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Self-Writing in Tral, Kashmir: Struggles in Public History

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During the last leg of my ethnography in (Indian) Kashmir, conducted over the summer months of 2017, mostly in its southern districts, students I met would often narrate in lengthy written or spoken accounts, how mediated representations of their lives were so different from the bitter experiences of their collective history. The region had seen, in the previous summer, the killing of Burhan Wani, a local Kashmiri youth-turned Hizbul Mujahideen militant, in an encounter with security forces. The first in a generation of educated, digitally active millennials to join militancy, Wani had an unprecedented following amongst ordinary Kashmiris in a region suffering prolonged disillusionment with both Indian and Kashmiri political leadership. His death was followed by widespread protests which were put down by severely repressive measures. The valley was also clamped under complete curfew, for months on end, with particularly severe consequences for school-going and college students.

These intense efforts that I witnessed amongst students to persistently engage in (re) telling their histories, a critical epistemological and political task of public history, is hardly new to Kashmir. While academic and journalistic scholarship on Kashmir has been by far more concerned with questions of validity of its accession to India in 1947, wars fought over it by India and Pakistan, or consequences of the conflict for the region,[1] Kashmiris themselves have persistently attempted to recover, re-write or keep alive their own indigenous histories. In a recent essay, Faheem describes for instance how inside Kashmir, collective memories of bitter remembrances of accession to India in 1947, or the signing of the accord in 1975 between Sheikh Abdullah and Indira Gandhi, were informed by vernacular, public memorializations.[2] He details how what many analysts see as a period of relative calm in Kashmir between 1975 and 1986 – with Kashmir having accepted Indian rule- or citizenship as India would like to see it – was in fact one of intense political activity.

During this time, people critiqued the accord and articulated their displeasure with dominant Indian power structures through 'hidden transcripts', circulated in the cultural

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idioms including poetry, novels and anecdotes. Youth-led organizations openly discussed political betrayals and compromises in underground literature, including books and news-letters but also jokes or cartoons.[3] If memory of Sheikh Abdullah challenging the Indian state served once as phenomenological ground for constitution of Kashmiri identity that shaped contours of later political developments, from the 1950s to 1980s, collective memory of Kashmiris mediated between the slogans *raishumaari* (plebiscite) *and azadi ya maut* (freedom or death), critiquing what was seen as Abdullah's betrayal, constituting ground for the 1990s armed uprising.[4] The writings of those such as Prem Nath Bazaz or the painful political poetry of Agha Shahid Ali, can in this light also perhaps be seen as Kashmiri renditions of a freedom struggle – or experiences of the brutality of its suppression that contest dominant historical imaginings of Kashmiris as merely helpless victims of an unresolved conflict between its two neighbouring nations.[5]

In modes not dissimilar to history-making of past decades, Kashmiri scholars and activists I met in the course of my fieldwork in the region had also made efforts to rewrite histories of contemporary events and of the repression of unarmed protests in recent years.[6] Akin to accounts of historical moments of political loss or betrayal in the past, the telling, or re-claiming, of real experiences of 2016 was also a collective project, located in and arising out of the attempts by a historically denied people to reclaim their own history. These projects of history-making in the present included older modes of rewriting history such as political poetry.[7] But they are also now being produced via newer modes of rap music, political blogs, photographs and videos circulated in digital places.[8]

I repeatedly encountered such efforts to rewrite history, also in the form of letters, notes, poetry and sketches, which were given to me by ordinary students I met in repeated visits to high schools, colleges and universities in the region, including in the troubled districts of South Kashmir. Many of these students were protestors and stone-pelters. And their attempts to narrate - and make sense of – experiences of 2016 were often informed by painfully inscribed experiences of place and locality. I refer to these reflexive engagements of students with their own lived histories that were evinced in these letters as self-writing, drawing from Foucault's rendition of the complex discursive inscription of self and thought.[9] Yet, even as they narrated a given historical past, these letters were testimonies of personal experiences – interpretations of and struggles with a bitter present and the looming despair of unresolved futures. Located in collective history and framed by its experiences, they were contoured by technologies of writing particular to a period and a location. But the political imaginations expressed in them were not determined by it.

This article pays heed to such struggles with writing the self and rewriting history in a moment and particular site of historical experience, reading excerpts from a few of the many letters written by students I met in Tral *tehsil* in the Pulwama district. I delimit the field of study to a single site (of the several I visited in the wake of the bitter experiences of 2016 and through my fieldwork in the years before) to attend to critical relationships between locality, time and the possibilities of self-writing. The Tral region of Pulwama district became visible to both Indian and international publics in 2016, as home to Wani, the Hizbul militant from Sharifabad village of Tral, who was killed in an encounter with Indian security forces in July that year. Wani, his parents and friends say, was no different from any other ordinary teenager until an incident wherein he was beaten and humiliated by security forces, after which he left home to join Hizbul. He was the first Kashmiri militant to reveal his identity on digital media, inspiring through his digital discourses what came to be known as a 'new militancy' in the region. In 2016, after his death, angry protests and episodes of stone-pelting racked Tral and other sites in Pulwama.

In sections that follow, I quote first, at length, from excerpts of a few of the several letters, written by students of an undergraduate college in Tral, who came mostly from adjoining villages. As their letters indicate, they shared a deeply remembered history. In a following section, I reflect on how these letters evince particular histories of having belonged to Tral, whose everyday realities were not the same as those of students I met in sites of relative privilege, such as convent schools or private schools in Srinagar district. But they were also different from those struggles expressed in letters written for instance by graduate

students of literature I met in universities in Baramullah and Anantnag. Letters written in Tral were efforts by students to re-tell the history of their land, through forms of memorialization such as poetry about collective memories of loss, sacrifice and long failures of justice in Kashmir. But they were also urgent, troubled and complicated narrations of experience of, and reflective struggles with, *zulm* (oppression), humiliation and, overwhelmingly, in the recent wake of events of 2016, everyday encounters with mediated misrecognition.

In Tral, which has a distinctive historical past of political associations linked to factors such as long mobilization by Jamaat-e-Islami, armed struggles of the nineties, and bitter memories of a brutal counterinsurgency, the critical presence in most letters was an urgent seeking of *azadi* – freedom. The complex writing in these letters, however, and their imaginings of azadi, were neither determined (or constituted) only by shared locality or linear imperatives of historical longings. They evinced the reflective despair of struggles against the failure of others to apprehend their lives and political agency. In the light of this empirical material, I conclude with some reflections for the doing of public history and its epistemological possibilities.

Three Letters from Tral

Several students in Tral wrote to me in the summer of 2017. Excerpts from three letters are presented here. The first writes about, and attempts to re-write the idea of their political practice as `terrorism'. The second writes about (*why*) 'azadi', as political desire constituted and yearned for within lived frames of historical experience. The third attempts to rewrite who it was who was in fact dying in Kashmir and why peace between India and Pakistan was so important for *Kashmiris* (not India or Pakistan). While the specific struggles articulated in other letters were often similar, and sometimes different, it is their mode of reflexive argumentation and their possibilities for public history that I draw attention to.[10]

Letter One: Daishathgarh (terrorism)

> We belong to a district in Kashmir which is called Pulwama. This is the place where on 8th July 2016, Burhan Wani was martyred … that day the whole of Kashmir was grieving. The people of India call him a terrorist ... I want to tell the people of India that if Burhan Wani was a terrorist, then the whole of Kashmir would not have gathered at his funeral.
>
> What the conditions in Kashmir were after his martyrdom, I have witnessed myself how unjust and oppressive they were … since that day the conditions here are the same. Perhaps these conditions will change now only once Kashmir gets freedom.
>
> If asking for your right is terrorism, then India too was once terrorist …
>
> I have a desire that I too may be martyred one day, for my dear Kashmir, for our Islam. The oppression against us has reached its pinnacle but we will not back down.
>
> I am a girl …

The last paragraph of the letter begins by citing from Allama Muhammad Iqbal's famed lines:

> Wo kehte hain ne, yaqeen mohkam, amal peham, mohabbat faateh-e-alam, Jihad-e-zindagani mein hain yeh [mardon ki shamsheerain] (they say, don't they that firmness of belief, eternal action, love that conquers the world. In the holy war and struggle of life these are [the swords of men]).[11]

The letter concludes with an anguished question:

> Wo jawan jo apna khoon bahan rahe hai, apne liye, unko aap daishathgarh kehte hai … kuch logon ne yeh bhi kahan yeh log 500 rupaiye ke liye pathar maar rahe… kya sach me 500 ke liye koi apni jaan dega? (These boys who are giving up their lives for us, you call them terrorists … some people have even said they are paid 500 rupees to throw stones … will anybody give up their own life for just 500 rupees [US$8]?

Letter Two: Isliye Azadi (this is why freedom)

This second letter – also written by a female student – begins with words that are indigenous to the history of the valley. But they acquired a different resonance amongst young people in the wake of 2016 – '*Hum kya chahte* – azadi [What do we want – freedom]!'. It continues with the author's explanation of why azadi was so desired and so important.

> Yahan ke halaat din be din kharab ho jate hai. Yahan par har din kisi ka bhai, kisi ka beta mar jaata hai. Hum isi wajah se dar jaate hai. Hum man se padhai nahin kar sakte hai. Isliye main Allah se dua karti hoon ki hum ko azadi de. [The conditions here become only worse with time. Everyday someone's brother, someone's son is killed. We live in fear because of this reason. We cannot put our mind to our studies. This is why I pray to Allah to give us freedom].

The student's letter concludes with an appeal for help:

> Hum Kashmir ke student hamesha peeche rehte hai. Hum log bhi agey jaana chahte hai. Hum logoon ko is museebat se bahar nikalne main hamari madad kare. [We, the students in Kashmir, are always lagging behind. We wish to go forward too. Please help us to get out of this trouble].

Her last lines, written in English, are: 'Thank you so much. Go India go back. We want freedom'.

Letter three: 'Kashmir main … kaun marta hai' [Who is being killed in Kashmir]?

The third letter is written by a student who identifies himself as an undergraduate student in the first semester of his first year. He regrets that he has received no education in his college so far:

> Ek din ek ustaad padhata hai aur doosre din doosra ustaad padhane aata hai. Wajah yeh hai ki halaat theekh nahin hai… Hamare kashmir main aaj bahut zulm horaha hai. Khas kar talibi ilmoon ka nukhsaan ho raha hai. [One day a teacher comes to teach, the next day someone else. The reason is that conditions are not good in Kashmir. There is oppression and injustice in our Kashmir today. We students are losing out the most] …

Towards the end, the letter, like the others, makes a plea for justice:

> Meherbaani kar ke Kashmir ke logon par taras khao. Kashmir main log marte hai- kaun marta hai? Kashmir main Hindu marte hai- nahin. Kashmir main agar marte hai toh Kashmiri log marte hai. Mujahid shaheed ho rahe hai, who bhi Kashmiri hai. Police wallah marta hai toh who bhi Kashmiri. Nuqsaan Kashmir ka ho raha hai. [For God's sake, have mercy on Kashmir. Who is dying in Kashmir today? Hindus? No. Those dying in Kashmir today are only Kashmiris. The mujahids who are martyred are Kashmiri. The policemen being killed here are also Kashmiri. The loss is only Kashmir's.]

The writer continues, articulating hope for peace in the subcontinent and in Kashmir:

> **Inshallah mujhe umeed hai ki Kashmir phir se jannat banega. Aur Hindustan aur Pakistan ek doosre se dosti karle. Is me donon mulkoon ki bhalayi hai. Jang se gareeb log marte hai … Hum khoon kharaba nahin chahte hai. [God willing, I hope Kashmir may once again become paradise. And India and Pakistan friends. Both countries would benefit. War kills the poor … we don't want bloodshed.]**

The letter concludes with a prayer for the wider acceptance of Islam in India and an affirmation of faith in the goodness of Islam: 'Inshallah Hindustan main Islam aam hoga. Deen e Islam ek acha deen hai.' [If Allah wills, Islam will be common in India. Islam is a good religion.]

Historical Reflexivities, Self-Writing and History-Making

For Foucault, subjectivation presents itself a condition, or as he puts it an 'attitude' – 'a mode of relating to contemporary reality; a voluntary choice made by certain people. In the end, it is a way of thinking and feeling; a way, too, of acting and behaving that at one and the same time marks a relation of belonging and presents itself as a task'.[12] This belonging is a relation to society in its historical and political determinations with its embedded and embodied strictures, its sedimented orders of thought.[13] What kinds of relationships may such shared historical reflexivities have with possible forms of history-making in Kashmir? In circumstances of sustained collective denial, what possibilities remain for writing the 'self'? Is it also possible to see struggles, and imaginations of agency in these reflections of students within the historical specificity of a particular locale in Kashmir (Tral), and even in these 'historical tasks' of self-writing?

It is difficult to miss the threads of shared historical location and experience that constituted the modes of writing in these letters in particular ways. There would seem to be at least three distinct tropes that consume the writing of *all* three letters in Tral. The first is the urgency to (re) claim their true location as that of victims – and survivors – and not aggressors or perpetrators. Secondly, the letters speak in aggrieved response to, and seek to counter, not so much the histories perpetuated by the Indian history book, but by Indian media discourses which are in context of both circulation and censorship of local media, recursively – mostly digitally – consumed, also by these students who write thus in Tral. Thirdly, there is the dialogic and discursive tone of all three letters – even the first letter which expresses the willingness to be martyred, does not speak of *killing* the other. It quotes from Iqbal's famed lines on the real nature of *jehad* and the true weapons of men who wage the holy war and struggle of life: firmness of belief, eternal action and love that conquers the world. The writing in these letters evince not hate – as in fact does much of the recent writing in India *on* Tral, or its Kashmiri Muslim residents – but stubborn hope that it may render the realities of their lives not just visible, but to use Judith Butler's evocative words, apprehendable, and thereby grievable.[14]

Letter one on terrorism speaks to the contemporary circulation in Indian media texts of terms such as 'militant infested' or site of 'Islamic terrorism'. These letters – as the spoken narratives of several other students – were painful reflections on circulations of such mediated perceptions of Tral or of Pulwama, which they said were far from the realities of their everyday life and of the events of 2016. This is an attempt to rewrite Tral's history as a struggle for freedom, not terrorism. Identities of those who fight for that freedom, it insists, are therefore to be seen as those of martyrs, not terrorists. The writing is an endeavour to reveal themselves as *victims* of state repression. (Tral has over the decades been amongst the sites in Kashmir that have seen the harshest face of counterinsurgency measures.) This letter – as again did many students who spoke to me – asks the fundamental question: what makes their political struggle for freedom less legitimate than India's Quit India movement against British rule? The author of this letter says she wishes to give up her life for Kashmir, and for Islam; the two causes are for her interlinked.

The second letter – on *why* azadi – also reiterates the deep and fervent desire for freedom and explains why. Azadi here is not a handed down historical cause, but the only way she believes Kashmiris will have freedom from fear of death and life. The writer thanks the bearer and (hoped for) carrier of her letter in advance for its circulation to those who matter. The fervent Kashmiri slogan 'Go India, Go Back' is here a plea for reason and understanding from the other.

The third letter – about who is dying in Kashmir – is a compelling reminder of the real statistics of death in Kashmir. While India mourns the losses of its soldiers posted in Kashmir, the writer gestures towards the several hundred thousand dead and disappeared in Kashmir over the long decades. He points out that even today it is Kashmiris – police and ordinary people – who make up the numbers of those being killed every day in Kashmir. He evokes the conditions wherein students and young people also face symbolic death, with no good education possible in these war-torn conditions, and with no prospects of peace and reconciliation in sight. He asks India – the state but also its people – to have mercy on Kashmiris, to leave them alone. He ends with hope for a discursive peace between India and Pakistan with a reminder that war hurts the poor the most. This letter also writes the hope that, one day, Islam will be accepted in India – *Inshallah Hindustan main Islam aam hoga*. It concludes with the poignant reminder that Islam is a good religion – *Deen e Islam ek acha deen hai*. While some of those reading this essay may be quick to point out the seeming irrelevance of this plea, addressed to a nation-state that is home to amongst the largest Muslim populations in the world, the letter-writer's prayer speaks not just of the true particularities of lived conditions in Tral, but of the affective sensibilities of those rendered subjects of this material and symbolic marginalization.

Each of these letters in Tral then seek at once the outcome of both *azadi* itself– freedom from India which they advocate for– but also as deeply freedom from misrecognition. They articulate in that sense the desire to re-write history both in the real terms of materially lived realities but also in the discursive terms of the words they (re) write, and the meanings they intend to convey. Azadi is sought in Tral then from a dual injustice: violations of rights to life and dignity, but also from unfairness of public perception. These letters by ordinary students in Tral unlike other writing in digital spaces which I discuss elsewhere sought not so much to speak with or be heard by international publics but by Indian and Pakistani publics – to urge them to think of Kashmiris. They also make evident the urge to (re) make the history *of* and *in* Kashmir as a shared yearning in Tral. But its imagined outcomes are varied. The first letter articulates azadi as a long sought political desire of a historical collective with (in Tral) thick ties to both piety and Muslim nationalism. The second letter explains why freedom is so critical in Tral as the only envisaged way to lasting peace and for the wellbeing of Kashmiri students. The third letter sees life under Indian rule as having brought death, both real and in symbolic terms for the young. Azadi then is a common desire in Tral. But even here, it is mediated by and carries imaginings of different futures of freedom.

The criticality of foregrounding the self-writing of ordinary young people in Tral follows the importance accorded in public history practices not so much to translation of specialized historical discourse for lay audiences, but of furthering knowledge of the different sites and technologies through which historical knowledges are constituted, articulated and find legitimacy amongst wider publics. These letters evince both how deeply removed the meanings of lived history in Tral are from statist and mediated discursive circulations of their lives and its politics. And they witness the despair that misrecognition brings for populations who are given no chance to speak for themselves. At the same time this work of public history contends with the task of cognition of conflictual subjectivities, always difficult, but more complex in sites that have lived long historical denial of spaces for political articulation and belonging.

Public history, like all history perhaps, is in its spirit a collective project, leaving residual questions of what justice may be possible in contexts of collective denial, for other yearnings, ordinary desires, marginal subjectivities and post-nationalist imaginings, so often difficult to address. These letters, while reflecting the dominant imagination of a moment, in a particular site, still do not describe its complex subjectivities. A few letters from students from the minority Sikh community in Tral also narrated at length the unprecedented

measures used to suppress student protestors in 2016. This included the harsh use of pellet guns on stone-pelters, the complete denial of what was in fact happening in Kashmir in Indian national media and the misrecognition of Kashmiri Muslim students as terrorists. But this self-writing of Sikh students (as well as a few Kashmiri Muslim students) in the same college, articulated imaginings not of freedom from the Indian state but for justice and autonomous government.

The context in which this essay goes to press is bitterly different from when it was researched and first drafted. The Indian government has since repealed Article 370 and Article 35-A of the Indian Constitution that conferred special political status to the historically disputed region of Jammu and Kashmir. These decisions, and the failure of the Indian state to apprehend the rights of those whose lives are most at stake, to be involved in political decisions that concern them, have surely had harsh consequences for students in Tral. In a context where any attempt to discuss the efforts by ordinary young people in Tral to write their history may be considered seditious, the task of public history is vested with multiple urgencies. One of them certainly is to make public the voices of those who have hardly been heard, those forgotten in the nationalist discourses of warring nation-states. But a second task, critical at this juncture, is the task of nuance, of calling attention to constitutions of histories, with all their complexities, and conflictual dimensions. Perhaps the most urgent task of public history is the desperate need to build bridges of human cognition; for historical 'others' to (re) learn *why* azadi mattered so much in Kashmir. And why it mattered so bitterly. It was not just that their historical aspirations were not fulfilled – they were not even apprehended.

Endnotes

1 For rich exceptions that unsettle this terrain of scholarship on Kashmir in different ways, see Mridu Rai, *Hindu Rulers, Muslim Subjects: Islam, Rights, and the History of Kashmir*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2004 and Chitralekha Zustschi, *Languages of Belonging: Islam, Regional Identity, and the Making of Kashmir*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2004.

2 The political mobilization of Kashmiris for twenty-two years, from the early 1950s to the mid 1970s, was in historical continuity with a longer struggle against oppression, which had its genesis in the early 1930s.

3 The plot of Shabnam Qayoom's widely read and later banned novel *Yeh kiska lahu, yeh kaun mara* (Whose blood is this who died) published in 1975, for instance, traverses the questions that many Kashmiris had for Abdullah, a once beloved leader.

4 Farrukh Faheem, 'Interrogating the Ordinary. Everyday Politics and the Struggle for *Azadi* in Kashmir', in Haley Duschinski, Mona Bhan, Ather Zia and Cynthia Mahmood (eds), *Resisting Occupation in Kashmir*, University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia, 2018, pp230-247. https://doi.org/10.9783/9780812294965-009

5 See Prem Nath Bazaz, *The History of Struggle for Freedom in Kashmir*, Kashmir Publishing Company, New Delhi, 1954 and Agha Shahid Ali, *The Country without a Post Office*, Ravi Dayal Publishers, Delhi, 1997.

6 Rao Farman Ali, *History of Armed Struggles in Kashmir*, Jay Kay Books, Srinagar, Jammu and Kashmir, 2017 and Javaid Iqbal Bhat, *Scars of Summer*, Jay Kay Books, Srinagar, Jammu and Kashmir, 2017.

7 See, for example, Bhat, *Scars of Summer*.

8 See Sanjay Kak (ed), *Until My Freedom Comes: The New Intifada in Kashmir*, Haymarket Books, Chicago, 2013 for documentation of such efforts particularly in the wake of the 2010 protests.

9 M. Foucault, 'Self-writing', in P. Rainbow (ed), *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*: *Essential works of Foucault 1954-1984 vol 1*, The New Press, New York, 1997, pp207-222.

10 These three letters (as many in Tral) were written in Urdu, and the words here are translations.

11 I include a few missing words in this well-known quote in parenthesis.

12 Foucault, 'Self-writing', p309.

13 Rabinow, op cit, introduction.

14 Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?*, Verso, London and New York, 2009.