

What Are Kashmir's Stone Pelters Saying to Us?

SANJAY KAK

Kashmir's *sang-bazan* – stone-pelters – have captured the popular imagination, but the uprising has yet to be accorded the same political pedigree as the Intifada. Nevertheless, images of boys as young as nine and ten being dragged off into police vehicles, or shot dead by the paramilitary forces, have begun to dent conventional truisms about what is happening in Kashmir.

Like an obstinate nightmare, Kashmir has returned to haunt India's political discourse, in this third consecutive summer of massive protests. For almost two months now we are witnessing the brazen courage of Kashmiri youth, armed with stones in their hands, in groups of no more than a few hundred at a time, taking on Kashmir's much vaunted "security grid". This carefully welded network deploys at least 6,00,000 soldiers in uniform, and another 1,00,000 "civilian" intelligence and surveillance operatives. But pinned down by this summer's showers of carefully aimed rocks, the grid has begun to appear clumsy and vulnerable.

As the *sang-bazan*, the stone-pelters, insolently stormed into prime time, they brought with them an intensity that made the newspaper pundits, and the usual chorus of television-studio experts, briefly wilt. Images of boys as young as nine and ten being dragged off into police vehicles, or shot dead by the paramilitary forces, have begun to dent conventional truisms about what is happening in Kashmir. Startling photographs of middle-aged (and middle class) women in the ranks of the stone-pelting protesters have also destabilised those who have hidden behind a morbid panic of the "Islamists", or the fear of Pakistan's venality, to obscure their understanding of events in the Valley. Although reluctant to grant this uprising the same political pedigree, at least some Indians seem to be curling their tongues around the word *intifada*. On the whole, the David and Goliath disproportion of the protests, and its sheer effrontery, has begun to capture the imagination of a growing number of people in India.

So beyond their furious defiance, what are Kashmir's stone-pelters saying to us?

A Desolation Called Peace

As a Kashmiri who has mostly lived outside the Valley, my engagement with its

troubles began quite recently, in 2003, when I returned to Srinagar after a gap of 14 years. These intervening years were witness to the tumultuous history of the present movement – the *tehreek* – and were accompanied by massive militarisation. It had ended in a virtual deadlock: a restive population, locked down by a gargantuan military presence, in what Kashmiris call the "occupation" of the Valley.

The year 2003 turned out to be significant, partly because it gave the first indications that the armed militancy might be on its way out. From a peak figure of almost 30,000 militants in the early 1990s, security forces had dropped their estimates to less than 2,000 active fighters. Typically, and well before anyone could understand what lay behind the ratcheting down of the armed struggle, the government claimed credit for "breaking the back" of the armed struggle, and trumpeted the return of "normalcy". Unorthodox parameters were used to buttress the claim: tourism department estimates of tourist arrivals, and the headcount of pilgrims headed for the annual *yatra* to the Amarnath shrine. There was no acknowledgement that tourists and pilgrims were moving along sheltered corridors, tightly controlled by the security forces, and that these had little connection with the everyday lives of Kashmiris. The understandable enthusiasm of pony-men on the pilgrimage route, and *shikara-walas* and houseboat owners on the Dal Lake, were presented as the turning of the tide against the *tehreek*. And for... well, if not India, then at least for something called Peace. This was a "normalcy" concocted for visitors, not for the vast majority of people in Kashmir.

As the state government quixotically launched road shows to bring Bollywood producers back to the sylvan slopes of Gulmarg, Kashmiris seemed preoccupied with picking up on other parts of their lives. For the first time in over 15 years, they too were coming up with a set of numbers, not so much to plumb the peace, but to help configure their abnormal past, and consign their losses to a respectful memory. A dogged survey by the Jammu Kashmir Coalition of Civil Society was providing early indicators: 60,000 people

Sanjay Kak (kaksanjay@gmail.com) is a documentary filmmaker with interests in ecology and resistance politics.

killed, and almost 7,000 “missing” in 15 years. No one had gotten down to count the men and women injured and maimed in the thousands of incidents of firing; no estimates were made of those molested or raped. Interrogation and torture – words used interchangeably in Kashmir – had run their brutal, bloodied hands over several hundred thousand people it was said, but these were only whispered estimates.

“They make a desolation, and call it peace”, Agha Shahid Ali, the Kashmiri poet, had written.

Uniforms and Guns

In 2003, I was in the Valley with twin identities, Kashmiri and Indian. As a Kashmiri, in place of the promised “normalcy” I could only sense a deeply traumatised society, and one fearful of its own recent past. Not defeated perhaps, but in some inchoate way, overwhelmed. As an Indian, I was acutely disturbed by what I saw, and could see something with far-reaching consequences for India brewing in those troubles. Even today, the sharpest memories of that visit are those that bridge my two disparate identities.

The strongest memory always is the militarisation. However prepared you are for the presence of uniforms and guns, actually facing them, and living with them is much harder, even for the casual visitor. From the aircraft window, you see soldiers with automatic weapons on the tarmac; outside, dozens of vehicle-mounted machine guns wait to “escort” the convoys of dignitaries. The streets are endlessly lined with heavily armed soldiers, and roundabouts throw up the unsettling sight of traffic policemen who carry AK-47s. And then the bunkers: everywhere, but most galling when they turn up at both ends of the lane in which you live. Even without a secessionist bone in your body, so many guns can never stand for anything but intimidation.

The second is a compelling sense of the breakdown of the institutions of democratic governance. For a people bruised and battered by 15 years of an armed struggle, every single mechanism by which they could find representation, or hope to be heard, or to access minimal justice, seem to have been dismantled and put away. Elections; judicial process; the

rule of law; all had been hollowed out. In their place we had the draconian provisions of the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA), and the Public Safety Act (PSA). Despite the fact that an elected legislature was in place, real power was widely regarded as lodged in three specific sites: Badami Bagh, Srinagar’s cantonment, where the Corps HQ of the Indian Army are located; Gupkar Road, where a slew of Indian intelligence agencies are based; and Raj Bhawan, formerly the maharaja’s palace, now the governor’s home. (Kashmiris do not fail to make the obvious connection that all three sites are implicated in a century of highly oppressive rule by the Dogra maharajas.) Outside of Srinagar, for those living in the *qasba* and the small town, the real face of power was clearer, and usually sign-posted in the middle of the main street. “Town Commander”, the modest tin boards said. Lettered-in just below, the name and phone number of a Major of the Indian Army.

The third revelation centred on the national media. What was reported seemed so far removed from the reality unfolding on the ground here, that it was not long before an acute sense of disorientation began to settle in, a feeling of being lied to, and manipulated. Unlike the ongoing conflict in Manipur, or earlier, in Nagaland, which are shrouded in silence, Kashmir was regularly covered by the mainstream Indian press. There was a large contingent of reporters covering Kashmir for the Indian media, and there were a surprising number of local newspapers and magazines. But this media mirror was hugely distorting, sending out twisted images every day, right onto the front pages of newspapers, and on prime time television. The very abundance of such coverage seemed designed to obscure, a dense smokescreen on which Indian journalists could project a self-image of caring souls whose hearts bled for Kashmir.

The easy comfort with a military solution, and the near abandonment of the rule of law: many will recognise in Kashmir a set of tactics that the Indian state has begun to deploy with avidity in other troubled parts of the country.

What has changed in the Valley since 2003?

In 2010, despite occasional lip service to the idea of troop reduction, the military

presence remains unaltered, and the civilian population continues to suffer the full weight of the security apparatus. Despite the talk of normalcy, there has been only the rare instance when there was “troop reduction”. (One particular, well-publicised pull-out of a battalion of the Indian Army translated into no more than a 1,000 soldiers on the ground, out of an estimated 6,00,000.) In Srinagar the cosmetic changes have included replacing the Border Security Force (BSF) with an equal, perhaps greater, strength of the Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF). There has been a visible reduction in the ubiquitous squalor of the brick and barbed wire bunkers that puncture the daily life of its citizens. But in its place the CRPF have shifted to a more centralised “quick reaction” deployment, with even more lethal consequences. The recent cycle of protests, for instance, saw patients pour into Srinagar’s SMHS hospital with bullet injuries inflicted by security forces, 60 in the first fortnight of August alone. Surgeons at the hospital told the BBC that “most of the bullet injuries are in the abdominal area, chest, eyes and neck. They are single and multiple bullet wounds. They are all young men, in their late teens or early 20s.” This week a new threat was unleashed in the streets of Srinagar: a “pressure pump” gun. It fires highly damaging pellets, which enter the body and destroy vital organs, but leave hardly any external marks. So far the summer of 2010 has left 26 people blinded in firing, and more than 60 have been killed. The security forces have reported no casualties.

In the countryside, which has always been “held” by the army, even less ground has been yielded. If anything, the army have visibly dug their heels in, with the defence minister firmly rejecting the possibility of a troop reduction. Earlier this year the Army Commander, Northern Command waded into the debate around the removal of the draconian AFSPA, with a comment that displayed a dreadful lack of cultural sensitivity, describing the Act as a “holy book” for soldiers deployed in Kashmir. Debate on the possible removal of the notorious Act has always been upstaged by considerations of the “morale” of the Indian Army. What this word “morale” effectively silences is the impact

that half a million soldiers has on a civilian population. It starts with the colonisation of scarce water resources in villages, and the catastrophic effect of their presence on the forests. It is reflected in the high incidence of forced labour – *begaar* – around the army camps. And in the largely unspoken incidence of the sexual exploitation of women.

And yet, in discussion on this summer's protests, all attention has been focused on the incompetence of the Omar Abdullah government, encouraging the impression that it lay within his powers to alter any of the key elements in the crisis. Incidents like the Machhil fake "encounter" came and went, but were never allowed to disturb the tone of the official Indian position. But Kashmiris have not forgotten that the protests were directly connected to the cold-blooded killing of three innocent civilians by Indian Army soldiers. The soldiers were under orders from their officers, who tried to pass off the bodies as those of "militants" killed in an encounter. Eventually when the story broke, and massive protests erupted, a Colonel and a Major were charged with murder. Their motivation was not much more than a few hundred thousand rupees of "reward" money.

The Machhil incident is a timely reminder that India's military presence is perceived as an occupying force in the Kashmir Valley. Not as some well intentioned – if clumsy – bear sent to protect its people. To dismiss the incident as an aberration would be dangerous. The past two years have seen the unearthing of a series of mass graves in Kashmir, which could hold evidence of hundreds of Machhil style executions. There has been no considered official reaction. Within this present structure, were the prime minister arrange to have even Syed Ali Shah Geelani, the separatist patriarch, recast as chief minister of the state, he would be hard put to prevent further strife. Meanwhile the government remains doggedly centred on the role played by Pakistan, the involvement of the Lashkar-e-Toiba, and for the good news, the 2008 elections and its voter-turnout. These elections are still read – incorrectly – as an overwhelming mandate for Indian democracy.

Over two decades of conflict, Kashmiris have lost the protections of their right to

speech, assembly and travel; they have lost all guarantees of their freedom from violence, harassment and unlawful detention. They have seen every single substantive attribute of democracy give way under the pressure of militarisation and the attitudes of those who administer Kashmir. The rule of law, the independence of the judiciary, and the civic responsibilities of elected politicians: as each of these protective pillars has been hollowed out, all that remains of democracy is the thin patina of elections.

And this record is itself such a shabby one, right from the first Election of 1951, where the National Conference under Sheikh Abdullah won every single seat in the 72-member assembly. (Only two seats were actually contested. No one else was allowed to file their nominations, which were rejected at the outset.) But as long as he could deliver the Kashmiri "mandate" to New Delhi, Sheikh Abdullah was left undisturbed. His successors, Bakshi Ghulam Mohammed, and G M Sadiq, were allowed to do the same, a tradition that has survived all the way into the present. Elections are seen locally not as a measure of popular support, but the mechanism by which the writ of the Indian government can be stamped on the dispensation of its choice. (Ironically, the only election that Kashmir will remember as "free" was in

1977, in the aftermath of the Emergency, when the fractious coalition of the Janata Party was in power, and the "Centre" at its weakest. For a people who had not experienced a fair election in 25 years of voting, this brief tryst with democracy electrified Kashmir. But that moment of fairness passed too quickly, and as soon as the Janata Party coalition collapsed, and Indira Gandhi returned to power, things reverted to normal. This brief experience of free and fair elections, it has been suggested, could well have given a spurt to the secessionist movement in the early 1980s.)

Of course none of this sordid reality ever inflects the debate on Kashmir in India. This summer, while there was some grudging space for a "human-rights" discourse, attempts to read events politically were viewed with distaste. "You are bringing politics into it!" our TV anchors say in feigned outrage. On the streets of Kashmir, protestors are unambiguous, chanting "Go India! Go back!" and "Hum kya chahte? Azadi!". References to the voter-turnout of the 2008 election recur all too frequently, like an article of faith common to the entire political spectrum, from Left-liberal to Right-Hindutva. (With metronomic regularity, one Bharatiya Janata Party spokesman offers the *non-sequitur*, "Why don't the Separatists stand for Elections?" Ravishankar Prasad clearly chooses to be

Recruitment of Executive (Research)

PRADAN is an NGO based at Delhi involved in livelihoods promotion among the rural poor in some of the most disadvantaged regions in India. We invite applications from interested and qualified candidates for the post of Executive (Research) based at New Delhi. As the Executive (Research) you are expected to lead projects around both qualitative and quantitative research in the PRADAN field areas to understand impact of livelihood and well being interventions, to set up an effective monitoring and evaluation system and to create evidence base for policy advocacy. Excellent data management capabilities along with good writing skills in English is a pre-requisite for applying for the post. The candidate will be a Post Graduate or hold a professional degree with about 3 years of experience in field based research projects in the development sector. Compensation will not be a constraint for deserving candidates. Please apply to recruit@pradan.net with your CV and a recent writing sample within next 7 days. For more details on PRADAN please visit www.pradan.net

oblivious of the fact that during the last elections most separatists were in detention. Before, during, and after the polls.)

Noisy Triumphalism

The 2008 elections were called at a moment spectacularly unpropitious for the Government of India. It was a time not unlike the present. Through the summer, Kashmir had been rocked by protests against the state government's acquisition of land for the pilgrimage to Amarnath. Massive unarmed marches, often with 20,000 people, had snowballed into the most outspoken expression of public sentiment since the troubles began. After years of looking frayed at the edges, the numbers on the street suggested that the sentiment for *Azadi* was back. The palpable air of defeat one had sensed only a few years ago seemed to be a thing of the past.

Not surprisingly, the two principal "pro-India" regional parties, the National Conference (NC) and the People's Democratic Party (PDP), were both visibly reluctant to wade into this flood of separatist sentiment and canvass for votes. In the face of a poll boycott called by the separatists, a lacklustre and largely invisible campaign followed. Omar Abdullah and the NC in particular pointedly sheltered under the caveat that the election was narrowly about "development" and not about the larger issue of *Azadi*. Informally, police and intelligence officials made the gloomy admission that a turnout of 35% would leave them very satisfied.

Yet, when the results started to come in, and the turnout began to creep past these modest expectations, and eventually rise to 60%, no one admitted to being surprised (in 2002, the figure was just under 32%). Such was the din of celebration, deftly orchestrated by the mass media, that an election fought on the mundane platform of *bijli, sadak, pani* was suddenly being served up as a referendum. Kashmiris had embraced Indian democracy, they said. Kashmiris had rejected separatism.

There was no mention that to stall anti-election protests, most districts had been under curfew for weeks before polling. Or that almost 700 key activists of the summer's protests spent the months in the run-up to the election in jail, locked up

under the PSA. There was silence about the sudden and ominous reappearance of the dreaded *ikhwani* counter-insurgents, their murderous operations now dressed up in the constitutional uniform of Special Police Officers, as part of the Special Operations Group, and even the Territorial Army. (Knowledge of their renewed presence alone was enough to terrorise people in the villages.) No one drew attention to the fact that in addition to the soldiers already in place, nearly 450 additional companies (50,000 paramilitary troopers) had arrived to "assist" in the elections, allowing the government to flood each constituency with khaki and olive-green before the polling, which was held in an unprecedented seven stages.

Of course there were the more familiar reports of straightforward rigging, of bogus voting and booth capturing. But on the whole the strategy seemed designed not to favour one party or the other, but to simply ensure a turnout. The more subtle strategies included the sudden nomination of thousands of candidates, most of them independents, but others from parties that had little or no presence in Kashmir. In the midst of a fierce poll boycott, and a tense campaign, candidates suddenly showed up from the BJP, the Samajwadi Party, Janata Dal (Secular), Rashtriya Janata Dal, Janata Party, Lok Janshakti Party, All India Forward Bloc, Forward Bloc (Socialist), Republican Party of India (Athawale), Samata Party, Socialist Democratic Party, National Lok Hind Party.... An endless list of Indian political formations had lined up at the hustings. They clearly hadn't hoped to win, and almost 1,100 such candidates lost their deposits. But whatever the inducement to stand, these candidates were probably expected to poll only a few hundred votes each, often just from family and neighbours.

In the end it did all add up, they did deliver a few percentage points in the voter-turnout. "We had several different strategies in place", I heard from a senior police officer, some months after the elections, "and all of them luckily fell in place". He could not stop grinning. "Of course we will never again have this level of force available to us, never", he added emphatically, "so it will be difficult to replicate".

That is what the 2008 elections in Kashmir eventually was: an exercise in pushing up the turnout to a "respectable" level, to once again demonstrate the validity of Indian democracy in Kashmir. It did not matter what Kashmiris thought of it. When the new coalition government between the Congress and the NC, and headed by the telegenic Omar Abdullah, was sworn in early in 2009, all that was forgotten. In the noisy triumphalism generated by the Indian media, the spin masters in Srinagar and New Delhi seemed to so enjoy the din that they appear to have begun to believe in the implausible script they had written. These elections had pulled Kashmiris back into the mainstream, they said. Something akin to a "post-conflict" euphoria permeated the atmosphere, and the air was thick with talk about a "reconciliation" commission.

Illusions Fall Apart

It took only a few months for the illusion to fall apart, to understand what Kashmiris thought of all this delusory behaviour. The rape and murder of two young women in Shopian, in which the security forces were widely believed to have been implicated, led to another massive round of protests. If the protests in the 2008 Amarnath land issue were marked by huge unarmed processions, the overwhelming feature of 2009 was civil disobedience. Shopian town itself remained shut for 47 days, this unprecedented hartal itself called by a non-political formation of citizens, the *Majlis-e-Mashawarat*, the consultative committee. It was the Majlis who made sure that daily wagers and petty shopkeepers were given rations to survive the long shutdown.

But wrapped up in its hubris, and swaddled by a pliant media – and Intelligence – structure, New Delhi was unable to grasp what was developing. Opaque to the terrible bottled-up anger of people, Omar Abdullah's government responded with a series of callous statements about the death of the young women, and the J&K police followed up with a series of bungled investigative procedures. These eventually threw up so many contradictions, and started to look so shabby, that the Government of India had to rope in the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) to put a lid

on it. (The CBI promptly concluded that it was a case of death by drowning, in a stream with less than a foot of water.) Today the case remains stuck in an extraordinary place: charges have been filed against the doctors who performed the post-mortems, against the lawyers who filed cases against the state, against everybody except a possible suspect for the rape and murder, or the many officials who had visibly botched up the investigations.

This week I was suddenly reminded of a conversation I had some years ago with a committed separatist, a former militant, and ex-Chairman of the United Jihad Council. (He spoke about carrying an AK-47 for seven years, but was oddly proud of himself for never having fired it.) He is now a quiet scholarly presence, retired to a spartan hut in his sister's compound in Srinagar. "We didn't want an *azadi* where all our young men were dead", he said,

suggesting tactical withdrawal before the might of the Indian Army, not a defeat. There were 30,000 armed militants once, I insisted, what happened to their weapons? "Well, guns are not like fruit, my friend, they don't come off trees, they don't just rot with age..." he had answered thoughtfully. Then added, "They must be somewhere, mustn't they? There must be many, many weapons buried in the valley. Plenty of ammunition too..."

I regret not having asked him about the fighters, the survivors amongst the 30,000, those who were not killed, or jailed. (Or arrested and broken by torture.) How many of those are there? Where are they? What must they be thinking of what is going on? As the streets are taken over by younger people, the stone-pelting children of the *tehreek*, what counsel do they have to offer to this new generation of Kashmiris, who grew up in the tumultuous

1990s? What lessons are these veterans in turn drawing from the young?

The last three summers have seen an argument about resistance slowly taking shape in the Kashmir Valley. The tenacity of the *sang-baz* only caps a political debate that Kashmiris have been engaged in for the last 20 years, and in some ways, all the way from 1947. The difference is that this time the stone thrown on the street is being intelligently shadowed by a sharp understanding of the oppression. It is not a secret understanding, open only to a few select leaders. It is available on the Internet, on social networking sites. But it still is a debate. The form of the resistance is fluid, and can swing back to the place where it has come from. What is buried in the Valley, as my friend had hinted, can always be resurrected.

That is a debate that should engage all of us, Kashmiris and Indians.

This document was created with Win2PDF available at <http://www.daneprairie.com>.
The unregistered version of Win2PDF is for evaluation or non-commercial use only.