
Blooming Orchards in a Burning Valley: Kashmiri Identity Politics

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Abstract:

In contemporary times, the state of Jammu and Kashmir draws news headlines very frequently for insurgency related violence and civil unrest. This has been the trend for the past two decades before which the valley was seen as a heaven on earth, owing to its natural beauty. These two perspectives have been the official narratives of the land, recorded in public consciousness via mass media and 'official' statistics. This paper will attempt to demolish this popular (and often media generated) myth of a state perpetually burning, and explore an alternative version of identity politics and progress in the valley, in the words of those who live this narrative. This paper does not attempt to speak for the Kashmiri but in fact explores an evolution of a Kashmiri identity in a globalised, multicultural world, even as it passionately acknowledges and celebrates local traditions of syncretism that make it possible to believe "sustainable development" is not an oxymoron but a translatable reality. The archiving of this alternative history will challenge the obsession with reducing lived experience to statistical figures and stereotypical images.

Key words: Identity politics, Kashmir, Media-myth, Syncretism.

Bul bul wanaan chu poshan
Gulshan watan chu soni
Soni watan chu gulshan
Gulshan watan chu soni
(Mehjoor -Gulshan watan chu soni)

Bulbul nay yeun pukara
Gulshan watan hamara
Hain kitna pyara pyara
Gulshan watan hamara
[translated into Urdu by Sultan ul haq Shaheedii]

The bulbul sings to the flowers:
‘Why are you hiding thus?
Come down from the woods to the garden.’
A garden is our land!
[Translated by Trilokinath Raina -A Garden Is Our Land]

Just as Edward Said observes “Orient is not the Orient as it is, but the Orient as it has been Orientalized”(Said 483) we have the image of Kashmir as it has been presented by media. In contemporary times, the state of Jammu and Kashmir draws news headlines very frequently for insurgency related violence and civil unrest. This has been the trend for the past two decades before which the valley was seen as a heaven on earth, owing to its natural beauty. These two perspectives have been the official narratives of the land, recorded in public consciousness via mass media and ‘official’ statistics. This paper will attempt to demolish this popular and often media generated myth of a state perpetually burning, and explore an alternative version of identity politics and progress in the valley. There is no doubt that Kashmir became a “disputed territory” only because of the selfish politicians who tried to divide the region on the basis of religion.¹ Who is a Kashmiri? Is it only a Muslim or someone else also? Edward mentions in his *Culture and Imperialism*: “Appeals to the past are among the

¹ See Subhamov Das’s Kashmir: Paradise Lost Understanding the Kashmir Conflict (<http://hinduism.about.com/od/history/a/Kashmir-Paradise-Lost.html>)

commonest strategies in the interpretations of the present” (Said 3). This paper by making “appeals to the past” communal harmony will be trying to offer “interpretations” for “the present” identity of the Kashmiri.

The constant political struggles and ensuing mayhem that seems to dominate the representation of Kashmir in mainstream media is partly true, but in most part a terribly exaggerated propaganda. Certain forces in our country stand to benefit from a state of continuous conflict that can justifiably sanction the existence of draconian laws like the AFSPA². This paper will not tell you how woeful it has become for a Kashmiri to live his/her daily life. Neither will it tell you that all is fair, and the foul if any, is a large conspiracy of mainstream India against the poor Kashmiri. Instead this paper will give you an idea of Kashmiri life from the perspective of lived experience of the villagers of Mutalhama.³ As neither a person from the city Srinagar nor a person from a small village like Mutalhama “is outside or beyond” Kashmiri territory “none of us is completely free from the struggle over [its] geography” (Said 6) so villagers could equally claim, like the city people to be the representative of Kashmir. If a Kashmiri is just one who talks in Kashmiri, it is then the villagers who seem to be more Kashmiri than the city people because the latter forbid their children to have any discourse or dialogue in Kashmiri (Lone 51). This paper does not aim at proving that any particular group or area can best represent Kashmir. It rather aims at highlighting that every Kashmiri is the part of Kashmir. Even out of territory Pandits who have migrated from the valley are also a part of Kashmir.

An average villager of Mutalhama grows up surrounded by the sights and sound of rural life, much like in most part of rural India. The political power struggle and the jingoism of fundamentalist separatist groups most certainly and other

² Even though Chief Minister Omer Abdullah has been asking for the removal of Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act it is still going on in the valley. (www.news Bharati.com/.../Omar-Abdullah.com)

³ Mutalhama is a village in Kulgam district of J&K

political parties in general do not voice the opinions of villagers from Mutalhama and its like. It is true that an average Kashmiri child has a lot of problems going to school like their counterparts in metropolitan centres. It is also true that they are not very well equipped to face the challenges of the globalised world. In fact, surprising as it may sound, such adversity do not lead them either to pelting stones or to getting addicted to drugs as it is popularly touted in some mainstream “studies”⁴ conducted with vested interest. These are children who are happy and have been so over generations, without ever being influenced by the rhetoric of an economy driven by consumerism. Their happiness is not a slave to their purchasing power. While a child in the metros would be forced to score extremely high marks and be drilled into a fierce competitive structure that mimics the individualistic spirit, the children in the valley are encouraged to build their relationships with their kin, contemporary and cohorts. This friendship strongly contrasts the goal oriented principle most metropolitan children are expected to follow. Friendships bloom in the valley as the children learn how to graft plants⁵, and attain a significant mastery over the various aspects that govern rural life. While the ambitious child of the metro sacrifices time for games and friendship to school and then extended tuitions after school, the children of the valley literally grow up in the company of each other, building the foundation of a social mode of life that lasts them entire lifetimes.

The net result of this difference in upbringing manifests itself when the children grow up into adults. The metropolitan, learned citizen goes to the best college, acquires the best jobs, gets married, has children and suddenly hits what is called “the

⁴ Ishfaq-ul-Hassan’s article, “Stone-pelting in Kashmir was ‘joint’ exercise” argues that that drug addiction makes children in Kashmir to indulge in stone pelting.

⁵ National Horticulture Board Ministry of Agriculture, Government of India has approved 43 apple nurseries from J&K, out of which 18 nurseries are from village Mutalhama (see www.nhb.gov.in/nursery/report/nurseryreport/...)

mid life crisis". Their lives are rich materially. They have houses and cars to themselves. They can purchase all consumer goods available and then they find themselves pushing their children through the same grind they have been through. The villager from the valley has his farm, his orchards and his family to take care of, a task he conducts with his extended family and the entire community by his side.

This paper is not interested in trying to measure whether the metropolitan way of life is better than the village life. Instead, it is trying to underscore the fact that the definition of happiness is subjective enough to allow for the villager to be happy with what he has, and that does not necessarily make him impoverished materially and definitely not spiritually. It is an undeniable fact that material security cannot be ignored but what is of greater interest in the context of this paper, is the fact that there is life beyond that too. The state of mind that informs the tenets of happiness of the people of the valley stems from a philosophy that is a true cultural heritage- Kashmiri one that has been and continues to inspire millions with the values of syncretism and humanism.

The poet philosophers of Kashmir have been the bearer of this unique philosophy. Most noted among them are Lal Ded and Nand Rishi. Ostensibly the latter was a Muslim saint and Lalla is usually studied in contemporary university syllabi alongside the Bhakti poets Kabir and Mira Bai. The advent of Adi Shankaracharya in the valley during the 9th Century brought with it the tenets of Shaivism or the cult of the Hindu god Lord Shiva to a hitherto primarily Buddhist state since the rule of Ashoka. By the 14th Century the Shaivite tradition had percolated to the core of the Kashmiri culture. The influence of the Persian language due to the power of the Mughals in Delhi brought about a linguistic conflict with the prevalent Sanskrit and Prakrit of the valley. It is here that the reach of poets like Lalla came into play. Being unable to face the continuous physical and psychological torture meted out by her mother-in-

law Lalla had left home. Her wanderings in the wild brought her in touch with the ideals of Shaivism.

Legend has it that Lalla had nursed Nund Rishi when the latter as an infant, had stopped suckling from his mother. In so doing a strange bond was forged between the two. Hagiographers of Nund Rishi view this even as a sort of divine intervention that was to transform this infant into a saint figure. The precociousness of the child was seen as a marker of this divine play. Having lived his life away from material pursuits of livelihood despite being married, Nund Rishi was said to have left home to go out and live in the forests and in caves. There he agonized over existential angst and finally decided to leave his cave and engage directly with the people of the world. His proclamation about the existence of one absolute God, resonated with the monotheistic tenets of Islam, but he had Hindu followers as well. Lalla's Shaivite influence continued to be present in his preaching.

The most important part about all of this is the fact that after the 14th century, references of Lalla and Nund Rishi almost disappeared from the mainstream. It was only in the 16th century that she was revived by scholars and it is these hagiographic works that we can now access today. The illiterate and unlettered people of Kashmir managed to not only remember but also passed on the philosophy of these saints from one generation to the next through oral transmission during annual Urs and in the fields of agriculture through songs during hard labour. Hindus and Muslims alike partook in this process of transmission and their life was and continues to be informed by the syncretism of their philosophy. The evolution of the Kashmiri language as we know it today has deeply been affected by this oral transmission and the process remains witness to the socio-political upheavals through the ages that gave primacy to Sanskrit, Prakrit and Persian from time to time. This is proof of the fact that language itself is not

communal and could not have been developed in the presence of strong communalistic powers in the Kashmiri society.

It is true that the Kashmiri Pandits had to flee their homes during the insurgency of the 1990s but it is also true that now many of them are returning. “*Milchaar*” or “the peaceful coexistence and cultural harmony” between Kashmiri pundits and Kashmiri Muslims is coming back (Hamid 1). The neighbor in the Kashmiri tongue is known as a Hamsaya or one’s soul-shadow but still we have terms like “terrorists’ as gifts of media to the people of Kashmir. Kashmiri and a Terrorist are synonymous terms in India.” Such media-generated view of Kashmir has affected its tourism industry very badly. “But Kashmiris are far from being terrorists” and this is what has given rise to such questions as “how safe is Kashmir for a tourist?”⁶ There was once a time, before the green revolution and even after it when the poor peasants of the valley had little access to employment or upward social mobility. With the introduction of revenue and agricultural reforms in the state a huge number of people benefit from the boom in the agro based industries and in the field of horticulture. J&K State is well known for its horticulture both in India and in abroad. The state offers good scope for cultivation of horticulture crops, covering a variety of temperate fruits like apple, pear, peach, plum, apricot, almond, cherry and sub tropical fruits like mango, litchi etc. “There are around 6 lakh families comprising of about 30 lakh people which are directly or indirectly associated with Horticulture”(Horticulture 2). Today when this blooming got affected by newer projects like railway in valley, district Kulgam, particularly village Mutalhama is still producing apple nurseries to such an extent that NHB, this year (2014) has selected 31 nurseries from district Kulgam alone out of the total 43 selected nurseries.⁷

⁶ kashmir.wordpress.com/2006/05/01/80

⁷ National Horticulture Board, Ministry of Agriculture, Government of India, Find a Star Nursery (www.nhb.gov.in/nursery/report/nurseryreport.aspx)

Thus Mutalhama, an unknown village by getting a share of 18 selected apple nurseries seems to play an important role in the blooming orchards of the valley. They by doing so are practicing a saying of Sheikh-ul-Alam: *Ann Posh Teleh Yeleh Wan Posh* (i.e. food lasts as long as forests last)⁸

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⁸ Dr. Muhammad Aslam mentions it in his article “Conserve Nature, Preserve Future and give earth a chance” in Greater Kashhmir on 5th June 2006.

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