

Under siege, again

Kashmir: Rage and Reason

By Gowhar Geelani

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A few weeks after the state of Jammu and Kashmir was rudely stripped of the fig-leaf of a special status that sustained the myth of its integration into the Indian Union, Gowhar Geelani, a journalist of Kashmiri origin, was stopped at Delhi airport as he sought to board a flight to Germany. No reasons were given. He was simply informed, with customary bureaucratic brusqueness, that he was disallowed the right of free movement. Within republican India's constitutional scheme, Kashmir has always been an exception, not in the privileges it has enjoyed as zealots of the right-wing Hindutva camp have insisted, but in the denial of rights.

It is a time of confinement through house arrest of most of the Kashmiri political leaders who have served the cause of legitimising India's claim over Kashmir through the periodic artifice of elections. All communication is blockaded and journalists are afforded a narrow window of time at a defined location to file their dispatches.

Geelani's book, released at roughly the time that Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government was ramping up the rhetoric before its climactic act of legislative vandalism – stripping out an Article of the Constitution without the most perfunctory nod towards propriety – tells the story of a land under siege for decades. It was a time when the author grew from uncomprehending childhood to the maturity of adult judgement, when he learnt to transform the daily humiliations of life under military jackboots, into a narrative that restored dignity to an oppressed people.

Trust has never been in abundance in the relationship between India and Kashmir, and 5 August 2019 was a breaking point, when the very basis of the state's accession to India in the turbulence of Independence and Partition in 1947 was torn up. From then on, the Indian state has declared that nobody from Kashmir could be trusted to argue on its behalf. Yet it is also a time when the voice of Kashmir has begun acquiring a resonance rarely heard in the past. Geelani's story is a testament to the tortured history of a region whose oppressive despot in 1947, under siege by rebellious subjects, threw in his lot with India. It is also a chronicle of how the victims of the renewed siege under a republican order have learnt to tell their stories with resilience, irony and humour.

Geelani points out that his work stands in a wider body of Kashmiri storytelling. He suffered a denial of his right to free movement, but others among his professional peer group have suffered the ultimate consequence — as with Shujaat Bukhari's daylight murder in June 2018. Yet the voice of Kashmir is being heard like seldom before through journalists, poets, satirists, rap artistes and creative writers, some working bravely through daily hazards, others sitting at a distance and courageously speaking up for the democratic conscience.

Among Geelani's early childhood memories is being asked by Indian security personnel to read out an Urdu pamphlet circulated by one of Kashmir's rebel groups. He was a young schoolboy and could make little sense of the rhetoric. Yet in their attitude, the uniformed men forcing him to perform the deed seemed to hold him responsible for the words.

At another time, he was accused of insolence for seeking to disarm a

soldier's threatening mien with a broad childish grin. When his expression rapidly changed to fright, he was ordered not to even imagine that he could stare down the uniformed authority of the Indian state. As a child going to school, he was once asked to crawl on all fours through a security check-point. Seeking out a playing field for a game of cricket was often an arduous passage through cordons manned by hostile and suspicious soldiers.

Geelani's generation grew up reciting the alphabet in terms of the malevolent horrors they faced. A stood for 'army', B for 'bullet', C for 'curfew'. There was one occasion when his home was raided



by 20 soldiers looking for a militant from a family of six, much like his: parents, three girls and a boy. Though the mistaken identity was apparent, he was taken away as a teenage male to a police station. He was returned within a day relatively unmolested, aside from one sharp blow to the head.

For every one fortuitous escape, there have perhaps been more who have suffered debilitating torture, and that ultimate in the erasure of identity, disappearance. Nobody in Kashmir has been spared an intimate knowledge of the didactic techniques the Indian state has employed to rub in the futility of resistance. Geelani documents numerous cases of young men of accomplishment with a future to choose, opting instead for a life in the militancy, triggered by some incident of abuse. The vast number of unmarked graves that human rights agencies have unearthed, the continuing quest by wives of the disappeared – the "half widows" – and parents of young boys who have vanished without trace, are a call to conscience that state and civil society in India cannot much longer ignore.

The generation that came of age through three decades of armed confrontation from the late 1980s are the storytellers. But they constantly hark back to a specific event in history in their self-identification as the fifth generation since 1931. That was the year when Kashmir's struggle for liberation from the Dogra Maharaja's despotism flared to life after earlier efforts, notably in the shawl weaver rebellion of 1921, were extinguished. This is a recurrent theme in Geelani's narration. Today's struggles in Kashmir are contiguous with the uprising against a corrupt despot who was gifted the territory in 1853, after the collapse of the Sikh empire.

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In 1931, after decades of discrimination, the Muslim majority under the Dogra despotism exploded in rebellion. The repression that followed was brutal. In its constantly evolving strategy, the movement absorbed a diversity of influences, from the Indian independence struggle and the experiment in socialist construction in the Soviet Union. Invocations of the Muslim identity were part of the mobilisation of the liberation struggle, since religion was the basis of active discrimination. But under the influence of socialist ideologies, the movement opted for a non-confessional identity in a quest for wider solidarities.

This may have been a strategic error, not because there was any merit in confessional politics, but because of misplaced trust in the possibility of progressive politics in India. Jawaharlal Nehru's promise was what brought the acknowledged leader of 1931, Sheikh Mohammad Abdullah, into the Indian orbit. A future of secularism, equality and social justice, is what the Sheikh signed up for, ignoring provocations such as the Dogra Maharaja's brutal

massacre of Muslim subjects in the border *jagir* of Poonch, as the violence of Partition flared across the country.

The dominant narrative in Kashmir sees the Dogra atrocities as the trigger for the raid by Pakistan-armed tribesmen into the Valley, which in turn caused a panicky Maharaja to sign up with India. And then began the stream of betrayals, as right-wing politics from Jammu diffused across India, tapping into a receptive vein within Nehru's Congress, extinguishing even his firmly held democratic convictions and secular beliefs.

After dismissing the Sheikh from his position of authority in the state in 1953 and imprisoning him, Nehru wavered towards the end of his life. Riots originating in Kashmir at the end of 1963 in vicious action-reaction sequence, triggered violence in East Pakistan against the Hindu minority, unleashing a terrible retribution against people of the Muslim faith in east and central India. Debilitated by a stroke, Nehru was not told about the crumbling of his dreams, but as he returned to health, saw the writing on the wall. Sheikh Abdullah was released and authorised to travel to explore a resolution of Kashmir with the political leadership in Pakistan. The initiative collapsed with Nehru's death. After rushing back for the funeral in great distress, Sheikh Abdullah was soon returned to the carceral state by Nehru's successors.

Geelani compels his readers to get used to the legitimacy of Pakistan's political constituency in Kashmir. That affinity transcends specific political choices and debates between political camps that urge independence and those that swear by a future within Pakistan. India's approach since 1964 has been to resolve Kashmir by delegitimising Pakistan. Indira Gandhi's dismemberment of the world's only nation-state with two halves separated by an expanse of enemy territory was one such effort, which briefly pacified Kashmir and prepared the ground for Sheikh Abdullah's capitulation. Civil society in India has since then persistently refused to confront the reality that the constitutional promises of equal citizenship and religious neutrality have been egregiously violated. Kashmir's eruption in 1989 was an outcome foretold by India's multiple acts of betrayal of its own constitutional promises.

A return to sanity was briefly promised in 2003, when Atal Behari Vajpayee in the first public gathering addressed by an Indian prime minister in Kashmir in 15 years, held out a "hand of friendship" to Pakistan. That was a false dawn. It involved an effort by two nations with deeply insecure egos, to pretend that Kashmir was an issue of shared humanity. It faltered when the political leadership in the two countries – in 2008 in the case of Pakistan, 2014 in the case of India – fell back into the moulds they had been nurtured on.

For India today, Kashmir is all about seeking to externalise a deep-seated existential problem, by hurling cheap jibes such as "Terroristan" at the neighbouring state. That strategy may win the insecure nationalist ego some brief gratification. The greater challenge comes from a brutally subjugated people. And in their reaction to the constitutional vandalism of 5 August 2019, the people of Kashmir are discovering a new resolve that restores the 1931 spirit. Their new strategy of resistance could soon inflict impossible and unacceptable moral costs on India. ■