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Kashmir Made Me Fall in Love, and it Broke My Heart

It's easy to fall in love with Kashmir. Located at the northwest tip of India, near the Pakistan border, the region boasts idyllic lakes flanked by Himalayan mountains whose colours shift from deep green to a muted grey, or simmer down, with the dispersal of the afternoon thundershowers, into an uneven belt of indigo. They remind me of a café I've been meaning to visit in Srinagar, the summer capital, called Café Mood: "Different moods," its tagline reads, "One place." Driving in through the mountains, on the treacherous cliffside road, I share a Jeep with a vibrant young woman, her aunt and cousin, and several other strangers. We stop for a tea break, and the young woman, with whom I later become friends, admonishes me for ordering the Indian version, with sugar. "This is Kashmiri chai," she says, indicating her own cup. "We drink it with salt instead of sugar. You should try it, at least once." I promise her that I will.

As we careen down windy mountain roads, she catches her breath behind me. Our driver darts out into the other lane, then swerves back with squealing tires as a bus rounds the curve to face us. I'm too taken with the scenery to pay much attention – fields of emerald grass; poplar trees with leaves swaying gently in the breeze; a rushing river eroding boulders far below. When we stop at a village to drop off one passenger, stony-faced Indian soldiers confront the others to demand where they're heading. "Srinagar, Srinagar," they respond. Soon, we're back on the road, and descending into the valley.

The "City of the Sun," as Srinagar is sometimes known, consists of houses spreading out from the Jhelum river, with Dal lake lodged in its upper right corner. The lakeside can be stunning in its beauty, and has long been a hub of activity for locals and tourists alike. At the numerous *ghats* that line its shores, vendors hawk rides in canopied boats called *shikaras*, whose colorful cushions tempt passersby with the option to escape the heat by paddling out on the water in luxury. During the summer monsoons, rainbows sweep the mountains and disperse into the mist; golden eagles circle in the skies. I'm hardly the first to find Srinagar beautiful. As Sir Walter Lawrence, who authored the definitive

travelogue and history *The Valley of Kashmir* in 1895, wrote: "Perhaps in the whole world there is no corner so pleasant as the Dal lake."

It's partly why the Muslim-majority region of Kashmir has remained such a hotly contested territory. When India gained independence in 1947, leading to the partition that created Muslim Pakistan and secular, but Hindu-majority, India, Jammu & Kashmir was ruled by a Hindu maharaja who was reluctant to choose either side. But about 30 percent of the Kashmir valley had gone to Pakistan, and after tribal forces, backed by Pakistan, attacked that same year, the maharaja requested help from the Indian government; it said it would only intervene if he joined India. He agreed – on the condition that Jammu & Kashmir remain a semi-autonomous state, and with the promise it would determine its own future in a referendum. The implementation of Constitutional Articles 370 and 35-A ensured that special status, and that only citizens of Jammu & Kashmir could own property there. From 1950 to 1952, some 700,000 peasants were given land and began developing today's heavily agricultural economy.

Tourists flocked from all over the world to visit Indian-administered Kashmir. They purchased expensive Kashmiri shawls, custom-made jewelry and tailored suits. They stayed in houseboats whose intricately hand-carved facades boasted names like "New Beauty," "Gemini" and "Rajmahal." And they took long rides in the lakeside *shikaras*, including multiple-day water treks through hidden channels that wind through lotus flowers, island villages and flourishing vegetable gardens.

But in 1989, conflict returned to Kashmir. Following oppressive Indian policies and what Human Rights Watch calls "blatant rigging" of elections, militant groups trained in Pakistan, advocating independence or accession to Pakistan, recruited Kashmiri youth to their cause. They detonated bombs in government buildings, in state offices, and on buses. In response, the Indian army sent in troops to secure the region, who committed severe human rights abuses – rape, torture, indiscriminate arrests. They killed unarmed protesters and used pellet guns on civilians, causing many of them to go blind. As a result, more Kashmiri youth joined militant or separatist movements, the Indian army strengthened its response, and the cycle of violence continued.

It's hardly surprising that tourism has suffered as a result. Following last year's February 14 attack that left 40 Indian soldiers dead, countries including the U.S., the U.K., France, Germany and Canada issued travel advisories. The number of foreign tourists arriving dropped by more than a thousand in both April and May over a year earlier, according to State Tourism Department figures reported in *The Hindu*. By the time I arrive,

in June 2019, Kashmir is known as a beautiful but conflicted destination. When I tell people in other parts of India – or anywhere, really – where I'm going, they caution me against the journey. "Be careful," they say. My brother-in-law, who spent his early years in Srinagar and whose family lives in Delhi, warns me: "Don't tell the parents."

But in Kashmir, I find an immediate sense of community. I stay at a guesthouse near Dal lake, where other visitors trickle through – from Spain, Ireland, China; but mostly, other parts of India. Often, the four other rooms sit empty, and I become close to the family – the parents, two grown sons, a daughter-in law and two little girls. I spent many evenings chatting with my host out on the porch, or jogging along the lakeside with his son. Throughout my stay, the children remain curious but shy; one of their favorite activities is to stalk my cat – a companion of thirteen years who's joined me on journeys to five countries – and then run away, giggling, when she draws near.

My new friend from the Jeep ride invites me to her home, where she serves me the fabled Kashmiri salt tea. "So, how do you like Kashmir?" she asks me. "So, how do you find the hospitality in Kashmir?" I assure her that, in my travels to nearly forty countries, I've rarely encountered such warmth and hospitality. She runs out of the room and returns with a traditional handbag from her own closet. "Here," she insists. "Take it." Her aunt, who speaks only a spattering of English but hovers nearby, gives me a hand-painted paper mache box, in the shape of a heart. Later, the gift often comes to mind as emblematic of the Kashmiri people: they hold their hearts out in the open. They hand them over in an instant.

My friend takes me upstairs, to where two wooden looms hold half-finished samplings of the shawls her family has hand-woven for generations. Each is flanked by dozens of wooden needles wrapped in colorful thread; complex patterns of flowers and leaves wind their way across the frames. I ask how long they take to complete, and she tells me each requires around two months of labour. Once, business was easy, she says; now, the family sells their pashmina and cashmere products wholesale to third parties who distribute them locally or ship them out of state.

Her story is one I hear repeatedly throughout my time in Kashmir. People who own guesthouses or houseboats recall the days when tourists flocked the streets and a night on a lower-end houseboat sold for 3,000 rupees; now, that price has dropped to a mere 700. "What can you buy with that?" one man asks me. "It costs 200 rupees just to get some vegetables." A friend's father, who owns a jewelry shop, invites me in for tea, and gives me a pair of faceted sapphire earrings. His daughter tells

me that he built his business from nothing; once, he was unable to close the doors of his shop because so many tourists were present. Now, he wiles away the days, waiting for the rare customer to wander in. Another man, a tailor, stops me in the street and invites me into his shop for tea and pastries. He shows me handwritten letters collected over the decades, composed by customers from all over the world. “The suit you made me is a perfect fit,” they say. “I’ll be back for more.”

But these days, fewer tourists are coming. Kashmir is one of the most militarized zones in the world, and I begin to have the eerie feeling that my very presence is a safety badge, of sorts. When I go jogging with my host’s son, the only question the army personnel have for him is: “Is she German?” Meanwhile, on my way to meet him, I pass an army checkpoint where security forces halt Kashmiri youths on motorcycles with immaculately styled hair; they unfold their documents with shaking hands. Others pause to watch – women draped in colourful shawls, men smoking near the fruit stand. The air is heavy with familiarity, distrust. They’ve seen this scene before. They know how it could end.

In some ways, the situation of young men in Kashmir is similar to that of black men in the United States. Police profiling. Arbitrary stops. Targeted questioning that could lead to an arrest – or worse. The psychological weight that comes from living under such oppression every moment, every day. One houseboat owner tells me he’s afraid to send his son to market; afraid that he’ll be targeted, too. “Two or three Kashmiri youths disappear every day,” he tells me.

I ask a local journalist if this is true. He nods. I ask if most of them are, in fact, militants. “Many of them have joined,” he says.

“But they just disappear?” I ask. He nods again. Then he stares at the floor for a long time.

This has been going on for years. The same houseboat owner tells me that back in the 1990s, he himself was questioned by security forces who’d arrested several alleged militants. The only thing that saved him, he says, was that his mother urged two French women off the boat to speak on his behalf. “He’s our guide,” they told the officers. “You can’t arrest our guide.” This man had a safety badge; the boys, however, were less fortunate. “Even those who do join the militants do so because they have little choice,” this houseboat owner tells me. “Their sister is raped, an innocent family member is taken. What are they to do?”

And what am I to do? If I see someone being apprehended, do I take photographs, give the impression that the rest of the world is watching? Would it watch? And if it did, would it care enough to step in? I think

back to a time when, as a waitress at a lakeside restaurant in Oakland, California, I saw a policeman tell a black youth on a park bench to "move along." He was just sitting there, smoking a cigarette, the way anyone might do. As I stood there, bike lock in hand, and considered intervening, the moment passed – the young man, frustrated, said "Whatever," flicked out his cigarette and went on his way. I still think of that moment; replay it the way you do those times when you wish you'd behaved differently. I could have sat and joined him. I could have asked to share his cigarette; asked the officer why I could smoke there when he couldn't. Of course, he shouldn't need a safety badge – that perception is itself the problem. I'm not inherently safe, just as a black American isn't inherently criminal, and a Kashmiri youth isn't inherently a terrorist.

I don't see anyone being apprehended, so instead, I do my best to spend my money. I'm hardly well off, but when I consider that even my lowest-paying freelance job will earn me more in an hour than many Kashmiris do in a day, it's impossible not to be generous. I tip the waiter at one of the few restaurants I frequent, and the way his face lights up when I tell him that I plan to spend four months in Kashmir is worth every rupee. I don't bargain. Rather than arrange a cheaper alternative through my host, I book an early morning boat ride to the floating vegetable market on one of the *shikaras*. We depart at sunrise, and as my guide paddles past men lofting piles of seaweed into their boats to sell as fertilizer, he explains how his customers have dwindled over the years. "We used to have people from all over the world, from the United States and Europe," he says. "Now, we mostly get Indian tourists. Maybe a few Israelis." He tells me about the water treks he used to lead – cooking on the boat and camping out beneath the stars. "Maybe you'd like to do one," he says in the wistful tone I now find so familiar – nostalgia sprinkled with the golden dust of hope. It's the tone that makes me wants me to say "yes" to every *shikara* vendor on the boulevard, every *auto-walla* on the street. It's the reason I order a custom-made winter coat from the tailor who stopped me on the street that day – one with a price tag far beyond my means.

As it turns out, that coat is never made.

In late July, Srinagar is at the height of its tourist season when the Indian government sends an additional 10,000 troops into Kashmir. The move causes widespread speculation: Why are they doing this – why now? There are already half a million army personnel stationed in the valley. Is the government planning to do away with Article 370 and Article 35-A of the Constitution, which limits property ownership in Jammu & Kashmir to citizens of the state? Such a move would open up

land to magnates such as yoga guru Baba Ramdev, co-founder of the multi-billion dollar Patanjali Aryuved company, who has expressed an interest in building a factory there. It would open it up to anyone in India with money who wanted to capitalize on lakes and mountains; the serene landscape that has long drawn tourists from all over the world. It would open it up to major industrial development.

Still, things remain fairly calm until early on the evening of Friday, August 2. I'm in my room listening to music when my host knocks on the door, then bursts in, clearly flustered. He shows me an order from the government of Jammu & Kashmir on his phone advising all tourists and Hindu pilgrims to leave. "Keeping in view the latest intelligence inputs of terror threats," it says, "in the interest of safety and security of the tourists and Amarnath Yatris, it is advised that they may curtail their stay in the valley immediately."

I read the order. "I don't want to leave," I tell him. "Do I have to leave?"

"If you don't want to leave, don't leave," he says. "But this is what it says, so I came to show it to you." His hands are shaking, and I ask if he's okay. "I made a big mistake," he says. He looks around my room, as though searching for something. "I didn't get rice, and we have children in the house. My son called me and told me, go out and buy rice – no matter how much you have to pay, he said, just buy it." For the past week, since the troops arrived, many people have been stocking up on supplies. Now, my host is worried there isn't time.

The government is requesting that people leave as the army warns of a potential terrorist attack from Pakistan. But why send 10,000 troops before news of a potential attack? There have been terrorist attacks in the past, and tourists have never been asked to leave. The annual Amarnath Yatra pilgrimage has never been cut short. Why this time; why now? My friend from the Jeep calls and encourages me to stay. She thinks the government is just creating panic and causing problems, though she's shared her concerns about Article 370 with me before. I call my journalist friend, and ask him what he thinks. "Stay," he says. "Something is going to happen, we just don't know what yet. Maybe there will be a problem. But after all, you're just one of millions of people who live here."

I head to the streets to get a feeling for what's going on. People's expressions are drawn and scared; many gaze at me as though searching my face for traces of panic. I go to the local shops to buy extra water, oatmeal, medicine. "The situation is getting worse in Kashmir," one man tells me. That's how people speak here. They speak in vague assertions,

because there's no way to know what tomorrow will bring. Will there be a military crackdown? How many young Kashmiri men will be arrested or killed? Will Pakistani-led militants respond with a terrorist attack? Will there be a war? The government says there won't be a curfew, that political leaders who've raised concerns over Article 370 are "rumour-mongering" – but the people of Kashmir, through some combination of intuition and experience, can feel it in the air. Still, they can't know where it will lead, how long it might last. And so, they simply say: "The situation will get worse."

In the next two days, police officers pull tourists off of the houseboats and force them to leave. By Sunday afternoon, when I take a *shikara* over to the Chinar café – a coffee shop and bookstore on the island, one of my favorite places to write – the once-bustling lakeside is quiet and empty. A couple of local journalists interview me about my intention to stay, and I struggle to formulate my thoughts. "The Kashmiri people have treated me with great kindness," I tell them. "I don't know what the Indian government planning, but I don't feel like I can just desert them." The journalists contact me afterward to warn me that a curfew will be imposed the following morning – no mobile phones, no landlines, no Internet. Communications will be cut; nothing will be open.

I have just enough time to complete some work and inform my employers and family of the developing situation. I try to explain my decision to my family, aware that no matter what I say, my words will fall tragically short. Maybe the situation recalls my experience with that black man on a park bench, years ago. Maybe this time, I want to choose differently. "I just think it's messed up that you can fly out the tourists in order to oppress a people," I write in an email. I tell them not to worry, and forward them an article from *The Guardian*. "This is the situation as of now," I say. "As of tomorrow, you'll know more than I do." No sooner have I clicked "send" than a message arrives on my mobile, informing me the Internet has been cut. The wireless works for a few minutes longer, then disappears.

By that time it's nearly midnight, and I go to bed. On Monday morning, I find that the television has been severed as well. I learn that in all these years of conflict, this is the first time they've cut the television. The first time they've asked tourists to leave. The first time they've completely cut the government-supplied BSNL Internet service.

By evening some television stations return – cartoons, movies, sitcoms. The only news channel that hasn't been blocked is state-run Doordarshan News, which promotes the views of Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP).

At least, we are able to learn that the parliament has abrogated Articles 370 and 35-A, and split the state of Jammu & Kashmir into two union territories. In a bright yellow box in the middle of the screen, the channel blames Article 370 for seemingly everything that has ever gone wrong in Jammu & Kashmir – from discrimination to a lagging tourist economy. "Article 370 is the root cause of all terrorism," the yellow box proclaims.

Doordarshan claims that Kashmiris are happy with the change, and that everything in the valley is peaceful and normal. Video clips show Kashmiris chatting pleasantly in the streets – but many are clothed in the long *pherans* worn in winter, and the footage is clearly recycled. In reality, the streets are deserted, barred by looping coils of barbed wire manned by army personnel. Armored vehicles with gun-toting Indian soldiers roll by. Preparations for Eid-al-Adha, one of the Muslim world's most important festivals, are muted and shrouded in mourning. The communication clampdown ensures that nobody can communicate, nobody can organize and no Kashmiri voices are heard. As many people in Srinagar tell me: "Let them lift these restrictions, and they will see just how happy we are."

On Tuesday, the Indian news channel NDTV is opened, and I learn that more than 100 of Kashmir's political leaders have been arrested, including those supportive of the Indian government. In the evenings, people begin to venture outside to sit before closed storefronts, buy essentials from the few open shops or gossip about the latest news. Because almost all of the televised news channels are still blocked, and little-to-no news is leaving Kashmir, the only way to learn what's happening is through word-of-mouth. Whether or not it's true is anybody's guess, but it's all people have to go on.

On Tuesday, I hear that the Indian army has chased a group of Kashmiri youths into the lake, firing at them; that six entered the water, and only two emerged on the other side. Wednesday, I hear that police – attacked a fruit-seller, overturning his fruit cart and beating him. That night, I hear the sound of tear gas canisters being fired outside one after another after another. And in the coming days, more stories leak through: The army has reportedly killed several young Kashmiri stone-pelters downtown. A pregnant woman was allegedly shot and died with her unborn child inside her. When I wake one morning to the earth subtly shaking beneath me – an earthquake I estimate at around 4 on the Richter scale, but with the Internet gone, who knows? – I remind myself that sometimes, these small, repeated tremors can help prevent a more substantial loss.

The loss for Kashmiris, however, is enduring and real. “They’ve broken our hearts,” one friend tells me. “They’ve taken away our identity,” says another. Many express concern that as wealthy Hindus move in to buy land, Kashmir’s majority-Muslim population will become a minority. They share their belief that Modi’s Hindu nationalist government has been planning this move for a long time; indeed, his party has long identified the revocation of Article 370 as one of its primary goals. And while the BJP may have achieved its goal, it has done so using tactics that are undemocratic by any standards. Last November, Jammu & Kashmir governor Staya Pal Malik, a BJP member, suddenly dissolved the state’s legislative assembly over rival claims to power, turning the state over to presidential rule. Elections were to be held within six months – by August, they were long overdue. In a presidential order enabling the parliament to abrogate Articles 370 and 35-A, Modi modified the language of Article 367 to conflate the required approval of Jammu & Kashmir’s constituent assembly, which had been dissolved in 1957, with that of its state legislative assembly. And as that legislative body had been dissolved last year, that so-called “approval” fell to the parliament – and Modi’s ruling party.

Then there’s the long-term curfew and communication lockdown imposed on millions of people. The detentions of more than 100 Kashmiris – likely closer to 4,000, as AFP has reported, citing official sources. The human rights abuses that army personnel could potentially be committing in Kashmir, with little-to-no media presence to hold them accountable. And there’s the regular silencing of Kashmiri voices. I’m watching BBC with a friend in Srinagar when the Kashmiri politician Shah Faesel tells the anchor that Modi has been “murdering the constitution” and the parliament resorting to “unconstitutional methods.” He calls for a nonviolent resistance, and my friend turns to me: “That man is going to be arrested,” he says. The following day, NDTV reports that Faesel has been detained at the Delhi airport while attempting to board a flight to Istanbul, and has since been transferred to Srinagar. For many other Kashmiris, it remains unclear where, and under what conditions, their loved ones are being held.

Shortly after the abrogation of Article 370, NDTV runs a segment titled, “Kashmiri View: Silenced by Fear?” They aim to share the Kashmiri point of view, but say it’s been difficult to find people willing to speak. Instead, they provide a dozen anonymous quotes from Kashmiris residing outside the state. “I have a lot to say, but I am afraid,” says one person identified as a “shawl designer.” An academic says, “I have family in Kashmir. I don’t want to put them at risk.” An exporter of handicrafts states, “It’s not safe for me to speak out.” I receive similar

requests from many Kashmiris in Srinagar. “Please, tell our story,” they say. “Please, share the truth of what is happening here. Please, don’t identify us in any way that could get us into trouble.”

The communication lockdown drags on – twelve days characterized by a mixture of boredom, anxiety and depression. Sometimes I attempt to be productive, but the state of constant uncertainty and tension makes it hard to focus. Kashmiri friends tell me they’re suffering from headaches and a lack of sleep. Eventually, it becomes clear I must leave – I rely on the Internet to work, and if I’m not earning any money, I won’t be of any use to anyone. Most Kashmiris, on the other hand, don’t have a choice. They expect the situation to last for months – once the government lifts the curfew, they say, there will likely be protests, and bloodshed. They don’t know when they’ll be able to return to work, or their children to school; the tourist season, already stymied, has been ruined for the rest of the year. I bid a sad farewell to my host family, and to the many friends I’ve made – at least, the ones I’m able to visit in their homes. As for the others, there’s no way to reach them. I can’t tell the tailor that I won’t make it in for a fitting for that winter coat. I can’t tell my friend from the Jeep that there will be no more Kashmiri salt tea.

I take an auto rickshaw to the taxi stand to get a shared car to Jammu. The rickshaw driver tells me it’s 70 rupees, and I give him 100 and tell him to keep the change. But he insists otherwise. “No, no,” he says, forcing 20- and 10-rupee notes into my hands. “Take it, take it.” I accept his generosity. It’s so characteristic of the people here – people who have suffered so much and yet never cease to give – and as I do so, my heart breaks all over the place.

“Maybe,” he says, as I load my luggage onto the vehicle, “you’ll come back.”