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## An Italian in Kashmir

It all started with Sister Emilia. She was ninety-one when I first met her—a rotund, red-faced nun from Verona with the disconcerting habit of smiling beatifically and chuckling wistfully as she recounted tales of terror and brutality. Emilia Montavani was a survivor of the attack on the Christian mission at Baramulla. Half a century later, she was still living there, in a remote outpost at the sharp end of the Kashmir Valley, close to the ceasefire line which partitions the area between India and Pakistan. That chance encounter provided the key to unlocking an extraordinarily powerful story, an interlinking tale of personal tragedy in India's Himalayan foothills and the inception of one of the most destabilising geopolitical rivalries. Sister Emilia gave me access to a fresh and illuminating perspective on how the Kashmir crisis first erupted—who the attackers were, how they were organised and commanded, and why they failed in their goal of capturing Kashmir for Pakistan. It challenges the established accounts of the various claimants to the Kashmir Valley. And in a narrative that has so often seemed preoccupied by territory and by national pride, it puts people—their memories, their aspirations, their tribulations—at the centre of the Kashmir story.

The tragedy Sister Emilia bore witness to is still being played out in and around Baramulla, embittering relations between what are now nuclear powers and pitting armed Islamic radicals against what the Indian government sees as the forces of secularism. Ever since India and Pakistan gained independence from Britain in August 1947, they have been twinned in conflict about who rules Kashmir. The dispute has disfigured the region's development, provoked wars and been the root cause of a hard-fought separatist insurgency. It has also blighted the lives of millions of Kashmiris and ravaged an area of majestic beauty. The origins of the conflict have been clouded by partisan rhetoric and the underlying issues have been obscured by the clamour of competing nationalisms. Events in the small riverside town of Baramulla in the autumn of 1947 determined



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the outcome of the first bitter tussle for control of the Kashmir Valley. It is where the Kashmir crisis took shape.

My mission on that first visit to Baramulla was to record memories of the turmoil that accompanied Britain's pull-out from India. I had travelled to the Kashmir Valley many times to report on the battle between armed separatists and Indian security forces. I had repeatedly grappled with the difficulties of reconciling two sharply different accounts of every event and incident, and with the precarious phone lines that hampered attempts to file news stories from Ahdoo's hotel, the reporters' base in the Kashmir capital, Srinagar. On this visit, I had a broader purpose. I was travelling across South Asia scouring for material for a series of radio programmes looking back on the trauma of Partition in 1947, the blood-stained division of the British Raj at the moment of independence into Hindu-majority India and the Muslim nation of Pakistan. Kashmir had its own distinct story to tell about Partition-era violence. Elsewhere it was a confused agglomeration of politically instigated killings, local power struggles, and vicious retribution. At its simplest, the violence set Muslims against Hindus and Sikhs. Many millions chose, or were forced, to migrate and about half a million people were killed in one of the bloodiest convulsions of the century.<sup>1</sup> The Kashmir Valley did not initially endure communal carnage. But it witnessed an invasion, and violence that was political, religious and communal in nature, starting just as the Partition killings in Punjab were beginning to subside. The fighting developed into war between the newly independent nations. Kashmir lay between India and Pakistan. It was a princely state, where a Hindu maharaja ruled a largely Muslim populace. As tribal fighters from Pakistan crossed into Kashmir, the Catholic mission at Baramulla was ransacked and then transformed into the invaders' military base. It was subject to repeated aerial bombing raids and visitations by both Pakistani and Indian armies, before the initial campaign was decided in India's favour.

I had not intended to call at the convent and adjoining mission hospital on that first visit to Baramulla. I'd been told that there was no one at the mission with memories stretching back as far as 1947. But the day didn't go entirely to plan. Indian intelligence had got word of my impending visit to the town. The local journalist who was seeking out senior citizens to talk to me had twice been hauled in for questioning about what I was up to and who I would be meeting. He wanted me out of his hair and off his patch as quickly as possible. So I was on my way back from Baramulla to Srinagar much earlier in the day than I had

expected. The route took me past the brick-red corrugated roof of the mission chapel, peeping over a stout roadside wall. I asked the driver to pull in. We parked by a well-patronised dispensary. A small circle of garden had, as its centrepiece, a statue of the Virgin Mary in a small grotto. Beyond, a covered walkway led to a veranda around a larger garden, linking four neat, small hospital wards, an operating theatre, and what was once an X-ray room. In the other direction, beyond a sputum testing centre, stood a functional modern hostel for nursing students. The chapel, at close inspection, had clearly been renovated and expanded since 1947, and adjoining it was the convent, which seemed to be the oldest of the mission buildings. The sister superior, a Goan Catholic, was summoned. She heard out my quest for eyewitnesses of the tribal forces' attack. 'Well,' she replied, 'there is one sister still here from those times. I think she may be sleeping. I'll see if she will meet you.'

Sister Emilia, neatly attired in a light grey nun's habit, needed no convincing to share her experience of violation and valour. This had been the mission's greatest moment—when the faith and vocation of the nuns and priests had been put to its greatest test. 'There were rumours that they were coming—we were thinking they won't do nothing to us,' Sister Emilia declared in a lilting accent. 'The Monday after the feast of Christ the King they reach here. Then they started to shoot. They came inside. We were working still. Our dispensary was working still. The hospital had patients. They were on the veranda of the hospital, going from one ward to another. They say: shoot, kill, *maro* (attack).'

Sitting in the wood-panelled parlour at St Joseph's, reminiscing in the light of a paraffin lamp, Sister Emilia told me how raiders had stormed the convent and mission hospital. They had killed a patient and a nurse—and a young Spanish nun, a friend of hers. The husband of the hospital doctor was shot dead in front of her. The mother superior had been felled by another bullet. A British army officer was also shot, as was his wife, who had come to the hospital to give birth. In a matter of minutes, four people had been killed, and four more seriously wounded, two of whom died within hours. The attackers had ransacked every room, looted personal possessions and desecrated the chapel. I couldn't bring myself to ask about the reports of rape. The elderly Italian nun retold the episode as if it had been an adventure, almost with relish. But the memory was taking its toll on her. Another nun confided that Sister Emilia still had nightmares about the attack. In 1947, all but one of the nuns at Baramulla had been from Europe. Fifty years later, Emilia Montavani was the only



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European left at the mission. She had come to India in 1930, and arrived at St Joseph's in 1933, as a young nun aged twenty-eight. It remained her home for seventy years.

The bearded, black-turbanned attackers who for decades disturbed Sister Emilia's sleep were Muslim Pathan tribesmen. They came as a lashkar, a tribal raiding party, from Pakistan's North West Frontier Province (NWFP), close to Afghanistan. They acted in the name of Islam and of Pakistan. These hardy hill communities were, and still are, known as tribes because their lives are bound up with tribal and clan identity, custom, and codes of law, religion and honour. The tribal agencies where they lived had a special status under British rule, a degree of autonomy almost without parallel, which persisted into the independence era and has only recently begun to erode. Sister Emilia told me how these raiders had lined her up in the convent garden alongside other nuns who had survived the initial onslaught. They were told they would be shot. Her deliverer was a Pakistani army officer who, it transpired, had been educated by nuns. 'He saved us. He said something to them in their own language, and they put down their arms.' This was a telling anecdote, with its implications of a military command over the tribal fighters, and of attempts to maintain discipline.

The arrival of this Pathan officer, Saurab Hyat Khan, put an end to the initial bloodshed. But it was not the end of the mission's ordeal. All the survivors—nuns, priests, nurses, patients, and local non-Muslim refugees—were herded into one small ward of the mission hospital. There were about eighty people in all, including broods of children, and three British boys, one newly born, who had been orphaned in the attack. They spent the next eleven days crowded together, cramped, hungry and in perpetual fear that the tribesmen might again turn on them.

When I first stumbled on the story of the attack on Baramulla, it was on the cusp of slipping out of living memory altogether. The tribal army's occupation, the brutal assault on the mission, and the looting, killing and abduction, particularly of non-Muslims, has been the most momentous event in the town's modern history. At St Joseph's, only Sister Emilia had first-hand memories to rehearse. In the town, there were a few more old-timers who were willing to share their memories. The sense of a hidden and intense drama, a window on to a deeply contested historical episode which would soon be barred and shuttered, gave urgency to my resolve to retrieve individual stories and hunt down archive sources. I wrote an article about my visit to the mission for a daily newspaper in Delhi. I received several letters in response. One came from an Indian army veteran

who had been involved in beating back the tribal invaders, and another was from a relative of one of those killed at the mission. I was on my way. What started as curiosity had become a quest, and as I came to understand more of the interplay between events at St Joseph's and the initial military contest for Kashmir, it became a personal mission to uncover, retrieve, piece together and explain how and why Kashmir became a battleground.

Sister Emilia told me, in the course of several conversations at Baramulla, how she had cared for the orphaned newborn baby of Colonel and Mrs Dykes. During their captivity in the mission hospital, she had managed to get him milk. She had done her best to comfort the older Dykes boys, then aged two and five. 'I was touched—see[ing] the little boy clutching the other one and crying. Because there were no mummy, no daddy. So I said don't cry, don't cry. They are in heaven. They are praying for us. Don't cry. [The] bigger [boy], he was trying to console the other, smaller [boy].' She had often wondered how their lives had turned out. Those children born at the curtain call of empire had been touched by tragedy at such a young age. What had happened to them? How had they come to terms with the death of their parents?

Tracking down the Dykes brothers took many months. Letters sent to every Dykes in the phone book in the colonel's home city of Edinburgh produced a handful of replies, but no leads. There was little to go on. I knew the full names of the parents, Tom and Biddy Dykes, but not of their sons. Letters to regimental centres, and internet searches, led nowhere. In the end, it was a note passed on by an Indian army veterans' association that established contact. I came home from work one evening to be told that a man called Douglas Dykes had rung for me, and would ring again. He was the middle of the three brothers. All three men had spent much of their adult lives in southern Africa. The oldest, Tom Dykes junior, lived near Johannesburg. We wrote to each other. I sent him photographs of his parents' graves and a copy of his father's military service record from the archives. He sent me old family snapshots, and a copy of an extraordinarily poignant letter written at Baramulla by his mother ten days before her death.

Biddy Dykes wrote to her sister Muriel just days after giving birth—a gossipy family missive, laced with portents of unrest. Partition had dislocated the banking system along with just about everything else. She had run out of cash, and no one would accept cheques. 'Post arrived—Hells bells I've just had another cheque returned.' The last letter from her soldier husband had taken a month to reach her: 'He may be dead for all I know.' The local administration was in disarray: 'The Mother



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Superior is at her wits end.’ So too was Bidy Dykes, encumbered by two small children, a newborn baby and a dog, and anxious about when her husband would arrive to take them all home. ‘I’d give anything to see Tom walk in this evening, he said in one letter he would be up today. But I don’t think there is an earthly chance. I can’t wire any more for money as I haven’t any. Hav[e]n’t even wired Tom and couldn’t wire home either. There’s nobody to grouse over the matter with. The nuns are all foreign and hardly speak English. So here you’ve got it. I’ve no doubt it will all work out but at this stage I don’t feel like coping.’<sup>2</sup>

It didn’t work out, of course, and Tom junior told me in his letters that his recollections of the tragedy were patchy, yet acute and troublingly detailed. A few months later, I met Tom and his Afrikaner wife, Marlene, on the lawn of his brother’s home in Dorking, outside London. He shared with me memories of events surrounding his parents’ deaths that he had never discussed even within the family. He didn’t see his parents killed and never saw their bodies. He recalled that a young playmate at the mission, the doctor’s daughter, told him that his mother and father were dead.

That young girl was Angela Barretto. She and Tom had never met again after their shared ordeal at the mission. I managed to track her down to her home in the infotech city of Bangalore. Soft-spoken and bespectacled, she voiced distant memories of the incident, and proudly displayed photographs of her parents and sisters. She was four years old at the time of the raid. Her father was killed by the tribesmen. Her mother, the hospital surgeon, had been obliged to treat the injuries of the attackers as well as their victims. Angela had never set down her memories of the incident, but prompted by my interest and encouraged by a half-sister, she wrote an account of the attack.<sup>3</sup> Her recollections, borrowed in large part from the stories she had heard from her mother, echoed Tom’s on many counts of mood and detail.

The disconcerting rawness of their memories and the emotional punch of their accounts impelled me to seek out other voices. I was intrigued by Colonel Tom Dykes, a career soldier in the British Indian army. He had been one of the very few British casualties during the tumult and carnage of Partition, and he died just at the moment of Britain’s disengagement from India. I tracked down officers, Indian and British, who had served alongside him, and women who had been friends with Bidy, his wife. Some years later, I went for a convivial lunch in the well-heeled cathedral city of Salisbury in southern England—along with Colonel Dykes’s son, daughter-in-law and granddaughter—for one of



the last annual reunions of British veterans of Tom's regiment, the Sikh Regiment. The dwindling band of old soldiers, just a handful still fit enough to muster, looked back mistily at what had often been the defining experience of their lives. Almost sixty years after independence, a human aspect of Britain's colonial involvement with India was fading away, and with it a sense of direct connection with that experience.

I felt a compulsion to seek other testimony of the attack on the Baramulla mission. Through persistence and luck, I tracked down three men who had taken refuge in the mission during the invasion. One was living in Karachi and another in Kolkata. They both set down in writing their recollections, but did not want to be interviewed and do not wish to be named. The third survivor, Dr Francis Rath, a Catholic, was still in Baramulla and living just a few minutes walk from the mission. He was twenty-two at the time the tribal army entered town and took shelter at St Joseph's with most of his family. 'We never thought it would be such a holocaust,' he told me. 'And once they arrived it was terrible. Everywhere they were firing. Every corner.' In another part of town, a Sikh family spoke of the suffering their community faced as the lashkar advanced—of male relatives killed and female relatives abducted. Two elderly Muslim residents, one at the time openly sympathetic to the invaders, recalled how their houses and businesses had been looted by members of the lashkar. Other townspeople also spoke of the sense of shock that an armed force which had proclaimed that it was liberating Kashmiri Muslims from their Hindu maharaja had resorted to ransacking Muslim homes.

Further afield, on the English south coast, I met Frank Leeson, a military veteran of the North West Frontier, who had helped to evacuate the survivors at the mission. He spoke of the excitement with which the armed tribesmen descended on the Kashmir Valley and shared with me his photographic archive, including a magnificent portrait of members of the lashkar. On the coast of Maine in the United States, I met the proud and indomitable Leela Thompson and her son Inder Cheema. Their family had sought sanctuary at St Joseph's. Both had telling memories of Baramulla and Srinagar at the time of the attack. And eventually I found the voice that I had imagined would elude me. Khan Shah Afridi, almost blind, paralysed in both legs, and claiming an age of over a hundred, recounted how he had fought in Baramulla as part of the lashkar. He spoke in Pashto about how the prompting of a highly regarded Muslim cleric in the Frontier had impelled him to go on jihad, or holy war, in Kashmir. 'We shot whoever we saw in Baramulla. We did not know how many we killed,' he reminisced, lying on a cot outside his mud-brick





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village home in northern Pakistan. He had some qualms about the extent of the violence, but none about the justice of the cause.

There was another aspect to the attack on the mission that caught my attention and fuelled my determination to unravel the story of what happened there and why. The raid occurred not in the year, or the month or the week that the Kashmir crisis first blew up, but on the very day that it all started. The day the Baramulla convent and hospital was sacked—27 October 1947—was also the day that Lord Mountbatten, the first Governor General of independent India, accepted Maharaja Hari Singh's accession of his princely state to India. At first light on that Monday morning, troops of India's Sikh Regiment began an airlift in Dakota planes from Palam airbase outside Delhi to the rudimentary landing strip at Srinagar. It was a slow process. Each plane could take fewer than twenty soldiers, and just 500 pounds of equipment.<sup>4</sup> By dusk, about 300 Indian troops had landed in the Kashmir Valley. They were the first Indian troops in Kashmir. India has had a military presence there ever since, at times perhaps 1,000-fold the initial contingent.

Within hours of landing, the advance guard of the Sikh Regiment reached the outskirts of Baramulla, thirty-five miles up the road from Srinagar. They could hear the reverberations of the violence, but had insufficient numbers to advance. They didn't then know that the acting commandant of their regimental centre, Colonel Dykes, was among the victims. The following morning, the troops fought their first encounter with the tribal invaders from Pakistan. India fired its first shots in the battle for Kashmir.

At hand to hear those shots was a war reporter for a British newspaper. Sydney Smith of the *Daily Express* was holidaying with his wife on a houseboat in Srinagar when the invasion started. He begged a lift to the front line and filed the first eyewitness account of the lashkar's advance into Kashmir. A few days later, he accompanied India's newly landed commanding officer towards Baramulla. The Indian officer was shot dead by the tribesmen. Smith was captured. He was lucky to survive, and even luckier to be consigned by his captors to the hospital ward at the Baramulla mission. When he eventually reached safety, he filed a breathless account of the fighting in Kashmir, the attack on the mission, and the suffering endured by those trapped there.<sup>5</sup> The *Daily Express* proclaimed the scoop to be 'the year's most exciting story'. Under the banner headline 'Ten Days of Terror', Smith recounted how 'ravaging hordes of Pathan tribesmen' had looted and killed European nuns and their patients, and then confined the survivors—'a quivering heap of screaming children



and petrified women’—in the hospital’s baby ward. It bore echoes of the captivity stories from the Afghan wars of the previous century: wild, bearded natives impelled by Islam and tribal honour to launch a cruel attack on brave and stoical Europeans. This certainly was the aspect of Smith’s reporting that was seized upon by the best-selling writer H.E. Bates for his novel *The Scarlet Sword*, which borrowed from news cuttings to construct a fictional account of the attack on the Baramulla mission.

There were three other foreign correspondents in Kashmir when the conflict erupted—two of them conducting a surreptitious romance, again on a houseboat on Dal lake. Their reports and private papers provide another contemporary reference point for the account of a crisis which has mainly been told through the later, often less reliable, memoirs of the key political players. The Indian press corps also descended on Srinagar as soon as they could persuade the Indian army to give them space on the transport planes. Their graphic reports on the fighting around Srinagar, of the mood in the embattled Kashmir capital and of the devastation discovered in Baramulla are valuable source material.

As a news correspondent myself, I have come to meet many people in Kashmir from different walks of life. Among them has been Father Jim Borst, a Dutch-born, Cambridge-educated missionary who has lived most of his adult life in Kashmir. I’ve often seen him striding through the streets of Srinagar, a tall, distinguished man with a shock of grey hair, habitually wearing a full-length white priest’s robe with a simple brown Kashmiri shawl and open sandals. Father Borst is a Mill Hill missionary, a member of a Catholic religious order that seeks to bring the gospel to some of the least accessible parts of the world. He once taught at St Joseph’s school in Baramulla and at the time of my visits he was still the confessor to the nuns in the convent. ‘I’ve come to know the sisters very closely,’ Father Borst told me in the priests’ house alongside the Holy Family Catholic church in Srinagar. ‘I know the story of what happened there in October 1947 in great detail. It’s become part of my own history.’ He made available to me the local church’s modest but enlightening cache of documents relating to the attack and its aftermath. More than that, he pointed me in the direction of the order’s well-kept archive at its Mill Hill headquarters on the northern outskirts of London.

Among their holdings is an old desk diary from the early 1950s, printed in the city of Lahore in Pakistan. In it, a Mill Hill missionary, Father George Shanks, set down by hand his personal account of the attack on the mission. Father Shanks had been the senior priest at Baramulla, and was described by the *Daily Express*’s Sydney Smith as the ‘hero’ of



the affair. 'He became our leader and comforter as we were harassed day and night by tribesmen and dive-bombed and cannon-shelled by Tempests and Spitfires of the Indian Air Force. I saw him hiding Sikh and Hindu girls, defying loot-mad Pathans to carry out their threats to take all women off to the bazaar.'<sup>6</sup> Father Shanks's diary has never been published, nor cited in any account of the Kashmir crisis. I can't be sure whether anyone apart from Father Shanks had ever read it before I chanced upon the document in the bowels of Mill Hill. In the course of one hundred or so pages, tantalizingly incomplete, the missionary set down the most detailed account of the most dramatic event in the eruption of the Kashmir crisis.

Father Shanks described the mood in Baramulla as word spread of the tribal army's approach. Most non-Muslims fled. Many local Muslims looked upon the invaders as delivering them from their unpopular maharaja. He recorded the scene as the ragtag army entered the town: 'dirty, bloodstained, ill-kempt, with ragged beards + hair; some carrying a blanket, most completely unequipped; . . . with rifles of Frontier make, double barrellled shotguns, revolvers, daggers, swords, axes + here + there a Sten gun—jostling one another, shouting, cursing + brawling, they came on in a never-ending stream.'<sup>7</sup> In spite of its disorganisation and indiscipline, the lashkar advanced deep into the Kashmir Valley, scattered the maharaja's forces, and initially managed to hold its own against Indian troops. The tribesmen reached as far as the outskirts of Srinagar and the perimeter of the Valley's only airstrip. But when the military advantage turned, the invaders pulled out of Kashmir with a haste that astounded both their Indian adversaries and their Pakistani sponsors.

After my first encounter with Sister Emilia, I twice went back to visit her at St Joseph's convent. Both times, I again heard her story of the tribesmen's raid, told with the same engaging smile and air of humility. I have walked around the grounds, gentle and still in spite of the main road that skirts the compound. On the far side of the convent lies a small, unkempt orchard, where those two most graceful of Kashmir's birds, bulbuls and hoopoes, forage and fan themselves in the dappled mountain sun. It's the site of a tiny cemetery. Just five graves, the white paint on the gravestones peeling, and the shingle tangled in weeds. Beyond, the hills rise sharply, with fir trees silhouetted slightly menacingly against the mountain mist. It was down those hills that the raiders made their way into the mission. The graves are those of their victims.

On the other side of the compound, just beyond the kitchen garden that was once Sister Emilia's personal fiefdom, is the nuns' graveyard. This is where, in January 2004, Emilia Montavani was interred. She lies



buried next to her friend Mother Teresalina, the young Spanish assistant to the mother superior, who was killed in the raiders' attack. For almost sixty years of her life, Sister Emilia had witnessed the cost of the failure to resolve the dispute which she had seen erupting around her. In recent years, Baramulla district has been regarded as a stronghold of armed separatism. The town has suffered heavier casualties, and endured much more prolonged trauma, than anything encountered during the brief but brutal visitation of the tribal lashkar. The nature of the conflict has changed. But at its root is the same faultline that first opened up as the tribesmen from the Frontier scaled the walls of the mission back in October 1947. One of the nuns told me that prayers are said every day at St Joseph's for peace in Kashmir. It was a priority in their prayer. 'But there's a long way to go to attain real peace,' she added. 'That's what I feel.'

