



Kaifiyat

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Abstract

This film looks to explore experiences of reminiscence, haunting, and confusion, of the Kashmiri Pandit community, vis-a-vis Kashmir, the place considered by the migrant community, a lost home. I look to examine questions of the community's recent loss of agency, assimilation, and angst, from the vantage point of my own transferred inheritance of this experience. The resultant short film, written and made on a shoe-string student-film budget, is I hope ultimately an intriguing rabbit-hole leading into recent Kashmiri Pandit history.

Keywords: Aditya Basu, Kashmiri Pandit, Kashmiri Hindu, Migration, Exile, India, Kashmir

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Kaifiyat

There was a framed, frayed Kashmir tourism poster of glowing saffron fields leading up to serene, snow-clad mountains, up on the wall of my maternal grandparents' study in their Delhi apartment. They lived a brisk five-minute walk away from us, and I spent many school exam seasons preparing at their house. They lived quiet, regimented lives and ate at precisely the same time every day, come what may. It was the perfect environment for a chronic daydreamer coerced into passing exams.

My Kashmiri Pandit grandparents moved out of Srinagar when my mother was only a few years old. They left her and her elder brother (my uncle) behind at a maternal aunt's ancestral home and tried to make a life for themselves in the UK in the late 1950s. The known narrative even then was that Kashmir was a beautiful place to live, the crown atop India's head, where opportunities were limited, even for Kashmiri Pandits accustomed to plumb government jobs. A few years later, my mother and uncle were taken to Surrey where they lived till the mid 70s. My grandparents live in Surrey even today, and visit Delhi to stay with us to escape the cold English winter—but that framed poster remains on a wall wherever they are. A fading window offering a connection to something that no longer exists.

The insulated realities of my childhood in Delhi, spent closely around Kashmiri grandparents who called Surrey home, who spoke Kashmiri and met only with Kashmiri Pandit families, who ate only Kashmiri food at home, and looked forward to Kashmiri flavours even when eating out, comparing everything to those Kashmiri dishes—delicacies I've come to associate with comfort food—all have an underlying truth to them founded upon the fallout of their assimilation.

My mother and grandparents were perhaps lucky not to have lived in Srinagar during the last three decades as tensions in the region have grown especially rife, leading to a mass emigration of Kashmiri Pandits following a spate of aggressive militant and pro-freedom activities, often targeting those who cornered much of the power after Independence. My grandparents' move was a voluntary departure, however over time it has become one without a choice of return. This short film, *Kaifiyat*, encapsulates impressions of this loss of agency.

The Script

I had been writing about this transferred migratory experience while in India, and in a class at UCLA's program for screenwriting professionals in 2015. My pieces were

based on memories from childhood, my grandparent's stories, Kashmiri Pandit oral histories, rose-tinted imaginings more fiction than truth, and my experimentations with ways to convey uprooted-ness, loneliness, loss. Within this space came a study of short films curated by our UCLA instructor Vanessa Knutsen, director of 2012 student BAFTA winner *The Promised Land*, a film about a foreign immigrant single mother.

Vanessa's aim was for the class to write a five-page script, translating into a seven-minute film, featuring one location and a maximum three characters, and face the challenges of directing and producing what we wrote.

It was in her class that I discussed and developed the idea for *Kaifiyat*, an Urdu term denoting a continuing condition and its mood, often a lyrical expression of this mood. Two short films in particular were instrumental in shaping the language I found lent to the themes of loneliness and disaffection in *Kaifiyat*. These were Jane Campion's *Peel*, and David Michod's *Crossbow*. Both films worked on non-narrative imagery to tell their stories, and I was keen to invoke these voices and images in *Kaifiyat*.

Two major factors were to define the path of *Kaifiyat's* concept, borne both of production instincts I had gleaned working on feature films in Bombay, and the atmosphere I hoped to evoke. The factors were firstly the intended audience, and secondly, the practicalities of production in the US. Shooting in Kashmir was unfeasible. It was broadly possible, but cost and time were unavoidable concerns. It would have required time off from UCLA classwork mid-term, ample time to cast and prep in volatile Srinagar where I had shot a documentary before and barely managed. Additionally, I would have required 5000 USD, instead of the intended budget of 900 USD. Many used Kickstarter and crowdsourcing methods, but eventually only two students got anything funded through this. These resources were not available to me, but I was intent on writing a sparse and very visual telling of an evocative story.

I sparred with the idea that the context of Kashmir, even less Kashmiri Pandits, was too alien for Americans. Cashmere wool scarves was the closest anyone in my class of 25 got to guessing the context or true subject of *Kaifiyat*, and this was immediately inhibiting. As a result, I wrote a version of the draft outline adapted to a Navajo returning to his Native land, all the while invoking Pandit themes, but ultimately my conviction was still with Kashmir. That was the story I knew and was within me. Vanessa was encouraging of this too, and I grew to believe that with a compelling script, the context would be self-explanatory. Yes, even if I went non-narrative, choosing to express a *kaifiyat* with concept visuals alone.

The class had two rounds of feedback on scripts, where instructors and peers gave notes to each other for grades. Common feedback we received was to start hot, and not extend verbal exposition that could be explained within a scene while writing conflict. I had initially written a short visual portrait of the key character Brij at the beginning of *Kaifiyat*, revealing his dowdy clothes, his vermilion *teeka*, and an ankle chain tied to him as he walked the woods, very much at home in a makeshift tent, till he chanced upon his childhood photograph. This was to give the impression of a refugee-like experience, but a voluntary one, resulting in a semi-natural assimilation. This portrait was culled in the end, and its elements blended into what is now one big narrative scene.

The key experiment for me was how to evoke a haunting image, or engage with ghosts of a character's past, without using the convenient hackney of flashbacks. Audio samples, voiceovers, and effects appealed greatly to me and I feel they eventually helped create this world. The idea was to play with what we as viewers hear within the key character's mind. I felt this was an interesting experiment, to use visuals as a mirror to convey history and context, by suggesting what it means for our main character. Brij is sick, confused, desperate, lost in memories, and hearing things. This is his last breath of life before he vanishes from Kashmir's consciousness. Possibly, from all humankind's consciousness.

The initial drafts of the script had different voices emanating from the house. The first time Brij approaches the house, he hears voices of a happy Kashmiri Muslim family sitting to dinner, and mocking a Kashmiri Pandit acquaintance who claimed he had returned to Kashmir to buy a house for himself. These were based on the real accounts of extended relatives who had returned to Srinagar to buy homes but faced circumstances far from welcoming. I had seen these voices as a possible tool to convey resentment, and aggression by showing Brij's reaction to them. Over drafts, and with feedback, I came to see how it became less comprehensible, and too expositional to those without Kashmir's context. The clincher however, was how difficult it was to cast these characters! That's what ultimately shaped many decisions on *Kaifiyat*. What eventually made the cut were ghoulish voices laughing at Brij for trying to own a house in Kashmir. They are voices everywhere and nowhere.

Following recent Kashmiri Pandit literature, even at a cursory level, it's hard not to see an emboldened stance in light of recent nationalist discourses. *Our Moon Has Blood Clots* (Rahul Pandita), *A Long Dream of Home* (Siddhartha Gigoo & Varad Sharma), *From Home to House* (Arvind Gigoo ed.), *Kashmir: It's Aborigines and their Exodus* (Col.

Tej K. Tikoo) are a few of the more recent publications that reflect the community's overall positioning and leanings towards *panun*, or homeland. Priding themselves on scholarship, many Pandit authors invoke a need to not be lost to history, highlighting their roughshod treatment by successive liberal governments, and the country that left them in dilapidated refugee colonies without a second thought. There is a cry for attention from the mainstream, there is self-pity, there is a grappling to highlight their identity as the most prominent of all caste brahmins, who upheld nationalist ideals for decades only to be betrayed by everyone, and of course there is incredible resentment. These were emotions I looked to explore in Brij's visit to his old home in this film.

The bitterness among Pandits is directed towards many quarters, but most keenly towards Kashmiri Muslims at large who Pandits believe 'exiled' them by their complicity with militant aggression. In my family and in many others, there is a persistent indignation that somehow Kashmiri Muslims who stayed back in Kashmir, though persecuted by the state at least lived in their own homes, and were far better off than those forgotten by the state who lost their homes completely. This strikes me as moot, but comparisons of trauma asking 'who suffered more' do little to bring closure, or even a better understanding of the Pandit experience. That Kashmiri Pandits address this question often, is I find testament to the community's belief that they were ultimately forgotten by the state and country at large, especially when they needed help most. The crumbling house in *Kaifiyat* was to become the edifice of this trust, and the object of both connection and umbrage.

Fatima's character is the counterfoil to Brij, but also for me, the life within this bubble of melancholy and confusion. All she wants is to play a game, to live, and it's up to Brij if the last thing he does before he vanishes is to try to get back his wrecked home. I feel that many from the Pandit community are living, and thriving around the world, but it is also a truth that all will have to live with the lack of closure when it comes to where they're from, and who they are now. Not unlike ghosts.

Casting

I began early stages of casting and scheduling in the second week of writing, putting up casting notices around LA's professional and non-professional, online and offline communities. I was immediately looking for Indian, Pakistani, and Kashmiri actors who spoke Kashmiri or Urdu. This in itself was ambitious, and an ultimately unforgiving

process. I searched for over two months around LA and up the West Coast, holding four open casting sessions hosted off websites and free casting community spaces. These sessions were frustrating and also hilarious in hindsight.

I had to make a conscious decision to opt for non-union, seeing as SAG affiliated actors charged higher rates, and needed their producers to handle the surfeit of paperwork. Two days before the shoot, I went locked on the actors closest to the images in my head—even if neither spoke Urdu or Kashmiri, and neither were trained actors. I was also excited that Ryan Joseph (born Rehan Yusuf), and Opal Waybase were playing characters of each other's actual faiths. However, they are both from liberal homes in a cosmopolitan city.

I held two days of rehearsals with both actors in the UCLA lawns, and began 'seeing' the scenes and blocking as I had written them. Ryan threw himself into the character and that was heartening. Opal however, was more of a challenge. She was extremely confident, and that was perfect for the role of Fatima, but being barely eight years old, she was also full of uncontrollable energy. It took a while before she got used to following instructions and learnt her lines.

A key production aspect of working with minors in the US are the strict laws to protect them on sets. Minors can only shoot for 8 hours per day, often less, of which up to 2 hours need to be 'school-work' with a union approved 'Studio Teacher.' These hours varied with age, but 6 shoot hours per day is all I had with Opal. This was not optional either, and though I considered throwing this law to the wind, I did want the child to have a good and healthy experience on my set and decided to pay the base

\$200 a day for a Studio Teacher. I was also extremely fortunate for Opal's mother Meenu's kindness, as she decided to contribute \$200 for the Studio Teacher's fees on the last day. I was so overwhelmed by this I offered to make her co-producer!

Location

I was shooting Los Angeles for Kashmir, in the heat of the West Coast July. Location was everything for this film. Production design was everything too. And I had not a penny for either. I had been warned LA was one of the most expensive places to shoot in the US because of location costs, and I learnt it the hard way. A classmate found a location to shoot, an abandoned home that set her back nearly \$1500. Every option of an abandoned home in a wooded area that I found too was setting me back the total

budget of my film. I searched outside LA, in San Bernardino, in forest reserve areas around Los Angeles, even via friends in the Bay Area. My instructor Vanessa then mentioned Topanga Canyon, a hilly, arid area on the edge of LA with no phone reception. I made 4 trips up there in Ubers that shut down the moment they went out of reception. Topanga is remote, eerily quiet, and covered with ranches and empty summer homes. Winding roads led up to a group of small, sleepy shops, where I asked around about abandoned places for my student project, armed only with a letter from UCLA. Then, I walked 3–4 miles up those winding roads often going door to door, asking after places that looked the part.

I saw some beautiful ranches, with so many devastatingly striking empty homes resembling the abandoned Pandit homes of Kashmir. The profile of landowners I met in Topanga was, however, very different to the type of people I'd seen in LA, or the Bay Area. The area was far more rural, and felt much more conservative. I only saw men in these areas, and everyone wanted a pretty penny for their time, perhaps wise to films students or even film professionals who uttered the phrase 'shoot' and promised 'minimal intrusion.' Perhaps some were brusquer, or reluctant to help a bearded brown-skinned male, but I'll never know for sure if it was prejudice or just a general reluctance to have anything to do with a film shoot. Ultimately, it was one very blunt gentleman who pointed me in the direction of a ramshackle house belonging to a plumber named Dan Larson. Dan was elderly, extremely solicitous and smiley, a person of few words, and very tough to get hold of. He owned only a landline phone and was gone from his premises between 8.30 am to 8.00 pm when he returned home, he slept by 8.30 pm. All my calls and coordination with him had to take place before 8.00 am. Dan was literally the only person I had met in a month of location scouting who was amenable to a shoot the moment I met him. My instinct was that he needed the money. The house had holes in the side of it, as did some of his windows. The paint was chipped, there was tarpaulin hung on a part of the side for waterproofing, and the inside loo didn't work. I don't know how he was living in there. Grass and weeds grew wild, and rusted metal lay all around the place. All this worked excellently for me. The icing on the cake was that Dan agreed to the \$200 location fee. I knew immediately that the location was one thing I got right for this film. Everything about the place gave me goose bumps... and wrapped in thick woods, away from cellular coverage, I wouldn't be caught dead hanging around past sundown.

Crew and Shoot

Finding good, dependable, and ultimately artistic technicians is any director-producer's pleasure, and nightmare. The key artistic collaborator for *Kaifiyat* was going to be the DP, and I had a few meetings before settling on Aric Coppola, an Iraq and Kuwait veteran and NYFA alum who had a deft skill and presence of mind. His wife Allison, also an Iraq veteran, also NYFA alum, offered to do makeup, and ultimately became the line-producer on the film. I can say without a doubt, it was her contribution in particular that saw me, and this short film home. I found a sound designer/recorder in Jason Freeman who came recommended by a UCLA acquaintance, while Nick Wyatt an ex-marine NYFA alum did lights and grips, and my editor (actor and class friend) Kirstin Doyle gave camera slate. Another incredibly talented director friend Clementine Clarke gave slate and logged footage the second day. I scrambled all the help I could get last minute and I was fortunate my friends supported me.

Though the base concept of the script was evident to some readers, it took some doing to get my key technicians on one page about Kashmir. Not all of them understood the political context, but were willing to go on the journey with me to see where it took them. I put together a research docket and artistic reference docket that included movies, images and news articles, but to expect them to thrash through all of it just for political context, and be on the same page emotionally for a two-day shoot was, in hindsight, idealistic on my part.

On Shoot Day 1, it rained for the first two hours and wet the set, and my lead actor Ryan was late by three hours. Our Studio Teacher showed up and fell asleep on set, while our secondary star Opal was on set wasting away as time on the minor-shooting-hours clock ticked away. I had to, for the first (and I hope last) time in my life, play Producer, Director, 1st AD, Script & Continuity supervisor, and Location Manager all at once. Once Ryan came in, we stuck to the shoot list Aric and I had broken down, and kept chipping away. The rest is a blur.

Day 2 was even more relentless, and we began first by re-shooting a Brij dialogue that wasn't in focus from the previous day (God bless the digital medium). At one point we were in a chase to finish all we had planned, but we did. We drove to a dive bar to get the crew drinks, and I was both relieved and extremely anxious to enter the next stage, post-production.

Post-production

Reviewing footage, I was immediately aware of all the things I wished I'd done differently! I half-considered re-shooting a full day, just to get Opal's performance to what I envisioned for the edit. Shooting with children can be painstaking. *Painstaking*. And while some children are more cooperative than others, what they all require is time to perform as actors.

My stand-up comedian-actor-writer friend Kirstin offered to edit on Premier Pro, and she did a stellar job getting a first cut together in time. I let her be with the footage a full week, and she brought a simplicity that the film really needed. I stepped in for the final edit and polish, and in the end, I think we got to the best version of the visual edit that we could—given what we shot.

Sound was a major challenge, and I genuinely struggled, having to switch between three different sound designers after my main designer Jason was involved in a road accident. Finally, to meet deadlines, sound editor Ali Berke did the best he could to deliver what we finally have. Ali was a friend of a friend, and he had two days to scrub through and clean up what he could. We coordinated only over the phone and didn't meet even once. That said, he didn't charge a dime, and I was thankful for that.

I delivered the final cut with sample music in the nick of time. I was one of only five others in class who got to that stage. Many shot their screenplays but couldn't edit in time. Even more didn't reach the shooting stage. By this point I was about \$500 over-budget and was forced to reckon with what I put into for background music.

Evita Wagner offered to compose for credit only, and though she did not have much experience with Indian traditions of music, she was very diligent and did the best she could.

Takeaways

There were a few key learnings for me as a filmmaker and writer. A crucial point was deciding what aspects to be uncompromising with on set. On this film, it was the actors' performances. I wish I'd fought harder to give them more time, and capture the performances (on video and sound) perfectly.

The most important lessons, however, were to do with gauging the balance between technical completion, and story completion. It is clear to my mind now that story

completion, i.e. the clearest communication of the emotions of the story, must remain paramount. I set out making a semi-experimental, spooky ode to the Kashmiri Pandit experience, in 6 minutes. Though I did reach the technical completion of the story, I wonder if this film could bring a neutral viewer any closer to asking the mystery invoking questions that reveal the complete Pandit story.