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The forgotten voices of the East

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'Holocaust of the East, Not Mentioned in Books'

Ather Zia

Forced Erasures

In the old decrepit neighbourhood of Bat'maalyun in Srinagar, mired in the innards of an interdistrict transport hub, a bunch of



blood, slashed necks, stabbing, wounds, and cries of help. As if watching over a grisly scene, she would lament the bodies of those killed. People thought she had gone senile. Other than having some relations in Azad Kashmir and Pakistan, nothing was known about her. She had been married into the family kind enough to accept the poor orphaned girl from Jammu as their daughter in law. Her kin would often chide her for the “horror stories” that scared kids. Her memories were perceived as fictions of an ebbing mind. In reality, for half a century the lady had kept a tight grip on traumatic memories that age was slowly prying out of her. Not that it was common knowledge but she was a survivor of the Jammu pogrom. Even though one of the most brutal pogroms of the modern century, it has been successfully hidden in clear sight by the hegemon occupying the region for seven decades.

The Indian apparatus has manufactured the obfuscation and ignorance around the pogrom to engineer, by hook or crook, Kashmir's future with India. This, while covering up the Hindu fundamentalist militancy and ethnonationalism that lay at the core of the new India. A nation which was eyeing the secularist mantle on the emerging post-colonial stage. The magnitude of the slaughter of Muslims on a mass scale in Jammu between August and November 1947 was a holocaust. Yet, the reported numbers of those who were killed or escaped to Azad Kashmir and Pakistan were mired in debates for decades. A report published in The Times, London, 10 August 1948 mentions “2,37,000 Muslims were systematically exterminated – unless they escaped to Pakistan along the border – by the forces of the Dogra State headed by the Maharaja in person and aided by Hindus and Sikhs.”[1] A common estimate of casualties that lies between 200,000 and 300,000.[2]

The Dogra despot ruling the princely state of Jammu and Kashmir, unrelated to Indo-Pak claims, had long been facing challenges from his subjects. There was a strong movement demanding a change to constitutional monarchy and in the Western region of Poonch, a brewing insurrection which later took shape as the Azad (Independent) Kashmir Regular Forces to create an Independent state. Even though the king suppressed the revolt brutally but the rebels successfully liberated part of the region declaring the Azad (Independent) Kashmir provisional government on October 24, 1947. From August 1947 onwards, Hindu fanatics, aided and abetted by royal government forces, started looting and burning down village after village inhabited by Muslim communities – killing, raping, and abducting their women. The ruler was himself seen distributing arms to the Hindu militia. The pogrom ended in the ethnic cleansing of Muslims from the Jammu province. According to the census of 1941, in Jammu Muslims who had been a majority at 61% were reduced to a minority status at 38%. The Dogra ruler oversaw the pogrom to recapture his hegemony, but in the end, he relegated it to the next occupier — India and fled in the night as only a weak tyrant can. The extermination of the majority of the Muslim population would work in India's favor by tipping the demographic balance towards Hindus, in case the UN-mandated plebiscite was held. India had killed many birds with one stone.

The Jammu pogrom was shoved under the carpet. It served the policy of nation-making that India had engineered. Sidelining Jammu pogrom as minor riots and reducing it as part of partition violence, India was free to create the narrative about saving Kashmiris, cast the Poonch uprising as an invasion and not a revolt, make Pakistan appear as the sole aggressor and also tide over the discrepancies of the Maharaja's signing of the treaty of accession with India. India successfully maintained complete silence on the violence of its own military while making the violence by the militia from the North West Frontier Provinces hyper-visible, casting them as “primitive hordes,” which is not to exonerate them of their atrocities.

The Jammu pogrom not only exterminated the Muslim community from their homeland but also their forced departure from history books. In the competing accounts of the rival nations' exaggerations and judgments about the violence have become the

hallmark to the detriment of the human cost involved. In the Indian narratives, histories, renditions and stories, the pogrom is



more than just a spontaneous conflagration or a simple communal riot. It had all the features of concerted planning by the Dogra monarchy, their royal allies, the Hindu supremacist RSS militia, and the Sikhs with inbuilt spontaneity that is part of such exterminations.

A survivor of the pogrom, Dr. Khalida Ghousia Akhtar, a mere 10-year-old in 1947, calls it a holocaust of the east, not mentioned in books. The haunting question generated by such an omission and erasure is how does a full-fledged pogrom become a passing footnote in history? What forces manufacture and impose silence over people who have not only been wounded but continue to bleed in plain sight? And how do people stay silent, or do they ever?

Raw Wounds

An octogenarian, Amanullah Khan Naqshbandi, recounts his terror-filled experience of the pogrom as an 8-year-old. Communal strife had long been a feature of Muslim and Dogra Hindu life in Jammu, but it worsened as events around the creation of India and Pakistan cast their shadow on the region. The news of attacks on Muslims had begun increasing post-August 1947, and the prospect of migrating to Pakistan became real. The local Muslim leaders at the behest of royal authorities asked the community to gather at a public ground from where they would be transported to Sialkot. The first convoy was to leave on November 5. Amanullah, along with his mother and sisters, went in the first batch which mostly consisted of women and children. The men sent their families ahead to safety and intended to join them later. The Muslims genuinely believed that they were being given safe passage to Pakistan.

Amanullah recalls boarding the bus with his family. On the outskirts, the bus veered from the road stopping in the wilderness. The attackers lying in wait fell upon the convoy. Amanullah's mother tried to protect him but found it futile. She urged him to run: "Aman, jump into the canal" she shouted. Amanullah ran. Looking back, he saw blood spurting from his mother's head. Fatally wounded but even then, she kept shouting for him to run. Too scared to dive into the canal, Amanullah hesitated until a woman pulled him to safety on the other side. Amanullah recalls her as his "angel lady." Seventeen members of Amanullah's family alone including his mother were killed.

Such stories are strewn on both sides of the LoC. Privately mourned and grieved. Even if territories are conquered and public commemorations discouraged, people's memories remain unconquerable.

One of the most visible tragic stories of the pogrom belongs to none other than Chowdhary Gulam Abbas the leader of the Muslim conference, a movement against the Dogra regime. Chowdhary's family members were not only killed but also abducted. Dr. Khalida Gousia Akhtar, is the niece of Chowdhary Abbas, a survivor, she now lives in California. Dr. Akhtar has seen the tragedy that befell her uncle from close quarters. Jailed by the Dogra regime, Chowdhary's 17-year-old daughter Rahat Abbas was abducted by an Indian army man Jagdeesh Kumar, also allegedly an RSS affiliate.[3]Rahat, when later retrieved, had been married to her abductor.

The beloved poet, Rasa Javadani's family from Bhaderwah also bore the wounds of the pogrom silently. Known as a poet laureate popular for his songs of loss and love, very few knew about Javadani raising his sister's daughter Tahira Sultana as his own. Javadani's sister had been a 17-year-old new mother when her husband Umar-u-Din, a Professor of Persian in Jammu was killed in

the pogrom. In an investigative feature, journalist Bilal Handoo pieces together the life of a young professor talking to his daughter
 Taking Suraiya above the letters he had written to his wife. Each writing is a historic document that allows a peek into the room



knitting for him; which he never got to wear.[4] A deeply religious man with unwavering faith in God, the professor's letters give voice to the growing fear in the Muslim community, he states: "Jammu's mood is murderous." His letters become a countdown to the inching pogrom as he speaks of curfews, people fleeing, the apathy of Sheikh Abdullah, and the bloodthirsty heavily armed Dogra army. The good professor soon realizes that he cannot return home and decides to go to Sialkot. A witness told the family that the professor was last seen guiding a group of panicked women on how to save themselves. Ironically, he was stabbed in the back by his own student and his body was thrown into corpses that had piled in Samba town that day.

A tragic figure that surfaces in many oral and several written narratives are that of a girl named Suraiya. Proving that institutional archives are always at the mercy of people's memory, Suraiya's existence rises like a phoenix, a testament to the pogrom and its aftermath. In an essay, Anuradha Bhasin, a journalist, and activist from Jammu recounts the beginnings of her own political consciousness with the figure of Suraiya. Bhasin recalls: "Bright flowery printed salwar kameez on her slightly plump frame, black Bata school shoes, and plaited, oiled jet-black hair that ended in bloodred, thick nylon ribbons, dilated pupils, slurring lips slightly frothy, twigs in hand—this image of Suraiya is one of the most defining ones from my childhood in Jammu." Known in the locality as Suraiya Pagaal(crazy), she was the living face of the Jammu pogrom. Suraiya had seen her entire family being burnt alive; with her and her mother the only survivors. Bhasin adds: "After that, she had lost her mental balance. While my generation was growing up, Suraiya's story was not unique; there were many such around us, whose faces spoke of the bloodied streets of Jammu. It was easy to stumble on these narratives in a neighbourhood that had once had a huge Muslim population, one that had thinned drastically in October-November 1947." Qazi Zaid, a Kashmiri journalist also writes about Suraiya, who with time had become a fixture not just with the people of Jammu but also from the valley who would go for Darbar move."[5]

In 2003 Ved Bhasin, a veteran journalist gave an open testimony of the Jammu pogrom in a public gathering mapping how the nexus between the Dogra ruler, RSS, and the Indian government produced a perfect genocidal crime – one that was committed and omitted from memory. In recent years, the resurrection of the people's history in face of institutional erasure signals the coming of age of "history" consciousness in the Kashmiri people. Kashmiris are increasingly culling their native history from the hegemonic narratives that favour India's imperial project in Kashmir. In the context of the Jammu pogrom, academic research by native scholars has always been done in some measure, and often to cull it from the obfuscation of partition narrative.[7]

Reclaiming Memory

In the last 70 years, the Indian narrative has dominated the explanations of the Kashmir dispute and the events of 1947 and after. The Indian mainstream narrative around Kashmir's contested accession starts without blinking an eye, and seamlessly jumps from the "dilemma" of the Hindu Dogra despot about whether to join Pakistan or India or to stay Independent to "Pathan tribesmen aided by Pakistan" and then to Indian army "presented as heroic" rushing to save "a divided Kashmir for India." [8] Period.

The invisibility of the Jammu pogrom is deliberately woven into Indian politics. The historiography supporting the nation-making was fine-tuned to cast India as the saviour of Kashmir and in this the Kashmiri client-politicians of the time were complicit. After the pogrom, Sheikh Abdullah and Jawahar Lal Nehru together brushed aside the pogrom as mere "tragic events" in Jammu. Sheikh Abdullah went to the extent of blaming the victims for inviting the terror because they sided with Pakistan. On the other hand, to her credit, in the aftermath, Sheikh's wife Begum Akbar Jahan took up the mantle of rehabilitating the women

survivors. Sheikh Abdullah in due course did express some regret if not remorse when the Hindu fanatic heat was fully turned on him. It has been as well as the Hindu fanatic heat was fully turned on him. It has been as well as the Hindu fanatic heat was fully turned on him.



Today even as history consciousness has grown in Kashmiris and is finding expression, the exacting Indian occupation is mounting new technologies of erasure. Post-August 5th, 2019, the Indian government is not only violating Kashmir's territorial sovereignty and domicile laws but also its language and history. Included in the array of enforced changes that the direct rule from Delhi has imposed, are new public holidays marking the despot Maharaja Hari Singh's birthday and October 26, the day the Indian army annexed Kashmir. Both of these days are markers of subjugation, occupation, and humiliation for Kashmiris. These rulings add salt to the wounds of Kashmiris; they become painful reminders of the settler-colonial policies they are facing.

In face of such imperial erasures, the memory becomes an urgent duty. The pogrom must be "reclaimed," if only to save it from erasure. It is not reclamation for sadistic reliving of the genocidal murder and mayhem but to affirm that the memory and martyrdom of those killed and who survived. To reclaim the pogrom means to restore the humanity of the people made invisible by death and humiliation. At the same time, it entails understanding that without resurrecting the event of this catastrophic magnitude in its proper historical context there can be no true understanding of Kashmiri resistance and how to dismantle the disingenuous Indian narrative and its military occupation. And to make sure no one's perceived as fictions of an ebbing mind.

[1] There is some confusion about the newspaper not being published on the date which occurs in some accounts as 10 October 1948 as mentioned by Christopher Snedden. Ilyas Chattha clarifies saying the report about the 1947 Jammu events was in The Times issue of 10 August 1948.

[2] See Anuradha Bhasin Jamwal, *Prejudice in Paradise, Communalism Combat*, Vol 11, 2005; Ilyas Chattha, *Partition, and Locality: Violence, Migration, and Development in Gujranwala and Sialkot 1947-1961*. OUP Catalogue, 2011. Christopher Snedden, *Kashmir: The Unwritten History*, Harper Collins India, 2011; Arjun Appadurai & Arien Mack *India's world: The politics of creativity in a globalized society*. New Delhi: Rain Tree (Rupa), 2012; Iffat Rashid, *Theatrics of a 'Violent State' or 'State of Violence': Mapping Histories and Memories of Partition in Jammu and Kashmir*, *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, 43:2, 2020

[3] Vijayalakshmi Balakrishnan. *Growing Up and Away: Narratives of Indian Childhoods: Memory, History, Identity*. OUP. 2011

[4] Bilal Handoo. 1947: The Last Letter. *Kashmir Life*. 2016 <https://kashmirlife.net/1947-the-last-letter-123112/>

[5] Zaid Qazi, *Jammu Massacre@70: The frenzy of Suraiya, and the silence of history*, <https://freepresskashmir.news/2017/11/05/jammumassacre70-the-frenzy-of-suraiya-and-the-silence-of-history/>

[7] Sheikh Showkat Hussain, *Kashmir Profiles*, Dar al Kotob Ilmiyah, Kashmir, 2017

[8] Singh Khushwant, 2008, *Shiekh wanted a neutral Kashmir*, *The Tribune* <https://www.tribuneindia.com/2008/20081004/saturday/above.htm>

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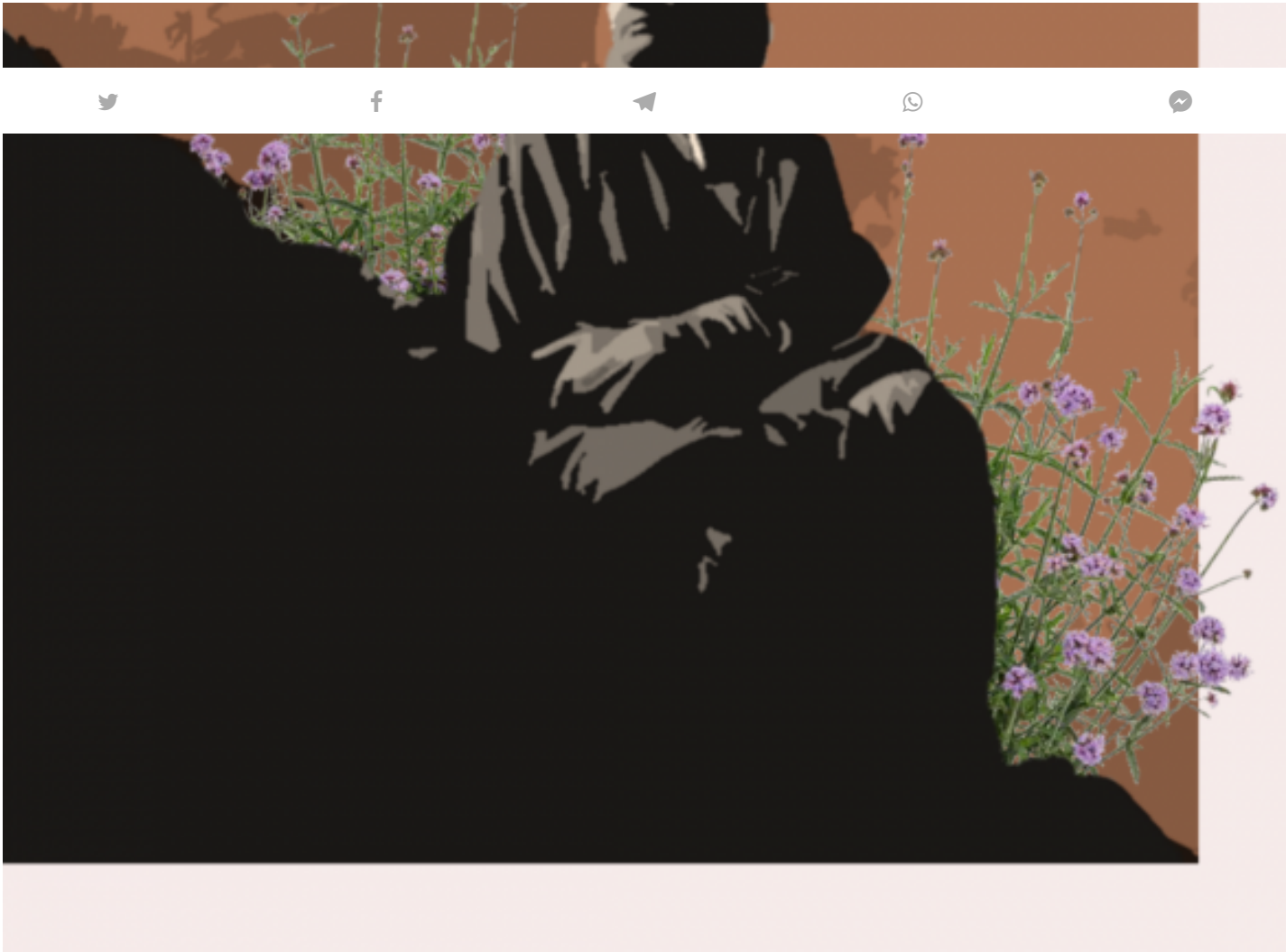
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