

زنان و نان



NOVEMBER 2021

Militarized Media: Power, Propaganda, and Press



new beginnings, radical possibilities

Published By: Zanaan Wanaan

Copyright License: This issue may be used, reproduced, or translated freely for non-commercial purposes, with due acknowledgement and attributions.

Date of Publication: November 2021

Website: zanaanwanaan.com

Contact Information: info@zanaanwanaan.com

Cover Design: Kashmir Pop Art

Editor: Mariyeh Mushtaq

Curators: Ifsha Zehra and Zara Bakshi

“then I will speak upon the ashes.”

-Sojourner Truth

Editor's Note

The first issue of *Zanaan Wanaan* insisted upon, and to an extent made a strong case for, the importance of scholarship produced by Kashmiri women. This issue is an excellent addition to that project of knowledge production we have undertaken as a part of this decolonial feminist movement.

The theme, 'Militarised Media: Power, Propaganda, and Press' is aimed at introducing the interconnectedness of power and media in this extraordinary region. This is a particularly timely issue offering a feminist critique of the state of media in India, particularly in the context of Kashmir. Ten essays raising important questions ranging from repression to representation and beyond, further add to the already existing body of work on the subject. The contributors comprise of a brilliant cohort of academics, scholars, researchers, journalists, etc, all bringing different enquires and areas of expertise to the table.

First, the works in the issue examine different genres of analysis within media studies, helping us understand how a Kashmiri audience engages with the contentious mediascapes around them. Second, the contributors share their own anxieties and experiences of engaging with the ethics of reportage, documentation and visual work considering the profuse violence that is an everyday reality of people. Finally, the focus of the works herein also propose a shift from the traditional ways of thinking about media and reportage to a more nuanced engagement with life and peoples' experiences in Kashmir.

The second part of the issue is comprised of *Guidelines for Gender Sensitive Media Reportage*, drafted in collaboration with the Beirut based feminist group, Fe-Male. The aim of these guidelines is to provide a starting point of engagement with questions of ethics, gender and violence.

We dedicate this issue to Aasia Jeelani, a journalist and human rights defender whose work is truly an inspiration for the younger generation. Through this dedication, ZW honours her legacy and finds hope in her commitment towards the women's movement in Kashmir. A part of the issue details her life and work; both of which are integral to understanding the Kashmiri struggle of 'telling our story' to the world.

With this, we expect to forge new directions of feminist enquiry within media discourses in Kashmir: from the personal, to the political and beyond.



Mariyeh Mushtaq,
Editor

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Aasia Jeelani- A Kashmiri Feminist Trailblazer	8
1. Territorial Disputes and Media Repression: A Case Study of Kashmir and West Papua Aashna Jamal	12
2. Memoir of a Lockdown Bisma Bhat	23
3. I Would Grow Up to be Collateral Damage Farah Bashir	27
4. I Am Not One story: The Metaverse in Kashmir Hameeda Syed	30
5. Politics of Humor: Women in Political Cartoons of Kashmir Heeba Din	34
6. In Kashmir Internet Access and Social Media Visibility are Both an Uphill Battle! Ifat Gazia	39
7. The Many Projections of a Normal Life: Everyday Photography and Visual Production in Kashmir Sadaf Wani	46
8. The Sounds of Silence: Self and Censorship in Kashmir Samreen Mushtaq	51
9. Mediating Experiences of Kashmir: Thinking through the Abrogation Souzeina Mushtaq	57
10. Speaking Kashmir in India: A Cautiously Optimistic Note Vanessa Chishti	63
<i>Notes on Contributors</i>	71
ZW Issue II Cover Art Explainer	75
Guidelines for Gender Sensitive Media Reportage in Kashmir (i - xvi)	78

Aasia Jeelani- A Kashmiri Feminist Trailblazer



Aasia Jeelani (1977-2005) was a force to be reckoned with; her involvement in the women's movement in Kashmir cannot be overlooked. An activist, journalist, and human rights defender, Aasia held command and respect in a heavily male-dominated field and era in Kashmir. In this tribute, we revisit Aasia's life and honor the legacy of defiance and truth that she left through her work and commitment towards Kashmir.

Born in Srinagar on 9th February 1977, Aasia grew up in politically volatile and complex times in Kashmir. She pursued a Bachelor's degree in Science from the Government College for Women, MA Road, Srinagar. After which, she shifted her field of study and did a Post-

Graduation in Journalism from the University of Kashmir.

Aasia began her career as a journalist, starting in Kashmir. In 2001, she moved to Delhi to work with The Times of India. However, she could not relate to the everyday conversations; her identity was in constant opposition to her colleagues. Feeling disenthralled with her work, she made a resolve to move back to her hometown and work there. Unapologetic yet nonchalant in her approach, she stood her ground when it came to speaking her mind.

After returning to Kashmir, she wanted to connect with her community and began exploring spaces in Kashmir, engaging with like-minded people. In one such interaction at the University of Kashmir, she became familiarised with the human rights organization- Jammu Kashmir Coalition of Civil Society (JKCCS). Taking little time to settle within the organization, Aasia undertook various human rights and civil liberties projects. Subsequently, she made it her work home.



Driven with the passion for Kashmiri women's struggle, Aasia strengthened and expanded the Kashmiri Women's Initiative for Peace and Disarmament (KWIPD). KWIPD was a pre-existing wing of JKCCS, Aasia empowered it to become a collective in itself. It was a space for discussion about the multiple struggles faced by the women of Kashmir on account of militarization and societal pressures. Aasia and others at KWIPD held various community engagement programs, conferences, workshops in the early 2000s.

Aasia was determined to internationalize the problem of militarization in Kashmir. She drew inspiration from struggles worldwide and took active steps to mobilize support from around the globe. As a member of both KWIPD and JKCCS, Aasia attended many conferences. In Amsterdam, the Netherlands-based NGO, Inter-Church Peace Council (IKV), organized one such important meeting. Aasia emerged as a notable voice at the meeting proposing an exclusive session to discuss women's issues in conflict zones. On her recommendation, the session was held, and she brought Kashmiri women's concerns forward while advocating for cross-movement solidarity across the globe. She also discussed critical issues like the mental health of the Kashmiri population in an informal session with MSF. After listening to Aasia, members of the organization- Lawyers Without Borders (LWB) attending the conference emphasized the need to visit Kashmir and assess the situation on the ground.

In 2003, KWIPD, under the leadership of Aasia, started a quarterly newsletter magazine called 'Voices Unheard.'¹ Aasia was the founding editor of this magazine,

¹ About. (2012, April 27). VOICES UNHEARD. <https://voicesunheard1.wordpress.com/about-2/>

a politically charged collection of essays and fact-finding reports. It contained original works collated by the team; they would travel to different parts of Kashmir to collect stories and testimonies of gendered and sexual violence perpetrated on the women of Kashmir. These were published in the form of newsletters every three months.

Voices Unheard brought forth four issues in total, all within the lifetime and editorship of Aasia. The first issue was published in March 2003. In the first editorial, Aasia emphasized the role of international opinion and action in bringing an end to the “political imbroglio in Kashmir.”

Aasia writes, "This newsletter is a salutation and tribute to those women who fight with courage and deserve all praises and applaud but go unnoticed even in the eyes of their people. Every effort of KWIPD will try to pave the way for peace and disarmament, not only at regional or national but also at international level."

She was optimistic that a women's movement would bring Kashmir on the world's political map and prove instrumental in internationalizing the issue of Kashmir. Aasia took an intersectional approach to critique the various forces subjugating women. Speaking to the lack of a women's movement against militarization, she also addressed the class disparity in Kashmir. She called out the elite section of the society for maintaining a criminal silence over the sufferings of their underprivileged counterparts. Aasia lived her life striving for the cause of seeking justice and accountability. “She died for truth,” says Parvez Imroz, chairperson JKCCS, in a documentary² dedicated to Aasia Jeelani.

On 20th April 2004, Aasia was visiting district Kupwara as part of an election monitoring team. That day bore witness to multiple acts of violence says Freny Manecksha³ while going through Aasia’s field notebook. The first violence it captured was that of the farce voting exercise. During the team’s fieldwork, they came across several accounts of intimidation and threats used by armed forces to exaggerate voter participation.

The other violence it is witness to are the marks from the explosion that took the lives of two members of the team. On their way back home, near Chandgam village, the car

² *Remembering Aasia Jeelani*. (2019, November 21). [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P38mEkW-Hxw>

³ Manecksha, F. (2018, May 20). *Notebook of Asiya Jeelani: Survivor and witness to the violence of 2004 elections*. Wande Magazine. <https://www.wandemag.com/asiya-jeelani-notebook-survivor-witness-violence-2004-elections/>

carrying Aasia and other colleagues from JKCCS was blown up in an IED blast. The vehicle's driver, Ghulam Nabi Sheikh, and Aasia died on the spot. Khurram Parvez, the program coordinator of JKCCS was severely injured, and two other volunteers were also hurt. Her martyrdom was and remains a collective loss for Kashmir.

Through her work, Aasia set the tradition of feminist revolt in Kashmir and left a trail for us to follow. We at ZW, take inspiration from her resolve, her commitment to truth and justice, and her unwavering spirit.

...

Territorial Disputes and Media Repression

A Case Study of Kashmir and West Papua

Aashna Jamal



The Indonesian provinces of West Papua and Papua.
Figure 1. Source: Lowy Institute, 2020

Paradise on Earth and the Land of the Bird of Paradise, Kashmir and West Papua respectively, have one thing in common: India and Indonesia assert that they are their integral and indivisible territories (Doherty, 2019)(BJP4India, 2020). Any international critique about the legitimacy of their dominion over these territories or allegations of human right violations are promptly met with the retort: it is our domestic issue. Over the years, media across various platforms, both local and foreign, has had to navigate reporting under the repressive eye of increasingly uncompromising governments in these countries. More and more so, media repression is not limited to the voices of traditional media but includes activists, academics, and common citizens.

Kashmir and West Papua's indigenous self-determination movements can be traced back to the partition of India in 1947 and the end of the WWII in 1945 respectively. West Papua, earlier called Irian Jaya, is the western half of the island of New Guinea (the eastern being Papua New Guinea). The Dutch had sovereignty over parts of the Papua region after the end of WWII. In 1962, the USA brokered something called the New York Agreement for Dutch parts of West New Guinea/ West Papua to become a UN protectorate, i.e. the UN would essentially be responsible for the area in a trustee position, under Indonesian administration till a referendum could be held (Tudor, 2021).

Subsequently, a plebiscite vote was held in 1969 with only 1025 hand-picked people, and West Papua was annexed by Indonesia. It wasn't a fair vote, most voters having been detained and coerced before the ballot (Doherty, 2019). A freedom movement for West Papua has been in existence since, seeking independence from Indonesia (Paddock, 2020). In 2003, the West Papua region was divided into two provinces – West Papua and Papua. Together, they are still called West Papua, and will be referred to as such in this essay.

Jammu & Kashmir (J&K) was a princely state in erstwhile British India that the then Dogra Maharaja acceded to the Dominion of India instead of Pakistan in 1947. This was done under an Instrument of Accession, with the provision of a referendum in the future to determine the status of the Kashmiri people. The aftermath of the accession reignited a self-determination movement in the region, which had started during the Dogra rule (Bose, 2005). The Indian Constitution inserted Article 370 in 1950 which limited its mandate in the then state of J&K.

The autonomy of the state was diluted over the years via various constitutional orders till the Article was finally revoked in 2019. In particular, Kashmir region's history post 1947 has been marked by protests, an armed struggle, a high degree of militarisation associated with human right violations, and continuing uncertainty in the life of the Kashmiri people. Overtime, international bodies, and many sovereign states have diminished the issue of J&K to a territorial dispute between India and Pakistan, largely ignoring the unresolved political aspirations of the people of this region. In this essay, the former state of J&K is referred to as Kashmir for the sake of brevity, and because many of the issues outlined in the following paragraphs especially concern the Kashmir region.

Framed by larger questions of self-determination and autonomy, the issue of media repression is crucial to understand the complex ways in which the state operates in these two places. As the succeeding paragraphs explain, this goes a few ways: First,

controlling the narrative regarding Kashmir and West Papua by limiting access. Second, surveillance of commentary, spreading disinformation and censorship. Lastly, denying services and resources are causes of concern for independent reportage.

Managing Media: Inside Out

Both Kashmir and West Papua have had major political upheavals in the last few years. In Kashmir, this was the de-operationalisation of Article 370 and Article 35 A on 5 August 2019, which limited the power of the Indian state in J&K and gave certain privileges to the permanent residents of the state. In July 2021, the Indonesian parliament voted to amend a Special Autonomy Law of 2001 which has implications for autonomy and decentralisation in West Papua (Atrakouti, 2021)(Strangio, 2021). Interestingly the new law rejects the prospects of West Papua to have local political parties evoking an eerie juxtaposition of the August 2019 move in Kashmir, which essentially rendered mainstream parties powerless as the state became a Union Territory that would be ruled from the centre.

India and Indonesia's attitudes towards media, especially during these upheavals, sparked criticism over press freedom in these countries. In 2021, India ranked 142nd in the Reporters without Borders (RSF) World Press Freedom Index; some reasons being the hate campaigns waged against journalists on social networks, criminal prosecution to gag journalists and the 'Orwellian content regulations' in Kashmir. Indonesia ranked 113th as Indonesian President Joko Widodo or Jokowi continued to restrict media access to West Papua despite his pro media comments (RSF, 2021).

Both countries have put measures in place to make access for foreign journalists difficult. In 2015, Indonesia's president Jokowi said that the government would lift restrictions for accredited foreign journalists who wanted to report on West Papua. This spoken commitment did not translate into a written decree, even after his second term re-election in 2019. Alliance of Independent Journalists reported in 2021 that out of the 'scores of applications for permits to report in Papua, only 18 permits were issued' (Pacific Media, 2021). Human Rights Watch (HRW) reported that a government 'clearing house' still existed to vet journalist requests before giving them permission to visit (HRW, 2017)(Human Rights Papua, 2019) .

In 2018, the Ministry of External Affairs in India sent communication to foreign correspondents to apply for travel permission if they wanted to visit Jammu & Kashmir. This had been done in 2016 as well when a Kashmiri militant leader, Burhan Wani was killed. The Print reported that only two foreign journalists were allowed to

visit between May 2018 and January 2019 (The Wire, 2019)(Bharadwaj, 2019). This is reminiscent of the early days of the separatist movement in the 1990s when the New York Times reported that foreign journalists were barred from Kashmir (Crossette, 1990).

In the aftermath of 5 August, Kashmiri journalists were unable to report for a certain period of time due to an e-curfew, a problem further compounded by the fact that even foreign journalists were not allowed to visit the region (RSF, 2020a). Barring foreign journalists often means that they are forced to rely on second hand accounts or not access events as they happen in real time, delaying critical information flow.

Along with making access to foreign media harder, any reportage that goes against the state narrative is lambasted by the two nations. Soon after the revocation of Article 370 in August 2019, BBC released a clip of anti-government protests in Srinagar. These were heavily contested by the Indian administration as being fake (Singh, 2019). Some mainstream media in India aired sensationalist shows irresponsibly labelling the western media as 'fake' and 'jihadi' media (News X, 2019). In Indonesia, an English site called Wawawa Journal, which discredited foreign journalism in the region, was found to have links to a former Indonesian Vice President (Strick and Syavira, 2019).

To combat any form of dissident narratives, the state also controls which international observers are allowed to visit during times of upheaval. UN officials have reported lack of access to West Papua, including successive UN High Commissioners for human rights (Letters, 2019). In 2019, India allowed a select delegation of right-wing EU parliamentarians for a sanitised and a state-sponsored tour of Kashmir. The delegation recognised Article 370 an internal issue of India at the end of visit while voicing concerns of terrorism. This visit was made after India denied a visit to a US senator as well as Opposition Members of Parliament (The Economic Times, 2019). If these practices continue in the future, the world will continue to get a biased rendering of West Papuan and Kashmiri affairs.

Controlling the Cyberspace: Surveillance and Censorship

Commentary or dissent online that goes against the state is shut down. In 2020, BBC reported an instance of hashtag hijacking where the #freewestpapua was taken over by stories of development and progress in the region, which were traced to an Indonesian company (Strick and Syavira, 2019). Pro-Indonesian trolls have been known to dislike or report certain reportage or pictures to get it taken down (RSF, 2020b). In 2020, a trolling campaign by Indonesian users targeted the official

Instagram account of the government of Vanuatu after its speech at the UN about concerns of human right violations in West Papua (Firdaus, 2021a).

Similarly, foreign celebrities or politicians voicing concerns about the situation in Kashmir are met with brute attacks on Twitter, Facebook and elsewhere. In 2019, when US Senator and former Presidential Candidate Bernie Sanders condemned India's actions in Kashmir, multiple campaigns surfaced online in India linking his remarks to one of his campaign managers of Pakistani origin (Shukla, 2019) (Gaurav C Sawant on Twitter, 2020). This is just one of the many examples of prominent social media users facing backlash and being cancelled in India after speaking about Kashmir.

Disinformation campaigns are run to change the narrative of events. Rest of World reported that many sites disseminating information on events in West Papua, and posing as independent outlets could actually be linked to an Indonesian soldier (Firdaus, 2021a). In another instance, a Jakarta media company, InsightID, that had bots hijacking the #freewestpapua was found placing targeted paid ads to Facebook users in western countries about normalcy in the region (Strick and Syavira, 2019).

It is important to note that large media platforms are also involved in cooperating with national governments to curb certain commentary on their platforms. Big media companies including Facebook and Twitter actively take down content on West Papua, some on unfounded grounds such as nudity (RSF, 2020b). Indonesian People's Front for West Papua, a pro-independence group, lost access to its Twitter account right before independence day celebrations in 2020 which they blamed on a bot attack (Firdaus, 2021a).

This is similar to measures taken in Kashmir where many accounts on Instagram, Facebook and Twitter have been taken down for violating community guidelines. A popular account Stand with Kashmir with a large following was made inaccessible to Instagram users based in India. A US based organisation found that thousands of tweets shared by accounts focused on Kashmir had been withheld by Twitter under its "country withheld content policy" (Shah, 2020). These curbs are not on large media, but on commentators which include activists and academics.

The fate of independent news sources or opinion platforms is even worse in Indonesia, being targeted or blocked routinely. According to Rest of World, websites run by the Free West Papua movement have been blocked for supporting separatism. Other independent news sites such as the Suara Papua were periodically blocked, and newspapers like Tabloid Jubi reported distributed denial of service (DDOS) attacks

which made it overload (Firdaus, 2021a). Accounts on Twitter like Lost Kashmiri History or With Kashmir on Instagram were taken down under similar pretexts. Control of commentary, disinformation campaigns and reworking of realities to suit state narratives are deliberate attempts to impinge upon independent voices in these regions.

Denying Services, Disrupting Information

Cutting off the internet or allowing only low bandwidth are used as strategies by both India and Indonesia. In 2021, Indonesia cut off the internet citing a broken cable. Activists disagreed saying that it was a common method used to curb discussion of violence or dissent. In 2021, Rest of World reported at least 8 cases of internet blackouts and bandwidth throttling in the West Papua region (Firdaus, 2021b). During one of the longest internet shutdown in the world post 5 August 2019, Kashmiri journalists had to depend on a state cell with internet access to file their stories. 4G internet was restored only in February 2021 (The Polis Project, Inc, 2021).

Media is often intimidated through outright measures or by veiled means such as cutting off revenue sources. A Jakarta-based Alliance for Independent Journalists reported intimidation by the military and radical religious groups as issues they have to deal with on a regular basis. Pacific Media reported that there were '38 cases of intimidation against media companies and the media in general in Indonesia' (Pacific Media, 2021). More recently, Rest of World reported that journalists have faced online and offline intimidation, including doxing (Firdaus, 2021b).

In Kashmir, there are well documented instances of harassment, surveillance and physical violence towards journalists (Committee to Protect Journalists, 2021)(The Polis Project, Inc, 2021)(Amnesty International, 2020). In 2018, the Wire reported that since 1990, 19 journalists in Kashmir have been killed at the hands of unidentified gunmen which include militants and armed forces (The Wire, 2018). Journalists face reprisals both at the hands of the government and militant groups. In 2019, the government refused to give advertisements to Greater Kashmir and Kashmir Reader without giving any reason, and also de-empanelled 34 newspapers (The Polis Project, Inc, 2021). Given that advertisements are the biggest sources of revenue for newspapers, this was a crippling blow.

Repressive government policies and laws serve as a deterrent to objective non-partisan journalism. An anti-blasphemy law and the Law on "Informasi dan Transaksi Elektronik" (Electronic and Information Transactions Law) is in place in Indonesia to dissuade journalists from reporting and self-censor (HRW, 2010). Similarly, in

Kashmir the government unveiled a New Media Policy of 2020 which asks for empanelment of newspapers, background checks of journalists and vetting from the government and security agencies to deem that the news is not fake, anti-national or unethical (Zargar, 2020). The government can deem news as fake without any explanation, and initiate legal action (RSF, 2020a). Especially after the revocation of Article 370 in 2019, various journalists have been booked under notorious laws such as the Unlawful Activities Prevention Act (UAPA), usually used for terrorists, and Public Safety Act (PSA) which essentially renders them without bail until trial (Chakravarty, 2020).

A key concern arising out of all of these issues is self-censorship. In September 2021, Free Press Kashmir reported that the Kashmiri administration had made a circular that would bar certain people from travelling abroad if they were on what was called the 'adverse list' (Free Press Kashmir, 2021). This included 22 journalists, as well as academicians and human right activists. When media and other informed voices are forced to silence themselves, consumers of news and other related content cannot be assured that they are getting the whole picture.

Being able to piece the truth of these two regions still remains difficult despite global interconnectedness. Media repression should concern the international community and citizens of these countries alike. Both countries need to address the implicit practice of managing media narratives by restricting access to external observers such as journalists and diplomats. Surveillance and censorship of online and offline media, academics, activists, and even common citizens, continues to filter out narratives unaligned to the state. Denying services such as internet access and cutting financial resources makes reporting difficult for both online and offline media. If the fourth estate is not completely free, and commentary or dissent is clamped down upon, Kashmiri and West Papuan realities will be cloaked in silence.

Bibliography

Amnesty International (2020) *India: Government must immediately stop intimidation of journalists in Jammu and Kashmir*, Amnesty International. Available at:

<https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2020/04/journalists-in-jammu-and-kashmir/> (Accessed: 18 October 2021).

Atrakouti, A. (2021) *Indonesia: Unilateral renewal of Special Autonomy and arbitrary arrest of protesters in West Papua*. Available at:

<https://www.civicus.org/index.php/media-resources/news/5178-indonesia->

[unilateral-renewal-of-special-autonomy-and-arbitrary-arrest-of-protesters-in-west-papua](#) (Accessed: 20 October 2021).

Blades, J. (2020) West Papua: The issue that won't go away for Melanesia. Lowy Institute. Available at: <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/publications/west-papua-issues-wont-go-away-melanesia> (Accessed :November 20, 2021)

Bharadwaj, A. (2019) *Only two foreign journalists have got permits to visit J&K since May last year*, *The Print*. Available at: <https://theprint.in/india/governance/only-two-foreign-journalists-have-got-permits-to-visit-jk-since-may-last-year/179975/> (Accessed: 10 November 2021).

BJP4India (2020) *BJP on Twitter*, *Twitter*. Available at: <https://twitter.com/BJP4India/status/1291242849946632193> (Accessed: 19 October 2021).

Bose, S. (2005) *Kashmir – Roots of Conflict, Paths to Peace*.

Chakravarty (2020) *FIRs against Kashmiri journalists sends message that media exists at the mercy of security agencies*, *Scroll.in*. <https://scroll.in>. Available at: <https://scroll.in/article/959874/firs-against-kashmiri-journalists-sends-message-that-media-exists-at-the-mercy-of-security-agencies> (Accessed: 15 October 2021).

Committee to Protect Journalists (2021) 'Jammu and Kashmir police assault journalists covering religious procession', *Committee to Protect Journalists*, 17 August. Available at: <https://cpj.org/2021/08/jammu-and-kashmir-police-assault-journalists-covering-religious-procession/> (Accessed: 15 October 2021).

Crossette, B. (1990) 'India Barring Foreign Journalists From Turbulent Kashmir', *The New York Times*, 18 February. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/1990/02/18/world/india-barring-foreign-journalists-from-turbulent-kashmir.html> (Accessed: 18 October 2021).

Doherty, B. (2019) 'Why are there violent clashes in Papua and West Papua?', *The Guardian*, 22 August. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/aug/22/why-are-there-violent-clashes-in-papua-and-west-papua-explainer> (Accessed: 18 October 2021).

Firdaus, F. (2021a) *How West Papua's independence movement stays online*, *Rest of World*. Available at: <https://restofworld.org/2021/the-silent-song/> (Accessed: 19 October 2021).

Firdaus, F. (2021b) *Indonesia said a broken cable caused an internet blackout in West Papua. Locals aren't buying it.*, *Rest of World*. Available at:

<https://restofworld.org/2021/west-papua-deliberate-internet-blackout/> (Accessed: 18 October 2021).

Free Press Kashmir (2021) *'Barred from travelling abroad': JK Admin's look out circular includes journalists, academicians* | Free Press Kashmir. Available at: <https://freepresskashmir.news/2021/09/22/barred-from-travelling-abroad-jk-admins-look-out-circular-includes-journalists-academicians/> (Accessed: 18 October 2021).

Gaurav C Sawant on Twitter (2020) Twitter. Available at: <https://twitter.com/gauravcsawant/status/1248355964895494144> (Accessed: 10 November 2021).

HRW (2010) *Turning Critics into Criminals*. Available at: <https://www.hrw.org/node/256062/printable/print> (Accessed: 19 November 2021).

HRW (2017) *Indonesia Still Restricting Foreign Media From Papua* | Human Rights Watch. Available at: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/05/08/indonesia-still-restricting-foreign-media-papua> (Accessed: 15 October 2021).

Human Rights Papua (2019) *Government keeps restrictive policy for foreign journalists covering in West Papua*. Available at: <https://www.humanrightspapua.org/news/31-2019/439-government-continues-restrictive-policy-on-access-of-foreign-journalists-to-west-papua> (Accessed: 15 October 2021).

Letters (2019) *'Freedom of the press in Indonesian-occupied West Papua'*, *The Guardian*, 22 July. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2019/jul/22/freedom-of-the-press-in-indonesian-occupied-west-papua> (Accessed: 19 October 2021).

News X. (2019, August 11). *Foreign Media Shows Video of Jihadi Rants; BBC, AL Jazeera claim ISIS, JEM Flags seen in Srinagar* [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EUV0C6A8ILc>

Pacific Media (2021) *Media alliance calls in Jokowi's pledge to allow foreign journalists into Papua* | Asia Pacific Report, Asia Pacific Report. Available at: <https://asiapacificreport.nz/2021/05/06/media-alliance-calls-in-jokowis-pledge-to-allow-foreign-journalists-into-papua/> (Accessed: 15 October 2021).

Paddock, R. (2020) *"Free Papua Movement" Intensifies Amid Escalating Violence'*, *The New York Times*, 12 December. Available at:

<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/12/12/world/asia/west-papua-independence.html> (Accessed: 19 October 2021).

RSF (2020a) *India: A year of throttling journalism in Kashmir* | *Reporters without borders*, RSF. Available at: <https://rsf.org/en/news/india-year-throttling-journalism-kashmir-0> (Accessed: 18 October 2021).

RSF (2020b) *Melanesia: Facebook algorithms censor article about press freedom in West Papua* | *Reporters without borders*, RSF. Available at: <https://rsf.org/en/news/melanesia-facebook-algorithms-censor-article-about-press-freedom-west-papua> (Accessed: 19 October 2021).

RSF (2021) *India : Modi tightens his grip on the media* | *Reporters without borders*, RSF. Available at: <https://rsf.org/en/india> (Accessed: 20 October 2021).

Shah, M. (2020) *Dodging India's media curbs in Kashmir* - *Nikkei Asia*, *Nikkei Asia*. Available at: <https://asia.nikkei.com/Editor-s-Picks/Tea-Leaves/Dodging-India-s-media-curbs-in-Kashmir> (Accessed: 19 October 2021).

Shukla, S. (2019) *The Pakistani American who could be behind Bernie Sanders' controversial Kashmir speech*, *The Print*. Available at: <https://theprint.in/world/the-pakistani-american-who-could-be-behind-bernie-sanders-controversial-kashmir-speech/285427/> (Accessed: 10 November 2021).

Singh, N. (2019) *BBC defends J&K coverage as Govt refutes international media claims of violence*, *The Print*. Available at: <https://theprint.in/india/bbc-defends-jk-coverage-as-govt-refutes-international-media-claims-of-violence/275569/> (Accessed: 19 November 2021).

Strangio, S. (2021) *Protests Greet Indonesia's Renewal of Papuan Autonomy Law*, *The Diplomat*. Available at: <https://thediplomat.com/2021/07/protests-greet-indonesias-renewal-of-papuan-autonomy-law/> (Accessed: 19 October 2021).

Strick and Syavira (2019) 'Papua unrest: Social media bots "skewing the narrative"', *BBC News*, 10 October. Available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-49983667> (Accessed: 16 September 2021).

The Economic Times (2019) 'EU MPs in Kashmir say Article 370 internal issue, stand by India in fight against terror', *The Economic Times*, 30 October. Available at: <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/eu-mps-in-kashmir-say-article-370-internal-issue-stand-by-india-in-fight-against-terror/articleshow/71817199.cms?from=mdr> (Accessed: 20 October 2021).

The Polis Project, Inc (2021) 'Gasping for breath: The fate of journalism in Kashmir after the abrogation of Article 370', *The Polis Project, Inc*, 19 August. Available at: <https://www.thepolisproject.com/read/gasping-for-breath-the-fate-of-journalism-in-kashmir-after-the-abrogation-of-article-370/> (Accessed: 15 October 2021).

The Wire (2018) *The Numbers Prove Kashmir Is a Highly Unsafe Place for Journalists*, *The Wire*. Available at: <https://thewire.in/media/kashmir-journalists-safety-numbers> (Accessed: 19 November 2021).

The Wire (2019) *Foreign Journalists' Presence in Kashmir Could 'Incentivise' Display of Stir*, *Says Jaishankar*. Available at: <https://thewire.in/external-affairs/jaishankar-kashmir-journalists> (Accessed: 19 November 2021).

Tudor, M. (2021) 'Gatekeepers to Decolonisation: Recentring the UN Peacekeepers on the Frontline of West Papua's Re-colonisation, 1962-3', *Journal of Contemporary History*, p. 0022009421997894. doi:10.1177/0022009421997894.

Zargar (2020) *Jammu and Kashmir's new media policy is aimed at demolishing the local press, editors say*, *Scroll.in*. <https://scroll.in>. Available at: <https://scroll.in/article/964900/jammu-and-kashmirs-new-media-policy-is-aimed-at-demolishing-the-local-press-editors-say> (Accessed: 16 September 2021).

...

Memoir of a Lockdown

Bisma Bhat

It was a Sunday, August 04, 2019; I was in office filing a story on chaos in the Sunday market due to the advisory issued by the government⁴ directing all nonlocal laborers, students, and tourists to vacate from the valley as soon as possible.

“Speed up, finish your work and leave for home before it is dark,” my editor directed his staff when he suddenly visited the newsroom in the afternoon of August 04. He had sensed that the situation in the region was going to be turbulent.

I was sitting with my senior reporter, who was also filing a story on some issue. We were talking to each other about the eerie tensions and the prevailing circumstances.

“We should finish our work and leave for home, something big is going to happen, and we have no idea what it will be all about... we don’t know if we will be able to see each other tomorrow,” he said. “How are you going home?” he asked me.

I told him that I was thinking of taking an auto-rickshaw or calling someone from home to pick me up because public transport was not readily available due to the chaotic environment for the last few weeks. I, along with everyone else, was worried. I could not get over the fear of the uncertainty and filed the story within no time. Then I packed my bag pack and left for home. In the meanwhile, my fiancé was already waiting outside the Press Enclave to drop me home.

My office was located in the buzziest hub of the city. People were rushing home in confusion, shopkeepers were putting down their shutters, and an unnerving silence was all around. Everyone was sharing collective anxiety for the events that were about to unfold.

“I heard mobile internet and connectivity will be blocked, but that is nothing new in Kashmir. We are used to it, so why are people anxious? Something sounds suspicious,” my fiancé told me anxiously. I replied, “Even the journalists in the valley have no idea of what is going on.” We bid farewell with the hope that we would be in touch with each other.

⁴ Ahmad, M. (2019, August 2). *As Govt Tells Amarnath Yatris, Tourists to Leave Kashmir, Valley Struck by Fear of the Unknown*. The Wire. <https://thewire.in/security/amarnath-yatra-army-kashmir-government-advisory>

The following day, August 05, I woke up to the notice that my internet and mobile network were blocked. I checked my younger sister's mobile for she had a different network but couldn't see the mobile towers on the top line of her phone either. Around 11 in the morning, everyone in my family was sitting in front of the television, tuned to NDTV news channel where Amit Shah announced the abrogation of Article 370 and downgraded the state of Jammu and Kashmir into two union territories in the parliament.

“Breaking News: J&K's special status scrapped, Article 370 Scrapped! Order signed by President” was flashing in the bottom line of the news on NDTV.

One of the neighbors was also watching the news with us because their cable connection was not working, and we had a DTH connection which is why we were able to find out. I was shell-shocked with the news, for this was unbelievable that such a massive political blunder could be simply announced to a locked-up population. There was a sense of disappointment on the faces of my family. All of us were in a state of utter disbelief. No one could process this in the first instance.

A senior Journalist at NDTV, Nazir Masoodi, was giving insights into the situation in the valley. After learning about all this, my mother did not allow me to go to the office because she had already realized that the valley was under strict curfew and paramilitary troops patrolled every corner.

I was out of touch with everyone, including my fellow reporters, friends, and relatives. I was confined in my home for at least 20 days. I could not move out. I did not know what was going on in the press enclave. I wondered, how were journalists covering stories? There was no answer to these questions. This resulted in immense mental stress and anxiety until August 18.

Suddenly out of nowhere one of my friends and fellow reporter visited my house. I was thrilled to see her. “Where are you Bisma? Why are you not coming to the Press enclave? Most of the journalists are doing stories. Why are you sitting at home?” she said. “One of the senior reporters in your office told me if you manage to reach Bisma, ask her to come to the office... I decided to visit your home,” she added. I responded, “...how are you managing to reach Lal Chowk with no transport on roads and strict restrictions in place. I am scared of traveling alone.... you know the patrolling of armed forces throughout the day.” She smiled and told me that sometimes she would walk, and at other times she managed to get a ride with fellow journalists. She added,

“I was stopped many times by armed forces to check my identity, and they asked where I was going...why, and so on.”

Two days later, on August 20, I decided to visit the office with her. We walked around three kilometres to reach the office from my house. The roads leading to my office were silent, lifeless, and very few people could be seen, and among them were the two of us.

We also noticed many new military bunkers and checkpoints after every stop. Paramilitary forces were lined up everywhere, and they were stopping people at the slightest sense of ‘suspicion.’

“Madam kaha ja rahey hoo...band hai sab...” (Madam, where are you going?... Everything is closed), said one of the police personnel holding his gun. I and my friend walked to him and showed him our press cards. *“Hum patrikar hai, office jana hai”* (We are journalists, we have to go office), we told him in a fearful voice. He checked our cards and let us go.

My editor assigned a story on ‘how working women are passing their time during the lockdown.’ It took me around a week to file a story which I used to do in a day or two. Due to the unavailability of the internet, I could not mail the story to my editor. I carried the story on a pen drive to my office. My editor transferred the story from the pen drive to his system. Further, after editing, he went to the media facilitation centre where the government had given journalists access to the internet. This centre was around two kilometres away from the press enclave. There he mailed this and other stories to another editor operating in New Delhi from where he would upload it on the internet.

It was a very long, hectic, and tedious process. We had to undergo the same process for around seven months until the internet was restored, step by step. I would travel alone to my office on foot and then to the media centre to access the internet. It was not easy to use the internet there as we had to wait for our turn in a small, cramped room where both male and female journalists had to work. After continuous demand for a separate room for women journalists, we were given an even smaller room adjacent to the previous room where men had the full advantage to use the internet per their choice.

Many news portals dependent on the internet became utterly dysfunctional, and local newspapers were only carrying government advertisements. We did not have the privilege to work on a story of our choice because the situation was not conducive. I

reported on deserted schools, how children were preparing for their annual examinations, and dispersion among the people due to the prevailing situation. However, after the Abrogation, there was fear among the people as most of them did not speak to the journalists for a story, and if any did, they would request anonymity.

I also reported on mental health and realized that the medical professionals were only speaking up on the condition of anonymity because they feared consequences as severe as losing their job if they spoke against the government. Needless to say, I could not do enough stories on the life of people around the periphery because I was not able to travel alone as my parents were concerned for my safety, especially given the unavailability of public transport.

It was a difficult period for journalists, especially female journalists, to report stories in those tough times. Even though I struggled hard to work and do stories, I didn't receive a salary for at least two months because of the lockdown.

...

I Would Grow Up to be Collateral Damage

Farah Bashir

Rumours of Spring: A Girlhood in Kashmir is a memoir by Farah Bashir. Through narrations of her childhood, she offers a poignant insight into life in Kashmir, observing resistance-in the midst of conflict, under surveillance and pervasive militarization.



THE LIGHT OF THE MORNING was expanding. It was getting brighter. The softest, most measured footsteps could be heard coming from the direction of the main door, and I knew who it was: Aunt Nelofar. Considerate as always, Father's youngest sister, my aunt Nelofar walked in quietly and hugged Father. They both sobbed quietly. Aunt Nelofar's presence made me aware of the sombreness of the funeral that would begin in a few hours. I recalled the funeral Aunt Nelofar had been to a few months ago, the one that she kept referring to as Karbala.

It was raining hard that day. I was covering my new textbooks with brown paper. It had been four months since our exams had been over, but the results were not out yet as the year had been especially restive. Teachers couldn't work. As this was considered one of the most crucial years of high school, Father thought I should not waste time and get started with the syllabus on my own. Assuming I would pass, he bought me a new set of books for the next grade. Then, as usual, our annual squabble began: he wanted to give the books to the binder to get them hardbound and I didn't want to part with my books.

'What if the shop is gutted in a gunfight? What if the owner is killed and they never open the shop again? What if the binder goes missing and never returns?' I worried, selfishly.

'I will cover them with brown paper and then wrap cellophane on top,' I convinced Father.

He didn't try to reason too much. He wasn't aware of what I was thinking. He bought me some sheets of brown paper, cellophane and a large bottle of glue. I was short of one roll of brown paper to cover some of my notebooks. I decided to cover the remaining ones with newspapers until schools opened regularly that year, which was a matter of chance than anything else. I looked through piles of broadsheets in the storage under the staircase. Though the writing in Urdu looked appealing and calligraphic, it also meant wrapping notebooks with unending deaths, killings, arrests and protests printed on those broadsheets. The morbid print was likely to discourage me from opening them.

I opted for the pile of Indian English dailies, which, other than the local news, also carried large sections of full-colour advertisements. These print ads had men posing with colognes, couples grinning wide to show their perfect dentition, young women posing even as they'd wake up in their fluffy beds to morning rays of the sun or slightly older women beaming at their children and their laundry, celebrating their motherhoods and everyday chores alike. I had developed a habit of scrutinizing the ads, wondering about the lives of the people who made them, the ones who featured in them and the people these ads were intended for. It was a world that was far from the long-standing strife and bereft of any unresolved political conflict. I wondered if it knew how, not more than 1,000 kilometres away, it had become commonplace for ordinary people to survive the fallouts of war: losing limbs in grenade blasts and kin to arrests and bullets, contracting splinters, being caught in cross-firings, and seeing their homes turn into battlefields. What kind of advertisements could such everyday routines inspire? Not ones pretty enough to be printed in full-colour, I thought.

The newsprint smiles on the faces of the models in the advertisements made me wonder if I would be a different person altogether had I grown up away from a conflict zone, outside of a disputed territory. To wake up to the rays of the sun without having the previous night's sleep interrupted by screams of the neighbourhood women who'd run after the armed personnel in convoys that took away their husbands and teenage sons in nocturnal raids. To only care about using the right colognes and worry about the right detergent, to not to have to constantly think about the availability of vegetables, milk and medicine during erratic but long periods of curfew ... I wondered what life would be like if there was some certainty in our day-to-day affairs. Wouldn't that be wonderful? Felt more like a dream... Meanwhile, outside, it continued to pour. I was adrift as I was slowly wrapping my books with

the newspapers. That is when Aunt Nelofar paid us a visit all of a sudden. She was drenched.

As she had come straight from a funeral, she looked even more dishevelled. She took her soaked dupatta off and asked me to iron it dry. While I plugged the iron in, Mother got her a cup of dalcheen kahwe. She began telling us what was weighing on her mind.

‘Three days ago, the younger sister of Tanveer, the one who teaches economics in my new college, came to visit her in the college during lunch break. I was walking past them, when Tanveer introduced me to her and told me she was the one who had recently been engaged. I congratulated her and kissed her forehead. The lunch break was about to end, so I rushed back to the staff room leaving the sisters to themselves. The rest of the staff members were already getting ready to resume their afternoon classes...

‘As we dispersed, suddenly, there was a loud bang. The glass panes of our staff room rattled. It felt like the room was going to cave in with that immense shock. We could hear students shriek. A bomb had gone off in Regal Chowk, just outside the college. Tanveer’s sister had stepped out after their meeting. Just when the blast had occurred. She was killed in the blast. But that’s not it...

‘They struggled to look for her remains ... she had been blown into smithereens and had to be identified by the tatters of her clothing that hung from the electrical wires just outside the college.’

I finished ironing Aunt Nelofar’s dupatta dry. The newspapers lay scattered on the living room floor.

This piece was excerpted with permission from Rumours of Spring: A Girlhood in Kashmir, Farah Bashir, HarperCollins India.

...

I Am Not One story: The Metaverse in Kashmir

Hameeda Syed

Can a story be simply told? Especially when it concerns two unequal sides: the powerful and the overpowered? Will the powerful allow the true nature of a story to be seen, especially when it undermines their authority and control? Similarly, can the overpowered allow themselves to be truly seen? One is compelled to raise these questions through the nuances of a story and the slow evolution of thought we experience.

In the context of Kashmir, the story is, in many ways, simple. It is one of the most militarized zones globally, wedged between an eternal tussle of two powerful nuclear states of India and Pakistan. The people yearn for the promised plebiscite to envision an autonomous future and dissent against a continued cycle of violence consciously inflicted on them. Within the mainstream media channels covering this conflict, the story is further simplified for the consumption of an Indian audience that is fervently indifferent towards all violence on Kashmiri bodies. Within this media discourse, there is a designated side for the good and the bad. The 'good guy' enforces the rules of hard-and-fast security, the notions of which are built upon a hyper-nationalist masculine imagination. In contrast, the 'bad guy' becomes synonymous with a Kashmiri Muslim body- which is undeserving of any fundamental human right and dignity.

In only a handful of local and independent platforms, the roles are reversed. The Kashmiri is depicted as a helpless innocent, caught in between different forms of violence. Even though, interestingly, the violence is never discussed in a manner that questions the very basis of military presence in the region. Under this backdrop, one is prompted to ask, can this be the only story in Kashmir? The story of the victim, or the perpetrator; the unfortunate, or the barbarian? The devastated and the destroyer?

It seems so. Even before 2019, media narratives focused solely on the documentation of trauma manifested in Kashmiris, on their end, an attempt to keep the spirit of resistance alive. Cries of outrage and anguish mixed to create headlines: We were, and still are, thrashed, harassed, abused, detained, made to disappear, and ultimately, silenced.

When I migrated to Kashmir in the summer of 2009 (before growing up outside India), one of my classmates asked me to narrate any traumatic experiences I had while living

in Kashmir. When I told her I had shifted back for the first time, her face fell. “Oh,” she said. “You’ve had a happy childhood, then.”

I didn’t understand the crestfallen look of hers until it dawned on me, several years later, that she had been hopeful of creating a bond with me over the shared trauma. This concern would occasionally resurface in the interactions with my loved ones, who understood the burden of shouldering the responsibility of my identities. The thought struck me deeply and made me realize how this single, monotonous story of pain had gripped us all. It is a shared experience, a collective memory, a shared lived experience of protracted violence that everyone has been subjected to. I grew up outside Kashmir, alienated from my culture, language, and history. However, I shared concern for my people’s dispossession and trauma. This is also common for many diaspora Kashmiris who struggle to come to terms with the disparities in their daily life experiences compared to Kashmiris in Kashmir. Therefore, one could take the liberty of saying, all Kashmiris feel a sense of dismay over the militarized violence and crisis in Kashmir. Years later, I entered the field of journalism, and I wondered how this commonality of experience and shared anxiety translates into the media work in Kashmir.

Carrying this confusion, I navigated through the multiverse of stories that strengthened our collective alienation and made us stick closer to each other than ever before. This takes me back to my previous discussion about the dilemmas of a monotonous narrative or a story. I noticed this first-hand whilst scouring through news articles one day. My search was interrupted as a photograph used in one of the online news reports on Kashmir unnerved me to my core. This picture was of an encounter wherein a mourning mother was crying over the coffin of her son. I could sense the pain and helplessness in her eyes, the sheer agony of the event was captured in this visual document. This photograph was also shared across social media platforms, with comments lamenting the tragic loss of the woman and the horrific vulnerability of being a Kashmiri in these times. “What a brave mother, sacrificing her child,” one social media user commented. “May the Almighty bless her struggle.”

On the other side, in my office, the debate about journalistic ethics erupted. How much of the truth were we supposed to expose? How were we supposed to make sure that this exposé did not infringe on a person’s dignity?

“It’s all about documentation,” a colleague piped, drumming their fingers on the table. “There is a need to put this on record.” I wondered in contemplation, who was it being documented for? “The general public,” they said as a matter of fact. “Isn’t that the reason why all of us are here? To educate the masses.” In the meantime, the photo

caption loomed over the discussion as the room lapsed into silence: “*Kashmiri woman crying over the dead body of...*” This is just one of the thousands of photographs and visual works depicting the ‘story of Kashmir.’ The internet is full of pictures of Kashmiri women wailing, crying, mourning, protesting, and men being thrashed, battered by the police, protestors being quelled by excessive force, and people being brutalized in the markets, streets, and on checkpoints, etc. All these photographs and stories, individually and collectively, attempt to make a case for the marginalized lives of Kashmiris.

On the one hand, it is undoubtedly essential to document the sufferings of innocent civilians, put together a record as a means for making a case for justice and accountability. But on the other hand, thinking about the years of documentation and evidence to suggest the rampant human rights violations, I think about the merits of documenting the ever-increasing violence with a little bit of apprehension. How much journalistic work and documentation is enough to make a case for the sufferings of a community pushed to margins by a state adamant of even acknowledging its actions?

Sometimes I try to reflect upon these questions and the impossibility of having a singular, homogenous answer. How do we make sure we can document the complex lives of people in all the myriad ways that they exist? And would that heterogeneity of narratives jeopardize the possibility of garnering a uniform and strong solidarity from people around the world? The debate on this matter is ongoing, and I cannot possibly begin to consolidate it in one essay. But I do want to draw some attention to the possibility of working as journalists centring the narratives around Kashmiris, keeping a Kashmiri audience in mind. Such an approach would be unbothered by the ‘single story’ that we have to confine to fit into the assigned ways of storytelling.

Kashmiris are people subjected to decades of militarized violence, facing extraordinary conditions of systemic precariousness. Still, at the same time, they strive to find gaps in these cycles of violence, look for a semblance of normalcy amidst the omnipresent chaos and uncertainty that their lives have been imperilled with. As a journalist, I try to lean on to the latter side of our story with a hope to restore the dignity of our people, struggles, and history.

...

Politics of Humor: Women in Political Cartoons of Kashmir

Heeba Din

Humor is one of the most potent means of shaping the collective memory for any society. The simple act of sharing a joke, if critically analyzed, can reveal deeply embedded ideological structures. When examined, they expose the way a society negotiates meanings, identities and even histories. Humor as a social phenomenon has the tendency to concurrently unite and divide people. It “produces simultaneously a strong fellow-feeling among participants and joint aggressiveness against outsiders” (Lorenz, 1963). This makes humor a complex phenomenon in a communication setting, which can make it act either as a lubricant or as an abrasive in social settings (Martineau, 1972), which redefines socio-cultural reality (Apte, 1985).

Therefore, locating humor in a conflict setting becomes even more complicated to understand considering it functions both as a mechanism of control as well as resistance. Political humor as a means of social criticism or resistance uses humor to delegitimize the mainstream power structure by ridiculing and mocking the elites, privileged and the people in power. In doing so, humor not only plays the part of shifting the power balance towards the less privileged but at the same time also generates a sense of collectiveness amongst the people who ‘share the joke’. On the other hand, humor also functions as a means of social control wherein by assigning what is a laughable act or not, it assigns meanings and values to people, roles and identities. Thus acting as a means of social control. This reasoning is reminiscent of Bergson’s interpretation of humor and laughter as a social corrective: by laughing at something, it is defined as outside of the normal.

Positioning this politics of humor in a conflict setting becomes intriguing. For often, ridicule and disparagement remain the only tools for the oppressed. The Serbian Otpor movement (1998) is a classic example of how political humor was used to drive a civil resistance movement and that too successfully. According to Otpor activist Srdja Popovic, Otpor gained popularity with the people “because I’m joking, [while] you’re becoming angry. I’m full of humor and irony, [while] you are beating me, arresting me, and...that’s a game you always lose, because you are showing only one face, [while] I’m always again with another joke...another positive message to the wider audience”. This subversive quality of humor is often echoed across conflict-

protracted regions. Kashmiri Political cartoonist, Mir Suhail when asked about the power of political humor said, “imagine if someone points a gun at you and you respond with laughter. It completely dismisses the existing power structure as something ridiculous.”

Kashmir has a rich history of political humor, which has/is manifested through cultural arts forms like *Laddi Shah* or ‘through art of controversy’- Political cartoons, as Victor Navasky would call it. This paper is in essence about locating and understanding the dynamic of humor through political cartoons but specifically directed at, or, through women. However, before moving forward, it is crucial to understand the uniqueness of this construct. First, we are essentially trying to see how political humor legitimizes or delegitimizes the various power structures such as state or society and by doing it in turn assigns meanings, values and identities in the society it is placed. However, when that society, from where it draws humor from, is essentially patriarchal and in addition to that, turns out to be a conflict zone; the meanings, values and identities it negotiates via humor in the form of political cartoons actually become sites for studying double patriarchy.

The culture of political cartooning in Kashmir began around the early 1930’s and the tradition though dwindled still continues today. Using social and political humor in the form of ridicule, irony, and satire via visuals; political cartoons have informed audiences, criticized elites, provided a comical relief and sometimes even instigated violence. Political cartoons have not only been one of the cornerstones of journalism but were also way ahead of their times in terms of laying the foundation of graphic narratives; whose prevalence today marks the dominance of visual culture. Furthermore, they also act as an effective chronicler of the history or rather the essence of times if not the full-fledged acts; which give us the pulse of the society at any given time.

However, if one investigates the representation of women in political cartoons in Kashmir; the results are dismal. Representations of women is a rare phenomenon in cartooning in Kashmir. Cartoons in Kashmir using political humor have been pretty successful and powerful in establishing narratives concerning various aspects of governance, history, culture and even environment. Women have been majorly missing from any major narratives that emerge from the cartoons. In the very few occasions women are subjects of cartoons; majority of them turn out to be sexist in nature wherein to establish a narrative on inter-party politics or the state of affairs; women are often shown through a male gaze- as a commodity or a subject of ridicule. This aspect was also highlighted while drawing the narrative of deep-rooted corruption in the administration; where the reference to the colloquial sexist comment

of “Maal” (goods) was also seen to be used by a cartoon correlating bribe with a woman labeled as ‘Maal’ in the cartoon. Further, since political cartoons depend heavily upon visual metaphors; in majority of the cases, women weren’t shown in a direct representation rather women were themselves used as metaphors. For example, in the cartoon below published in 2010 in Srinagar Times, the J&K legislative assembly is shown as a Kashmiri woman, who is about to be attacked by a man (used as a visual metaphor for legislative members).



Figure 2. Source: Srinagar Times, 2010

In another cartoon using the same analogy of the Legislative Assembly as a woman, the cartoon shows a woman trying to cover bare-self from a media camera. Repeatedly, women in political cartoons in Kashmir have been used in an in-direct way, to address a socio-political event where women have no agency or authority. Rather they are used to convey the notions of passivity, helplessness, exploitation. There were a number of cartoons where in order to ridicule key political players or showing the inter-party rivalry; cartoons showed the politicians dressed as women or were shown cooking food. By reducing women to domesticity, they relegated being like a woman or womanhood as something derogatory and not normal.

Cartoons used to create instant meaning within the readers have often used stereotypical representations of women to be the preservers of the culture and purveyors of traditions. Similarly, the gendered notion of work, relegating the house

chores to women and physical labor to men; is another way narratives have been built in cartoons using women as subjects.

In most cases, with women subjects -silencing of women in the cartoons occurs by default—they simply have nothing to say—and the pattern of muteness reveals women in Kashmir have no agency of their own. Rather they are mute spectators in a patriarchal setup. Shame, product, and objects are some source domains which were mapped onto giving metaphoric meanings into cartoons using women as subjects. The understanding which thus emerges as women being relegated to a commodity or an artifact meant for decorative purposes or being traded off as objects.

The only exceptions to the sexist representation of women in cartoons have been the female political leaders like Hilary Clinton, Condoliza Rice and Mehbooba Mufti. The latter being one of the major political players of the region got a decent coverage in the cartoons without resorting to any major sexism. However, while representing Benazir Bhutto, former Prime Minister of Pakistan, one of the cartoons ridicules her dressing rather than her political strategy.

It is pertinent to mention that cartoons strive to create an instant impression and understanding with the audiences and as such need to rely on the common understanding of its audiences to be able to connect with them. This gives cartoonists a very small window for experimenting or creatively presenting issues, because priority is given to cartoons reaching to the audiences and as such banking upon stereotypical roles and identities are time and again used in the cartoons at the expense of falling into the trap of sexism/stereotyping. Further, the majority of the cartoons in Kashmir are and have been drawn by men thereby enabling the patriarchal lens through which women have been continuously portrayed.

Additionally, language is something one also needs to address while understanding how women are represented. Considering Urdu language has a grammatical gender, wherein all Urdu nouns are either masculine or feminine; this could shed some light **to how** and why certain indirect representations majorly used women subjects like representations of electricity, governance, culture and environment. These representations saw these concepts being drawn as feminine or through feminine traits. While one can understand the limitations a language can put into how abstract concepts are/can be drawn; the problematic part arises when the very same language is used to further a certain representation or narrative, which is skewed, stereotypical and sexist in nature. Understanding that electricity is feminine in Urdu language but when that feminine trait portrays electricity as a woman who is being wooed by a

man- that is where the problem lies. This has been the chronic case in cartooning in Kashmir.

The real impact of political humor is cumulative. Humor works in subtle and persistent ways. It would be unwise to assume that a single joke or a cartoon will change the public opinion. Collectively, over a period, humor garners the power to tilt the public opinion, to act as a social corrector, reforming using humor. This is what makes laughter so powerful. As it continues to work subconsciously in ways that sharing the sense of humor can reveal group allegiances, communicate attitudes, and help in establishing and reaffirming dominance in a status hierarchy.

Bibliography:

Apte, M. L. (1985). *Humor and laughter: An anthropological approach*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Lorenz, K. (1963). *On aggression*. New York: Harcourt.

Martineau, W. H. (1972). A model of the social functions of humor. In J. H. Goldstein, & P. E. McGhee (Eds.), *The psychology of humor* (pp. 101-125). New York: Academic Press.

...

In Kashmir Internet Access and Social Media Visibility are Both an Uphill Battle!

Ifat Gazia

Almost five years ago I was preparing to write my master's thesis at SOAS, University of London. It was the summer of 2016, a local rebel commander Burhan Wani was killed, and Kashmir faced one of its longest internet and communication blackouts; the ban lasted for almost 133 days (Boone, 2016). Protests erupted across the valley. Not only was extreme violence used to quell the protests, but people were also once again barred from communicating with each other. Pellet guns were used on civilians, blinding, and killing hundreds of people in Kashmir (Yasir, 2017). In my research, I was attempting to understand how the internet influenced social movements in Kashmir. I was trying to make sense of how Kashmiris used the internet differently than say how people in London were using it. All this because the internet was instrumental in my own journey of storytelling, and I wanted to assemble my personal experiences with the collective experience of Kashmiris.

Almost 10 years ago, I met three other Kashmiris on Facebook during the 2010 summer uprising in Kashmir. Together, I ended up directing my first documentary film about the youngest victim of that uprising (Irfan, 2012). Sameer Rah, a seven-year-old was trampled under military boots in broad daylight on a curfew day and Indian media reported that he died in a stampede. This 21-minute investigative documentary was my first attempt at telling our story in our own voice and had there been no internet to initiate this process, it would never have been possible.

In a place like Kashmir where physical spaces are choked, introduction of the internet in the daily lives of people was **very** instrumental in voicing dissent. The calls for *Aazadi* (Freedom) were not limited to occasional protests anymore. Sentiments for *Aazadi* were reverberating in the online spaces now. After 2008, the internet use in Kashmir was not just limited to its internet cafes. More and more people were able to access it through their phones and on their computers at home. There was a shift in the local narratives, from an offline world to an online one. Political discussions were not limited to men on shop fronts. Women started taking part in the online discourses. Social media reinvigorated Kashmiri social organizing, engaging more and more minds. Henceforth, creating strong online public spheres where like-minded people shared their ideas of freedom, their resistance against occupation and even daily occurrences in their areas. However, due to the lack of openness to discuss social

movements in offline public spaces, the increased visibility of Kashmiris on these social networks also led to increased choking of these spaces. This was usually achieved by frequent internet bans, censorship, and surveillance. Intermittent bans on the internet in Kashmir have lasted from hours to years. The longest so far lasted for 550 days (Hussain, 2021).

Social media platforms have become important in terms of local and international discussions which has also led to concerns on the freedom of expression. Therefore, the attacks and attempts of silencing actors in political conflicts have also increased, thus forcing them either into nonparticipation or triggering platform policies to remove controversial speech (Zuckerman and York, 2019).

The dissidents in Kashmir are exposed to an obstinate stream of political events over which they exercise no control; left to make sense of it in their own way. On one hand, social media helped people in creating such sense, which otherwise the institutional media failed in doing. But on the other, internet shutdowns and intense censorship, purely driven by the government to criminalize Kashmiris, threatens their presence on these very platforms. The extent of internet censorship varies from country to country and is reflective of its state of democracy. One of many myths in cyberspace is that the internet is an inherently emancipatory tool, a device that promotes democracy by giving voice to people who lack power (Warf, 2010). However, in Kashmir, if anything, the internet, and big tech platforms have only helped India to further its control and silence Kashmiri voices (Gazia, 2021).

A lot has been debated about the implications of internet use in general. Is it empowering the citizens or the authoritarian governments? Is it a threat to civic power or is it not? Rebecca MacKinnon in her 2013 book, *Consent of The Networked* has tried to address these questions. She forms a bridge between the two extremes by illustrating examples from different countries. MacKinnon's detailed breakdown of the process by which big tech companies like Google, Facebook and Twitter became powerful online public spheres is very important to understand how much power and control these companies have over people. Her work is also important in understanding the relationship that Kashmiris have with the internet.

Kashmiri voices have always been silenced by mainstream media as well as the big tech platforms (SWK, 2021). On the contrary, narratives claiming, 'Kashmir is an integral part of India', 'Kashmir issue is a terrorism issue' and 'India is a post-colonial state' have been widely promoted through the same platforms. Seldom heard are the legitimate counter-perspectives: Kashmir is not India's internal dispute, and it is not a law-and-order situation but a powerful resistance movement for right to self-

determination (Gazia, 2020). And whenever Kashmiris tried to use the only space available to them through social media and voice their opinions, everything was done to curb this space that was helping them to tell their stories and locate themselves in the world (Saramifar, 2015). Indeed, part of India's strategy in silencing Kashmiris online and offline is in preventing these counter-framings about the legitimacy of Kashmiris struggles from receiving traction and media attention.

Electricity cuts, water cuts, cable tv cuts, are very common usually in developing nations but in this region internet cuts are also an everyday experience of people. Kashmir's internet blockade broke all the records of internet blockades throughout the world. A new development in the list of assaults is the unannounced internet cuts that started this year. Since October 2021, many areas of Kashmir including areas in the main city Srinagar are facing daily internet cuts. These cuts happen daily and last from three to seven hours or more. To make matters worse, no news channels announce these cuts, and no record is kept for such outages, thus hindering essential services as well as education of students (Bhat, 2021).

The disputed region of Kashmir has been under India's illegal occupation for more than seven decades now. As a result, physical spaces have systematically been choked due to intense militarization. There is one soldier for every 30 civilians in Kashmir. That is a higher civilian-soldier ratio than the wartime Afghanistan (Gazia, 2020). In Kashmir, the internet did not only have the only use of connecting long lost friends overcoming geographical barriers within and outside Kashmir, it was also helping them to create alternate spaces where they could meet each other, listen to each other's thoughts, vent their anger, share their grief, mobilise and organize protests. Facebook's feature '*What's on your mind*' has opened new windows of self-expression for otherwise silenced people. In the early days of Facebook and Twitter in Kashmir, the ability to maintain connections online, when they were so difficult to make physically, was a joy until surveillance, censorship, frequent internet bans and even physical arrests and harassment based on 'online activities' became a reality.

The use of technology and its importance in social movements is instrumental in understanding not only the sentiments of the public who use it but also the motivations of the authoritarian government that controls it. No doubt the growth of the internet has exponentially increased the possibilities of freedom of expression. But to protect that freedom of expression online is also turning out to be a major challenge for government and non-government organizations (Benedek and Kettemann, 2020).

In 2016, the UN passed a non-binding resolution, a 'soft law', declaring the internet as a human right. It took the world an entire COVID-19 pandemic to understand that the

internet was a human right and not everyone has access to it (Open Global Rights, 2020). Online classes, binge watching, online doctors' appointments and crucial services like contact tracing, downloading CDC guidelines were completely hampered in Kashmir due to the unavailability of 4G internet (Parvaiz, 2020). This level of censorship also helps us to understand how much that country's government is open to criticism and receptive to dissent.

There's never been a time when freedom of expression on the Internet has played such an important role in debating the questions about our future. The Internet no longer remained a luxury but became a necessity for everyone. As a result, more and more states started to use the Internet to spy on journalists, activists, and civil society members, to prosecute them and most likely to jail them as well (Simon, 2018). These are just some of the ways cyberspace impacts social relations, everyday life, culture, politics, and other social activities. In fact, the real and the virtual have become thoroughly intertwined for rapidly growing numbers of people around the world (Warf, 2013).

There are countless needs and desires expressed in every social movement. This is a liberating moment when everyone releases his or her frustrations and opens his or her magic box of dreams (Castells, 2015). Freedom of expression on the internet is crucial to understanding the possibilities of information and communication technologies. It is not only for bringing about increased levels of equality, civil rights, and social justice but Information Communication Technologies are redefining how we live, work, play, and learn (Benedek and Kettemann, 2020).

In 2019, more than eight million people from Kashmir were pushed into an information blackhole, with complete shutdown of any forms of communication, including post offices. When the world was transitioning to a complete COVID-19 lockdown, Kashmir was already undergoing a militarized lockdown, without internet and without the liberty of physical mobility. When I tried to bring into the world's attention the double lockdown Kashmiris were enduring, I became a target of a vicious doxing campaign on Twitter. Emails from Twitter threatening my account suspension became usual and eventually I realized how everyone around me had been either silenced or they had to self-censor. I began seeing Kashmiri dissident voices disappear from Twitter and I learned the cost one must pay for a 280 character-long tweet. I found myself rethinking my words a dozen times before pressing the tweet button. The organized harassment on Twitter against people like me is a routine and so are the chances of getting mass reported and suspended.

This control and censorship does not operate in a vacuum. Governments need certain tools to engage in different kinds of censorship. For example, China used custom made equipment to create it's 'Great Firewall', Yemen purchased off the shelf software and Palestinian authorities installed open-sourced software to achieve this goal (York, 2021). Despite its global reputation for democracy, India is one of the biggest censors of the internet, a behaviour almost universally accepted to be a characteristic of autocracies rather than democracies. For India, it is the Information Technology Act (IT Act) 2000, wherein the section 66A could be used to criminalize anything that does not suit the narratives of the authorities (Bailey, 2014). India also achieves **their** censorship goals by directly ordering Internet Service Providers (ISPs) to block access to selected websites for its users within its geographical reach (Statista, 2021). For example, since March 2021, the social media pages as well as the website for the diaspora led activist group Stand With Kashmir (SWK) remain geographically blocked from users in Kashmir and India (Stand With Kashmir, 2021). SWK is one of the very few voices that continues to draw attention to the human rights violations in the region. In their recent report, SWK published findings of their research where 62 percent of Kashmiris who participated said they experienced censorship on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. The users registered different methods in which they were censored, including being removed permanently from platforms, their content pulled down, or their privileges restricted. All of them were given dishonest technical reasons for the cause of censorship, therefore impacting their trust in the political neutrality of the platforms (Stand With Kashmir, 2021).

The internet platforms understand that they have constraints towards operating in some countries based on their governments' censorious attitudes. At best, they work to make sure that individuals and groups can express themselves even when governments object - consider Facebook's celebration of its role in the Arab Spring. Platforms like Twitter need to understand that they are being used by the Indian government and their allies to silence Kashmiris and other vulnerable groups across the world. I have faced censorship, harassment, trolling and doxxing first-hand and as an internet scholar I can only hope that the big tech companies stop being complicit in silencing voices that are critical of India's actions in Kashmir. It is high time social justice be promoted in all means possible and voice be given to those who struggle to remain visible and tell their stories.

Bibliography:

Bailey, R (2014). The Information Technology Act and Internet Censorship in India. [online] Available at: <https://www.thoughtworks.com/en->

[us/insights/blog/information-technology-act-and-internet-censorship-india](https://insights/blog/information-technology-act-and-internet-censorship-india)
[Accessed 5 Nov. 2021].

Benedek, W.; Kettemann, M.C. (2020), Freedom of Expression and the Internet (Updated and revised 2nd edition). Straßburg: Council of Europe Publishing.

Bhat, B. (2021). Like unscheduled power cuts, Kashmir is now witnessing unannounced internet shut-downs | Free Press Kashmir. [online] freepresskashmir.news. Available at:
<https://freepresskashmir.news/2021/11/02/like-unscheduled-power-cuts-kashmir-is-now-witnessing-unannounced-internet-shut-downs/> [Accessed 5 Nov. 2021].

Boone, J. (2016). Kashmir death toll reaches 23 in protests at killing of rebel leader. [online] Available at:
<https://www.buzzsprout.com/1238807/6610102-episode-eight-busting-myths-exposing-truth-india-s-settler-colonialism-in-kashmir> [Accessed 3 Nov. 2021].

Gazia, I., 2021. Episode Eight: Busting Myths, Exposing Truth: India's Settler Colonialism in Kashmir - The Kashmir Podcast with Ifat Gazia. [online] Buzzsprout. Available at: <https://www.buzzsprout.com/1238807/6610102-episode-eight-busting-myths-exposing-truth-india-s-settler-colonialism-in-kashmir> [Accessed 5 November 2021].

Gazia, I. (2020). In Kashmir, military lockdown and pandemic combined are one giant deadly threat. [online] The Conversation US. Available at:
<https://theconversation.com/in-kashmir-military-lockdown-and-pandemic-combined-are-one-giant-deadly-threat-142252> [Accessed 14 Sep. 2020].

Gazia, I. (2021). Silicon Valley must not silence Kashmir. [online] Tech Policy Press. Available at: <https://techpolicy.press/silicon-valley-must-not-silence-kashmir/> [Accessed 4 Nov. 2021].

Hussain, A. (2021). India restores 4G mobile internet in Kashmir after 550 days. [online] Available at: <https://apnews.com/article/race-and-ethnicity-india-kashmir-asia-new-delhi-48c739ee2a6bdf95194fe2467eb9cb19> [Accessed 4 Nov. 2021].

Irfan, S. (2012). Telling Stories. [online] Kashmir Life. Available at:
<https://kashmirlife.net/telling-stories-2016/> [Accessed 5 Nov. 2021].

Mackinnon, R. (2013). *Consent of the Networked : The worldwide struggle for internet freedom*. New York: Basic Books.

Open Global Rights. (2020). COVID-19 exposes why access to the internet is a human right. [online] Available at: <https://www.openglobalrights.org/covid-19-exposes-why-access-to-internet-is-human-right/>

Simon, J. (2018). *New Censorship : inside the global battle for media freedom*. Columbia University Press. New York.

Stand With Kashmir. (2021). SWK Censorship. [online] Available at: <https://standwithkashmir.org/swk-censorship/> [Accessed 5 Nov. 2021].

Stand With Kashmir. (2021). Social Media & Digital Censorship For Kashmir I Stand With Kashmir. [online] Available at: <https://standwithkashmir.org/stop-censoring-kashmir/> [Accessed 5 Nov. 2021].

Statista. (2021). India - internet penetration rate 2019. [online] Available at: <https://www.statista.com/statistics/792074/india-internet-penetration-rate/> .

Warf, B. (2010). Geographies of Global Internet Censorship. *GeoJournal*, 76(1), pp.1–23.

Warf, B. (2013). *Global Geographies of the Internet*. Dordrecht: Springer Netherlands.

Yasir, S. (2017). Kashmir unrest: What was the real death toll in the state in 2016?- India News , Firstpost. [online] Available at: <https://www.firstpost.com/india/kashmir-unrest-what-was-the-real-death-toll-in-the-state-in-2016-3183290.html> [Accessed 3 Nov. 2021].

York, J.C. (2021). *Silicon Values : the future of free speech under surveillance capitalism*. London ; New York: Verso.

Zuckerman, E. and York, J.C. (2019). Moderating the Public Sphere. In: R.F. Jorgensen, ed., *Human Rights in the Age of Platforms*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

...

The Many Projections of a Normal Life: Everyday Photography and Visual Production in Kashmir

Sadaf Wani

With the advancement in affordable technology over the past couple of decades, photography is more accessible now than it has ever been. The implications of this accessibility varies across regions, and for most places, the camera and the photographic gaze have brought irrevocable cultural shifts. In Kashmir too, visual production through photography is steering socio-cultural changes, and creating symbols and codes for collective understanding and interpretation of everyday life in a conflict zone.

Tracing how rapidly the camera has been changing its functions in our society, Susan Sontag in her book *On Photography*, says that the first cameras made in France and England in the early 1840s had no clear social uses and photography was only an artistic activity with a few pretensions of being an art. It was with industrialization that photography came to establish itself as an art, as industrialization provided social uses for the operations of the photographer. Making a reference to how deeply photography has been incorporated into the socio-cultural values of the modern world, Sontag says that photography is now a mass art, and like every other mass art form, photography is not practiced by most people as an art. She says that photography is now mainly a social rite, a defense against anxiety, and a tool of power. Sontag's explanation of the role that photography has played over time is based on the understanding of the time and context where photography was being practiced. I find that in context of Kashmir, everyday photography, or photography of everyday life, fits Susan Sontag's description of photography as a social rite very closely, given what it reveals about collective aspirations and existing power dynamics in the Kashmiri society. Everyday photography forms a significant section of the visual archive on Kashmir that is being created and re-created by hundreds and thousands of people sharing their experiences, memories, and interpretations of life in Kashmir on the internet through photographs. This archive is also a revelation of the collective emotions, agency, aspirations, and political demands of the people who voluntarily participate in creating this archive, one photograph at a time.

Amongst the many subgenres that are developing within the broad category of

everyday photography, photographs which visually capture Kashmir in its *pristine* form, away from influences of conflict, militarization, and violence are wildly popular. These photographs try to orchestrate a visual imagination of Kashmir that is devoid of, not only its socio-political and historical context but interestingly also of its local people. While creating the vision for the pristine Kashmir, visuals of natural landscapes that are still in their 'pure' and 'untouched' form are encouraged as the authentic depictions of Kashmir. On the other hand, places where most of the public interactions, exchanges, and life activities take place like the streets, roads and markets are considered peripheral and not inherently linked to the idea of Kashmir.

It is intriguing as to why the portrayal of Kashmir, the one that is visibly more distant from the socio-political and cultural discourses in the valley receives more attention and visibility on the internet from Kashmiris. Through this piece, I explore what the popularity of these sanitized depictions of natural landscapes in the visual records of Kashmir can tell us about public spaces and state control in the valley, and how it is linked to the aspiration for a normal life in a conflict zone.

The term everyday in 'everyday photography' suggests certain predictability to the order of the day. It signals towards recurrent patterns of stability established over time that allow people to develop their ideas of normal life, and use that stability to orient their expectations from everyday life. However, with respect to areas of prolonged conflict like Kashmir, every day does not carry the connotations of predictability, stability, or normalcy. These words are not representative of the meanings and experiences of daily life. On the contrary, normalcy (whatever forms it takes) is laden with anxieties and anticipations of volatility and it is marked by the awareness that it might crack and break apart anytime.

So, what becomes of everyday photography in a place like Kashmir, where the idea of everyday life itself is unstable? Does the pervasiveness and duration of long-term conflict, normalize the unnaturalness of violence and turmoil and bring them into the fold of everyday life and consequently everyday photography? Or does the camera become the instrument that helps people creatively manifest (although temporarily) the desire of the everyday that is away from violence, conflict, and volatility?

I suggest it is a bit of both. Based on experiences of growing up in a highly militarized place like Kashmir, spaces of public activity and cultural landscapes are always replete with markers of conflict (armed personnel, barbed wires, checkpoints, etc.). In order to create the semblance of a normal life, people learn to zone out these markers of conflict. So even while they are blatantly present in the public sphere, there is a purposeful attempt to not notice them. This periodic zoning in and out of the

immediate soundings and politics is an important strategy and coping mechanism for people in a politically turbulent region who are periodically exposed to witnessing large scale instability and turmoil.

Of spectators watching a scene in performance, theorist Richard Schechner states that 'some spectators find themselves falling into parallel rhythms of focused attention and selective inattention.' He states that when their attention "wanders", spectators begin picking up on events and images that would otherwise escape notice or be blurred side visions, meaning they start noticing things and events beyond the center of the scene or setting. Apart from the center of the scene, they observe other features such as the overall arrangement and dynamics of the space'. Schechner states that "selective inattention allows patterns of the whole to be visible, patterns that would otherwise be burned out of consciousness by a too intense concentration". This understanding can be applied to people who are exposed to the markers of conflict in public spaces on a regular basis. There are phases when these markers of conflict are at the center of their focussed attention and they dominate their thoughts and regulate their actions more directly. However, there are also phases of selective inattention when these markers are zoned out and they form the backdrop in the face of other more immediate activities in their surroundings.

The equation gets complicated when a person is holding out a camera in a public space. When a person holds out a camera and orients it outwards towards streets, roads, and markets, the markers of conflict that had been zoned out become present and prominent in the photographic frame and, (usually) there is a purposeful attempt to avoid them. The reasons for their omission are many, ranging from state surveillance and self-censorship to burdensome existential questions: Have we accepted the presence of these markers of conflict in our everyday life? Is this an admission of their belongingness in our homeland?

Turning the camera away from spaces of public activities, cultural and historical centers, and orienting them towards natural landscapes, thus, helps delay the immediacy of answers to these difficult political and existential questions. Susan Sontag says that as photographs give people an imagery possession of a past that is unreal, they also help people take possession of space in which they are insecure. The voluntary participation from the people in orchestrating these erasures can be reflexive of the broader aspiration for a normal life and of a refusal to be defined by conflict and its markers. By creating a virtual reality that is different from the reality on the ground, *people can see a different Kashmir* than the one they live in. Or, people can *create the aspiration of a different Kashmir* than the one they live in. This creative license (although heavily regulated by what is allowed and not allowed) allows

people to visualize and create the collective fantasy of a conflict-free home and share it with others. Visiting places captured in these photographs makes one realize how many markers of conflict must have been erased to create a perfect frame for a *normal life*. How many failed photographs it must have taken to capture a frame which erases the historical context and the political turmoil and only presents a bare aspiration.

Of course, these erasures are not complete. The signs of conflict and political turmoil manifest themselves inadvertently every now and then. Sometimes they slither into the corners of the photographs and sometimes, they occupy the center of the frame without even noticing. These photographs fail in their mission to create the collective fantasy of the pristine Kashmir, while simultaneously lacking the bravery to report the whole truth. Such photographs play a different role, they poke holes in the collective fantasy. They become the testimonies to the gaps that exist in our visual records.

The Gaps in our Records: Everyday Photography and Self-Censorship in a Surveillance State



Figure 3. Sheikh Abdullah's grave in Srinagar.



Figure 4. Cement Bridge, Baramulla.

[Image Courtesy: Sadaf Wani]

A mother and daughter stood by the banks of Jhelum; the daughter wanted to take a natural photo of her home. She wanted to capture in a photo what her home would have looked like without conflict, without violence. She pointed her camera towards the bridge, the mountains, and Jhelum. Her mother's gaze surveilling their surroundings for people who MIGHT find them suspicious. The daughter took photos from many angles but the out-of-place blue object occupied the center of the frame every time.

The mother's nervous gaze meets the surveilling gaze of the state looking over them. For a few seconds, their eyes meet and they maintain eye contact.

You are being seen.

I acknowledge that I am being seen.

She gently touches her daughter's arm. Without any questions, the camera was put away.

Bibliography:

1. Schechner, Richard. Performance theory. Routledge, 2003.
2. Sontag, Susan. On photography. Vol. 48. Macmillan, 2001.

...

The Sounds of Silence: Self and Censorship in Kashmir

Samreen Mushtaq

A few days before India celebrated her independence day this year, my 7-year-old niece insisted I take her to see Pari Mahal, a terraced garden overlooking the city of Srinagar in Kashmir. “I want to see what fairies look like,” she told me. She thought there were indeed fairies stationed there that she would get to meet; she was eager to find out if they looked like the fairies she had come across in bedtime stories. That afternoon, her excitement clearly showed as we went to see the ‘palace of fairies’, only to be turned away by uniformed soldiers, close to three kilometres away from the site. “Because of 15th August, only VIP movement is allowed in this area,” police personnel told me when I confronted them. “You can keep the car here and walk all the way but it is quite some distance. Come back another day!” one dictated. “The kid won’t be able to walk that far and we can’t just come from Varmul another day,” I retorted. The heated exchange went on for a while. I could not hold back my anger, my niece now crying, jackboots in the ‘paradise on earth’ interrupting the ‘fairy dream’. I later recounted this conversation with a friend. “You should not have argued with them,” he said out of concern. “How does one censor rage?” I asked.

In the larger scheme of things, a confrontation such as this is so ‘normal’, so ‘trivial’, that mentioning it sounds petty especially in a context where silencing has taken violent forms and people have paid with their lives for the act of speaking out. And where not everyone has the luxury of planning picnics or finding the motivation to, amid all loss and longing! There is a vicious chokehold of bala’y on Kashmiri lives, as Mohamad Junaid⁵ puts it, and it is suitable for the state and its collaborating agents in Kashmir to have pretty pictures to cover up the dark river that lies beneath gorgeous flowers – a constant reminder of our seasons of blood-letting, as Mirza Waheed⁶ writes. The times that I have visited such spots, I find it hard to reconcile with feelings of guilt and shame, and often ask myself if it makes me complicit in the ‘normalcy’

⁵ Mohamad, J. (2020, August 25). *Laughter and leaked memos: debating state violence at a Kashmiri baker’s shop*. Association for Political and Legal Anthropology. <https://politicalandlegalanthro.org/2020/08/25/laughter-and-leaked-memos-debating-state-violence-at-a-kashmiri-bakers-shop/>

⁶ Waheed, M. (n.d.). *The Blood of Tulips*. Jacobin. <https://jacobinmag.com/2019/04/kashmir-tulip-garden-killings-war-repression>

narrative or if it is an escape. I don't really make sense of it. In a state of intimate brutality and manipulation, what desires does one hold on to and what dreams does one forgo and censor? What 'normal' does one seek in order to deal with the chaotic every day?

Every form of human rights violation, bodies deemed undeserving of life, erased, disappeared, tortured, maimed, blinded, raped, is an attempt at erasing history and memory. All curbs on the media and human rights organisations, punishments, threats, inducing fear, are meant to stop documentation, memorialization, and instead centre the state's narrative. This continuum of censorship and self-censorship, enforced through violence and an all-intrusive surveillance architecture, is a part of the state ensuring the "not seeing" of its actions. One could imagine a more diffused structure now with private actors like the big tech, engaged in monitoring and surveillance, as ensuring some kind of self-censorship. Yet, it is the state with its anxieties stemming from popular resistance, that regulates control and produces visible forms of censorship as well as the more insidious and invisibilized ways of self-censorship. This essay engages with moments of individual vulnerabilities and anxieties to bring forth how silencing is imposed and the resulting questions that are often rendered unintelligible to our own selves. Even as it analyses state framings pushed onto the media, it is not an all-comprehensive account and analysis on censorship; it is more an attempt at unsettling an imposed, subjugated subject position in a context where asymmetrical, colonial power relations exist. In engaging with the entanglements, insecurities, demoralizing and disorienting nature of censorship and surveillance, the essay embraces uncertainty and "lack of closure amid a perpetual war"⁷ – something that also marks everyday life in Kashmir.

State Narratives and Acceptable Language

In recent years, Kashmir's media sphere has been subjected to violence, restrictions, intimidations, and rigorous censorship, some of which continue to be documented even amid enforced silencing, especially by independent and freelance journalists from Kashmir. This is not to overlook the kind of continuities in state structures of violence, control, and narrative-setting over the decades. However, the attempts in recent years to muzzle the media – from Aasif Sultan's arrest to UAPA (Unlawful Activities Prevention Act) cases against some journalists, to physical forms of violence

⁷ Vijayan, S., & Falak, U. (2021, January 27). *Resistance and pain beyond words – challenging the narrative warfare in Kashmir*. Suchitra Vijayan. <https://suchitravijayan.com/resistance-and-pain-beyond-words-challenging-the-narrative-warfare-in-kashmir/>

and other intimidating tactics like raids, questioning, harassment, and restrictions on travel, are “arguably the most blatant, openly repressive measures against journalists ever undertaken in Kashmir.”⁸ Such blatant state conduct has also been institutionalized through the Media Policy 2020, meant to ensure ‘effective use’ of media to build public trust and create a ‘positive’ image of the government’. The metaphor of a frame as a fixed border is useful to think of how the government dictates what kind of information needs to be included and what stays out, so that even content production by the media becomes an exercise of government power.

One of the key components of the policy is *Putting in place suitable mechanisms to address issues of fake news, plagiarism, verification of antecedents of all concerned with the profession*. Under this section, the policy highlights how Jammu and Kashmir has law and order and security considerations amidst a ‘proxy war,’ therefore, in order to be careful with regard to ‘anti-national elements,’ a robust background check for all journalists is necessary for accreditation. In addition, media content shall be examined for anti-national activities and advertisements shall be blocked if the media questions sovereignty and integrity of India. An extension of this policy was witnessed in the diktat that stopped journalists from covering encounters in Kashmir, invoking national security.⁹ What such a policy (read warning) does is it not only enables the state to dictate what gets published – therefore available to be read, and what gets penalized in the name of security and integrity of the nation, but also the kind of language that the media is allowed to use. The policing of bodies extends to the policing of words, essentially forcing a reproduction of state framings and narratives.

On 7 August this year, a report¹⁰ by a Kashmiri journalist noted that Kashmir’s press was being forced to replace the use of the term “militant” with “terrorist.” The report quoted a journalist as saying, “It was the first time ‘terror’ appeared in newspaper headlines, that too on the frontpages.” It has also come to the fore how the CID (Crime

⁸ Raafi, M. (2021, October 26). *Mainstream Media Caged, J&K Govt Turns The Heat On Freelancers – Article 14*. Retrieved November 10, 2021, from <https://article-14.com/post/mainstream-media-caged-j-k-govt-turns-the-heat-on-freelancers--6177671160af0>

⁹ Ganai, N. (2021, April 8). J-K Police Ban Live Coverage Of Encounters, Law-And-Order Situations. <https://www.outlookindia.com/.https://www.outlookindia.com/website/story/india-news-j-k-police-ban-live-coverage-of-encounters-law-and-order-situation/379674>

¹⁰ Naqash, R. (2021, August 7). Kashmir’s press is being forced to replace ‘militant’ with ‘terrorist’. It’s dangerous. *NewsLaundry*. <https://www.newslaundry.com/2021/09/16/2021/08/07/kashmirs-press-is-being-forced-to-replace-militant-with-terrorist-its-dangerous>

Investigation Department) has created a unit called ENT or Ecosystem of Narrative Terrorism to profile activists, lawyers or academics, seen to propagate 'terrorism' through their work. These actions are also reflective of the categories the state has created which it seeks to propagate and push through the media, of language that is normalised and words that must disappear. While Kashmiri bodies are generally seen to be killable, there are also gradations of difference created therein and then these differences are blurred too. Someone being a militant, not an OGW (Over Ground Worker) or a civilian, is enough of a justification for extrajudicial killings, of course the most killable category already. An OGW (alternatively, a militant associate) killing has also found justification in recent years, with OGWs called as militants without weapons. The state wants to censor any possibilities of questions asked. Last winter, when three Kashmiris were killed in Lawaypora in what the state called an encounter, the police statement said, "Background check also reveals that Aijaz and Ather Mushtaq, both OGWs (Overground workers) variously provided logistic support to the terrorists. Antecedents and verifications too show that both were radically inclined and had aided terrorists of the LeT (now so-called TRF) outfit." In 2018, India's army chief went on to suggest that stone pelters in Kashmir should be seen as OGWs of terrorists.¹¹ Therefore, grades of dispensability and fluid categorisations are put in place, which keep shifting depending on specific actions and need for justifications.

In the nineties, too, allegations of being associated with militants were used as a weapon in the state's narrative warfare to reject people's testimonies of human rights violations. The report by Press Council of India in the Kunan Poshpore mass rape case of 1991 rejected the charges as "a massive hoax by militant groups and their sympathisers and mentors..." In another rape case, the government statement rejected allegations by claiming that the women were wives of terrorists. The 1993 report, *Rape in Kashmir*¹², notes how such a claim becomes a way for the government to discredit women's testimony as well as shirk responsibility for it. Therefore, the state's narrative building has been one where a case of legitimate violence is built, rather than allowing the lens of human rights violations to be used, and journalists are pushed to pre-edit their own work in order to comply and avoid punitive action. In enforcing the terminology of 'terrorists' for example, the state attempts to articulate a

¹¹ Outlook Web Bureau. (2018, October 27). *Stone Pelters Should Be Termed As OGWs Of Terrorists: General Rawat*. <https://www.outlookindia.com/.https://www.outlookindia.com/website/story/stone-pelters-should-be-termed-as-ogws-of-terrorists-general-rawat/319121>

¹² Asia Watch, Physicians for Human Rights. (n.d.). *Rape in Kashmir: A War Crime* (Vol. 5, Issue 9). <https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/reports/INDIA935.PDF>

normativity where such bodies are already deemed undesirable, imposing a regime of language on the media that disallows it from any alternate articulations.

Beyond Media Censorship

I am thinking of censorship not just in terms of withholding information, or what it entails with respect to writing or speaking in the media, which is often examined and in fact, tends to attract some visibility even in its silencing. In addition, the divergent pulls – ‘individual agency’ on one end in determining what the ‘self’ must/not do, and external structural constraints on the other end putting limits on one’s actions – often make it difficult to conceptualise self-censorship. I think of individual and collective navigation of militarization – every word caught in the throat, every expression schooled so as to not invite ‘trouble,’ every thought restricted before it finds articulation, resulting from coercion and often concealed as meant ‘for our own good’.

I think of blood-soaked bodies, and those behind bars because they ‘refused’. I think of the transformations of our thirst for freedom deflected into codes, metaphor and poetics. I think of vulnerabilities and anxieties, the shame of cowardice, that one associates with one’s silence. Sometimes when we ‘choose’ to self-censor, I think of it in the context of the state manipulating us to believe it’s apparent invincibility where we are pushed to question if it not only directs violence but also forms of resistance to it in terms of what we (are allowed to) speak and when and how.

During discussions with friends, there have been times when we have wanted to write about something, then asked ourselves, “Is this the right time to write?” “Afraid of being strategic?” Not that there could ever be a ‘wrong’ in speaking back to the oppressor, but in censoring oneself, one also wonders whether we attach significance to our words and writings which they may not actually carry. After all, what words could ever suffice a story written in blood?

Two months after the Pari Mahal ‘episode,’ I saw pictures of the garden,¹³ decorated in the colours of India’s flag, “to mark 100 crore Covid vaccinations in India.” The next

¹³ ANI. (2021, October 21). J-K: Pari Mahal in Srinagar lights up in Tricolour to mark 100 cr COVID-19 vaccination. ANI News. <https://www.aninews.in/news/national/general-news/j-k-pari-mahal-in-srinagar-lights-up-in-tricolour-to-mark-100-cr-covid-19-vaccination20211021230151/>

day, I witnessed the usual sight of red flags waved from an army convoy amid whistles as we waited for traffic to be allowed on the highway. Just as I had done the previous day on seeing the pictures, I laughed – in refusal, in rejection, in disavowal, in resistance. It was the only kind of political grammar I could express even as I ‘chose’ self-censorship. Someday, this repressive silence has to come crashing down, when the empire crumbles under the weight of its injustice and people’s resistance, when fear, guilt, and shame collapse, all codes and metaphors disintegrate, and one thinks, writes, and screams – in freedom, “down to the last atom of [one’s] discontent.”¹⁴

...

¹⁴ Kris, Danilo. (1985, November 3). *THE STATE, THE IMAGINATION AND THE CENSORED I*. The New York Times. <https://www.nytimes.com/1985/11/03/books/the-state-the-imagination-and-the-censored-i.html>

Mediating Experiences of Kashmir: Thinking through the Abrogation

Souzeina Mushtaq

“I watch the news and my mouth becomes a sink full of blood.” — Warsan Shire, Teaching My Mother How to Give Birth.

August 2019. My sister, who lives in New Zealand, arrived in Srinagar with her husband and year-old-nephew. A day later, the Indian state revoked Articles 370 and 35A and suspended all forms of communication.

For almost 15 days, like most Kashmiris living abroad, I had no idea about my family until I received the eleven seconds of hurried voicemail. *“Aes ti chi yeti saeri theek paeth,”* (We are all fine here) her voice says. My dear mother attempted to call me after 15 days. She, like my family, like my homeland, curfewed. The endless curfew. *“Wond maye badan,”* she says. How do you translate a mother’s love into a foreign language? *“Theek paeth ruzzi,”* (stay well) she continues as some distant voice tells her to hurry up. *“Beh rabbas chakh hawali. Beh khudayas chakh hawali”* (May god be with you). *“Asalamualikum.”* The phone goes silent. I hold my phone close to my ear, trying to imagine the conversation we could have had. The silence is deafening.

Any discourse on Kashmir in Indian media was jingoistic. I relied on the New York Times to get news about Kashmir since the local news media was also under communication blockade. Man Booker Prize-winning Indian author Arundhati Roy called out the Indian state for turning Kashmir into a “giant prison camp” by “caging” seven million “humiliated” people, “stitched down by razor wire, spied on by drones, living under a complete communications blackout.” Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi defended the decision of caging Kashmiris and clamping down on the communication systems, saying, “a new era has begun.” His “new era” made the paradise on earth a “living hell” for those living in Kashmir and for those of us living outside.

I still had not spoken to my family.

Almost after 18 days, at five in the morning, my phone rang. The thought of my mother clouded my mind and jolted me out of my dream-like state. I saw a long, familiar number. Under it, a tiny lettered India. I answered with an anticipated

“hello.” A hello of waiting hopelessly for a phone call every night before going to bed. A hello of despair. Only to hear a stranger’s voice calling number “76.” I said hello again.

A hello of desperation, hoping it’s not a mistake. The stranger called number 76 again. I heard myself say hello again. After a panicked hello, I hear my mother’s voice saying hello back—a hello of a long wait.

I imagined my mother jostling through the crowds of worried parents waiting to call their children in foreign lands. Authorities had given them numbers/tokens and made them wait to speak to their children. In our own home, we are reduced to bare life—prisoners of the heaven-turned-hell on earth.

“Hello,” my mother called—a hello of a broken-hearted mother.

“Mummy, mummy,” I said back, my voice pregnant with grief.

As a journalism professor, I always emphasize the importance of accuracy, truthfulness, and fairness in my classes. “As a journalist, your job is to bring reliable information to your audiences, verify and triple check the facts before you bring those stories to your audiences without employing false information,” I tell my young students. We hold the ten principles Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel proposed in their book, *The Elements of Journalism*, sacred. We discuss the importance of critical thinking in journalism and examine the dangers of a single story.

Yet, as I watched the news reporting by the media of the largest democracy about one of the most militarized places in the world, there were no rules. There was no journalism. Indian state had finally turned into what French scholar Christophe Jaffrelot calls an “ethnic democracy” where “where minorities are second class citizens.” India’s Muslim citizens and Dalits were openly lynched in the name of Lord Rama. Social media, especially Facebook and WhatsApp, became a fertile ground for spreading misinformation, promoting hate speech against and celebrating violence against Muslims and other minorities. According to the New York Times, India is Facebook’s largest market, with around 340 million users. And even though most of the misinformation comes from India, where bots and fake accounts tied to the BJP are spreading communal hatred and violence against minorities, 87% of Facebook’s

global budget is set aside for the United States, and only 13% is set for the rest of the world.¹⁵

I watched as many Indian activist friends got trolled for speaking against the atrocities of the Indian government in Kashmir. I watched as many Indian friends celebrated the abrogation of Article 370, praised the Modi government for opening up Kashmir for “development.” I watched as Bollywood, with its history of trivializing Indian occupation in Kashmir, and bolstering Indian nationalism in their movies, welcomed the dehumanization of Kashmiri people. According to news reports, within a week of removing Article 370 in Kashmir, more than fifty titles were registered at various Hindi film bodies like Indian Motion Pictures Producers Association (IMPPA), Producers Guild of India and Indian Film TV Producers Council (IFTPC). The titles included Article 370, Article 35A, *Kashmir Hamara Hai* (Kashmir is ours), *Dhara 370* (Article 370), *Kashmir main Tiranga* (Tricolor in Kashmir), among others, ‘reinforcing Bollywood’s role in India’s settler-colonial project.’¹⁶

Bollywood’s obsession with Kashmir has always been about perpetuating a “single story” of Kashmir. Be it in the 60s, 70s, and the 80s, when Kashmir was portrayed like a slice of paradise on earth where the Indian male protagonist loses his inhibitions in the snow-capped mountains of the valley and falls in love with the naïve poor Kashmiri woman. The valley was feminized for its beauty, extending the colonial ideologies to Kashmiri women’s bodies which could be fetishized for their fairness, and capitalized just like Kashmiri land. No wonder, when the news of repealing of Article 370 spread, many Indians cheered that they would now have access to the Kashmiri land *and* Kashmiri women.¹⁷

After the militancy broke out against the Indian occupation in the 90s, Bollywood focused its attention on susceptible bearded Kashmiri young man driven to violence by a radical ideology whose existence was as dangerous as his religion, Islam. Thus, Kashmir took the center stage as a breeding place for violence where every Kashmiri

¹⁵ Frenkel, S., & Alba, D. (2021, November 9). In India, Facebook Struggles to Combat Misinformation and Hate Speech. The New York Times. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/10/23/technology/facebook-india-misinformation.html>

¹⁶ Jha, L. (2019, August 6). Article 370: Film producers scramble to register related titles. Mint. <https://www.livemint.com/industry/media/article-370-film-producers-scramble-to-register-related-titles-1565091595193.html>

¹⁷ Reuters. (2019, August 9). Surge in misogyny on social media as Indian men ‘look’ for Kashmiri women for marriage; womens right activist decry objectification. Firstpost. <https://www.firstpost.com/india/surge-in-misogyny-on-social-media-as-indian-men-look-for-kashmiri-women-for-marriage-womens-right-activist-decry-objectification-7135231.html>

was either a suspect or a terrorist. The Indian army became the natural saviours to protect feminized Kashmiri land and use fetishized Kashmiri women against the dangerous Kashmiri men. For instance, in the movie, *Shershaah* (2021), the highest-rated Hindi movie on IMDB, the heroic sacrifice of an Indian army officer is valorized who laid his life to protect the 'honour' of his 'motherland' against brainwashed Kashmiris who slip to the other side of the mountains to train in 'radical Islamist' Pakistan. In one of the scenes, one paramilitary officer tells another to focus on the traffic instead of staring at Kashmiri women because "*there are many wolves in sheep's clothing here.*" With the revocation of Articles 370 and 35A, it would be no surprise to see the continued glorified representation of the Indian army as the guardians of the land to feed the growing Islamophobic and Hindu nationalist audience.

As I was reading the news, my phone buzzed. It was a video of my grandfather. "*Hum to saare bachhe theek thaak hain. Main ye chahta hoon ki aap khush rahe wahan. Hamare liye dua bhi karein,*" (we are all fine here. I want you to be happy. Pray for us) he tells my Indian journalist friend who went all the way from Delhi to Srinagar to find him and record a video for me.

"*Aagaye hain mushqilaat magar us main bhi qudrat ne bahut meherbaani ki. Reham kiya har waqt. Aap ko bhi reham karega*" (We are facing some problems, but almighty has been quite gracious. Always. He will be generous on you too), he says with a smile.

"*Aur meri jigar. Theek hona. Saare theek hain meri jigar*" (And my dear, are you okay? We are all fine, my dear), he says as the video ends.

It had been three weeks since I had spoken to him. I watched as I waited to get through my family caged in Kashmir.

"*Gova?*" (Did it go through?). That is what I heard when he put me on a conference call. My sister's chosen brother called me one morning at 6:15 am. I had never spoken to him before. So, I was a little surprised to see his name popping on my phone screen. "I have Andy on conference call," he said, referring to my sister. "What?" I asked. Before he could answer, I heard my sister's voice asking, "*gova?*" (Did it go through?) The last time I spoke to her was on a text message. She had landed in Kashmir a day before the siege with her husband and my year-old nephew. I had texted, "how's Kashmir?" "Kashmir is as it is," she had responded. I had heard her voice after 20 days.

October 2019. As I landed in Srinagar, my cellphone stopped working. A newly minted doctorate from the United States, I walked through the barricades of the Indian army in a freshly decorated facade of an airport. *'Welcome to Paradise on Earth,'* read the placard. The words written in blue ink almost disappeared on the red and yellow tulip backdrop. A collage of Bollywood movies posters greeted me as I left the airport. *'Welcome to Kashmir.'*

The roads were mostly empty. As we drove past Batmaloo, the text in Urdu on the wall of an army cantonment read – *"This area belongs to the army. Trespassers will be shot dead."* "My home is the barrel of a gun," writes poet Warsan Shire. On the same stretch of the road, I see a police barricade that read, "Your security is our concern."

My parents don't own a car, and because public transport was mainly suspended, I was stuck at home. I studied the broken glasses of my parent's house. They reminded me of my childhood spent at my grandfather's house, my *matamaal*, where the incessant fights between the Indian army and the militants would leave the windows bullet-ridden. My mother told me the Indian military would throw stones at the windows occasionally.

On the way to my *matamaal*, a 10-min-walk from my parents' house, I saw graffiti about the slain young militant Burhan Wani embellished on the walls. The local English daily, *Greater Kashmir* was mostly filled with advertisements. If one accidentally watched the Indian media, it was as usual full of the rhetoric of how Kashmiris were finally a part of India.

My cousins had not gone to school or college in months. A picture book brought to me by a younger cousin had pictures of "our great leaders." All 12 photos on the page were of Indian politicians, including the current prime minister of India, Narendra Modi.

The project of creating India as a Hindu nation was designed back in the 1930s when the Hindu traditionalists within the Congress party were seen as "Hindu chauvinists" but not outright Hindu militants. In 2014, Modi came into power essentially by arguing that India's global reputation as a weak country resulted from the failures of the Nehru Gandhi family. He openly called himself a "Hindu nationalist with a deep Hindu heart," and people supported him because they saw him as a strong leader with a majoritarian tilt. His success was rooted in creating the "other" as a national threat. In this new majoritarian dominant narrative, all Muslims became national

security threats. Traditional media and social media actively built a cult of personality around Modi, hailing him as a strong leader and a great visionary who could be compared to Hindu Gods.

To think of these 'developments' in the political landscape and the subsequent media discourses emerging out of it in India, as complex and inextricably tied to the larger history of violence and propaganda in Kashmir is essential; mainly, inter alia, to understand how a Kashmiri audience consumes the news and information about Kashmir from the Indian media. I try to reflect upon the ways in which the experiences of deceit, dispossession and denial of political autonomy- the events of Aug 5, prompted us to rethink India's actions in Kashmir as an ongoing project of nation-building; the grounds for which were made a long time ago. I suppose, and beyond that, hope that this reflection will lead us closer to understanding the intricate connections between Kashmir's occupation, Islamophobia and the media discourses within India.

...

Speaking Kashmir in India: A Cautiously Optimistic Note

Vanessa Chishti

I

The resounding victories of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in the general elections of 2014 and 2019 mark the culmination of longer-term processes in Indian politics that were clearly evident by the 1990s: the steady decline of the once hegemonic Congress party and, following an interregnum of coalition governments, the consolidation of the BJP's political hegemony. The BJP, and the *sangh parivar* of which it is part, presents itself as heralding the long awaited realisation of a thwarted possibility: the creation of a strong Hindu Rashtra, which India was cheated of by the "Nehruvian interruption".¹⁸ The popular backlash against the RSS following Gandhi's assassination, and the disarray in the Hindu right within the Congress following Sardar Patel's death allowed Nehru's vision, otherwise a minority tendency, to dominate the direction of the party, and the new state. The 'Nehruvian consensus', especially its commitment to secularism, and state-led capitalist development (mis-described in official mythology as "socialism"), is the target of much strident criticism in Hindutva rhetoric. It is blamed for caging the economic and cultural potential of India. In contrast, the BJP champions an unapologetic commitment to Hindutva and a more full-bodied embrace of neoliberal reform.¹⁹

To this end, the BJP government has enacted a number of policies: the Ayodhya verdict and the construction of the Ram Mandir, massive disinvestment of profitable public enterprises calculated to benefit corporate cronies, a serious dilution of India's regime of labour laws, the absurd 'triple talaq' bill criminalizing a form of divorce which is already legally void, the enactment of three farm laws designed to deregulate agricultural markets and effectively facilitate a corporate takeover of agriculture, the abrogation of Article 370, and the passing of the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA)

¹⁸ Satish Deshpande, "Hindutva and its Spatial Strategies", *Contemporary India: A Sociological View*, (New Delhi: Penguin, 2004), pp. 81-82.

¹⁹ This contrast is, of course, deliberately overdrawn; both the secular and the *dirigiste* character of the Indian state were always marked by ambiguity, and had been substantially eroded well before the BJP emerged as a major national player. That said, it is important not to make too *much*, or too *little* of the difference between the political hegemonies of the Congress and the BJP. See: Achin Vanaik, "India's Two Hegemonies", *New Left Review*, Vol. 112, (July/August 2018), 29-59. (<https://newleftreview.org/issues/ii112/articles/achin-vanaik-india-s-two-hegemonies>)

together with proposals for a nationwide National Register of Citizens (NRC). Most of these moves have gone more or less unchallenged thanks to the effeteness of the political opposition, the absence or weakness of peoples' organizations, and the government's relentless criminalization and repression of dissent. In Kashmir, an increased troop presence, incarceration of political leaders and activists, a punitive lockdown and a near total communications blackout prevented political demonstrations. On the CAA/NRC and the farm bills, however, the government has encountered spirited mass resistance which has halted (if only temporarily) implementation of these policies and prompted widespread questioning of a regime that was beginning to look invincible.

I offer in this piece some thoughts on how we may locate Kashmir in the midst of all this change and upheaval. In the first part of what follows, I discuss the significance of striking down Article 370 for the political project of Hindutva, and briefly trace the influence of the *sangh parivar* in shaping the broader national consensus on Kashmir. In the second part, I discuss the anti-CAA/NRC movement and the ongoing farmers movement and suggest that they signal important departures from conventions of politics and political discourse in India, including, perhaps, on the question of Kashmir.

II

"Kitna accha lagta hai na?? 70 saal se jo apna kaam pending tha, ek jhatka main kar diya!!". (Doesn't it feel great? What was kept pending for seventy years was finished in an instant!).

Evident in the above statement, one of many that I overheard following the abrogation of Article 370, is a palpable sense of *personal* vindication (*apna kaam*) shared by many middle-class Hindus in North India. In this milieu, Kashmir is seen as a beautiful place wasted on an overindulged, and yet ungrateful and disloyal Muslim population. Though elements of it existed before, this notion crystallized in popular commonsense in the 1990s. Against the backdrop of the overt communalization of Indian politics, lurid depictions of the militancy in Bollywood films consolidated a hitherto diffuse suspicion into animosity. Through the 1960s, depictions of Kashmir as an eroticized landscape in Bollywood films generated intense national desire. From the 1990s onwards films such as *Roja* (released mere weeks after the demolition of the Babri Masjid) depicted the danger of this desired landscape being lost to 'terrorists'.²⁰ As the

²⁰ Tejaswini Niranjana, "Integrating Whose Nation? Tourists and Terrorists in 'Roja'", *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 29, No. 3 (Jan. 15, 1994), pp. 79-82.

*sangh parivar's*²¹ depiction of Muslims as fifth columnists plotting the territorial disintegration of India acquired vividness in public imagination, the spirit of Jigmohan's description of the counterinsurgency as "collective punishment of a disloyal population" resonated deeply; Kashmir must be 'protected', no matter the cost to its people. It is a testament to the insidiously deep inroads the *sangh parivar* has made into commonsense that this view is widely held, even by many who do not support Hindutva ideology. Right from 1948, the *sangh* has framed the special status accorded to J&K, the only Muslim majority state in India, as an intolerable instance of minority appeasement. By destroying this enclave of privilege, then, Narendra Modi and Amit Shah showed themselves to be decisive leaders, unconcerned with pandering to Muslims.

The striking down of Article 370 has a particular resonance in the *sangh parivar's* organizational memory. The *Jammu Praja Parishad* was founded in 1947 by Balraj Madhok, a member of the RSS. It was a reactionary political party that primarily represented the interests Hindu landlords, money lenders, traders, and former officials of the Maharaja, who was also the party's chief benefactor. Guided by the RSS, which was banned at the time following Gandhi's assassination, the *Parishad* campaigned for the full integration of J&K into India.²² The mass slaughter that accompanied partition had made it amply clear that neither Pakistan nor the ostensibly secular India would be a hospitable home to religious minorities. The *Parishad's* call resonated with Hindus in Jammu who feared the consequences of a pro-Pakistan verdict in a plebiscite. Had the elections to the J&K Constituent Assembly not been heavily manipulated by the NC, the *Parishad* would have likely won many seats from Jammu. It was the Delhi Agreement of 1952, which stopped well short of full integration, that catalyzed sporadic protests into a popular agitation led by the *Parishad*. Abdullah's regime came down heavily on it, but where the repression of pro-Pakistan and pro-independence dissidents had been ignored or applauded, the repression of *Parishad* activists was met with outrage in Indian political circles and the media. As is well known in Kashmir, Abdullah was imprisoned, and shortly after, under G.M. Bakshi, the Jammu and Kashmir Constituent Assembly adopted a constitution declaring the state an 'integral' part of India. It is no small irony that this was the same assembly that the Hindu right itself had, quite legitimately, decried as fraudulently constituted.²³

²¹ *Sangh Parivar* is an umbrella term for the Hindu nationalist organisations.

²² Undoubtedly motivated by the fact that big landlords in Jammu and Kashmir were dispossessed without compensation, whereas this was not the case in India.

²³ Vanessa Chishti, "Kashmir: The Long Descent", *Catalyst*, Vol. 3, No. 4 (Winter 2020), pp. 101-129.

In addition to seeing it as an especially galling legacy of the Nehruvian interruption, the *sangh parivar* has treated Article 370 as an aspect of the broader ‘Muslim question’ in India. Alongside the Ram Mandir, the Uniform Civil Code, and the CAA/NRC, the abrogation of Article 370 has for decades been a core Hindutva agenda. Each of these is critical to remaking India as a Hindu Rashtra: Ram Mandir as restitution for imagined historical wrongs, the CAA/NRC to introduce a religious basis into citizenship, and the UCC and repeal of Article 370 to remove the so-called special treatment of minorities. The essential operational elements of the BJP’s Kashmir policy are barely distinguishable from that of previous regimes: armed force, client regimes, and the proactive destruction of any independent political opposition. What distinguishes the BJP, however, is its ‘programmatic’ communalism. Which is quite unlike the ‘pragmatic’ communalism of the Congress. While the Congress has intermittently stoked anti-Muslim violence, while also patronizing Muslim leaders to mobilize votes, the *sangh parivar* aims for the systematic political disenfranchisement of Muslims. The BJP’s electoral strategy across India has been to render Muslims irrelevant as an electoral force.²⁴ The process of delimitation currently underway in Kashmir and Jammu, which is expected to manipulate electoral constituencies to reduce the number of assembly seats from Muslim majority areas, marks a major advance in this direction.

The national consensus in India on the political status of Kashmir — that accession is final and above question — spans virtually the entire political spectrum, including the putatively secular and liberal sections of political opposition and civil society. Sadly, the progressive end of the political spectrum is also not outside the consensus entirely. While some are outspoken in their criticism of militarization and its attendant excesses, few question the politics of India’s presence in Kashmir. In 2014, as JNU (my home for several years) fought back against a vicious attack by the BJP government, following slogans of *azaadi* at a program on Kashmir, an integrationist rhetoric dominated an otherwise vibrant and sophisticated political conversation.²⁵ *Azaadi* was glossed as “Bharat *main* azaadi”, as opposed to “Bharat *se* azaadi”. Outside of small and increasingly beleaguered circles of students, intellectuals, and activists (the ‘urban *naxals*’), any question about Kashmir’s political status is practically *unspeakable*.

²⁴ Unsurprisingly, the representation of Muslims among Lok Sabha MPs waxes and wanes in proportion to the BJP’s electoral fortunes and is currently at an all-time low. For an illuminating discussion of Muslim representation see: Ghazala Jamil, ‘Who Can Represent Muslims in Electoral Politics? Debates in the Muslim Public Sphere’, *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 54, Issue No. 17 (27 Apr. 2019). (<https://www.epw.in/engage/article/who-can-represent-muslims-electoral-politics>)

²⁵ Explicit ‘Kashmir as integral part of India’ statements apart, this integrationist rhetoric takes many forms: descriptions of the question as one of ‘internal’ colonialism, a ‘federal’ or ‘regional’ question, eliding the difference between demands for statehood (such as Telangana) and demands for secession, lamenting the tragedy of the state killing ‘its own people’ and so on.

It is hardly surprising then that the abrogation of Article 370 was met with studied silence or feeble protest. Some criticized the cloak and dagger nature of the operation, others lamented the lockdown and the internet shutdown as excessive, few questioned the validity of the move itself, and virtually none dared broach the subject of Kashmir's political status. Most of the opposition was falling all over itself to be seen applauding the move.

III

In his analysis of why fascism, an avowedly pro-capitalist ideology, won mass support among the German working class despite being demonstrably against their material interests, Wilhelm Reich describes fascist ideology as a "mixture of rebellious emotions and reactionary social ideas".²⁶ Fascism tapped into the anger and frustration felt by working class people, but offered a false resolution: it misdirected these emotions at Jews, and away from the ruling class, ultimately preserving capitalist class relations. Although the *sangh parivar* employs a socially inclusive language to emphasize Hindu unity, it is at its core a Brahminical, patriarchal project which can only incorporate the vast majority of the Hindu population – women, Dalits, OBCs and tribals – as inferiors.²⁷ Further, the BJP advocates a mercenary pursuit of neoliberalism. How do we understand the popular appeal of Hindutva, beyond the upper class, upper caste elite whose narrow interests it represents? Herein lies the significance of the "Gujarat model". Narendra Modi's success in breaking an electoral coalition of Muslims and lower castes engineered by the Congress demonstrated that violence against Muslims could mask "internal" contradictions by displacing them onto an 'external' enemy.²⁸ Although carnage on the scale of 2002 has not repeated since, the use of communalism to break lower caste and Muslim alliances that threaten to edge out upper castes has become standard. The animosity directed at Muslims (and other 'anti-nationals') is then, partially at least, an expression of rebellious emotions turned to perversely reactionary ends.²⁹

²⁶ For a brief but illuminating exposition on Reich's ideas, see: Jairus Banaji, "The Political Culture of Fascism", *Historical Materialism*. 19 Feb. 2017. (<https://www.historicalmaterialism.org/blog/political-culture-fascism>)

²⁷ For an insider account of the RSS by a former member see: Bhanwar Meghwanshi, *I Could Not Be Hindu: The Story of a Dalit in the RSS*, (New Delhi: Navayana, 2020).

²⁸ Ornit Shani, *Communalism, Caste and Hindu Nationalism: The Violence in Gujarat*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

²⁹ For a general discussion of the cathartic functions of violence in Indian politics, see: Thomas Blom Hansen, *The Law of Force: The Violent Heart of Indian Politics*, (New Delhi: Aleph, 2021).

The anti-CAA/NRC movement and the farmers movement have begun to upend this false resolution and turn rebellious emotions the right side up; together they constitute a deep renewal of emancipatory politics in India. The anti-CAA/NRC movement, led by Muslim women, has defended India's secular constitution, and has in the process revived the public discourse on secularism, interpreting it as an ethic of respectful, democratic coexistence and not just an anemic state ideology. Described by many as suffused by a maternal wisdom, Shaheen Bagh (the first, most visible and therefore best documented of over 120 such protest sites) was witness to deeply moving gestures of solidarity as people of all faiths heeded their call; *langar* by Sikh farmers from Punjab, inter-faith prayer, an invitation to Kashmiri Pandits to share their experiences of loss and dislocation.³⁰ Usually only visible in Indian political discourse as abject victims³¹, Muslim women outflanked community leaders who are content with deriving advantage from their influence over Muslim votes without raising substantive issues. They broke the stigma associated with Muslim political mobilization in India. The farmers movement, led by left-wing farm unions who also form the core of its organized strength, is fighting a wave of accumulation by dispossession that threatens millions of precarious livelihoods. It has refocused attention on the government and corporate interests it represents, and is demanding wider reforms to address the agrarian crisis. Their emphasis on shared material interests has successfully cut through the vitriolic communal rhetoric of the *sangh*. *Mahapanchayats* have been held in Muzaffarnagar, the site of anti-Muslim riots in 2013, which were attended by tens of thousands of people, Hindus and Muslims, expressing regret at the killings, roaring pledges of communal amity and announcing boycotts of the BJP.

Perturbed by the electric impact of the anti-CAA/NRC movement, the BJP turned to its usual failsafe – religious polarization. It engineered the Delhi riots and proceeded to unlawfully imprison several young activists. In the farmers movement, however, the BJP confronts an adversary that it has not been able to silence, delegitimize or crush. This resilience is in large part due to the organized character of the radical left wing farm unions that are leading the movement. It also has to do with the fact that a

³⁰ Seema Mustafa (ed.), *Shaheen Bagh and the Idea of India: Writings on a Movement for Justice, Liberty and Equality*. (New Delhi: Speaking Tiger, 2020).

³¹ The flip side of this, of course, is the long standing and plainly self-interested refusal by male 'community' leaders to address questions of gender justice, citing the looming threat of majoritarianism. For a brief and insightful comment on this and related issues see: Albeena Shakil, "Need Both Gender Justice and Minority Rights, Not Either Or!", *The Leaflet*. (<https://www.theleaflet.in/specialissues/need-both-gender-justice-and-minority-rights-not-either-or-by-albeena-shakil/>).

majority of the protesting protesters belong to socially dominant castes — the very same social milieu (predominantly Haryana and Punjab) from which the Indian Army recruits a majority of its soldiers. This alone diminishes the ability of the government to use force to break up the protest. Attempts at branding the farmers as ‘terrorists’ (*khalistanis*) and ‘anti-nationals’ have been singularly ineffective and have, instead, prompted a veritable explosion of rebellious conversation — on social media, in *chaupals* and market squares.³² All winter in 2020, I spent hundreds of hours, transfixed, watching interviews of protesting farmers from Punjab, Haryana and Uttar Pradesh on YouTube. The farmers, many of them former BJP supporters, went beyond critiquing the farm bills — they offered a systematic critique of the regime itself.

To my surprise, many of the farmers (and not just the ones from Punjab!) questioned the abrogation of Article 370, and the lockdown and internet shut down in Kashmir and Jammu. In one video, a *jaat* man from Haryana speaking about the internet shut down at the protest sites on the borders of Delhi said, “They always tell us that Kashmiris are terrorists and that is why the internet is shut down there. They are calling us terrorists! Now I know they shut down the internet to prevent people from talking to one another, and to defeat peoples’ movements. Who knows what is really happening in Kashmir?” I had to wonder: how would politics in, and politics about Kashmir be different if Kashmiris were not totally dehumanized in the eyes of the Indian electorate? The ideological edifice that legitimizes the excesses of the Indian establishment is far from shaken, but this is the closest I have seen it come to trembling in the last two decades. I don’t want to make too much of this possibility, for the legacies of history are bitter and not easily forgotten, but I will watch peoples’ movements in India with a very cautious optimism.

...

³² *National Dastak* is one of many YouTube channels that covered the protests. This channel is especially interesting because their reporters covered the Ghazipur border site most extensively — where most of the protestors are from Western UP.

Notes on Contributors



AASHNA JAMAL

Aashna Jamal is an economist with experience of working in low and middle-income countries. She has worked on projects in India, Timor-Leste, Lebanon, Zimbabwe, and West Africa. She was selected as a Fellow under the Overseas Development Institute Fellowship scheme and requested by Timor-Leste as a civil servant. She served as lead economist in the budget department of Ministry of Finance, Timor-Leste between 2018-2020. She has cross-cutting experience in governance, health, child protection, social protection, and education sectors. She holds an MA in International and Development Economics from Yale University, USA, and a BA (Honours) in Economics from St. Xavier's College, Mumbai. She has received scholarships from Aga Khan Foundation, Rotary International, and P.E.O International, amongst other institutions. Her interests lie in public finance and governance within fragile states. She likes writing fiction in her spare time.

BISMA BHAT

Bisma Bhat is a Kashmiri journalist who reports on education, conflict, and crime. She has a Master's degree in Convergent Journalism from the Central University of Kashmir. After her Master's, she joined The Kashmir monitor, a local English daily of Kashmir, where she worked for three years. Presently, she is working with the weekly magazine Free Press Kashmir as a feature writer.



Her stories have also appeared in news portals such as First Post, Article 14, The Wire, and Gaon connection. She has also been a winner of the Sanjay Ghose Media Award 2020.



FARAH BASHIR

Farah Bashir was born and raised in Kashmir. She was a former photojournalist with Reuters and currently works as a communications consultant. *Rumours of Spring* is her first book.

HAMEEDA SYED

Hameeda Syed is currently pursuing her Master's in Conflict Analysis and Peacebuilding at Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi. She has worked as a journalist for close to two years in Kashmir and Delhi. Having completed her graduation in Psychology, she has spearheaded two-month online Zoom sessions imparting Mental Health awareness to young Kashmiris. Her areas of interest include conflict analysis, mental well-being, and building community-based informal spaces to re-invigorate youth. She was a Project Coordinator at Afghanistan-based women-led NGO, The Jalal Foundation



HEEBA DIN



Heeba Din is a Lecturer at the Media Education Research Center of the University of Kashmir, where she teaches Human Rights and Photography. She did her Doctorate on Political Cartoons in Kashmir from KU, during which time she was awarded the Maulana Azad Fellowship. She has also received the Kashmir Times Shamim Ahmed Shamin Memorial Award for professional work and academic excellence in 2015. Heeba has also worked as an Assistant Director in the movie "Tamaash" which won the special jury mention at the National Film awards in 2013. She has several research publications in National and International UGC-approved journals to her credit. Her research work includes Emerging Graphic Narratives, understanding the role of Music in Conflict, studying the visual power of Iconic Images, Media and Diasporic identities, Portrayal of Third Gender in Bollywood, and Gender Disparity in local Press in Kashmir. Her current field of specialization and interests are New Media, Comic Journalism, and Cultural Studies.

IFAT GAZIA

Ifat Gazia is a Ph.D. student in the department of Communication at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. She previously has an MA from SOAS, University of London, in Media in Development. She is the founder and host of The Kashmir Podcast.

Ifat is the recipient of the Muslim Women in Media Fellowship 2020, the UMass Research Enhancement and Leadership Fellowship, and the Unicorn Fund 2021.



SADAF WANI



Sadaf Wani is a Research Associate at Zubaan, a feminist NGO based in New Delhi. She has an MPhil in Sociology from Delhi School of Economics, University of Delhi. Her research interests lie at the intersection of anthropology of space, gender and visual cultures. Her work has been published in Himal South Asian, Scroll, and Wande Magazine among others.

SAMREEN MUSHTAQ

Samreen Mushtaq is a Research Fellow at the Centre for Studies in Gender and Sexuality, Ashoka University, India, as part of a collaboration with Governing Intimacies, located at the University of Witwatersrand, South Africa. She has a Ph.D. in Political Science from Jamia Millia Islamia, and her research interests include gender, militarisation, and everyday forms of resistance.





SOUZEINA MUSHTAQ

Souzeina Mushtaq is an educator and a photographer based in New York City. She received her doctorate in Media and Gender studies from Ohio University. She worked as a journalist in multiple capacities as a reporter, editor, and television host for seven years in Kashmir and New Delhi. Her research focuses on queer Muslim women and their intersecting identities. Moreover, she collaborated on a visual ethnography project on “Nomads and Weavers of the Himalayas” in Kashmir and Tibet and “Yörüks of the Taurus Mountains” in Turkey for nearly a decade. The work has been exhibited in major galleries in New York City, Mexico City, Cuernavaca, Queretaro, Puebla City, and New Delhi. She currently teaches journalism at the University of Wisconsin-River Falls.

DR. VANESSA CHISHTI

Dr. Vanessa Chishti is an Associate Professor at Jindal Global Law School. Her areas of interest include modern South Asian history, histories of capitalism, Marxist and Feminist political economy, and theories of social reproduction. Her Ph.D. thesis entitled 'Articulating Kashmir: Commodity Economy and the Politics of Representation c.1770-1930' offers a historical political economy of modern Kashmir and is currently under revision for publication into a book manuscript of the same title.



...

ZW Issue II Cover Art Explainer

@kashmirpopart



The Cover Art for ZW's second issue is an attempt to engage with the theme, *Militarized Media: Power, Propaganda and Press*. This is a digital collage/illustration wherein the central focus is a 'weaponized camera.' Carefully placed on top of a military tank, the optical lens, posited as an extension of the barrel, symbolizes the expanse of militarized state control exerted on various forms of media in Kashmir. The camera also has a gaze of an eye which depicts the omnipresent, Orwellian surveillance that a police state exercises.

The 'weaponized camera' is surrounded by an array of elements, each symbolic of media repression and peoples resistance. Superimposed on a mesh of web, big data, an information clutter is scattered in the backdrop. It typifies the magnitude of data being controlled and used against Kashmiris. The red fingerprint is trying to invoke a sense of urgency around questions about the Kashmiri identity. This tussle is also present in the adjoining pen and the stop sign in the foreground.

In contrast, the pine trees stand upright, signifying life in Kashmir- an element carefully placed to remind us of the humaneness of the people's struggle. A similar attempt is made through the line of houses, which represent the everydayness of life in Kashmir.

On the left side of the camera, there is a picture of the Kashmir valley with beautiful mountains, meadows, etc. This is the version of Kashmir that is sold to a large population to obfuscate the truth. Therefore, a window is strategically placed on top of this picturesque variant of the valley. A protest gathering can be seen through the window, displayed in an old black and white television. This distorted, colourless picture of the protest gathering is meant to highlight that the perversion of on-ground realities is not new; it used to happen on old tv sets as it does now in high definition. On top of this component, a comment bubble, with the number 1, illustrates how conversations about Kashmir are monotonous when the reality is much more complex.

On the camera's mic sits the 'no internet dinosaur' to juxtapose the tool of speaking with its limitations. This element renders the illusion that there is freedom of the press, that people in Kashmir have a voice ineffective. The lack of internet and limited access makes even those with a voice voiceless- as they have nowhere to take it. Another such contrast is the full range Wi-Fi but yet again it is futile considering the hostile surveillance within cyberspace.

The structure of the camera sits upon a pile of documents and the waters of Dal Lake. This is to recall how honest and objective documentation processes have a direct militaristic weight on them – the information is almost floating on the light waters of Dal but is at risk of sinking anytime. An essential part of this artwork are the three bars in the backdrop- which are reshaped holes that the people of Anchar dugout on the roads in defiance of the arbitrary troop movement in the residential localities. These holes, dug to bar hostile entry, here perform the task of holding the overall collage together. Towards the right, a stencil of protest outlines three pencils next to a women's arm held upright.

Noticeably, in front of the collage stands a Kashmiri journalist, with a camera significantly smaller than the central aperture. Her foot unshakeably appears to be placed on a pile of newspapers- that represent the state narratives that the local media is forced to reproduce. The 'small' woman is standing defiantly in front of the big state apparatus.

This is a tribute to the undying, unyielding spirit of independent journalism in Kashmir. Despite the threat of punitive action, those who continue to speak truth to power.



Zanaan Wanaan
new beginnings, radical possibilities

GUIDELINES

for Gender Sensitive Media

Reportage

in KASHMIR

2021





ZANAAN WANAAN

in collaboration with

FE-MALE

has drafted these guidelines for sensitive media reportage to develop and foster an understanding of gender sensitivity in the media and to prioritize ethical considerations. The purpose of these guidelines is to encourage media organizations and practitioners in Kashmir to assess their gender-sensitive responsiveness at an individual and an institutional level. This document forms a practical guide aimed at identifying dimensions and frameworks to enable media coverage that is sensitive, particularly to the portrayal of the women and girls in an armed conflict.





About ZW

Zanaan Wanaan (ZW) is an independent feminist collective based in Kashmir. Zanaan Wanaan are Kashmiri words for 'women speak'. ZW engages in feminist activism on the ground, produces independent scholarship, and works towards strengthening the women's movement in Kashmir. Our advocacy work is focused on bringing international attention to women's human rights and the crisis in Kashmir. ZW's action-research based approach is rooted in the commitment to upholding principles of peace, equality, and justice

About Fe-Male

Fe- Male is a civil feminist collective based in Lebanon aiming to achieve a just world free of patriarchy. Fe-Male works with women and girls to eliminate injustice by building a young feminist movement, empowering agents of change, and campaigning against discriminatory norms and policies.

Fe-Male was the first feminist organization in Lebanon that raised the issue of women's objectification and their stereotypical image in media and advertisements. For their project, 'Challenging Women's Objectification and Stereotyping in Media and Ads (2013- Ongoing),' Fe-male campaigned to challenge women's objectification in traditional and social media, mobilizing more than 2500 women and men for the cause. They also engaged policy-makers, media, and advertising agencies' owners to stop exploiting women. This cause is one of the strategic themes Fe-Male is working on, and it expanded and continued beyond an individual project to day-to-day work.

CONTENTS



1. MEDIA IN KASHMIR

2. INTRODUCTION OF THE GUIDELINES

3. OBJECTIVES

4. FOSTERING GENDER EQUALITY WITHIN MEDIA INSTITUTIONS AND ORGANISATIONS

5. GENDER PORTRAYAL IN MEDIA CONTENT

6. REPORTING GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

7. REFERENCES



MEDIA IN KASHMIR

Media in Kashmir operates in some of the most hostile and challenging conditions. From intimidation, harassment, incarceration, assaults, internet shutdowns, censorship, and surveillance, Kashmiri media practitioners have, and continue to work under immense pressure and unfavourable conditions. Despite these challenges, the media here has been integral to disseminating information and speaking truth to power irrespective of the hostility of the state. The Media Policy, 2020[1], is one example of how the state exerts its control over all aspects of media in Kashmir and limit media here as the mouthpiece of the government which disseminates ‘news’ that is within the political acceptability.

Such an extraordinary situation forces the media to exist in binaries- to either portray events through a dehumanizing lens, in order to make a case for the brutal conditions of life in Kashmir, or to project a semblance of ‘normalcy’ in the region. There is barely any framework in place for the media to function, to seek accountability, and even to monitor and evaluate its own practice.

As a collective, ZW is concerned with these difficult questions of narrative construction and structural problems that shape the way media operates. People’s narratives are documented through a specific prism that is largely dictated by the state. Amidst all this, gender barely surfaces as a subject of primary concern. Our larger aim here is to ask a broader question about narrative change. Is it possible? And if so, could gender be a starting point?

These guidelines are aimed at setting a scene; in finding and thinking aloud about alternative ways of reporting and disseminating news. This is long-term work that requires thinking, re-thinking, and incorporation of media practitioners in these conversations. These conversations around gender sensitivity are challenging and made worse by the absence of any institutions or a lack of a rule of law, which would otherwise protect vulnerable groups.

INTRODUCTION TO THE GUIDELINES

In Kashmir, women's representation is mainly limited to violence against them or their glorified representation in, say protests, funerals or other public settings. Their representation is reliant on individual reporters or editors' discretion and not moderated within a framework of codes of conduct or regulation policies. Even outside of the non-existent domestic frameworks, there is no applicability of international resolutions dedicated to women in armed conflict say. These conventions and treaties pertaining the rights of women in an armed conflict remain ineffective like any other universally protected fundamental human rights in Kashmir.

What is required is not simply more attention to these issues in reportage but to holistically locate gender bias in the context of Kashmir in which media operates. Our aim is not only to dedicate more efforts to coverage of gender issues but to promote 'genderization' [2] in all the processes that entail journalism-from education in media, to employment, to content production, reportage, editing, policy-making, and regulation. We insist that the media personnel use a gendered lens in reportage of not only matters 'of women' but across the board.

While the content produced in media runs on strict timelines and there may not be scope to delve deeper into the gender issue in each story; what we are proposing is a holistic understanding that is long-term and sustainable. These practices can be cultivated over time. A gender-sensitive approach can make the work of journalists more credible and effective. These guidelines are a reference point that has been curated with experts and professionals in media to create a resource on gender sensitivity that is contextual to Kashmir. We hope that media organizations assess their gender responsiveness and adapt these guidelines within their own mechanism to enhance an overall culture of gender sensitivity of and in media.





OBJECTIVES

Providing information that would assist the media practitioners in producing media coverage that is gender-sensitive.

Enabling practitioners to understand and identify the dimensions, frameworks, forms, and types of GBV in the context of armed conflict in Kashmir.

Integrating gender in the policy framework and facilitating the involvement of women stakeholders in decision-making at an institutional level.

Promoting ethical codes and policies for gender portrayal and sensitive reportage.

Proposing a shift from generalizations, stereotyping, objectification, and romanticization in gender portrayal in media.

Encouraging organizations to make gender issues transparent and comprehensible to the public and analyzing internal policies and practices to take necessary actions for change.

Creating a safe work environment for people of all genders and taking adequate measures to address instances of sexual harassment in the workplaces.

Fostering Gender Equality within Media Institutions and Organisations

1

Education, training and targeted action to increase women students in the media.

To have more women in media, we need more women media students. Even though there has been a gradual increase in women both taking up media academically and professionally, more concerted efforts need to be made in this regard. Media organizations can conduct workshops and capacity-building training with students in school as well as colleges across districts in Kashmir. These focused exercises should also propose gender-sensitive modules and awareness programs. Organizations can offer internships and volunteering programs so more students get hands-on experience in media.

2

Equal treatment in the workplace.

There should be equal treatment of staffers regardless of their gender. It is important that women staff feel heard and valued in the organization and their opinions and contributions are taken seriously. There should be equal compensations for the same work, and equal opportunities should be provided to the employees across the board.

3

Gender equality in associations, clubs, and organizations of journalists.

Representatives of professional associations, media self-regulatory bodies, or even representatives of public institutions are often men. Even if there are a few women members, their role is often tokenistic and barely ever in a leadership role. The associations/bodies should actively include women in administrative, decision making and other levels. Affirmative action can also enable designated leadership positions within these media structures.

4

Gender balance in decision making.

Women journalists should be considered active participants in decision-making as well as in their abilities to highlight pertinent causes and issues to public opinion. There should be active efforts to ensure women are given equal opportunities and are valued for their work and opinions. Media organizations can conduct a periodical gender audit to assess their overall gender balance. This can also be enhanced through affirmative action aimed at increasing opportunities for women in the organizational structure.

5

A safe working environment.

Include staff in discussions on what constitutes a safe working environment for them, and have policies against sexual harassment and bullying. There should be no room for casual sexism in the workplace. Organizations must have basic necessities from separate toilets and pick and drop services to facilitate women journalists' mobility especially given the frequent lockdowns and shutdowns. Journalists should be provided appropriate safety gear while covering violent events like protests, CASO & encounters.



Gender Portrayal in Media Content

1

Review language and expressions in media coverage.

Use gender-neutral language in reportage. A gender-neutral language refers to neither men nor women when the gender of the person is not relevant to the subject matter. It is important to shift from using 'man' as a generic noun, using neutral professional descriptions and especially paying careful attention to headlines. Especially in GBV reportage, priority should be given to not reinforcing stereotypes, and the usage of active/passive language should be used with caution. Similarly, adjectives used to victimize women should be avoided.

2

Content Regulation Policies.

Create a gender-sensitive content regulation policy, in case there isn't one in place- in consultation with women journalists, experts, and civil society members. There should be a focus on ethics, gender representation, balanced and multi-dimensional portrayal of women.

3

Considerations for privacy and ethics.

There should be a code of conduct pertaining to ethics of reportage on women which should be circulated with and discussed with all practitioners and people involved in the organizations. Journalists should minimize harm through their reports and ensure that privacy and confidentiality in sensitive matters are prioritized.





4

Graphics and Visualization.

Often images of violence focus on women as victims and distressed figures while the perpetrator often surfaces as a distant shadow. These sensational images use visual tropes wherein the focus is entirely on the victim-survivor; reiterating the notions of loss and honour placed upon women's bodies. These tropes further the conditions that create an environment of gendered violence in the first place. Kashmiri women are also often photographed in their most vulnerable conditions, in funerals or in the aftermath of incidents of violence. Media organizations should steer clear of using this graphic imagery and visual techniques should be used to protect the privacy of the people involved in the reports.

5

Content on Minors.

Special consideration should be employed when engaging with minors (people below the age of 18). Practitioners must protect their privacy, seek consent from their guardians for interviews as well as reportage on the subject matter. Careful considerations should be taken for the safety of the child and the cultural ramifications of the media reportage. Through their reportage, journalists should aim to protect a child's best interests and promote child rights.

Reporting Gender-Based Violence

Gender-based violence stems from power relationships and in the context of armed conflict, it is disproportionately exacerbated- affecting women and other marginal identities as they are more disempowered and vulnerable.

Reporting gender-based violence requires caution and sensitivity on the part of media professionals, especially, given how closely it impacts the lives and perception of not just one incident but towards the phenomenon of GBV.

A gender-sensitive approach would situate GBV in the ambit of power, or rather, powerlessness, of women which often creates the conditions for GBV in the first place. Violence against women is a manifestation of this power imbalance where women have been put in disproportionately marginal positions not only socially but politically and legally as well. With the absolute lack of any redressal mechanisms in Kashmir, it is all the more important for the media to share the responsibility of sensitive reportage. This would foster a culture beyond the narratives of shame and victim-blaming. Journalists covering GBV should be trained with gender-sensitive techniques aforementioned like adopting appropriate terminology, informed consent, and conducting interviews sensitively. Reporting GBV sensitively would also entail:

**Media
reportage
of
GBV
has a real
tangible
impact on
the lives of
women.
This makes
it pertinent
to take
careful
considerati
ons while
reporting
such
incidents**

Privacy and Confidentiality

Respecting and ensuring privacy in cases of gender-based violence is of the utmost importance because it is directly related to ensuring the safety and security of the survivors. Also, source protection is important as GBV is a sensitive topic that is often not discussed and could potentially put the source at risk. Organisations must refrain from vindictive and counterproductive information regarding the survivor that might adopt a tone of victim-blaming.

Fair Representation

Avoid the usage of stereotypical and graphic imagery. Journalists should not attribute the act of violence to the survivor. For example, instead of saying 'x was assaulted by b', instead use, 'b assaulted x', putting the onus of the crime on the perpetrator.

Sensationalist visuals and vocabulary like 'scandal' should be strictly avoided whilst reporting cases.

Sensitive Engagement

Respecting and ensuring privacy in cases of gender-based violence is of the utmost importance because it is directly related to ensuring the safety and security of the survivors. Also, source protection is important as GBV is a sensitive topic that is often not discussed and could potentially put the source at risk. Organisations must refrain from vindictive and counterproductive information regarding the survivor that might adopt a tone of victim-blaming.

4

Interviews for GBV Reportage

Journalists should be made aware of the practical, ethical, and humane steps to be followed when conducting an interview with a survivor of violence. It is important that standard practice of the interview is adopted which prioritizes privacy, confidentiality, mental health, and safety of the survivor. The reporter should give the survivor time for psychological preparation before the interview and employ the use a language that is comfortable to them. No information about the survivor's identity should be disclosed in the media content; informed consent should be taken prior to the publication. Ensuring the survivor has easy access to the journalist. Therefore, providing them with the contact information is important. In most cases, survivors are more comfortable in the presence of a woman journalist. There should be a woman team member while covering and interviewing such issues. Do not push their boundaries and respect their wishes if they want to stop the interview in-between.





In addition to the aforementioned best practices, media organizations should also develop and think of civil mechanisms which can allow readers or their audience to flag and report triggering content. Within the regulatory bodies, an official monitoring mechanism should be put in place for promoting best practices for gender-sensitive reportage. These bodies should also facilitate the awareness against stereotyping, objectification, and exploitation of women in the media. The aim should not only focus on creating change in the media discourse but also impact and inform public opinion. Through these practices, we aim to make media practice in Kashmir more inclusive and to create a space for women to not only exist but thrive in this sphere.

Ultimately prioritizing the issues of gender through media on a social, political, legal, and cultural level is a crucial step for building a just and equal society.

RESEARCH AND FURTHER READINGS

IFJ (2014) Guidelines for Reporting on Violence Against Women.

UNESCO. (2012) Gender-Sensitive Indicators for Media: Framework of Indicators to Gauge Gender Sensitivity in Media Operations and Content.

UNESCO. (2019) Reporting on Violence against Women and Girls.

UNICEF. Ethical Reporting Guidelines: Key Principles for Responsible Reporting on Children and Young People.



REFERENCES

[1] On June 2, the Government unveiled its the Media Policy 2020 which outlines their power to monitor content in the media, determining the accreditation of Kashmiri journalists and control allocations for government advertising. The local journalists or editors were not consulted at all before drafting this policy. This policy enhances the control of the government over media and poses a serious threat for local media. The Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) in its article calls this Policy as a " nail in the coffin for free press."

[2] 'Genderisation' is a framework put forth in Missing Half the Story (2010) proposing a gender lens in all aspects of journalism and news coverage including reporting, editing and feature writing.

Code of Conduct for Media Coverage on Gender Based Violence (March, 2006). Fe-Male and ABAAD.

Guide Training: On Critical Media Coverage of Women and Girls Survivors of Gender Based Violence (May, 2018). Fe-Male and ABAAD.

Kashmir Media Policy: Accentuating the curbs on the freedom of press. Economic and Political Weekly. (2021, May 2).
<https://www.epw.in/engage/article/kashmir-media-policy-accentuating-curbs-freedom-press>.

Kashmir New Media Policy is "nail in the coffin" for free press. Committee to Protect Journalists. (2020, August 7). Retrieved November 19, 2021, from <https://cpj.org/thetorch/2020/08/kashmir-new-media-policy-is-nail-in-the-coffin-for-free-press/>.

Sharma, K. (2010). Missing: Half the Story : Journalism as If Gender Matters. Zubaan.

UNESCO. (2012) Gender- Sensitive Indicators for Media : Framework of Indicators to Gauge Gender Sensitivity in Media Operations and Content. <http://www.unesco.org/new/en/communication-and-information/resources/publications-and-communication-materials/publications/full-list/gender-sensitive-indicators-for-media-framework-of-indicators-to-gauge-gender-sensitivity-in-media-operations-and-content/>



ZANAAN WANAAN

FE-MALE

2021



Copyright License: This document may be used, reproduced, or translated freely for non-commercial purposes, with due acknowledgement and attributions.