

Curfewed in Kashmir: Voices from the Valley

AALIYA ANJUM, SAIBA VARMA

Poets, lawyers, writers, activists and doctors speak about the current crisis in Kashmir and what daily life in a regime of curfews and urban unrest means to them.

Since 1989, civilian life in Kashmir has been governed through the presence of more than half a million troops, making the region the most heavily militarised zone in the world. This, despite the fact that last year, official government figures put the number of militants operating in the Valley at less than 500.

Since 2008, Kashmiris, especially the young, have been waging a new form of rebellion against the Indian state known as the “second revolution”. Expressing their demands through public protests often punctuated with stone pelting rather than guns, Kashmiris have launched this “second revolution” through a massive, sustained, and predominantly non-violent, civil disobedience movement in the streets. These protests are expressions of widespread dissatisfaction with what Kashmiris view as a defunct justice delivery system and gross violations of human rights that have occurred under Indian rule in the larger context of their persistent demands for the right to self-determination. Since June such protests have been met with disproportionate force from the Indian paramilitary, leading to the deaths of at least 60 civilians and the arrests of hundreds more, heralding what Kashmiris are calling, “The Year of Killing Youth”.

Writing this on 21 August, we await the stomach-churning news of more deaths. The cursor blinks at 62 – tenuously, tentatively. Any moment now, we think. Friends are phoned anxiously, “facts” are double and triple checked, even though we know that in the inevitable act of putting type to paper, things will be lost. This piece too will become history.

In the eerie quiet, mobile phones have become umbilical cords, Facebook pages, arteries. Information – found in the liminal space between fact and rumour – spreads like wildfire: the Internet is going to be

banned, warns Mehran Khan, one of our collaborators, so finish your piece quickly.

Journalists scramble to guarantee accuracy, as numbers are what matter now. And what numbers? Only the dead can be affirmed. We mark these on neat and orderly spreadsheets – who, how old, when, where, how. Dilnaz Boga, a journalist friend, sends us the Excel spreadsheet that she updates daily, which she has named “Body Count”. We are grateful for the orderliness of it – the way she has highlighted the names of those deceased, assembled a narrative that grows and grows, but for the moment stops at “75 civilians so far”. This “Body Count” sheet starts in January, when the first teenage civilian death of the year was reported on 8 January, 16-year-old Inayat Khan. Although there have been regular strikes and protests in Kashmir since Inayat’s death, the confrontation between Indian security forces and Kashmiri civilian protesters became particularly intensive in the first week of June, prompting frequent comparisons to the Palestinian Intifada.

On a recent Facebook status update, Sajid Iqbal, a lawyer, writes of the scarce heed paid by the international media to the persistent civilian killings in Kashmir in these past weeks: “After over 40 deaths, the BBC finally does a full length story on us, in one of their main evening programmes, ‘The Hub with Nik Gowing’. Congratulations everyone, our body count is finally respectable....” Besides gaining Kashmir a small amount of international media attention – a piece in *The Guardian*, *The LA Times*, *The New York Times*, *Christian Science Monitor*, *The Huffington Post*, occasional coverage on the BBC and Al Jazeera web sites on exceptionally violent days – the casualty figure is the only thing we have left to hold on to. It is the lone fishing vessel in a sea of rumours, proxies, and hurdles.

*Along that solitary gravelled path
Into a crimson evening,
My eyes chase you and chase you
Until you ask them:*

‘Where do these boys go after they kill them?’

‘What happens to their hearts, the love-lakes, now mad with the tempests of freedom?’

This piece is part of a collaborative writing project called “Voices from the Valley”, composed of youth voices from Kashmir. We asked poets, lawyers, writers, activists, and doctors to submit their interpretations of the current crisis. Rather than have others speak for them, we wanted to create a forum where Kashmiris could speak for themselves.

Contributors: Umar Ahmed; Haley Duschinski; Sajid Iqbal; Aadil Kak; Mehran Khan; Jasim Malik; Dr Junaid Nabi; Feroz Rather.

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*In Kashmir, in my village, Bumthan,
A cold summer morning
Whispers into the leaves of an elm,
Why the dearest ones have to leave us before
autumn?*

*Ah! You have taken away the summer rain,
And the news of our own death smashes us
under the glaring sun.*

(From "The Shining Stars of My Sky" by Feroz Rather, nd).

This excerpt captures how Kashmiris will remember the summer of 2010 as a season of loss and longing.

"It's almost two months now", says Ahmad Umar, "during which Indian paramilitary forces killed over 50 young people, including nine-year old children, as well as women, besides leaving hundreds of others injured or crippled." As the Indian media establishment prepares itself for yet another round of brouhaha, it is sometimes easy to forget how all of this began. That there was something *before* and something *other* than images of burning police stations and masked teenage boys hurling stones.

Body Counts

*Into the sunset, a scream rises from
the stones rebelling in the streets of the
Old City,*

Our hearts turn crimson,

The blood seeps into the lake,

And in our eyes Tufail floats like a new leaf

Amid the wreaths of lotuses.....

(From: "The Shining Stars of My Sky" by Feroz Rather, nd).

The most recent wave of state violence began on 11 June with the death of 17-year-old Tufail Ahmad Madoo. Tufail, a bright student who had just passed his examinations with distinction, was playing in a park in Srinagar when local police shot him in the head with a teargas launcher. As crowds poured into the streets to protest his death, Indian paramilitary forces responded with a "bullet for a stone" policy amidst an atmosphere increasingly charged with restrictive curfews, arbitrary arrests, stone pelting, and consequently, increasingly violent protests. Incidentally, the J&K police registered a first information report (FIR) on Tufail's death, 36 days later, on 18 July.

As the number of civilian casualties mounted, the centre called the army in to

Srinagar on 7 July to enforce "law and order" for the first time in 20 years, making it clear that such a move was intended to deter the protests. While the army-imposed curfew succeeded in stopping the haemorrhaging for a total of 10 days, the return of Omar Abdullah's civil administration heralded yet another round of killings in the month of July. By the end of July, the civilian death toll in the months of June and July had reached 22.

Meanwhile, the establishment began carrying stories about how the agitations were being sponsored by "anti-social elements" – coded language that the protests were being backed by Pakistan. It went on to declare that armed militants had infiltrated the protesting crowd, but the fact that there has not been a single paramilitary casualty does not support that theory. This stance was also echoed by Jammu and Kashmir Chief Minister, Omar Abdullah as recently as 1 August. Since 2 August, however, the narrative has shifted once again, with Omar Abdullah declaring the crowds as "leaderless". Omar, who until very recently was being touted as a poster boy of everything from secularism to technical savvy, even dazzling the Prime Minister Manmohan Singh with his Power Point presentation on developmental works in the Valley, has quickly become a punching bag, with the central government and media blaming the current crisis on his misgovernance.

The chief minister, meanwhile, has shied away from expressing his thoughts on the ongoing chaos as frequently as he is expected to. Of late though, in desperation, and probably to make his presence felt, he has appealed to the people to help him restore calm amid his dashing off to Delhi for meetings, asking for troop reinforcements and promising employment packages to the youth, whose single most pressing concern according to his analysis is unemployment. How his token concern for Kashmiris was perceived by those injured was demonstrated by the anger and resentment he faced on his first visit to a Srinagar hospital on 6 August. Apparently, he had to leave hurriedly as attendants shouted slogans against him, and some reports say more serious humiliation was meted out to the young chief minister. One of those injured was quoted as saying,

"Who is Omar Abdullah and who gives a damn?" More recently, on 15 August, during the Independence Day celebrations, a defiant J&K policeman hurled his shoe at Omar while chanting pro-freedom slogans. Although the cop was arrested after the incident, he was widely celebrated on the streets of Kashmir for capturing the sentiments of the people; thousands of people visited his home in Bandipora and decorated it as a wedding house. Meanwhile, the chief minister – perhaps missing the cultural significance of a thrown shoe – retorted, "It is better to throw shoes than to throw stones".

The Soft Knife of Everyday Violence

I am incarcerated, in these dark walls

I see nothing, coerced to smell

Filthy, dirty, plagued floors

You caught me by my collar

Dragged me to these walls

Which I won't call a "place"

Some days ago

Just the sore words I whispered

"We Want Freedom!"

(From "As I Die" by Jasim Malik, 19 January 2010).

The death toll is, of course, the most spectacular example of ongoing sufferings. But there are other sufferings which have not gained as much media or public attention also because these "facts" are more difficult to verify. According to the daily *Greater Kashmir*, since June approximately 1,400 people, mostly teenage boys, have been detained and charged with crimes ranging from rioting to attempted murder. Around 70 youth have been booked under the Public Safety Act of 1978 (PSA), a preventive detention law that has been criticised by Indian and Kashmiri civil rights groups and political parties.

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Under the PSA, a person can be jailed without trial for two years to “maintain public order” dumping speedy and fair trial guarantees. The PSA has also been used to detain prominent legal activists, including the president of the Jammu and Kashmir High Court Bar Association, Advocate Mian Qayoom, who has also been charged with sedition.

The current climate of uncertainty has been exacerbated by intensive restrictions on media and communication in the Kashmir Valley, including blocks on sms services since 30 June, complete jams of cellular services in more sensitive pockets, and limits on local print and televised news reports, as ordered by the Jammu and Kashmir government. Further, while the curfew passes of local journalists have not been honoured, and the media persons have also been assaulted and arrested under special security legislation, journalists from outside Kashmir have been given unobtrusive access to volatile areas. To protest what they describe as “discrimination”, on 8 July, the Press Guild of Kashmir unanimously decided to willingly suspend local news publications.

Yet, it is not only journalists who find their curfew passes dishonoured. In a similar vein, Dr Junaid Nabi describes how the government invalidated curfew passes for medical practitioners as well: “Being a doctor I had a horrible time not being able to make it to the hospital. I just want to know what happens if a person falls ill or something untoward happens. How would I help them? No one has any answers.” As doctors like Junaid struggle to deliver their duties, those who manage to reach hospitals have to go through the trauma of a sea of injured protesters pouring in daily. Further, local doctors report that a significant number of the injured have been shot at point-blank range, and almost all have been shot in the upper body. (*Greater Kashmir* reported on 2 August that doctors at SK Institute of Medical Sciences, Soura, said that of the 31 patients admitted with bullet injuries, 29 had been shot above the legs.) Many of them have been left maimed for life. The hardships, and in some cases, life-challenging perils, caused to the sick due to non-availability or lack of access to medicine and medical supplies, including blood, were also causes

for serious concern until very recently. Fortunately, on 4 August, after reports of blood shortages in one of Srinagar’s biggest government hospitals, volunteers donated 180 pints of blood in a single day.

Apart from the number of civilian casualties, gross restrictions on movement and the sudden structural transformation of local neighbourhoods have also been deeply disturbing. The armed forces have severely restricted civilian mobility by blockading roads, neighbourhoods, and entire towns with barricades, checkpoints, and spirals of concertina wire. Police and paramilitary units guard the streets and often intimidate local residents by shattering the windows of their homes, chasing them off the streets and at times beating them without provocation. Past experiences of life under curfew have led some neighbourhoods to set up barriers with rocks and cement pipes to deter police vehicles from patrolling their streets and causing further damage. In such circumstances, neighbourhoods resemble not so much war zones, but rather prisons or ghettos of collective punishment. Umar Ahmed, an activist, describes this atmosphere as one “between

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a wall of physical oppression and a hard place of psychological suppression”, where Kashmiris are left with “no option as an option and no choice as a choice”.

As with other communities who have experienced this scale and duration of violence, Kashmiris have revived declining cultural practices to try to adapt to such conditions of uncertainty. For example, because the landlocked Valley used to be cut off from the rest of the world, particularly in winter, Kashmiris developed techniques of efficiently storing food, such as by drying (*hokhea syun*) or pickling vegetables. Although these practices had to some extent dwindled as Kashmir moved away from a self-sufficient agrarian economy, there was resurgence in many of these practices – such as the tendency to “hoard” non-perishable items – during militancy, when there would be curfews in place for months at a stretch. A professor of Linguistics at Kashmir University, Aadil Kak commented that, “while people in Delhi buy one or two kilos of rice at a time, we keep 2-3 months’ supply of rice at all times. *Yeh humari purani aadat hai* (This is our old habit).” In other words, while the armed struggle may have waned, many of the (war-time) habits of Kashmiris – what the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu has termed *habitus* – continue to be part of the Kashmiri cultural toolkit.

Yet despite these commendable efforts to use resources available to them, almost every household in Kashmir currently faces an extreme shortage of supplies. For many Kashmiris, then, such periods of unrest bring together feelings of victimhood and agency, the familiar and unfamiliar, the everyday and existential.

Stonewalled

For the last two months, in India, newspapers and television channels have been dominated by images of Kashmiris enacting violence against the state: a gang of youth setting fire to a government vehicle; boys cornering a policeman and beating him to the ground; stone pelters breaking the windows of a police vehicle disabled in the midst of a street clash. During the first few days of protest, the establishment including the ruling Congress Party, asked the Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF)

and other security personnel to “exercise maximum restraint” against protesters.

However, as the “anti-social” argument gained momentum within the Indian establishment – buttressed by images of anti-state violence – the burden of acting responsibly was shifted to the protesters. The only admission of responsibility comes in the suggestion that these troops – who have mostly been trained in counter-insurgency ops – need to be better trained for “riot” control.

One of the less visible and longer term effects of blaming the protesters is that it obscures the Indian state’s failure to find a long-lasting political solution to the Kashmir dispute. It also obscures the non-accountability for (at least) recent human rights abuses that kick-started the ongoing cycle of killings-protests-more killings-more protests, and the pressing need for revocation of the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA), which gives unbridled powers to the armed forces. Ironically, in the months before June, civil society groups from Kashmir and beyond had finally made inroads in their long-standing demands for the repeal of AFSPA, gaining support even from the upper echelons of the Congress Party, much to the chagrin of the army chief and the Bharatiya Janata Party. Yet, thanks to the renewed estrangement between New Delhi and Srinagar, however, the debate around AFSPA has once again been placed on the back burner.

In contrast to the Indian narrative, Kashmiri media outlets have been circulating a proliferation of images of state brutality and people’s anguished responses to it: a father kneeling in the street and mourning over his dead son’s body; crowds carrying corpses through the narrow lanes of the old city in massive funeral processions; a mother wailing on hearing that her son has been killed by the forces; a lone agitated woman hurling a brick at a group of a dozen police personnel in full riot gear. Pertinently, the only local cable tv channel that Kashmiris used to turn to for garnering an actual understanding of the situation on the ground – as it carried exclusive coverage of the ongoing protests – has been banned by the state.

The juxtaposition of these images in national and local circulation gives rise to two mutually exclusive ideological

narratives – one backed by the coercive authority of the Indian state, and the other backed by the popular authority of the Kashmiri people. In particular, it seems that the mainstream Indian media has been unwilling to make sense of the spontaneous uprisings after Tufail’s death within the context of a broad-based Kashmiri movement for self-determination. “By trying to discredit all stone pelters as ‘hired agents’”, says Sajid Iqbal, “the armed forces, the home ministry, and the powerful media houses are in effect implying that Kashmiris are perfectly fine dying without protest at the hands of the armed forces, since all ‘mobs’ are sponsored. They are trying to pass us off as an insensitive people, who experience no pain, have no heart, no feelings and no emotions.”

The end result is that the rhetoric and representations in the mainstream Indian media continue to delegitimise the genuine disillusionment faced by Kashmiris resulting from non-accountability for years of human rights abuse in the larger context of their persistent demands for their right to self-determination. On such representations in the mainstream media, Mehran Khan says, “They can’t feel or represent our sentiments. They blame us for protesting against India’s brutal and inhuman acts, rather than blaming them for killing our youth and opening fire at their funerals.”

Frustrated with these representations – as *either* victims *or* perpetrators – Kashmiri youth have taken responsibilities of representation into their own hands. Youth from all across the political spectrum have turned to Youtube and Facebook in a major way to express their thoughts on the current situation. On the walls of Facebook groups that have mushroomed in the last two months, stories proliferate describing the human consequences of curfew: pregnant women unable to reach the maternity hospital in time for their deliveries, families unable to access local graveyards to bury their dead, and ambulances turned back at checkpoints, leaving patients with no access to clinical care.

This turn to Facebook as a contingency news network in recent months is reminiscent of its use by youth in political crises in other parts of the world, notably during the Iran election crisis. (In the case of Iran, of course, Facebook was used to

organise people before the election, but it was also blocked after the vote. This prompted Iranians to turn to the micro-blogging site, Twitter.) As then in Iran and now in Kashmir, the turn to Youtube and Facebook represents a fundamental shift in the way politics is, and will be, done here – including the manner these sites are monitored. Although not to the same extent as in Iran, the online activities of Kashmiris on Facebook are also being closely followed by the Indian state and media. An NDTV reporter recently made an analogy between a stone and a computer mouse, implying that both are equally dangerous weapons in the hands of Kashmiri youth. This representation, of course, mirrors the Indian state's decision to survey Kashmiri Facebook users, even making arrests on the claims that users are "provoking people" to "anti-state activities".

Is Anybody Listening?

While Kashmiri youth are dying in the streets, the international community has all but ignored the ongoing human rights and humanitarian crisis in south Asia's most volatile region. This is nothing new. Historically, the only moment in recent years when Kashmir made international headlines was in the year 2000, when former us President Bill Clinton described it as a "nuclear flash point" and termed south Asia as "the most dangerous place on earth".

On 10 July, us state department spokesman Mark Toner explained the administration's reluctance to intervene, stating that the us "regretted the loss of life" but regarded the current climate of repression as "an internal Indian matter". Most recently, a controversy was adrift around whether the UN Secretary General, Ban Ki-moon made any statements expressing "concern" over the prevailing security situation in Kashmir on 29 July. The Ministry of Home Affairs and the mainstream media proclaimed in unison that Ban's spokesperson of Pakistani origin – Farhan Haq – had concocted the secretary general's remarks. Ban's chief spokesperson Martin Nasirky, expressed his displeasure with the Indian media's suggestion that Farhan's ethnicity might have inspired his alleged "concoction" and sternly told the journalists at the UN briefing that he "won't tolerate

insults being directed" at his colleagues. No statements from the Indian government or media followed this incident.

On the part of the Indian state, after over 60 days of deaths, scores of injuries and tough talk, the home minister finally expressed his "regret" for the killings and condoled the affected families. However, he continued to uphold his claim that the armed forces have been exercising maximum "restraint" in their attempts to quell the protests. Clearly, the number and manner of civilian deaths and injuries do not support his contention. After weeks of denial that the civilian deaths were nothing but the consequence of teenage angst run amok – or, alternately, the handiwork of Pakistani-backed insurgents – on 17 August, P Chidambaram finally admitted that (at least) 12 of the civilian deaths were "unprovoked" and would be investigated.

Does this signal the beginning of the end of the vicious cycle of killing-protests-more killings-more protests, violence and death? There are at least two sparks of hope. A viewer poll conducted by CNN/IBN on 5 August showed that 82% of its viewers thought that Indian state needed to completely overturn its Kashmir strategy. This suggests that there is an appetite amongst at least some sections of the Indian public for a new way forward. The last 10 days or

so have also seen a spate of writing in the Indian mainstream media by Indian public intellectuals which contradicts the state narrative.

These lone voices find resonance with the voices of young Kashmiris who also continue to speak out – through poetry, photography, art, and, most of all, street protests. Such public demonstrations provide tools for preserving their memories of the past, negotiating the uncertainties of the present, and carving out a collective future.

In the words of the singer-poet Leonard Cohen, "there is a crack in everything/ That's how the light gets in". And meanwhile, the counting continues... In a poem dedicated to Tufail and to many others who have gone unnoticed, Jasim Malik carries forward the memory of loss through a voice of a Kashmiri youth who speaks from beyond the grave:

*This silence has lots of stories to tell
Each word in these Chronicles pierces my page
Stories which no pen dares to jot down
Accounts which no ink can 'give tongue to'
Blood ruptures by my eyes, I feel lazed
I can't even say, 'till we meet again'*

*For I am not sure about the future
At last I must confess, as I leave you forever,
I stole a jam bottle from the kitchen last week
And I love you the most.*

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