Creating a counter-memory

A Desolation Called Peace: Voices from Kashmir
Edited by Ather Zia and Javaid Iqbal Bhat
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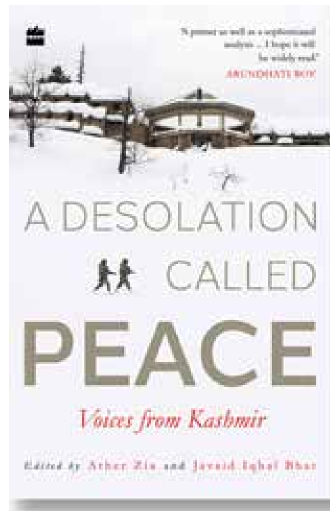
Some years have become shorthand for inflexion points in modern Kashmir's tortured history: 1931, the popular uprising in the Valley against the Dogra dynasty; 1947, the accession crisis and resulting from it the advent of two rival armed forces; 1953, the Indian government's dismissal and arrest of Sheikh Abdullah, Kashmir's prime minister; 1989, the eruption of the separatist insurgency. Now we have to add 2019 and the unilateral revoking of Jammu and Kashmir's special status in the Indian constitution.

A Desolation Called Peace was in print by the time Article 370 became – in the inelegant word of Indian officialdom – "inoperative". It makes only passing mention of Kashmir's constitutional status. But the Indian government's action – in both concept and execution so dismissive of the people of the Kashmir Valley – makes it peculiarly timely. The provisions of Article 370 have been so diluted over the decades that its importance had become largely symbolic. Yet it remained a profoundly important symbol in both Delhi and Srinagar: in the eyes of the Hindu nationalist Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP) and its parent organisation, Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), it was an unacceptable privilege arising from Muslim religious identity, while for Valley Kashmiris it was seen as the only tangible expression of an autonomy to which so many aspire. The manner of its revoking has added insult to injury, with a crackdown, switch off, lockdown and mass arrests without recent parallel. Delhi has repeatedly interfered, rigged and detained, but never before have three former chief ministers of Jammu and Kashmir – all at one time or another allies or partners of the BJP – been placed under arrest at the same time.

The 12 contributions to this volume all weave in personal experience and family history with the moulding of political attitudes and the changing expression of Kashmiri identity. They vary hugely in style and quality but all offer an insight into the inferno into which the Kashmir Valley has fallen, the disillusion with conventional politics and the despair at the lack of agency Kashmiris exercise in their homeland. They stretch in scope from the fall of Sheikh Abdullah's 'Naya Kashmir' project with his overthrow for questioning the finality of Kashmir's accession to India to the early stages of the militancy and descriptions of the impulses which propelled so many young Kashmiris to the close-to-suicidal act of picking up the gun. Both the editors, Ather Zia and Javaid Iqbal Bhat, are academics, but the articles are not academic in tone and while they pre-suppose a basic familiarity with the Kashmir conflict they are accessible — even enjoyable, in spite of the often grim subject matter. Their aim is to compile "an ethnographic memory" and fill in one of the biggest blanks in how the Kashmir crisis is perceived: what happened between the early 1950s and late 1980s to make Kashmiris so angry and despairing?

The most substantial piece – in every way – is Mohamad Junaid's discussion of the Kashmiri novelist and short story writer, Akhtar Mohiuddin. This is the least autobiographical of the chapters but it too has a personal and family dimension. Junaid explains how while his mother embraced the Kashmiri language and its tradition of short story writing, his father was moulded by leftism. She held that "the lack of faith in communism – the idea of faith itself – was the ultimate source of its weakness" while he would "mumble his scorn for the 'spiritless spirituality' of Sufi poetry". Mohiuddin, in his life and writing, bridges this gap, being at first aligned with the influential progressive school of Kashmiri writing and ending up a champion above all of the mother tongue. As a young man, he was excited by the radicalism within Kashmiri nationalism:

> Poverty taught me rebellion against everything, against parents, against society, and against the Maharaja's autocratic rule (Mohiuddin told his biographer) I was thinking something new, something I could devote my life to. To find this 'new', I firmly supported the Naya Kashmir programme. But it just remained a book, food for the bookworms ... It was conspiracy; the whole struggle was lost, and the passion around Naya Kashmir was killed.



That passion was finally extinguished when Khrushchev, the Soviet leader, visited Srinagar in 1955 and declared that it was the "imperialist forces" that wanted to separate Kashmir from India and that the Soviet Union would join India in facing up to those forces. For Mohiuddin and other Left progressive writers in the Valley, Junaid argues, that threat terminated "any further possibility of communist activism in Kashmir".

Mohiuddin turned to the development of the Kashmiri language, the creation of a Kashmiri dictionary and attempts to achieve consensus on the script. He was still around when the insurgency broke over the Valley. Junaid heard from his mother a story about the writer.

One day, in the early 1990s, when Kashmir was simmering in rebellion against the Indian state, a paramilitary soldier is said to have peered over the wall into Akhtar Mohiuddin's compound in Lal Bazaar, Srinagar, and impudently asked the old writer if there was an *aatankwadi* (terrorist) hiding inside. Mohiuddin, who was lying on the grass and soaking in the spring sun, stood up and replied sardonically, "I am the only *aatankwadi* here, and I fight with my pen."

Whether literal truth or parable, you get the point.

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Among other contributors, Mirza Waheed is acknowledged as the outstanding among a talented group of contemporary Kashmiri novelists whose work is infused by a fury at the indignities Kashmiris suffer. He relates a memory from his teenage years in Srinagar which continues to haunt him and from which he has drawn in his fiction.

> I was sixteen at the time of what I sometimes remember as the almond crackdown (I remember signalling my vain defiance by leaning against an almond trunk and reading a book I had carried with me). As we were walking in file, my eyes suddenly fell on some bodies lying on the ground, like discarded logs of wood. One of them was still alive and I think he asked for water. It is possible I may have added, imagined this last bit over the years but equally his lips may have uttered the words. But I could not stop. How do we arrive at a situation when we see corpses a few feet away but we cannot do anything about it?

Abdul Qadeer Dar writes of disillusionment with the manner in which the electoral support for the Muslim United Front in 1987 was erased from the record, his crossing of the Line of Control, activity as a militant commander in the Valley and suffering in its torture chambers. He now helps to run an organisation which supports victims of torture.

Mona Bhan, from a Pandit family, powerfully recounts her grandfather's jailing in 1953 for disputing Kashmir's accession to India and her mother's rejection of attempts to recruit her as an informer. The human rights activist Khurram Parvez tells of how his grandfather was killed by Indian troops in the notorious Gaw Kadal massacre of January 1990; how in 2004 his friend and colleague Aasia Jeelani died and he lost a leg in a targeted attack on the vehicle in which they were travelling; and how, quite by chance, he was in the Lidder Valley in July 1995 when armed men from Harkat-ul-Ansar kidnapped (and later killed) a group of backpacking foreign tourists. It is from the assembly of these episodes and memories that a contemporary Kashmiri narrative of a homeland and its fall from grace has been woven.

The editors have assembled accounts from women and men, and across generations and communities, to fulfil their principal goal, that the anthology "contributes to destabilizing the official and nationalistic histories" of both India and Pakistan. "These native voices create a much-needed counter-memory", they assert, "recorded by people who have lived the years, and are part of the everyday grassroots resistance as it exists on the ground". The difficulty with such an explicitly political purpose is that the range of voices is limited. The fairly uniform anti-India viewpoint reflected in these writings may well represent the outlook of most Valley Kashmiris — but it is not the only Kashmiri perspective. There is no one here reflecting the mainstream Kashmiri Pandit narrative — and that would have been a useful point of contrast. And not all those who have an allegiance to the two main Kashmiri political parties, National Conference and People's Democratic Party, are corrupt or craven: the argument that India's hold on Kashmir is not going to weaken, so Kashmiris might as well make the best of it, is at least worth hearing, even if the events of 5 August 2019 make it much more difficult to sustain.

Outweighing these shortcomings is the book's success in exploring the links between the personal and political, and giving a range of first-hand accounts of what it's been like to be a Kashmiri. Peace has proved so elusive in the Valley — not meaning simply the absence of conflict, but the peace which comes with governance by consent and the feeling that everyone has a stake in the place. And peace is not getting any nearer. Prime Minister Narendra Modi's stated determination, regardless of what Kashmiris want, to forge what he has called a 'Naya Kashmir' – you wonder if he and his advisors are aware of the history and resonance of this term – makes the broadcasting of Kashmiri voices and opinion so much more essential. ■