

Seduction of the old City of Srinagar: An Enquiry into Competing Narratives of Belonging

Arshi Javaid

Abstract

This essay explores the various narratives of belonging vis-a-vis the city of Srinagar. As the city witnesses massive transformations politically and socially, the interplay between space and power acquires new forms. In this essay, I map this interplay through the elite narrative, the porno-tropic narrative, and the localist narrative to the city.

Keywords: Srinagar, heritage, smart city, localism, right to city

Introduction: The nature of the old city of Srinagar

The old city of Srinagar in the Kashmir valley is witnessing massive political and social transformations, as influenced by both the state and private sector. The shift threatens the fragile architecture, infrastructure, ownership, demographic composition, and the lived heritage of the city. Like other cities, the old city of Srinagar is not only a spatially bound geographical cluster but also a cluster of social and political networks.

Likewise, the old city of Srinagar is the product of historical interactions that have taken place over the years, from the significance of the Kashmiri Sultanate days (1339-1561), when the old city was formed, to the present-day. The history and location have made this a diverse place in the sense that it harbors plurality. One walks in the city and is confronted with signs of disparate living in terms of the size of the houses, the architectural styles, and the *mohallas* (quarters) developed on the basis of occupational similarity. In a conversation, noted journalist Zahid Ghulam Mohammad discussed the plurality in the city as exhibited by the presence of the native population and the migrant population, which formed over the years comprised largely of Sufis

and their disciples. In Mohammad's imagination, the old city of Srinagar has been a space under construction. Routine practices that are materially embedded follow a systematic daily rhythm. As any city's spaces are inherently political, the old city of Srinagar also needs to be approached in terms of its politicization and the political sphere that it forms. It has been a cradle for sub-nationalists and nationalists, and subsequently emerged as a battlefield for contested politics within these domains.¹

This essay has been developed over the course of many such interactions and interviews conducted. These took place in Srinagar and on digital platforms during the past few years. Additionally, the essay profits from my sustained engagement with the subject of Srinagar city online. Here I have been connecting my personal experiences with a wider understanding of the subject. The tenor of my essay is also informed by the collective response towards the city after the abrogation of Article 370 in Kashmir.²

In introducing these narratives, my primary objective is to discuss the intricate interplay between space and power, particularly, how power can manifest itself spatially. Each narrative of belonging carries with it distinct political objectives. The elite narrative perpetuates an interpretation that disregards any acknowledgment of socio-historical processes. In this view, the city becomes a stronghold of the elite, overshadowing and marginalizing those who contribute to its existence. On the other hand, there is a porno-tropic narrative that perpetuates a complex web of connections between the state, capital, market, and colonial influence. While appealing to neo-liberal and nationalist perspectives, these two viewpoints undermine the indigenous narratives of the city. Such narrative reproductions of the city not only pose a physical threat but systematically erase the presence of the local population.

¹ In the 1930s, the old city became a spatial center for resistance against the Dogra rule in Kashmir. Mirwaiz Manzil was erected as a hub for political leadership, and to meet with its representatives, people from far flung areas would visit the place. From the 1940's to the late 1970's, Srinagar's urban space was divided into two groups, Sher and Bakra (Lions and Goats). Lions followed the National Conference, which was comprised of sub-nationalists within the Indian state, while Bakras were the followers of Mirwaiz Mohammad Farooq, who also had control over the oldest mosque in Srinagar. Bakras held to the vision of Pakistan and associated with the larger Muslim world. The two groups would fight around local issues, and at times they became embroiled in physical fights. The Sher-Bakra divide ended in 1983 but was soon followed by militancy that erupted in 1989. The Jammu Kashmir Liberation Front (JKLF) pioneered the militant movement, and its spatial center was also Srinagar.

² Article 370 was added to India's Constitution in 1949 and allowed Jammu and Kashmir together to have their own constitution, a separate flag, and control over matters of foreign affairs, defense, and communications. The autonomy as allowed was eroded over the years. On August 5th, 2019, the Indian government suddenly revoked Article 370 of the constitution, stripping the state of its last remnants of autonomy.

In contrast to these narratives, there is a localist perspective; it dismantles the myth of the ideal smart city citizen who is emblematic of futuristic smart cities, while championing the right to the city. This alternative narrative challenges existing power structures and emphasizes the importance of preserving indigenous stories and the well-being of the local population.

Elite narrative to the city

The elite narrative to the old city can be traced back to the creation of surplus value, which eventually led to the formation of classes and to subsequent population movement outwards of the city. Rai (2004), Zutshi (2003) discuss the rise of trading families in Sheher-e-Khaas (the local name for the old city of Srinagar). These families had enormous influence on the politics and affairs of the city and have been instrumental in generating trade and commerce. Nonetheless, their social capital and privilege also had a capitalistic flair and became a central feature for the reproduction of business interests. Mohammad (2023) discussed the rise of “war wealthy,” popularly known as *jung khojas*, who made massive economic progress during the years around the world wars.

This geographical and social concentration of surplus wealth resulted in a class stratification phenomenon. It also meant that surplus must be extracted from somewhere, i.e., from the city’s working class. The city perpetually produced the surplus that this type of urbanization required and it became instrumental in creating a new lifestyle. The creation of surplus was a class phenomenon where the capitalistic classes used the predatory practices of exploitation and dispossession against vulnerable populations. Harvey (2012) notes those who had helped to create exciting and vibrant neighbourhoods then lose them through predatory practices to upper-class consumers and capitalists. The elite narrative looks at the city of Srinagar as a commodity, while the commons can be destroyed. At the heart of this narrative lies a neoliberalist ethic of possessive individualism. The members of this upper class could move into posh colonies in the city’s suburbs, which often became privatized public spaces under constant surveillance. This narrative reproduces the old city as a market-driven urbanity, shaped more by the market’s logic than by the inhabitants’ needs. Public concerns held by the population that resides in the town take a back seat to the glorified narratives of the elite, who take ownership of the old town. In this logic, the old city becomes the function of what Harvey calls “surplus capital absorption,” i.e., it

becomes a site of capitalist functioning in pursuit of profitability rather than one that serves public needs (2012).

The elite narrative to the city pitches tourism to audiences in a heritage city to mediate the past, which could sometimes also be seen as actively contributing to creating

ahistorical narratives. The old city of Srinagar is presented in a manner that whitewashes the complexities of processes occurring locally. The argument is repeatedly illustrated through the material culture independent of any particular historical contingencies surrounding its creation.

I will use two examples to illustrate the old city's elite narrative and associative politics. Marryam H. Reshii has written about food and lifestyle for thirty years. She has been a food critic and an independent writer, according to her

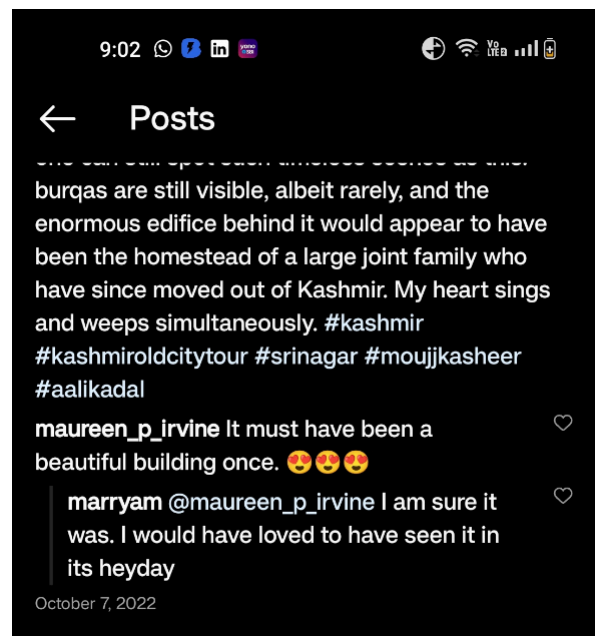


Figure 1 (left) and 2: Some pictures from Marryam's Instagram page. © marryam

website.³ In her Instagram posts, she tells us that she was married in the old city and that she has been forever charmed by it. She uses her influence as a food curator to write about the city. However, what comes out through her narratives is a monolithic image of the city, decked up with flowery stories of heritage and the charm of old houses and architecture. In other words, she talks about the city without its inhabitants, the invisible dwellers who toil there. The only occasion where the natives are mentioned arises in one or another oriental fantasy of individuals being presented as extremely good-looking, as wearing a burqa, or as having magical hands that produce world-class crafts. Kabir (2009) explains that the Kashmir Valley gained symbolic significance through its indirect integration into the British Empire in 1846. Postcolonial India has inherited this symbolic capital since 1947. Kabir further explores how India's yearning for Kashmir, the dynamics of representation and self-representation, and the interplay between hegemony and resistance are all intricately tied to the enduring shared desire for the valley.

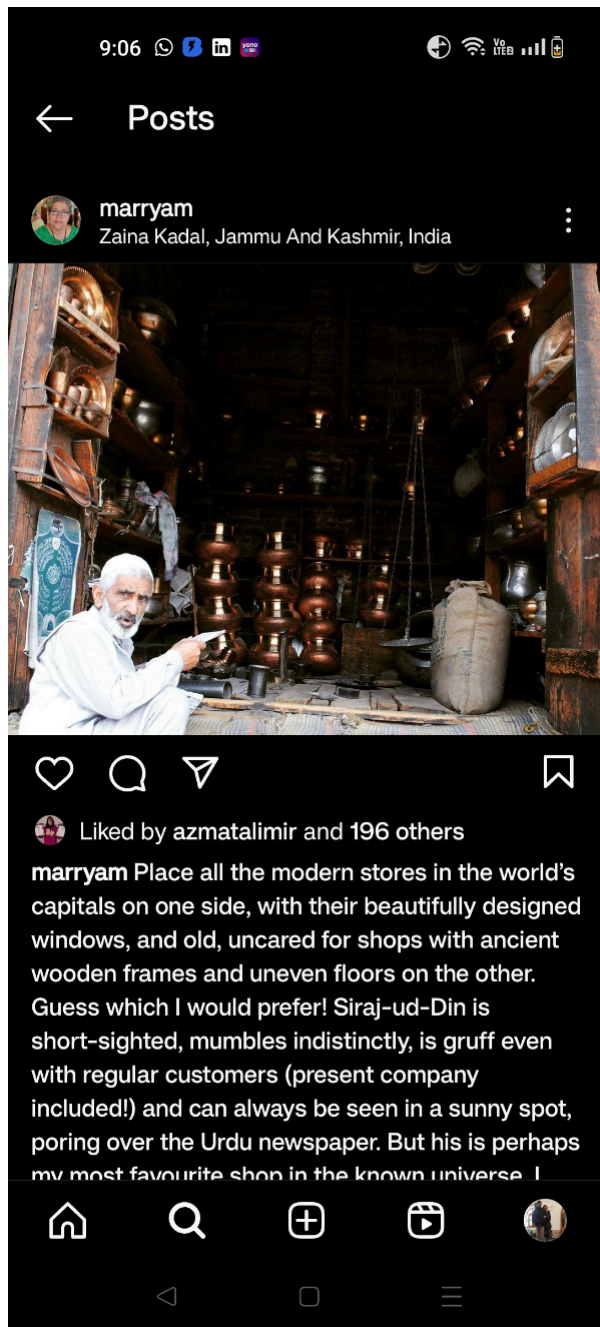


Figure 3: Some pictures from Marryam's Instagram page. © marryam

³ <https://marr Yamhreshii.com/> (Last accessed:15.10.2023) Needless to say, there is no personal enmity or competition associated with the examples I am using. These examples are selected from the public Instagram handles of the users and are only being used to to consider a point.

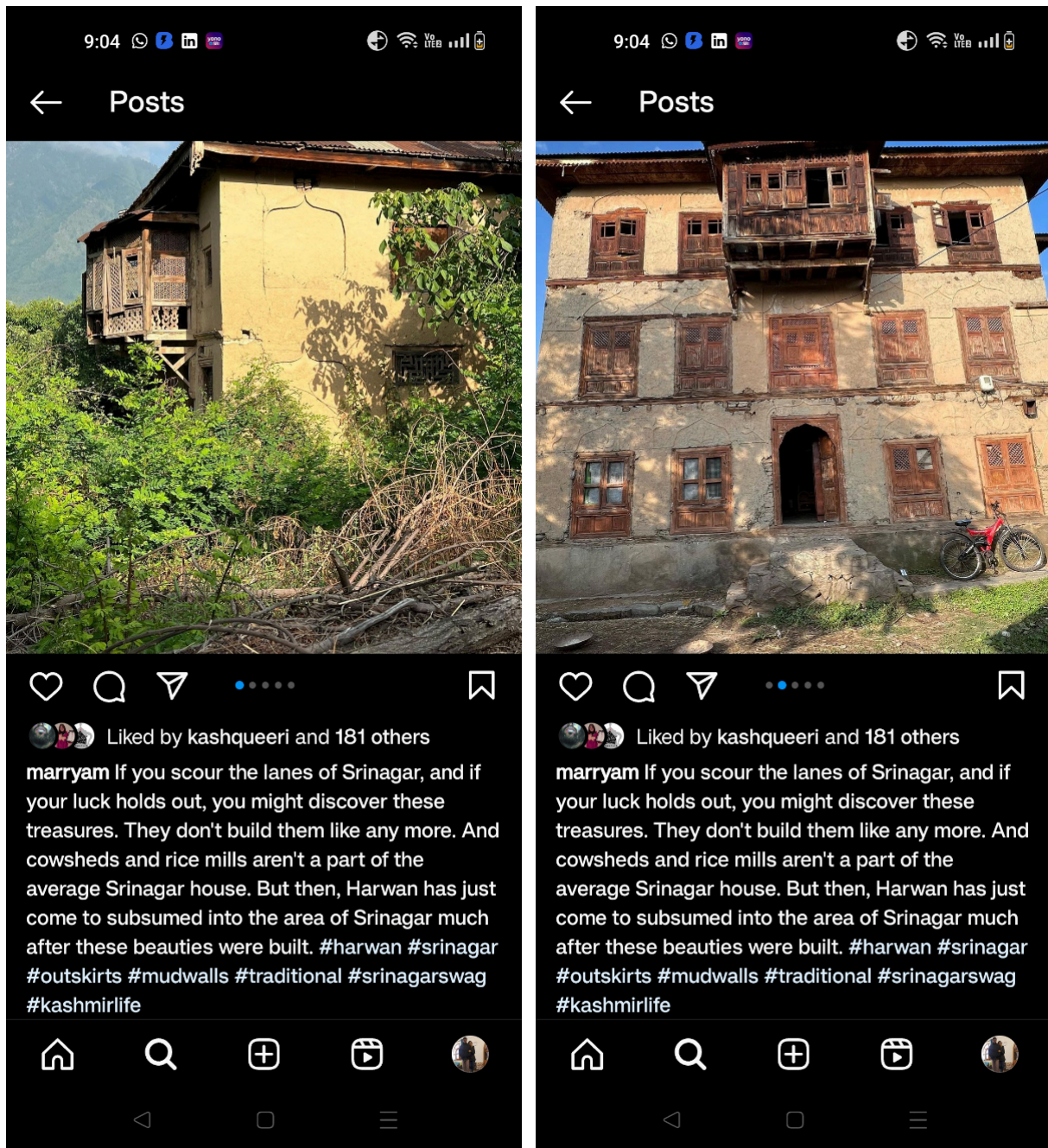


Figure 4 (left) and 5: Some pictures from Marryam's Instagram page. © marryam

In Marryam's narratives there is never any mention of the struggles and shortcomings experienced by the city dwellers or of what the old city has undergone in the past thirty years of active conflict. Nowhere in her writings does one find it reflected that the businesses, educational establishments, and religious places in the old city were closed for prolonged periods. The city was punished collectively for its political standpoint and loyalties. Essential services were denied to the city repeatedly, and it was stigmatized

socially—so much so that people from the old city would find getting their children married in the outskirts of the civil lines area difficult. Admissions to schools lying outside of the old city were denied owing to a perception that people from the old city were fierce and combative. Going back to Marryam’s flowery narration of the old city, it may cater to a distinct niche in the market, but it also becomes appropriative and impacts the narrative that needs better visibility. Shields (1991) reflects on how specific spatial arrangements and cultural practices become appropriate for particular types of activities. Such arrangements and practices constitute a mythical place, one that is undergirded by a suite of local images.

The second example used to illustrate my point is taken from a project of the architect Zoya Kashmiri, where she juxtaposes scenes from the old city of Srinagar with scenes from famous Hindi films. She also uses Hindu iconography from the work of renowned artist Raja Ravi Verma. Religious depictions of Hindu deities in the old city are also



Figure 6: Zoya Kashmiri’s Instagram page.
 “Shahabbuddin is arriving soon in a white buggy.”
 © zoyakashmiri

was painted on a multi-story building near Magarmal Crossing in Srinagar. A newspaper article quoted the artist as saying,

reflected on her Instagram page. With regard to her work, it could simply be a matter of her having a normal interest in a particular artistic style and utilizing it in the designs she creates. But it also means obscuring the realities of the city. There have been some designs which reveal a gothic influence or an influence of Degas. Yet, the absence of the city dweller is something that remains consistent throughout her work.

In *Fearless Collective*, the title of another project executed by Zoya Kashmiri, a mural

“it’s for the first time in Kashmir Valley that women artisans are being appreciated. As one can see, the mural has Kashmiri women artisans making namda, copperware and sozni embroidery and pashmina. Our motive was to send across a message by making this mural on a four-story building so that people know about the history of our crafts and also focus on Kashmiri craft getting more recognition.”⁴

As with the other classic emancipatory movements for the liberation of women, this narrative recognizes women through a bureaucratic-institutional logic whereby women from a different class and geographical location come together to paint images of marginalized women practicing their craft. As unrepresentative as the campaign could be, it privileges elite identities over marginalized artisan identities. In terms of its relation to the city and its dwellers, the campaign promotes a hierarchical social engagement by those who are not

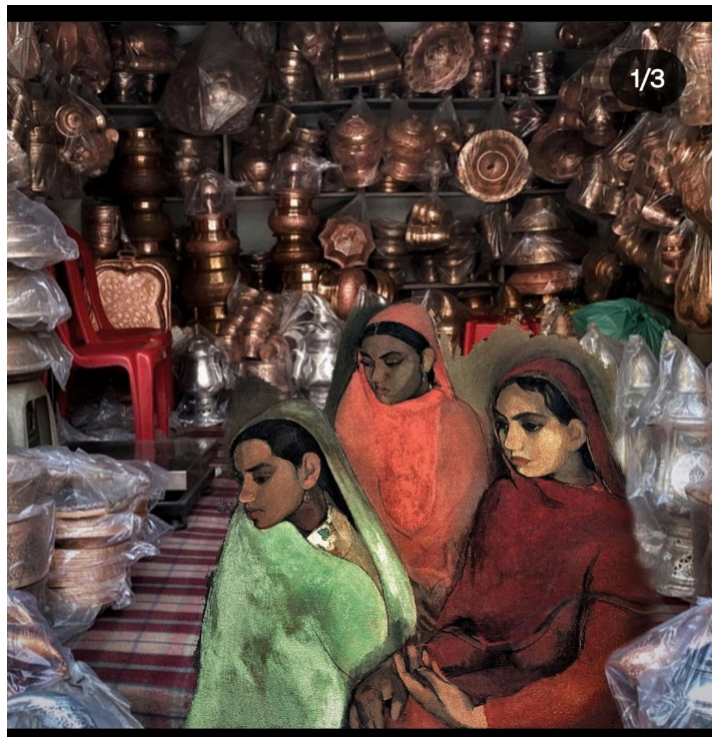


Figure 7: Zoya Kashmiri’s Instagram page.
“Three Girls in Zaina Kadal.” © zoyakashmiri

practicing the craft but rather promoting it. It’s equally unfortunate that within this campaign, the mural becomes bigger than the artisanal lives it is aimed to pay tribute to. Moreover, it’s also dubious as to just how the state allowed this mural to be installed, when it has been removing the graffiti and murals throughout the city.⁵ Johnson (1999) emphasizes the mechanisms through which space is privileged over time in a manner that loses sight of the complexities of localized historical processes. In a way, this approach seems to “museumize” the city by focusing on a display of material culture without regard to the historical contingencies around its own creation.

⁴ <https://www.wionews.com/india-news/kashmir-women-artisans-get-long-overdue-recognition-through-mural-621682>
(Last accessed:4-12-2023)

⁵ <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/other-states/Graffiti-gone-from-Kashmir-walls/article60525760.ece>
(Last accessed:15-10-2023)

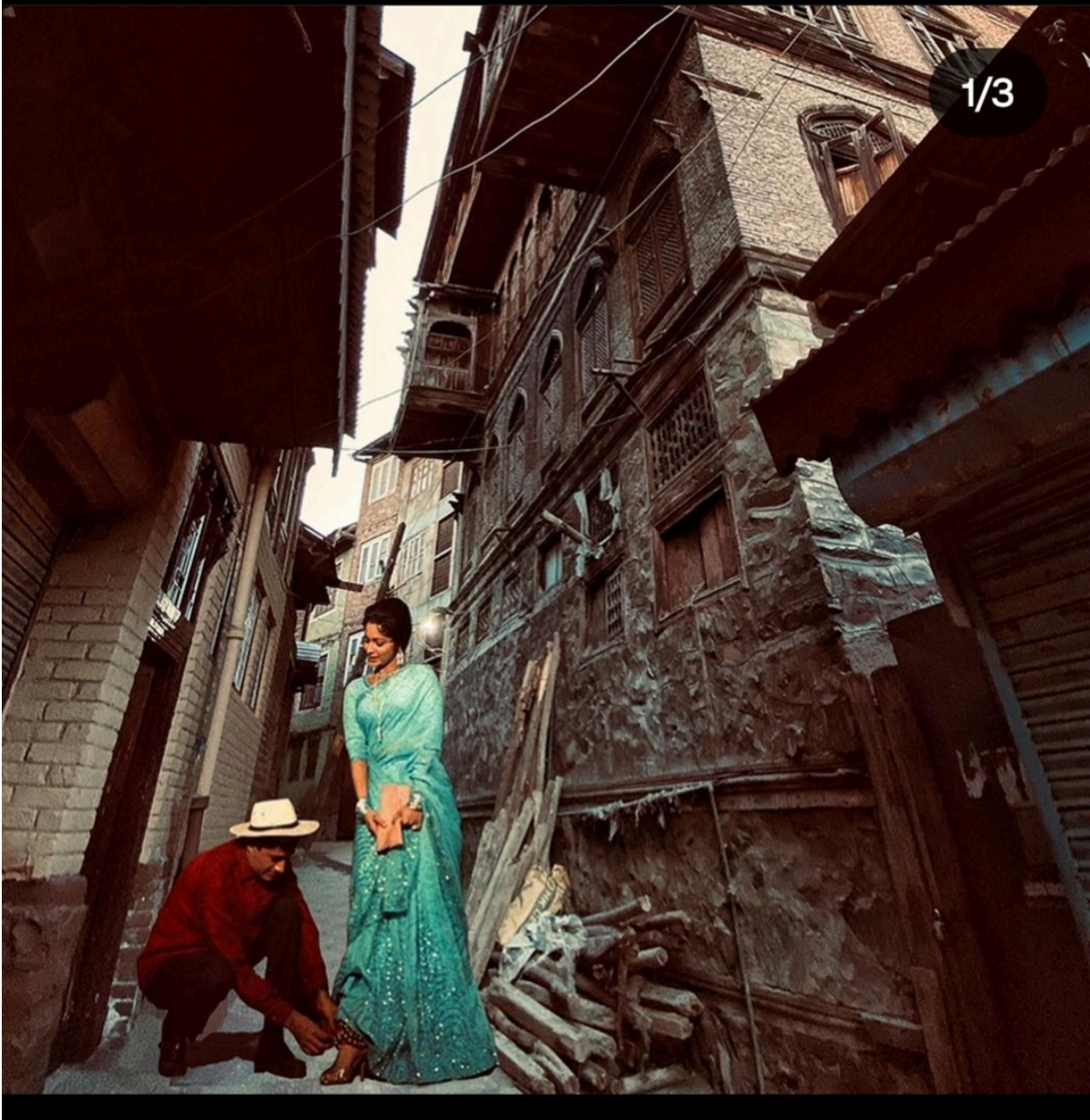


Figure 8: Zoya Kashmiri’s Instagram page. “Rosie Marco X Sheher-e-Khas.” © zoyakashmiri



Figure 9: Zoya Kashmiri's Instagram page.
"Sheher-e-Khas X Raja Ravi Varma. Padmini waiting for Bahaar." © zoyakashmiri

Porno-Tropic Narrative to the City

From Hindi cinema representations to the current phase of social media reels, Kashmir stands out for its symbolic topography and positioning as a “territory of desire” (Kabir 2009). Ananya Kabir (2009) examines the roots of Indian desire for the Kashmir Valley and looks into representation, self-representation, hegemony, and resistance to help explain the perpetuation of this collective passion for the valley. Looking at Hindi cinema’s consumption of Kashmir, one notices a pattern whereby the films could have been shot at any location other than Kashmir; the stories don’t belong to Kashmir or to Kashmiris either. In the films made before the 1980s, a Kashmiri character played by a non-Kashmiri actor would have had a minor, indeed, frivolous role that added nothing to the plot. Or maybe a Kashmiri actor would be an effeminate jester who provides some comic relief. However, the background would be glamorized. In the post-1990s set-up in Hindi cinema, the Kashmiri character has forgotten its spiritual roots and evolved into an evil terrorist who has to be controlled and somehow defeated. Nonetheless, the background again is picturesque and needs now to be unblemished by its savage inhabitants.⁶ Delaney-Bhattacharya (2019) writes about how the male protagonists in Bollywood films are Kashmiri Muslims who, by their very nature and perceived cultural proximity to Pakistan, suggest a dangerous cultural threat to India. These narratives demonstrate how Bollywood’s representation of Kashmir is open to cooptation by anxieties over Pakistan and Islam. These anxieties play out on the screen by means of the representation of Kashmir, Pakistan, and Islam as something that is dangerous and as enemies of the state. The narrative of coercive belonging has been circulated through popular mediums and dominates the touristic gaze, too, which has itself to safeguard the verdant meadows and the snowcapped mountains from the savage natives.

Since the abrogation of Article 370 in 2019, the old city of Srinagar has become a newfound location in the Indian tourist itinerary. Before the abrogation, the old city was considered politically volatile, so tourists did not venture around. The coercive

⁶ To name a few films from the 1960s and 1970s, *Junglee* (1961), *Kashmir ki Kali* (1964), *Aarzo* (1965), *Jab Jab Phool Khile* (1965), *Aap Aye Bahar Aayi* (1971); none of these represented the cultural space of Kashmir as it exists. Ananya Jahanara Kabir’s research delves into the portrayal of the Kashmiri protagonist in three prominent Indian films: *Roja* (1992), *Mission Kashmir* (2000), and *Yahaan* (2005). Her objective is to make a case for a fresh emphasis on the Kashmiri identity as Muslim within Bollywood’s extensive engagement with the Kashmir Valley; she unpacks how Kashmir and Islam, despite having distinct discursive origins within Bollywood, have significantly intersected at a particular historical juncture. This convergence has opened up new avenues for the ideological appropriation of the Kashmir conflict and the role of Muslims in India by the popular cinematic medium.

sense of belonging discussed above pervades the newfound relationship between the Indian tourists and the old city of Srinagar. Acting as rescuers of local heritage, a few initiatives led by groups from Delhi and Srinagar have been operating legacy tours for reviving the heritage of the old city and explaining the authentic tradition and culture of Kashmir to outsiders and Kashmiris alike. However, the meaning of heritage in their scheduled presentation is strictly focused on sites or objects without there being any mention of their cultural, historical, or political significance. It's also worth mentioning that diminishing the value of these sites also weakens the possibilities for fostering political cohesion and enhancing collective political legitimacy.

Time and again the Government of India and the subordinate state governments of Jammu have nurtured the above-discussed narrative of belonging, through their promotion of tourism over other sectors. It is seen as an avenue for creating employment and also for arresting the secessionist tendencies of the population. From promoting tulip diplomacy⁷ to branding Kashmir as a “mini-Switzerland” or a “Venice of the East,” the state becomes complicit in promoting porno-tropic⁸ narratives of belonging. Sacred geography and religious tourism are invoked to create and celebrate the idea of the nation.

In a set of top-down measures, the Government of Srinagar has been included in the new Smart City Program,⁹ run by the Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs, Government of India. The program promises an urban renewal and retrofitting of the city for providing core infrastructure and applying smart solutions to improve cities and their infrastructure. The approach imagines the Srinagar city governed within a top-down order, homogenous, and often in tension with heterogeneity and the indigenous networks. Here arises the dilemma in terms of what Srinagar loses with its inclusion in the Smart City Network. The contrasts sharpened by the transformation are already dramatically threatening the old city: the monopolized commodification along the streets, the disintegration of what had once been a vibrant neighborhood life built around arts and craftsmanship, the demolition of old businesses and ownership patterns. Other factors include the surrounding political uncertainty and the

⁷ <https://www.knskashmir.com/tulip-garden-was-my-dream-project-conceived-with-an-aim-to-compete-with-other-mughal-gardens--ghulam-nabi-azad-176479> (last accessed:29.08.2023)

⁸ The word porno-tropic is borrowed from Anne McClintock's influential book *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (1995). She refers to the European tendency to sexualize the orient and rework it into a fantastic magic lantern of the mind onto which Europe projected its forbidden sexual desires and fears. This term was used to evoke a fetishistic colonial idea of the tropics as sensual and feminine, alluring yet dangerous.

⁹ <https://srinagarsmartcity.in/> (last accessed:29.08.2023)

marginalization, exclusion, surveillance, repression, censorship, and disempowerment of the old city resident. The porno-topic representation fosters a skewed relationship of space and power and, more specifically, of colonial power and indigenous space.

The new localism

Against this backdrop of the elite and the porno-tropic narrative to the city, there is a minor local story that is people-oriented and that considers the old city and its heritage unfixed, changeable, constructed, and varied in historical processes. Here the story of the city doesn't start with objects and sites. Rather, it encapsulates experiences of the city-dwellers and reinforces the very "right to the city." The narrative entails efforts to restore the glory of the city by re-using its former name Sheher-e-Khaas and to initiate various civil society reforms for removing the city's stigma.¹⁰ Those reforms had the goals of fostering civic conversation and of creating an engaging and empowering participatory place to live.

The new localism in Srinagar makes its claim to the city as a collective right. It starts from a critical awareness of urban structural inequalities and extends to social struggles of different classes for claiming specific rights. It manifests itself as a higher form of rights: the right to freedom, to socialize, to enjoy a habitat, and to inhabit. It is both a cry and a demand, or as Marcuse (2009) remarks, it is a cry out of a necessity and a demand for something more. It represents both the outcry of urban residents who have been denied basic human rights and the aspirations of individuals striving to unlock their potential within a controlled urban environment. Therefore, this concept of a right to the city assumes greater significance in the context of the socio-political crisis that the old city is facing. To give an example of the new localism, I am using the song "Down Town"¹¹ written and sung by Musaib Bhat.

The song was released in 2021 and has been watched by 7 million people on YouTube. Shot locally in various parts of the old city, this song is a lyrical complaint about the lack of services and the discrimination seen by the city. It fosters a deeper appreciation for the city's value system, praising in particular the characteristics like *zaanun maanun*

¹⁰ In an interview with Zahid Ghulam Muhammad in 2023 about re-introducing the term Sheher-e-Khaas, I was informed that in usual conversations at the editorial office of a well-known newspaper in Kashmir, it was suggested that he write a weekly column to revive the city. Once he started writing, he ended up writing several books on Kashmir and the old city. His writing also created a civil society focus, and many authors and writers joined him in his efforts to sensitize the readership around the devaluation of the old city.

¹¹ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YmQ_36hrerE (Last accessed:15.10.2023)

(knowing and understanding), *bhaichara* (brotherhood), *yakjehti* (solidarity), *meacher* (sweetness). Gradually the song moves to the part where the lack of services in terms of hospitals, ambulances, petrol pumps, and marriage halls is reflected. Musaib also talks about the frequent stone pelting incidents (*kanie roud*, or “stone showers”), armed vehicular movement within the city, locking of mosques (referring to the locking up of Jamia Masjid Srinagar) and political sloganeering. In the chorus, he recalls the neighborhoods named for bridges in the city—Habbe Kadal, Kani Kadal, Safa Kadal, Bohri Kadal, Razai Kadal, Eail Kadal, Zanie Kadal, Fateh Kadal, Gaw Kadal, Saraf Kadal, Teank Kadal. The song then goes back to the non-tangible values in which old city dwellers delight.

The new localism, in essence, offers a dual critique. On the one hand, it challenges the prevailing elite-driven and superficial narratives concerning urban areas. On the other, it questions the motives of smart city initiatives, which often prioritize efficient urban management at the expense of sufficiently maintaining the status quo, thereby reinforcing the dominance of powerful stakeholders under the guise of participatory processes. An architect, one who chooses to remain anonymous for political reasons, underscores in an interview that this form of new localism is essentially a commentary on the developmental path of an imbalanced city. This approach perceives shortcuts as mere technological solutions that perpetuate socio-economic hierarchies. Moreover, this new localism embodies an open-ended and pluralistic approach, which creates a dynamic space to reflect the ebb and flow of movement, complexity, conflicts, and contradictions within the urban landscape. This new localism strikes a balance between routine, critical analysis, and creative thinking. These juxtapositions open up possibilities for new aesthetic and political interpretations of the urban environment.

Conclusion

This essay discusses narratives of belonging to the city of Srinagar. The idea behind the introduction of these narratives is to inform reflections on the relationship between space and power and how it is, in turn, that power can lend itself to spatial considerations. Each narrative of belonging produces its own precise political aims.

The elite narrative to the city fosters an understanding which resists any sense of socio-historical processes. The city remains a citadel of the elite, while those who make the city vanish into the margins. The porno-tropic narrative reproduces the nexus of state, capital, market, and colonial character to present Kashmir as a territory of desire. These

evocations are attractive for neoliberal and nationalist imaginations but erode indigenous narratives of the city. The reproduction of the city in this manner threatens the city materially and systematically denigrates the local population.

Bibliography

- Delaney-Bhattacharya. 2019. "Bollywood and India's Evolving Representation of Kashmir." *The Diplomat*, August 20, 2019. <https://thediplomat.com/2019/08/bollywood-and-indias-evolving-representation-of-kashmir/>.
- Harvey, David. 2012. *Rebel Cities: From the Right to the City to the Urban Revolution*. London: Verso Books.
- Johnson, Nuala C. 1999. "Framing the Past: Time, Space and the Politics of Heritage Tourism in Ireland." *Political Geography* 18 (2): 187–207. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0962-6298\(98\)00072-9](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0962-6298(98)00072-9).
- Kabir, Ananya. 2009. *Territory of Desire: Representing the Valley of Kashmir*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Marcuse, Peter. "From Critical Urban Theory to the Right to the City." *Analysis of Urban Change, Theory, Action* 13, no. 2-3 (2009): 185-197. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13604810902982177>.
- McClintock, Anne. 1995. *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest*. London: Routledge.
- Rai, Mridu. 2004. *Hindu Rulers, Muslim Subjects: Islam, Rights, and the History of Kashmir*. Ranikhet: Permanent Black.
- Shields, Rob. 1991. *Places on the Margin*. London: Routledge.
- Zutshi, Chitrlekha. 2004. *Languages of Belonging: Islam, Regional Identity, and the Making of Kashmir*. London: Hurst & Company.