The Shades of Violence: Women and Kashmir

PART-I
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PART-II
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Introduction

The Scholar of Peace Fellowships awarded by WISCOMP for academic research, media projects and special projects, are designed to encourage original and innovative work by academics, policy makers, defence and foreign affairs practitioners, NGO workers and others. The series WISCOMP Perspectives bring the work of some of these scholars to a wider readership. This issue of WISCOMP Perspectives series, *The Shades of Violence: Women and Kashmir*, is a compilation of a series of articles written by two young scholars of Peace – Sudha Ramachandran and Sonia Jabbar, over the period 2000-2001, in different national newspapers.

A former Assistant Editor with the *Deccan Herald*, Bangalore, Sudha Ramachandran bases her media project on the premise that in any conflict situation, women and children become victims of psychological and sexual abuse and the routine violation of their fundamental rights becomes the norm. Her study reflects the various forms of violence that widows, mothers and orphans are subjected to and how this violence threatens their livelihood and security. In her articles published in the daily *Deccan Herald* she explores the role of women as catalysts in addressing conflict resolution and peace processes in the Kashmir valley.

Sudha Ramachandran’s articles foreground the impact of the violent movement in Kashmir on the lives of the ordinary people particularly the women of Kashmir. The impact of the conflict on the women of Kashmir is brought out, tellingly, by focusing on a variety of issues ranging from how women define democracy, azadi, and peace, how they deal with militant diktats and human rights abuses by the Security Forces to how a woman’s separatist group the Dukhtaran-e-Millat operates. The articles touch upon the irony inherent in the glorification of women as biological regenerators of the nation on one hand and the call for mothers to sacrifice their sons on the other. The pieces capture the multi faceted and complex dimension of the conflict as reflected in the increasing disillusionment with both the guest militants and the Security Forces, the loss of the spirit of Kashmiriyat, the aftermath of killings, the breakdown of trust between neighbours and families, the impact of the conflict on children, the infiltration of religious extremists into the Indian part of Kashmir.
Sonia Jabbar’s special project enabled her, as a freelance journalist and photographer to live in Kashmir for six months uninterrupted. This moulded her insight into the pain, suffering and fear experienced by the Kashmiri people. Intended more as a travelogue, what emerged from this project was a series of experiential articles published in national dailies and other journals that explored and interrogated the rhetoric of war, heroism and masculinity and highlighted the manner in which these had marginalized alternative voices.

Sonia Jabbar writes with passionate intensity about human rights violation by the security forces and the militants, the agonies of Muslim women in the valley caught between two sets of guns haunted by the spectre of unending violence and the agony of a displaced community of Hindu Pandits who had lost their home, hearth – indeed their whole universe. Her articles bring alive the horror of bloodshed and violence when she describes the massacre at Chattisinghpora. It also highlights the complexities of the Kashmir narrative when she focuses on the Gurez valley, where apparently there is “no militancy” or captures the timeless spirit of Kashmiriyat which seems to surface just when it looks like it has been snuffed out.

The compilation of these articles cover a whole gamut of issues that lie at the core of the Kashmir conflict as it has unfolded over twelve years and the changing trajectory of the movement due to a variety of reasons. The deeper questions of conflict resolution are also flagged through the exploration of the myriad connotations of what azadi means for the people, what the women of Kashmir would seek if they were at the negotiating table and what peace with justice really implies for the women of Kashmir.

Together the series of articles, written approximately over the same time period, by these two young Scholars of Peace, explores the fractured reality of the conflict in Kashmir. Here multiple realities co-exist and one truth does not cancel out the other. The Shades of Violence: Women and Kashmir, brings forth the multiple, multi-layered complexities of life amidst conflict in Kashmir at a point of time when the armed conflict had raged for over a decade, leaving in its wake a fierce trail of death and destruction. By using the gender lens to highlight how life survives in the midst of exploding violence associated with insurgency and counter-insurgency the human aspect of the Kashmir tragedy unfolds itself in this collection of articles.
Sonia Jabbar and Sudha Ramachandran speak neither for the militants nor for the Indian government but for the people of Kashmir – the non-combatants – especially the women of this strife torn region caught between two sets of guns. It drives home the point that in protracted civil conflicts with multiple and dynamic actors it is the non-combatants whose suffering assumes gigantic proportions. This, despite the fact that they are not the direct targets in this war of attrition that leaves no winners.
PART-I

Sudha Ramachandran
Life Amidst Death

Living in Kashmir through 1½ months of cease-fire, Sudha Ramachandran discovers that you can have a cease-fire that is internationally applauded but brings no respite to the common people. You can have a peace that is the peace in a graveyard.

As the plane took off from Srinagar airport, Iqbal Ganai’s words resounded in my ears, as they had several times during my stay in Kashmir. “India is concerned mainly with the territorial and constitutional integration of Kashmir. It is treating Kashmir merely as real estate, not as a land with people,” the 70-year-old retired school teacher had told me while discussing the problem in Kashmir.

He was right. What I had seen in Kashmir over the previous two months confirmed that. I was in Kashmir from November to mid-January – a period during which I was able to view closely the situation in the Valley before and during the cease-fire. Over the weeks, several incidents I witnessed and conversations I had, had left me disturbed. None as much as what I saw and heard in Kupwara district.

The district of Kupwara is regarded as the “hot-bed of militancy”. The district borders Azad Kashmir and it is in the mountains in Kupwara that thousands of Kashmiri boys have crossed for training in Pakistan. Kupwara is believed to have suffered the most in the Valley over the last decade.

I saw them first a few miles away from Qalamabad village on the road to Handwara – around 10 villagers, some 16, others 60 years of age. They walked slowly, gently prodded the ground on both sides of the road with a stick, as though looking for something. The security forces followed them some distance away.

Then I saw more villagers, more security forces and the same operation, all the way up to Handwara.
At first I couldn’t figure out what was happening. And then it hit me. The villagers were talking about it the previous evening – the use of civilian mine sweepers by the Indian security forces.

They had told me that the security forces were forcing local boys to clear the roads of landmines every morning before the army convoys moved. I had not believed them then. Perhaps I did not want to believe them. But here it was happening before my eyes.

Every family in the villages in Kupwara district is expected to send the men for such ‘duty’, they had said. Their boys were also expected to guard the village at night and report to the security forces if any militant entered. I had not believed that either.

On my next trip to Handwara, I saw it happening again. This time it was the use of civilians as shields. I saw two buses full of BSF personnel returning from an operation. While the BSF men sat inside the bus, around 15 villagers sat huddled on the roof. “That’s to protect them from militant attacks,” 19-year old Farooq Butt explained to me. Was this the way India waged a battle for the hearts and minds of the Kashmiri people? Why were they doing it even during a cease-fire? Was the cease-fire just for the militants?

Two weeks later I was in the village of Batpora. Little of the village remained for it had been destroyed in an encounter between militants and security forces. Militants had taken shelter in the village, the locals told me. The security forces had flattened the village with shelling in a bid to flush them out. The militants escaped leaving the villagers to bear the brunt of the attack.

The decade-long armed conflict has left the ordinary Kashmiri weary and cynical. “The mehaman mujahid (guest militants) – as the foreign militants are called – and the security forces must go,” Ganai had said. Ganai was among those who had welcomed the Indian troops when they reached Kashmir in 1947.

There are thousands like Ganai in Kashmir. Staunch Indians, secular but who feel betrayed by India.
“Indian feminists are silent when women get raped here,” one woman had observed. “When it comes to Kashmir, the Indian media, otherwise so critical of the government, speaks like the government,” another had pointed out.

“When 35 Sikhs were killed in Chittisingpora, all of India was outraged. But there is silence when tens of thousands of Kashmiri Muslims are killed,” observed a cab driver.

At a discussion with students at Kashmir University, I had said that democracy had not worked in Kashmir. “It was not allowed to work,” a student quietly pointed out.

“They call me a traitor for feeding a hungry militant,” a woman in Mazboora told me. “But tell me, am I more anti-national than the corrupt army officer at the border who allows heavy weaponry to enter the country?” she asked.

Ironically, it was in strife-torn Kashmir that I learnt what peace really means. “We want peace but only a just peace, a dignified peace,” many Kashmiris told me. At first their need to qualify the ‘peace’ didn’t quite make sense to me. After all, wouldn’t any peace do?

Living in Kashmir through 1½ months of cease-fire, I understood what they meant. You can have a cease-fire that is internationally applauded but brings no respite to the common people. You can have a peace that is the peace in a graveyard.

If outside Kashmir, every Kashmiri is looked upon with suspicion as a militant, it is no different within the state. Even senior citizens, known to have strong allegiances to a secular India, spoke with sadness at the way they are treated.

True, most Kashmiris see themselves only as Kashmiris and not as Indians. “When did you come from India?” they would ask me. But the Indian-Kashmiri differentiation, I found, is just as deeply etched in our minds.

Not once during my two-month stay in Kashmir was I frisked at a checkpoint. I was never expected to walk the ¾ kilometres that every
Kashmiri, male, female, young or aged had to, at checkpoints. The reason? “You are Indian, madam, it is okay,” I was told every time, in the presence of Kashmiris.

There were many things I learnt about Kashmiris – that they are hospitable and open-minded, that they don’t have a problem with the Indian people but only with the Indian State, that many of them are very devout Muslims and secular at the same time.

During the month of Ramzan, nobody expected me to keep a fast. In fact, the family of a Hizbul militant, took care to prepare a vegetarian meal for me.

A few thousand Pandit families remain in the Valley, the rest having left in the early 1990s. Both Pandits and Muslims in the Valley speak fondly of the past when they ate at each other’s homes and shared a common culture. But sadly, neither community has taken any initiatives towards reconciliation. Kashmiriyat, I noticed, is drifting into history. Few youngsters even know what it means.

But there are rays of hope. Both Kashmiris and security forces worship at the shrines for Sufi saints. Little strips of cloth offered by the BSF flutter in the breeze. “Perhaps the shrines will bring us closer to each other,” an army officer said. In Tral, I saw a temple and a mosque with a common wall.

Life in Kashmir I found was very tough, yes even during the ceasefire. There is tension all the time. “Anything can happen, anytime,” I had been warned by a friend and indeed, the danger of a grenade blast or a shooting was always there, even in so-called ‘safe areas’.

There is not a family that has not been hit in some way by the violence. It is believed that at least 50,000 people have been killed in the last ten years. There are graves everywhere.

Political institutions command absolutely no respect. The National Conference is regarded with contempt. Corruption is rampant as is unemployment. Everyone is desperate to get out. Psychiatric problems have increased ten-fold over the last decade.
There is no social life in Kashmir. People work during the day and rush indoors before it gets dark. Srinagar’s streets are deserted by dusk. The only people who have a ‘night-life’ here are the security forces and the militants.

But for the Broadway cinema in the cantonment area, there are no movie theatres functioning in Srinagar. Cable TV is available but the militants have banned several channels, including MTV and VTV. But since there is no electricity most hours of the day and night, even television-viewing is not an option. Evenings are therefore long, cold and depressing.

Two months of this and I had had enough. It had been an experience, no doubt. I had learnt more in two months than I did in many years. And I had made many friends. Yet I was anxious to leave, I hated having to be careful all the time. I desperately missed my freedom.

How do the Kashmiris endure this? Some I noticed have accepted their hardships and live life from day-to-day. Several, I noticed fight the system, subverting it individually and resisting the pressures they are subjected to from the militants and the security forces. Cab drivers have innovative ways of avoiding the long wait at checkpoints.

One cab driver switched on the light inside the cab and told me to look ‘important’. He sped past the other vehicles waiting in line. At the checkpoint he slowed down, waved to the security personnel authoritatively and then crossed. No waiting, no frisking. What would have taken two hours was achieved in two minutes. “If you appear important, these fellows will think you are a VIP and let you go,” he told me with a laugh.

Women have largely rejected the diktat by militants to wear the burqa. They do cover their heads with a scarf but most do not wear the *burqa*. “Islam requires women to cover their head, not their faces,” they explain.

16-year old Zooni covers her head in a way that one ear remains uncovered. “That way I get to show off my earrings and at the same
time don’t displease the militants,” she says with a laugh.

“I want to live life the way I want,” 13-year old Rabia told me. “So long as my actions don’t harm another person, I should be able to do things my way. That’s true azadi,” she said with a sigh.

In Kashmir I learnt that for the average Kashmiri, whose life has been turned upside down, the meaning of azadi has to do with their daily life and goes far beyond the “freedom from India and Pakistan” we hear their leaders talking about.

For Parveena Ahangar, whose son Javed has been missing since 1990, azadi is seeing her son alive again. For her 15-year old daughter, Saima, azadi is not having to wait for permission from the security forces when you need to rush a loved one to the hospital in the middle of the night.

But it is 7-year-old Ishfaq Ahmed Khan, whose father was shot dead by unidentified gunmen four years ago, who taught me the real meaning of azadi and of peace. “Azadi is when I won’t be frightened,” he told me.

“Of the gun,” he replied and walked away.

(The names of some individuals have been changed to protect their identity).
Caught in the Crossfire

In Kashmir, most of the dead or missing are men. It is the women who are left coping with economic hardships, mental trauma and the struggle to rebuild lives and homes, writes Sudha Ramachandran in the first of a 3-part series:

“The real experience of war is not the killings, the bomb blasts or the grenade attacks,” says Rabia Shafi. “Those are just incidents, the ones you read about in the newspaper or see on television.” The real experience, she says is “what you go through in the years following the incident – coping with the physical disability and the mental trauma, the struggle to rebuild your life and provide for your children.” Rabia is speaking from experience. Unidentified gunmen killed her husband, Javed Shafi, four years ago. The 25-year-old widow has three daughters to take care of. The eldest, 9-year old Anisa saw her father being gunned down and has been diagnosed by psychiatrists as suffering post-traumatic stress disorder. There is not a family in the Kashmir Valley that has not been hit by the decade-long violence. Women have suffered in many ways – experiencing rape and torture, and losing loved ones and homes. In Kashmir, most of the dead or missing are men. It is the women who are now struggling alone, to rebuild their lives and homes. Some families have no male members left. At least twenty five families in Tregam village, are all-women households. In Chittisingpora, one family alone lost four men in the killings in March last year. According to A R Hanjoora, Vice President of the J&K Confederation of Social and Charitable Voluntary Organisations, at least 12,000 women have been widowed in the conflict. Dardpura village alone has 108 widows, he says. A survey conducted two years ago revealed that over 7,012 girls have been orphaned. Most of the widows are very young. Afshan and her husband had been married for barely thirteen months when unidentified gunmen killed him in Bandipora. Their son was three months old at the time of the killing. Sanaullah War, a farmer from Warpora, near Sopore, was killed during a cordon and search operation in his village. War had gone outside to tie his horse when the security forces shot him
dead. His widow is uneducated and unemployed and is dependent on her neighbours’ generosity to feed her five children. Theirs is a hand-to-mouth existence. Wives, mothers and sisters of militants are particular targets of harassment. They face routine questioning and harassment from the security forces. They also suffer social isolation. Since 1995, when the counter-insurgency operations gained ascendance, nobody wants to be seen associating with the militants’ families. Jana’s son, Fayaz Ahmed War, is a member of the Hizbul Muja-hideen. She hasn’t seen him since 1994 but the security forces constantly question her about his whereabouts. Twice they have set her house in Warpora village on fire. Desperately poor, Jana’s is a lonely battle for daily survival. “Even my neighbours avoid me,” she says. In Mazboora village, Kupwara district, Mehmooda, sister of a Hizbul militant says that she and her mother suffered intimidation by the security forces for years. Her brother is now dead and the Hizbul has done nothing for them. She says she deeply resents the fact that she and her mother had to suffer for her brother’s decision to become a militant. Worse than the suffering of the widows is that of the half-widows – the wives of missing persons. Rafiqa Ganai is a half-widow. Her husband, a clerk in the P&T department, has been missing since January last year. He is probably dead, but has not been declared dead. She is therefore not eligible for ex-gratia payment from the government and she cannot remarry for seven years. “My three children keep asking me when their father will return and I don’t know what to say,” says 31-year old Rafiqa. With death there is a closure on the matter in some sense. The family has seen the body, accorded it the last rites and buried it. This is not so in the case of missing persons, where the uncertainty never ends. Rafiqa’s plight is not uncommon in the Kashmir Valley where hundreds of men of all ages have disappeared since the conflict began in 1989. Or rather, have been disappeared. A human rights activist says that when an innocent person, picked up by the security forces dies due to torture during interrogation, he is ‘just disappeared’. The body is not returned to the family and instead quietly disposed of. According to Parveena Ahangar, founder of the Association of Parents of Disappeared Persons (APDP), around 350 names of missing persons are registered with her. But the numbers are far higher, she says, perhaps several
thousands, most of them in the villages. Parveena’s own son Javed Ahangar has been missing since 18 August 1990. She has been trying to locate him but with little success. In 1994, she founded the APDP to help parents and wives of disappeared persons. Women, who have persisted in efforts to trace their disappeared sons, have been harassed, threatened or killed. In September 1998, unidentified gunmen shot dead Haleema Begum, mother of Bilal Ahmed Bhat who has been missing since 1992. Her death has been linked to her activist role in the APDP. Some of the worst excesses against civilians, and women in particular have been committed by the ‘unidentified gunmen’. While many of them are ‘pro-government militants’ i.e. former militants now working with the security forces. There are increasing reports that militants too are indulging in violence against women. Growing indiscipline in the militant ranks and the fact that women have, by and large, turned against the militancy has resulted in increasing targeting of women. Women who go to the security camps to get their sons or husbands released run the risk of being branded informers. Najma, a resident of Behmina, Srinagar went to the BSF camp to secure the release of her husband, who had gone missing the previous week. Militants shot her dead, assuming she was an informer. Hundreds of women are believed to have been raped by militants and security forces over the last decade. Militants have raped women as a way of punishing other family members believed to be informers or suspected of opposing the militants. Soldiers rape women to punish, intimidate, and humiliate. “Raping women is a way of defiling and demoralizing the enemy,” says a lecturer in the University of Kashmir. “Why else are women raped in front of their families and community?” Although it is the woman who suffers physically and bears the social ostracism, it is, in a sense, an assault on the entire community, another victory scored over the enemy,” she says. Ten years after the women of Kunan Poshpora were gang-raped by jawans of the 5th Rajputana Rifles, most of the women in this village remain unmarried. Men in the Valley do not want to marry anyone from the “village of the raped women”, as it is known all over Kashmir. It was only a man in his mid-fifties who was willing to marry 25-year old Munira, a victim of rape. “Whenever we have a fight, he calls me a tainted woman,” she says. Zoona Amin was raped too.
Three of her daughters remain unmarried. “They were not raped,” she keeps repeating. Her eldest daughter, who was married and in another village at the time of the incident, was sent back by her husband. The reason? She is from the “village of the raped women”. The men of Kunan Poshpora lament the fate that has befallen their women. But would they marry women from another village where women had been raped? “Certainly not,” says a young man. “Yeh to izzat ka sawal hai. (This is a question of prestige and honour.)” Raped women are thus victimised by more than one aggressor – the rapist and then their own society. No effort has been made to help the victims fight their trauma. In their propaganda literature, the militant groups seem more concerned about “the attack on values like chastity which are cherished by Kashmiris” than on the violence the women have suffered. As one woman victim points out, “We women are only useful as statistics in propaganda efforts of all sides.” Beyond that they just don’t seem to matter.

(The names of some individuals have been changed to protect their identity).
At the Altar of the Nation

The glorification of women in Kashmir as biological regenerators of the nation has resulted in disregard for their reproductive rights and maternal emotions, writes Sudha Ramachandran.

In ethnic and nationalist struggles, the glorification of women as biological regenerators of the nation, combined with a complete disregard for them as people results in massive abuse of their reproductive rights and maternal emotions. This has happened in Kashmir too. In the early 1990s, militant groups imposed a ban on the use of contraceptives and on abortions. They had denounced it as unIslamic. People, especially in the villages were told that the Central government was trying to alter the Muslim-majority nature of the State and so Muslims should have more children. Besides, the armed struggle needed more fighters. The sale of contraceptives was stopped and family planning procedures were not performed, at least openly, in the hospitals. The result was an increase in the number of unwanted pregnancies. Women who already had 3-4 children were expected to bear more even if it meant economic hardship. “Members of the Jamaat-e-Islami and the Banat-ul-Islam (its women’s wing) would tell women that they were life givers and so should not kill their unborn children,” recalls a doctor in a government hospital. “The ultimate hypocrisy was that at the same time, these very organisations would tell women that they should be willing to sacrifice their sons for the sake of the armed struggle,” she says. The role of women was to ensure a continuous supply of fighters. Mothers were exorted to send their sons to fight. Those who did were praised as “patriotic mothers”. Propaganda songs honoured these mothers who “blessed their sons and sent them off for training with a smile on their lips.” And indeed, in the early 1990s, when militancy was at its peak and azadi seemed to be around the corner, many mothers did respond to the call of the separatist leaders and sent their sons willingly. “We would line the narrow streets of our neighbourhood and shower flower petals on the boys who marched off for training,” recalls 26-year old Sofiya, sister of a former militant. When militants came for food and
shelter, they were welcomed. Women protected militants hiding in their homes by telling the security forces pursuing them that they were their husbands. The truth is that most people, especially the mothers, had no idea of what lay ahead. They had been swept off their feet by the tidal wave of nationalist emotions. The social pressure to sacrifice for the struggle was tremendous and no woman, whatever her personal fears, was in a position to resist the pressure. This was especially so in the villages. And then the dead bodies started arriving. The mothers and wives who had not stopped the men from joining the jihad were filled with guilt. “I hate myself for sending him to his grave,” whispers Khatija Bee, whose son Irfan, was killed in 1993, soon after he returned from training in Pakistan. When Irfan died, Khatija was praised for the sacrifice she had made. Some members of the local unit of the Jamaat-e-Islami told her she should not grieve, for in sacrificing her son she had motivated others to sacrifice.

“Shaheed ke jo mauth hai, voh qaum ki hyat hai” (He who dies a martyr, gives life to the nation), they would tell me over and over again,” she recalls. “And I actually believed it, for a while.”

“In front of the others in my village I would say that I was happy to be the mother of a shaheed (martyr),” she recalls. “But inside, I was actually dying.” In ethnic and nationalist struggles, women are regarded as the couriers of cultural and ideological traditions. Women are expected to dress and behave in ways that are prescribed by tradition. In Kashmir, militants imposed a dress code on women. In the early nineties, they had insisted on women wearing the *burqa* as “it is a part of Islam”. They have attacked those not covering their hair or wearing trousers by throwing acid and paint on their faces or by shooting them in the legs. Women are expected to dress simply and “not in a way that will attract men.” They must not use make-up. Beauty parlours have been targets of attack. “Militant groups have also indulged in policing people’s morals, and were strict, even ruthless in enforcing moral norms,” says Jahangir Saeed, from a village near Srinagar. Recounting one instance where a woman was having an affair with a married man and became pregnant, he says that militants publicised the matter to punish ‘the guilty’ and to deter others from indulging in similar behaviour. They held the woman captive and would not let her have an abortion. The man was
tied to a donkey and paraded around the village. The rules were of course different for themselves. There have been reports of “command marriages” where militants would ‘marry’ a woman at gunpoint. A doctor at the Lal Ded Hospital for Women in Srinagar cites the case of a senior militant’s daughter becoming pregnant. The father brought her to the doctor and insisted that the baby be aborted. Participation of women in politics and public life has declined sharply. If in 1989-90, thousands of women participated in the street protests, often at the forefront, today few women venture out. While this must be attributed mainly to the poor security situation in the Valley and the disillusionment of women with the militancy and the militants, it is a fact that women have been discouraged from coming out in public by most of the political organisations. Girija Dhar, Chairperson of the recently constituted Women’s Commission, points out that just three of the 116 MLAs and two of the MLCs in the State are women. The Leader of the Opposition, Mehbooba Mufti, is perhaps the only vocal woman politician in Kashmir. The All Party Hurriyat Conference has just one organisation that has women activists – the Khawateen Markaz. The Khawateen Markaz has no voice on any issue. Few within the Hurriyat even know of its existence or activities! Gulam Mohammed Bhat, Chairman of the Jamaat-e-Islami, says that women should remain indoors as “they will be protected from the problems that arise when they meet men, who are not their blood relatives.” He says the Jamaat is opposed to women getting involved in politics as it wants to “protect women from the degenerate nature of current politics.” Begum Hanifa, a founder leader of the Banat-ul-Islam, says that it is the current situation that has prevented women from participating in politics. But she is opposed to women being politically active, whatever be the situation. She is of the view that if they are active, “they should be involved in character building programmes and social work, and behave in a proper way as prescribed by Islam.” “When men are active in politics, women should only assist them. There is no need for them to be in the forefront,” she says. To some extent women have resisted the restrictions imposed on them over the last decade. They have, for instance, refused to wear the burqa, which they say is not a part of Kashmiri tradition, although they do cover their heads with a scarf. They have
circumvented the ban on abortions and use of family planning procedures by going to Jammu for the same or having them done in Srinagar after paying a hefty sum. But these are individual efforts. There have been no attempts by women yet to articulate their demands or to resist as a group. Till that happens their voices will remain muted.

(Names of some individuals have been changed to protect their identity).
Scarred Psyche

*The decade-long violence has left indelible scars on the psyche of the women in Kashmir. Traditional support systems have crumbled and there has been a ten-fold increase in the number of psychiatric cases in the valley, writes Sudha Ramachandran.*

Living in conditions of prolonged violence has serious impact for the mental and psychological well being of individuals. In Kashmir, the decade-long turmoil has led to a dramatic increase in the number of people with psychiatric problems. The violence has left indelible scars on their psyche.

According to Dr Mohammed Aslam, a leading psychiatrist based in Srinagar, the trauma caused by torture, sexual violence, death or disappearance of family members has led to a ten-fold increase in the number of psychiatric cases in the Valley. Most of these are women.

Huge crowds wait outside the out-patient department (OPD) at Srinagar’s mental hospital. The number of OPD consultations which was 1,700 in 1971, jumped to 17,000 in 1992 and then to 32,000 in 1999. Almost every other woman in the Valley says she has a ‘heart ailment’ – referring to the feeling of constant anxiety.

The stress has affected menstrual patterns. Dr Safiya Zargar, a gynaecologist at a government health centre in Behmina, Srinagar, says that the onset of menopause is much earlier among Kashmiri women. Women in the 35-40 age group are showing symptoms of menopause, she says.

The most common psychiatric problem is depression, followed by anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorders and psychosomatic illnesses. Women account for most of the cases. This is because they are targets for sexual harassment and assault. “They also carry the burden of having to fend for themselves and their children following the death or disappearance of the husband or son,” says Dr. Shobna Sonpar, a psychologist, who recently did a preliminary assessment of the psychological needs of the people in Kashmir.
Women are in a state of prolonged and heightened anxiety as they are worried that their sons may join the militants, or get picked up by the security forces. Besides, as Dr Aslam points out, most women remain at home all day. This means they have no change of scene or recreation. This deepens depression, he says.

The plight of those whose sons or husbands are missing is particularly pathetic. For relatives of the missing the grieving never ends. In these cases, the process of mourning cannot reach closure, as there is no dead body, points out Dr Sonpar.

Relatives of the missing show little response to medication or psychotherapy, Dr Aslam observes. “They have just one demand – they want to know what happened. And we have no answers. All we can do is reassure them,” he says.

Relatives of killed militants appear to suffer deep guilt. This is especially so in cases where they, carried away by the nationalist fever of the early 1990s, had encouraged their sons and husbands to join the armed struggle. Now most of them attribute the death to fate and God’s Will.

According to Dr Aslam, most women suffer from severe depressive psychosis. He cites the case of a woman whose husband and two children were killed recently in a bomb blast. “She was in a very agitated state and had lost all will to live. She kept saying she had nothing to live for,” he says. There are tens of thousands of such cases in Kashmir. “What am I living for? Everything is over, my life is finished, I don’t want to live,” says 24-year old Hiba, whose husband was killed by pro-government militants two years ago. “Ab main jeena nahin chahthi hoon, (I dont wish to live anymore),” she keeps repeating to herself.

It is not surprising that the number of cases of attempted suicide in the Valley has registered an alarming increase. In 1995, the number of suicide attempts and suicide registered at the SMHS hospital was 12 and 3 respectively. In 1998, the number of suicide attempts crossed 100 and 70 per cent of these were women. Almost all the cases of attempted suicide or suicide deaths in the Valley are reported to be in the 20-35 year age group. Seventy per cent of these cases are women
and 80 per cent are in their early twenties. In most cases, pesticide used in the apple orchards is consumed.

Domestic violence has registered a significant increase. Women become the targets of the frustration and trauma that men suffer whether as militants or as civilians. “My son used to beat me whenever he came home,” recalls Jana, the mother of a militant. “He slapped me when I told him to leave the militant struggle.” The easy availability of weapons has worsened the problem.

Religion has helped the people cope to some extent. Several women also turn to the ‘pirs’ at shrines to help them out of their distress. Strips of green cloth are offered by Kashmiris and BSF and army personnel at shrines all over the Valley. “We tie these strips of cloth when we go to these wayside shrines to pray and make a wish,” says a woman from Rainawari. “Of course most of the time we are asking for peace of mind.”

Traditional sources of support have crumbled. In the past the community was a source of tremendous help to the individual. But the conflict has heightened suspicions; trust between neighbours and even within families has broken down. “You don’t know whether your neighbour is a militant or an informer. So how can you confide and tell her how you feel or what you saw,” asks Ather, a student of Women’s College, Srinagar.

The entire Valley has only seven psychiatrists, all based in Srinagar. Expecting a depressed or anxious woman to travel all the way from Kupwara for treatment is unrealistic. It is not surprising then that that self-medication is very high and abuse of cough syrups and minor tranquillisers widespread.

(Names of some individuals have been changed to protect their identity).
Arms and the Women

*Several women help the armed struggle in Kashmir. While some shelter militants, others transport weapons from one place to another under their burqas or in their baskets.*

Although women in Kashmir are not known to have participated in combat operations their role in the armed conflict formed the backbone of the insurgency, especially in the early 1990s. The militant groups are all-male. According to former militants of Hizbul Mujahideen, Hizbollah and Al-Jehad, there are no women in the militant groups. Women were not among those trained in Pakistan, they say. The boys maintain that women should not be involved in actual combat but admit that but for the support from women the combat operations would have suffered. In 1989-90, women came out into the streets in thousands and participated enthusiastically in the protests. They were often seen at the forefront of street demonstrations. When the boys returned from training in Pakistan and launched their armed struggle against the Indian security forces, the women provided them food and shelter, even took care of the injured. “Some of us helped the militants because we had brothers in the militant groups. But most of us helped because we were excited about azadi,” says Anjum of Sopore. Even today many women help the armed struggle. Some transport weapons from one place to another, under their burqas or in their baskets. There are others who come out in public and accuse the security forces of rape, who allow themselves to be used by the separatists’ propaganda machinery even if it means they have to suffer the social ostracism that comes with being a raped woman. Most of the women who have actively supported the militants are not known by name or face. But there are some like Farida bahenji and Aasiyeh Andrabi whose involvement is known all over the Valley. Ask anyone in Kashmir about the role of women in the militancy and they will tell you to “ask Farida bahenji.” “Farida bahenji used to coordinate the activities of various militant groups,” says a member of the Hurriyat Conference. “She knows everything,” he adds in a conspiratorial whisper. Farida was arrested under TADA in 1995.
following a series of bomb blasts in Delhi and was held at Tihar jail till her release last year. She vehemently denies any involvement in the militancy although she admits she supports it. She accepts that Bilal Ahmed Beg, a top J&K Islamic Front militant, used to frequent her house. “Why not?” she asks, a trifle irritated. “He is my brother. Is it wrong to allow your brother into your house? Is it wrong to give him food?” Aasiyeh Andrabi, leader of Kashmir’s sole all-women separatist group, the Dukhtaran-e-Millat, is vocal in her support for the militants and for Kashmir’s accession to Pakistan. But she too maintains she is not involved in the “practical militancy”. “I have never held a gun,” she says adding that she gives only “moral support to the Mujahideen.” However, many believe that the Dukhtaran-e-Millat’s burqa-clad members are involved in gun running. But the attitude of women to the militancy and the militants has undergone substantial change over the years. If in the early 1990s, women welcomed the militants into their homes and provided them food and shelter willingly, today they prefer not to answer their knock on the door. “In the early years women would hide the militants in their homes during cordon-and-search operations, today several women are turning in the boys to the security forces,” says a resident of Handwara. The change has come about because of war-weariness and the growing indiscipline within the militant ranks. The boys are not the heroes they once were. “We opened our doors because we had no option,” says Bilkees Ahangar. “We still don’t have an option,” she says. “What can we do? The boys are armed and we aren’t. Besides we hate the security forces so much.”

(Names of some individuals have been changed to protect their identity).
We don’t want the kind of peace that will come from the talks going on nowadays, says Aasiyeh Andrabi, chief of Dukhtaran-e-Millat, Kashmir’s only all-woman separatist group, in an interview to Sudha Ramachandran.

Aasiyeh Andrabi, chief of the Dukhtaran-e-Millat, Kashmir’s only all-women separatist group, shot into prominence when she tried to enforce the burqa on Kashmiri women in the early 1990s. She sees herself as a champion of women’s rights.

Fiercely anti-India, Andrabi is in favour of Kashmir’s accession to Pakistan and according to reports, has hoisted the Pakistani flag in Srinagar every August 14, for several years. She has spent much of the last decade either in Indian jails or underground.

Andrabi backs armed jihad but claims she has never touched a weapon. It is believed that her outfit is involved in gun-running for the militants.

She is known in the Valley as “The Voice”. Few have seen her or can identify her by face as she never appears in public without her face covered.

Meeting Andrabi is not an easy task. There are intermediaries who fix the appointment.

Appointments are made and broken. She plays hard to get. And just when you have given up on meeting her, it happens. A burqa-clad woman appears almost from nowhere and takes you to meet “Madam”.

Andrabi takes me by surprise. She is in a burqa but with her face uncovered. Her infant son in her arms throughout the interview, she presents a picture of a doting mother and a regular housewife – hardly an extremist on the run from the Indian security forces.

But when she speaks, her extreme views become apparent. Excerpts of the interview:
Why did you start the Dukhtaran-e-Millat?

I started Dukhtaran-e-Millat to make women aware of their status in Islam. Islam says that women are servants only of Allah and not of any human being. This gives women individuality. Islam stresses education for men and women without discrimination. Islam has given women the most rights. It is the best religion for women.

I want to see not only Kashmir but the whole universe governed by the laws of Allah. Allah says Islam is the religion of all human beings not just of Muslims.

What has Dukhtaran-e-Millat done for women?

We have made them aware of the rights Islam has given them. We have made them feel more secure by making them wear the burqa. We are helping widows and destitute women. We organise the weddings of the sisters and daughters of martyrs and campaign against the dowry system.

How does a burqa improve the status of women?

I wear the burqa and feel free in it. I feel secure. The burqa improves a woman’s security.

The Quran says that the chastity of a woman should be protected, her sanctity preserved. If you leave precious ornaments out in the open, they will get stolen. Similarly, a woman must be covered for her own safety.

Should women play a role in politics?

Certainly. If women do not play a political role what will their future be? They constitute 50 per cent of the population. So they cannot be ignored.

But organisations like the Jamaat-e-Islami insist that women should remain indoors and not play an active political role.

What does the Jamaat know about Islam or what rights Islam has given women?
The Hurriyat is a divided house. All of them will only compromise with India. We have nothing to do with these men or their organisations.

You will not see any women in the movement here. Dukhtaran-e-Millat is the organisation where women are politically active.

Do women have a role in armed struggle?

No. There is no necessity for women to get involved in armed struggle. The men are fighting and if women too go away to fight there will be problems in society. We need to take care of the home front. If women go away family life will be disturbed.

I don’t think carrying weapons does anything positive for their status. Men are physically built for weapons and fighting. I think it is below our status to pick up weapons.

When the jehad began in 1990 and the boys went to Pakistan for training, many women came to me and told me they wanted to go too. I told them not to. Had I permitted them over 80 per cent of Kashmiri women would have been martyred by now.

What does secularism mean to you?

I don’t believe in secularism. It is rubbish. I believe that there should be only one religion – Islam. We Kashmiris are fighting to be free of India and when we are free we want to be part of Pakistan because all Muslims should be united.

Do you think women in Pakistan have a better status than those in India? There is no Islamic government in Pakistan now. So there is no difference between the Indian and Pakistani governments.

So how would accession to Pakistan help Kashmiri women?

First all Muslims should be together. Then we will have greater power to change things. So we must get freedom.
Our work does not end with accession to Pakistan. The most hectic part of our struggle will start after we unite with Pakistan as we then have to Islamize Pakistan.

Your campaign to enforce the burqa on Kashmiri women… Why did you resort to pressure?

When we started the campaign, I spoke to the ulema (Muslim clergy). I told them that women would not wear the burqa and that we should use some pressure to impose it.

They agreed and issued a fatwa that we could use pressure. We announced the fatwa in the newspapers and gave women a deadline by which they would have to wear the burqa. What impact has your campaign had on women? Very few women wear the burqa in Srinagar…

Two out of every three women wear the burqa, or at least they wear the abaya (a loose ankle-length coat) and cover their heads even if they don’t cover their face. So we did have an impact.

In 1981 when I started wearing a burqa I went to the shop to purchase material for the burqa. The shopkeeper told me that he didn’t keep burqa material as nobody used it.

But today if you go to the market you will see that the material is available indicating there is a demand for it today.

You and your supporters threw acid and paint on women who refused to wear the burqa. Did the terror tactics achieve anything?

It was only after the deadline expired that we threw colour. We never threw acid or paint; just colour which I tried on my hands first and which washes off easily. It was the agents of Indian intelligence who went around throwing acid to malign us. Anyway, we stopped throwing colour after two months.

Why?
Ninety-nine per cent of the people had started wearing the *burqa* so our goal was achieved. We also felt that anything achieved through pressure never lasts.

If pressure never achieves lasting results, why do you support armed struggle? Has anything been achieved so far?

I believe in armed struggle only. Politicians will do nothing. We have achieved a lot. India will have to leave.

But so many lives have been lost…

To gain something one must sacrifice.

What is your role in the ongoing struggle?

I am not involved in practical militancy. I have never held a gun. I give moral support to the Mujahideen. My husband is a Mujahid and I am proud to be his wife.

If you have never held a gun, why were you in jail?

Who knows why the security forces want to harass me?

You are in favour of armed struggle, but many women here want peace….

What peace? We don’t want the kind of peace that will come from talks going on now-a-days.

We want the peace that comes when we will be free from India. We have sacrificed 80,000 lives, so we don’t want pre-1990 peace.

How do people respond to your political activism?

They tell us to go home and work but we are used to it.

What does Kashmiriyat mean to you?

Kashmiriyat is a rubbish slogan. I believe only in Islam. Kashmiriyat
is un-Islamic. It is Indianised culture. We have to save the Islamic character of Kashmir. Being with India, it is Islam that is in danger not Kashmiriyat.

What about the Pandits? Aren’t they a part of Kashmir too?

We don’t say Kashmir is for Muslims only. It is for Muslims, Pandits, Sikhs, Christians and Buddhists.

It was the Pandits who left Kashmir just because Jagmohan told them to. Nothing happened to them that warranted their exodus.

Yes, some Pandits were killed. But many Muslims too were killed – 10 Muslims for every Pandit killed. The Pandits were informers. It is very difficult for us to trust them.

When we suffered we suffered alone. Why should they be allowed back when there is peace? They left and are now suffering outside. Let them suffer. I think they should suffer a lot more.
Give Peace a Chance

Most women are of the opinion that it is the gun which has brought them this pain and suffering.

Ask Javed Mir, Vice-Chairman of the Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Front (JKLF) why there are no women playing a political role or participating in negotiations and he says that this is so because women “aren’t sure what they want.” “They don’t have clear ideas,” he says, dismissively.

But ask any woman in the Kashmir Valley what she would ask for if she was sitting at the negotiating table and she will tell you firmly that she will demand peace. “We want peace and a just peace,” is the chant you hear all over the Valley. Overwhelmed by the immediate challenges they are confronted with, several women who have been widowed say that they need money, jobs, education for their children or a house to live in. If the average Kashmiri woman appears to be disinterested in the ‘big political issues’ it is because they have immediate problems to solve. Besides they are deeply disillusioned with their political leaders and the militants.

But this apparent lack of interest camouflages a sharp awareness that they have of the underlying problems that have led to the present situation and the variety of ideas that could lead to a better life for their people. Ideas that people like Javed Mir and scores of others in Srinagar, New Delhi and Islamabad have no interest in or time for. Most women, especially those who have suffered directly because of the violence, are of the opinion that it is the gun which has brought them this pain and suffering. But they are very clear that it is not the militancy that is responsible for the state of affairs but the “gun culture” that is prevalent today in the Valley.

“We don’t support guns but we understand why they came to be used,” says Hamida Bano, who teaches English at the University of Kashmir, in Srinagar and is wife of a Hurriyat leader. “The gun was used as a means of drawing attention, a vehicle of dialogue. But
having brought the Kashmir issue into the spotlight, the militancy should have stopped after a year,” she says. By refusing to address the underlying issue, India provided space for militancy to continue and for the entry of foreign mercenaries. Mehbooba Mufti, leader of the Opposition in the State Assembly, says that any solution to be lasting should be an honourable one that will have something to offer to all parties to the conflict. “The solution must not be of a type where any section feels that they have been defeated or made to surrender,” Ms Mufti says. “They should not feel that their sacrifice was in vain.” Stressing the need for interim arrangements whereby the people will develop a stake in the peace process, Ms Mufti says that “free movement between the two Kashmirs” and “allowing social, cultural and economic exchange will lead to a huge change in the attitude of the people.”

With anti-India feeling running high in the Valley, there is a need for the Indian government to work on confidence building measures. “For a start, Kashmiris who are in custody on minor charges should be released and action should be taken against those who are violating human rights,” she says. “If the Indian government would extend meaningful help to families hit by the violence, it would go a long way in solving the problem,” says Ather, a 35-year old widow from Sopore, pointing out that it will restore the faith of the people in New Delhi. But, Hamida Bano disagrees. While admitting that victims of violence need immediate help, she believes that this only helps in tackling the symptoms, not in addressing the root of the problem. “You can help a widow or a wife of a disappeared person. But so long as the root problem remains, more women will be widowed and more young men will go missing,” she points out. And the root problem, she says, is “India’s denial to Kashmiris of their right to self-determination”. Pointing out that India has never allowed democracy to work in Kashmir, she says that her demand is for “sovereignty to be restored to the people of Kashmir.”

“I have just one demand,” says Parveena Ahangar. “If I was at the negotiating table I would ask the Indian government what happened to my son.” Parveena’s son Javed Ahangar has been missing for almost a decade now. “These politicians and Hurriyat leaders only
worry about becoming ministers. I have more immediate worries like whether my son will reach home safely today,” says a teacher in Srinagar. “Aman gachi asun (Give peace a chance). That is what I would tell the Indian and Pakistani governments,” says Javida Shah, the mother of a former militant, playing with her grandson. “What is the use of all this fighting if there is no one left to enjoy its eventual benefits?” Are decision-makers in New Delhi and Islamabad, Srinagar and Muzaffarabad listening?

(The names of some individuals have been changed to protect their identity).
A Generation Lost

Their lives have been shattered by bombs and bullets. The rattle of gunfire is as familiar to them as the bleat of a goat. The children of Kashmir never feel safe, even at home, writes Sudha Ramachandran.

When Altaf paints, he uses only three colours – red, grey and black. Light strokes first. Then he splashes colour and the strokes grow in intensity, becoming almost savage. By the time he is done, he is exhausted. “This is my Valley,” the 9-year old says pointing to the drawing. I take a look and am horrified, for Altaf’s Valley has no green meadows, grazing sheep or bubbling brooks. It is a macabre picture of blood and gore. Three men, all armed, stand near a mangled body. A bus in flames is parked near a bunker. A blindfolded child is seated on a chair, what looks like a severed leg by his side.

Altaf shows me more of his paintings. Violence and sadness pervades every one of them. He never uses yellow or green. “Altaf was hiding under the bed when unidentified gunmen entered the house and shot his father dead,” his uncle tells me. The boy was alone in the house when it happened. Today, three years after that incident, Altaf is withdrawn and given to mood swings. And, he refuses to talk about his father.

This is the story of Altaf Wani. It is the story also of Harleen Kaur & Ghouse and of thousands of youngsters in Kashmir; children whose lives have been shattered by bombs and bullets, to whom the rattle of gunfire is as familiar as the bleat of a goat. Many of them have spent nights cowering in a corner while militants or security forces ransacked their homes or gunned down their loved ones. This is a generation, which is always anxious and never feels safe, even at home.

Every child in the Valley has been affected in one way or another by the 11-year long armed conflict. Some have been direct victims and have been killed in crossfire or grenade blasts. Many have been injured, some disabled for life.
A fortnight ago, two children, Merjauddin and Abdul Majid, were blown to pieces when a landmine exploded near their school in Baramullah town. Five other children were injured in the incident. Militants had planted a landmine in the sand heap they were playing in.

Shaziya was barely 10 years old when her left leg was ripped off in a bomb blast six years ago. “I was playing outside my house, just playing,” she says. “Suddenly, there was a deafening sound and I felt a sharp pain. I don’t know what happened after that but when I woke up my leg was gone.” She pauses and then whispers, “for no fault of mine.”

In October 1990, 8-year-old Jawaid Ahmed Dar was arrested, possibly by CRPF personnel, for throwing stones at their vehicle. Police officials initially admitted that he was being held at the Old Airport Interrogation Centre. Later they denied it. A CRPF official in a Srinagar interrogation centre told his parents he had been adopted by a CRPF officer and taken away. The State government subsequently denied that he was arrested at all. According to Amnesty International, his whereabouts are unknown to date.

Several children have lost close family members. Many of them have witnessed the killings. They are all inevitably traumatised. The impact is evident across the religious divide. Gulshan, Parveena, Ghouse and Zahid were locked up in a room while their father, a peon in a government school in Tregam, was being interrogated in an adjacent room by the security forces. He was tortured and subsequently killed. That was six years ago. Even now the older two children have problems falling asleep as they are troubled by memories of their father screaming in pain.

7-year old Harleen Kaur of Chitisinghpora has been deeply scarred by the massacre on the night of 20th March 2000, when unidentified gunmen shot dead 36 Sikhs of her village. Harleen’s father, uncle and two cousins were among those who were gunned down that night. “Every time there is a knock on the door, Harleen cries as she is reminded of that terrifying night,” her mother says. The events are deeply etched in the little girl’s memory – the knock on the door,
armed men taking her father and other men away, then the gunshots that shattered the silence of the night and finally, the sight of her father’s blood-splattered body lying on the ground.

“Since the killing Harleen has become very aggressive,” her mother says. She rarely talks. Her older sister is perpetually anxious. Arif Rashid Bhat’s father, a militant, was shot dead by the security forces. “I wish my father hadn’t become a militant,” the 10-year old says. “If he had been a regular father, he would be alive and with me today.” Arif now stays at the J&K Yateem Trust, Kashmir’s oldest orphanage.

However, even children of ‘regular parents’ and from ‘normal’ families have been affected by the tension and conflict. The presence of soldiers and bunkers is un-nerving and a constant reminder of the danger that surrounds them.

“I can never talk freely in school because I don’t know who is with the militants and who with the security forces,” explains 15-year old Saira, who lives in an upmarket residential area in Srinagar.

There is simply no recreation for children. Most of the open grounds have either been converted into burial sites or taken over by the security forces. In Srinagar, children from less privileged homes can be seen playing cricket in graveyards. Those from the middle and upper classes spend the evenings inside their homes. Except at school, children do not interact with each other.

But for the Broadway Cinema in the Srinagar cantonment area, there are no cinema halls in Kashmir. Militants banned movies and burned down cinema halls in the early 1990s. Only the television provides some entertainment. However, with frequent power-shutdowns even that is not much of an option.

Teenage girls suffer the worst of the attacks by militants imposing dress restrictions. In the early 1990s, when the Allah Tigers and the Dukhtaran-e-Millat first imposed the burqa on women, they threw acid and paint on the faces of girls who dared to defy the diktat. In March 1999, militants shot a 14-year old girl in her legs as she was in jeans and had left her head uncovered. A month ago, militants of
the Lashkar–e-Jabbar threw acid on the faces of two girls because they were not wearing the *burqa*.

The recent imposition of the *burqa* has again spread panic among girls and their parents in the Valley. Most youngsters deeply resent the restrictions. Teenage rebellion is sometimes expressed through violating norms set by the militants, which anxious parents want their children to follow. Listen to the children talk or watch them play and it is so obvious – it is the conflict, the ‘security situation’ that is uppermost on their minds all the time. A child follows me around chanting the word “Indian”. Exasperated, I try to chase him but he races away. And then, he trips as his shoe slips off his foot and falls down. I pounce on him triumphantly and hold him down. Just another pesky 6-year old? As he struggles to wear his shoes, he says: “When you chased me, I thought it was catch-and-kill.” Another frightened six-year old, I correct myself.

Catch-and-kill is a counterinsurgency tactic where a person, believed to be a militant, is shot dead on capture. Ask any child in the Valley what it means and he will tell you, even if he does not otherwise speak in English. Bullet, bunker, bomb, curfew, militant, grenade, security forces, army, catch-and-kill – words that do not generally figure in the vocabulary of most children elsewhere in the country. But here in Kashmir, a child uses the words with an easy familiarity. Sadly, few children have any understanding of the word Kashmiriyat. The armed conflict has left its violence and hate-filled stamp on children’s vocabulary, as well.

As it has on the games children play. You don’t see children play hide-and-seek or cops and robbers. It is “militants and security forces” that is the most popular on the streets of downtown Srinagar. Nobody wants to be a soldier and the security forces never win. It’s a ‘cordon and search operation’ on Nalamar Road. Only the soldiers and militants are 8-year olds armed with toy guns and using rubbish heaps as ‘bunkers’. ‘Hizbollah Commander’ Idris walks with an exaggerated swagger and points his gun at ‘traitor’ Ali. The latter’s ‘wife’ Salima begs for mercy but Idris pushes her aside and shoots Ali at point blank range. The ‘soldiers’ arrive on the scene. ‘Major saab’ cordons
off the area. Idris hides himself and nobody betrays him. ‘Major saab’ grabs an onlooker and hits him hard with the butt of his rifle. He orders his soldiers to search the house. The ‘television’ is broken and the house is ransacked. There is a chase and a shoot-out. However, the militants get away. ‘Traitor’ Ali who has been eliminated early in the game sits by my side and explains the rules to me. The first rule is that soldiers are not allowed to run faster than the militants!

Education has been one of the biggest casualties of the conflict. Militants are said to have razed to the ground 828 of the Valley’s 5,379 schools. Several schools have been converted into army camps. At the height of militancy, children spent most days of the school year at home.

While enrolment has remained more or less static since 1989, the dropout rate from schools has increased dramatically. Economic pressures following the death of the breadwinner has compelled several children to drop out of school to support the family. Some report disinterest in studies, which was probably triggered off by depression and anxiety, as the reason for quitting school. Mafoosa was in Class I when her father was killed accidentally during a cordon-and-search operation in Warpora village. She quit school to look after her younger brothers and sister and to take care of their home, while her mother was out at work. Shabir Ahmed was 9-year old when his father was killed in a grenade blast. With an unwell mother and four sisters to look after, Shabir quit school to provide for them.

The anxiety and depression triggered off by the conflict situation has a particularly frightening impact on teenagers for their listlessness often makes them vulnerable to exploitation by vested interests. In the Valley, this often means joining the militants. The story of 18-year old Afaq Ahmed indicates what can and does happen to youngsters in the Valley.

Afaq failed to clear his Class X examinations twice. Depressed and confused, he started spending long hours in the mosques and would come home late. Unknown to his parents, he was being indoctrinated by militants. They convinced him to attain ‘martyrdom’ by becoming a ‘human bomb’.
On April 19th last year, Afaq drove a car laden with explosives to the army headquarters in Srinagar and blew himself up along with the car. Would Afaq have taken a different path if he had been given professional counselling and support? Perhaps. Unfortunately, there are just eight psychiatrists in the entire Valley, all based in Srinagar. There has been a ten-fold increase in the number of people seeking help since the insurgency erupted in 1989. Most children needing help go undetected as they are unable to articulate their problems.

Unlike other conflict areas where international aid agencies are active, in Kashmir such efforts are minimal. “The number of children who have been orphaned in the conflict is a virtual deluge,” says A R Hanjoora, General Secretary of the J&K Yateem Trust. Yet, there are barely a handful of orphanages in the State. Most orphanages house boys only.

At the J&K Yateem Trust, Kashmir’s oldest orphanage, Shanawaz Ahangar (13) tells me about his father, a blacksmith, who was shot dead 8 years ago by the security forces during a cordon-and-search operation. “I hate the army,” he says. “They killed my father for no reason. He wasn’t a militant.”

Ishfaq Ahmed Khan (7) was barely 3-year old when his father was shot dead. Yet neither he, Shanawaz nor Arif are keen to pick up the gun to settle scores. They all want to become doctors and take care of orphans. As Arif explains, “Azadi is when you don’t let the past dominate your life. When you are happy you find azadi.”

(The names of some individuals have been changed to protect their identity).
Paradise on Earth – But Not for Women

The infiltration of religious extremists into the Indian part of Kashmir has major human rights implications. They have imposed new restrictions on women in Kashmir’s secular society, sharply circumscribing women’s activities and rights.

When 24-year old Shaziya discovered she was pregnant with her fifth child she panicked. She did not want the child because she could not afford another.

But there was no way she could terminate her pregnancy in Srinagar, the capital of Jammu and Kashmir, the northern Indian state, without inviting the wrath of Islamic militants fighting for separation.

“So I made a 10-hour journey by bus to have the pregnancy terminated at Jammu,” says Shaziya.

Jammu and Kashmir is India’s only Muslim-majority state. Kashmiri separatists accuse the Indian government of trying to alter the demographic composition of the state through its birth control campaign. With a population of one billion, India is the second most populous country in the world.

Since the armed conflict in Indian-administered Kashmir began in 1989, militants demanding independence from India have banned the adoption of birth control measures, the sale of contraceptives, and abortion. This has forced many women to have unwanted babies.

But many others make the trip to Jammu town, lying 300 kilometres from Srinagar to use facilities there. Militancy is less of a problem in
Jammu, the winter capital, than in Srinagar, the summer capital of the state.

Those few who can afford it, pay huge sums to buy contraceptives on the black-market or undergo sterilisation or abortion surreptitiously.

The challenge to their reproductive rights is one of many threats facing women in the Himalayan province, once hailed by a local poet as ‘paradise on earth’ for its breathtaking scenic beauty.

As men are killed in the fighting or leave home to join militant groups, many Kashmiri women have become sole breadwinners, swapping the role of house-bound housewife for jobs.

But they are under fire from all sides: the deterioration in the security situation and strict patrolling by government troops have restricted their physical mobility. At the same time, they are under severe restrictions imposed by those extremist groups that seek to undermine women’s rights.

“It is un-Islamic to use contraceptives or terminate a pregnancy,” says Abdul Wani, an activist of the hardline Jamaat-e-Islami organisation in Sopore town, 50 kilometres from Srinagar. The town is a stronghold of the Jamaat and the militant Hizbul Mujahideen.

“If our women do not bear many children, we Muslims will be outnumbered by Hindus in Kashmir,” he argues.

The mammoth Indian family planning programme is implemented all over the country. Nation-wide, contraceptives are easily available, the medical termination of pregnancies is legal and incentives are offered for sterilisation.

Before the conflict, many Kashmiri women opted for birth control measures. The militants’ ban has restricted their access to these facilities.

But the facilities continue to exist and a thriving underground network has sprung up, providing the service at a high price – an abortion, which elsewhere costs no more than Rupees 100 cost up to 10,000 in the Kashmir Valley in the 1990s.
Militants are known to have gunned down doctors who provided family planning facilities. “But there have been instances when militants used this information to extort money from the doctors,” says Dr Lone who served at the Lal Ded Hospital for Women in Srinagar.

Apparently, the ban excluded some women. Dr Lone cites the case of a militant commander whose unmarried daughter had become pregnant. “He was willing to pay any amount to ensure that the pregnancy was terminated,” says Dr Lone.

On another occasion in 1995, unidentified gunmen shot dead a female doctor in Tangmarg, 40 kilometres from Srinagar, for refusing to terminate the pregnancy of a woman associate.

“The militants imposed the ban because they really want more fighters,” says a social worker in Srinagar.

“Members of the Jamaat-e-Islami and the Banat-ul-Islam [its women’s wing] would tell women that they were life givers and so should not kill their unborn children,” recalls Dr Ayesha Haider, a gynaecologist in a government hospital.

But while militant organisations glorify the role of the mother as the biological regenerator of the ‘nation’ they show scant regard for women’s reproductive rights and for their maternal emotions.

Dr Haider says that even as they emotionally pressured women not to abort, the militants had no qualms about asking them to sacrifice their sons in the armed struggle. Many Hizbul Mujahideen songs appeal to mothers to “do their bit for the armed struggle”.

And many women, touched by this emotional appeal and a wave of nationalism that swept Kashmir in the early 1990s, did send their sons to fight.

But when the bodies started arriving home many mothers were overcome with deep guilt and remorse.

When her son Irfan, a member of the Hizbul Mujahideen was killed, Khatija Bee was deeply depressed.
Scores of people, including local members of the Jamaat-e-Islami, paid respects to the ‘martyr’.

“I was praised for my sacrifice,” she recalls. “Everyone told me not to grieve because my son is a shaheed [martyr] and that his sacrifice would invigorate the nation.

“When talking to others in the village I would feel pressured to say I was happy to be the mother of a martyr. But inside I was actually dying. I did not want my son dead, even if he had attained martyrdom,” she says, tears streaming down her face.

Efforts to rule by fundamentalist edict have existed from the early days of this conflict. As early as 1990, even the supposedly secular Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Front (JKLF), its Islamic credentials under attack, collaborated with moves to forcibly close down liquor shops and cinema halls.

Later the Hizbul Mujahideen and an assortment of militant groups cracked down on women. They were ordered to wear the burqa (a black cloak which covers the woman from head to toe, including her face) and banned from using make up or wearing ornaments.

The ban on contraception and abortions followed.

Those who refused to conform were severely dealt with. Acid and paint have been thrown at women who refused to cover their faces. More recently, girls wearing trousers have been shot in the legs.

Many Kashmiri women have tried to defy the militants’ orders by wearing a scarf that only covers their head and not the face as they believe that the burqa is not a part of Kashmiri culture. In fact, a woman in a burqa is a rare sight in Srinagar.

The defiance was facilitated by a decline in militancy in the late 1990s, when Indian forces were able to flush militants out of Srinagar.
But women are once again fearful, with the spread of hardline Islamic ideology from neighbouring Afghanistan and the infiltration of Afghan militants into Kashmir. The growing Talebanisation – named after the ruling Taleban regime in Afghanistan – of the militant movements in the Valley has led to fears that the old diktats will now be re-enforced.
Blood Soil
Chittisinghpora and After

The road from Anantnag took us past burnt houses once belonging to Kashmiri Pandits, past hamlets where men in pherans huddled on street corners, bewildered, past groves of almond trees, laden with soft pink blossoms on this early spring morning. Arshad’s new Enfield cut a narrow path through the cold air, which closed quickly around me, numbing my fingers and ears, chilling my body despite my thick pheran. On either side of the road lay impossibly green fields stretching to meet the white majesty of the Pir Panjal range. In my stomach, cold dread; my heart already weighed down with anticipation. I know I am not cut out for what I will be witnessing shortly.

We pass the turn off to Martand, where we had planned to go that morning. I was to photograph the 8th century Sun Temple built by Lalitaditya. It rises majestically on a plateau, Kashmir’s Parthenon, silhouetted black against the snow peaks. The Pandit girl in Mattan had called it the temple of the Pandavas and I had looked forward to the simple pleasures of clambering among the ruins at dawn. Arshad had ridden early that morning from his home some miles away to pick me up from Anantnag when he was stopped by a policeman who asked whether he knew anything about the rumour, you know, of the massacre of the Sikhs. If I had been in Srinagar, safe, some eighty kilometers away, I know I wouldn’t have made the journey. I’ll admit it: I am a coward. I have no stomach for these things. Here, in Anantnag, so close to the massacre, it seemed I had no choice. Some crazy sense of duty or guilt made me say, “Arshad, drop me there and leave. I’ll make my way back.”

Half a kilometer from Chittisinghpora I could hear the wails and shrieks of women. The deserted track soon grew thick with turbaned men running in the same direction as us, their faces wild with grief and disbelief. “Who?” I kept asking myself. Security forces/ Indian Agents seemed the most obvious answer. Clinton is in town. What better way to point to the perfidy of the terrorists.
I am one of the first journalists to arrive. We are made to stand near the police jeeps while the Sardars gather around the policemen shouting, raging. They abuse the police, the army, the journalists, the politicians. From time to time young men rush at us, screaming, waving their fists threateningly. A few men from the village gather around me, and I get the first layer of the story, which would later grow and thicken as the days passed. It was the first time in the twelve years of militancy that the Sikh community in Kashmir was the target of an attack—an attack that left 36 dead.

In this hamlet of 300 Sikh families nearly every house has lost a relative, neighbour or friend. I see in the distance women squatting together, wailing, beating their chests. One of them has lost her husband, father-in-law, brother-in-law and two young sons, a young man tells me. Suddenly, the cops wave us on. A few TV crews arrive and elbow their way to the front. I let them go and approach with leaden feet, camera gripped tightly between me and the scene in front of me.

The Gurudwara walls are riddled with bullets. Slippers and shoes lie scattered in pools of blood where they fell the night before. I pick up my camera and start shooting mechanically. My heart is beating wildly; my hands start to shake. Inside the courtyard of the Gurudwara, the bodies are assembled, uncovered, blood-spattered, mourned by their grieving relatives and friends. The shrieks and shouts grow each time a new bier arrives. And my God, they don’t stop coming. I don’t know why I am photographing all of this. What am I recording – my own grief or theirs?

The killings had taken place in two spots simultaneously. One, outside the gurudwara as you approach the village, and the other, in front of another gurudwara a few hundred meters away where the land dips into trough. I walk towards the second spot, passing men coming up the slope with dead bodies covered in blankets, the women following behind, their cries sharpened by rage and grief. I pass a pretty little girl of around twelve or thirteen, a thick brown plait reaches below her waist. She leans on an old uncle, perhaps, “Daddy, Daddy kitthey? Where are you?” she keeps repeating. I hear a strange sound above all of this dreadful clamour and it is a while before I realise it’s my own breath faltering into loud, ragged sobs.
Just the night before in Anantnag, I had sat in the kitchen sipping tea, warming my hands on a *kangri*, and listening to Basheer tell me about the brutal murder of his father and brother in the early ’90s. Both were National Conference politicians who were gunned down one after another by the Hizb-ul-Mujahideen (HM). Basheer himself was not involved in politics, but a couple of years later when elections were announced, thinking that he may run as an NC candidate, the HM put him down on their hit list.

“Every night between 7 and 10, we would wait for them to come and get me,” he said, “Twice they came for me, but I escaped unharmed because we managed to bang on our tin roof and alert the neighbourhood. In no time a couple of hundred men from the village came running and the killers disappeared into the night. I was lucky,” he laughed softly at his fate. “No one comes to kill during the day,” he said, suddenly serious, “It’s always around this time.”

At Chittisinghpora the next day I realised that the massacre had taken place even as we were speaking, even as we were sipping our tea, in exactly the manner that Basheer had described.

Someone takes me to a man who narrowly escaped being killed. I ask for Karamjit Singh from the group of people huddled together. “Why? Who’re you?” a middle-aged Sardar asks sullenly. I squat a few feet away from the group and wait patiently. It takes a while for the man to ease up before he turns to me and tells his tale.

“I’d stepped out to get some milk around seven in the evening and met some friends on the path on my way home. Right near the gurudwara, right here, outside, we saw we saw a group of men from our village talking to some army men. I asked what was wrong, and the tall uniformed man who claimed to be a C.O. of the army said that they suspected three militants were hiding in our village and needed to search the houses. This guy even had a colonel’s pips on his uniform, the bastard. Then they asked the women and children to stay inside while they pulled the men out. I was worried about my wife who gets very tense in such situations so I asked him whether he could excuse me, but he very politely and laughingly said, “relax, sit down, this won’t take more than 5 minutes.” He said relax, that it was Holi and we could
join them for a drink later if we wished. Just then in the distance someone shone a flashlight which distracted these guys and I slipped away because I really didn’t feel like hanging around, and the next thing I hear are automatic rifles shattering the peace of our village forever.”

“Were they army?” I ask, “how can you be so sure that they weren’t really army?”

“We’re sure because we live here and we know who is who,” he glares at me, and then turning to his friends mutters, “He said relax, the bastard said relax…”

He wraps his blanket tightly around himself and shrinks back into the protective circle of the men without another word.

A former schoolmaster sits by me. A small man with kindly eyes. He wants to talk to me but is afraid. Only when I assure him of anonymity does he speak. He had just asked his young son to close his shop and come in when he heard his neighbour’s son being asked to come out of his house. “Since his father was already outside with the other men he readily obeyed. Then they were made to squat in front of the Gurudwara wall and eat bullets. The men then ran off shouting Jai Hind! The young boy, Gurpreet Singh, a student, was only 19. His father who actually survived in spite of his bullet wounds probably wishes he hadn’t.”

I get up from the side of the Gurudwara where the men have gathered and from where I am gleaning my information. I am drawn back to the side where the bodies, the women, the children and the grieving relatives sit. It feels strangely voyeuristic to stumble upon this scene at once so intimate and so public. The bodies are wrapped in blankets. A hand, grey now, but upturned, the fingers curled, peeps shyly from under a blue checkered blanket as if it were still in its bedroom early in the morning.

Who were these men who did this? Was it easy for them, their fingers light against their triggers, a too-quick burst of fire and then, there in front of them, blood and life leaking slowly, inexorably, out of these bodies. As they ran into the darkness, away from the smell of death did the dead weight of remorse slow them, or was it simply the surge of
blood-lust in their veins, in their loins that spurred them forward. What do I feel about these men whom I have never seen? At the borders of my numbness, my tiredness, is there hatred, revulsion? What does the girl whose father was killed feel? Can she direct her anger, her feelings of revenge profitably against ghosts who vanished without a trace, or will she sit forever raging at her own inadequacies, her own paralyzing helplessness?

I find myself squatting in front of two young men crying quietly in the corner. I put my hand out on a shoulder; a face looks up, wet, red-eyed, registering surprise for only a moment before he leans into my arm and collapses into shuddering sobs. I notice the snow piled up in the shadow of the Gurudwara is getting dirtier from being trampled upon by truckloads of Sikhs arriving from all over the Valley. One family enters screaming, their women claw at their own clothes, a man rips off his turban, tears open his shirt at the chest and falls at the feet of a corpse. The young boy of about fifteen, who had been weeping quietly until then, grabs him, tries to calm him, sobbing, beseeching. In the scuffle his own turban is knocked off, and his hair, thick, long, almost sinuous, unfurls like a flag around him. I am struck by an incongruous thought: how fragile, how beautiful he looks.

The stories about last night differ in their telling. A wizened old Sardar stops my questions with a question: “Are you Hindu or Muslim?”

I am speechless, I cannot reply. “Hindu or Muslim?” he asks, a little more aggressively, peering into my face. My mind races, searching for an answer. Both, I think, stricken, both and neither.

“Neither,” I answer, alarmed, “I’m neither...”

Satisfied, he then sits down on his haunches and tells me his version. Much later, after trust has been established, I ask him why he had asked me that question, “It saddened me, Baba, to hear that from an old man like you.”

His eyes misted immediately, “I’m sorry, puttar, I’m so sorry. Forgive me,” his voice cracked, “it’s just that these ten years have made monsters out of all of us and we have to be careful. We have one answer for a Hindu and one for a Muslim.”
Sometimes the number of assailants is estimated to be fifteen, sometimes fifty, but every Sikh is in agreement about the identity of the gunmen. In spite of the army uniforms, the colonel’s pips on the tall man’s epaulets, the offer of alcohol and the battle cry of the Indian Jawan as they disappeared into the night, these men, they are convinced, were not from the army. “They were militants,” they concurred, “not Kashmiri militants but foreign militants.” They are convinced this is so for a number of reasons.

Chittisinghora, lying in a remote part of Anantnag district, was frequented by foreign militants during the last few years. One resident spoke of how they would arrive quite openly and demand food and shelter. Once, they even played cricket in the village. Another man described how they would boast about walking across the border unchallenged. A third said that some had visited the village just five days ago, had eaten dinner with the village headman who was then the first person to be called out of his home and killed. The men who came in uniform the night of the killings were reportedly speaking in Urdu and Punjabi.

But the Sikhs had been expecting trouble in Kashmir. Only last month a leading Sikh journal, describing the oppression of Sikhs in Talibanised Afghanistan even after they had lived there for centuries, questioned the fate of the Kashmiri Sikhs. Just a few weeks ago some Pandits were killed in Telwani, only a couple of kilometers away from Chittisinghora. The Hindu Welfare Forum, a group representing the interests of Kashmiri Pandit families in the Valley had then met with Sikh leaders to see whether they could come together to protect each other after. As for the men in army uniforms, this ruse has been used in other militant operations earlier, namely, the suicide attack on the Badami Bagh Cantonment where six soldiers were killed, and the murder of Pandits in Ganderbal. Besides, they tried almost too hard to pass off as Indian soldiers.

A little later I can no longer photograph or ask questions. My body gives way. It crumples in the middle of the courtyard. I bury my face into my lap and weep uncontrollably for a long, long time. Hands reach out. I feel the hands of strangers on my head, patting my back,
comforting me, “Bas puttar, come, child.” I feel ashamed to cry like this when it is I who should be comforting the others. Three years ago when I was in Bandipora, North Kashmir, I had visited a man who had lost 11 of his family: father, brothers, children, nephews and nieces, aunts and uncles, in an army mortar attack that had gone wrong, missing the militants and wiping out his family instead. He had shown me photographs of the dead, the recently dead, blood spattered, blackened, some with their guts spilling out, some with their brains blown out. “I find myself wondering,” I had written then, “about the man photographing, how he continued to take pictures without throwing up – or perhaps he did...” Now, sitting in the middle of the gurudwara, having shot 3 rolls of Kodak SW100, I felt the waves of nausea sweep over me. I am forced to rush out of the courtyard, lean against a tree and feel my empty gut heave against my throat, taste the bitterness of bile and the futility of these ghastly deaths.

Someone brings me water and after a while the tremors recede, leaving me numbed and exhausted. I am still feeling quite blank when a voice rouses me.

“Hi! Hi, I’m ............”

I turn around. Somewhere I register the familiar face of a TV anchor woman. I am relieved to see her here, this woman from Delhi, this woman somehow connected to my universe so far from Chittisinghpura. Her cameraman hovers close behind her.

I manage a smile, “Hi, I’m Sonia.”

“Have you been down there,” she gestures towards the gully, the second spot.

I nod.

“Is there blood?”

I stare at her speechless. Then, I turn on my heel and walk away.

From time to time the crowd in the Gurudwara stirs and buzzes like a mass of angry bees. I know by now that it marks the arrival of some senior bureaucrat, senior police or army officer. In spite of clearing the
security forces of direct responsibility for the killings the mood of Chittisinghpora is hostile towards them. Rajender Singh, the Granthi of the local Gurudwara is very young, but he has a messianic quality which holds the attention of the hundreds of men who form a circle around him. “We had been telling them about foreign militants in the area,” he shouts, “even two weeks ago we sent a representation but no one came. They knew everything and yet they ignored us, and now they come in droves after forty Sikhs have been martyred. India should either withdraw from Kashmir or protect its minorities”. He demands angrily that the Government of India send a representation to the area immediately and that if the government cannot guarantee the safety of Sikhs then they would have no choice but to leave the Valley. The sentiment is echoed by another resident, “It’s India at daytime, but once night falls it becomes Pakistan, and we have no place in Pakistan.”

The Sikhs of this village had lived peacefully with the Muslims during the twelve years of militancy. Ironically, even as some Sardars tell me this, the Muslim residents coming to mourn are sent away from the gurudwara gates by the village elders who fear reprisals against them. They scuttle away towards their own basti, weeping, frightened and unsure. I run after them, “Please stop,” I plead. A woman does a half-turn; her face is wet with tears. “Did you hear anything last night?” I ask.

“Yes we...NO! No we heard nothing, nothing...” she turns and scrambles down the track. I let her go.

It is afternoon and I have by then met up with two foreign correspondents, Bob Nickelsberg and Tony Davis. Bob, I know from Delhi and so I ask for a ride back to Srinagar. The skies have darkened and a light drizzle starts up. It is freezing cold and there is nothing more to be done here. My heart is wrung dry.

We stop in Anantnag for tea. I am ravenous and although the shops are shuttered one man opens his tea shop especially for us. We tuck into hot seekhs and bakarkhanis, washing it all down with cups of sweet tea. Javed, the owner, joins us, eager to talk. He is agitated and speaks for the other traders when he says, “We’re fed up of strikes. In 365
days we get to work only 5 days because of these strikes but today we have willingly closed shop because we are shocked by what has happened to our Sikh brothers.” They are convinced the killings were the work of the security forces. “Why should Muslims kill Sikhs. It is India trying to get mileage out of this while Clinton is here.”

When I return to Srinagar I find the shops closed and the streets deserted but for boys playing cricket. I find an unreasonable irritation rise inside which gets exacerbated when I get home and find the TV blaring Hindi movie songs. Behenji brings me tea and reads my mood. “What are the children to do,” she says gently, “we see this everyday. The killings never stop and our tears have long dried. Life must go on, and so must cricket and so must TV…”

We look at each other a long while in silence before I reach out and hug her, overwhelmed by admiration and sadness for her and all the people of Kashmir – and for all of us, too, forced into the straitjackets of religious identity, of Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, against our will. Later that night I take solace in my memories of another Kashmir, little-known, liminal, ambiguous which still survives in spite of all the attempts to bash it into rigid categories: of waking up at dawn, half-asleep, to what I thought were Vedic hymns only to be told it was the Dua-e-Seher, the morning prayers, sung so sweetly only in Kashmir; of Rahman Sahab, the blind Sufi of Ganderbal with his Pandit following; of my visit to Sharika on Hari Parbat, my friend, an artist, a Shia, filling me in on the myths and legends of the Hindu sacred site; of Shafi dipping his fingers into the blue waters of Mattan Nag, running them over his closed eyes and saying, “This is what I worship;” of Inder Tickoo who has always called himself Inder Saleem….

That evening I call the Mirwaiz, Umar Farooq, acting-chairperson of the Hurriyat Conference.

I’d dropped in at his home a few days ago, where we’d spent a couple of relaxed hours chatting. He is a personable young man burdened with great responsibility since the Indian Government locked up his colleagues in Jodhpur Jail without a trial. He was only sixteen when his father the Mirwaiz, Maulvi Farooq was shot dead by unidentified
gunmen. “I thought I’d study computers,” he had confessed, “but suddenly I found myself plunged into the middle of Kashmiri politics, made the Mirwaiz when I really knew very little...” Now, speaking to him on the phone I learnt that the Government had put him under house arrest to prevent him from going to Delhi to meet Clinton. He was shocked by the incident at Chittisinghpora and made me relate all that I had seen. But he refused to believe that the militants were responsible.

“No! This is a deep-rooted conspiracy against the people of Kashmir, designed to create a diversion from the real issue during President Clinton’s visit. In all these long years of militancy the two communities have lived in harmony.

“They’re talking about leaving, Umar Sahab...”

“No! No, they must not. We belong together, whether we are Hindus, Muslims or Sikhs.”

There is pandemonium at the press conference called by the Sikhs the next day. I am relieved that they have rejected the Government’s offer of arms and training to form Village Defence Committees. “Who do they want us to kill?” they ask. They appeal to the Sikhs in the Valley and in the rest of India to remain calm and not seek vengeance. But all hell breaks loose when the Sikhs make their appeal to the “majority community” to ensure their safety.

“Are you saying that the majority community is responsible?” “How can the majority community ensure your safety when they can’t even ensure their own.” The ‘they’ turns into ‘we’ as the journalists forget that they are journalists and become Muslims. The remorse and guilt that they feel simply because the gunmen could have been Muslim is revealed by the tension in the air, by the interrogation of the men slumped at the panel, “Are you saying that we don’t feel devastated by what has happened?”

Later, a Sikh businessman talks to me in his home. “Remember the early eighties? When Hindus were being killed off like flies in Punjab?” he asks, smiling ruefully, “Well, we all said it was the security forces. We told each other it was the security forces, we told ourselves it was not our people, that it couldn’t be the Sardars. We could never admit
that we were capable of killing in cold blood. We could not bear the thought that we were capable of such terrible acts.”

*The very nature of violence is that it is completely unpredictable. Once you step on this path, you can never tell which way it will lead.*

This is how the Dalai Lama once answered a question about whether violence was justified in struggles for justice, as in the struggle for Tibetan independence, for example. I think of Kashmir and the violence that has ransacked thousands of lives; how it constantly changes its nature like some pernicious virus, baffling those it infects by its mutations. How does one make sense of the massacre at Chittisinghpura? Where is its genesis? Did the virus infect the body of Chittisinghpura the moment it struck the rest of Kashmir, only that it lay dormant for twelve years, biding its time until it awoke on the night of March 20? What will be the effects of this night, rippling out radially like waves after a stone has been dropped in a pool? How long before the waters are still again, and then again, how long before the next stone is cast?

On the way back from Chittisinghpura we had passed Bijbehara. “I was here right when the Bijbehara massacre took place, I think it was ’93,” said Bob, pointing to where the road rose up the hill to the middle of the town. “The security forces gunned down a hundred and fifty unarmed protesters that day – right here. I was photographing... there was blood everywhere, and my God, the shoes and slippers, all over the road...”

Then Davis spoke of the massacre at Lanjot in February.

“What massacre?” I had asked, scanning my memory furiously, and feeling stupid after coming up with nothing.

“Oh, on the other side of the LOC. The Pakistanis had made a big fuss about it, flying foreign correspondents out in choppers to see for themselves.”

In the early hours of February 25, soldiers of the 9th Sikh Light Infantry allegedly crossed the LoC under cover of artillery and massacred fourteen people, including women and children, beheading three. Davis
speculated whether the Chittisinghpora carnage wasn’t an act of revenge. When I returned to Delhi I logged onto the Net and surfed through the Pakistani papers of February 26, 27 and 28. They were full of detailed accounts of the Lanjot massacre, full of the kind of outrage that was present in the Indian coverage of Chittisinghpora. Next I checked the BBC and CNN web sites. Both had accounts of the killings. I then came across a Newsweek report that said:

“No one is sure what happened on the night of February 25. The Pakistani army says Indian soldiers crossed into Pakistani Kashmir and fired automatic weapons on the 14 civilians. India denies its troops ever cross the line. New Delhi, meanwhile, has accused Pakistan-backed terrorists of entering Indian Kashmir, killing an Indian officer and six soldiers. A militant group broadcast in mosques that they avenged the civilians deaths by slaying 35 Indian soldiers and taking the heads of three. India confirms that only one soldier’s body was headless.”

But the Indian newspapers are strangely silent around that time. I go through them several times, trying to hunt down a reference to Lanjot but come up with nothing. The Home Ministry is doing an amazing PR job, and our journalists, if I am to be kind, are dozing – sometimes. Otherwise, they respond with alacrity. Soon after Chittisinghpora and my return to the Capital I read triumphant reports of the killers being tracked down and killed by the armed forces. Ghastly photographs of their charred remains graced the pages of the Indian dailies. There is no way in hell that the killers would have been hanging around just 20 km away from the massacre waiting to be nabbed, I thought. They had either crossed over the LoC by the time I was at the village the next morning or, they had made their way to the thick forests of Doda to lie low before striking again in South Kashmir. If they were involved why couldn’t the army capture them alive. Surely they could have waited out a long siege and then paraded them in front of the world, proving once and for all the ruthlessness of Pakistan’s hand in Kashmir.

The night before I had left Kashmir I was invited to dinner by a senior police officer. It was a quiet affair with only two other guests, one of whom was a senior CRPF officer. The evening faltered at first around niceties and it was only after we’d eased into our drinks that the
conversation turned to Kashmir. The officers admitted that it wasn’t simply a question of tackling insurgency and that the Government of India could put in a lot more effort into solving the political and administrative problems. It would certainly make their task easier. “But why can’t you simply tackle the militants?” I had asked, emboldened by the whiskey, “You guys have really damaged Kashmir, alienated the people by the excesses, the rapes, the killings, the custodial deaths. Why?”

My host suddenly looked very tired, “Who do you think signs up to join the security forces, people like you? Do you think you’ll be able to pick up a gun and kill? Could you stay away for months from your family earning just a few thousand rupees, risking your life everyday in some God-forsaken place far from home? No you wouldn’t. Only a brute would or someone desperate. We get the worst – the rogues, the thugs, and then we have to play with them,” he pulled at an imaginary rope, “giving them lead and then reining them in. It’s not easy.”

A few days later, back in Delhi, I read about the protests in a village near Anantnag. The villagers claimed that five of their men had disappeared and accused the army of killing them and claiming that they were the ones involved in Chittisinghpura. They demanded the bodies be exhumed and the DNA tested to prove their identity. The next day I receive a phone call from a journalist friend, a Kashmiri. The CRPF and SOG had panicked and opened fire on the demonstrators who were going to see the District Collector with their memorandum. Seven people were killed on the spot and 25 injured. “I’m glad you weren’t there. It was really terrible” he said angrily, “we got there as they were hosing the blood off the streets.”

It doesn’t really end. What does one do, give thanks that it wasn’t as bad as Bijbehara? The rope slipped out from the hands of my cop friend for a moment and seven more were added to the list of the tens of thousands killed in this war. The State will make its noises, but not one man will be taken to task for the killings. The killers of Chittisinghpura will also roam free. Then a young Sikh jawan will take revenge for Chittisinghpura, and a young Muslim will pick up a gun to avenge the deaths of the protesters, and then the cycle will start again. The virus
mutates and stays alive and well.

Epilogue

19th March 2001

It is the eve of the anniversary of the Chittisinghpura massacre. I am back in Delhi after having spent the greater part of the year in Kashmir; a year spent in the gruesome accounting of executions and massacres, torture and mutilation, disappearances and rape. Since Chittisinghpura, there have been further attacks on the Sikhs. Six of them were attacked and killed outside a Gurudwara in Srinagar; fear and uncertainty amongst the remaining minorities of Kashmir. People are packing their bags and leaving quietly. Amit, a medical student and a Pandit, tells me that 9 of 13 Sardars he knows have left. Gurcharan uncle, my friend, the kindly scientist and amateur antiquarian, has already sent his eldest son and wife to Delhi. I had looked forward to peacetime when the two of us could have visited the ancient sites of Kashmir together. Kashmir will be all the poorer after he leaves.

Many of the events I witnessed after Chittisinghpura overshadowed the massacre by comparison. On my birthday, for instance, on 2nd August, I spent the day driving from one massacre spot to the other. Pahalgam, Mir Bazaar, Acchabal. Happy Birthday. Close to a hundred people had been butchered that day. Standing amidst the large, dark stains of human blood on the soil at each of the sites, I was struck forcefully by the thought that perhaps the earth itself had developed a sudden insatiable thirst for human blood. Don’t ask me for rationality. Don’t ask me who killed whom and why. It is difficult enough to keep oneself from going mad with grief.

A few months later I managed to meet one of the militants involved in the Acchabal massacre who was apprehended and kept in custody. As I drove from Srinagar to the meeting point, images of Acchabal kept swimming in front of my eyes: The frightened Bihari labourers huddled together stunned into silence, the neat rows of unbaked brick of the kiln where they worked, the ground, dark red with blood, the smoking funeral pyres in front of the setting sun, the low hovels where they once lived, and a beautiful earthenware pot, hurriedly left behind when
the rest took flight. I was full of anger. I had to remind myself that when I saw the killer I should not, could not, lose my temper. But the killer was a young man in manacles and chains. He had been beaten badly so that he couldn’t stand. A wound on his head had matted the hair around it. He wept and trembled and remembered his family. He fell at my feet and begged me to save him. I felt an all consuming sadness and tiredness when I left him a few hours later. It had been impossible to generate anger.

My hunch proved right about the killers of Chittisinghpora. The incident was to become the infamous Panchalthan/Pathribal case. The security forces were under pressure to prove the identity of the killers, so some of them picked up 5 civilians, took them up to a secluded hill, killed them, burnt their bodies, and then claimed that the victims were the Chittisinghpora killers, killed, alas, in a fierce encounter.

I drove great distances through militant-dominated country to meet the families of the victims. At the last village under Army control I was advised to blow my horn from then on so that the militants would know my car was not a security force vehicle, and hopefully, desist from blowing us up with an IED. The man who guided me was terrified and didn’t see the point. After all, we all knew who did it. But I wasn’t going out to discover anything new. And it wasn’t as if anything much was going to change by my going or not going. All this I knew.... And yet, and yet, when the world is blowing up around you, it is irrelevant to ask whether the smallest gesture of humanity makes any difference or not. I went to each of the five families and begged forgiveness.
Cease Firing!

After announcing one or the other step in Kashmir “in the right direction” the Indian State is in the habit of falling asleep with its head in the sand, hoping that if and when it wakes up things would have sorted themselves out – somehow. The Prime Minister’s Ramzan Cease Fire announcement is the most recent example of this policy.

I was in Kashmir in the early days of the cease-fire and the relief and hope it promised amongst the Kashmiris was remarkable. There was a carnivalesque feeling in the air: shops alight and open until late, large crowds in the market places, mosques and shrines, feasting and revelry after the day’s fast. Even hardened separatists heaved a sigh of relief and welcomed the Centre’s move. Three months later things are back to normal: curfew, custodial killings, firing on demonstrations, civilian casualties.

Consider the events of the last few days: Jaleel Ahmed Shah was picked up by the Special Operations Group (SOG, the counter-insurgency arm of the J&K Police) and the army from his residence in Haigam, Sopore, on the 13th. Two days later the people of Haigam were told that Shah had been killed in “retaliatory action” when he had ambushed an army/SOG patrol in the forest area of Juhama, Baramulla. As it often happens, the police delayed in handing over Shah’s dead body to his relatives. This prompted the residents of Haigam to lead a demonstration of an estimated 6,000 people onto the Srinagar-Baramulla highway, demanding Shah’s body be handed over to his relatives. An officer leading an army convoy, on finding the road blocked by the protestors, ordered his men to open fire on the crowd. 5 civilians were killed, 30 were injured. Police sources say that the police was already present, persuading the crowd to leave when the army opened fire. One policeman was also injured in the firing. Of the two women killed, one was a first-year B.A. student.

The security forces claim that Jaleel Ahmed Shah was a dreaded district commander of the Harkat-ul Jehad-i-Islami (HUJI) and had masterminded several attacks on the army and on civilians. But this is
in direct contradiction to their own claim that the HUJI has no presence in the Valley, but in the Jammu area. Also contradicting the claim of Shah’s affiliation to the HUJI is a statement by Yasin Malik who says that Shah was the District Secretary of the JKLF and had even participated in the blood donation camp recently organised by the JKLF for the victims of the Gujrat earthquake. The JKLF declared a unilateral cease-fire in 1994 and has since advocated a non-violent, secular, political struggle. Since the Indian State lifted the ban on the organisation last year it has a right, under law, to exist. Its workers and office bearers have the right to profess their ideology and engage in political activities.

A day after the Haigam firing, workers of the JKLF organised a demonstration at Lal Chowk protesting the custodial killing of Shah and the 5 deaths at Haigam. A plain clothed security man fired into the demonstration killing one young man immediately. Another is in hospital with a bullet in his head. Curfew has been clamped in Srinagar. The tremendous goodwill generated in the early days of the cease fire towards the Indian state stands to be lost unless immediate measures are taken to rectify the situation.

The Centre must not be tempted to retract the cease-fire in view of the escalation in violence. But an extension of the cease-fire would be meaningless if it were seen simply as an instrument to score brownie points against Pakistan in the international arena. It must demonstrate its sincerity on the ground in Kashmir if it genuinely wants peace in Kashmir.

A high-ranking minister or official from New Delhi should visit the Valley and listen to the grievances of the people. In the decade long war in the Valley where thousands of innocent people have been killed, it is a rare occasion when a minister visits. And yet, Kashmiri Muslims have seen how the gruesome killings of 36 Sikhs of Chittisinghpora brought planeloads of concerned officials from the Centre.

The SOG/STF should be reined in. Fifteen of the twenty-three extrajudicial executions recorded since the cease-fire have been attributed to the SOG/STF. The granting of impunity to the security forces under the bogus claim that holding them accountable would somehow “demoralise the forces” is unacceptable to any self-respecting
democracy. Senior officers in the Police and Army while admitting to working under tremendous pressure have stated often enough how they would welcome a more transparent system as it would discipline the forces. But finally, it should be recognised that abuses by the security forces will only stop when they are pulled out of the Valley. And that can only happen when a genuine peace gets a foothold in Kashmir.

For a genuine peace to be established Kashmiris need to be treated like other citizens of this country with full democratic rights. If the Kar Sevaks were not shot at in Ayodhya and the Shiv Sainiks during their V-day celebrations, why should Kashmiris be shot at for protesting against killings of non-combatant Kashmiris?

The Centre should recognise that the Kashmir issue has festered for over half a century because it did not allow any healthy opposition to grow and democratically challenge the governments that New Delhi foisted upon Kashmir. Opposition and protest are vital safety valves for any democracy. Plug them and you have pressure growing and exploding like it did in 1989 when Kashmiri youth picked up the gun.

Opposition to the National Conference government and Farooq Abdullah is virtually non-existent in the Assembly. This is hardly a healthy political scenario. The only opposition rests outside the Assembly, within the Hurriyat Conference. In such a situation the Centre needs to be a little less paranoid about the Hurriyat’s miniscule pro-Pak element and engage with it seriously. This would be the next logical step in the peace process.

The Hurriyat had announced in early December its intentions to visit Pakistan to hold talks with the militant organisations, and set the date for their departure as January 15. The mandarins in the Home Ministry vacillated and continue to stall their initiative by not issuing passports – a decision entirely uncalled for. Abdul Ghani Lone’s brave statements against foreign militants on his last trip to Pakistan and the Hurriyat’s transparent agenda for Pakistan should have convinced the Centre how necessary it is to allow the Hurriyat to travel without impediment. The continued intransigence on the passport issue impresses no one, and only underscores the whimsical high-handedness of the Indian State.
The Valley is in shadow again today. Six families are bereaved. There will be six funerals. I have seen this scene played out hundreds of times: Mothers, grandmothers, children, uncles will be sitting around the bodies weeping; weeping for a boy or girl who was a student, a worker, a businessman. He or she was just going to be married or just had a child, or there would be some little detail about this person that would make the whole thing terribly tragic. Afzal or Imran or Ghulam Mohammed was soft-spoken, I would be told, had never picked up the gun. And yet, here he lies, cold, never to wake again.

This has got to stop. People cannot be killed every day because our leaders have no idea on how to proceed with initiatives that they themselves take. If Kashmir is indeed an inseparable part of India as we have been told for more than 50 years, then we must as Indians rise, and in one voice say: stop killing our own people.
“There is no militancy in the valley”

Davar, Gurez, 26 May 2000

This is perhaps Kashmir’s best kept secret: there is no militancy in this valley. No, this is not Hindu Jammu, nor is it a part of Buddhist Ladakh. The Gurez valley is very much part of the Kashmir valley; its nothernmost frontier, further north than Kupwara, Leh or even Kargil, in fact; a snub nose poking into the very gates of Gilgit.

I’ve been coming to Kashmir for the last few years but I’ve never seen anything like this before: smiling villagers salaam-ing army officers, unafraid school children who have the temerity to hitch rides from army trucks, entire villages without a single family being affected by custodial killings, or torture by the security forces, or for that matter, gruesome revenge killings or extortion by the militants. Surely this can’t be Kashmir. I’m convinced I’ve been set up, that this is an army PR exercise to make them look good, that all the Gurezis I’ve met so far are damned fine actors, so I dump the LoC story, dodge my escort, and try and get to the truth.

At the hospital, the Pir Baba’s shrine, at the vet’s, everywhere, I casually, surreptitiously pop the question, “What about militancy? Do the people here support the movement? Is there militant recruitment in Gurez? Is there sympathy, at least?” And everywhere the answers are in the negative so that after three days I am convinced that miracles do happen.

“Why?” I had asked Jumma Khan an unemployed middle-aged man who had a leg blown off in a freak accident when he stepped on an Indian mine which slipped down from the LoC with the melting ice in the summer of 1992.

He shrugs his shoulders. “We are not ungrateful,” he says simply.

“But you’ve just been telling me how you’d spent over a lakh on your treatment and gotten nothing from the government in compensation...”

“Yes, it’s true,” he grins wryly, hitches his trouser, and taps on his wooden leg, “even this is giving away now...I have two little girls and a boy to support. I have a few goats and no land. The government really should do something for me.” I stare at his face for traces of rancour, for bitterness and find none. This is Tatri Kalshai, a forward
post, literally a stone’s throw away from Pakistan. I’m told to keep my head down. It has been a steep climb up to the village and I am surrounded by grinning, curious Gurezis the moment I stop to catch my breath. Their poverty is all too apparent by their tattered clothes, the thin little children, the old women with rheumy eyes, but they all seem extraordinarily spirited nonetheless.

An old man squats besides me and tries to explain. “See, we’re not Kashmiris but Dards,” he says emphatically in broken Urdu. “Before 1947 some of us used to live in a village of 170 homes called Kalshai Bala, about 10 kilometres that way,” he points north towards the Pakistani posts across the LoC. But shortly after independence when the fate of the kingdom of Kashmir still oscillated between India and Pakistan and tribesmen from the North West Frontier overran north Kashmir, Gurez was taken over by the Pakistani army. “That was a terrible time for us at Kalshai Bala,” the old man continued, “we didn’t want to get involved but the Pakistani troops gave us a rough time, accusing us of guiding the Indians to their vulnerable positions and leading them to where the Pakistanis had cached their arms and ammunitions.” So they fled across the border and joined their clansmen in Gurez, eking out a living from these barren hills since then.

“The army is our only source of income, employing us as porters, hiring our ponies,” the old man said frankly. “In winter when the snow is up to our roofs, it is their helicopters that take us to hospitals in Srinagar. Our very lives depend on their goodwill. So you see, no militants come here because they know they won’t be supported. No one has ever been recruited from this village. We will die hungry but we will not join militancy.”

“A militant’s life is 5 years at the maximum,” he ruffles the head of a little girl with large eyes, “much better to live for ones children and grand children.”

I think of the suggestion to carve Jammu and Kashmir along religious lines as a solution to the Kashmir problem: how absurd, how tragic it would be for the Gurezis and so many like them if that were to happen.

Every day I see vast numbers of well-scrubbed, uniformed boys and girls skipping along the road on their way to school. There is no bus service in Gurez valley so children, especially those in remote villages
keen on attending middle and high school, have to march as far as twenty kilometers a day to Davar. This becomes near impossible in winter when snow drifts block the roads for months on end. The need for more middle schools and high schools is strongly expressed in all the villages I visit. The Gurezis have always attached great importance to secular education and education for girls. Madrassas that have proliferated in the Kashmir valley in the last ten years are conspicuous by their absence. “We may be poor,” says Abdur Rashid, a pharmacist at the Davar Hospital, “but we are an enlightened society. We have many graduates who have become doctors or civil servants through hard work, we treat our women well. There is no custom of dehej, for example. If anyone is caught giving dowry for their daughter’s marriage,” he says glaring at an imagined offender, “he is looked down upon by our society.”

I have become, to my great embarrassment, a minor plenipotentiary. Word has spread of the arrival of a journalist who will hopefully carry news of this valley to the outside world, and within 24 hours I am being salaam-ed and importuned by every Gurezi to take note of his or her grievances. A boy approaches me for compensation for his family’s land that was taken over when the army built the Brigade Head Quarters at Markote ten years ago. The hospital needs a surgeon and a lady doctor badly. Many women have died in childbirth. The Gurezis regularly endure shelling from the Pakistani positions across the border, and they should be compensated for damage to their standing crops. No, never mind that electricity is a rare commodity, they are still vehemently against the big dam, the Kishenganga project. But they’re furious that the work on the mini hydel project at the Asthan Nala has been stalled. The Government must set up a vocational training centre in Gurez; there’s so much unemployment, yet carpenters and masons have to be brought in from outside. There should be a Hill Council like Ladakh. Gurez is cut off from the rest of the Valley for 8 months and can’t be administered and, yes, there really ought to be cable television, or at least the Koshur Channel.

In Chorwan, the children and dogs are shooed away and a plastic chair is placed facing the semi-circle of a hundred village elders squatting in the dirt. My attempts to sit on the ground are dismissed peremptorily. On the chair I feel uncomfortably like a Collector of the Raj; all that’s missing is my sola topee.
“We have always been loyal to Hindusthan, janaab,” an old man, beaked-nose and regal, clears his throat and petitions me formally. “but the government scarcely recognises our loyalty and treats us instead as a step mother would.”

He points to the new huts being built, the wooden planks looking raw like wounds. “Last October there was a fire and 88 houses were burnt down. A child died. The local MLA came, even the Chief Minister came…” A rumble of discontent among those seated. A few younger men jump up and start speaking together, “Farooq Abdullah came and promised us the world, but a fraction of that was paid, and that too only 59 of the 88 got it.”

The old man waves them down and carries on, “There is terrible poverty and unemployment here. The agricultural land is not sufficient and we can’t afford the steep hike in the price of rice. You see all these able-bodied young men,” he says, pointing into the crowd, “not one of them has a job. They’d all like to join up with the armed forces.”

“So why don’t they?” I ask.

“Because we can’t meet the criteria for height and education,” they chorus, bursting out laughing. “See how thignu we are,” the old man says pulling out a few particularly vertically challenged young men, “but they should allow us special dispensation, like the Gurkhas.”

“How many of you would like to join up if the army gave you a chance?” I venture, genuinely baffled by the fascination with soldiering. The hands raised are too many to count.

“We’ll even sweep the roads if we have to – it’ll be better than sitting idle,” says a cocky voice from the crowd.

“Since 1947 we’ve unfailingly demonstrated our wafadari to the Indian state. When we leave our little valley and go into Kashmir,” continues the old man with a peeved expression, “we’re teased and taunted, ‘Gurezi, coward Gurezi, kiss-ass Gurezi,’ they call us.”

Another old man gets up emboldened by all the vocalising of complaints. “I’m Abdur Rahman Lone, a Congress worker,” he introduces himself while hitching up his shalwar to reveal a deep scar circumscribing his ankle. “I was helping with the election campaign when my jeep met with an accident. I lost soooooo much blood and spent so much money
on treatment. The government should pay me compensation.”

“Why should Farooq Abdullah pay you for campaigning against his party?” I ask with a straight face. A moment of silence before the crowd explodes laughing, slap his back, tease him, “Answer her,” they say, “Why should he?”

Abdur Rahman himself is doubled up with laughter, “I was shouting Hindusthan zindabad, Long Live India” he says gasping for breath, “aur khud ho gaya murdabad,” and nearly cut short my own life!”

“At least tell Sonia Gandhi about me,” he says as I take my leave, and I can hear hoots and shouts of merriment long after I’ve crossed the Burzhil nala to meet the road head.

In Barnoi, I sit on the porch while Ghulama pours kehva and chats amiably. It is beautiful here. Thick pine forests cover the hillsides. From where I sit I can see the Kishenganga tumbling and foaming white besides fields which glow iridescent in this marvelous afternoon light. Glowing, too, like an ember in my heart is a sense of great peace and well-being, so gratefully received after my tumultuous month in Kashmir.

“They’re wonderful people,” said Brigadier Pavri at the Head Quarters. He’s full of ideas of how to improve the lives of the Gurezis and we discuss the income generating scheme he’s come up with for some of the villages.

“No wonder they love you,” I tease him gently, “what occupying force, you’re more like the Salvation Army around here!”

He smiles, “No, but we don’t do enough – can’t – we’re always short of funds. I’ll let you in on a secret: we can kill militants but we can’t really kill militancy. That has to be tackled politically, skillfully. I served in Doda in the late ’80’s, and at that time most of us in the army felt that the insurgency would never spread into Doda. There was a large Hindu population, the Muslims did not support the movement...but all that changed suddenly and overnight Doda was in flames.”

“We can’t take the Gurezis’ loyalty for granted,” he sighs, “they’re delightful, but they are also poor. A few young lads could be sorely tempted by the money and then we’d lose all this.” We bid each other goodnight and I step out into a luminous evening. I am saddened to be
leaving tomorrow; this has been a memorable trip. And yes, the Gurezis have been wonderful. But I know, too, that a particular people are not inherently more wonderful than others. And that the Gurezis are not more special than the Kashmiris or Punjabis or Nagas.

I find myself thinking of a night I spent in a remote hamlet in north Kashmir. The shrieks and wails had carried on for hours, but my hosts wouldn’t let me go out to investigate. We sat in silence in the dark instead, windows shuttered. The children had fled up to the attic to hide. The women lay shivering and weeping in corners. Several hours later I got to know that a company of the Rashtriya Rifles had taken away a man on suspicion without any explanation. And strangely, as it often happens in Kashmir, the same man had been mercilessly beaten by militants a few weeks before because they suspected him to be an informer. The man had an old mother, a young wife, and a little girl. No one knew for sure whether he’d come back alive.

I think of my Kashmiri friend, Shaafi, and our walk together in Abbajaan’s little vineyard in Bandipora. “And in those days it was so lovely,” he had said grinning, “we weren’t scared – they were good to us then. We’d walk in the middle of the road, wave the army trucks down and demand lifts.” That was in 1989. Since then his entire universe has been squeezed between the giant pincers of the Pakistani and Indian states. Today he shrinks into his seat every time we pass an army convoy on the highway.

The Brigadier is right. We could lose all this – and there would be no one to blame but ourselves.
1. The Path

It is autumn and I’m hovering somewhere between the 9th and 14th centuries, recovering some of Kashmir’s rich past in my explorations of ancient sites and still more ancient people – amateur historians, mythologists, anchorites, all. It is truly fascinating and far more engaging than the dreadful accounting of killings and tortures that has occupied me all year. The weather is gorgeous. Brilliant sunshine and a cold that nips pleasurably. The gigantic chinars and poplars are turning to rust and gold. Great flocks of sheep and long-haired goat swarm down from the high pastures, flooding the plains, drowning the highways so that even now, on this road to Ganderbal, the Maruti and the bus in front are transformed into little islands in this vast woolly sea, lapping and eddying around us. It is a while before the shepherds, the Gujjars, with their great curving noses and hennaed beards, whistle their flock into remarkable discipline.

The wait, though, isn’t without some trepidation. Kumarji and I sitting in front, could pass off as anybody – we have nothing that distinguishes our religion. But the ladies crammed into the back seat, the old ladies who have gossiped and giggled and sung bhajans off-key this past hour? Sari clad, tikas, and worse still, the unmistakable mark of the Kashmiri Pandit woman, the dejehor, heavy triangular earrings suspended by a complex system of gold chains. In Srinagar this would have been passable but we are in Ganderbal and Lar is only a stone’s throw away. The same Lar which, according to some, could be Kandahar, so infested is it with Afghan Mujahideen, their fingers welded to hair-triggers. But the ladies are sanguine. “Bhagvati kare theek,” they shrug, and we are, after all, going to visit Bhagvati, Devi, Ragni, Khir Bhavani, the great benign mother in her shrine at Tula Mula. It is
this spirit of optimism and resilience that has kept the handful of Kashmiri Pandits – 17,860 to be precise – in the Valley. I am tending to spend more and more time with them these days, watching them negotiate and nourish the old relationships with the Muslims, worn thin by the decade of war, dirty politics and mistrust. Watching also, their anger and disbelief at being scorned and targeted by the Pandits who fled the Valley in the early ’90’s to become refugees in camps in Jammu and Delhi.

It was at a refugee settlement in Jammu that I first realised the importance of Khir Bhavani for the Kashmiri Pandits. My host was Shekhar, a soft-spoken, bespectacled, middle-aged man. I’d thought of spending an hour or so with him but ended up five hours later unable to tear myself away from the unending stream of stories, anecdotes, myths, histories. How different he seemed now from his earlier avatar that I had encountered in various fora on Kashmir: the strident Dr. Agnishekhar, convener of Panun Kashmir, demagogue, agitator for a separate Pandit homeland. We had kept our respective politics intact and yet laughed quietly together this afternoon. Now we were parting as friends. “Wait. Don’t go yet. I want to show you something,” he slipped into his slippers and walked out of the front door into the warm evening, “I know you’ll enjoy this.” We walked up the narrow street, negotiating piles of building material. The colony was desolate, a treeless wasteland. On either side were the newly built, single-storeyed, pill-box like homes of the refugees, abject substitutes for the ancient, soaring four-tiered houses of Anantnag, or Safa Kadal, Bijbehara or Sattu Barbarshah: delicately brick-worked, latticed-windowed, wooden-tile-roofed structures gravitating lovingly towards each other.

“What’s this?” I said as we stood under a small rise on top of which I could see the marble trikoned canopy of a temple. We trotted up the steps, Shekhar greeting the evening temple-goers. At last we stood at the gate and with a great theatrical swoop of
the arm, he said, “Welcome to Khir Bhavani, Jammu.” I entered speechless and stood silently watching a few men and women at prayer, the gaudy fairy lights illuminating their faces deeply absorbed in devotion. In front of me stood an exact replica of Khir Bhavani – smaller than the original, but faithful in detail. The holy spring out of which the original temple grew was replaced here by a marble tank filled with tap water. All form and no content. A wave of sadness washed over me. It was suddenly perfectly clear. This wasn’t any old temple. They missed Kashmir so badly that they tried to replicate it here, like children with their doll’s houses, entering a world at once real and make-believe. It was like the old Pandit woman in a camp in Delhi who confessed that she could only make it through the hideous summers by sitting in front of the cooler, closing her eyes tightly and imagining that it was cool Kashmiri rain and not the wet machine-propelled air caressing her face. The rage follows quickly after disappointment when the eyes fly open and it is not Kashmir at all but a stinking cooler in a stinking room in a stinking refugee camp far, far away from Kashmir. At some point each one must have realised that it is not a question of a few weeks or months but perhaps forever that the gates of Kashmir have been slammed shut behind them. Now that I have lived in Kashmir I understand their irreparable sense of loss and longing, of betrayal and heartbreak. I understand now the anger of the refugee, their bitterness towards all who were fortunate enough to remain in the Valley, be they Muslims or Hindus.

I don’t know what is worse: to lose a beloved, to lose a father or son, or to lose one’s entire universe.

2. The Circumambulation

Ravan had the audacity to try and bribe the Goddess to work the forces of the universe on his side as Ram battered down the gates of Lanka with his army of monkeys. The Goddess, appalled by
Ravan’s evil deeds was in no mood to be propitiated and flew into a rage. Ravan tried his best to appease her, but She would have none of it, or of him or of Lanka and ordered Hanuman to fly her out of the wretched isle as far away as possible. They flew far north into the Himalayas – Hanuman, the Goddess and her 360 serpents, and alighted, it seems, in the most felicitous of places, Tula Mula, where the Goddess has remained since.

But it wasn’t until a pious brahman, Krishna Pandit – in some unspecified period of antiquity – had a visitation by the Devas, that the site became known to humans.

“How shall I find the spring?” he had asked the Gods trembling with excitement

“Engage a boat as far as Shadipor, and from there a serpent will guide you. Thus shall you know.”

He did as he was told, engaged a boat and came as far as Shadipor, and behold! a snake was seen to be swimming in the waters of the swamp. The boat followed the snake. The snake halted at particular places where Krishna Pandit fixed long sticks into the swamp to demarcate the area. Thus was the divine spring discovered. Then the intrepid Krishna Pandit set about reclaiming the land by dumping dry earth into the marsh. When the ground was prepared, he brought wide-eyed devotees from Srinagar to worship the Goddess. As soon as the puja ended Krishna Pandit opened his eyes and found a piece of birch bark floating on the waters of the spring. On retrieving it he found a sloka written on it, describing the divine form of the goddess Ragni.

_I make obeisance to that one Goddess who,

having taken the position of the Supreme God

is the Queen in reality, whose form is made of light and is

adorned by (the lustre of) twelve suns,

who cannot be observed through senses,_


who is seated on a throne and is wrapped with serpents.

It is said that the spring was once surrounded by 360 springs. Now it is surrounded by the bunkers of the Border Security Force. Gaily painted signs welcome us as we approach a sandbagged booth to sign ourselves in. Name, State, M/F, Time In, Time Out, Sign. It feels like the register at the heavily guarded gates of the secretariat in Srinagar. But nothing can spoil our mood, and I follow the excited chattering old ladies into an enclosed area at the edge of the temple wall that says “for women only”. In no time they have stripped down to their underwear, great breasts flapping against wobbling stomachs as they plunge into the icy waters of the canal to purify themselves. I realise with some alarm that I am expected to follow suit. It is far too cold and I decide to put up with their withering glances instead. I bring the women fists full of earth that serves as soap, and also help one of the toothless ladies out of the contraptions that hold her broken old body together: neck collar, spine brace, left knee brace, right knee brace, elastic crepe bandage around the left ankle. She chuckles loudly at my obvious discomfiture before pinching the tip of her nose, taking a voluminous gulp of air and disappearing under the dark waters of the Gangkhai.

I first heard about Hamid the Fish after he had been shot dead by the security forces. They claimed that it was he who had masterminded the killing of 23 Pandits in Wandhama in January of ‘98. It was spring and I think the event was sandwiched between reports of Fidayeen attacks and the dreadful massacre of Chittisinghpora. It would have escaped my notice except that the local newspapers had made much of the fact of him ducking the security dragnet for eleven years. There were just a handful of the old guard left among the militants. Most had been killed by the army and paramilitary or by rival Mujahideen groups just a few years into the insurgency. The cleverer ones surrendered,
joined the pro-state Ikhwan, only to be picked off one by one by determined assassins over the years. The cleverest were like Hamid the Fish, or Yusuf Chopan of Bandipora, Robin Hood like characters, determined, incorruptible, striking terror into the hearts of their enemies but never, it is said, harassing innocents, silently cheered on by the villagers of the area they controlled. A forest of legends grew up swiftly around them, so that it was impossible to hear a story about one or the other without the appellation of ferishta, or angel, added to their names. This is rare in Kashmir: one usually hears the army and the militants being cursed in the same breath.

“Even in death Yusuf Chopan was compassionate and heroic,” Haleema had said softly, “the army had cordoned the house. He knew that they would have used mortars and blown us all up if he’d remained holed up inside. So he made a dash of it with the other guy. They leapt out of this window. The snow was deep and the dawn light made them easy targets, dark silhouettes against the whiteness...”

She pointed to the field behind the house, “This is where they fell. There was fresh snow, white, pure white. But they pumped so many bullets into him to make sure he was dead, that the field turned red.”

“So, when did they take your husband away?”

“Right after. They accused us of being accomplices but what could we do? Yusuf came at 3 in the morning and demanded food. They have guns too. I woke up and fed him and allowed him to rest for a bit, that’s all. What could we do?”

This is Buthu, Bandipora District in North Kashmir, a couple of hours hard climb through the forest from the shrine of Aham Sharif. Because there is no road the village remains isolated and
at the mercy of both the militants and security forces who swoop down with tiresome frequency.

Shaafi and I sat eating hot rotis and a delicious local *saag*. We were famished after the walk. It was a warm summer night and I was propped drowsily against the window half-listening to the delightfully secular young Maulvi’s monologue and drifting into a delicious feeling of well being. A fat buttery moon painted the pine-covered hillsides in dramatic shades of silver and shadow. Suddenly, I thought I heard something which made me sit bolt upright, straining to hear above the conversation, the clinks from the kitchen and the insistent chirping of crickets. A half minute went by before I heard it again. A ghostly wail which echoed in the hills and made my hair stand on end.

“What’s that?” I said.

The men looked up quizzically, unwilling to break the talk.

“Listen.” I said with a growing sense of unease.

Nothing. After a few minutes of politely humouring me they return to the gossiping. I begin to feel a bit foolish when I hear it again. And again.

“Listen! what was that?!!”

“Probably jackals..”

The man at the hookah giggles nervously.

“Ha didi, it’s probably *chudails* or ghosts!” Shaafi teases.

But then they hear it. The Maulvi jumps up and walks swiftly outside, stands on the step frowning but perfectly still. The wail echoes again and the Maulvi explodes into life, rushing inside and shutting the windows. Like a well-rehearsed drill all the actors, without a word spoken to each other, leap up and dash about.

“What... what’s going on...Shaafi, what is it dammit? Someone say something.”

Everyone is tightlipped and I hear the banging of doors and
windows, creaking of bolts sliding shut, thumping of seven or eight pairs of little feet on wooden stairs as the children run to hide in the attic. Then, silence and stillness but for the women weeping and whimpering in each others arms in the corners. The lamps are turned out. We sit quietly in the darkness, neck-deep in fear. I can feel my heart slow down, my breath shallow, my senses expanded.

“It sounds like something’s happening in the mohalla above us,” the Maulvi whispers.
“What?”
“I don’t know. Maybe an RR raid.”
“At this hour?”
“Always at this hour.”
We wait. The minutes drag on. We hear the shrieking again, clearer this time, inhuman cries. I can’t bear it any longer and get up.
“Where d’you think you’re going?” the Maulvi hisses.
“I have to find out. I must see...”
“Sit down,” he pulls me roughly by the wrist, “don’t be foolish. We’ll find out in the morning.”

A couple of hours later a group of wailing women and men come down the path in front of the house. It seems it is safe now to step out. The Maulvi is soon surrounded by them and speaks in low comforting tones. They hold mashaals, burning torches, in their hands, the flickering light throwing ghostly shadows on their tear-stained faces. The story unfolds jerkily, but in the end I gather that the paramilitary Rashtriya Rifles did a cordon and search operation. A couple of rough Ikhwanis went in first looking for Manzoor Ahmed Reshi while the RR stood guard outside. He was asleep. They woke him up, told him to dress at gunpoint while the women wailed and pleaded with them not to take him away.
“Don’t worry. The sahab just wants to ask him a few questions outside. He’ll be back after 5 or 10 minutes.” one of the men said soothingly. Then the whole lot disappeared swiftly into the night. That’s when the wails and screams started. The village had had some experience of this. The Maulvi’s brother had been taken one night a couple of years ago in exactly the same manner. They found him the next morning, face down, barely a hundred yards from the village with a bullet through his head.

Poor Manzoor Ahmed Reshi, the carpenter who can no longer ply his trade. The man whose arm hangs limply at his side because it was shot up in the cross-fire five years ago by God alone knows whose bullets. The same man who was picked up a year ago and shown a photograph.

“Know this face?”
“Yes.”
“Is he with you?”
“No.”
“Does he come often?”
“Yes.”
“Go now and when Chopan comes into the village next I want you to inform us.”

When Chopan was killed retribution followed swiftly. They picked up Reshi one night and beat him mercilessly. He pleaded with the militants to let him go, that he was innocent and had nothing to do with Chopan’s betrayal. Perhaps they believed him because he returned bleeding and battered but alive.

Sitting in the dusty courtyard the morning following the nightmare I had witnessed, I promised Reshi’s young wife that I’d follow up on the case, and that she shouldn’t lose heart, that I was sure he’d return just fine, words I have repeated so often these last five years. Earnestly. Then I went to see Haleema up the hill.
The house was double-storeyed, as Kashmiri peasant houses tend to be, with a large courtyard full of clucking chickens. The woman looked worn out and frail as she recounted the tale of Chopan’s last stand and the subsequent arrest of her husband. The room was neat and gaily painted. On one wall, in red paint, in English, neatly printed, with laurels in green on either side, was written: *You only live once, but if you live right once is enough.*

“And who wrote this?” I asked, struck by the terrible irony.

“I did,” Haleema’s sixteen year old son, Hilal, said shyly.

“Your English is very good, as is your writing, but your wisdom is even better.”

He smiled, “Actually, my father used to say that.”

I turned to Haleema just before I left, “By the way, what charge did they take your husband on?”

She excused herself for a few minutes and rummaging in an old trunk pulled out a copy of the FIR. It had been lodged by the Naib Subedar, S.S. Rawat of the 14 Rashtriya Rifles camped at Chittarnar, under the Indian Arms Act 7/25 and Act 307–212 RPC. It recommended 9 months for Wali under the Public Safety Act. Naib Subedar Rawat accused Wali Mohammed Reshi of sedition: “Mohd. Wali Reshi incites militants against India.”

3. The Gates

This is marvelous. My neck starts to hurt because I’ve been looking up in wonder for the last five minutes. The chinars were planted with some design in mind because now, several hundred years later, together they form a grand marquee. The sky shows only in tiny irregular fragments of blue. The light filtering in is a cool green. The flagstones are so cold that they hurt my naked feet. Behind me is the Gangkhai arcing around the periphery of the temple, forming a natural moat. I turn to look at the ducks quacking and fussing among the reeds when a voice says, “The canal protects the temple. Whenever it has been attacked the
bullets and shells have landed harmlessly in these waters.”

I turn to see the man who has been selling Kumarji flowers and incense grinning at me. “Really, it’s true,” he says emphatically, “this place is very special.”

I grin back and buy a plate full of flowers from him. The old ladies are making a huge racket ringing the temple bells vigorously. I follow behind them, touching the temple bell above me to announce my presence to the Goddess gingerly. I don’t really believe but I’ve always been a sucker for ritual.

The temple is actually no temple. A wide courtyard with flagstones and the chinars surrounds the spring which is no more than twenty-five feet long and fifteen wide. The spring is an irregular septagon with its apex at the east curiously called, Pad, or feet. On its opposite end is the Ser or head. The northern and southern sides are longer. On an island in the centre is a tiny shrine to the Goddess. Once a mulberry tree grew here (“Tul=Mulberry, and Mul= Roots,” Kumarji told me.) Yellow and orange marigold overflow from it, tumbling into the spring. The Goddess peeks out from among them: a small delicate figurine in bronze, said to have been recovered from the waters. Facing the shrine at the edge of the spring is a narrow pavilion in which we stand now, hands folded, heads bowed. The Purohit is chanting raucously in Sanskrit. Kumarji and I exchange glances, “The Mahant is on leave today so we’ll have to make do with the BSF Purohit,” he whispers. I steal a glance at the old ladies. They are blissed out: eyes closed, beatific smiles, swaying to the grating voice of the Purohit. From time to time he instructs us to light the diyas, drop flowers or pour lotas of milk which we’ve brought along into the spring. We have to step around a large man to do that. He sits praying in front of a stack of handwritten notes lit by a single diya. Something about him makes me believe he’s been at this for a long time. But I know we are disturbing him by the frown
that creases his forehead. At one point the Purohit steps around him and attempts to light a diya from the one illuminating the notebook. The man explodes wordlessly, hissing and waving him off like he would an irritating blue-bottle. The Purohit slinks off into his own corner without a peep and rummages in his pockets for matches. Just deserts, I think with some amusement. At the gates I had seen him bullying a small wretched looking man in a prayer cap and pheran. The same man who would later prove useful to me.

The puja ends with a dreadful rendition of Om Jai Jagdish Hare. I groan inwardly. I had been expecting a traditional Kashmiri Pandit hymn. I have never heard this bhajan being sung tunefully and the group here was being faithful to the tradition. “Om jay-aa-jag-a-deesh-a-hare-swaami-jayaa-jag-a deesh-hare,” they squawked, dragging the tortured syllables painfully behind them. I grab the opportunity to slip away, and it is then that I realise that the pile of rags among the tins of ghee in one corner had a pair of round glasses, a flowing grey beard and a wide toothless smile.

“Come, sit,” he says patting a sack into a seat, “let’s take a look at your hand.”

I hesitate only for a moment before making myself comfortable and offering him my palms to read.


“No.”

“Good thing. But you should have according to your hand, at twenty-eight.”

He holds my palm close to his face. “What do you do?”

“I write...”
“Ah! Journalist. Silly profession. No integrity,” he says the last in English. “According to your hand you should spend your life in spiritual activity.”

“Join your profession?”

He throws back his head and laughs. “My profession, my profession,” he repeats, delighted with the joke. “I tell you, you’re right, Diksha and Bheek, begging for alms is no longer what it was supposed to be but has become big business. When I first became a sadhu and hung out at the Kumbh I made a friend, an older sadhu. Everyday we used to step off the ghat into the river and then spend the rest of the time hanging out with the other sadhus smoking ganja at the akharas. One day my friend pointed at the sea of sadhus and spat in disgust, “Look Rajen,” he said, “mark them carefully. They are like the oil the halwai uses over and over again to fry pakoras, black and sour and without potency.”

Then I thought here I am a sadhu and I eat for free, but nothing is for free. I owe the universe.”

Kumarji joins us and they greet each other effusively. “You’ve met Rajen Maharaj, I see,” he says squatting besides me. The Purohit comes around with a platter, spots my forehead with a vermilion tilak, pours dates and misri into Rajen Maharaj’s lap and leaves the temple. His work is over for the day.

“Babaji is from Bengal and has been here for the last forty years,” Kumarji tells me. I am intrigued. I thought I’d detected a Bengali accent and now try out my meager store of Bengali on him. It is his turn to be delighted, and the Bengali seems to nudge a torrent of stories out of him. “I was at the Calcutta University very involved in student politics. CPI in those days, the undivided Communist Party of India. Before everything started to be divided... Bengal, the Party, the country for God’s sake! For years, even as a sadhu I was known as the Communist Sadhu. Tea... tea
was wonderful then. We used to get Flowery Orange Pekoe at 6 Rupees a pound. Very good stuff, and we’d drink it like gentlemen, not like the sherbet they serve you in Kashmir. Pah! Came here in ’58 after Amarnath but settled finally in ‘60. As I was telling you nothing is for free, so I started working. Cut grass every morning and went around from house to house feeding the cows...” he pauses, “Earlier it was the Hindu cows but after the Pandits left, it was the Muslim cows.” He collapses into laughter at his own joke.

“So, how come you came here, to Kashmir, to Khir Bhavani?”

He gives me a look, ignores my question and continues. “You see politics is supposed to serve the country, the people. But I soon realised that it was the politics of frustration. So I became a monk. Left the party and became a monk to serve people. Was in Belur Mutt for many years. Did you know Bose wanted to become a monk at Belur Mutt? No? Well he did. And he was denied permission so he went on to form the INA. You think the British would’ve left without the INA? Hah! Gandhi and Nehru were all very well, but if it wasn’t for Bose and the Indian National Army...Here, eat,” he offers the dates.

“Why did I come here? Well, because of Swamiji. Swamiji inspired me. His life inspired me. And finally he chucked up everything because of the Devi right here” he says triumphantly.

“Er..which Swamiji?” I venture

“Swami Vivekanand of course. Look I don’t believe in a personal God. Never have. Maybe because I was Communist or maybe because I became a Vedantist. All I know is that to concentrate the mind you need a personal God. I’m 88. I should know.”

“And Swamiji..”

“Hmm Swamiji had all sorts of plans and ventures, all kinds of
ambitions before he came to Kashmir and stood before HER. One day standing right here – *right here* – in worship he thought, ‘The Goddess has been manifesting in this wonderful place for centuries and when the Mohammedans came they destroyed her temple. Yet the people here did nothing to protect it.’ The Swamiji was thinking these thoughts, thinking if he was here he surely would have protected the temple. Just then, just as he was thinking these thoughts, a voice thundered in his head, “Ho! Phellow!” Babaji was jumping about his seat now, enacting the ancient drama vigorously, speaking in English “‘Ho! The temple was destroyed because *I willed it so,*’ it was the Divine Mother speaking.” he whispered, eyes swimming large in his spectacles, “If I wished I could live in a golden temple seven stories high but I prefer it this way. You phellow! *You will take care of me or I you?*”

This, according to the Babaji prompted the Swami to take early retirement from proselytising.

“So, it doesn’t matter?” I asked quietly, thinking of the all the ultimately useless acts of vengeance from the Babri Masjid to the ravaged temples of Kashmir.

“It doesn’t. These are simply cycles...” he smiled, drawing a circle through the air with an arthritic finger.

The old ladies were fidgeting now and sighing meaningfully. It was time to go and I stood up reluctantly. “Babaji, what d’you think about Kashmir? I mean the situation, you’ve been here forty years..”

“You know how to make curd?”

“Well...”

“If you did then you’d know that you can’t make sweet curd out of curd that is sour...Goodbye and Bless you!”

I followed the old ladies out and waved goodbye to Babaji. The man at the notebook was still at prayer but he looked up and our eyes met. To my surprise his forehead unfurrowed and his face split into a beaming smile. I put my hands together and bowed
slightly. He put his hand out in benediction and silently gestured that I should meet him the next time.

“Do you know that Sadhu, the one who doesn’t speak?” I asked Kumarji at the gates as he struggled into his shoes.

“Which? Oh him! He’s no ordinary Sadhu. Used to be a bureaucrat and a film maker. Quite high up in Doordarshan. Then he retired and came here. He’s highly educated.”

4. The Sanctum Sanctorum

Khir Bhavani, 74° 48’ long. 34° 13’ lat., an hour’s drive north, just off the Srinagar-Leh highway. I found myself returning often, a warm feeling of homecoming suffusing me the moment the car crossed the churning clear waters of the Sind. Few people visit Khir Bhavani but the man selling flowers and incense is always at the gates, greeting me now with marked familiarity, shaking my hand and then touching his heart, “Aap theek hain? Aao chai piyo,” he says.

Ghulam Mohammed Ganai looks like a villain with his thick mop of uncombed curls threaded with silver, the scraggly beard, one-eye permanently closed, the other dancing behind grimy spectacles. But he’s been here all his life, sitting at the Mother’s feet, as he says.

Once, after I’d been inside he told me his story. His father had been the temple store keeper and after he died Ganai set up his stall outside the temple. It’s been seventeen years since.

“Muslims don’t come here after eating meat. You’re not supposed to. It got so complicated, trying to figure out when I could and couldn’t – if I ate at lunch that was it for the day and if I ate at dinner I couldn’t come here in the evening as I usually do – that I turned vegetarian. On Eid this year my family had cooked a sumptuous meal and tried to persuade me to partake of it. And
then I thought I’d have to stay away from Her if I did, so I didn’t...” he explained, grinning lopsidedly.

“How are things here?” I asked.

“Quiet now. There weren’t many boys who went from here across the border. The few who went were killed. Whosoever picks up the gun has to die,” he said sagely. “There were some strange ones though,” his voice dropped an octave, “Hubba. Joined the HM. He was a graduate. He’d even studied in Delhi. But he only lasted 2 years.”

We are joined by Umar Butt, the caretaker of the temple for the last 22 years, the same small man whom I saw being bullied by the BSF Purohit on my first visit here. He salaams gracefully and squats on the earth next to us.

“And then of course there was Hamid,” Ganai continued, “You know Hamid Gadda?”

“Yes.”

“Well, Hamid was a dropout, but he loved this place. As a child he used to run away from school, drop his books at the gates – right here—and spend the rest of the day singing bhajans. There used to be an old sadhu who died a few years ago. Hamid was his disciple.”

I was intrigued by this place, by the relaxed, generous attitude of the Muslims, not to mention the Pandits, for I know of no other temple in India where there is a Muslim caretaker, where the gates are open to Muslims. Umar Butt, quietly listening all this while now reads my thoughts, “Hum maante hain,” he says emphatically, “We believe in this place. It’s not simply that the Hindus believe and we think the idol is stone. No, we truly believe this is Bhagvati’s place. We believe it is sacred. There is no cow slaughter in this village. You’ll find Muslims coming here and offering milk to the spring just as the Hindus.”

“But the Jama’atis, don’t they give you a hard time, they’re
constantly trying to separate pure Islam from what they consider corrupt?"

They both laugh. “The Jama’atis no longer strut around,” says Umar Butt with surprising vehemence, “they’re so terrified of being picked up by the army for their links with the Hizb that even the most righteous of them declare in writing that they have nothing to do with the organisation.”

“And what about the spring?” I ask, aware of the legend that surrounds it.

“The spring is black now,” Umar Butt sighs, “once it was white and sometimes even a rosy pink. The first time I saw the waters turn black was in ’84. I heard right after that Indira Gandhi had died and the Sikhs were being butchered in Delhi. Then it became black, pitch black when militancy started, and then Kargil...” he lists the events slowly, carefully, making sure that he hasn’t missed anything, “In ’95 the waters became white again. Last month, though, they turned black. When things get bad it is reflected in these waters.”

The days in Anantnag (literally, limitless spring) are soft as Pashmina. The sun warms our skins with the gossamer lightness of Shahtoosh. Shafi Chaman is an artist who wears his vocation on his sleeve. I am an Artist says his bearing, his loping walk, his crooked smile, and people actually defer to him. We swagger down the streets in our pherans, (“In the early ’90s it was Mast Gul and his cronies with their AKs walking up and down these very streets, my friend.”) past the copper shops and bakeries, past the shrine and the mosque. With him I feel we could be Cezanne and Monet. People here have an old-fashioned respect for artists. We drink endless cups of fine Darjeeling tea while Shafi tells me about Ibn Batuta’s travels in China as if it happened yesterday and Ibn was a pal. Later, we visit Mattan Nag. This has become ritual for us. Every time I visit Anantnag we must spend
an hour or so at the waters of Mattan. Each time I am astounded by the blueness of the water tessellated by the mass of catfish speckled with gold, leaping, seething, moving as one, racing back and forth as we throw the puffed rice here and there, gleaming in the sunlight, glittering. Nishan claps her hands in delight, gurgling and dribbling in her father’s arms. Her mother, a Raquel Welch look-alike, is with Jaana, Shafi’s mother, circumambulating the spring and then standing respectfully in front of the temple; both women, heads bowed, hands folded, looking like devout Pandit women at prayer. The whole scene is suffused with a noble and sublime indifference to the fact that these are Muslims at a Hindu Shrine. These are simply people in love with doing what they have done all their lives.

Water, spring, rock, cave, tree, mountain – all these are honoured, held sacred in Kashmir by Pandit and Muslim alike and imbued with the moving spirit. In truth their differences are on the surface, deeper down they are animists faithfully following the traditions of their common ancestors. In Kashmir you can’t take a step without walking into a shrine or temple built along a crevice, under a tree, over a spring. Great islands of peace in these turbulent times. Shafi points to one right near the house, behind the Masjid Sharif of Baba Dawood Khaki. The great Baba’s descendent, the Imam of the mosque, leads the way with a huge bunch of keys.

The Sharika Devi Bal spring is tiny, the mandir built over it is the size of a small box room, but it was of great significance to the Pandits of Anantnag. The door swings open with a creak. I peer in. It is desolate, abandoned, a few wan pictures of the Goddess still grace the walls. The spring oozes black filth onto the marble floor. An old rusted pump lies abandoned in one corner.

“Our women come now and then to clean but there isn’t much they can do about the water,” the Imam says apologetically, “I informed Pyare Lal Handoo when he came here last year, but you know what the government’s like.”
I approach the spring and look in. Opaque – like looking into a dead man’s eyes.

“The waters turned black in the winter of ’88–’89 and overflowed. The last time that happened was fifty years ago and then we had the plague which killed thousands,” he continued solemnly.

“And how it overflowed,” Shafi recalled, “It ran past my house. The Pandits grew afraid. Some spoke of disaster and wanted to leave right then. It alarmed us all actually. We all felt something terrible was going to happen.”


Survived by wife (42), daughter (22), son (20), father (80), mother (68)


These are just a few of the names of the Pandits who were killed by the militants between 1989-91. I’d have to add some nine hundred more for you to get the complete picture. These women and men were not killed in the cross-fire, accidentally, but were systematically and brutally targeted. Many of the women were gang raped before they were killed. One woman was bisected by a mill saw. The bodies of the men bore marks of torture. Death by strangulation, hanging, amputations, the gouging of eyes, were not uncommon. Often their bodies were dumped with notes forbidding anyone – on pain of death – to touch them.

900 brutal killings out of population of around 350,000 Pandits over a period of 24 months is a startling figure. Anyone who says Jagmohan engineered the Pandit exodus is a liar.

April 26, 1990: a press release of the JKLF from Rawalpindi, trying to distance itself from the killings of the Vice-Chancellor
of the Kashmir University and his secretary, both Muslims, stated: “The JKLF wants to clarify its position... it might occasionally become necessary to organise operations like kidnapping and execution of hostages, hijacking, etc., the targets should be government officials and collaborators, not sons and daughters of the soil…”

But who decides who is a collaborator and who a genuine son or daughter of the soil?

The judge and the executioner together were born in anybody who picked up the AK 47. When the Pandits fled, the sights were set on the Muslim populace. In a grim twist of fate the JKLF suddenly found themselves dislodged and hounded by other Mujahideen groups, hunted in turn like rabbits and killed mercilessly in the warrens of Srinagar’s mohallas. Suddenly people were being murdered by shadowy assassins for no apparent reason: A family butchered in their kitchen as they ate dinner, a primary schoolteacher wiped out even as he taught, sitting under a beautiful young chinar, a poet in his eighties, ill and infirm, killed in his death bed, a university professor dragged out of class, tied to a tree and shot dead... Wandhama, Telwani, Sangrampora, Chittisinghpura... Senseless violence is a phrase which takes on new and hitherto unsuspected dimensions in Kashmir.

“No, my name’s not Gadda, it’s Butt. Ghulam Mohammed Butt. Gadda was a name the security forces gave him.” The speaker looked like the quintessential Kashmiri peasant: tall, lean, broad-shouldered, a prayer cap pushed to the back of the head, a waistcoat over the kameez, the shalwar hitched up above the ankles, enormous feet, hands like shovels.

“You see, he eluded them for eleven years. He was very smart, very resourceful. Once, when he’d just become a militant he was caught in a cordon and search operation. There were so many of them closing in on him so he dived into the water and swimming
underwater he reached the reeds. And there he stayed for seven hours – in that freezing cold water – breathing through a pipe he’d made from the reeds,” Ghulam Mohammed said with restrained paternal pride, “That’s why they named him Gadda.”

Gadda. Hamid Gadda. Hamid the Fish, slippery as an eel.

His house was just a few hundred yards from Khir Bhavani, close enough to persuade Umar Butt, the caretaker, to sneak me past the BSF bunker to meet the family. Gadda’s brother was waiting for us in front of the tiny two-storeyed house, nodding a curt greeting. It stood at the edge of the Gangkhai canal, now wide and green, moving slowly between dark banks pitted by the hooves of animals. I had been surprised by the size of the house: a small kitchen below and the room above it that served both as bedroom and living room for the family of six. Obviously, Hamid the Fish didn’t make money out of militancy, or if he did he didn’t send any home. But that was no reason for any want in hospitality, and soon we were served large glasses of hot milk and plates of biscuits. A few old blankets were quickly pulled out to cover our knees. Cushions were plumped and stuffed between us and the walls. I found myself deeply moved by all the fuss.

Once I had stopped Habla Bano, Gadda’s mother, from retiring to the kitchen, she took over from her husband and spoke with remarkable confidence. I was struck by her open, relaxed face. She didn’t look like someone who had lost her first born only a few months earlier. It was only later that I realised he had died so often in her imagination in the last decade, that she had wept so much in the early years, that the actual event so many years later had been a banal formality, and her own response as empty and perhaps even tinged with some relief.

“It was because of the mandir,” she said smiling wistfully, “all because of Khir Bhavani.” And then she told their story as the shadows lengthened in the courtyard below.
Autumn 1989. Gadda had just finished his dinner. It was harvest time and he’d worked hard in the fields all day, but there was still time enough for a quick visit to the temple. In the lane outside the house he came upon a knot of men, some armed. A few he recognised from a nearby village. They belonged to the Al Umar Commandos. When they struck up conversation with him, he realised to his horror that the plan was to blow up the temple. He tried reasoning with them and when that didn’t work an argument and scuffle followed. Gadda was a big man, capable of taking on the whole bunch. They panicked and ran, leaving behind the gun he had snatched during the scuffle. He didn’t know what to do with it so he took it along to the nearest Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) bunker and handed it over to them. Then he made his way to the temple.

“But they were so angry, these Al Umar thugs,” Habla Bano recalled, “that Hamid had to hide from them for days. They came looking for him, threatening all of us. We went to the police, the CRPF for protection but no one helped us. One day when he returned, the Al Umar got to know in no time and they swooped down on us and started dragging Hamid away. My husband wasn’t around. I ran behind them crying, falling at their feet, begging them to spare him and take me instead. It was crazy, all these men with guns and me screaming, “Shoot me! Kill me but spare him!” and Hamid struggling against six, seven of them bellowing, “Don’t touch her! Kill me, but leave my mother!” The CRPF bunker was so close, just across the canal. They did nothing. There must’ve been about thirty people watching quietly from their homes. They did nothing. I realised at that moment that we were alone, completely alone in this thing. They took us both but left me behind outside the village.”

The ransom was the price of the AK47. When Gadda’s father returned he set about selling a kanal of the little land he had. With only 15 of the 40 thousand that they had demanded in hand
he tried to bargain for his son’s life. They released him after the Hizbul Mujahideen, who had been approached by a relative, stepped in and persuaded them to do so.

“But it doesn’t end there,” said Habla Bano, rising to serve us biscuits, “they came back after a few weeks demanding the rest of the money, threatening us, waving their guns in our faces. We were so scared. Hamid worked as a weaver. He was a master weaver at a loom, an excellent weaver, but he couldn’t dream of raising that sum in such a short while. The trips to the police and CRPF yielded no results. It was when Hamid went to the Hizb for help that they struck a deal. They would protect us if Hamid joined up. It was a horrible moment.”

Hamid Butt went across the border and trained for six months. Then he crossed over and became Hamid Gadda, code name Bambar Khan. The Hizbul Mujahideen were true to their word and protected the family from the Al Umar Commandos, but there was little they could do about the raids of the security forces.

“For eight years the family slept separately, rotating between friends, relatives and neighbours every night, so that if we were picked up or killed the entire family wouldn’t be wiped out in a stroke,” said Ghulam Mohammed, taking up the tale, “it was so terrible. We used to live down river. This here used to be a cow shed. But our home was destroyed one night, blasted apart in ’96.”

“By whom?”

“Who knows. Thank God we weren’t there that night.”

“It all started because of the temple,” Ghulam Mohammed frowned, looking for answers in his upturned palms, “You know I’ve devoted my life to it. I’m a karamchari. I clean the temple and don’t take a pie for it. I don’t know what sins we are paying for...”

A long silence settled between us and then Umar Butt, the caretaker, tapped his wrist. “We better leave now,” he said
worriedly, “we’ll all get into trouble...”

“Often I’d hear of big militants surrendering” Ghulam Mohammed suddenly said, “and my heart would leap up with the possibility... I would send word to Hamid, sometimes even go and see him myself and beg him to surrender. This is a dog’s life, I would say to him, for you and for us, give it up, I would plead. But he was a changed man. Didn’t listen.

“Then in ‘96 during the elections, the renegades picked me up one day and took me to the polling booth. You know how it is during the elections, with the militants doing everything to scare people away and the government forcing the people to vote. Well, these guys were the pro-government Ikhwan. Kuka Parrey’s men. They stripped me naked and made me stand in front as a shield saying if Hamid Gadda attacks the booth he’ll have to kill his father first. The security forces just stood by and watched the scene. They were twenty I was alone. Then half way through the polling someone did open fire. Five people were shot. Two killed. I was lucky,” he said rolling up his sleeve to show a dark scar running from his shoulder down the withered bicep to his forearm, “I got away with just this.”

“Who...?”

“Don’t know...maybe Hamid’s men, maybe someone else...” I stared dumbly at him. He wasn’t ruling out the possibility of his son pulling the trigger on him. Umar Butt tugged at my sleeve insistently. “We must go. This is too risky.”

I stood up and took my leave, thanking the gracious family. Habla Bano hugged me and showered kisses on my cheeks and forehead. “Come back soon,” she said smiling.

Then Ghulam Mohammed took my hand and thanked me. “No, no, thank you, takleef muaf,” I had said, feeling acutely embarrassed. Gadda’s sisters stood at the door giggling shyly.

“What’s your name?” I asked Gadda’s brother as he bade me
farewell.
“Fayaz Ahmed Butt.”
“What do you do?”
“Nothing now, but I used to be an SPO.”

I was shocked. “How were you a Special Police Officer? What about your brother?”

He smiled. “We didn’t get along after he became a militant. I didn’t want him to become one. Then later when I joined the police he sent messages threatening me,” he shook his head. “He once even put out a contract on my head. And then the police would hassle me. Never trusted me. Where’s your brother. How should I know, I’d tell them, I hate him. But they didn’t believe me and it got too much so I chucked it up.”

We looked at each other a long while before I asked, “Well, what would you like to do now?”

His eyes lit up, “join the police, of course.”

5. The Gates

He held the blue box up to the light, twirling it slowly as one would a precious jewel, reading: “LOP...CHUUU.... Phhlowery...Orange...Pekoe.. Bahh, Bhalo! Wonderful!”

“Happy Diwali, Babaji.”

“Oh aaj ke Kali Pujo? Then Happy Diwali to you, too.”

I had looked for him all over. He wasn’t among his pile of ghee tins in the pavilion and I was starting to worry when I saw a bundle of rags and wooden staff under a chinar. I noticed his feet were covered by a pair of cloth shoes he’d obviously made for himself and those together with his patchwork gown made him look like an ancient druid. He lay happily in the dappled sunlight, gnarled hands folded across his chest, chewing cud the way very old people tend to do.

“But you better take this back and drink it for me. There’s no one here to make it, and I’m too old to do it myself.”
I start to insist, calling a BSF jawaan from the kitchen at the back and explaining how to make a decent brew, when the silent meditator appears. The fierce one. We greet each other. He ignores my namaste and embraces me, thumping the wind out of my lungs at the same time.

He gesticulates frantically, pulling me behind him back to the Babaji. I give him my notebook and pen so that I can understand him better. *Don’t bother about the tea. Take it back. There’s no point. He has no SELF*, he writes in English.

I smile, shrugging my shoulders. “My name’s Sonia. When is your penance, your maun vrat over, I’d like to talk to you?”

*In another month.*

The Babaji stirs, opens an eye and says, “Don’t talk to him. He’s a Pandit. All Pandits are rakshasas, ogres of the highest order.”

The man throws back his head and laughs silently. Then he snatches the notebook and writes for a long time before handing it back for me to read.

*My name is Swaminatri. I was a press correspondent. Worked for local papers and some foreign papers & lastly UNI. Then I went to the Film and T.V. Institute. Won international award for my film, ‘Never on a Sunday.’* Worked for some time in Mumbai. *Then joined TV, working as ASD News Doordarshan Directorate, Mandi House, New Delhi. I am still a member of the Press Club.*

*P.S. After retirement facing the odd circumstances here in Kashmir I am now devoted to ‘Mother .’*

I look up from the notebook and find him beaming at me. I can’t wait to hear the whole story.

“Do you know why there is no peace in Kashmir, Sonia?” Babaji suddenly asks.

“Well, I guess because of intransigent attitudes, no one wants to give an inch...” I venture.
“No. The deeper reason?”
I invite him to continue by keeping quiet. I know he’s dying to tell me.
“Because this is Kali and Bhairav’s place!” he says triumphantly.
“Vishnu. Now the places that belong to Vishnu are more or less peaceful, but this belongs to Kali and to Shankar, to Mahakal. There have to be cycles of destruction. Shankarji’s dancing the *tandav* now, and the waters turn black, the Goddess is upset, the waters turn black. But one day, you’ll see, the waters will clear. You’ll see.”

We look instinctively towards the little shrine in the murky waters. There among the yellow and orange marigolds, on the head of the Goddess perch a pair of exquisite Himalayan Bulbuls. I laugh aloud with delight. This is miracle enough, this place: the Gangkhai, this courtyard with the enormous chinars, the clouded spring, the wonderful old men, and now the birds.
“What’s the time?” Babaji props himself suddenly on a frail elbow. “A quarter to one.”
He leaps up with amazing alacrity and gathers his things.
“What’s wrong Babaji? where are you going?”
“I’m late. It started at 12:30”
“What? what’s started...?” I cry out after the swiftly receding figure dodging behind the trees.
Just then a sudden gust of wind sussurated among the leaves of the great chinars so that the voice that came back was tiny and broken, but I could’ve sworn it sounded like: “My... fav...ouritetee... veepr..ogramme.... Nev...ermissit....”

6. *The Path*

It is autumn and I’m hovering somewhere between the 9th and 14th centuries, recovering some of Kashmir’s rich past in my explorations of ancient sites and still more ancient people–amateur historians, mythologists, anchorites, all. It is truly
fascinating and far more engaging than the dreadful accounting of killings and tortures that has occupied me all year. The weather is gorgeous. Brilliant sunshine and a cold that nips pleasurably. The gigantic chinars and poplars are turning to rust and gold. Great flocks of sheep and long-haired goat swarm down from the high pastures, flooding the plains, drowning the highways so that even now, on this road to Ganderbal....
Targeting the Ceasefire

The mutability of truth is a phenomenon best demonstrated in Kashmir.

Last month I had joined a host of other journalists censuring the Indian government on its inability to implement the cease-fire on the ground, particularly with the Human Rights violations at Haigam and Maisuma (see Goodwill Hunting in Kashmir, op-ed, Indian Express, Feb. 20). The alarming reports of the spontaneous intifada-type uprising and the violent reaction of the State, prompted me to fly up to Kashmir to get a feel of the situation and to see for myself why the security forces were reneging on the cease fire.

In the early days, the cease-fire had promised relief. If there was a reduction in cordon and search operations, fewer checks on the highways, a drop in combat operations by the security forces, then, logic would have it, the stresses on the ordinary Kashmiri would lighten and perhaps one could gradually look forward to a much-needed restoration of normal civil life. But this was not to be— and the security forces are not the only ones to blame.

In the three months of the cease-fire approximately 87 militants were killed. The corresponding figures of last year show that there has been a decrease of 42% which indeed indicates a decline in the number of pro-active combat operations against the insurgents. And yet the number of violent incidents by the militants, which include grenade, rocket and fidayeen attacks, IED blasts and summary executions, show a rise of over 100% from the previous year. Even during Ramzan when Islam strictly forbids acts of violence, far from reducing the number of attacks, the mujahideen actually stepped up the violence from 54 incidents of the previous year to a startling 110 violent incidents in December 2000.

The non-initiation of combat operations by the army has meant that almost the entire burden of the insurgency has been placed on the police force. Whereas, before the cease-fire, the police were involved with around 50% of operations, post cease-fire, the police and its counter-insurgency wing, the SOG/STF, now conduct 80-90% of the operations. With less than 30,000 men in the Valley, the increased burden of work,
and the deliberate targeting of non-combatant policemen by the insurgents, the pressure on the police has increased dramatically. It will not be surprising if the police raises more forces by recruiting irregulars into the SOG/STF or asking the Centre for more sophisticated weaponry. Far from allowing the effects of the cease-fire to trickle down to the hapless populace, the strategy of the militants seems to be to force the Indian State to respond militarily.

The Hurriyat has been accusing the Indian Government of using the cease-fire as a cover up for Human Rights violations. The 23 custodial killings recorded by the Hurriyat, plus the 6 shot at Haigam and two at Maisuma are acts which deserve the condemnation and censure they received from all over the world. Regrettably, these 31 deaths do not tell the entire story of Human Rights violations in the last three months in Kashmir, as I discovered during my stay.

If one scans the local English dailies, one will find a small innocuous column that states something like: “3 civilians killed in militant related incidents in Valley since last evening.” The killers are almost always described as “unidentified gunmen.” But anyone familiar with Kashmir will know this to be a euphemism for militants. A count from the newspapers and then correlating them to official figures revealed a startling increase in militancy related civilian deaths during the cease-fire. In December alone 61 civilians were killed as opposed to 35 in the previous year. In the three months of the cease-fire 151 non-combatant Kashmiris have lost their lives, and not simply inadvertently, in the crossfire. There have been grenade attacks in crowded market places bound to cause severe casualties, as well as summary executions of those Kashmiris deemed to be inimical to the interests of the “movement.” Curiously, Jaleel Ahmed Shah from Haigam who was killed in custody by security forces, and Bilquis Rather, the 22-year old B.A. student who fell to army bullets while protesting the killing of Shah, both had fathers who were National Conference workers executed by militants some years earlier.

I had asked a senior Hurriyat leader if he was constrained to condemn such acts of violence, why he didn’t at least publicly express sympathy with the families of the victims of militancy. Surely, those who fall to
militant bullets are no less Kashmiri than those who are killed by security forces. “If you kill a boy in custody that is State terrorism” he had prevaricated, “Indian forces are guided by the laws of the land, which they must adhere to. But the militants are boys, not regularly trained. And boys will be boys. So, I can understand if there are aberrations there…”

This is only partially true. India is a signatory to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which expressly prohibits derogation from the right to life even in times of emergency. But “Boys” who carry dangerous toys are also governed by international laws. The International Humanitarian Law applicable to Kashmir is found in Article 3 common to the four Geneva Conventions of August 12, 1949, known as “Common Article 3” which governs the conduct of all parties in an internal armed conflict. Common Article 3 expressly safeguards the rights of all non-combatants, including civilians and those in the armed forces who have laid down their arms or placed in hors de combat by sickness, wounds, detention, or any other cause. It prohibits the following acts with respect to such persons (a) violence to life and persons, in particular murder, mutilation, cruel treatment, torture and rape; (b) taking of hostages; (c) outrages upon personal dignity; (d) the passing of sentences and the carrying out of executions without previous judgement pronounced by a regular court. Common Article 3 of the Geneva Convention includes even those who have provided food, shelter or other partisan support to one or the other side. If under these circumstances, such persons are summarily executed or die as a result of torture their deaths are tantamount to murder.

A sizeable portion of the 151 civilian deaths has been caused by summary executions by the militants. The main targets are National Conference workers or sympathisers and their families, and so-called “mukhbirs,” army sources, and their families. That these murders of Kashmiris (and Muslims) should be shrouded in silence is shocking. There seems to be a tacit understanding between the separatist leadership and the local media to maintain silence about Human Rights violations by the Mujahideen. The effect this has on the ordinary Kashmiri is quite bizarre. After the attack in Kokernag on a police vehicle by the militants, which killed 6 Kashmiri policemen, I had visited the deceased
SHOs family in Kupwara District. At the end of the visit the SHOs teenaged son had said, “It wasn’t militants who killed my father.”

“Then who?” I’d asked startled, and then tried to tell him how eyewitnesses had confirmed the attack by militants.

“No,” he insisted, “they normally claim an action in the local newspapers and this time they didn’t.”

For all the talk of State repression, at least the newspapers are free from censorship by the government. There is censorship, however, by the militants. Local scribes will always privately admit to “walking on the razor’s edge”; writers have spoken of their pens being broken. A free-lance journalist, whose 70-year old father was recently killed by militants said, “An ordinary person has to watch every step he takes. He has to make sure that every action is guarded so that there are no side effects.” I was shocked when a senior Jamaat-e-Islami leader in north Kashmir, defending why he didn’t condemn militant violence said, “You speak of rules and laws? Guerrillas have no principles. You ask me why I don’t say anything? You would do the same if you were in my position.” And then realising that this would endanger his life, he begged me not to quote him.

I know I must protect his identity, but I also despair that a man of his stature is unable to say this in public in Kashmir. If we all genuinely desire peace, the first thing civil society must do is to ensure that truth is not a permanent casualty. So, when there are violations by the Indian State, the people of India must unequivocally condemn it. Similarly, when the mujahideen commit excesses, since the people of Kashmir are silenced, Pakistani civil society must find the courage to censure them. It is deeply regrettable that in this age of instant information from 24-hour news channels on TV and the Internet, even respectable newspapers in Pakistan toe the state-controlled media line on Kashmir. I was distressed to read, for instance, the Pakistani version of the killings in Rajouri of 15 non-combatants, including 3 women and 7 children, as the killing of “three army informers and their families by freedom fighters.” Similarly, Kashmiri Muslim policemen have been described as “Indian Police” and the insurgents as “Muslim Mujahideen.” It is only when civil society in India and Pakistan resolutely challenge the
blatant lies dished out by their respective governments can there be some hope for Kashmir.

The next step after the cease-fire is to ensure that Kashmir is demilitarised. As long as vast numbers of men carry guns, no amount of Track II or I diplomacy is going to make any headway. For a meaningful and lasting restoration of normal civil life we must envision a phased reduction of Indian troops in the Valley in the near future. But violence begets violence, and as long as militants continue their stepped up operations, the raison d’etre for the Indian security forces in the Valley remains unchanged. Any reading of the situation to the contrary by those involved in the fighting and we can be sure to look forward to another decade of war and bloodshed.