

Touching The Remnants Of Time In Old Srinagar

On August 19, at about noon, I was in front of the house I was born at several decades ago. While experiencing the moment I could feel the flow of time. This was the place where the clock of my life started ticking. I was born at my maternal grandfather's house, which was inhabited by six Karihalloo brothers and their families. The joint household was so large that in the evening an attendance would be taken of the youngsters to make sure none them were missing after an afternoon of games and fun. I became the beloved grandchild of my grandfather, Dama Kaul Karihalloo, by virtue of the transference of his love for his favorite daughter, Arni, who was renowned for her fine demeanor, charming shyness, and beauty.

The Karihalloo house was located at Fateh Kadal, near Malik Angan. Relying on my photographic memory of places, I looked for the right lane to turn into, but was prevented to find it, by the changes that several decades since my last visit to my birthplace had wrought to its neighborhood. Finally, I resorted to asking people on the street for the direction to the Karihalloo house. When it seemed that no one could help me, an old man, perhaps in his 80's, confidently told me that he could help me. I requested him if he could walk me up to the house, instead of giving me its directions. He enthusiastically escorted me to my destination; without him I would have had difficulties in finding it. All the markers I had remembered for the house had been swallowed by the vortex of time. One of the salient markers of the house, the Madan house, which was in close proximity, I was unable to locate. The people living in the house after Karihalloo's had taken a good care of it, as it looked intact, as well as spruced up. I conjured up the images of the halcyon days of Karihalloos, living in familial bliss and with a strong identity, unlike most of the families in the Age Of Technology we live in. I mused on why and when I was orphaned from the clan, detached from the hub.

I went to see the house in Malikyar where I spent most of my childhood and

young adulthood, just up to the point of leaving college for a professional college outside Kashmir. I thought I knew the road from Karan Nagar to my house, having traversed it several thousand times. While the starting point was identifiable but as my taxi went along the road it changed drastically. We continued on it, not knowing any better, till we hit the new Fateh Kadal, called Biscoe Bridge; having a good idea of the location of the bridge from my previous visit, I thought I would know how to reach my house. So, the taxi driver followed my directions, until we discovered we were lost. This was a shock to my confidence. While making inquiries from the people on the street, an old man gave me the directions, but he wondered who I was. Upon giving him my identity, he got very excited, and later emotional, as he revealed his. He was our neighbor Omar Bhat, he and his family had lived across our street for decades. We hugged each other and later we met again outside our former house.

Seeing my former house I was excited but also a little disappointed, as its appearance had changed. It had a new color on the outside, as well as a new roof, the windows also appeared to have changed. I started taking pictures of the house and its environs. Khet Beni's green grocery shop was no longer there, as were not the butcher, kandar wan, Khala bisot's, and Shudhar's dry grocery shops. To say that the neighborhood had changed was an understatement; it had drastically changed. But the roads were better built, including the old feces-laden lanes. I was happy to see the lane near my house, which I used to take to go to college and other places, made pukka. In the old days, walking over it, especially in dark, was a risk I had no choice but to take. Our immediate neighbor, Khatbeni's (different from the green grocer) family, had moved to suburbs (Khatbeni herself had died in 70's). But for the mosque and woodwork shop, every other shop had changed, although the street and lane layout had remained the same. There was an open area we called bagh where we used to play, the only decent playground we had, it was now occupied by a new house. This seemed to be an encroachment from the point of view of my sentiments for the bagh. I was feeling how could they? Within a few minutes after my arrival on the scene several people gathered around me, who later I came to know were my old neighbors. Now old like me, they had changed, as I must have appeared to them. I did not recognize anyone of them, as they must not have recognized me. After introductions we were excited and the emotions gushed. Some of them wanted me

to have tea with them right away. I had to tell them that I would come another day and would be happy to spend time with them, but time is a merciless maiden who must keep you on a leash to suit her agenda.

Ghulam Mohamad Durzi, the person to whom my uncle sold our former house, was in the small group of people who surrounded me once the word went out in the mohalla that I was there. He seemed to be a fine gentleman: courteous and low-key. I asked him if I could visit my former house; he graciously invited me to visit it. We entered the house where I had spent 14 years of my early life. The years in which I came to know something of human desire, relationships, and loneliness. The years that laid the foundation of my consciousness and launched the odyssey of my search for the absolute. Here was the house where I had secretly cried, was smitten with loneliness, as I was left by my parents at my uncle's house, under the idea that remaining in Srinagar, rather than in New Delhi, where they were stationed at that time, would help my education. The seeds of my loneliness were sown earlier than they should have been. All these early experiences have contributed to what I have grown up to be now, warts-and-all.

Escorted courteously by Darzi Sahib, we went room by room in my former home. Our wut was shortened by including some of its space with the newly designed kitchen. Gone was the old earthen dhaan, replaced by a table-top type of range. The betakh had remained unchanged and the muttey koothar, the grain storage room, was where it used to be. On the second floor I passed by the koothar where I used to study. I went in the bud kuth, where my parents Babuji and Bhabi used to sleep. I looked out from one of its windows at the bazaar outside. The wooden jali below the window, where once my right hand got stuck in one of its spaces, needing an emergency intervention of someone to free it, was no longer there. Similarly, on the third floor I looked out from my uncle Papaji's bedroom. The house looked now so much smaller than it seemed to be when I lived there. Time, for a moment, seemed to have frozen, and I traversed forward and backward on its wings.

From the kaani I looked over to my uncles' houses and was shocked to see them splintered badly, as if a hurricane had smothered them. I asked my host what had happened. He explained that the destruction was the work of militants sometime back. I did not feel comfortable asking him the details, as they would have necessarily upset him. But what was surprising to me was that by 2002 these houses were purchased by Muslim families, but were yet destroyed by militants. Furthermore, the compound between our house and the uncles' houses was rife with weeds, as the lack of its use over extended time would have encouraged. The site of these houses was painful, flashing in my mind momentarily the turbulent history of the last two decades.

While going through my house a memory of an event spontaneously crossed my mind. During one afternoon in 50's I had just heard the announcement of my expected passing of the matriculation examination. Jubilantly I marched to Amira Kadal to indulge in some celebration with my friends. On the way I fell from a bicycle and broke my left arm. Seething with pain, I cancelled the celebration and walked to my matamal at Mandir Bagh to sleep off my pain. But its accentuation compelled me to visit a neighborhood hospital, Rattan Rani Hospital. Screening revealed a fracture of the elbow. Burdened with the grim news I marched to my home. Upon hearing my travail, some people present at my home that time talked about setting the elbow bones by the traditional bone setting procedure, which involved first breaking the joint in question in a rice pounding stone vat and then setting it right, of course without the use of anesthesia. I was smitten with fear at the scenario but luckily when my uncle Papaji came home he dismissed this barbaric procedure and told me he was going to take me to a hospital the following day for the scientifically established state of the art remedy.

We drove over Biscoe Bridge. Then I walked on the old Fateh Kadal, whose width has been reduced to just about 15 ft., for pedestrian use only. From there we drove toward Habba Kadal, formerly the "Times Square" of Srinagar. Passing through Chinkral Mohalla, I keenly looked for the Tarakh Halwoy shop, which sadly did not exist anymore. Again, we have the "pedestrian only" old Habba Kadal, though of full former width. There is a barrier put on the side opposite the Kanya Kadal side, for security reasons. Gone are Kapoor Booksellers and Dr.

Chagtoo's office. I walked on the old Habba Kadal and recaptured the times when I along with many boys would watch the girls returning to their homes after a day at school. For me the special moment would come when Bimla and I would stare at each other to carry on our eyes-only romance. The magic of the life on the old Habba Kadal has vanished into the layers of time.

The road between Fateh Kadal and Kralkhud , which used to be too narrow for its usage, has been widened and is of superior quality than before. At Kralkhud I looked up my relatives Shangloo's former home. I saw a woman sitting at the second floor window, which somehow disturbed my concentration to take pictures. Kashmiris have a serious problem of staring at the outsiders. They are unaware that this action is rude behavior. 99% of the times I am able to ignore it and remain focused on taking pictures. This time I momentarily lost my will, with the result I did not take all the pictures I wanted to take. Furthermore, I did not go inside the Shangloo compound, which I had keenly planned to do.

Moving on further I went to Ganpatyar, where my poofi Bengashi used to live. My former markers for the house were nowhere in sight, as the area had changed in the decades I was away. Then I got an idea that I could get the whereabouts of the Muthu household from the people inside the Ganpatyar temple. I was surprised to see the temple had a military camouflage over it and a security check post, obviously to keep the militants away, as it is one of their prime targets for bombardment. Inside the temple, I found a marble floor tile close to the steps leading to the temple idol chamber, inscribed with my poofa Dr. Dwarika Nath Muthu's name. This triggered a flashback of my noble uncle, who lived with high integrity and compassion for the destitute.

Beyond Ganpatyar we drove to Mandir Bagh, a place near Rattan Rani Hospital, where Karihalloos lived after they moved from Fateh Kadal. The place had changed drastically. The Karihalloo house had been replaced, a lane built through its garden, and the neighboring Saraf house replaced by a hotel. I remembered the happy childhood days spent at my matamaal. My foremost memory is that of my grandfather Baijee, whose acute love for me remains a treasure of my life.

Then there was the thrill of spending time with an extended family and playing in the bamzoonth bagh.

Following day I went to Amar Singh College, where I had spent three years. Its entrance gate had been moved to the far front side of its main building. Certainly an improvement. At the time of my visit there, about 9 A.M., there were not many students in it, perhaps because it was yet too early for the classes to begin. Again a change from my days.

The building looked as stately and intact as ever to my surprise, as I had expected the inexorable saw of time to have withered it. What could have avoided that in this case of a circa 1930's building? Excellent original design and maintenance. It buoyed my spirits to find that some things used to be done right in the past and then maintained right. The new entrance path bordered with slim and tall poplar trees looked graceful. Overall, the "campus" looked neat. Looking at the field where I had spent countless hours playing cricket, I saw a few cows lazily chewing grass; a not so unusual a sight in India. Some construction was going in the field. Turning to the inside of the building, the "U" contoured back side, where we spent hours waiting for the classes to start, watching girls, or just gossiping, had remained unchanged. I entered one of the unoccupied classrooms and was amazed to see that it had remained in form and shape the same as it was in 1958. It was amusing to see the department and building signs reading: Computer Lab, Health Fitness Centre, etc., the icons of modern culture.

Karan Nagar, formerly a bastion of middle class residence, has absorbed some business activity. Its central boulevard has changed to become one of the heavily trafficked roads in Srinagar. Lal Chowk is Jammu and Kashmir State's most famous square, both politically and commercially. Also, I believe, it is the widest road. But the iconic traffic island does not exist anymore. Mir Pan Shop is larger than before and continues to enjoy a special status among the businesses around it. Bund has ceased to be the exciting and fashionable boulevard that it once was, it is sparsely visited now. There are no cinema halls in Srinagar anymore; people see movies through DVDs and TV. J & K prohibition laws only allow two hotels,

Lalit Grand Palace and Broadway, to serve alcohol, and 5 state run shops to sell liquor. The latter are closed during the month of Ramadan, when I was there.

Jehlum looks sullen, as there seems to be little activity either on it or at its shores. Its muddy looking waters do not invoke a good mood either. The houses on its shores have a deserted look, with some of them splintered, strongly suggesting their ownership belonging to the Pandits who left them to go out of the state to save their lives. The idea of taking a boat ride down Jehlum that had occurred to me once remained a nonstarter after I viewed its appearance and mood.

The Old Srinagar has changed quite a bit in the last several decades. Apart from the replacement of the major bridges: Fateh Kadal, Habba Kadal, and Zero Bridge, while the old bridges still remain for restricted use, many old roads have also been replaced, and some new roads have been added. New roads are of better quality. Amira Kadal is for pedestrian traffic only.

Tongas are a relic of the old times, the auto rickshaw has taken over. In spite of the strong diktat of the militants to use burqas, Kashmiri women defied it, except some of them still use them out of their volition. Their courage is stupendous, their vision is correct. People in general use sneakers, jeans, and T-shirts. The move to suburbs is ongoing. Bemina, beyond the airport, is one of the growing suburbs. Good life concept is sinking in the people.

Shops are bursting with goods, people are bristling with energy, the arrow of time is darting forward. Kashmir is a state in flux. People want to forget the wounds of the recent past, they want to be only dealing with present and future.

The Old Srinagar, like old New York, or old London,, or old Delhi is roped in by time, circumscribed by history. It is a living museum, where the patina of time has given everything coloration, where we cannot expect any significant changes to

occur. It is only the archeologists, historians, and poets that will find things of interest there. Streets in Srinagar are as hideously dirty as they are in the rest of India. In 2008 there was a news item from Srinagar that caught international attention: that the city was considering mass poisoning an estimated 100,000 population of its stray dogs. (Human population of the city is about 900,000). I do not think that program was carried out, as I found too many dogs. A Kashmiri dog can be found lying prostrate in the middle of a busy street, which moves just enough to let a vehicle or a pedestrian pass by.

Even with having lived life on the sharp blade of a knife in the last two decades, the people are busy living their lives. There is no other way to live life but that way. Kashmiris have shown a lot of resilience, even absorbing silently their self-inflicted wounds. They have changed their history and way of living by their decisions and actions. The common man is fed up with militants, who are a miniscule of the population, who have deep and passionate belief that Kashmiri Muslims do not belong to India. For decades Kashmiris believed that they must join their co-religionist Pakistan, but in the last few years that has changed to becoming an independent nation, insurmountable practical difficulties of which have not sunk deep in their minds. But election after election they have favored the National Conference, a political party which has steadfastly espoused alliance with India over the separatists parties.

As my tour of Srinagar came to an end, I realized that I had only just touched the corners of a flower, its many layers of petals harboring the sites of my childhood and young adulthood had yet to be peeled. I did not visit my high school, the house of my friend Tej Zutshi, walk down the lane which would take me from my house in Malikyar to Habba Kadal and beyond to my college and other places. I did not walk down the road between Habba Kadal and Kralkhud where I was once mistakenly slapped for eve-teasing. I did not go to the Doctors quarters compound in the SMHS Hospital, where I spent a lot of time playing cricket. I can make amends to this incomplete tour of Srinagar of my childhood by coming to it again.

Not everything is dissolved by the mists of time, some things survive them.

Suffern, New York, October 23, 2011 www.kaulcorner.com
maharaj.kaul@yahoo.com