

**“They have occupied our *rattekoal*¹ (summer) and made surgical strikes into our *soanth* (spring) and *harud* (autumn), but when *wande* (winter) arrives...”² –
Memories of everyday encounters in Kashmir³**

Sarah Ewald

Abstract: The following essay is a personal account of two several months long stays in the Himalayan Kashmir Valley during autumn-winter of 2016 and 2017. Staying in Kashmir had a couple of reasons, one was a research interest in different kinds of work networks and how through them the political situation of the larger region could be understood more thoroughly. This essay though is rather about what happened in between the more official interviews. Text and images developed by and by, based on several diary entries and the visuals I took during these months. The different paragraphs do not claim and don't want to be a coherent narrative or analytical piece, they are more like fragments of conversations and time spent with people in different parts of Kashmir, people who are friends, became friends or whom I met and accompanied during their work. The essay struggles with one open question, however. There are almost no names mentioned in the text and no faces visible in the pictures. One could say this follows an academic convention to anonymize people, also for their own safety in parts. From a perspective of 'representation', on the other hand, it would be a right thing to give full references. These particular, small insights into people's lives are unique, while at the same time, coming to Kashmir since a few years now, I could have added several names to most of the paragraphs. Without having a final answer to the open

¹ The diacritics in this text follow as good as possible a book by George Grierson (1916), one of the few works on Kashmiri language, or Koshur, how the language is called by the ones who speak it. But even when it is the everyday language of over 7 million people in the Kashmir valley, approximately 95 percent of Kashmiris can't read and write it. Kashmiri is a language recognized by the Constitution of India as the language of the Jammu and Kashmir State. Though, after a very short period in the early 1950s when Kashmiri was introduced in the schools of the Valley, the language was taken out from the school curriculums till November 2008, when it has been made a compulsory subject in all government schools in the Valley up to secondary level. <https://www.hindustantimes.com/books/the-kashmiri-noveltales-in-a-lost-tongue/story-2PqYE6Y4iSJviPJsCVGlyL.html>. (accessed: 13 September 2019)

² <http://www.wandemag.com/about/>. (accessed: 13 September 2019)

³ The essay has already been published in a slightly different outline as a two parts essay in a Kashmiri journal, the *Wande Magazine* – *wande* means winter in Kashmiri – in September 2018.

question, for me, the essay therefore is an attempt to share my subjective understanding of what I see as some of this society's strengths showing in individual and collective engagements, as well as what people have to struggle with due to the impossibility of not being involved, in the one or other way, in the larger regional politics. While writing this introduction, Kashmir, a region which's population is equal with countries like Switzerland, Hungary, Austria, Bulgaria, Senegal, Bolivia or Sweden, and the people living there, remain under a complete communication lockdown, imposed by the Indian army for more than seven weeks now, with a more and more precarious health and food supply situation. Considered as the most extensive shutdown in the history of Kashmir, cut off from the rest of the world, it was the Indian government's strategy to silence people's protest against India's unilateral decision to remove the autonomous status of the region from its constitution on 5 August 2019. Neither was the government of Jammu & Kashmir involved in this decision (rather it was put under detention, together with several thousand other Kashmiris), nor anyone living in Kashmir.

“If you haven't stayed here in winters also, you don't know what it means, Kashmir,” more than one person had told me during the last two summers. How do you come to an understanding of the places and people you grow up with? And how do you come to an understanding of places and people you meet later in life? Sometimes by coincidence you reach somewhere, and what you find there makes you keep coming back.

The air is like vibrant, cicada chirring the first welcome of the Kashmir valley after crossing the Himalayan Peer Panjaal range through the Banihal tunnel, a pass which connects the valley with the neighbouring region of Jammu. Traffic, as expected, has thinned out. Right at the bifurcation to Verinag spring, the major source of the river Jhelum, a friend of a friend is waiting for me. A serpentine byway leads us downhill towards Duru, Islamabad. It is the year 2016. Late September, beginning of harvest season. From the fields the rice ears seem to wave and call with dry whispers. Roads are as good as empty.

This is not a piece about July 2016's Kokernag encounter or the valley wide funeral processions which followed⁴. Not about roads filled with people, men, women, all ages, out for protest marches, queues of army busses

⁴ <http://www.raiot.in/the-restored-humanity-of-the-kashmiri-rebel/>. (accessed: 13 September 2019)

filled with soldiers getting relocated, their shotguns' pellet rain, which blinded hundreds, deaths on the roads and inside homes, months-long shutdown, cut off from food, medicine and energy supplies, mass demonstrations, mass detentions, calls for strike, night raids or what happened afterwards in the prisons.⁵ It is also not a piece about a 2017 Indian army operation "All Out" and related "standard operating procedures"⁶. It isn't, somehow. It is about several everyday moments I can't but remember, and about how people keep up commitment for their occupations, in a place the different Indian governments keep in a state of emergency since nearly 30 years, in a place where its people, since long decades, live and work for their (political) self-determination (Faheem 2018, Bhan 2018).

Dusk and uncertainty about the roads on the first evening back in Kashmir make me follow an invitation of people I just got to know. The family of a friend. His brother-in-law takes me further the next morning. We stop at the local hospital. His daughter who last night entertained me with ball games and imitations of an elderly relative's snoring has a small injury close to her right eye. I had heard about the situation in the hospitals during these last two months, overcrowded in many parts of the valley, doctors and nurses working extra shifts. When we walk out with the prescription, the corridors are filled with people waiting; most of them for family members admitted with pellet injuries from ongoing street protests. Young volunteers hurry back and forth to support the staff and the families. A good number of the injured apparently decide not to consult doctors but rather go to a blacksmith's workshop for makeshift treatment, afraid of the army raiding hospitals to find and arrest stone throwers, as I read in a Kashmiri newspaper later. Next to the article is the image of a body x-ray. Hundreds of tiny metal pieces under the skin of the person make his torso and head look like a sieve. Other articles report about retina specialists from Indian AIMS hospital rushing in to support Kashmiri doctors. They struggle to extract pellet fragments from numerous eyes, while outside, the Indian army continues shooting on protesters.⁷ I also read about a 5-year-old boy who

⁵ http://www.4a.com.au/4a_papers_article/alana-hunt/. (accessed: 13 September 2019)

⁶ <https://www.newsclick.in/operation-all-out-kashmir-bludgeoning-military-panopticon> (accessed: 13 September 2019)

⁷ <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/29/world/asia/pellet-guns-used-in-kashmir-protests-cause-dead-eyes-epidemic.html>. (accessed: 13 September 2019)

was found on the road with sand rubbed into his eyes and a thin needle sticking in one of them, inserted just like this by an Indian Central Reserve Police Force man. “*Army ha aayi. Yim ha layan mea,*” (“Army came. And started beating me.”), the words of the child quoted in one of the local dailies⁸. My brain fails to provide any frame. In front of the building another group of volunteers prepares food for the people waiting inside. Our car leaves the hospital court. On the seat behind me, the small girl balances a brown paper bag with the medicine on her knees. Her father points to the ambulance ahead of us. I look at him. He nods. Transport outside the towns, on the main roads, is still highly restricted. Someone waves in our direction “Today they transfer only medicine”. A fast farewell, then I switch the vehicle to cover the last kilometres. Two doctors sit next to the driver. They move a bit to the right. Through the small window behind our heads I see other passengers in the back. Nobody is injured. While in the car, all the pictures I had seen via facebook posts of ambulances’ bonnets dented by army personal and scattered glass splinters of ambulances’ windscreens cracked by soldiers’ sticks don’t come to my mind. Also, not the reports of security forces beating up drivers and the patients they transport. 15 minutes later I get off as quickly as I got in.



Fig. 1: sustainability (Kashmir 2016)⁹

On one of the many days behind the garden walls – I have forgotten if it was curfew or *hartal*¹⁰. Mud has left a mark on her trousers’ knee. She is

<https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/6221-pellet-gun-injuries-reported-in-unrest-after-burhan-wani-killing-jk-govt/articleshow/62640795.cms>. (accessed: 13 September 2019)

⁸ Online version of the Kashmiri newspaper Kashmir Today.

<https://www.facebook.com/TodayInKashmir/posts/crpf-trooper-inserts-needle-in-eye-of-5-yr-old-says-familysrinagar-kashmir-reade/1119199451469966/>. (accessed: 13 September 2019)

⁹ The copyright for all photographs belongs to Sarah Ewald.

the lady of her fields. Under her fingers another handful of *haakh* seedlings find a space in the humid autumn ground. Efficient-experienced, like I have seen it in many gardens here. Due to shut-down and protests her office has been closed since weeks. She has intensified work at their home. Side by side we move through the bushes, harvesting what feels like myriads of red chillies, warding off mosquitos. Her husband piles up dry leaves and weeds in a corner, then sets the heap on fire. Ashes for the soil. The smoke makes me choke. “It’s just like tear gas”, his voice from behind my back. His mechanical lawn mower controls the green 10x15 meters patch in front of the house. But then, grass has already been cut short yesterday, you can hear the rasping of blades along the ground. Morning is for picking the big bottle gourds to fill the stocks before winter approaches. A common practice here in Kashmir. Wash, cut in halves, clean, slice. Her hand and knife seem to belong together. Keeping up is a task. 10:4. Or 5, maximum. Though I must be doing my part well enough. “Dear, I want to adopt you”, she repeats twice. I try to hide my grin. The thin snippets are placed row after row under the sun. Tightly laced wicker baskets already keep the air-dried vegetables from the last days. Wind scatters leaves from the trees orange-rain-like over the grass. When I look up, I see his grey-haired head bending downwards. He starts collecting the leaves. “They irritate me”, his hand already stretched out for the next few. When he turns away, I quickly collect some myself. The roar of the lawn mower echoes faintly from the red brick walls. Stone clatters against metal teeth.

From beyond their premises distant noise is growing louder, feet on the road, voices calling like with one voice. They mix with the persistent chirring from the trees and fields. *Harthe’roosh*. I write down the Kashmiri word for cicada in my notebook. Some of these species apparently stay underground up to 17 years till they reach maturity. They then burrow upwards, towards the surface and when they feel the right time has come, they emerge from the dark of the soil. A swarm of them is said to produce sounds up to 120 decibels— equivalent to a military jet aircraft’s take-off. This chirring later mixes with the steady chipping of sickle strokes in the nearby paddy fields.

¹⁰ *Hartal* is a call for a general strike that is given in Kashmir by resistance groups, like *Hurriyat*, as a form of civil disobedience, often after protesters or civilians are killed by Indian army.

Someone hums a melody, while morning turns to noon. My nose catches bits of dust and sweat, heated up by the sun. Raspy ears tickle my palm. And row by row the harvest workers turn them into a tile shape pattern of long ochre-coloured sheaves. After drying, they will be stacked into spiky bales, the form of large bee hives, visible from far in the fields.



Fig 2: heart (Kashmir 2016)

Some days later a friend sends me a message with a video attached: First the frame is filled completely with yellowish smoke. Someone's scream. Then about a dozen rice bales emerge through the haze. Maybe the collecting point of a village. More than half of these bales are burning. Shielded men in uniform encircle them. People try to pass through the cordon from different sides. Sticks keep them at a distance. The camera is shaking. Suddenly gunshots, the crackling of fire continues, interrupted by a call for evening prayers. There is no gap in the line-up of the uniformed men. In front of the people their harvest turns to ashes. End of the recording. The army from the country of rice fields and farmers' suicides repeats this work pattern in several other places throughout the Kashmir valley.¹¹ And walks away.

¹¹ Via the Kashmiri newspaper Greater Kashmir.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W_c2YQKJbVs. (accessed: 13 September 2019)



Fig 3: women at work (Kashmir 2016)

We meet at his work place, where he can be found on most days if he is not doing this or that side job he considers to be helpful for others. His ideas about life can disarm you. Though there is disagreement sometimes. “I think our friendship became strong.” “It was always strong.” Together we walk through the narrow alleys of the old city towards his home. Sun light reflections follow us along the rolled down shutters of shops and stalls. He and his family keep an open door for those in need. For friends, and friends of friends, and groups of now school-less children, whose daily routine got disturbed because no classes do happen since weeks due to curfew, or because the army has accommodated its newly arrived soldiers in several state schools’ buildings. People repeat this pattern of privately set up ‘curfew schools’ in several other places throughout the valley.¹²

¹² <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-37128457>. (accessed: 13 September 2019)



Fig 4: solidarity (Kashmir 2016)

Cooking is not really her favourite activity, but I love the way she does fry spices, nose up in the air to make sure a good mix. Neither she nor her mother ever let me leave without having a second cup of salty noon chai. I sometimes pay back in lemon tea. She has perfected her driving skills on some of the rougher roads of Jammu & Kashmir. Her car takes me along on many days. The valley's public transport is still not running in this shutdown autumn of 2016. Picking up people standing waiting at the roadsides she turns her Maruti car into a small version of a Sumo taxi¹³. We squeeze in while the car fills with kids, grownups, bags, pieces of conversation. Several old women's relieved prayers the moment they climb on the back seats are still in my ear. "Stop being over-sensitive", she says when we part.

¹³ Sumo is the name for car's used in public transport in Kashmir. Apart from the driver 9 to 11 people can find space in this public taxi.



Fig. 5: remnants (Kashmir 2016)

A “welcome” in plastic is pinned on one side of his bedstead, incomplete. A polythene bag hanging on a hook, filled with knots and loops of yellow rope. A few signs and stickers around the window. Otherwise, his room is bare. His sister points to the corner where he used to sit to take rest or a cup of tea. The last ‘signs’ he has left and an army bullet has left in him on a road of his village some weeks back on an early morning in August. My eyes meet the mirror. Its reflection shows the back of the father, sitting on his son’s bed.



Fig. 6: elusive/fading (Kashmir 2016)

His family had cleared the room after he got killed on the road. Was it what they call a ‘stray bullet’? From a shelf right under the ceiling three yellow and pink plastic toy birds of his children are peeking into my eyes. I walk towards the window. The patch outside looks like a green, gently heaving

sea. Under my fingers, I can feel the wood of the window frame, smooth and cool. “This is his work”, the father tells us. Carpenter has been his profession. The design reminds me of my parents’ house and the windows there, which grandfather and my mother’s brother had built when we were kids. Nobody has touched his work bench in the workshop next door. Wooden dust and locks garland metal.



Fig. 7: *hatchu khwaab* / wooden dreams (Kashmir 2016)

Early mornings in August, around the days when the South Asian subcontinent celebrates its independence from the British colonial oppressors, on the roads of a village like many villages in Kashmir, several people get killed.¹⁴ A lot of roads in the valley have seen people coming out to gather to tell a state which claims to be theirs what they disagree with. A lot of roads have seen this state’s soldiers, doing what they are paid for, dispersing the protest marches, whereby many are left maimed, blinded, or killed. Maintenance of law and order? Quite some roads have also seen passers-byes just busy with their daily routines not returning home.

¹⁴ <https://www.firstpost.com/india/kashmir-unrest-crpf-opens-fire-in-fresh-clashes-toll-rises-to-63-2958346.html>. (accessed: 13 September 2019)



Fig. 8: people at work (Kashmir 2016)



Fig. 9: wings (Kashmir 2016)

The sound of her fingers flying over the keyboard. She is into words. And silences. Her own kind of rhythm. She creates words. She collects them. From others sometimes. Exchanges words with them. We exchange some. She gives me a few. One for my impatience. “Wait”. And later: “Get on your toes”. I remember the ventilator air playing with a fold of her scarf in the afternoon when she recites some thoughts about Gaza. “We give birth to your destruction, every time we make love—you count.”¹⁵ Some other afternoon, we hike up the hill top to the lately re-opened old fort of Hari Parbat. Army had closed the doors of the fort for the public when they turned it into one of its base camps in the 1990s after the Indian state’s proclamation of ‘emergency state’ in Kashmir. The garden still contains scattered remnants of the paramilitary forces’ trainings: obstacle track, tripwire field, ropes pulled taut low over the ground to crawl through flat on your belly. From under a tent a metallic reflexion: A group of soldiers cleaning the pieces of their disassembled weapons. Her back against the granite of a window frame, eyes caught by some movement further down. “They walked into my dream silently. Stones became their pillows. Night healed their sore feet and bruised backs. Love-filled, they walked ahead into labyrinths of the dream. Their kohl eyes never blinking.”¹⁶ Her breathless voice counting the steps of our running legs on the long stretching stairs downhill, fast, faster, as if relieved to be in the open again. Then we disappear in a wilderness of apricot trees.



Fig. 10: pan optic (Kashmir 2016)

¹⁵ Line from a poem by Uzma Falak; <http://www.palestinechronicle.com/summer-in-gaza-a-poem/>. (accessed: 13 September 2019)

¹⁶ Lines from an unpublished poem of Uzma Falak.

He shows me his collection of mobile recordings. Filmed from inside their home. A visual diary. Window frames filled with bleak summer storm, thunder rumbling, window frames filled with streaming and then standing, standing water and floating dogs of the 2014 floods¹⁷, filled with road and people and patrolling forces¹⁸, filled with columns of clouds in dusk light, a muffled animal's howl. It makes me feel like being inside the house's head, memories. "I can't say why, but I do remember you in my prayers."



Fig. 11: prayer (Kashmir 2016)

¹⁷ <https://m.economictimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/jk-floods-how-are-people-in-kashmir-dealing-with-the-natural-calamity/articleshow/43018970.cms>. (accessed: 13 September 2019)

¹⁸ <https://jkccs.files.wordpress.com/2017/05/occupation-hazard-jkccs.pdf>. (accessed: 13 September 2019)



Fig. 12: efficiency (Kashmir 2016)

From Srinagar, one has to switch the vehicle three to four times when traveling by public transport to the piece of land that they chose to create a space where everyone can be student and teacher at the same time. They have negotiated that their work is all about engaging hands, minds, feet, and hearts alike to make things grow, and keep the fire burning. It is about trying to bring together what was, is and could be, in practice and theory. Topics already discussed sitting in that one corner on grass under trees, before they, by and by, build the infrastructure, still roam in my head. How to efficiently generate energy while using as less resources as possible? How to grow your own food safe from the circles of multinational monopolies' fertilizers and pesticides, which harm soil, water, and our bodies? How to live together as if we were all equal? Their place has become a meeting site for people from many backgrounds. *Hu kus, bu kus, teli wan tsu kus?*¹⁹ Do we keep thinking there need to be a closing answer to this question?

¹⁹ Line from the Kashmiri lullaby "*Hukus bukus*"; "Who is he and who am I, then tell me, who are you."



Fig: 13: community building (Kashmir 2016)

Sometimes days or nights are too much. They leave you with no words. Or with not the right words. There is disconnection from tears. They appear when you don't think of them, when doing something ordinary like brushing your teeth.



Fig. 14: dream (Kashmir 2016)

They tell us, their son recently started to trim the hair of people from the neighbourhood. The tools of his barbershop in the attic room of their home are lying there in the shelf as if he has left only five minutes ago. Like nobody has touched them after he got killed on the road in the month of August. Next to a heavy armchair, a green-white dryer is dangling, still plucked in. Dozens of small square shaped boxes filled with razor blades, neatly tucked in a leather belt's pocket, are waiting to get unwrapped to meet with a beard. A first layer of dust already started covering the colours. He had been on the road because he wanted to buy a newspaper.



Fig. 15: lokchaar/ childhood (Kashmir 2016)



Fig. 16: dailies (Kashmir 2016)

With the leaves' shades turning paler, the Indian army announces its operation 'Calm Down'²⁰. They 'calm down' during nights, when in hundreds of raids they pick people whom they identified during the days protesting on the roads from their beds. The prisons are filling up with students, teachers, civil rights activists, lawyers, some political leaders. Seven is the age of the youngest inmate, I hear. During the day, outside in the roads, soldiers and paramilitary forces now work with chilli filled PAVA (pelargonic acid vanillyl amide) shells alongside the pellet guns to disperse the protesting people.²¹ The powder is so fine, it easily finds its way inside also through the thinnest chinks to stay with you for a while. My first unexpected encounter with PAVAI mistake as an acute allergic reaction.

²⁰ <https://www.thecitizen.in/index.php/en/NewsDetail/index/4/8840/Operation-Calm-Down-Achieves-the-Opposite>. (accessed: 13 September 2019)

²¹ <https://www.firstpost.com/india/kashmir-unrest-chilli-based-pava-shells-too-slow-for-crowd-control-home-ministry-announces-recall-3025760.html>. (accessed: 13 September 2019)



Fig. 17: fire (Kashmir 2016)

Inside a home on another day. The pounding of wood on stone, turning the dried chilli peppers to pulp, adding spices, the laughter while handing the pestle round from her son to her mother-in-law to me to her to her son to... Long after my arms' muscles become tired, the sounds continue. Preparing for the next step, she dips her fingers in oil. "They will burn anyway for a couple of days", she says with a shrug of shoulders and a half smile, hands already kneading and forming the dough into roundish shapes. Really red chilli cakes placed on newspaper to dry. A time-tested method to warm you up throughout the cold months. They will make my tongue burn later in winter.



Fig: 18: monochrome (Kashmir 2017)

The door opens. Dodging his outstretched arm, his children leave home, and over the small path that leads from the one-storey house through the faded winter garden they come running to catch the bus to reach tuitions, satchels flying after them. He waits for us. His eyes are not visible behind the sunglasses. Like some others, the Indian soldiers 'non-lethal' pellets did not blind him completely. The vision of one eye came back. The ability to distinguish colours though not. With the help of colleagues, he has shifted his workplace from the collective workshop to a small backside room of his house some weeks ago. They also supported him to figure out a system for weaving the different colours without seeing them. I try to understand his numbers and pattern plans that guide the way how to transform individual twines into the form of one of these pashmina shawls. To finish a piece, he now needs around double the time he used to in the past, he tells us while his wooden needle goes up and down and carefully adjusts the distances between the individual warp threads.



Fig. 19: intricacy (Kashmir 2017)

Hollywood, opposite Lambert Lane, second floor. The left corner table is ours, like when I had come to Srinagar for the first time in 2011. Kashmiri-German session. In front of us the black tea is abundant and strong as usual. I add some milk. My cup rests on the journal he brought along; his article about these last months. “Memoir of a siege”, the title reads. “...A crowd began to build up on the main street. I too joined it... people from the adjoining villages poured in and marched through our village... there were people from every social class — daily labourers, students, businessmen, doctors, teachers, old, young... ‘Aazadi, aazadi, aazadi.’ The roar amplified... a mass all-out uprising in the making that would soon spread across Kashmir and push the State almost over the precipice... ”²² We have one hour before he will go back to work. “Wait, wait, wait.” You can hear excitement in his voice while he checks the notebook pages to assemble a short sen-

²² <http://kashmirnarrator.com/memoir-siege-life-resistance-repression/>. (accessed: 13 September 2019)

tence with the few words he has learnt so far. “Frr-aulene Sarah ist r-ott.” He starts giggling. I join. German plus Kashmiri accent makes of an often said to sound rough language something that produces now smiles. Some letter combinations though we try and try in vain. Same applies for Kashmiri. “Anyim sui, wavum sui, lötschum panis.”²³ “Hatte hoinj, kette sang”²⁴.

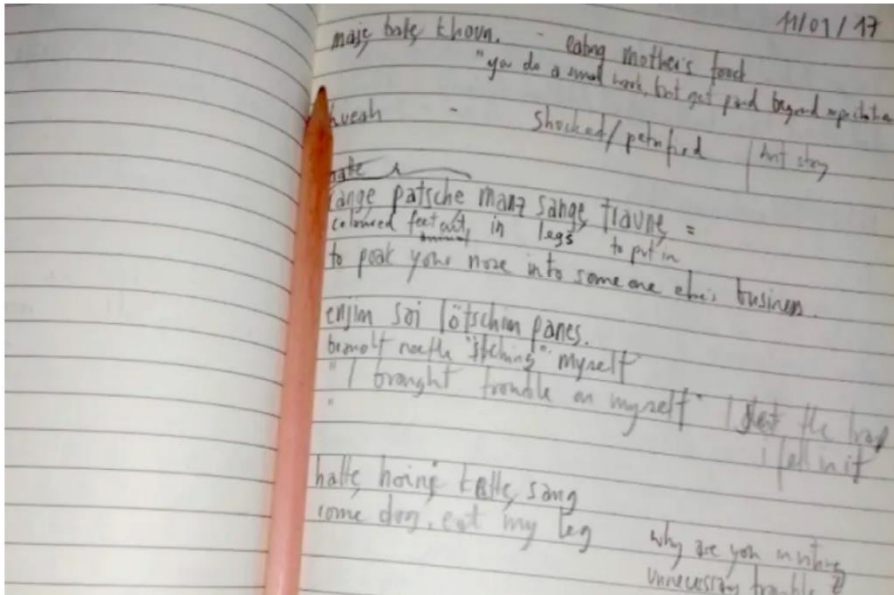


Fig. 20: range patsche / coloured feet (Kashmir 2017)

²³ Translation from Kashmiri: I brought the nettle, I sowed the nettle, and then the nettle stung me (proverb).

²⁴ Translation from Kashmiri: “Why don’t you come here, dog, and have a bite from my leg” (proverb).



Fig. 21: night shift (Kashmir 2017)

The best way to test Kashmiri beginner skills turns out to be during sumo journeys on the highway from Srinagar to Jammu and vice versa. Knowing that one probably won't meet the co-passengers again seems to create a kind of 'safe' exercising space. And be it this road or something else, these journeys often turn strangers into travel companions. The snow layers on this January afternoon become more persistent the higher we climb. Public and goods transport have resumed after months of shutdown. Around Bon Dialgam from a conversation of two men sitting in the back of the Sumo I come to know about the Srinagar-Jammu-winter-oneway-system and that I have chosen the 'Jammu day'. Unlikely to reach the other side of the pass and Patnitop tonight. Slope slowly ascending, behind the city of, Duru we meet the end of the queue. Fresh flakes start falling. Like a huge iron worm, the vehicles crawl further up the serpentines. Some kilometres away from the Banihal tunnel, altitude almost 3000 metres, in two rows we come to the day's final hold. People try to arrange themselves in their cars for the next hours. With slightly guilty conscience I look behind, where four men probably taller than me share the back seats. Night sets in. Silhouettes in front of our windows, some truckers and sumo drivers in discussion. Now and then, the dark inside the car is lifted by flashing rear lights, a flaring match, conversation bits, a laughter. Ten people try to generate warmth against the snow cold. We exchange dried dates, clothes, one *kāger*²⁵ pot makes its round till its clambering coals fade. After the fruits are finished, I decide to count the cars till the beginning of the jam. Cold air surrounds my head. Through the small corridor left in the middle of the road I walk ahead,

²⁵ A traditional way in Kashmir of staying warm in winters, glimmering coals carried in a small wicker basket, which people keep below their clothes.

meeting some eyes behind steamy glass, some sleeping faces. Most of the drivers are still awake and out, night shift. They try to direct the vehicles in one single line, already preparing for the road clearing snow machine awaited for the next morning: pushing, pulling, arranging in well-versed ways, routine, it seems, using free gaps for their manoeuvres. Against the slippery surface they fix the trucks' wheels with stones to keep safe their heavy loads awaited in the marketplaces of the cities and villages. Morning twilight reveals the beginning of the queue. Further up towards the tunnel, I see another line of trucks getting lost in the distance. Like out of nowhere a voice calls, with an offer for hot noon chai! My neighbour from last night whom I had lent my *pheran*²⁶, puts one of these small *Bakirkhani* breads into my hand.



Fig. 22: hibernation (Kashmir 2017)

The bulb for a second flickers, its glow wire's reaction barely visible when he wakes us up at dawn. "Electricity not easily finds its way to these outer parts of the valley", he says, lighting a match for the candles. In my estimate the power house of the Kishenganga Hydroelectric Plant built by the Indian National Hydro Power Corporation can't be further away than five

²⁶ Kashmiri cloak.

kilometres from their home. We follow him through a forest turned snow desert past criss-crossing bird traces and unknown footprints towards the lake. Boots crunch over frozen tractor wheel tracks. They reach till the shore. His hands, around 17 years younger than mine, resemble a flexible map reflecting the parameters of his profession. Using a small bucket, they rid the boat of overnight accumulated water, then fix some spots between the wooden planks where new drops appear with scrunched up polythene snippets. In the early morning light, mirror like, the Wular, hazy blue and silent, keeps its secrets. We are four and the rim of our boat almost touches its water. Fishermen float by on our left, their fishing lines waiting to get strained. Suddenly objects appear, soaked, trundling just some centimetres beneath the surface or swimming in groups around an over-water plant or some bow net construction. First plastic yield. His paddle strokes take us deeper inside the lanes of the lake, the sand diggers' calls become distant.



Fig. 23: home-habitat (Kashmir 2017)



Fig. 24: bagged (Kashmir 2017)

Fingers act like forks. Between our feet more flotsam gathers. A swallow's cry. The deck sways as we change positions. His sister now steers the boat, while he combs through the undergrowth of some small islands, home of a group of horses. After the day's work is done, boat tied to the lakefront, a sack filled with bottles, bulbs, abandoned chapels, unidentifiable plastic pieces extracted from the water's body, in the pale gleam of the evening snow we start running towards white nothingness, two of us dancing in circles, making my head spin. Through the thicket of trees, a faint sound of *Azaan* seems to call us back to the houses.



Fig. 25: slipped (Kashmir 2017)



Fig. 26: siblings at work (Kashmir 2017)



Fig. 27: after work (Kashmir 2017)

Spring and summer... are on another page.



Fig. 28: beat (Kashmir 2017)

I return in September the same year. *Harud*, autumn. Marriage season. 2016 hasn't seen many weddings. This year four friends of mine become wives and husbands. Everyone seems involved and busy with this or that task. From the section where *wazas*, the cooks are working, sounds of the mallets pounding meat float over to the big wedding tent. The air holds the scent of fennel. Two men simultaneously apply filigree dark red *Mehndi* colour patterns on the bride's outstretched hands and feet. Another person is holding a phone to her right ear - last minute arrangements with a smile, and all seems in her control.



Fig. 29: perfect round (Kashmir 2017)

Family and friends roam inside and outside the tent. Short instructions back and forth, the bubbling of *samovar*, laughter, clanging dishes, here and there children's whooping. The groom with his following is expected by tomorrow. But already today many guests will gather. A room inside the house, hands on drums and the lights turn low. To prepare for the long night before the wedding—*mainzeraat*, four of us share the first food-filled *traem*. Not easy to convince her not to push too many meat pieces towards my side of the plate. The beats of *Tumbaknaer* drums increase. One of the younger women takes the lead. Songs for the farewell of their friend, for another family making space for a new member, for two families' idea of becoming one. I can't understand all the words, but her high pitch voice's slight ironic undercurrent

feels like a sub-text to the lyrics. Dancing starts. Spinning tops around two pairs of hands holding tight. Mothers are into it. Some end up lightheaded on the floor, tittering. Another girl gets up to improvise a freestyle. Looking a bit nervous at first, but then precise moves follow. Her arms and legs form a relaxed choreography. All of a sudden the *Tumbaknaers'* rhythm change. More accentuated. Faster. Many voices join in. "*Hum kya chahte?*" The open door and window frames fill with curious men and boys of the family who are still busy outside making sure everything is prepared. "*Hum kya chahte?*" "*Aazadi*"²⁷. The sounds of the roads resonate inside the homes. From the other side of the room the girl who did the freestyle winks at me.



Fig. 30: stronghold (Kashmir 2017)

Indo Kashmir Complex. Downtown Srinagar, Nawa Bazar. The premises used to harbour a carpet factory. Sunlight throws a skewed reflection of high, narrow windows on the concrete floor of the big hall. In the early 1990s, the Indian army turned factories, town halls, guest houses, colleges, and hundreds of schools everywhere in Kashmir into detention and torture centres to control the villages and city neighbourhoods; to tortured men

²⁷ Translation from Urdu: "What do we want? Freedom."

abducted from various places²⁸. Landscapes altered through violent cartography– the carpet factory was one of such places. Some years later, a fire incident took place. People from the locality claimed responsibility, I hear. The centre got closed. These days, the long-stretched grey two-storied building in the backyard of the compound hosts several start-ups in the ground floor and half of the second floor. The other half for a few weeks during this September exhibits the work of an artist from India. Around four dozen drawings and paintings cover the bare walls. Ten years ago the artist’s engagement with Kashmir started.²⁹ After some time, she got involved with local artists and journalists and an organization of families who keep confronting the Indian government with questions about the thousands of enforced disappearances of the now nearly three decades of Emergency State.³⁰ Several elderly women have accompanied the painter and stand next to her while the exhibition is opened.



Fig. 31: endurance (Kashmir 2017)

²⁸ <http://jkccs.net/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/TORTURE-Indian-State%E2%80%99s-Instrument-of-Control-in-Indian-administered-Jammu-and-Kashmir.pdf>. (accessed: 13 September 2019)

²⁹ <http://immersive.himalmag.com/kashmir-a-metaphor-of-pain>. (accessed: 13 September 2019)

³⁰ <https://thewire.in/politics/parveena-ahangar-imroz-parvez-awarded-norway-rafto-prize-2017-human-rights>. (accessed: 13 September 2019)

How do you memorialize something that is at the same time still on-going? People start walking along the walls. I look at the artist. How these last ten years must have been for her? She is in conversation next to the frame with pencil sketched stone pelters and soldiers made from news clippings. Somehow, despite the fact that they are created through realistic technique, the soldiers appear like templates to me. Why does one continue working on one place for so many years? Yet, the first time she travelled to Kashmir is only now, together with her daughter, her mother, and the paintings. I stop in front of the one with skeletons in the forest. Did she have the unmarked mass graves in mind with several thousands of bullet-ridden or mutilated bodies that could be located all over the valley, and in Doda, Poonch, Rajouri, and Reasi districts in Jammu province, next to fields, schools, and homes, just some years ago?³¹

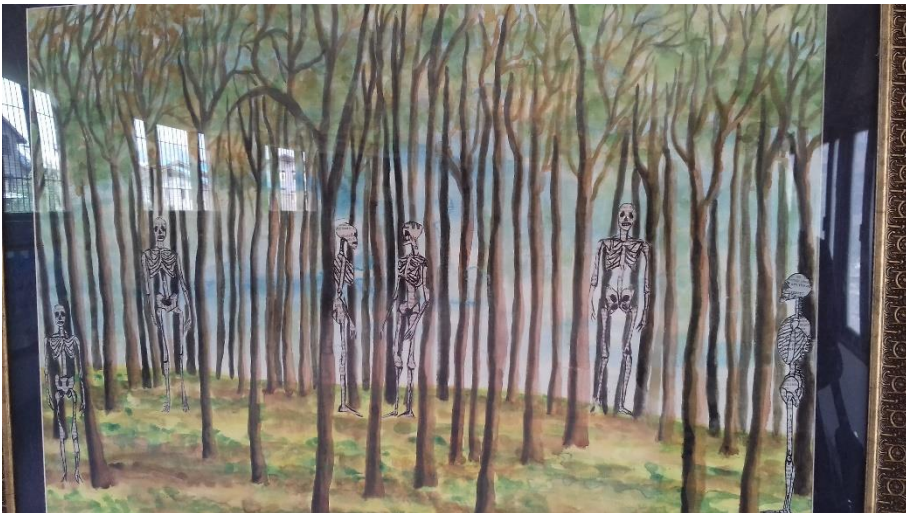


Fig. 32: behind bars (Kashmir 2017)

The findings of years long investigative work of lawyers from a Kashmiri civil society organization forced the Indian state and its army to at least provide a few confessions.³² Though, when I try to find further legal follow-up's,

³¹ https://jkccs.files.wordpress.com/2017/05/buried-evidence-_report-on-mass-graves.pdf. (accessed: 13 September 2019)

³² <https://jkccs.files.wordpress.com/2017/05/facts-under-ground-first-report-on-mass-graves-in-kashmir.pdf>. (accessed: 13 September 2019)

nothing can be found in the Indian media. People for sure laugh at you when you try to imagine a world without armies. Do they also laugh when you wonder about the implications of a marketing concept like that of ‘incentives’ applied in the context of state-employed army personnel whom we have assigned authority over death and life through impunity laws?³³ Counting bodies? I look at the painting again and wonder who for me would be the ‘real’ skeletons in a place like Kashmir.



Fig. 33: chroniclers (Kashmir 2017)

“Welcome to the ghost valley”³⁴. My fingers turn a brittle page. On the left side of the desk rests a pile of folders with Kashmiri daily papers from 1993, June till October. The archive’s racks are cluttered, chronology maintained in large parts. On the right side a window front. Wind fizzes through a gap. Down in the courtyard, I see the chairs circle, where earlier I had coffee with some members of the Kashmir University student union. Soon after the beginning of the Emergency, the Indian state has officially banned the

³³ <http://america.aljazeera.com/multimedia/2015/3/the-ghosts-of-machil.html>. (accessed: 13 September 2019)

³⁴ Greater Kashmir, 29th August 1993.

union. "Our school is the road," one of them told me. And on the road, they and others are often. These days, for example, to protest against the ongoing illegal detention of hundreds of fellow students and (school going) boys who are in prison since last year's mass uprising. From the table diagonally opposite, an employee of the Allama Iqbal Library, checking something on the monitor in front of him, nods in my direction over pulled up shawl. Now and then, he turns the front of his gas heater with his foot slightly towards me. I open another folder, June 1993. There seems to be no day with no crackdown by the Indian troopers, looking for Kashmiri rebels, while alongside using the opportunity to loot and vandalize many of the houses they barge into and search. Again, a newspaper headline reads "Operation Bhoot". *Bhoot* means ghost in Urdu and Hindi. In the papers of summer 1993, I find Kashmiri journalists reporting from across the valley about the "appearance" of what they describe as long-nailed, shrouded, uncanny sound making figures, trying to barge into people's houses after dark and molest the residents. Apparently, for weeks neither the government nor the general public could make any genuine catching of these nocturnal 'ghosts'. Difficult to imagine in a place, where with over 600000 stationed soldiers and curfew-bound nights normally the tiniest movement on the road attracts the attention of the eyes inside the bunkers. On the following page, an article talks about the brigades people started forming to patrol their neighbourhoods on their own. An image comes to my mind from last year's newspaper. A group of armed forces marching on the road on the way to work, the soldier closest to the camera wearing a Skeletor mask. "Whenever some persons amongst the affected localities have tried to wrestle down and capture the '*bhoot*', it has managed to get either inside a security forces bunker or boards a security forces gipsy readily available for him"³⁵.

³⁵ Greater Kashmir, 19th August 1993.



Fig. 34: sentinel (Kashmir 2017)

Their front gate is not like usually open. The bell reacts with a faint ring. Steps coming closer, accompanied by a ‘clack’ sound. He peers through the crack in the door. Unlocks. “Are you a braid chopper?” We both laugh and hug. “There is a door code now normally”. When we walk the short distance through the yard towards the house, the long stick in his hands goes clack, clack over the ground. On the veranda, the cat that lives with them and usually gives everyone a hard time entering the house without him whizzing in, does he today somehow look alert as well? Inside, the mother welcomes me with her familiar humour. “Didn’t you write three weeks ago you will come over in two days?” I make her let me prepare the salad for the dinner. Family discussions. Accounts of unidentified assailants breaking into houses and chopping off women’s hair had reached from Delhi and neighbouring states during the summer. Till September, the ‘phenomenon’ had travelled all the way up to Jammu, Kashmir and Ladakh³⁶. During the last weeks here, I have seen dozens of newspaper and social media pictures of fists clapping braids. There has been another incident in this locality on the day before yesterday, reported by a young woman. Her description of the intruder: a black masked figure, black trousers, black pointed boots.

³⁶ <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/asia-pacific/kashmir-gripped-by-fear-of-braid-chopper/943881>. (accessed: 13 September 2019)

Apparently, the person had managed to enter the family's house. The woman said she had fought back. He wasn't successful in cutting her hair. But she showed the marks his blade had left on her cheeks and lower arms. According to one Kashmiri daily over 240 cases have been reported in the valley alone. "One was hiding under a bed, imagine. Bloody pigs", the mother curses through clenched teeth, while pulling out wet clothes from the washing machine. She wants me to accompany her for hanging out the laundry. When she leaves the kitchen, she grabs a stick. Upstairs she tells me to check all the rooms. My first reaction: I want to grin and console her. Then while doing what she asked for, going through room after room, I try to imagine how in a lot of places all over Kashmir, people might do exactly the same thing, keep checking their homes, rooms, inside wardrobes, under their beds, in the evenings, or also again and again during the day, armed with sticks or other tools. Till now, police could not identify a single perpetrator. And people have started patrolling the neighbourhoods on their own. Gates and doors remain shut.³⁷ Later in the night, the father is out on the road. Noise has woken him up. We rush to the windows. A few minutes later he returns. No braid choppers, but army out for their night raid. The soldiers pick up several people whom they had seen protesting during the day in the *mohalla*. Afterwards, I lay awake listening. The solid clay walls all of a sudden feel thin enough to even hear the hair off the outside roaming dogs scratching along the house.

³⁷ <https://kashmirilife.net/ghosts-90s-back-45975/>. (accessed: 13 September 2019)

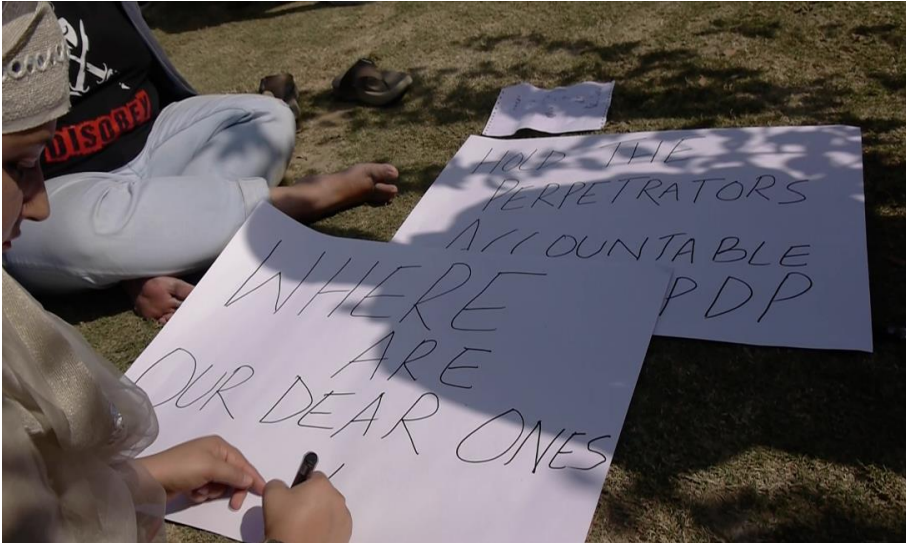


Fig. 35: unflinching (Kashmir 2017)

“Justice for Manzoor and Nasrullah”, she writes in capital letters on a white cardboard. They have gathered in Pratab Park, which is part of Srinagar’s Lal Chowk. Since the beginning of the armed rebellion and subsequent counterinsurgency in 1989 around 8000 to 10000 Kashmiris have been subjected to enforced disappearance by the Indian army³⁸. On the 10th of every month, since 1994, family members have organized a sit-in protest in Lal Chowk to remember and claim the whereabouts of the ones disappeared.³⁹ The Lal Chowk, or Red Square, is one of the central places in Srinagar. Kashmiri freedom fighters in their anti-colonial and anti-Dogra struggle against the last by British deployed governors gave it its name. It is the place where in August 1947 Mahatma Gandhi had no “hesitation in saying that the will of the Kashmiris was the supreme law in Kashmir and Jammu”; (Noorani 2013) where three months later, in November 1947, the first prime minister of an independent India promised the people from Kashmir a plebiscite. “The fate of Kashmir will ultimately be decided by the people. It is not only a pledge to the people of Kashmir but to the world. We will

³⁸ <https://jkccs.files.wordpress.com/2017/05/half-widow-half-wife-apdp-report.pdf>. (accessed: 13 September 2019)

³⁹ <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/kashmir-widows-launch-calendar-remember-disappeared-190127000143885.html>. (accessed: 13 September 2019)

not, and cannot back out of it.”⁴⁰ It is the place where, in 1993, around 1500 Jammu & Kashmir policemen staged protest marches against the torture and killing of one of their colleagues by the Indian Army. Through Operation “Police Control Room” the mutiny was crushed by the Indian forces after a week⁴¹.

Another cardboard. “Where are our dear ones?” Manzoor Ahmad Khan and Nasrullah Khan, are two farmers and herders hailing from the frontier district Kupwara, village Diver, overlooked by a garrison of the Indian Rashtriya Rifles 27. People say it is one of the places where you still can find *begaar*, forced labour, which can mean villagers have to construct and maintain bunkers and residential buildings for Indian soldiers without getting paid. On the morning of 31st of August 2017, both men when moving to the foothill meadows where during summer they graze their livestock, first they had to pass through the garrison to produce their identity cards. They were asked to come in. The newspapers write the Army was looking for information about the hideouts of Kashmiris fighting against the Indian army. Nasrullah Khan was found outside the camp the same evening. “Third-degree torture”, according to a local police official, anonymous. In the hospital, they diagnosed kidney failure. “We sold our cow and horse for our father’s treatment,” according to Nasrullah Khan’s son, 13 years old. The other man, Manzoor Ahmad Khan, till date, remains disappeared.⁴² She continues writing, “Hold the perpetrators accountable”.⁴³

⁴⁰ <https://mronline.org/2010/11/29/nehru-on-kashmir/> (accessed: 13 September 2019)

⁴¹ <https://kashmirlife.net/april-28-1993-when-army-disarmed-rebellious-cops-in-kashmir-103546/>. (accessed: 13 September 2019)

⁴² <https://scroll.in/article/849844/disappearance-of-a-man-in-north-kashmir-leads-to-allegations-of-torture-forced-labour-against-army>. (accessed: 13 September 2019)

⁴³ <https://jkccs.files.wordpress.com/2017/05/alleged-perpetrators.pdf>. (accessed: 13 September 2019)



Fig. 36: family (Kashmir 2017)

The Lal Chowk is also a place where journalists protest in support of one of their young colleagues, who because of his journalistic work has been in custody of the Indian National Investigation Agency since months, on charges of “conspiring to wage war against the government of India”. And today, on an International Human Rights Day, it is a place where the families again try to gather to protest against the practice of enforced disappearance, despite Indian army and Kashmiri police having shut down the whole area. Some people from the media also manage to get through the cordon till Press Colony. Cameras start shooting. “Until my son dies or I die, the search will continue.”⁴⁴ When the work is done, people pack their equipment or roll their placards and disperse.

⁴⁴ <http://www.wandemag.com/interview-parveena-ahangar/>. (accessed: 13 September 2019)



Fig. 37: line-up (Kashmir 2017)

Old trees man the road. In summers, I imagine them to be like a green tunnel. Earlier this highway connected Srinagar with Muzaffarabad. Now a borderline is cutting through; Muzaffarabad being part of by Pakistan controlled Kashmir. Crowded army busses rush by. I stop counting when they seem to become as numerous as the trees. Sleet slides down the wind-screen. The Baramulla turning to our right. The colony they live in is located a few kilometres west of the town centre. Some years ago, together with others, as part of a resettlement program of the Indian government for Kashmiri Pandits, the Hindu community of Kashmir, they moved from Jammu back to the valley (Duschinski 2017, Kaul 2016, Rai 2011, Kaul 2012). A guard opens the gate for us. Arranged in long rows parallel to the river, the flat-roofed, two-room houses are all white and plain. I see only one, which someone has painted in light blue colour. Most of the entrances are framed by a small garden patch. Remains of *pudina*, *haakh*, and *makay*⁴⁵ between dry leaves. It's the weekend when a group of handymen moves from unit to unit to make the plasterboard walls more winter fit. Window sashes wide open, she hands over the interior of their sleeping room to us standing outside. Her husband and one of the neighbours push the remaining furniture towards the centre of the room. The other room and the kitchen are already cleared. Walls ready for the workers. Their belongings rest in neat

⁴⁵ Translation from Kashmiri: Mint, collard greens, and maize

piles on several spread-out carpets and blankets next to the colony's fence. I adjust a bundle of school books between some clothes. Behind the wire mesh, a sling of the Jhelum is visible. But this whole stretch of the river doesn't look like the Jhelum anymore. Grey machines in the water roar day and night, extracting hills of sand and pebbles and transform the landscape into an edgy, monochrome geology. Grey November sky reflects in a grey river. I didn't ask them why they chose to move to a colony. They say that they might build a small house on the land the family has kept, after some years maybe. When night sets in, their son and me light a bonfire and roast pieces of maize from the gardens. Through the open door, we can hear low-pitched sounds of the harmonium. Whenever I came to meet them, I saw him playing, eyes closed. We move closer to the fire. His son turns the skewers. He visits one of the local schools here, two years left till college. His parents think he is still too young to tell him too much about this place' past and present. And I wonder if he not already must have come to know more than they assume.



Fig. 38: shelter (Kashmir 2017)

“*Aapko mallum hain, Lhasa restaurant kahã hai?*” (“Do you know where the Lhasa restaurant is?”). He nods, stows his earplugs in a pocket, and reaching back, opens the rickshaw door from inside. The thick plastic cover pretends to give shelter against the cutting winter wind. I try to use my sleeves to warm my hands. When he turns around to offer me his basket of coals, the young man’s eyes are hardly visible under the pulled down hood. Over the rising warmth, the blood in my fingers starts prickling. I pass the *kãger* back together with one of the walnuts I have found in my pocket. We chew and drive on. He drops me after Dalgate, at one of the *ghats* where a few *shikara* drivers at the shore of the Dal lake are waiting for some last passengers who dare to come out for a boat ride despite dusk and freezing temperatures. His car is already waiting there. Destination Ganderbal. We head around the lake, towards the Nishat gardens and further in direction of the Hazratbal shrine. Where water ends and where the sky begins is today just defined by a thin strip of pale land, which itself looks like it is about to dissolve. A single boat is sailing in-between. His phone rings. I can hear a female voice. “*Meynish haiz chu tuhund battwe*” (“I have your wallet”). “*Nahenz, mey haiz chu battwe paneshish*” (“No, mine is with me.”), he replies. He hesitates. And looks at me, slightly confused. “Where is your wallet?” “Why? I have it. It’s with me.” My hand checks the left pocket of my *pheran*. Empty. How? I try to reconstruct: You paid in the haberdashery, also the man with the rickshaw, but then... the wallet must have been there, he must have passed it on? ...this woman on the phone? Or she found it? But how then? There is a faint memory of some visiting cards sticking next to the credit card. Also one of a friend in Ganderbal. The friend we are on the way to meet right now. (He later confirms). The woman who helped me out will, two days later when I pick up my wallet, even refuse an invitation for a cup of tea. “I just returned what is yours.” We drive on. Music sounds from the car radio: „*Raat haneri nadi thathan maardi, ariye ariye haan ni ariye.*”⁴⁶

⁴⁶ A line from the song Paar Chanaa De, by Shilpa Rao & Noori, Episode 4, Coke Studio Season 9, “The night is deathly dark. The river waves surge high around us. Oh listen, girl, don’t be stubborn.”



Fig. 39: indistinct (Kashmir 2017)

Roadside shops are closing down one by one. In front of us, several young men hop on maybe today's last bus home. How they cling to the rear of the crowded vehicle somehow reminds me of another Kashmiri man. During the by-election in Kashmir in spring 2017, to keep protesters at bay, an Indian army Major had trussed a civilian to the front of his jeep. For around five hours the man was used by this Major as a 'human shield' while driving through the villages of the constituency.⁴⁷ "This is a proxy war, and a proxy war is a dirty war. It is played in a dirty way. That is where innovation comes in,"⁴⁸ says the chief of the Indian army when he honours the same Major some days later with a medal for his "innovation and sustained efforts".⁴⁹

⁴⁷ <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/major-involved-in-kashmir-jeep-row-awarded-army-chief-s-commendation-card/story-iYbtHFUy3GZhZIRP26j4UN.html>. (accessed: 13 September 2019)

⁴⁸ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/may/29/india-army-chief-kashmir-protests-man-tied-to-vehicle>. (accessed: 13 September 2019)

⁴⁹ <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-40103673>. (accessed: 13 September 2019)



Fig. 40: towards home (Kashmir 2017)

A Delhi spokesman from the ruling BJP party soon after picks up this ‘innovation’. Via his online business outlet ‘T-Shirt Bhaiya’ he is selling the into an illustration converted picture of the Kashmiri man tied to the bonnet of an army jeep. Printed on a T-shirt. Its caption reads “Indian army is saving your ass whether you like it or not”⁵⁰. Several thousands of them, at a prize of 495 Indian rupees, have already been sold, according to the man “wearing one’s patriotism on one’s chest”. The by-election’s turnout in Kashmir, with around 200 instances of protests and eight people who got killed, was found to be seven per cent, the lowest participation in the last 30 years.⁵¹

The bus stops next to a junction. Some of the men jump down from the rear while we take over. Twilight turns to night. “*Kacchiyaan da hunda kacha anjaam ni, eh gal’aam ni*”⁵² the speakers sounds fade out. First lights of Ganderbal appear ahead.

⁵⁰ <https://thewire.in/rights/bjp-leader-kashmir-human-shield-t-shirt>. (accessed: 13 September 2019)

⁵¹ <https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/crucial-by-polls-underway-in-srinagar-delhi-and-7-other-states-10-points-1679074>. (accessed: 13 September 2019)

⁵² A line from the song *Paar Chanaa De*, by Shilpa Rao & Noori, Episode 4, Coke Studio Season 9, “The unsound can only reach an unsound end. This is a truth known to all.”

While writing the last paragraphs, the blossoms of the cherry trees outside have turned into the pink greyish mud like layers on the road. I'm thinking of returning to Kashmir in summers.

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