



Reimagining Kashmir

Barkha Dutt

*Dal Lake in Srinagar, Jammu and Kashmir. Watercolour by Masood Hussain, as part of his 'Transparent Strokes' series.
Credit: Masood Hussain*

INTRODUCTION

Sometimes a single image can capture the essence of a complex issue in a way that a million words cannot. To cut through the din of high-decibel, shrill rhetoric from primetime 'patriots' pontificating on Jammu and Kashmir, look no further than the searing art of Masood Hussain, one of Kashmir Valley's most distinguished voices: At first glance it appears to be an infant asleep, in

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the benevolent shadow of a tree, in a makeshift cot made from a sheet tied loosely across the width of two branches. Look closer, and those are not branches nor a tree; they are automatic guns and grenades, weapons forming a canopy over a sleeping baby. Quite literally, one sees the birth of an entire generation in the shadow of the gun.



Guns as trees

Credit: Masood Hussain

Masood Hussain—his face weathered, framed by a mop of white hair—has borne witness to all the different ways a 27-year-old insurgency has changed the State and spawned a new cycle of rage and agitation that has not spared even children. When Masood Hussain paints schoolbags, what tumbles out of them are not books but stones—a metaphor for the pitched battles that take place on the streets of Kashmir between young men (and now, women too) in their teens, and security personnel. It may seem at times as if the Kashmir conflict has been hard-wired into the body politic of India, static and unchanged, over more than two decades. But despite the *déjà vu* it may evoke, there are many changing currents in the swirl of the conflict. How Jammu and Kashmir must be understood, and the determination of what the appropriate response is, must be guided by these vicissitudes. The multiple realities of Kashmir are best explained by recalling a film made by the legendary Japanese filmmaker, Akira Kurosawa: in his 1950 classic, ‘Rashomon’, a murder and a rape are recounted in four absolutely contradictory ways, challenging the notion of ‘singular truths’. This report examines these varied truths of Jammu and Kashmir, and how time has altered these realities and given birth to new ones.

A CHALLENGE TOUGHER THAN MILITANCY AND TERRORISM

While 2016 and the first half of 2017 has seen a sharp spike in the fatalities amongst both soldiers and civilians in Kashmir¹—indeed, last year was the bloodiest in terror-related violence in six years—the Indian State has a well-built capacity and security paradigm to counter this. The new and much more intractable problem has been the cloak of ‘civil resistance’ thrown over militant violence, creating a new phase of agitation-as-insurgency. Massive turnouts at funerals of slain terrorists, the shadowy appearance of armed militants at eulogies, school-going children, boys and girls sometimes as young as ten encouraged to address gatherings and ratchet up emotions, and the noticeable increase in the number of Pakistani flags in rural Kashmir, draped over coffins or flying from an electricity pole down the street, its casualness belying its obviously designed provocation — all of these are relatively new variables in the CI (counter-insurgency) grid.

Before Burhan Wani, the Hizbul Mujahideen militant, was eliminated in an encounter in 2016, triggering a year of unrest and lockdown, the number of operational terrorists in the Valley was less than 200, the lowest in years; the army, police and paramilitary could have legitimately claimed success. Today they are confronted with a battle not of their making. The Army, especially, may not want to be drawn into a situation where they need to engage in either crowd control, or a pitched battle with sections of the citizenry. Indeed, secessionists have been able to shift strategy because of a political vacuum. It is effective politics that ultimately must find a way of constructing a new response to an evolving challenge.

NEEDED: A NEW S.O.P.

Street clashes between paramilitary personnel and protesters armed with stones are not new. In 2010, in what would turn out to be a prolonged period of turmoil, more than a hundred young men were killed in fierce confrontations, triggered by the death of 17-year-old Tufail Mattoo,² who was hit by a teargas shell not intended for him as he walked home from tuitions. But unlike then, when the spark that started the forest fire was a case of human rights violation, in 2016, when the Valley erupted once more, it was not to oppose an extrajudicial killing but in support of a dead militant. Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) need to adapt to the changing nature of the aggression: agitators who are not afraid to get hurt or even die. One senior officer told this author³ that it is no longer unusual for women to encircle a security post and snatch a lone soldier's weapon; or for civilians to stall encounters with stones and slogans that throw a protective shield over the militants being hunted down.



Credit: PTI

Every evening, in downtown Srinagar, as the sun descends into a swirl of smoke and stones, a ritualistic dance plays out between the CRPF (Central Reserve Police Force) on duty and the men who charge towards them, with rocks and small boulders, as the local police wades into the melee to escort the paramilitary out to safety. Last year, at the peak of the tensions, this author spent an evening with the CRPF walking through a neighborhood where anti-India separatists had marked their territory with ‘Azaadi’ watchwords and vitriolic graffiti. The soldier explained how earlier the protesters would position themselves and take aim from a safer distance; today, he said, they charge right up to his face, staring him in the eye, seemingly unafraid of the consequences. That evening, when the predictable daily altercations started and a rush of men came charging at the CRPF, the Jammu and Kashmir police arrived to oversee the end of their duty hours. Many of the officers had black handkerchiefs wrapped around their faces; being local Kashmiris, they did not want to be identified by their own communities, fearing backlash for themselves and their families that can be fatal. Those posted outside the city spoke of how they sometimes traveled to their work stations in civilian clothes so as not to be identified by protesters on the connecting highways. The police are the most vulnerable among all forces—targeted by terror groups, separatists and their own people alike. “They look at us with suspicion, they abuse us, and they loathe us. What can we do? We tolerate it,” said a 34-year-old police officer. “*Ya pathar, ya gaali* — either a stone or an expletive — that is my life; I am used to it now.”

Yet, because SOPs have not been adapted to these changes, the fall-back on the option of pellet spray guns, when teargas shells did not work, only ended up eroding the moral authority of the State. The mass images of blinded Kashmiri civilians—some, partially and others, permanently—their eyes bandaged in

wads of white, their bodies pockmarked by the iron ball bearings that come gushing out like a fountain spray and thus often hit targets they were not intended for, including children, did not help the government make its case. While there are genuine challenges in dealing with emboldened, unafraid, mob-rage, a new security protocol must be developed.

LAPTOPS NOT STONES?

In August 2016, Prime Minister Narendra Modi invoked Atal Behari Vajpayee and lamented that young Kashmiris should have laptops in their hands, not stones. The inalienable truth, however, is that education and employment are no longer the solution. The new militancy has seen resurgence in local participation; in 2015, the Jammu and Kashmir police flagged an alarming statistic⁴ that everyone ignored: for the first time in a decade, local militants had outnumbered foreign terrorists, many of them educated school-toppers belonging to economically secure families. When Burhan Wani was killed, this author had described him as a militant who happened to be the son of a government school headmaster; this clinical detail provoked an odd degree of debate on social media. But let indisputable facts not be confused with 'glorification'. There is no getting away from it if you travel through the interiors of Tral, in South Kashmir, home to not just Wani but scores like him. In the hamlet of picturesque Laribal, where every morning hopeful mothers send their freshly scrubbed children to school, this author visited the home of Ishaq Parray 'Newton', named after Isaac Newton for his academic brilliance. Ishaq's science books were still stacked up on an otherwise bare shelf in what used to be his room. His father proudly pulled out ancient report cards carefully preserved in polythene sheets and firmly pressed between old newspapers. "He could have got any job he wanted," Newton's father said, "that's not what drove him to the gun." At the house of militant zealot Zakir 'Musa', initially the so-called successor of Burhan Wani, this author met his father, a civil engineer in the PWD department of the state government who hospitably served guests cans of juice and turned philosophical as he spoke of having accepted that his son had "chosen his way." Musa's father had tried hard to shield him from hardline ideology by altering his geography; he sent his son to be an engineer in Punjab. That did not work. One day Musa came home for a vacation and left his father a letter on the front porch announcing his new life as a militant. Musa's entire family is highly educated; his brother, a doctor at Srinagar's bone and joint hospital, told this author he felt "proud" that his brother had done "what I have failed to." Laptops no longer matter—metaphorically or literally. What India is dealing with is increasingly radicalised rage; the battle is at least partly psychological.

THREAT OF RADICALISATION REAL; POLITICAL NON-ENGAGEMENT NOT THE ANSWER

In a hospital in Srinagar, this author meets a school-going boy who had been out on the streets marching in support of slain militant Burhan Wani. A bandage over his eye and facing the possibility that he may never see properly again, he says when asked what made him do this for a terrorist — “He is the protector of Islam.” This author pushed, “Islam or Azaadi?” seeking to understand whether a generational shift had indeed taken place in the self-definition of the insurgency. “Islam and Azaadi, both,” he said.

Many would argue—prominent among them, Kashmiri Pandits who have been forced into mass exile—that there was always a religious dimension in the very genesis of separatism. Many Kashmiris reject this idea and emphasise an ethno-nationalist thrust to their campaign. But, in a society brutalised and numbed by relentless conflict, there is no doubt that younger people are today far more aggressive about their religious identity compared to their parents’ generation. On the condition of anonymity, a prominent Kashmiri separatist told this author that he now has to underline issues of Muslim identity in his public speeches because otherwise, “no one will come to listen to us.” A senior police officer identified the shift in these words: “Earlier, Islam was a subset of Azaadi; now Azaadi is a subset of Islam.” Though compared to what is happening in other states of India like Kerala, Maharashtra and Uttar Pradesh, there has been no recruitment (save reports of one case) from the Valley to the ISIS, the larger global trend of political Islam has drawn many young Kashmiris into being part of a veritable ‘Internet Ummah’. If social media has become a weapon of war for this generation of tech-savvy militants, how does one ignore the fact that Burhan Wani called for a Caliphate in Kashmir? Musa went a step further — he said that anyone who classified the conflict as a political issue and not a religious one should be beheaded. Musa’s words were disowned by most Kashmiri separatists but Wani was elevated to cult-status as if he were the Valley’s Che Guevara. And Musa has since been declared the local chief of the (previously non-existent) Al-Qaeda in Kashmir — all warning signs that need attention.

As religion insinuates itself deeper into the mix and traditional separatists like the Hurriyat conference slowly lose control of the streets, this leaves a piquant question: If there were to be a dialogue, who would the government talk to? A senior central minister argues that “the Autonomists have been replaced by the Islamists,” declaring that the classic template of talks for greater

autonomy was now redundant. But the corollary is that this may be the exact time to strengthen the hand of those who are moderate; it would be a fatal error to push pro-dialogue separatists closer to the Islamist camp by refusing to engage with them. While restoring the writ of law is a priority, if non-engagement continues to be the defining core of Delhi's Kashmir policy, there soon may not be anyone left to talk with, in what is essentially a leaderless upsurge of hardened, often radicalised, rage. Jammu and Kashmir's Chief Minister has been attacked by hardliners for suggesting that the 'idea of Azaadi' must be replaced by a "better idea"—but there is merit in paying attention to her prescription. She also warned that mainstream politicians—like her and her principal opposition, the National Conference—would be gravely weakened if hawks tried to alter the special constitutional status the state enjoys. She is right. There is a complicated new challenge in the Valley today; strengthening moderates should be India's priority.

The other inescapable fact is that the rising radicalisation in the Kashmir Valley is only strengthened by right-wing Hindutva violence in other parts of the country.⁵ As India's only Muslim-majority state, Jammu and Kashmir has always been central to the country's proud self-identification as a 'secular' nation. In a year in which Beef politics has filled the headlines and Muslim cattle-traders have been targeted by murderous mobs—for instance, two Kashmiris truck drivers who were assaulted with petrol bombs⁶—there is no denying that extremism only feeds more extremism.

THE CHALLENGE OF THE IDEOLOGICAL DISSONANCE OF PDP-BJP ALLIANCE

A few weeks before he gave his assent to stitching a pact with the BJP, Mufti Mohammed Sayeed was unwinding in Mumbai, enjoying a few rounds of Bridge and catching up with old friends from another time. Despite the high-stakes risk of what he was about to undertake, he appeared relaxed in a casual t-shirt and polka-dot pajamas.⁷ "It's like bringing the North Pole and the South Pole together," he chuckled. The coalition was initially a bold and innovative resolution to an electoral verdict that otherwise threatened to draw a political and religious line through Jammu and Kashmir. Moreover, the soft separatism of the PDP (with its slogans of self-rule) and the hyper-nationalism of the BJP would have moderating influences on the other. But over time, despite being a testimony to the extraordinary possibilities of politics, the sheer ideological contradictions of the alliance is pulling the state in multiple directions.

Though a carefully crafted ‘agenda of alliance’ was scripted by Haseeb Drabu and Ram Madhav (sometimes jokingly referred to as Ram and Lakshman by their parties) that framework agreement has turned out to be entirely theoretical. ‘Nationalism’ is to the BJP today, what ‘Hindutva’ and the ‘Ram Mandir’ was to the party in the ‘90s. There is a direct contradiction between the politics of Mehbooba Mufti, who until recently argued in favour of personal outreach even to the children and families of militants – and the BJP which has positioned itself today as the guardian of an aggressive Nationalism. Managing the contradictions of the alliance has weakened both the Mufti-led PDP in the Kashmir Valley and the BJP in Jammu. The parties have a fundamental disagreement on every issue, including on talks with separatists and Pakistan and even on whether Burhan Wani should have been killed or taken as prisoner. While the contradictions have been managed and the alliance kept alive, there is an unwieldy weight to it that will eventually need a resolution.

TRUTH & RECONCILIATION STILL MATTER

Media as monster

Primetime populism in the national media has done the single biggest damage to the Idea of India in the Kashmir Valley. A codified diktat on what is ‘national’ and what is ‘anti-national’, as determined by bombastic studio anchors, most of whom have spent no time reporting from the ground in the State—has reduced the Kashmir conversation to untenable binaries. It has become virtually impossible to have an honest conversation about the state and its myriad, often simultaneous truths, because of the pressure to choose camps. If an intolerant stridency drives the discourse in the national news media, the local narrative too is somewhat blinded by its own ideological leanings. A reporter who tries to chronicle all dimensions will often be branded both “jingoistic” and “anti-national” for the same work of journalism. The polarised media narratives have depleted the dialogue of all nuance and truth-telling. The artificial dialectics of confrontation in the media have created an unnecessary divide between the Kashmir Valley and the rest of India.

The folly of surgical strikes minus domestic initiative

Launching ‘surgical strikes’ without working hard on local initiatives will not achieve much. This wisdom comes not from those who have pejoratively been called “bleeding heart left-liberals”, but from Gen. D.S Hooda, former Northern Army Commander. Hooda led the surgical strikes against Pakistan-controlled militant bases across the line of control, in the aftermath of the terror attack on

an Army camp in Uri in September 2016. He said he believed it was a “missed opportunity” to not have built on the internal situation in the aftermath of the strikes.⁸ “Despite all the hype that followed, the Army was clear that one strike would not kill terrorism from Pakistan. A sustained political, diplomatic and military effort was needed to pressurise Pakistan, and, equally important, to address the internal situation in Kashmir which had starting calming down by this time (we cannot divorce events in South Kashmir from violence on the LC). Sentiments are high today but we should not think of our response options as restricted only to the military. The Army will extract its retribution, but a more comprehensive and sustained strategy should be crafted to deal with Pakistan,” he said. Will Gen. Hooda now be called anti-national for arguing for a more holistic response?



Perhaps the biggest tragedy of the Kashmir insurgency has been to see grief and mourning—primal human emotions—reduced to a battle of contested narratives. How you mourn the dead in the Kashmir Valley can depend on your political ideology. And in a 27-year-old conflict zone, the wounds of history do not heal on their own; the balm and bandage of justice is necessary. Kashmiri Pandits seek it for the bloody, forced exodus from their homeland and remain haunted by massacres like the one in Wandhama in 1998, in which 18 Pandits were shot dead. Kashmiri Muslims point to the “half-widows” of their communities—women who live in the netherworld of not knowing whether the men they were married to are dead or alive after they ‘disappeared’ from their homes. They are presumed to have been the victims of extrajudicial encounters. Justice continues to elude the victims of the Pathribal encounter,

in which five Kashmiri civilians were killed and falsely presented as terrorists responsible for the massacre of Sikhs. And a military court recently suspended a widely hailed life term that was handed out in another fake encounter in Machil, undoing the Army's own attempts to prove that fair-play is possible within the immunity offered under the all-powerful Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA).⁹ Families of Kashmiri policemen, the most vulnerable targets, live every day with heartbreak and loss. What will be the idea of justice for the six-year-old daughter of Feroz Dar, a slain policeman, whose face was disfigured by terrorists who shot him and who may have foretold his death in a poignant post on social media, called 'Imagine yourself in a Grave'? What about justice for the strappingly handsome soldier, Ummar Fayaz, who was unarmed and at home for a wedding when he was murdered? The absence of justice and closure only deepen the fissures and faultlines every day. The other regions of the state—Jammu and Ladakh—face the injustice of not even being made part of the national conversation. The challenge is to build a bridge of dialogue across these differences and to restore hope by at least reviving an intra-J&K conversation.

REIMAGINING KASHMIR: NEW STAKEHOLDERS, NEW POLICY

It is clear that New Delhi's standard Kashmir policy has not yielded any sustainable results. That is because the approach has been to "manage" the conflict, instead of resolving it. Former R&AW Chief A.S Dulat inadvertently revealed one of the Valley's worst kept secrets when he said that money had been paid by agencies to militants, separatists and mainstream parties alike.¹⁰ "Corrupting someone with money is more ethical and much smarter than killing him," Dulat said. But this "management" or influence-seeking, even if merely a routine practice for intelligence agencies across the world, is not going to move anything forward. At most, it can help to keep the conflict simmering at status quo. And the ironies of that tired, old approach are beginning to stack up: As the Hizbul Mujahideen's Syed Salahuddin (who once contested polls in the rigged election of 1987) cavorts with Hafiz Saeed of the Lashkar-e-Toiba in Pakistan, four of his children remain government employees and one of his sons was saved by the same security personnel in a militant attack last year. Such contradictions abound in Kashmir, where in the same household, you may find both a police officer and a militant.

The question is, what next? The old formulas have run stale as have the key protagonists, both mainstream and secessionist alike. In the end, the inability to progress in Kashmir is a story of a failure of imagination, of politics—not of one, but of successive governments. And contemporary history is replete with

the many missed chances India had but did not take in the State. To begin with, to deny is to court death: both by the state and those who oppose it. Jammu and Kashmir is always one implosion away from eruption. In these months of desolation, there has been a tiny glimmer of promise: the near unanimity with which Kashmiris rose up against a terror strike on Hindu pilgrims on their way to Amarnath as well as the unequivocal condemnation of police officer Ayub Pandith being lynched to death by a violent mob. Think of this moment as the sliver of light that a small crack in thick wall allows in. Do not fill the crack with more cement; rather, find a way to bring down the whole wall instead. For too long the 'handling' of Kashmir has been to slap a lid on a pressure cooker of simmering tensions; but the cauldron inevitably boils over every time.

Every lull is an opportunity. Grab it. [ORF](#)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Barkha Dutt is a multi-award winning, Emmy-nominated journalist, broadcaster and author who has spent more than two decades reporting from Jammu and Kashmir. She is the author of *This Unquiet Land: Stories from India's Fault Lines* and a columnist with the *Washington Post*, *Hindustan Times*, and *The Week*. She is among the five most followed journalists globally on Twitter.

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