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How I became a Kashmiri Rebel in India

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THE day I was born, my hometown Srinagar was under a stringent curfew imposed by the Indian authorities. My mother often flippantly tells me that it was done to greet another child of conflict. It was a frosty winter day with snowflakes descending from heaven. The stage was set for my grand arrival, but the soldiers manning the streets and the inclement weather conditions almost played spoilsport. My mother tells me how many Indian soldiers, carrying automatic rifles, metal rods and tear gas canisters, blocked the streets. Movement was restricted and vehicles were barred from plying on the road. Battling excruciating pain, my mother struggled to reach the nearest hospital. I had almost died before I was born, my mother often reminisces.

For many years, I was swollen with strange pride over this dubious distinction, but that was before I realized that many of my childhood friends had also been born on days of curfew. We were the children of conflict, born in the mid- to late 1980s, when the sentiment of freedom from India was fast gaining momentum. To crush the popular sentiment and browbeat the Kashmiri people, the Indian state employed various draconian and repressive measures. Young or old, men or women, none was spared by the military witch-hunt. Children as young as three years old were introduced to ominous terms like 'curfew', 'crackdown', 'Kalashnikov', 'encounter', and 'interrogation'.

I have terrifyingly vivid memories of growing up in the Kashmir of the late

1980s and early 1990s, when the armed rebellion was at its peak. As a child, I was besotted by the sprawling meadows in Gulmarg, the trout-filled streams of Pahalgam and the beautiful shikaras (canopied boats) that floated on Dal Lake. But my childhood, like that of my friends, was not normal. The trials and tribulations started early and caused a great deal of emotional and psychological pain. Ours was a perennial struggle for survival; a murder of innocence.

The Kashmir of our childhood was like a beautiful bride abducted by a ruthless beast. Every day, this bride would be subjected to physical harassment and emotional torture. Her heart-rending ordeal, for some ludicrous reason, was totally disregarded by the international community. Unlike what some self-proclaimed historians would like you to believe, this ordeal did not start in the 1980s or '90s. It began soon after the partition of erstwhile British India. My grandmother tells me how Indian forces came into the state and refused to leave.

As I grew older, I began to understand the import of Grandma's stories. My personal experiences during the early 1990s reinforced my belief that the freedom struggle was not a futile exercise. Those who sacrificed everything to fight the Indian forces were doing us a big favour. Dying with honour, as my father often told me, was better than living as a slave. My thoughts on this have not changed in all these years.

I remember stumbling against a barbed wire fence and injuring my leg while passing an army camp. I remember being admonished by a gun-toting soldier for not carrying an Indian identity card while coming home from school. I remember standing in a long queue behind my father during a military crackdown and helplessly watching a veiled mukhbir (informer) identify 'suspected' militants. I remember holding my uncle tightly after he had been mercilessly dragged around and interrogated for his alleged links with militants. I remember my friend and classmate proudly telling me how his father had heroically laid down his life, fighting the Indian forces. I recall how bullets and bombs killed our people and destroyed our land. I remember how all hell broke loose in front of our eyes.

The situation went awry in the early 1990s when the Indian state upped the ante and began to use indiscriminate force to quell protests. The Indian political machinations ensured that young Kashmiris were forced to take up arms in their

quest for freedom. Many of my friends, who had faced some degree of harassment and torture at the hands of Indian forces, dropped out of school and crossed the border into Pakistan to be trained as militants. All of them had legitimate grounds to revolt. It was a full-scale uprising spurred on by the tornado of resentment against the occupational forces.

I was barely five when the Gaw Kadal massacre took place on 20 January 1990, a day after New Delhi sent Jagmohan, who is notorious in Kashmir as a 'ruthless hate-monger'. The Indian forces opened indiscriminate fire on a crowd that had been protesting the ruthless crackdown in downtown Srinagar where women had also been molested. The troops mowed down at least 200 Kashmiri protestors. In her book *Kashmir in Conflict: India, Pakistan and the Unending War,*[1] Victoria Schofield calls it the 'worst massacre in the history of Kashmir'. It was followed by the Zakoora massacre on 1 March 1990, when thousands of protestors marched to the office of the United Nations Military Observer Group in Srinagar to protest the policies of the governor. At least twenty-six were killed in the army firing. The Tengpora massacre took place on the same day, when the Indian Army at a bus stop in Tengpora, Srinagar, killed twenty-one people. Kunan Poshpora, a small hamlet in north Kashmir, was rocked on 23 February 1991, where at least fifty-three women were gang-raped by the Indian security forces. Two decades on, there has been no action taken against the accused soldiers from the fourth Rajputana Rifles.[2]

This gratuitous brutality further stoked the flames of rebellion among us Kashmiris. Azadi became a war cry as millions rallied behind the mujahideen. As days passed, the mazar-e-shuhada (martyrs' graveyard) in the heart of Srinagar filled up. Families did not wail over dead bodies, but felt immensely proud. The bodies of martyrs resting in those graves became an inspiration for my generation. The burden of sacrifice was heavy and the stakes were high. There was no question of letting down those who had given their blood for our beloved nation.

Shutdowns and curfews were common in those days and schools would remain closed for weeks and months together. My studies were affected, which was a matter of concern to my parents. Like most of my friends, I was losing interest in my studies and, instead, wanted to join the militant ranks. I was ready

to sacrifice my modest dreams for a bigger cause. But before I could flee my home, I was dispatched to a boarding school. Ironically, it was in a bustling city in the northern Indian state of Uttar Pradesh, famous for Aligarh Muslim University. I recall looking down from plane at the fleet of sand bunkers juxtaposed with green, agricultural fields. I waved my hands and pledged to keep Kashmir in my dreams every night.

The journey from Kashmir to India, from occupied territory to occupying state, transformed my life and stirred my political consciousness in a way I had never imagined. I was barely twelve, but my unapologetic political beliefs, which I had assimilated deeply, surprised many of my classmates and teachers. My father, like any concerned parent, had instructed me to avoid stirring the hornet's nest. 'We are all entitled to our political beliefs but don't argue or fight with anyone,' he told me. His words echoed in my head but I found it difficult to remain tight-lipped, especially when the topic of discussion veered to Kashmir and Kashmiris' right to self-determination.

For a twelve-year-old, debunking the statist narrative with robust arguments was both a challenge and a self-designated responsibility. The hours of intense reading and writing on Kashmir, arguments and discussions I had with my classmates and teachers, veiled warnings I used to get for showing dissent helped me grow beyond my age. Political maturity, I realized, does not come with age; it comes with daily experiences. For children of conflict, politics runs in their veins and political lessons are part of their overall upbringing. I made some good friends in the boarding school and some of them were hard-core nationalists. We spent many nights discussing Kashmir, India and Pakistan and ended up agreeing to disagree.

My day would start with newspapers, which often carried stories with horrifying details of young boys mown down in cold blood and young schoolgirls gang-raped in frontier districts by soldiers and members of disbanded government outfits. The spin doctors of Indian media, however, cunningly obfuscated the facts to keep their Indian readers in the dark. As the years passed, I began to understand the policies of India and how the Kashmir policy was flawed.

I was living a free life in India, but the fact that my brothers and sisters in

Kashmir were denied that freedom by the very same state was something that haunted me the whole time. Every time I got a call from home, the news would be of cold-blooded murders, rapes and enforced disappearances. It affected my studies, even though I tried hard to follow my father's instructions.

One fine morning in March 2000, as I was getting ready for school, our hostel warden summoned me. To me he seemed like a cross between Farooq Abdullah and Mufti Sayeed, two Kashmiri pro-India politicians of dubious distinctions. He would scare the daylights out of us residents. This was long before cellphones became a fad, so we used to get calls on the hostel telephone. It was my cousin calling from Kashmir, and talking to him always buoyed me up. Known for his sense of humour, he would often call to cheer me up and wipe away my homesickness. This time, he sounded strangely grim. A day before, on 20 March 2000, almost fifteen army personnel had entered a village called Chattisingpora in Anantnag district in south Kashmir. A total of thirty-four men belonging to the minority Sikh community had been lined up in an open field and shot dead. This had happened on the eve of the then US president Bill Clinton's visit to India.

I was fourteen and my cousin a year older and we were discussing the political conspiracy behind the Chattisingpora massacre and the possible identity of the perpetrators. The hostel warden, who was seated in his cosy chair right across from me, was leaning forward to hear our conversation. There is something fishy about this whole incident, my cousin insisted. I hung up and rushed to the morning assembly. As always, it commenced with the Indian national anthem and everyone sang along in unison. That morning, I was outraged and wanted to give vent to my irrepressible anger. I refused to sing the anthem that praised my tormentors. After the assembly dispersed, a teacher walked up and politely reprimanded me for being 'anti-national'. I did not react.

On 15 August that year, a local politician unfurled the Indian tricolour and all the boys marched to salute it in a show of national pride. I stood my ground and walked away. I was reminded of the famous Howard Zinn quote, that there is no flag large enough to cover the shame of killing innocent people for a purpose, which is unattainable. Saluting a piece of cloth, whether you identify with it or not, is no big deal, but when the same piece of cloth is stained with

the blood of innocents and used to mask the horrendous crimes committed against people, it becomes a big deal.

Five days after the Chattisinghpora massacre, I came across a news report that stated the seven foreign militants behind the massacre had been gunned down in Pathribal village of Anantnag district. After school hours, I took permission from the hostel warden and went to a telephone booth outside campus. I called my cousin to find that he was equally flustered by the news reports. The real perpetrators were being shielded and innocents being made scapegoats, he told me in choking voice. There was a line of people at the booth and any one of them could have been a spy. Kashmiris in India have to exercise great deal of caution. It takes mere suspicion from Indian security agents to arrest Kashmiris and force them to confess to crimes they have not committed. After many attempts over the years to cover up the horrendous crime, in 2012 the Indian Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) said the seven men killed in Pathribal were innocent civilians and the officers involved 'were cold-blooded murderers and deserve to be meted out exemplary punishment'.

Incidents like the Chattisingpora massacre left an indelible impact on my mind. The dance of death continued in various forms and shapes. The sense of fear and vulnerability was overpowering. Young boys would leave home for a game of cricket and never return. People would be abducted from their homes and dragged to various interrogation centres for third-degree torture. The traumatized families would run from pillar to post to find out the whereabouts of their loved ones. The xenophobic Indian media would block any news that could possibly invoke the outrage of liberal Indians, thus sacrificing objectivity at the altar of jingoistic rhetoric.

Quite often, we had heated arguments in the hostel dormitory on why Kashmir was not 'integral part' of India, or even the 'jugular vein' of Pakistan for that matter. I had to remind my friends of Jawaharlal Nehru's solemn promise made in Lal Chowk, Srinagar, in 1947, where his friend Sheikh Muhammad Abdullah had flanked him. I had to remind them of the resolutions passed by the United Nations on Kashmir and how successive regimes in New Delhi had made a mockery of them. I had to remind them of the thousands of Kashmiris killed in the last two decades of conflict. I had to remind them of fake

encounters, custodial killings and more than 8,000 cases of enforced disappearances.[3] I had to remind them of boys who never came home. I had to remind them of children orphaned and women widowed. I had to remind them how occupiers occupy land, hold people hostage and yet claim the occupied territory as 'integral part' of their ideal.

Often, the reaction of my friends and teachers would be amusing, and almost border on the outrageous. 'What do Kashmiris want?' was the question frequently tossed at me. The answer was simple and straightforward, but the venom of jingoism made it unfathomable to them. We don't ask for the moon or the stars, we just want to breathe free air, I would gently assure them. My arguments were seen as 'seditious' and dangerous to the 'sovereignty' of India. The question of the right to self-determination, explicitly mentioned in the UN resolutions, did not sit well with them, which exposes India's forced claims on Kashmir. If India is so confident, it should allow a referendum under the supervision of a neutral body, I used to tell them.

Those days, we used to anxiously wait for summer vacation to go home and catch up with friends and family. The moment the bus passed through Jawahar tunnel, which marks the entrance to the Kashmir Valley, my eyes would light up and the feeling of homesickness would fade away. But the sight of sand bunkers and gun-toting soldiers was nauseating. For the record, Kashmir happens to be the most militarized zone in the world, something the tourism and travel agents never tell tourists. With more than 600,000 troops currently deployed in the Valley, it is indeed a 'beautiful prison' as famously noted by a European Union delegation in 2004.[4]

Coming home was like entering a cage filled with befuddled humans. Every time I returned, the first thing I would do was inquire after everyone's well-being. Once I went to see a close friend to gift him a shirt I had bought in Delhi. With tears rolling down her wrinkled face, his mother told me he had vanished under mysterious circumstances. She wanted to know if he was alive or dead. I wonder now if she were asking for too much.

Coming home meant experiencing the horror first-hand. On one such occasion, while I was home for summer holidays, I realized how truly vulnerable we were. I had heard stories of Indian troops ransacking houses and thrashing

people for no reason in the frontier districts of the Valley. This time, it was much closer and the target was my home. It was past midnight and we were fast asleep when somebody started banging on the door. My brother woke me and we rushed out to find a posse of armed men taking position in our lawns. They had jumped over the wall, almost 15 feet high. Without a warrant, some of them stormed inside and rummaged through everything. They checked my desktop computer and sifted through my school notebooks while flashing their automatic rifles left, right and centre. My parents were terrified and I was wondering what had gone wrong. I tried to ask one of them and he almost shot me. After nearly an hour, they left with just a few words: 'We got wrong inputs.'

We didn't sleep that night. We could easily have been victims of yet another fake encounter and passed off as foreign militants, as it happens in remote districts, far from the media arc lights. That fateful night I realized what kind of unbridled powers these men had under the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act (AFSPA). It is far too easy for them to kill and get away with it. The immunity from legal action has saved them over the years as they continue to unleash a reign of terror on hapless people. Lack of prosecution creates a culture of impunity, as noted by many international human rights bodies, but the occupiers remain unfazed.

When I narrated this story to my Indian friends in boarding school, they were in utter disbelief. It could never happen to them because they were not the children of conflict and didn't live in an occupied territory under the spectre of draconian laws. My family was lucky that night, but there are hundreds of families in border districts who lose their sole breadwinners when they are kidnapped during military raids and killed in custody. Their loved ones keep waiting, expecting a knock on the door in the middle of the night.

After spending five years in boarding school, I moved to New Delhi to study journalism. There, I saw another hideous face of the devil and realized that the whirlpool of terror for Kashmiris was not limited to Kashmir. In India, Kashmiris faced music of a different kind. There were many cases in which Kashmiri journalists, academics, businessmen, artists and students were abused, vilified and targeted by the state and its agencies. Syed Maqbool Shah was seventeen when the Delhi Police in Lajpat Nagar arrested him in 1996 in

connection with the Lajpat Nagar bombings of 21 May 1996. After spending fourteen years in Tihar jail, he was released in April 2010 for 'lack of sufficient evidence'. Mirza Iftikhar Hussain was arrested in Bhogal in June 1996, also in connection with the Lajpat Nagar blasts. He was also released in April 2010 after thirteen years, ten months and twenty-five days, for 'lack of sufficient evidence'. Shakeel Ahmad Khan was arrested in April 1992 in Lajpat Nagar for allegedly plotting to kill Bharatiya Janata Party politicians. He was released in August 2002 after serving nearly ten years behind bars, again for 'lack of evidence'.[5]

I have both personally as a Kashmiri and professionally as a journalist analysed these cases threadbare before arriving at the conclusion that it was difficult to be a Kashmiri in the capital city. The government, however, does not represent the only threat. Right-wing forces, with overt and covert support from security agencies, are a bigger one. The workers from right-wing groups interrupt almost every seminar, rally, sit-in demonstration or public meeting on Kashmir. At one seminar on Kashmir in Jamia Milia Islamia University, the hostile audience, comprising mostly right-wing hoodlums, created a ruckus and stopped the proceedings. At a peaceful sit-in to condemn the execution of Afzal Guru, a Kashmiri medic sentenced to death in the Parliament attack case 'to satisfy the collective conscience of the society', young Kashmiri students were attacked by a mob of venom-spewing right-wing forces, in the presence of police officials. Life had begun to get difficult for Kashmiris outside Kashmir as well.[6]

One event that will remain etched in my memory for a long time was the seminar 'Azadi: The Only Way', at Delhi's LTG (Little Theatre Group) Auditorium in October 2010. I remember the goose pimples I got when the auditorium came alive with thunderous slogans of azadi, even though right-wing trouble-mongers tried hard to disrupt the proceedings. After the seminar, both Kashmir's top separatist leader Syed Ali Geelani and prominent writer-activist Arundhati Roy were slapped with sedition charges, but the political establishment, cutting across party lines, was shaken to the core. This is the power of resistance shown by Kashmiris.

Kashmir has seen many tumultuous social and political changes since the mid-1980s, but one thing that has remained constant is the overwhelming desire for freedom and peace with dignity. The transformation from armed struggle to

a peaceful grass-roots movement shows the tremendous maturity of a people who have grown weary of war and violence, death and destruction. But this change has been reciprocated with more despotism and tyranny by India. Occupying land and holding people to ransom to the idea of India has become the standard operating principle of successive regimes in New Delhi. That, however, has not dampened the spirit of the Kashmiri people. The young generation of Kashmir is politically more aware than the youth in any other part of the world.

The events of the 1990s influenced my generation, and the events taking place now are likely to influence the next. If that happens, India will be digging its own grave in Kashmir. The 2010 uprising, for instance, made the international community sit up and take notice when bullets were showered at teenagers protesting the horrendous crimes committed by the occupational forces. Many were arrested and thrown behind bars under the draconian Public Safety Act and many more were booked for 'seditious' posts on social networking sites. That is how the state muzzles the voice of dissent without realizing that they are not doing themselves a favour.

The writing is on the wall: No matter what the Indian tourism ministry claims, peace and normality are a far-fetched dream unless the political aspirations of Kashmiris are respected. Contrary to what self-anointed political analysts in New Delhi would like Indian masses to believe, it is not about political or economic packages or cosmetic confidence-building measures. Kashmir is about the right to self-determination, and the right to not be occupied and subjugated. The resounding war cry on the streets of Kashmir is for azadi, complete freedom from the spectre of oppression, humiliation and occupation. That is what I notice whenever I come home.

Today when I look back, I think the decision my parents made to send me to a boarding school in India was a good one. Rather than suppressing me, it made me politically informed and aware. Having to constantly defend my position and being the Kashmiri 'other', I understood what I was and what I stood for. Endless arguments with my Indian friends on why Kashmir remains a disputed territory occupied by more than half a million troops reinforced my belief that the key lies in resistance. Kashmir's martyrs have taught the younger

generation that standing up for our rights is the only way.

We the people of Kashmir wake up every morning to resist. We write to resist. We speak to resist. We live to resist. We breathe to resist. This resistance will someday bring down our occupiers. To invoke our beloved poet Agha Shahid Ali, we shall meet again in Srinagar, by the gates of the villa of peace, our hands blossoming into fists, till the soldiers return the keys and disappear.

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NOTES

1 London: I.B.Tauris & Co., Ltd, 2000, 2003.

2 For background and analysis of the cases mentioned here please refer to Afshan, Rashid, *Halfwidows in Kashmir*, New Delhi: Pharosmedia, 2011; Batool, E., I. Butt, M. Rashid, N. Rather and S. Mushtaq, *Do You Remember Kunan Poshpora?,* New Delhi: Zubaan Books, 2016; Mathur, Shubh, *The Human Toll of the Kashmir Conflict*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016, pp. 21–38, Chapter 2, 'The Forgotten Massacres'. Also see 'The Human Rights Crisis in Kashmir, A Pattern of Impunity', A report by Asia Watch, 1993, https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/reports/INDIA937.PDFhttps://www. (accessed on 27 October 2017); and Human Rights Watch, 'Everyone lives in fear, Patterns of Impunity in Jammu and Kashmir', 2006, https://www.hrw.org/…/everyone-lives-fear/patterns-impunity-jammu-and-kashmir (accessed on 7 July 2018).

3 See Mathur, *The Human Toll of the Kashmir Conflict*, 2016.

4 The Committee on Foreign Affairs, Human Rights Common Security and Defence Policy of the European Parliament issued the Report of its Ad hoc Delegation on 27 July 2004. The delegation visited both sides of the LoC.

5 In February 2017, three Kashmiris, including a man named Mohammad

Rafiq Shah, who was picked up from Kashmir University were released from Tihar jail innocent of all charges after twelve years [editors].

6 For a discussion on this, see Geelani, Syed Bismillah, *Manufacturing Terrorism: Kashmiri Encounters with Media and the Law*, New Delhi: Bibliophile South Asia, 2006. Also see, Roy, Arundhati, *The Hanging of Afzal Guru: And the Strange Case of the Attack on the Indian Parliament*, New Delhi: Penguin India, 2013; and Ali, Tariq, Hilal Bhatt, Angana P. Chatterji, Habbah Khatun, Pankaj Mishra and Arundhati Roy, *Kashmir: The Case for Freedom*, New York: Verso, 2011.