

Blood On The Chinars: Ordinariness of Death in Kashmir

The Needle's Eye



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There is nobody left in the Valley with the moral authority, the stature and the courage to stand and speak to the angry mobs. The last man who could have, Sheikh Mohammed Abdullah, died nearly 34 years ago.

All of us view the past through a very limiting lens. We move the glass over people and events, and we deceive ourselves into thinking that what we see is crystal-clear, when all the while it might just be smudgy, blurry images. Then we exclaim in a pleased and smug tone that we have seen the real picture.

This is grand self-delusion. If we were honest with ourselves, we would see the Potemkin villages that line our road to perdition.

Grigory Aleksandrovich Potemkin was an 18th-century Russian nobleman, briefly one of Empress Catherine II's lovers, who brilliantly concealed the weak points of his administration during a tour by the ruler of the southern part of her empire in 1787. 'Potemkin villages' are apocryphal and relate to the impressive and deceptive facades we erect to hide the shoddy and sordid realities that lie behind.

Those of us with long memories will remember many Potemkin moments. Much horror, skulduggery and propaganda has been perpetrated behind painted plywood props.

Month after month this summer we heard that tourist arrivals in the Kashmir valley were going up and up, that life had returned to the gentle, languorous pace of shikaras gliding on Dal Lake.

As I wrote this, news came in that Prime Minister Narendra Modi was unhappy with media coverage of the

ferocious protests and violence that have engulfed Kashmir after the killing of the young militant Burhan Wani on July 8.

Should we be shocked by the speed at which the flames have spread? Wani and his cohort are only the show-cards in the theatre lobby. The chorus starts to sing only when the curtain goes up.

Here is the generational problem. Those of us who are digital immigrants, well into our middle-age but eager to believe that we have kept pace with the younger digital natives in our use of technology and adaptation of social media, don't really get it.

Just as we indulged ourselves in continual self-aggrandizement through our selfies, tweets, Instagram images and Facebook posts, young Kashmiris took to the myriad branches of telecommunications and the internet, festooning them with their anger and frustration.

If anything, the older generation of militants pushed a more Islamist ideology. Their progeny broadcast their more broad-based rebellion via YouTube. Then, the message was spread through sheets of cyclostyled Urdu. Now, all you need is a smartphone and WhatsApp.

A generation ago, radicalisation was much more symbolic. Today it is direct and in your face. Young Kashmiris are angry about the sol-

diers constantly in their midst, about the Armed Forces Special Powers Act which confers the power to kill with impunity. They want real political change, not the usual suspects, who have held the levers of power for far too long. They want business opportunities, not tens of thousands of crores in generous but not job-generating government spending. They want water not oil on the fire.

Deeper Problem
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ANIRBAN BORA

This is a generation that has grown up under the shadow of the gun in a new century. If you were born in the 1990s you would already be well into your 20s. The earlier generation of militancy was sheltered and nurtured across the Line of Control. This one is more home-grown. This one is not even willing to listen to the Syed Ali Shah Geelanis or the Maulvi Umar Farooqs.

In fact there is nobody left in the Valley with the moral authority, the stature and the courage to stand and speak to the angry mobs. The last man who could have, Sheikh Mohammed Abdullah, died nearly 34 years ago.

It is facile to believe that the rage flooding through Kashmir has been orchestrated by Pakistan. It is true that Pakistani Prime Minister

Nawaz Sharif spoke about the violence and has been told by India's foreign ministry to cease and desist. But it is also true that, despite shutting down the Internet after Wani's death, the crowds gather and swell in defiance of curfews and seem oblivious to calls for peace.

How do you win hearts and minds that can shrug off every blandishment? What do you do when the carrots are cast aside and the sticks are snatched away and sharpened into spears?

Here's a story from the past. In August 1998 I watched while heavily-armed soldiers guarded the Broadway cinema in Srinagar, which was reopened six years after it was burned down during the first flush of militancy. Those militants tried to impose a puritanical Islamic ban on all cinemas and beauty parlours.

The rebuilt cinema was opened by Farooq Abdullah, the then chief minister, who had just returned from a vacation in England. "I know what the press will write," Abdullah told the audience at the cinema hall. "They will say Farooq was watching a movie while Kashmir burned. They will say Farooq was holidaying in London while Kashmir burned."

That was the point: a leadership that could holiday while the Valley burned. This sort of elitism continues. The first high-level meet-

ing to discuss the latest blood-letting was held only after Modi returned from his Africa trip, and it was minus Kashmir Chief Minister Mehbooba Mufti.

The Bharatiya Janata Party is squirming over its poisonous alliance with Mehbooba's Peoples Democratic Party. The chief minister favours a soft line on the militancy, but BJP leaders like Ram Madhav, who masterminded the shotgun wedding, are pushing for a hard line. Who will prevail?

Contrast this ambivalence with U.S. President Barack Obama, who cut short a visit to Spain to rush back so he could speak to a racially splintering nation about the Dallas deaths.

In India we take our spasms in stride. The blood spilled in Kashmir is coloured with ordinariness. If even one major party in India had a more uplifting vision for Kashmir it would be cause for cheer. It is not as if Farooq's son Omar Abdullah was able to douse the flames during his turn at the helm. In 2010, during Omar's chief ministership, dozens of Kashmiris died during a bloody and prolonged intifada.

The buck-passing goes merrily on. This week Omar was tweeting to his successor Mehbooba: "More than anyone else I know what you are going through... & I can assure you that we will follow your lead but lead YOU must."

Can Mehbooba really lead?

