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Curfewed Night: An Endeavoring Literal Effort

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Kashmir eludes all. It does not lie in the old movies. It does not reside in declaration of either Mughal Emperors or Dogra rulers. It escapes the imagination that tries to pin it down as a burning wound of terror on the India's visage. If it's essence is to be captured, only a son of Kashmiri soil can do it.

Basharat Peer, a Kashmiri journalist, author and a political commentator in one of the touching memoirs "Curfewed Night" brings an honest attempt what should have been attempted a long time ago. It goes beyond the political rhetoric that envelops Kashmir and is the authentic story of a ravaged land that continues to labor and breather under the shadow of state occupation. Basharat illustriously presents a book that is blunt about the turmoil of Kashmiri people and its anti-Indian stand. It may hurt a few sentiments here and there, it may give a tough time to a biased reader, it may pinch the jugular vein of an Indian patriot but it is what it is in Kashmir.

The book chronicles the bloody and devastating past and ongoing violence of Kashmir through the writer's eyes. Peer's writing is beautifully descriptive and splendid and the emotions are hauntingly deep and breathtaking. Very candid in portraying emotions and inspirational in presenting a true picture of wounded Kashmir through a prism of reality and unprejudiced approach. "Curfewed Night" is truly a poignant peek into a Kashmir that the rest of us Indians can't even fathom to imagine.

In a masterful marriage and a tight hug between memoir and reportage, Peer narrates the tale of his homeland and its ill-fated people. Personal experiences woven seamlessly into the recounting of greater events. Stories from his childhood sit next to interviews with victims and survivors of decades of violence, torture and inhuman acts. Peer has successfully conveyed the heart broken atmosphere of numbness and emotional exhaustion, which will be instantly recognizable to anyone who has firsthand experience of Kashmir as a non-partisan.

"Curfewed Night" stands out, in the English literary world in particular, as it lends an authentic Kashmiri voice to the tumultuous events that punctuate much of Kashmir's historical canvas over the last twenty-three years or so. It revolves around the life of ordinary Kashmiris, which were completely transformed with the onset of militancy in the early 1990s. The author make a very daring critique of the Indian state, which responded with brute force and crushed its proclaimed constitutional values of democracy, rule of law, freedom, secularism and human rights. The most disturbing aspect of these developments, apart from the mass graves that dot the

otherwise picturesque landscape of Kashmir, comes in the form of the author's profoundly disturbing account of Papa 2, which served as a notorious torture centre in the heart of Srinagar into which large numbers of local people as well as the occasional captured foreign *jihadi*, would "disappear". "Their bodies would later be found, if at all, floating down rivers, bruised, covered in cigarette burns, missing fingers or even limbs. Peer describes how many of his generations of Kashmiris were rendered important by one favored torture method: inserting copper wire into their private parts and connecting it to the electricity mains." (Peer, 142-152)

Peer also draws out certain uncomfortable realities that people in Kashmir have to face, that is the failure of Kashmir's political class—both the mainstream and separatist leadership. *Viz a-viz* its people, how militancy has scared the social and cultural fabric of Kashmir, how people despise Indian rule.

Peer's work "Curfewed Night" is also sensitive too in a way that how conflict painted the portrait of history in very different colors. Deeply critical of the Indian state, and its heavy handed security apparatus, which has subjected Kashmiri's to an almost routine humiliation of identity parades, body searches and an unpleasant volley of questions, he is also able to tease out the humane side of the men in uniform. In an interview with Peer an army man admits and subsequently taking leave and saying, "I was a different man before I joined the force and came to Kashmir." (Peer, 239) Thus, clearly the routine violence in Kashmir has taken a toll on all the actors involved.

The book is a labor of love, a proof of steely determination to make the voice of his people heard. Peer recounts the tales of brutality, repression and violence, stories that became an everyday occurrence and shockingly absorbed into a daily routine. "Shameema, who lived in a village Larkipora, huddle of houses and serene fields, It's tragedies hidden from the casual visitor. She tells her tragic story like this; her two sons Shafi and Bilal (class 10th students). "In May 11, 2001 a gun fight had started between militants and Indian army near Shafi's school. Shafi was going to offer *Namaz*. Shameema's neighbors told her that army had taken her Shafi and Bilal. Shamema raised her head now and looked at the distant sky and said, "God gave me courage that day, I fought with every soldier who tried to stop me and reached the house where the encounter was going on she saw arrested boys. "I saw Bilal from a distance but Shafi was missing. She said, she grabbed Bilal and began walking away with him. Bilal told her that soldiers had sent Shafi inside the militant's house with a mine in his hands. At the same time soldiers came and tried to take Bilal away from her mother and thrust a mine in Bilal's hands & pushed him towards the house. Shamema faced the officer, holding the mine and told him to leave her son and let her take it in to the house. 'I held on to the mine and asked the officer to blow me up.' He remained silent; she shouted again 'then he ordered the soldiers to let us go' as we walked away I saw them pushing an old man towards the house with the mine in his hands (Peer, 172 – 175).

The description of torture, rape and murder assault numb the reader but Peer soldiers on. For instance Peer narrates a shocking incident of an ill fated bride Mubeena Ghani, in May 1990, a few hours after her marriage; she had been raped by paramilitary soldiers. Mubeena says,“

three bullets hit her in the back, shoulder and hips, when CRPF fired on the bus. After that they dragged her and bridesmaid by the road side to the mustard fields. “ I could not remember how many they were. I had lost my senses”. During this incident Rashid’s cousin had been killed and others were injured including Rashid himself. (Peer, 157-158)

In what is one of the most chilling passages in the book, he describes the Gowkadal massacre where hundreds of innocent people were gunned down by the all powerful CRPF personal who terrorize the region at will. “On the morning 21 January 1990, several thousand Kashmiris, broke the curfew and marched peaceful out of the old city to complain about incidents of police violence during search operation the previous night. When the crowd was half way across the Gowakadal Bridge, CRPF paramilitary opened the fire on the unarmed civilians. Farooq Ahmad, the urban city engineer, described how after the firing the CRPF walked slowly across the bridge, finishing off those who were lying on the ground. Ahmad had fallen flat and managed to escape unhurt. “Just as I was to get up.” he told me, “I saw soldiers coming forward” shooting anyone who was injured. Someone shouted and pointed. “That man is alive; and the soldiers begin firing at me. I was hit 4 times in the back and twice in the arms.” seeing how he was still alive, another soldier raised his gun, but the officer told him not to waste ammunition: “he will die anyway.”

Peer captures Kashmiri life in its everyday ordinariness, where the ordinary makes the reader cringe. He speaks of thousands of lives whose development has been arrested. The daily grind of police check posts, the identity searches; the unwanted visits from Army personal, the missing people, the uprooted families, everything stunted in the shadow of fear. The author, protected from bad decisions by a wise family goes to Delhi to be educated. Later as a journalist he interviews survivors and families of the dead, missing and tortured. He speaks with colleagues, Indians, Kashmir ex-pats and refugees and through their stories a portrait of Kashmir is drawn.

Peer describes the multiethnic peace before these battles. He shows how Kashmiri Muslims, many who have integrated Hindu customs, are comparatively resistant to fundamentalist and political Islam. Women in Kashmir seem to have educational opportunities. Peer interviews a number of women, too often ignored in books by males.

The book is a good starting point for understanding the situation with a focus on human tragedy that the power struggle and political hysteria has created. For those more versed in what is happening, the book provides a good background on the human cost of this war. Peer provides a moving and insightful account that makes for a very gripping read. His work underscores the need to see Kashmir beyond its pre-modern cast as a picture landscape, epitomized in popular culture through celluloid. This work underscores the need for us to take pause and introspect.

Even as Peer speaks of his own time as a student in Delhi, learning his way around the capital as a Kashmiri. He speaks for a region alienated from the rest of the country; people for whom the democratic ideal that the country seems to cherish is a ghostly idea intangible and unachievable. Peer’s writing is lyrical and heartfelt and his prose is moving. It is a master piece of conflict writing and valuable more so because of the absence of voices from Kashmir in

literature. Even though he recounts take of horror and shattered lives and dreams, he ends the book on a hopeful note, when he describes resumption of bus service between Muzaffarabad and Srinagar. The message seems to be clear; politics is a game played between power centers and ultimately Kashmir belongs to its people. The hope of a nightmare free dawn belongs to the hopeless and hapless subjugated and conquered people. "Curfewed Night" is a must to read, to ponder upon & to introspect.

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