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ARTICLE (PEER-REVIEWED)

## Silent Narrative: Bringing Srinagar to New Delhi

**Rishabh Bajoria**

Jindal Law School, India. [rishabhbajoria1804@gmail.com](mailto:rishabhbajoria1804@gmail.com)

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This article proposes a public history project which creates a Srinagar marketplace in Connaught Place, New Delhi. The central aim of the project is to lay bare that the Indian presence in Kashmir is a colonial one, enforced by making the Kashmir Valley the single-most militarised zone in the world. Kashmir is also an important arena to test the Indian State's actions against its claims to being the world's largest liberal-democracy, which finds 'unity in diversity'. India's actions in Kashmir, the only Muslim majority State in the country, is an example of diversity and unity being maintained through the bayonet, rather than the ballot box. The ideal museum visitor for the project is the middle-class/caste Indian. This demographic uses its greater access to the public sphere to air vitriol around Kashmir, often dismissing any resistance to the Indian State as a conspiracy sponsored by the eternal bogeyman, Pakistan. This project aims to viscerally bring home how occupation strips its subjects of dignity. Hopefully, this will help the visitor better understand the rage of Kashmiris against Indian colonialism, whether expressed through peaceful dissent or armed insurgency.

In the first section, I describe the narrative around Kashmir in the Indian mainstream. This narrative flourishes under the aegis of the State, with departures from, or challenges to the narrative met with State sanction. Drawing on Haitian historian Michel-Rolph Trouillot, I highlight the 'silences' which are central to the coherence of this narrative.<sup>1</sup> These silences are demonstrated through a review of both the academic historiography of the subject, and the popular imagination of Kashmir. Overall, the mainstream narrative seeks to assimilate Kashmir within India as an 'integral part of the nation'. A cartographic image of 'Mother India' [Bharat Mata] plays a pivotal role in achieving this in the popular imagination. On the other hand, academic historiography silences Kashmiri history pre-1947, and helps frame events in the Valley as a bilateral dispute between India and Pakistan.

In the second section, I describe my public history project, which seeks to uncover the silences in the Indian historiography of Kashmir. It points out that the contemporary

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unit of 'Jammu and Kashmir' was created by the British Colonial State in 1846 for largely administrative reasons. The argument that 'Kashmiri' self-determination is an incoherent concept because of the diversity of Jammu and Kashmir is somewhat subverted by this historical fact. Similarly, the project highlights the Kashmiri resistance movement against the Dogras since 1931, which calls the legitimacy of the 'Instrument of Accession' into question. Further, the project seeks to recreate the normalcy of occupation phenomenologically, through a heavily militarised street with various check-points. Therefore, it seeks to give citizens of the Metropolis a taste of the colonial medicine handed out to Kashmiri subjects, often in their name and with their complicity.

## Mainstream/State Narrative

### ACADEMIA

It is impossible to accurately represent the vast historiography on a complex issue like Kashmir in this short section. However, I will highlight some common silences in the Indian historiography of Kashmir, because 'history reflects the period in which it was written'<sup>2</sup>. Most historical works on Kashmir produced in Indian academia take the 1947 Partition as their departure point.<sup>3</sup> Like all departure points, this one is not neutral and serves an important epistemological purpose.<sup>4</sup> Choosing Partition allows historians like Sumit Ganguly to frame Kashmir as a disputed territory between India and Pakistan.<sup>5</sup>

Importantly, the original accession to India is legitimised as India's rescue of Kashmir from the clutches of the 'savage' tribals of the North-West Frontier Province sent by Pakistan.<sup>6</sup> Thus, Kashmir is formulated as an 'integral part of India'.<sup>7</sup> Subsequently, it is easier, particularly after 9/11, to establish the entire militant insurgency of 1989 as a burst of Pakistan-sponsored terrorism<sup>8</sup>, instead of an indigenous armed rebellion against Indian occupation.

This school of scholarship glosses over the important 'pre-history', particularly between 1846-1947, of the Valley, and reduces Kashmir to an object of tug-of-war between Secular India and Islamic (communal) Pakistan.<sup>9</sup> Scholars like Praveen Chandra<sup>10</sup>, Bipin Chandra<sup>11</sup> and Sumit Sarkar<sup>12</sup> who have applied a longer historical lens tend to fold Kashmiri resistance against the Dogra rule from the late 1920s, led by Sheikh Abdullah, into the Indian 'Nationalist' struggle against British colonialism.<sup>13</sup> This understanding is undergirded by the ahistorical assumption of princely rulers being mere 'tools' or extensions of the British colonial State.<sup>14</sup> These silences are compounded by unavailability of important archival documents of the post-1924 years in Kashmir, in both the state and National Archives of India.<sup>15</sup>

### POPULAR IMAGINATION

In the Indian middle-class/caste imagination, Kashmir has been constructed as an 'integral part of India' through a potent mix of religious nationalism. A University Professor<sup>16</sup>, who was teaching me a course on colonialism at the time, dismissed Kashmiri resistance as a 'jihadi' outburst of violence sponsored by the 'Terrorist-State' Pakistan. The irony of his position as a well-respected scholar of colonialism, was not lost on me. Similarly, when forty-two-year-old shopkeeper Ram Gupta was asked what Kashmir meant to him as an Indian, he replied: 'Kashmir is the crown of India. It is like heaven on Earth.'<sup>17</sup> When asked if Kashmir had a 'right' to leave India, he argued that a crown cannot 'be cut and removed and given away.'<sup>18</sup> Twenty-six-year-old secretary Om Prakash, and twenty-eight-year-old hotel serviceperson Mili Sharma had similar views, calling Kashmir an 'inseparable' and 'integral' part of India respectively.<sup>19</sup> Mili added that Kashmir is 'India's and the world's most beautiful place', and

belongs in India. Nineteen-year-old salesperson Shikha also agreed, calling Kashmir the 'Indian equivalent of heaven'.<sup>20</sup>

This small sample size is symptomatic of the Indian middle-class/caste attitude on Kashmir. Despite never having been to the Valley, they unanimously gushed about the Valley's scenic beauty and, barring Shikha, they agreed that secession for Kashmir was out of the question. Literary academic Ananya Kabir has argued that this collective desire for the Valley is imbricated with photographic technologies of reproduction ushered in by nineteenth-century modernity. She highlights the role of Bollywood movies set in picturesque locations in the Valley, from the 1960s through to the 1990s, in fashioning Kashmir both as the embodiment of India's physical endowments, and as the erotic playground for urban, modern Indian youth.<sup>21</sup> In a similar vein, historian Ronald Inden draws on medieval writings and modern films to illustrate how the discourse of Kashmir as a 'privileged locale' has been constructed.<sup>22</sup>

Modern nation states are reliant on finely demarcated boundaries on political maps of themselves, to give their citizenry a visualisation of the otherwise abstract nation.<sup>23</sup> In other words, 'inventing boundaries' and 'imagining communities'<sup>24</sup> work hand-in-glove to engineer national citizens.<sup>25</sup> While maps are meant to foster a visual attachment to the nation, they "desocialise" the territory they represent; they foster the notion of a socially empty space.<sup>26</sup> Due to this abstract, dehumanising ability, maps have been used by imperial powers to claim and legitimise lands of conquest.<sup>27</sup> So, India claims the entire administrative region of Jammu and Kashmir as part of itself. Any foreign publications of maps of South Asia, which may indicate otherwise, are accompanied by the statutory warning: 'The external boundaries of India as depicted on this map are neither correct nor authentic.'<sup>28</sup> Reputed media houses, Aljazeera and The Economist, were both banned temporarily for publishing maps which showed Kashmir split between Indian, Pakistani and Chinese administration.<sup>29</sup>

However, this cartographic obsession does not fully explain the citizenry's fixation with Kashmir, because as Indian writer Rabindranath Tagore's character in the famous 1916 novel 'The Home and the World', Sandip says, 'No one can give up his life for a map!'<sup>30</sup>. On the other hand, people are more likely and willing to sacrifice their lives for a deity. Hence, we see the anthropomorphising of India's map into a Goddess Mother India [*Bharat Mata*]. This transforms the abstract territory into a devotional entity.<sup>31</sup>

*Bharat Mata* gained prominence in the burgeoning Indian national movement in the early 1900s.<sup>32</sup> Around the turn of the century, Tagore's niece Sarala Devi 'organized a group of young Bengali men who pledged to [Mother India] in front of a map of India that they would sacrifice their lives fighting for independence from British rule.'<sup>33</sup> Representations of Mother India were frequently used in fierce national protests<sup>34</sup>, and in pamphlets by political organisations like the Ghadar Party.<sup>35</sup> In 1936, the Hindu pilgrimage city of Benares hosted the first temple to Mother India, but because the association between the goddess and the map had been firmly established, the temple only housed a marble relief map of undivided India.<sup>36</sup>

Contrary to the scientific precision of a map, Mother India's nebulous bodyscape, particularly her sari, helped claim territory for the nation. For instance, in a 1948 Tamil textbook, Mother India lays claim to all of pre-partition India and Srilanka.<sup>37</sup> In other representations, her *green*<sup>38</sup> scarf covers West and (formerly) East Pakistan.<sup>39</sup> In another poster, printed post the Indo-China War, Mother India's characteristic halo covers the territory being disputed, Jammu and Kashmir.<sup>40</sup> The gendered nature of the bodyscape induces the citizen-subject to view the nation as a personal deity, and a vulnerable mother.<sup>41</sup> Hence, vivisection of the Mother becomes unimaginable, particularly of the 'crown'.<sup>42</sup>



This helps explain the vitriol faced by anybody who raises the question of Kashmiri self-determination. In February 2016, an event in Jawaharlal Nehru University organised along these lines, faced the wrath of the national media, the State and large sections of the society, including 'Left'/Liberal' sections of civil society, all of whom labelled both the event, and the participants 'anti-national(s)'.<sup>43</sup> Then Education Minister Smriti Irani declared that no insult to 'Mother India' would be tolerated.<sup>44</sup> Thus, Kashmir is constructed as an 'integral part of India', and any questioning of this statement invites severe backlash from state and society.

## Public History Project

### LOCATION AND IDEAL MUSEUM VISITOR

My project is recreating a militarised Srinagar marketplace in Connaught Place, New Delhi. The reason for this location is symbolic, not geographical. I want to question the fundamental claims of the Indian State in the heart of its capital. I will offer the disrupted vendors a job, possibly as actors, in the exhibition because the livelihood of relatively innocent people should not be sacrificed for an educational project like this. Should they refuse the job, I will compensate them for their losses, as far as possible, from a part of the donation proceeds<sup>45</sup>, and possibly out of pocket.

The target audience for this exhibition are Hindu, middle-class, middle/upper caste Indians. There are several reasons for this choice. First, most visitors to an exhibition like this will inevitably be from this demographic, because a certain cultural and social capital is a prerequisite to feel at ease in most museums/exhibitions. More importantly, this group is the most vocally jingoistic in the public sphere, again owing to their cultural and social capital, whenever Kashmiri self-determination is discussed.

Lastly, I belong to this demographic, and would have echoed much of the jingoism they are infamous for until three years ago. However, education about Kashmir's history, along with spending June 2017 in Srinagar, has made me rethink my complicity in the occupation of Kashmir, and re-evaluate my ethical obligations towards Kashmiris. Through this exhibition, I hope to induce two similar realisations within the Museum Visitor. First, that the Indian

administered part of the Kashmir Valley is a colonial, military occupation. And, if India is occupying a land inhabited primarily by Muslims, because they are Muslim, is India the Secular, Liberal-Democracy it claims to be? I hope they see the gap between the Indian State's lofty claims, and its practice—at least in the arena of Kashmir.

Being an Indian, I am complicit in India's occupation of Kashmir. Hence, it is important that I collaborate with Kashmiri artists like Mir Suhail in designing and executing this project. Suhail, a Kashmiri political cartoonist currently residing in New Delhi, provides a sharp and artistically brilliant take on Indian occupation in Kashmir. The exhibit aims to be a phenomenological account of walking down a street in Srinagar. Having spent only one month in the city, that too as an Indian<sup>46</sup>, I cannot pretend to understand the experience of living in, what Kashmiri anthropologist Mohammad Junaid has called, an *Everyday Occupation*<sup>47</sup>. Therefore, working with Kashmiri artists will not only improve the project because they will have ideas, presumably drawing from their experiences, to improve the project, but doing so is an ethical imperative.

## THE STREET

As visitors head into the street, they will be presented with some brief historical text contextualising Kashmir. Two important things will be highlighted. First, that the current administrative unit of Jammu and Kashmir was formed as a transactional object through the 1846 Treaty of Amritsar, between the British Colonial State and the Dogras following the First Anglo-Sikh War. The British had strategic reasons for forming this administrative unit, because they saw this as a buffer between British India and Central Asia/Russia.<sup>48</sup> Second, that unlike the Indians, Kashmiris were not rebelling against the British Colonial State. Instead, since the late 1920s, and particularly since 1931, Kashmiris, led by Sheikh Abdullah were seeking to overthrow the exploitative Dogra regime.

The plaque will go on to brief visitors about the Instrument of Accession (26 October 1947), the promised plebiscite that never was, the subsequent partial assimilation of the Valley within India, and militant insurgency post-1989. I highlighted the Treaty of Amritsar and Kashmiri resistance against the Dogras because it relocates dominant Indian historiography in two ways: first, by taking 1846 as a departure point, and thus emphasising the historical contingency of the administrative unit of Jammu and Kashmir; second, by not assimilating the Kashmiri movement against the Dogras, within the Indian nationalist fold. I also highlighted Kashmiri resistance in the 1920s to make the visitor question the legitimacy of the Instrument of Accession.

The street will be refashioned into a Srinagar marketplace, with a heavy military presence and background noise of gunfire and political slogans.<sup>49</sup> The soldier-actors will be fully-equipped and appear combat-ready. There will be three outposts. The first will be an army bunker, out of which protrudes the menacing barrel of a gun. Actors will be planted among the visiting groups. At the first outpost, one actor will stray too close to a bunker, and nearly touch the gun. The military man will punish him for this infraction by beating him. The ferocity of the weapons is lost if they are reduced to benign structures which can be played with, as at the Imperial War Museum. Retaining this ferocity helps maintain illusory authenticity of the experience.

As visitors proceed, they will be flanked by military men, army trucks and fruit and vegetable sellers. This is to emphasise the 'normalcy' of militarisation in Kashmir. At the second outpost, all the visitors will be frisked by soldiers. Again, actors within the group will be punished for seemingly innocuous objects and acts, like a blade, or for attempting to record the frisking on their smartphones. All visitors will be subjected to identity card checks in the third checkpoint. Occupations, like Kashmir and Palestine, are characterised by the identity card. Since every person

is inherently suspect, the only exonerating evidence for the State is the identity card. I want to give visitors a taste of this uniquely dehumanising experience. Once again, an actor within the group will be brutalised for not having an appropriate identity card with him. After the third outpost, visitors will be led into a quiet room, where they can have some tea and snacks. They will be encouraged to reflect on their experience, with each other and the curators.

I am anxious of trivialising the Kashmiri experience of brutalisation, by implicitly suggesting that it can be grasped through physical assault. I think, however, the beatings are important because they drive home to the visitors that their physical security and well-being is at the whim of the soldier. Despite being in the safe-space of an artistic exhibition, they may feel the ‘necropolitics’<sup>50</sup> (politics of death) to which Kashmiris are legally condemned by the *Armed Forces Special Powers Act*, which gives soldiers impunity to kill civilians. I want visitors to see the Valley as a case of a State against society. This should make them think twice before they dismiss Kashmiris advocating for ‘azaadi’ (freedom) from India as ‘fringe elements’.

One of my aims with this project is to depart from liberal-legalistic understandings of Kashmir which view it through a human rights lens. Kashmiri thinker Arif Ayaz Parrey argues that even if Indian security forces are removed overnight from Kashmir, and all human rights violations would magically cease, Kashmiri resistance would persist because this movement is asserting the Kashmiri’s political right to self-determination, not just protesting human rights excesses.<sup>51</sup>

This emphasis on occupation makes this project impossible, because while the liberal scaffolding of the Indian State may allow space for a human rights discourse on Kashmir, a project highlighting India’s colonial tendencies would attract the full might of the State, and large sections of the society. Indian exceptionalism is built on the foundational myth of being a diverse, liberal democracy. Kashmir is the only Muslim-majority state in India today. It is India’s badge of secularism – the attribute that sets India apart from Islamic Pakistan. Alleging that the people of this State view India as a Hindu, Brahmanical oppressor would strike at the foundations of the claims of the Indian State. Therefore, it would be profane, and beyond India’s liberal limits. As Home Minister Rajnath Singh announce: ‘Anyone who raises anti-India slogans or tries to put a question mark on nation’s unity and integrity will not be spared.’<sup>52</sup> This fear of ‘balkanization’ is ubiquitous in Indian discourses around Kashmir. However, when Kashmiri Pandits demand a ‘Panun Kashmir’, no such objections are raised, mainly because Pandits are Hindus, not Muslims.<sup>53</sup>

## Conclusion

In this article, I proposed a public history project seeking to intervene in the dominant understanding of Kashmir among Hindu, middle-class, upper-middle-caste Indians. In the first section, I highlighted the dominant historiography and imagination of Kashmir. This project seeks to challenge, re-orient and displace this dominant narrative. In particular, it challenges the historiographical trend which renders invisible Kashmiri history pre-1947. The events in Kashmir before 1947 are neatly assimilated within the ‘Indian struggle for independence’. Instead, I explicitly highlight the historically contingent and rather arbitrary formation of the administrative unit of Jammu and Kashmir in 1846 via the Treaty of Amritsar. Further, I highlight that the Instrument of Accession, on which Indian pegs its claim to Kashmir, was signed by a ruler whose people had been revolting against him for nearly two decades. Through the project, I aim to humanise the otherwise desocialised imagination of Kashmir prevalent among the Indian middle class. Importantly, the project frames the Indian presence in Kashmir as an occupation, rather than one characterised by human rights excesses which need to be checked through greater institutional transparency and accountability.

I hope to lay bare two phenomena. First, that India is a colonial occupier in Kashmir. And second, that there is a gap between the Indian State's claims of being a secular liberal democracy and its practice. I hoped to achieve this by phenomenologically recreating a heavily militarised Srinagar marketplace. By being provisionally placed in the shoes of the occupied Kashmiri subject, I hoped visitors would question their cartographic imagination of Kashmir and develop empathy for the political situation in which Kashmiris find themselves.

Therefore, this project seeks to allow for an appreciation of the situation on Kashmiri terms rather than the straitjacketed view of Kashmir as the picturesque, sanitised object of a bilateral dispute. While I acknowledge the impossibility of this project, I argue that this impossibility demonstrates why questions should be asked of the Indian state's conduct in Kashmir.

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