

**“Who will tell them this land belongs to your father when I die?”
A Journey through Kashmir’s Landscape of Dislocation**

Alpana Kishore

Abstract

Who will tell them this land belongs to your father when I die? deals with the ethnic cleansing of Kashmiri Pandits from the Kashmir Valley when the Pakistan-backed insurgency took root in 1990. At one level, it is a purely human story of betrayal and friendship. At another, it provides the political backdrop and changing emotions through years of violence and dislocation during the conflict, nuances of fractured relationships between the two communities and the breakdown of society during those difficult years and later.

Author Profile

Alpana Kishore (India) is a WISCOMP Scholar of Peace Fellow. She reported extensively on Jammu and Kashmir as a journalist at the peak of the conflict in the 1990s, and has worked on Partition and identity issues in India and Pakistan. Her fellowship work is based on mapping shifting identities during Jammu and Kashmir’s armed conflict, the myths and beliefs systems that these promote, and the impact they have on the decision-making processes of public opinion within the conflict. She has utilized the fellowship to explore key identity issues that have remained on the periphery of reportage, such as the minorities, rural Kashmir, the changing face of Islamic belief, and the exile of the state and its comeback. Kishore is also involved with several citizens’ groups and urban bodies on critical urban law, planning and transport issues in Delhi. Currently, she is working on a book based on her fellowship research.

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The chicken lies so submissively in its green plastic bag under the seat of the Sumo, that I forget it’s there. It’s counting its last moments. The Lolab Valley is about 24 kms long. When we reach one of its last villages nestled in its mountains of rich beauty, it will be cooked and I will eat it. It is a token of my host’s respect and desire to please me that he has bought it. Laden with other goodies like the fresh produce of Kupwara and its invaluable, prime commodity - walnuts - we have set off in time to beat the witching hour. The gates into Lolab will be shut for the night – even now there is steady infiltration of *jehadi* groups from Pakistan on this route. Entry and exit will be prohibited to slow down the militant traffic to the rest of Kashmir. That means I have to be in and out of there before 8:30 pm.

I’m doing this because I can and someone else can’t. I am here to take a story back to its beginning. And to fathom an intriguing friendship between two middle aged men. I am also here because a strict line drawn between two communities 17 years ago has turned wavy and confusing. It no longer separates perpetrators from victims, aristocrats from serfs, oppressors from oppressed. Sometimes they even switch places. It’s appealing to swallow its dissonance, because challenging it is hard work. Yet it is for this that I have come to a place people don’t usually want to come to. I want to decipher this confusion, tease out its entanglements and get a grip on something that makes little sense to me. There may be plenty of time till 8:30 pm but I have a journey to complete and I am in a hurry to reach my destination.

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The DC’s office is a vital spot in Kupwara town, the hub of Kupwara district whose frontier-like busyness comes with its location on the Line of Control. It had been prearranged through several unsatisfactory phone calls between Jammu, Delhi and the faraway Lolab, that I would meet Nazir Ahmed, my host, outside the Deputy Commissioner’s office when I arrived in Kupwara town. No fixed time was mentioned. I had no idea what he looked like and vice versa. Yet Kashmir is a place where strangers often meet through the good offices of bystanders. If I asked around for Nazir Ahmed of Lolab, I had been assured over the line from Jammu that I would find him. Or *he* would find me.

Since I hadn't been given his mobile number, a precaution taken for both of us, I couldn't call him. This seemed as vague as things could get, and considering I would be travelling practically to the country's borders to see this man, pretty tentative to justify my effort of time and money. Yet I also knew enough about Kashmir to sense that these woolly directions would be enough. In fact the scene played out as if it were on stage. I arrived at the entrance and asked around for Nazir Ahmed of Lolab. Within minutes he was there, beaming and wringing my hands in welcome, his face wreathed in a giant smile that conveyed the importance of my visit to him.

Beyond the ridge of mountains that encircle Kupwara district is Pakistan. State Transport Buses collect briskly at the frequently bombed market square ringed with the debris of small shops spilling out from their confining shacks. Some weeks later it will get bombed again but I will be far away and safe by then. Smoke blows as conductors holler out names of towns across the state and bang the sides of their buses with urgent, metallic thuds. People anxiously get on and go somewhere, schoolchildren jump over puddled holes in the slushy mudpack that passes off as a road and women and men shop for fresh fruit, vegetables, slaughtered, hanging goats, Surf, red buckets – the nuts and bolts of small town desires. Nazir Ahmed has pleaded for a moment to pick up something before we start our journey. The clamour washes over me as I wait for him in the Sumo, almost hidden from view.

It is a loud clamour. Still, a subtler sound slowly overtakes its more obvious din. Its consistency makes it unnoticeable, a hum that rises above the ringed mountain town like a factory roar that workers don't hear. I have to wait for other senses to register- the olive green, the fumes, the grumble of diesel engines – before I recognise the unmistakable resonance of gravel crunching under the giant tyres of a military convoy. It is the resonance of Kupwara – its heartbeat. A couple of hundred thousand soldiers are stationed along this border. Their needs, their life and their *raison d'être* determine this town. Their daily rations drive the sales of local traders. Their supply chains power the movement to this remote location. *"Beedi toh peeyega fauji, sabun toh khareedega. Ek anda toh roz khayega,"* says Sultan Malik the walnut trader whom I have met just before Nazir Ahmed, dressed in a dark suit and silk cravat, a deliciously crazy spectre in this muddy, mountainous, garrison town. It is why Kupwara has a flourishing economy and why sharp, wealthy businessmen are no aberration here despite it being one of the most dangerous places in the world.

The walnut trade doesn't hurt either. It brings in, according to Malik, roughly calculating on his fingers, 250 to 300 million rupees a year, and supplies the whole of India with its famed produce. Add to that the militancy – a profit making enterprise to rival the best. After all, even militants need porters, guides,

supply chains, bribes. Kupwara is not known as the Gateway to Pakistan for nothing. And finally there is the government. If the DC cannot send a man to the field area to pass bills because it is too dangerous, he will sign the bills in his office. There is no one to check whether the work has been done or not. That is how the Government of India has functioned for the last several years, keeping the economy afloat on corruption. The point being – Kupwara is flush with cash.

The Lolab Valley that starts just outside the busy town is one of nature's extravagant gifts. "If you have been to Lolab," Puranji told me last year in Jammu's 38 degree heat, "there is no need to go to heaven. You are already there."

Most people in Kashmir these days would correct him to say it has long been now, a *stairway* to heaven. IEDs, grenades, killings are what the Lolab is better known for. Six years ago, during the elections, a young college student monitoring the fairness of the polls for a civil society group was killed when their car set off an IED on the road. The elections themselves were held in the strangest circumstances possible. Candidates were warned not to campaign beyond a certain point even if they belonged to the forbidden villages themselves. The dense mountain forests where leopards and bears once roamed free now played host to a different tribe - 350 armed militants from across the border. They were a multinational bunch - Pakistanis, Afghans and Sudanese - from the Harkats and the Lashkars of the jihadi world. To ensure no one missed the message, posters were put up all over town promising 1000 rupees for the first person to cast his vote and the free "gift" of a bullet. Some of them - bearded and wild haired, came down from their mountainous hideouts and fired a volley of shots from their AK rifles in the local bazaar to make the threat real. MA Lone, the National Conference candidate who won finally, paid for it later with his life.

One of Lolab's more famous sons is Mushtaq 'Latram', formerly chief of the Al Umer Mujahideen militant group, who now currently sits in Pakistan directing terrorist strikes and operations in Kashmir. Through the 1990s, the unpredictable and volatile Latram's reputation for brutality created a reign of terror while he carried out several bloody attacks. Latram, Pakistani Azhar Masood and Briton Omar Sheikh were the three prize terrorists in Indian jails released in the hostages-for-terrorists deal during the Indian Airlines plane IC-184 hijack to Kandahar, Afghanistan on New Year's Eve 1999. While Omar Sheikh went on to execute the Daniel Pearl kidnap and murder, Latram went on to coordinate the activities of the feared Jaish-e-Mohammed in Pakistan; formed in 2000 and led by its shadowy founder Azhar Masood, the third and most powerful released terrorist.

Today the Lolab is still a “hot” militant zone in Army parlance. The old days of braggadocio swagger are long over but there is still a decent number hidden in those thick forests. When I set off on my journey from Srinagar, the sprawling summer capital of the state – safe and familiar – I am warned by several Kashmiri friends. “You will be careful,” admonishes one like a schoolteacher. “No heroics.” Some even admire my “adventurous spirit” confessing they haven’t been there since the violence started 17 years ago and won’t go till its well over. Their confessions and admonitions have the natural effect – I am nervous and have no desire to prove my ‘adventurous’ side. I want to hurry this thing up and get the hell out of there back to Srinagar.

My host looks nothing like I expected him to. Sitting in the Sumo now, on our way to his home and someone else’s, Nazir Ahmed’s face puzzles me – it is an old face. The pointed, clipped beard is snow white, the hair whiter. With his pink and white lined complexion, thin, shortish physique and smiley face, he looks like a lean, pared down Santa Claus. This is not what I expected. Puranji looks nothing like him. He is dark complexioned and dark haired with a dark moustache. The heat and dust of the plains, life’s vicissitudes, have been pile-driven deep into his bones. At first thought, he looks younger and wearier than Nazir Ahmed – later I can see their eyes are the same age. It’s difficult to believe however, that they studied together, ate out of each others’ tiffins, spent days shooting the breeze, studying, talking, getting married, having children and leading a full life before one saved the other from certain death.

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During long stretches of non-Muslim rule, when Sikh and Hindu Maharajas ruled the old kingdom of Jammu & Kashmir in the 18th, 19th and early 20th centuries, Puranji’s Pandit ancestors strutted around with their chests out. This was the high point of their history, when they practically ran the state. As a tiny, immensely privileged, scholarly minority, they lorded it over the illiterate, peasant Muslim majority, their ‘superior’, ancient Brahmin genes inspiring a snooty condescension for their ethnic twins, the Muslims.

As Puranji puts it, “In the Maharaja’s time (pre ’47) *Hindu seena taan ke chalta tha aur 100 Musalmaan uske peechhe chalte the ki yeh humein sahi thikaane le jayega.* Political power was in *our* hands though *they* were the majority.”

And why not? For generations, the Pandit has taken pride in this scholarship, unmatched by the Muslim till very recently. And through history, he has used his learned mind strategically, the way the Muslims used violence in 1990. As a tool - to gain power and keep it.

As a survival tactic, it ranked among the best - his scholarship negated his powerlessness in the numbers game. It wasn't an easy ride. Pandits faced bitter persecution, forced conversions, even mass exile under eras of Muslim rule in the earlier centuries. Yet their gift for survival and the rulers' need for their learning ensured their continued prominence, bringing them back to Kashmir when the bad times passed. The Sultan may have been Muslim but all his sophisticated courtiers were not. As the privileged landed *zamindar*, the powerful Court official, the authoritative *kotwal* - the Pandit remained the face of authority and power - it is the Muslims' historical memory of him.

In 1989, Puranji worked in a government department in Baramulla town, about 50 kms from the Lolab. He would have to change three buses to get there. "Lolab-Kupwara, Kupwara-Sopore and Sopore-Baramulla," he explained to me. The route was the first thing that he had to change when the letters first arrived, at the start of 1989. Sometimes he would take the later bus, sometimes the slower one. On his way back he would change his timing, hang about at Sopore beyond time or suddenly take the earlier bus home. The letters didn't stop. "*Ya maro ya mix ho jao*" they warned in the beginning. To "mix" had only one meaning - conversion to Islam. By the time the new-year dawned, even that option had dried up. "*Bhago - nahin toh maar denge*".

"Life came first," as Puranji puts it. At the time of Puranji's letters, the killings had already started in Srinagar when the state's chronic political unrest exploded into violence. Though the declared agenda of militant groups trained, organised and financed by Pakistan was political freedom, their first target had a religious identity.

Hit lists with Pandit names had been circulated in mosques. Prominent Pandits were being assassinated. A J&K High Court Pandit Judge Ganjoo who passed the first death sentence against a Muslim separatist leader accused of kidnapping and killing an Indian diplomat was gunned down on a street. No one came near him or tried to rush him to hospital. Lassa Koul, a Pandit and the Director of the Central government run state television, was shot dead as he left his house for work in the morning. Another was shot limb by limb and delivered in a hand cart to the home of a Pandit leader who had appealed for peace.

Others were killed in particularly brutal ways, some in their own homes, one horrifically, in Pandit lore, chased up to the loft in his own house and shot dead hiding inside a rice storage bin, in front of his pleading, screaming wife. Another was reportedly cut in half by a woodmill saw. On the nights of January 19th and 20th 1990, the community remembers sitting terrified, huddled in their homes as neighbourhood mosques and loudspeakers fitted to cars spewed out a barrage of abuse and threats aimed at them, exhorting Pandits to leave, and frenzied mobs,

some a hundred thousand strong, roared slogans of Independence and Pakistan, their Muslim brothers supporting them from across the border. Some of them had specific messages for the Pandits:

*Aisi kya ghachi – Pakistan
Batao rochtuy ta Batanyan saan*

“What do we want? – Pakistan. Without the Pandits but *with* Pandit women

The subtext was very clear. *Get out of Kashmir!* The elite five percent minority that had coasted for centuries on the edge of their vaunted scholarship fled for their lives, leaving behind the Muslim majority Kashmir Valley, their home for aeons, to live in Hindu majority Jammu city across the Pir Panjal mountain range. The original community of the soil was cleansed from it so well that hardly anyone remains today in the villages, few in the towns.

Many individual Kashmiri Muslim neighbours may have sympathised or helped but collectively there was silence and fear. No one tried to stop the Pandits when they started fleeing. No group spoke out against their exodus. No friend could guarantee their safety and neither could the government. It was an impossible task - the police force had melted down, the intelligence structure had been destroyed, its operatives killed; and armed militants roamed freely in several parts of Kashmir. The state had virtually collapsed – it was hanging on by a thread. For Pandits, especially like Puranji, caught isolated and scattered in the rural areas in ones and twos, there was no escaping the armed bands. A Muslim junior colleague he had once helped out for a promotion kept him up to date with the mosque hit lists – an oxymoronic term that wasn’t - but other colleagues would avoid him.

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Puranji’s neighbour has entered the discussion while we are talking about the Muslims. “Let me tell you,” he leans in closer, “Muslims cannot tolerate the presence of non-Muslims where they are in a majority – they will *start* the trouble by ethnic cleansing. Even at Independence – they couldn’t stomach the thought of living with Hindus – they had to make a separate Pakistan and throw all non-Muslims out of there as well.” Heads nod around him. “A Muslim is a fine, loving individual, the best friend you can ever have. But put him together with other Muslims and you have to run for your life.” Puranji’s expression conveys his assent to this picture.

Even so, a schizophrenia of sorts touches the relationship between the two. Fraught relationship aside, both communities have also been exceptionally close

through the ages, with common temperament, language, custom and history. Both flock to shared religious spaces like the *ziarrats* where they ask for divine intervention. Little wonder that the cramped room is crowded with emotions – they reek of a friend’s duplicity rather than an enemy’s expected assault.

The Muslims have their own betrayal to remember. In the 1940s, when a popular, mostly Muslim uprising broke out against the Maharaja, the Pandits backed the ruler, protecting their elite positions. They were caught on the wrong side of history. Post Independence and accession, elected government replaced the Maharaja’s rule. The Muslims would be setting the agenda in this Muslim majority state now – and their priorities would be different.

Overnight land reforms without compensation stripped Pandit landlords of their elitist swagger and unshackled the Muslim peasantry. Successive state governments tightened Pandit entry into government jobs by affirmative action for Muslims, sidelining Pandits to ensure their bright minds would not suck up all the jobs on offer. The need of the hour was to help the less educated and less privileged Muslim catch up to form a new middle class. A new elite would start replacing the old.

A story, apocryphal or not, about Chief Minister Bakshi who lowered benchmarks for medical and other admissions in the 1960s, goes like this. A Health Department official came to him with a complaint from the state medical colleges about the lack of cadavers for students to practice surgical skills on.

“Don’t worry,” he is reported to have said. “Tell them to wait a couple of years – there will be no shortage once these new medical students become doctors and start operating!”

Gradually and surely, the Pandits’ only weapon – their educated mind – was taken away from them. Effectively then, though they had not been rulers for centuries, they had lost an empire. It was as traumatic as it has historically been to nations and communities – something a Muslim is familiar with. Inevitably they were shrunk to size by reforms, unspoken quotas and the changing balance of state support that now tilted towards the Muslims. Yet Muslim insecurity refused to relax its guard – its jagged edge sharp with disbelief and mistrust. It ensured that the image of the Pandits, as the illegitimate usurpers of power positions that Muslims should rightly enjoy, persisted.

The popular, underlying itch to see them being knocked off their perch was egged on by the Pakistan-directed groups in whose view Kashmiri Muslims had a separate destiny. To enable this destiny, Pandits had to be removed from the scene. The mythology of insecurity held powerful sway in 1989-90 when the

Pandits were forced by militant groups to flee, and would be rightly or wrongly, a key reason for Muslim silence. The undeniable fact that Muslims today benefit from an overwhelming domination of government jobs in Kashmir was possibly another.

Puranji's younger Pandit friend Aiman Raina who has been listening quietly to the story of the flight recalls his moment of truth. On a posting in Jammu for his first job, he received a late night call from his terrified family on January 19th seventeen years ago. "I could hear the roar of the crowd in the background," he recalls. "They were begging me to somehow rescue them. I could do nothing....absolutely *nothing* for my father, my mother.... I was just helpless, sitting here. I desperately rang up whoever I could, whoever I knew from here but no one was there, no officer would pick up the phone." His rage is smoking with heat even now – as a young man, he carries the full historical weight of this bitterness between the communities. Friendships with Muslims were cut short before they could mature enough to lighten its load.

Aiman's emotions are unexceptional among the Pandit community that blames the zealous pro-Islamic colour of the violence for their flight from the Valley in 1990. He takes a hardliner's view of the hit 'lists' and even the 'friends who helped'.

"I feel today that even the lists were a conspiracy. No Muslim can be a friend," he says. "No Muslim group said 'Stop! This is wrong'. Real friends come out when a person is in trouble – who the hell came out? With the passage of time I have understood. They used to sit in the mosque and conspire to kill us and give the hit list to a 'friend' who would tell you – so you would *have* to flee."

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The narrow lane is part of a labyrinth. 'Houses' of a single room each are built haphazardly, stretching far into the distance – it's obvious there was never a plan here. A tap pokes its brass head out of a wall in a dingy looking toilet with dank, dark walls and a single bulb. Fresh water gushes out as a bucket overflows, then runs in to the open gutter below, coated with slime. Flies buzz above it. It is visible from Puranji's room where we are sitting in Jammu's sweaty April. Does safety truly mean so much? Is this hellish single room really preferable to the risk of living in one's own home and land however dangerous it may be? I try to imagine what it would be like to think of neighbours as predators, to suspect colleagues, best friends, children's school buddies. Or to see threat lurking in the most familiar, routine things like home, office, well-travelled routes, local markets. There is an air of 'normalcy' in Jammu that makes it difficult to do this. It's easy to see why Puranji feels 'safe' here, with his 'own', where he is no longer

a religious minority. Possibly, being free to say who he is and which nation he wants to belong to without worry, soothes his temperament.

He has not had this freedom since 1947 when Pakistan was born. Though the Pandits remained safe in their overwhelmingly Muslim Valley even as the whole of India went up in flames with riots and ethnic cleansing; the physical peace was only the glitter that wasn't gold. Nothing would remain the same between the two.

Pakistan's Two Nation theory that claimed Muslims were a separate 'nation' regardless of shared ethnicity with Hindus, changed the way the two saw each other. Old power or class issues were now processed through a filter of religious identity and both downgraded their shared ethnic identity. For the Muslim, *Kashmir* came first where he was in majority and held the reins of power. He also held out the unspoken threat of Muslim Pakistan. For the Pandit *India* came first and with it, *its* counterbalancing threat. He may have now lacked the power that he had before in Kashmir - but he had the safety backup of the 'mother' country as the 'nation' that would command his first loyalty. Neither side could shed old baggage and make the leap to the new paradigms of India - democracy and secularism.

Once the new elite began replacing the old, the Pandit sought security in flaunting his Indian connections. He saw himself as a heroic minority. Says Puranji, "We saved Kashmir for India. If we had supported their ideology as they wanted, Kashmir would have gone to Pakistan years ago". "Jo 'Jai Bharat' bolega, woh apna hai. We don't believe in Kashmiri nationalism," bites out Aiman. For him, the Muslims are Pakistani stooges and Indian traitors.

Yet, since the Kashmiri Muslim saw his chances of power *outside* these Indian connections, the Pandit in his eyes *remained* an Indian stooge and Kashmiri traitor who blocked and resisted popular Kashmiri aspirations for separation. The silence at his forced migration and the targeted violence came from this belief, despite the friendship, despite the shared culture. Neither could view the other's version dispassionately.

"They thought people from India would *just* come and take care of them like this," a Muslim college principal once told me, snapping her fingers, her face angry. "They never *dreamt* we'll be sitting in those miserable one-room camps for twenty years and our children will never see Kashmir again".

It is a notion Aiman confirms. "We had a *phobia*" he says. It is an interesting word he uses as a replacement for 'an article of faith'. "We thought if one Hindu

is killed in Kashmir, 100 Muslims will be slaughtered in the rest of India. *Jab nikle toh bhai ko bhai ka pata nahin tha,*" he laughs.

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Puranji, like Aiman, trusts no Kashmiri Muslim – he has made that very clear. He quotes an old saying:

*Zovuai vasa pose?
Musalman banea dost?*

Roughly translated it means something not very nice. Can you take the skin off lice it questions? No, he shakes his head explaining. Then how can a Muslim be a friend, his fingers twist to ask? Both tasks are an impossibility!

"Rishta unke saath? Na zyaada gehra, na zyaada door."

But that would be an insincere friendship I argue.

"Yes it is a fact. It won't be a sincere friendship – but it *cannot* be!" he argues back. "They have given us such a body blow that it will take *seven* generations to recover from it."

Yet there is one sacred friendship exempt from this category.

"Except my friend who warned me and saved my life." Puranji's face physically softens as he forgets the bitter things ranting in his head, the anger that has overwhelmed him.

"Woh friend bachpan ka tha. Kaththe job lagi, khaana peena, uthna baithna. He saved my life, honour and dignity. Except for him I can trust no other Kashmiri Muslim"

"His children call me Mama," says Puranji's wife. "They call every Tuesday," adds his daughter. *"Bahut achcha lagta hai.* They come every year."

"What were relationships like before all this happened?," I ask.

He reflects, eyes distant. My question has taken him past the bitterness into a sweeter place. The Muslims are, after all, Hindu converts from just 600 odd years ago. This is not an easily discardable ethnic bond. Perhaps why the shock of betrayal is so real on one side and the denial of guilt so vehement on another.

"They were not normal - butvery delicious," he rubs his fingers with his thumb. "Caring *ka* culture *tha*. If my wife was coming on the bus, *phataphat* boys would get up and offer her a seat – *just* - as a Hindu lady. If somebody's daughter was going somewhere, they would automatically take care just because she was a daughter of the community. *Jeena marna, uthna baithna, khaana peena* – everything was together in the localities."

He disregards Aiman's conspiracy theory. His friendship with Nazir Ahmed has withstood not only the weight of the Pandit flight from the Valley but also the

historical angst the communities' relationship has borne for centuries. That's an awful lot of weight. But then, this is quite a friendship.

The decision was taken for him during his usual game of hide and seek on the 4 pm bus from Baramulla on the 22nd of February 1990. It was the evening before Shivratri, the biggest Pandit religious festival of the year. He got a chilling though polite message from the group known as Allah Tigers.

"Kal chhutti hai. Hum aapke ghar aayenge, Shivratri ki badhai denge aur aapko eliminate kar denge." The Allah Tigers had cultured people on their roster who would remember to greet members of the other community before killing them.

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Halfway through the beautiful Lolab, past the giant gates that will be locked at 8:30 - a far more relaxed time from the earlier 5 pm deadline - past the Gujjar hostel, past the two checkpoints in the first part where we get off and do our entry so that we can get back out unhindered, there is no sign of anything unpleasant nor any hint of fear on the faces of the local residents who are visibly milling around on the meandering central road that cuts through the entire valley. Hundreds of schoolchildren reassuringly spill out from scores of schools that dot the route. Some sit under trees with slates, some inside classrooms in neat uniforms. A bunch of schoolteachers flags us down to have tea with them in the Middle School by the side of the road - delighted, we accept. Schoolgirls of the 2nd class in red checked kameez sit neatly under the tree. The 4th class is indoors and sings a Kashmiri poem for us in the high pitched voices so typical of Kashmiri folk music. Its sweetness is piercing - among the trees, the fresh, peaceable silence and birdsong outside, the little school and the guileless faces of the children, it embodies the Lolab for me in ways that no gun ever can.

It makes me reflect on my reason for this journey to the far corners of this troubled state. On paper it is to meet the one, single friend Puranji says is the exception to his rule of Muslims as a community of insincere betrayers. But there is more. From the outside, living in Lolab today sounds terrifying - awash with jihadi Afghan and Pathan terrorists, located in the first district next to Pakistan from where this traffic originates, violent and tightly controlled by both the militants and the Indian Army stationed there. Perhaps today, much less by one and much more by the other but still...What could be more alien for a non-Muslim?

Yet it was home for Puranji and many of his community - it had to have been different in the older days. And living in an almost purely Muslim land in such small numbers, Puranji must have been immensely comfortable with Muslim life - the sound of the *azaan*, the sight of the skull cap, the neighbourhood pagoda

roof mosque, bearded friends, festivals. So much that he may have even felt alien in Jammu with his 'own'.

I ask a little 4th standard girl if she has ever heard about the Pandits

"Haan."

"Kya suna hai unke bare mein?"

"Woh saaf hain. Apne ghar ke aas paas bahut safai rakhte hain."

Listening to her, I discover what I actually want from this journey. I want to reclaim a slice of that relationship the two communities shared, scoop a bit of its unspoken ease, its comfort and its deep understanding and space for one another. In this day of ranting believers, this unspokenness is what I want to retrieve – perhaps for myself, perhaps for this land and its people.

There are plenty of Army Headquarters of every level permanently settled in the area since 1947. Though no soldiers are conspicuous on the road except for the three checkpoints we pass, signs of their presence are all around. Tiny shrines of local saints - a secular Kashmiri tradition now under fire from the jihadis - lie on the route, many draped with giant green *chaadars*, shiny and new, with florid slogans in the Devnagari script – a rarity in these parts. They are offerings from the army and paramilitary units posted in the area. Things have changed a bit since the wild times five years ago. Perhaps it is time for my Srinagar friends to be 'adventurous'.

Nazir Ahmed confirms it. *"Ab kaafi kam ho gaya hai,"* he beams. Are conditions then good enough for Puranji to return? His face falls. *"Not yet,"* he says, the regret spilling out from every pore as if his entire body is a sigh. I switch topics, ask him about Puranji – his face lights up again.

"At school, people would say what do you two talk about all day long – Kya kaanaphoosi karte ho? Aap thakte nahin ho ek doosre se baat karte? Hamari shaadi bhi kareeb saath hi hui. Meri shaadi mein shareek the. Lalpora gaye baraat ke saath. Mere liye aur biwi ke liye suit laye."

What did you like about Puranji's family I ask? *"Everything!"* he answers eagerly and enthusiastically with such shining brightness that I am taken aback at the intensity of his emotion. *"Har cheez!"* he repeats. *"Unki sociability - woh bahut candid the – truthful. Unka khaana-peena pasand tha. Bahut pyaar mila unke parivaar se, bhai se zyaada. Tyohaar ke din Hairat (Shivratri) pe, hum do din rehte unke ghar mein. Akhrot pani mein bhigote the, raat ko pooja ke liye istemaal hota tha – uske baad humsayon mein baant te the. Rishtedaaron ke saath hum bhi jaate the baantne ke liye. Us waqt der raat tak hum Wavoora se chal ke aate. Na gun ka darr tha na militant ka na fauj ka. Eid ke liye woh aate the 2-3 din ke liye."*

Puranji's departure was traumatic.

"Mere dil ke do tukde ho gaye" says Nazir Ahmed in his extravagant, emotional way. "I never wanted to let him go – I didn't want him to become a migrant. I told him you shift here to my house. But when he said 'my life is not safe, *zyaadti mat karo*, let me go – I had to give in. He told me '*Intezaam karo*' so I fixed up the car, never told anyone."

Bound up with his tradition, Puranji's story contains the strands of his soil, his religion and the interlocking weave of Hindu and Muslim, sacred and profane. At 11:30 at night on the 22nd of February 1990, his house was incandescent with the light and music of prayer and celebration as the nearly twenty strong joint family in the three storeyed house where they all lived, observed the holiest day of their calendar - Shivratri. Nazir Ahmed arranged for the car to arrive precisely then. Leaving the rest of his extended family behind amidst the chanting, as arranged – they would follow twenty days later- Puranji, his wife and their two daughters, one aged three years and the other a little baby, nine months old, sneaked out of their home together for the last time in their lives, walked quietly across their vast field and reached the road where the car was waiting with Nazir Ahmed and his eldest son. Quickly, they loaded it and set off for Kupwara.

In the time-honoured departures of migrations, partitions and cleansings, people never imagine this will be the last time they will see the homes and lands they have lived in for centuries. They sever the link with the earth that has nourished their tradition, without knowing of its finality. They entrust their houses to neighbours as in pre-Partition Punjab, keep their keys safely for years as in Palestine and cannot think of a timeline beyond a few months. "My mother lived in Kupwara proper," says Puranji's wife. "We woke her up in the middle of the night. The bus was coming from Jammu in the morning. We sat in it and reached Jammu on the 24th. *Us waqt humne socha – paanch-chheh mahinon mein aa jayenge – we will be back.*"

"Rone ke bagair kuchh nahin tha," remembers Nazir Ahmed. *Kupwara mein humne unko vida kiya. Socha ek-do saal mein wapas aa jayenge.*

Seventeen years later, Puranji's family still lives in a one-room quarter with a tin roof in a refugee camp in Jammu. Summer temperatures go up to forty degrees – a matter of trauma for Kashmiris who pride themselves on their inability to bear the heat of the plains. It has the clutter of schoolchildren's things, kitchen utensils neatly stacked in the corner, mattresses, suitcases and naked bulbs on the ceiling. There is also now a red telephone but in Kashmiri style, no furniture, just cushions on the durrie-covered floor where we talk for almost five hours. This is

where they sleep, eat, study and cook. Puranji also has a son born in the camp who has never seen Kashmir. The family of five shares a single bathroom with four other families. Their own family is scattered all over Jammu. Puranji went back to collect them and returned for the last time in April, hoping to sort out family affairs. On the sixth day of his visit the message came again – *Aaj ki raat mat guzaro yahaan*. He left on the 28th. On the first of May 1990, the massive Lolab style timber house was burned down by militants. It took three days to burn. “*Chhat laga tha teen ka, usey policewalle le gaye,*” he ends. 182 *kanals* of their land adjacent to it remain fallow.

* * *

We stop at a small village shop to buy something. The village idiot is drooling next to the Sumo, his eyes squinting, his face helpless and unfocused. He sways from side to side and holds out his hand. He leans forward to accept the change I am giving him, the drool threatening to fall on the car. The driver has a fit and shoos him away. Nazir Ahmed is back, beaming with a green plastic bag he shoves under the seat in a flash. It has a live chicken in it, with feathers and eyes and beak. I try to suppress my city squeamishness but there is no sound from the doomed bird.

“*Logon ko pata nahin tha* but the threat was there because of our friendship” he carries on the conversation interrupted. “*Reports were coming that yeh tehreek ke khilaaf hai. Gaon ke do Gujjar the – anpadh, jaahil – jinhone mujhe hit karne ke liye ek militant bheja. Aaya hamare ghar, raha chaar din, usey achhi tarah rakha toh usne kaha logon ne aapke khilaaf galat report di. Baad mein un dono ko Army ne hi khatm kar diya.*”

His face is a mixture of relief, contempt and serves-them-right. He has paid a real price in fear and tension for this friendship. And unlike Puranji, there was nowhere to escape, no one to look to for support. And no one would raise the cry of Islam being in danger if a Muslim was brutalising a fellow Muslim.

It has been two hours since we left Kupwara including our leisurely stop at the school. “*Soon,*” Nazir Ahmed says. We are nearing the place I have come to see. He counts off the villages we pass. At a turn when we see a mountain straight ahead, signalling the end of the Lolab Valley he stops the car. We get off. There is green, fertile, empty land on both sides of the road, mountains on all sides. Children play cricket on one side. “*Yeh sab unki zameen hai,*” says Nazir Ahmed spreading his hand out in an arc that covers both sides of the road. Where is your house I ask expecting it to be next door since they were so close. “*Nahin nahin,*” he says with startled eyes – “*woh toh bade ghar ke the, unke paas bahut zameen thi.*”

Hum toh thoda door rehte the." It's the first time I am made aware that there was an economic disparity between the two friends.

He points to a clump of trees at the far end on the other side. "*Wahaan ghar tha unka,*" I can't see anything. We decide to walk up to the spot – there is no motorable road till there, just empty fields. As we go nearer, I can see some houses at the back. I am expecting some ruins, some empty burnt out shell but I still can't see anything except the stunning, green beauty of the place. Nazir Ahmed has stopped and is searching intently for something in the ground. He looks around and bends low. I am puzzled.

"Where is it?" I ask.

"Yahaan.....idhar, He summons me triumphantly having found what he was looking for.

"Dekho yeh paudiyaan, yahaan darwaza tha."

He sketches out a door frame with his hands. I look. I see two exposed brick steps on one side of an uneven ridge in the grassy field. Two steps - just two! The cement is long gone, grass already filling in the cracks. This is all that is left of Puranji's house. If I didn't see the steps, I'd never know anything ever existed here. Within a year or so they will be gone too.

In this wonderland of a place, there is a gurgling stream on the left, tucked into the end of the small valley, cosy in its small beauty with towering, forested mountains around it as if it were made for the family's personal viewing pleasure. The clump of trees next to it is graceful and majestic – there is pine and walnut. A duck paddles in the brook, the setting sun giving its rushing, full waters the patina of an old jewel. It looks like a desktop screen. This is the way nature intended things to be. Truly, Puranji was right - if you are in Lolab, there is no need to go to heaven, you are already there. Yet in this place of his heritage, the cradle of his language, scriptures and poetry, there is not a trace of Puranji, not a whisper that he once lived here as did his ancestors, one of the oldest races on earth. The contrast with his one room in the refugee camp is horrible and painful even for me. It must be unimaginable for one who has lived a life here in this paradise.

Nazir Ahmed walks me through the rest of the 'house'. He opens the imaginary front door and points to the staircase going up in empty air. We turn left from the porch to 'enter' the main room where everyone sat together in the evening. It overlooks the stream. The rooms were upstairs his hands wave out. I imagine them. Puranji's words from the Jammu camp sketch in the rest.

“There were thirty-six rooms in a three-story house with three ‘sets’. Joint family *thi – saare shaam ko Pitaji ke saath khaya karte the*. When we sit together now, it is like the old house - *pachhis-chhabbis bande ek kamre mein reh sakte hain. Par yahaan purana mahaul ban hi nahin pata.*” His wife’s memories, “*Do badi bhabhiyaan theen. Kaththe saath baith te the. Yahaan din bhar akele rehte hain.*”

Puranji’s struggle with himself - “My father had 182 *kanals* of land left after the reforms. We still have it - *registaan ban gaya hai*. In my middle age I still feel I should get this property, if I dispose of it at least I will get something. My daughter says let it go to hell. The generation grown up here is least bothered about these things. Till I am alive, I can think about these things. If the problem isn’t solved till my death - who will tell them this land belongs to your father, when I die? No one, absolutely no one”

Shaken by the vision I have just seen, I am quiet. So is Nazir Ahmed, lost in the memories of the old days. We get back in to the Sumo and head to his house five minutes away that lies nestled at the bottom of the mountain that ends the Valley. Beyond it lies Pakistan. A rushing stream is crossed by a little fairytale bridge down a path that leads to his Lolab style wooden log house. There is huge excitement at my visit and the fact that I have come via a very special connection. The chicken in a plastic bag is discreetly passed to the lady of the house to meet its fate. The family seems endless - children of different sizes keep appearing out of every nook. “I have eleven children - the youngest is seven years old - I am a sinner,” Nazir Ahmed confesses, touching his ears, so sweetly repentant that I have to laugh. The first grandchild is already five years. Three more have been born. It is necessarily a large house and next to it he is building another, but this one is a brick house.

Within half an hour I am eating the fried chicken, Kashmiri bakery bread, apples cut just for me, *kahwa* and the walnuts cracked and kept before me in a little plate. Nazir Ahmed beseeches me with the pleading urgency of a mother feeding a recalcitrant child to eat, eat just a little bit more, his hand piling up my plate till I can have not even a walnut more to please him. We grapple hand to hand over a piece of the chicken. The hospitality of a rural Kashmiri cannot be outdone, no matter how poor he may be. *Meri achhi behen* he calls me, my good sister. His wife is twice his size, with a smiling face. She bounces the latest baby on her lap and never says a word. Perhaps she is not as fluent in Urdu.

The photo albums tumble out. Puranji’s family came last year to visit for the first time in seventeen years. He didn’t come. His wife is in the photographs, wearing smart dark glasses and uncovered head in the bright sunshine at some tourist guesthouse nearby, on plastic folding chairs. Nazir’s wife stands next to her in

her traditional clothes – she looks far older, like the grandmother she is. All of them in this very room, laughing, chatting.

“Kabhi ahsaas nahin tha Muslim ya Hindu ka – humein pata hi nahin tha,” says Nazir Ahmed. “We drank from the same cup. Once Puranji’s wife picked up a piece of meat from my plate. A Pandit lady looked at her shocked - she told her - we are all brothers and sisters. *Bade gehre talluqat the.*”

There are also pictures of Nazir Ahmed’s son Inam visiting in Jammu. These show him with Puranji’s smart young daughters dressed in jeans and shirts, arms casually slung around his neck, smiling in to the camera; his twelve year old boy dressed in baggy calf-length shorts and sleeveless torn T shirt with a back-to-front cap. He looks like a dude and has a dude-like expression for the camera. Inam looks like he is a conservative schoolteacher trying hard to look fashionable in jeans. In another, the whole family and Inam are sitting, in winter Kashmiri style, under quilts in the room at the camp. Inam looks happy and has a can’t-quite-believe-this expression on his face.

The pictures are telling a story that Inam will confirm on the way back to Kupwara. The eating and drinking has brought in the evening hours – darkness will fall soon. I will have to start well in time before the heavy gates shut the Lolab in for the night. But first I have to take my leave and bid farewell to the family. It has barely been four hours since I met Nazir Ahmed. He entreats me to stay the night, his elaborate rural hospitality will settle for no less. I insist I must go. We say the sentimental farewell, offer lavish phrases of sister and brotherhood and wave the fond goodbye. It is not an insincere one. Nazir Ahmed’s generosity to me and his remarkable emotion for his friend through seventeen years is a rare thing to see and experience. We have been through an overwhelming personal journey together as strangers, with Puranji as the ghost who accompanied us. Like several experiences in Kashmir, a lifetime has been lived in a couple of hours.

Inam is deputed to escort me back to Kuligam, just before the gates. We discuss the Jammu photographs in the car where he feels free to talk in his father’s absence.

“Ajeeb lagta hai” he says when I ask him about his first visit to Jammu and seeing girls on the street wearing jeans and tight clothes. *“Ladies ko nahin pehenna chahiye,”* he admits hesitantly.

“But if everybody wears such clothes then is it okay?”

“Haan tab theek hai” he says, embarrassed; but clearly his demeanour suggests otherwise.

The incongruous photos of this Muslim village boy with his smart city 'sisters' and the dude younger 'brother' have spoken of this embarrassment already. The girls, unaware of his conservatism, casually posing with him, his struggle to disguise his awkwardness and unfamiliarity with more modern modes of behaviour, his desire to keep up with the city lights – all this is visible in every frame. So too is the realisation that modernity has snatched the migrant away forever.

There is no way Puranji can come back here even if he can – at least with his children. His migrant life has moved far, far ahead of this simple, rural existence where emotions are extravagant and friends are for life. His wife has shed her rustic demeanour to acquire a city slick that leaves her rural sister far behind. His children may be at home in Delhi or Bombay but hardly in the conservative Lolab. The opportunities the world has given him and his children outside his sheltered "heaven" may never compensate for its loss. But they won't let him go back easily either - maybe not at all. This partition-held-in-abeyance may just turn out to be as real and as divisive as any in history

I drop off Inam at Kuligam and head to Kupwara. I remember the last conversation with Puranji. Do you miss that collective society, I ask?

"Na yaad hai na asar," says Puranji.

"Hona bhi nahin chahiye," interjects Aiman

"They bargained us – gave us hell," says Puranji. Just imagine – *apna hi khoon* – all convertees!

"Jin logon ne bachpan cheena hai, unhe thodi maaf kar sakte hai," adds Aiman as he exits the room to meet a neighbour.

The conversation carries on after a pause.

"If attitudes change....." begins Puranji, drifting off. From righteousness, his expression has changed to something tentative. He wants an acknowledgement of the trauma he has endured, some respect for the loss he has suffered. After that....

"Do you feel the Muslims betrayed you?"

"Definitely – yes," he nods.

"But you miss them still?"

"Yes".

And you can forgive?"

The answer comes before the question is over. *"Yes."*

The apology may be a long time coming. Neither side believes it is wrong, both believe the other 'owes' them. But *"Apna khoon"* is how Puranji has described his tormentor and closest friend - the Kashmiri Muslim. The pull of this blood may be too strong to fit into the ideological precision of nationalism and religion.

We reach the gates – they are open, the soldier waves me on ahead with a smile. I return it with some sense of relief. The Lolab is left behind me in the evening darkness as I re-enter the relative safety of Kupwara town.