

What I heard about Kashmir

Until My Freedom Has Come:
The New Intifada in Kashmir

Edited by Sanjay Kak

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On 11 June 2010, a 17-year-old boy named Tufail Ahmad Matoo was killed in downtown Srinagar. I heard that he was returning home from his tuition class when he was hit on the head by a tear-gas shell. His death resulted in an explosion of protest.

I heard that the next day hundreds of young men carried Tufail's body to the martyrs' graveyard at Eidgah. The coffin passed through streets where pitched battles were fought with the police and paramilitary forces shooting tear-gas shells and firing guns in the air.

I heard that on 18 July 2010, 36 days after Tufail's killing, the Jammu and Kashmir Police registered a First Information Report (FIR) pertaining to his death.

Earlier, on 7 July 2010, the Indian government handed control of Srinagar to the Army for the first time in 20 years. The Army imposed a curfew but I heard that the killings continued, bringing the number of civilian deaths for June and July to 22. The death-toll for the entire summer was 112.

I heard that one of the 112 civilians killed was a young woman named Fancy Jan who was shot as she was reaching for the curtain to keep the tear-gas from entering her house. Fatally struck, her only words were, *Mummy, mae-ae aav heartas fire*. Mummy, the fire is at my heart.

Fancy Jan was killed in her home. In Machil, in north Kashmir, however, I heard that three men were called into the forest before being shot in cold blood by soldiers. The bodies were buried and it was announced that the men were militants killed in an encounter.

A government inquiry revealed the facts about what had happened in the forests of Machil. Such findings by the government commissions of inquiry are rare. Remember the two young women raped and murdered in Shopian? I heard that the CBI found out that it was a case of death by drowning in a stream with less than a foot of water.

I heard that throughout the summer, the protesters on the streets were pelting stones. The Army adopted the policy of a bullet-for-a-stone. Surgeons at the Shri Maharaja Hari Singh Hospital told the BBC that "most of the bullet injuries are in the abdominal area, chest, eyes and neck".

"After over forty 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..." I heard that this was the Facebook status update of a Kashmiri lawyer.

On Facebook, I heard 21-year-old MC Kash, Kashmir's first rapper, singing "I Protest, Against The Things You Done! / I Protest, Fo' A Mother Who Lost Her Son!...I Protest, I Will Throw Stones An' Neva Run! / I Protest, Until My Freedom Has Come!"

I heard that there was a three-minute video on Facebook and YouTube showing four young Kashmiri men walking across a field. The men were naked. They were walking with their clothes in their hands, forced to show their privates to anyone watching the parade. The soldiers were leading them, taunting them; they were speaking in Hindi. *Chal, behanchod, chal*. Walk, sister-fucker, walk. *Kapda hatao, baath upar kar*. Hold up the clothes, Raise your hands.

I heard that another Facebook status update was "The routine: waking up, morning chores, breakfast, out on the streets to hurl stones and abuse at the visible symbols of occupation,

no lunch, more stones, more abuses, getting chased, hurt, tear-gassed, shot... The next morning, the same routine."

I heard that the Internet is place where the protesters have found a way to bring their message to the world. Ordinary journalists find it difficult to do their work when a soldier takes your curfew pass, tears it up in front of you, and asks, "Where is your bloody curfew pass now?"

Policemen fired on journalists even after they had shown their press passes. The pressmen took cover in paddy fields, surprised that the bullets missed them. I heard that one journalist's wife asked him to quit and raise chickens instead.

I heard that the Indian government believes there are only around 500 armed militants in Kashmir. Why are well over 6,00,000 army, police and paramilitary personnel deployed in Kashmir?

I heard that there was good news in Kashmir. Out of more than 1,600 small and big bunkers (mud and cement, brick and sand, trench and pillbox types—all unanimously ugly) sixteen bunkers were to be removed

with immediate effect.

I heard that the bunker is forever. The bunkers have grown bigger and uglier, with their loops of concertina, fences, gaudy paint and slits, demonstrating that the state does not tire.

Then I heard that the people do not tire either.

I heard that the boatmen in Dal Lake told intrepid journalists – clad in bullet-proof vests – that even the usually calm carp fish were mutinous during the summer of 2010 and were nibbling away at their oars of late.

The arrival of a beautiful female officer, in charge of a paramilitary camp, posed a problem for a group of five stone pelters. I heard that they wrote her a letter stating that they would stop throwing stones if she accepted one of them as her life-partner. They would no longer throw stones, the letter said, but they still would continue to demand azadi.

Who were the stone-pelters? I heard that the names of the dead reveal that it was a proletarian protest. Those killed belonged to the working class, the lower middle class in cities and towns, and the peasantry in the villages. The urban educated were the fence-sitters who said "I Protest" on Facebook and in drawing rooms or in television studios.

I heard that in Kashmir the Indian state has for long cultivated a class of collaborators, a diverse and pliant native elite.

A more humble collaborator is Atta Mohammed, a farmer in Bimyar village. He has buried the nameless dead brought to him by the security forces. I heard that about 12 years ago the police began bringing to him bodies to be buried in a small empty field and they stopped only when there was no more room.

I heard that a third-grader wouldn't go back to school for two years after he watched gunmen break into his classroom, tie up his teacher and shoot him.

I heard that an Indian all-party delegation went to Kashmir. Ordinary people expressed their frustration



that India insists Kashmir is a part of India but suspects Kashmiris of being Pakistani agents and uses that suspicion as justification for its security tactics.

I heard that a Kashmiri asked the delegation, "Why don't you feel our pain if we are a part of your body?"

I heard a man complain that "our occupiers tell us to send our children to schools, where they could learn how Bhagat Singh and Subhash Chandra Bose fought for India's freedom, but they don't want our children to learn about their own long overdue freedoms..."

In a free Kashmir, I heard that the people will happily accept the presence of those whose safety is threatened in their own countries of origin for speaking out for justice and truth. "Who wouldn't offer with gratitude Arundhati Roy a Kashmiri citizenship?"

Before the conflict, doctors at the psychiatric hospital in Srinagar saw 1,700 patients a year; now they see 100,000. A newly opened psychiatric ward in a nearby hospital sees another 40,000.

I heard that one-third of Kashmiris questioned in a 2006 Doctors Without Borders survey said they had thought of killing themselves in the previous month.

The Defence Minister AK Antony told the Rajya Sabha that 170 armed force personnel had committed suicide in the preceding 19 months.

Children, inured to the violence, have become angry, aggressive and helpless. They don't fear death. They pick up stones, ignoring a crackdown by security forces.

I heard that a commentator in Delhi mused on Twitter: "NOT condoning death: but WHY wd parents allow 11yr olds to protest."

A senior police officer told the press in Srinagar that of the 1,000 young men they had detained, 72 per cent were social misfits. Waving a picture of a protester, he said, "They do such acts of heroism only under the influence of drugs."

I heard that in Kashmir the tortured man returns home one day to tell the tale. The pallbearer remembers when the slain boy's body fell on the street. The hands of the doctor who struggled to stitch the torn limb bear witness.

They have been remembering for a while, and we don't make it easy for them to forget. I heard that even when they don't know they are remembering, they remember.

This essay is inspired by Eliot Weinberger's eye-opening report on news from the US occupation in Iraq. Weinberger's report, "What I Heard About Iraq," was published in the London Review of Books. The principal inspiration for the present piece, however, comes from the reports collected in Until My Freedom Has Come. Each snippet above draws directly from the book. The anthology's force as well as range is best represented through such a form of nearly direct quotation. The voices brought together in Until My Freedom Has Come are so strong and yet so often absent from the mainstream that their collective publication must be regarded not only as a corrective but also a celebration. A veritable jashn-e-azadi.

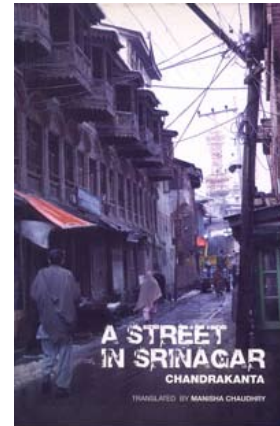
Hari Krishan Kaul's short story 'Patte Laraan Parbat' (1972) revolves around a haunting image of the Parbat. Hari Parbat, the hill that overlooks Downtown Srinagar, appears to the narrator, sitting in the backseat of a tonga, to be chasing him. The farther the Parbat recedes into the distance, the more intensely is the narrator drawn towards the apparition. The spectres of this tonga trip haunt Kaul's exiles from Downtown Srinagar. The hills come after you, close in and overwhelm with an *unheimlichkeit* whose foreignness only conserves the desire to return home: in the words of Lal Ded, "*zuv chum bramaan gare gachaba*" (My soul longs to return home.). The strange fate of novels about Srinagar is that they too are in exile from Srinagar. The novels on Srinagar, it seems, can only be written from a distance. Chandrakanta poses this as a question in her own novel about Srinagar, *A Street in Srinagar*: "Does the face of reality show up only through distance? Is that how its meanings stand revealed?"

A Street in Srinagar was originally published in Hindi as *Ailan Gali Zinda Hai*. Chandrakanta's *Ailan Gali* is like Kaul's *Parbat*: neither tradition nor history, neither culture nor memory, but that which is at once necessary and impossible to reach. Much like Kaul's short stories, Srinagar is in Chandrakanta's novel a city of *ailans* (decisions) sovereign in their return to what Rattan Lal Shant called "*raavmit maaniy*" (lost meanings). Chandrakanta's novel is about the singularities of Downtown Srinagar which are never lost in the community. This novel should be read with other such novels about Downtown Srinagar like Akhtar Mohiudeen's *Jahanamuk Panun Panun Naar* (To each according to his own hell). It is difficult to think of any other Kashmiri novelist (except perhaps Akhtar Mohiuddin) who dared to write about a city whose every detail escapes into myth, every excess into absence, as Chandrakanta does?

The Srinagar of Chandrakanta is a city in which you are already in exile, a city opaque to history, a city where hope is already despair and despair already rage. This is a city where the most impossible – becoming Nothing – is no longer inaccessible. The city's losses shelter it from the erosions of its new ambitions and raptures. The everyday in the city guards its secrets. As Chandrakanta writes: "There was nothing new that happened here...and even if it did, a small circle appeared over the surface of the routine but the everyday took over yet again." As a novel about Srinagar, Chandrakanta's *Ailan Gali Zinda Hai* could easily have been about the city Asoka built, or the hopes the Buddhists or the Persian Sufis carried over to Srinagar, it could have been about the *kavyas* and *masnavis*, Abhinavaguptas and Ghani Kashmiris, the *shers* and the *bakras*, the JKLFs and the Hizb-ul-Mujahideens. But instead, it is about a street — one street in Srinagar. It is in the end about Srinagar as place, about the One, the place of solidarity with a nameless wound.

Chandrakanta makes clear right at the beginning of the novel, Srinagar's

The city of the impossible



A Street in Srinagar

By Chandrakanta

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ABIR BAZAZ

Downtown is not merely about "houses propped against each other," or any other such presence, but it is a play of visible darkness against invisible light.

Chandrakanta's street *Ailan Gali*, a street of decision, is a dark gali. The darkness spreads from the reeds in the Dal Lake to the markets in the

to the Kashmir's South". (I can recall only Akhtar Mohiudeen connect these dots between Srinagar, Asoka and nuclear India). The city makes its last stand against the new imaginings of Empire even as young romantic Marxists twist their ankles in *Ailan Gali* and lose their way. The young Avtara learns from Rupa Di the stories

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city and settles over the street like a bereavement. Only old Master Dayaram Ji makes a connection between the darkness of the gali, death and time. The world of this street is revealed to us through the eyes of the young Avtara. We witness Anwar Bhai of *Ailan Gali* strike a deal with the thieves of the old city and call it an *ailan*, a decision, and announce to the gali: "leave all your anxiety and fear behind." There is also the devout Sansarchand and the philosophical Master Ji. There is Ratni, the rebel, and Arundhati, the devoted wife. There is Rupa Di, the scholar, and Shubhi, the refugee. The gossip here moves seamlessly between the accidents of the gali and the events of the world. Repartee is a fine art here as is the resistance to what Akhtar Mohiuddin used to call "the Empires

of Queen Didda, Abhinavagupta, Somdev and Habba Khatoon—but he leaves the Valley to first study at the Benaras Hindu University and then work in Bombay. As Rupa Di teaches him: "this gali is not for the likes of you and me." We see *Ailan Gali* with Avtara from a distance.

Politics is dear to Chandrakanta's *Ailan Gali* and discussions about politics usually take place at Master Ji's house. The conversation often turns to "pilbiscide" (plebiscite) for Kashmir. Everyone has a theory about "pilbiscide": some defend the Maharaja, others stretch the paradox of Sheikh Abdullah to a debate about Vishnu and his avatars. Someone blames the speech of a certain Abdul Qadeer in 1931, and another remembers a murder in Shopian—but in the end everything can and