar, Arun had come many years ago as a boy with his family and once laughed about how he had spent most of his life in Jammu. He was an extremely articulate young man. I would look forward to conversations with him which varied from the profound to the inane, such as an argument where he insisted that the actress Aishwarya Rai was Bengali whereas I thought she was Mangalorean.

We once compared the places we visited, prompting him to remark that he had visited many more places in the world than me. He was also a source of useful local knowledge. Conversations with him were also a break from my own work. The spot where he came with his cart everyday was a part of the same transitory landscape with the dhaba, which provided some rough comfort for people who were passing through and did not really belong in the city.

Conversations with Arun Kumar also made me aware of the migrants from central and eastern India who came to the city to work as labourers on various construction sites. These workers were not invisible and large settlements were found across many places in the city. There was even one camp just across the road from the Kashmiri Pandit camp where I conducted fieldwork and it was not uncommon for these migrants to work at the Pandit migrant camp.

> As the hours passed, the baby's position under the tree would be shifted like the hands of a clock so that it remained in the turning shade.

Often, banana sessions at Arun's cart would result in chance conversations with others like him who he knew or with a group of workers from Chhattisgarh who lived in a camp at the edge of the university campus, close to the gate. The Chhattisgarhis had set up a camp to work on the building of an auditorium in the university. Living in huts made of corrugated tin, the camp included men, women, and children. I remember for a few days a group of women who worked at one part of the construction site that I would pass by whenever I left the hostel. These women would leave a sleeping baby on the ground next to where they worked, under a short, skeletal tree which provided a thin strip of shade from the sun. As the hours passed, the baby's position under the tree would be shifted like the hands of a clock so that it remained in the turning shade.

I came to know one young man from this settlement who had some years of schooling and spoke fluent Hindi. He had revealed that they had followed others from their village who had come to Jammu before and established a relationship with a local businessman who guaranteed employment to people from their village. In turn, that businessman was ensured a steady stream of docile workers who were out of their place and their elements, with little access to health care, protection or schooling for their children. According to him, he and his people had no choice as they earned barely anything from agriculture back at home, now forced to be a part of a mobile mass the city's economy fed off.

One day I decided to interview Arun Kumar, towards the end of my fieldwork before I returned to my university. When I asked Arun, he readily agreed and for the sake of convenience we decided to talk at his cart. Shortly after we began, a man who I had never noticed before came over and angrily asked what was going on. Clearly knowing him, Arun replied calmly and told him nothing was happening. When he walked away we turned quiet. I did not realise until then that he had a minder. While I would return to Arun Kumar's cart, I did not try the exercise again. When I returned to my university to begin writing my thesis I would swap stories about Arun Kumar with friends, calling him the 'smartest man in all of Jammu'. I wonder how he is now.

5. The Shock of a Billboard

What kind of a city can the city of Jammu be regarded as? As a transit point in the region, the city was defined by the flows of people, goods and ideas. It was a point of arrival and departure. Yet for many, displaced by politics and conflict, or forced to find a place where they could find some kind of work, Jammu provided some form of sanctuary. Whether they were 'border migrants', Kashmiri Pandits or labour migrants, Jammu was a place of survival. The process for any migrant is never simple. Like labour migrants anywhere else, they were subject to precariousness, exploitation and the denial of access to welfare.

> Any conversation with Kashmiri Pandits or other displaced people such as the refugees of Partition would include stories of the difficulty of remaking life, tension with the locals and the fears of an uncertain future.

The children in the Chhattisgarhi camp I had come across, stayed in the settlements and missed school. Arun Kumar had a minder. The workers at the dhaba, while provided shelter, were also taken advantage of. Any conversation with Kashmiri Pandits or other displaced people such as the refugees of Partition would include stories of the difficulty of remaking life, tension with the locals and the fears of an uncertain future. Locals, in turn, felt the city changed far too quickly for them to process. Yet the city provided some measure of sanctuary. Its inherent diversity, while lacking the overt claims to a cosmopolis, allowed people to live with differences in a conflict zone.

My last visit to Jammu took place in the spring of 2017. In the years in between, politics in Jammu had changed with the rise of the BJP in Jammu, where they have come to dominate local politics. While travelling in the city I saw a large billboard next to the road that left me shocked. The poster declared 'To Save Dogra Culture, throw out Rohingyas'. The Rohingyas, a population subject to ethnic cleansing in Myanmar have been forced to escape and find shelter wherever they can, with many to be found across South Asia, including in Jammu. They are subject to mistreatment, suspicion and violence from host populations, reminiscent of Jews escaping the rise of Fascism in Europe in the 20th century. Yet this was the first group of travellers who were openly seen as a threat to Dogra culture and had to be dealt with. As if a group of poor people, expelled from their homes and unwanted by most nation-states are a threat to a people who had once dominated Jammu and Kashmir for a century.

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Rohingyas have been subject to attacks and harassment in New Delhi and elsewhere. But to see such a billboard in Jammu seemed unsettling. In 1990 the Pandits found shelter in Jammu. But by the first quarter of this century, migrants were seen as a threat towards whom violence could be justified. This concern perhaps acquires urgency with the recent hollowing out and effective abrogation of Article 370 and the ascendancy of Hindu nationalist politics in India, which has drawn on xenophobia among other kinds of politics. It is too early to understand the effects of recent political formations on life in Jammu. Nevertheless, just when it seems that an intriguing cosmopolis, a place that had its own way of managing cultural difference, could be understood with its possibilities and imperfections, that same space is at risk.

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