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Springtime in Kashmir: A Tale of Two Protests

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The Kashmir valley experienced a painful, unsuccessful armed movement for national self-determination against Indian rule from 1989-2002. [1] While a ceasefire was declared in 2002, Kashmir's political future continues to be mired in uncertainty, caught between the national interests of Pakistan and India. Despite the end of the armed struggle, the vast majority of Kashmiris aspire to the yet-unfulfilled promise of self-determination (azaadi). The Indian state responded to the movement for self-determination, not as an indigenous struggle for political autonomy, but rather, as cross-border terrorism.[2] As such, the significant militarization of Kashmir has been, and continues to be, justified on the grounds of protecting the Indian nation-state's territorial integrity. The Indian state's repressive response to Muslim "terrorists" in Kashmir has been further buttressed by a continuing global "war on terror," leading Kashmiri activists and political figures to, in turn, reevaluate their strategies of protest away from an armed movement to mass street protests.

In this post, I reflect on the multiple temporalities that characterize militarized everyday life in Kashmir, including how these affected my own ethnographic field experience. In the process, I think through two rather different kinds of public "events" to understand how militarization is conceptualized and temporalized. Finally, I introduce another temporality—that of ethnographic writing—which I suggest has the potential to hold these events in tension, while also deviating from them in important ways.

1. Catastrophic time

This spring has been unusually difficult for Kashmiris. This is saying a lot, for a people living in an uninterrupted state of emergency since 1989, in one of the most militarized places on earth. One of the challenges I have faced as an anthropologist working in Kashmir is how to write about the mundane in a context where catastrophic events occurred frequently and unexpectedly. Beth Povinelli writes that "catastrophic" events are those which "seem... to necessitate ethical reflection and political and civic

engagement” (2011: 13-14). Meanwhile, medical anthropologists have also emphasized the significance of the “everyday” or what I call *mundane time*.

One such catastrophic event occurred this past February. On a Saturday morning, Kashmiris awoke to the news that Afzal Guru, a 43-year old Kashmiri man convicted of “aiding and abetting” an armed attack on the Indian parliament in December 2001, was secretly executed in a jail in Delhi. Guru had spent [the last twelve years in solitary confinement](#), in the company of Sartre and other French existentialists. In 2005, the Indian Supreme Court judgment which gave Guru three life sentences and a double death sentence, arguing that although there was only circumstantial evidence against him, “the collective conscience of the society will only be satisfied if...capital punishment is awarded to the offender” (Appeal 373-375 of 2004). Despite serious doubts cast on the veracity of the case built against Guru by legal [experts](#) and commentators, the execution went ahead.

While Indian TV channels and newspapers accompanied the news story with a lurid graphic of a noose around Guru’s neck, Kashmiri protestors held up photos of Guru looking peaceful and pensive, with a *kaffiya* wrapped around his head. The images below exemplify the existence of two Afzals, materialized through their rather different physical appearances.



Fig 1: News of Afzal Guru’s hanging broadcast on an Indian national English-language channel.

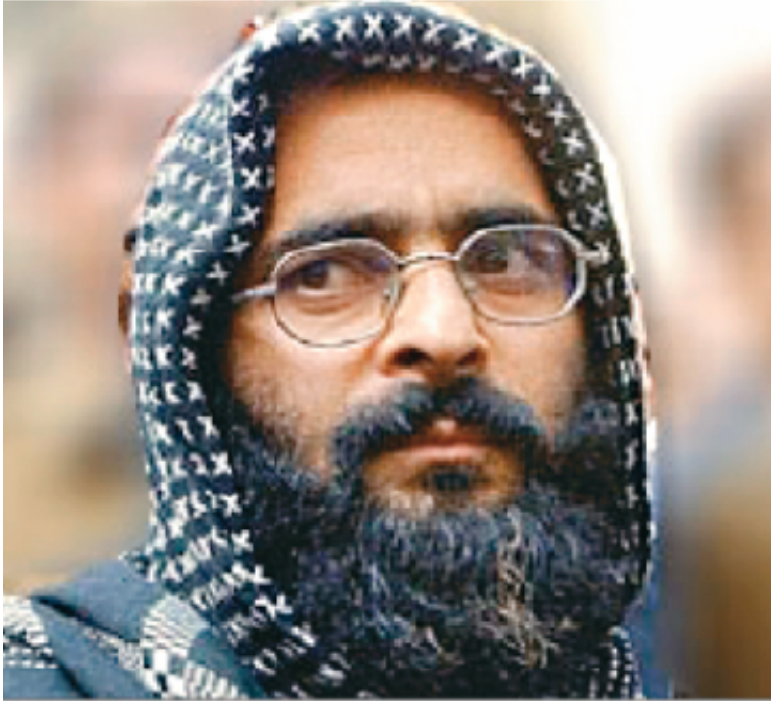


Fig 2: The image of Afzal Guru widely circulated in Kashmiri newspapers and blogs.

Guru himself may not have been surprised by this bifurcation. In a [2006 interview](#), he was asked how he wanted to be remembered. He said, “As Afzal, as Mohammad Afzal. I am Afzal for Kashmiris, and I am Afzal for Indians as well, but the two groups have an entirely conflicting perception of my being.” For Kashmiris, the execution and its aftermath made explicit the alienation between India and Kashmir in an intimate, profoundly personal way, as the Indian state refused to return Guru’s body to his family. As [Mirza Waheed](#), a Kashmiri writer put it, the decision to bury Afzal Guru in Tihar jail exemplified how even a “Kashmiri corpse can be seditious.” Perhaps unsurprisingly for anthropologists, Guru’s death did not signal the end of his life: rather, the Indian state’s refusal to return his body produced new forms of political action.

After the news of Guru’s hanging, mass protests broke out in Kashmir. In response, the Indian military imposed curfew for days. Local newspapers and cable TV networks were blocked, and 185 out of 252 ATMs in the valley were put out of commission. Despite the restrictions on movement (curfew in Kashmir implies restriction on movement as well as time), a group of Kashmiris erected a tombstone for Guru over an empty grave in Mazar-e-Shuhada, the main Martyr’s Graveyard. The Urdu epitaph read, “The martyr of the nation, Mohammad Afzal Guru...whose mortal remains are lying in the custody of the Government of India. The nation awaits its return.” Meanwhile, most Indians digested the event as a triumph of justice. I tried, but was unable to read many of the comments on major

Indian news sites; their celebratory, high-pitched tone was unbearable, even though I was 7000 miles away and outside the crisis-time.

2. Mundane time

Some weeks later, a seemingly different news story from Kashmir caught my attention. This time, media outlets reported that counterfeit versions of the antibiotic Amoxicillin Trihydrate were supplied en masse to several hospitals in the capital, Srinagar. Laboratory tests of the pills, Maximizen 625 and Curesef, which are supposed to contain 500 mgs of Amoxicillin each, showed no traces of the antibiotic. According to some accounts, over 200,000 pills had been distributed to hospitals in Kashmir the previous year and had possibly attributed to the deaths of [hundreds](#).

A number of professional medical organizations and political parties called for a statewide shutdown (*bandh*) on May 6 to protest the sale of spurious drugs. One of Kashmir's leading political figures linked the government's supply of spurious drugs as a "conspiracy [by the Indian government] to carry out genocide" against Kashmiri civilians. Unlike the protests after Guru's death, however, the protests against spurious drugs were [halfhearted](#). Newspapers reported that despite calls for a shutdown, only one of Srinagar's main marketplaces remained closed; the rest of the city functioned "normally." As the story unfolded, it became increasingly focused on systemic corruption and governmental neglect. [Government documents](#) revealed that the Drug and Food Control Organisation (equivalent to the US FDA) took more than three years to test samples of medicines.

Several news articles also reported how the scandal tapped into widespread fears surrounding biomedical technologies, particularly pills, in Kashmir. As one government employee [explained to a journalist](#), "One trusts nothing in Kashmir these days. If a committee of senior doctors by the government can purchase fake drugs, what stops retail drug shops from selling spurious medicines?" I had encountered such suspicion first hand while observing interactions between mental health experts and patients. I learned that despite complaints by medical professionals that Kashmiri patients were irrationally desirous of pills, there was intense circumspection and doubt surrounding their consumption.

For example, patients often questioned the efficacy of pills based on the fact that although "branded" and "generic" drugs reportedly had the same active ingredients, there was a significant price difference between them. "How can one drug cost 15 rupees and the other drug cost 150

rupees, and they be the same thing?” one of my interlocutors asked rhetorically. In general, if they could afford them, patients preferred foreign pharmaceutical brands over their Indian counterparts. However, doubts over pills were not limited to their material or ontological form. Patients also identified pills as permeable objects, transmitting the nefarious intentions of corrupt medical practitioners. In this sense, biomedicine was not viewed as a neutral or universal form of knowledge, but rather, was shaped—and corrupted—by its social and economic context; in this case, Kashmir’s endemic corruption (Schaffer 2005).

3. The *longue durée*

It feels odd to draw a connection between these two events—the event of Afzal Guru’s execution and the report of spurious drugs—because it invariably invites a comparison. Yet in the process of ethnographic writing, we are forced to choose between such events all the time. It is perhaps worthwhile to ask: what makes an event significant, in the sense that it makes it into public consciousness and calls for ethical reflection or action? Which events are presented as self-evidently significant, and which remain under the surface?

Guru’s hanging represents a moment of shared, public mourning, a(nother) notable rupture in the history of Kashmiri-Indian relations, and one likely to be remembered by Kashmiris for generations to come. By contrast, the report of spurious drugs produced an active response only from health professionals, despite considerable efforts to mark it as a kind of public health “crisis.” I suggest that part of what made Guru’s death visible and urgent was that his death localized the cumulative suffering of Kashmiris in a singular body—and in a specific temporal moment. The knowledge of spurious drugs, on the other hand, dispersed suffering across different bodies—old and young, male and female, rich and poor. While Guru’s death provided specific knowledge about Kashmir’s suffering, the effect of spurious pills was diffuse and general.

These two moments also reveal something about the limits of our own heuristics of “catastrophic” vs. “mundane” violence, categories that are not entirely satisfying for Kashmiris either. While Kashmiris (like anthropologists) struggle to make space for everyday suffering in a context where spectacular forms of injustice are plenty, the fact is that, both events cohere within a single framework.

Many Kashmiris told me that the conflict is a disease (*bemari*). In this sense, while Guru’s death represented an important moment of localization, there were many other everyday moments where Kashmiri

patients refused such a logic of containment. In the psychiatric clinic where I conducted fieldwork, the vast majority of Kashmiri patients I spoke with refused to specify their suffering, in that they did not present symptoms specific to trauma even though they had been through a ‘traumatic’ event, such as witnessing the death of a loved one in unnatural circumstances. Patients who suffered from a range of diseases, from depression to diabetes, all shared a common symptom, that of *kamzori* or bodily weakness. While other symptoms would often be treatable through the consumption of pills, complaints of weakness did not respond to medication.

Similarly, rather than locate their suffering within a specific catastrophic event, patients preferred to speak of their daily struggles of life under occupation: how they worried about the safety of their children when they went to school, how it was impossible to be healthy in Kashmir, and how their quality of life or livelihoods had suffered because of frequent strikes and shutdowns. My questions about how the post-1989 period was different from the pre-conflict days also exceeded the timeframe of militarization I imposed: “This occupation is nothing new,” many said, “We have been colonized for 400 years,” referring to previous colonizations of Kashmir by Mughal, Afghan, Sikh, and Hindu rulers.

4. Ethnographic time

What does it mean to do fieldwork in these intersecting temporalities? In practical terms, it meant navigating security checkpoints, unruly traffic, and gun-wielding soldiers on the streets, accounting for days of unexpected protests, strikes, or curfews, and attending to not one but two simultaneous calendars, the “official” calendar of the Indian state agencies, and a “protest” calendar published weekly by a Kashmiri separatist political organization.

My research, which examines trauma-related psychiatric and humanitarian interventions in Kashmir, was profoundly shaped by this unsteady, and at times, dual reality. During my fieldwork, in June 2010, major street protests erupted after reports of a fake “encounter”^[3] killing by the Indian army surfaced. As the numbers of civilian casualties mounted, more protests took place to commemorate the dead, fueling a cycle of violence that lasted till October. The international and national Indian press was awash with images reminiscent of Palestine, of *kaffiya*-wearing youth hurling stones at an Indian paramilitary force that responded with gunfire and teargas. When the protests gradually dissipated, 124 protesters—most of them young—had been killed and the months of strikes and curfews had

paralyzed social and economic life in Kashmir once again.[\[4\]](#)

At the time, I told myself that the first-hand experience of curfew was important to what I was writing, and in a way, encapsulated what Kashmiris had been going through for the past twenty years. In my field journal, I carefully chronicled my feelings of imprisonment—I felt I truly understood the meaning of “cabin fever”—since there were days when I wasn’t allowed to leave the house at all. At the same time, as a non-Kashmiri, I was fully shielded from the dangers and tribulations of the streets. I never felt personally threatened during my time in Srinagar, and in any case, I had the luxury of hopping on a plane to Delhi at any given time. I was not living in a different place, but I was in a different time, fieldwork time, temporary time.

I felt a sense of immediacy, often corroborated by Kashmiri interlocutors who used 2010 as a badge of my authenticity: “You were there,” they would say, “so you *know*.” Yet the strange sense of accomplishment I derived from my presence was always tempered with the acknowledgement that the writing process would take me far away and leave me behind.[\[5\]](#)

As much as “catastrophic” events such as Guru’s death drew me back in, there were people and narratives that pulled me away. I became interested in those events that existed below the surface and seemed a necessary part of how Kashmiris experienced and understood suffering in the *longue durée*. It is a suffering that becomes almost invisible, yet still palpable, although in a less-localized yet equally significant way. In accounting for these different histories and temporalities, ethnographers will do well to remember that ethnographic time is itself not unified. It has its own strange temporality. To paraphrase Marilyn Strathern, it is produced by alternating between the time of “being there” (present) and “being here” (absent). In this sense, rather than think of ethnographic time as encompassing these other temporalities, I’d like to think that we are bobbing along besides them.

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[1] I use the shorthand “Kashmir” to refer to a geographical region within the Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir, otherwise known as the “Kashmir valley.” This region is controlled by India, but portions of Kashmir are also controlled by Pakistan (Pakistan occupied Kashmir or *Azad* Kashmir) and China.

[2] Many young Kashmiri men crossed over the border to Pakistan in the late 1980s and early 1990s to receive military training. However, while Indian military officials estimate the number of active militants in Kashmir to be in the hundreds, over 600,000 Indian troops maintain a presence in the valley.

[3] An encounter is a euphemism used in South Asia to describe extrajudicial killings in which the victims are described as suspected gangsters or terrorists. A fake encounter refers to death in custody or cases where unarmed victims are framed.

[4] This was not the first time that mass protests had broken out in the post-ceasefire period in Kashmir; there were also major protests during the summers of 2008 and 2009. However, the protests of 2010 and the brutal response led to an unparalleled outpouring of grief, concern, and outrage

on the part of Kashmiris, but also many Indian commentators. For the first time, there was the acknowledgement on mainstream Indian channels that something was deeply wrong in the government's policies on Kashmir.

[5] Hiro Miyazaki (2007) argues that the fear of being “left behind”—or the temporal lag that characterizes scholarly production—is what propels anthropologists to study new, so-called cutting-edge subjects.

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