

The Trip To Touch The Hallowed Land

The visit to Srinagar, Kashmir in Nov. - Dec. 2002

I had been haunted and agonized by the idea that I had been unable to go back to my birthplace Kashmir for fourteen years. Darkly hallowing this idea was the anguish I felt over the death of some sixty thousand people and the driving out of the whole community of Kashmiri Pandits, the original settlers of the land, by a degraded and a dishonorable war, which has conflagrated the place for the last fourteen years and is ongoing, perpetrating the fraud of seeking to give Kashmir's Muslim inhabitants their supposedly long sought after freedom.

I made an attempt to visit Kashmir during my 2000 trip to India but was rebuffed by my flimsy planning, reinforced by half-willed ambition.

In 2002 I made good of my earlier failure, which besides other things meant riding rough-shod over well-meant advice and conventional wisdom of my relatives and friends to avoid this dangerous area . A plan to visit Srinagar, Kashmir was made and it was executed, enabling me to fulfill the long cherished longing of touching the hallowed land of my ancestors , my birthplace, and the site of my early adulthood, which now lay crassly defiled and its people deeply wounded.

The flight from Jammu to Srinagar, though of only twenty-five minutes duration, was choked with unshakable trepidation, stressed with over-controlled excitement, and buffeted with the slow release of cloaked longing. The sight of the Pir Panjal range of mountains was the sounding of the bugle of welcome to the Valley. Within minutes after the welcome call was the sight of the Valley itself - veiled with the thin veneer of clouds with enigmatic movement. The first look of

the Valley at this point from the vantage perspective of the ten-thousand feet elevation is that of a semi-real place -magnificently contoured by mountains, the valley below diffused though panoramic. The sun was shining lavishly on this day in November.

The passage through Srinagar airport security was rather too smooth, considering the danger afloat in the place. My host and I recognized each other with electric intuition, though having never met before, and we began the drive to Amira Kadal, Residency Road, Bund areas, the grand piece of the mosaic of the city of Srinagar. There was a new road coming out of the airport. Looking at a distance one noticed new construction, something which warmed my feelings in that that in spite of the life crushing upheaval of the last decade and a half the emotion to live in the inhabitants of this place persisted strongly. Getting closer to the city the presence of military posts and their frequency was one certain sign of something having gone terribly wrong with this place. The traffic in the heart of the city was heavy, again giving the impression that life was going on, in spite of the horrific situation surrounding it. The Lal Chowk, the center-square of the city, seemed to be a washed out picture of its previous glory. Beyond it, toward Partap Park, the scene seemed even feebler. The Bund, the riverside boulevard, the heaven of the evening walkers, was completely deserted, its legendary shops, I am sure, were almost completely empty. Even accounting for the winter low turnout of people, the sight seemed mournful, more perhaps because of its contrast with its past grandeur.

Traveling through the core downtown areas, some of which I was seeing for the first time, I got the chance, which I greatly wanted, to have a glimpse of the surviving real people of Kashmir. In the dilapidated structures, often bereft of light and air, almost always without the modern amenities of life, live human beings who have taken the heaviest brunt of the brutality of the last decade and a half. These are the people who by now have forgotten which side of the war they are with. Some seventy-five years ago, a great son of theirs, Sheikh Mohammad Abdullah, fought for their freedom from their historical backwardness. In 1947 they were ushered in a new age of democracy, both political and economic. In the subsequent four decades they were transformed from landless tillers to landed

gentry, from the lowest rungs of the social ladder to the top echelons of wealth and political power. But yet they were thrown into another fight for their freedom in late 80's, this time for a state based on their religion. But this fight proved to be very difficult, pulling immense sacrifices from them, and its conclusion is very much under a cloud as to whether they have any chance of winning anything of what they wanted.

The famous Kashmiri stylized walk, a picture of body coordination and intense self-consciousness, was still alive. People looked terribly preoccupied and yet seemed to walk with a purpose. They seemed not to socialize while walking. Behind their apparent calmness and focus they seemed to cloak something. What is on their minds, one wondered. Shops filled with packaged goods looked awaiting customers. Cars and micro-buses running with heavy punctuation of screeching horns and brakes, just always managing to miss pedestrians. A bizarre traffic scene, perhaps without a duplicate in the world outside India.

Frozen in time, the Srinagar downtown is a vibrant organism, where political and social emotions run deep and strong and primeval personality reigns. People are intensely involved with themselves and do not pay much attention to the other parts of the world. Their stubborn loyalty to their traditions, ideas, and emotions can not be bought off. The buck seems to stop here. Their stoic acceptance of their sufferings engendered by the political war in the area is sustained in good measure by their belief in the rightness of their political positions. The mixture of pride and stubbornness, non-conformism and fatalism, forms the essence of Kashmiri personality, which unfortunately has come to become an immense barrier in the resolution of the ongoing civil war.

River Jhelum is the centerpiece of the city of Srinagar, intertwined with the daily lives and the culture of its people. It is not sinewy like Seine in Paris or wide like Hudson in New York, but is physically more intimate with the surrounding habitation than them, like a street running through the town. During winter its water level falls significantly, exposing the unsightly shores. Three new bridges over the river have been added: Biscoe Bridge (south of the demolished Fateh

Kadal), New Habba Kadal (south of the old but still used Hubba Kadal), and New Zero Bridge (north of the still used old Zero Bridge). I was told that the statue of Tyndale Biscoe which was erected on the west end of the bridge named after him was demolished by the local people, presumably on the ground that he as a foreigner was unacceptable to the sensibilities of Islam and their culture. Biscoe was a shaft of light in the Kashmir of early last century with his creative ideas on education and the school he left has continued to remain a gleaming institution of character building and learning. The topic of the bridges reminds me of another noble soul, Bad Shah, for whom Bad Shah Bridge is named. His official name was Zain-ul-Abidin, who ruled Kashmir from 1420 to 1470. His treatment of Hindus and tolerance of Hinduism was such that his reign is considered a high-point in the Hindu-Muslim relationship since the advent of Islam in Kashmir in 1339.

Driving down the Srinagar downtown sights of the burnt Hindu houses are frequent. It is amazing to see the precision with which the fires have been extinguished just at the boundaries of the targeted houses, leaving the adjacent houses intact. Most of the burnt houses have not fully burnt, leaving the wooden structural members and the masonry at precarious positions, posing safety risks. Either Government has thought the posed danger to be insignificant or has not thought at all. The thought comes of what were the Muslim onlookers doing when the militant targeted houses were burning. The inhabitants of the adjacent or adjoining Muslim houses must have been tearing with fear of their houses catching the fire. But most likely the fire starting people must have taken care of the situation and assured the Muslim neighbors that their houses will remain safe. Also, frequently visible were the shuttered up Hindu shops which, most of them, I was told, had been by now sold to Muslims. What do Muslims feel and think when they see amidst them the burnt houses and the shuttered down shops?

There are much lesser number of people walking on the streets than before. This can be explained as an enormous number people have died, almost the entire Kashmiri Pandit community has emigrated out, and a lot of Muslim young people have also emigrated out of Kashmir, many of them going to the Middle East. The downtown looks like a semi-deserted town, with little excitement and cheer; everything seems gray, solitary, and feeble. Where is the hustle and bustle of

Habba Kadal, the tension on the streets, the excitement of the school children, the energetic solicitation of the shopkeepers, the aggressive haggling of the shoppers? The acute shortage of electric power resulting in its daily rationing does not help the stained ambiance of the place. The semi-lifelessness of Srinagar and environs, and we can venture to stretch this condition to the entire Valley, is emblematic of the decade and a half long barbaric activities in the area. The Kashmir Valley is a humanized prison-camp.

I ventured into the old Fateh Kadal area to see my ancestral home at Malik Yar. This place is now close to the new Biscoe Bridge, which replaced Fateh Kadal. Kauls had lived at Malik Yar for generations in a compound comprising several houses, which in its heyday may have amounted up to nine families. Now there was no one of them living here, though most of the buildings appeared to be on the ground. (In fact a new building had arisen on a compound, which was used as a playground by the children). A black patina had grown over some of the buildings, an effect accumulated by time. The complex seemed to echo loneliness and abandonment, neglect and unhappy times for the people living in it. I introduced myself to some young women who careened out of the windows to sight the stranger standing in their compound and photographing the structures. They appeared to be defensive in their being the new occupants of the buildings, which were once owned by my families, saying that they had moved from the immediate neighborhood. Some of the neighbors, whom I had known since the early adulthood, came out of their windows inquiring about the welfare of my other family members and inviting me to tea, a customary gesture of welcome and friendship in Kashmir and many other parts of India. I was amazed to see how even the long stretches of silence among neighbors had not dulled their ardors of friendship. Some human relationships can defy the dilution and disintegration engendered by the unwearied assault of time. Scenes of my childhood flashed in a stream of consciousness mode through me: playing, going to school, fear of elders, excitement on festivals and weddings, growing awareness of mystery of life and efforts to keep it cloaked from others, lest I be taken as a lunatic (a fear which has not completely left me even now). I tore myself from the physical backdrop of my early life as prolonging the stay, I thought, might cause a stir in the neighborhood leading to some problems with the militants. As I left I thought someday I needed to return here in greater inner tranquility to contemplate my

early life and the growth of my consciousness.

From the old Fateh Kadal area I moved to Karan Nagar, not a downtown area, and also not an old area, inhabited mostly by middle and some upper class people, mostly Hindus. It appeared to be mostly intact, viewed from its central boulevard. Furthermore, new shops have erupted in its northern section. Here I looked for my uncle's home, where I had spent a lot of time. It had become my home too as my father moved from country to country as a professional diplomat. The house was sold by my uncle in 1999. The new owner owned it for a short time only, demolishing it to construct a diagnostic center, which is a much bigger structure than the former building. Ironically, my uncle had named the house "Smiriti," a Hindi word meaning remembrance. All that was left now was the remembrance of the "remembrance." So much of human life is lived in the structure of mind, a situation commonly unappreciated by people.

While Srinagar, even in its heydays, was at best a medieval city, now it has taken the looks of an ancient city. The Dal Lake and the high mountains around it have given it a splendid backdrop for thousands of years. The city is like a poor, common looking woman, who has been dressed in a magnificent gown and a resplendent and a noble headgear, lifting her to a level of superb majesty and mesmerizing beauty. Dal Lake is serene, modest, and mystic. The mountains around it stand in a stance of frozen eternity, sentinel to the lake, their light brown luster radiating warmth and glory, standing in an obeisance to Gods. Without a visit to the lake and the several gardens fringing it the visit to the city is incomplete. It is in this spirit that I visited these places, even as I was absorbed in the tragic experience of Kashmiris in the last fourteen years.

Driving down the Boulevard toward the Moghul Gardens nothing much seemed to have changed except that more hotels and Kashmiri crafts showrooms had emerged across the road from Dal Lake. The unpaved footpath along the Boulevard remained unpaved. The lake looked forlorn. I was too focused on the general appearance of things that I paid no attention to its state of cleanliness. Even though it was sunny a thin veneer of fog covered the lake as if to defend its

privacy in these flagrant times. Not many people were either on the lake or on the Boulevered. I entered Nishat Garden after twenty-six years. I found its fame of a transcendent work of art highly exaggerated. Though it is beautiful but its beauty is more due to its setting in its surroundings than due to its intrinsic merit as a garden. Its much ballyhooed terraced layout is no wonder. The garden may have looked fabulous in Moghul era and a few hundred years after that but it has not been upgraded to the present standards of gardens and that too of famous gardens. The stonework, fountains, pathways, turf, shrubs, and flowers are crying for upgrades. Without the mystic tranquility of the lake in front of them and the grand dignity of the mountains around them, Nishat and other Mughal gardens would have been very commonplace gardens.

The gardens were deserted as expected at this time of the year. The turf had turned light brown and there were no flowers left except of one variety. In their bareness the gardens revealed the structural deficiencies they have been carrying on for a long time. I could only remember the magic they cast on me and others decades ago, when the times in Kashmir were more human and I had not been exposed to some of the other gardens in the world. A garden is an expression of human heart but woven in the strands of human mind.

I visited Palace Hotel, now bought by someone from its previous owner, Oberoi. It seemed no one was staying there at the time. What made me go there was the experience of the beautiful sight of Dal Lake, Hari Parbat, and the high mountains beyond that I had in 1988. But I found some of the trees dotting the hotel property had been allowed to grow so tall as to block some of the grand view. Furthermore, the fog on the lake and clouds in the distance had changed the scene dramatically. Same could be said about the view from Shankaracharya, the place where I went next.

As the hour of my departure from the Valley drew nearer I could not help thinking of the mood of the place. It looked as if a public mourning was going on that was hiding some loss greater than what it indicated, in public's hearts and minds. Behind a facade of life-as-usual look people were unconsciously harboring a deep

hurt, a deep loss, a break from an anchor. A state seemed to have evolved in their minds when there was no need to express their anguish, no desire to find out the agents which extinguished the flames in their lives. The people seemed to have crossed into a terrain where there was no hope at the moment and no need of regaining it. They were beyond Hamletian “to be or not to be” question and into acceptance of their existence as it was.

For my hosts my visit was a dramatic homecoming, coming as it was after a decade and a half, for which I was taking a security risk. They worked very hard to make it comfortable and secure and they were concerned every second that I enjoy it. Little could I tell them that I had not come to Kashmir to enjoy it - I could not do that even if I wanted to do it. The purpose of my visit to Kashmir was to feel the pain of the people living there who had gone through heart and home wrenching experiences in the last decade and a half, to see the destruction of the place I was born in, to rekindle the earliest memories of my life, to touch the hallowed land of my ancestors. I put in the hardest efforts I could command to cover my pain, to hide my sleepless nights. But in the end I realized that it was futile as my hosts understood what I was going through, through the invisible lens of the human heart, through the penetrating field of the human mind. When I said goodbye to them I felt as if I had known them since the first crack of my consciousness, as long back I had known the mountains surrounding Srinagar.

This journey to the ancient sources of my consciousness was surrealistic and sensitizing, opening ancient wounds and blurring new dreams, baring the fragility and the absurdity of human life, and bringing to focus once again in my long quest of the understanding of human life the power and drama of human condition.

As I sat in the plane ready to leave Kashmir I looked through the window at the brownish mountains afar. I was transported to the most ancient times of my life. Like an umbilical cord connected to a human baby at birth, Kashmir had breathed and sustained life in me not only at my birth, but directly and indirectly, throughout my life. Beyond my own life, small and insignificant that it is, were the

lives of several millions of people dependent on it both physically and mentally. I could not help feeling sorry how Gods had given this near perfect land to Kashmiris and what they did to it. A beautiful valley was turned into a torrent of blood, a benign brotherhood between Hindu and Muslim communities was transformed into a relationship of hatred and vengeance, and a tranquility in the hearts and minds of the people was replaced with perturbation of anguish and disillusionment. I was reminded of a stanza of my poem Roots:

We do not know where to begin anew -
Even, if we should begin at all,
To resume God's work,
To revive the spontaneous sparkling smiles
On the faces of a thousand gloomy children,
To let the lotuses grow unperturbed.

When the plane took off the ground I felt sorrowfully that most likely I will be unable to return to Kashmir, given the ruination Kashmir was continuing to go through, given the irreversible erosion of my own life.