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Capturing Conflict from Below and Within: A Profile of Photojournalism and Photojournalists in Kashmir

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Abstract:

Visual representations have become an essential part of news today, depicting and disseminating information across the world in a way that transcends the linguistic boundaries. As a result of *the pictorial turn*¹, journalism in Kashmir attained new dimensions. Kashmir witnessed a significant rise in the number of photojournalists, who have contributed to the narrative of Kashmir in a unique way. This paper seeks to explore the factors that led to this rise and attempts at understanding the impact it had, or continues to have, on the photojournalists themselves and the viewers. The paper gives a contemporary profile of prominent Kashmiri photojournalists (with special reference to Altaf Qadri and Showkat Nanda) and highlights the hazards involved in the profession.

Keywords: Photojournalism, Kashmir, Press Photographers, News Photography.

Introduction

In the forward to his book *Kashmir*, Amit Mehra writes that every photographer in Kashmir is bound by “a chain that binds together two rival and mutually opposed regimes of visibility which have dominated the perception of Kashmir in India’s popular imagination for a long time”. The first regime, according to him is the “regime of scenic” pictures, which “eroticizes Kashmir as an outdoor setting for the disposition of fantasia” and the other one is “the regime of the news photographs relayed from the frontlines of the Kashmir situation”. The latter depicts pain and profile of injuries as a result of militarization, civil riots, state suppression and public uprisings. “Kashmir, once eulogized by emperors and poets as a land of unparalleled beauty, has today mutated into a deeply troubled space” (“Of Occupation and Resistance” back cover). For decades now, the problem of Kashmir has remained unresolved. While there have been many accounts of voices being suppressed and conflicts being met with violence, things have undergone a change since the advent and popularization of social media platforms; where Kashmiri citizens have found ways and means to express their true sentiments.

The Kashmiri insurgency began at the time of India’s Independence and partition of Indian and Pakistan in 1947. It gained momentum as an organized movement in 1990s; it has

¹See Mitchell, “Picture Theory” 11.

remained a reality till date causing deaths, instabilities and administrative difficulties. The upheavals created by various separatist and militant groups in Kashmir, some of whom desire independence of Kashmir and others who want that Kashmir be acceded to Pakistan, led to the deployment of heavy security and paramilitary forces in Kashmir by the Indian government. The Indian security forces in Kashmir have been accused of “fake encounters”, rapes, and killing of innocents (“Kashmir’s extra-judicial killings” 1). The opinion on whether Kashmiris wish for their state to remain a part of India or not seems to be clouded by and shrouded under a lot of factors. Many such as Fahad Shah feel that “For decades now, India has been undermining these protests and the voices of dissent emerging from Kashmir (loc 207, par. 2)” and that:

The Indian government’s response, all along, has been brutality, injustice, apathy and denial. There are thousands of cases pending and fake encounters continue. Dissent voices are crushed. There are draconian laws like PSA and the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA). Both have been widely used to jail and kill civilians with impunity, Minors have been arrested and put in jails under PSA. (Shah, loc 214, par. 2)

Similar feelings are expressed by Mirza Waheed, in her article titled *India’s crackdown in Kashmir: is this the world’s first mass blinding?* where she writes that “In the slaughterhouse of the Kashmir valley, even the grievously injured – with pellet-scarred eyes or broken limbs – have remained defiant . . .The hostility now appears to be total, unbridgeable, and for those on the receiving end, unbearable” (5).

There are multiple and opposing discourses on the problems related to Kashmir and it will be nearly impossible to objectively reach any conclusion/solution on their basis. In his article titled, *Sinking Valley*, Pratap Bhanu Mehtawrites, “The roots of the Kashmir problem are deep, and the point should not be to gloat at one government’s failure. The deep gulf between what the Indian state wants and what Kashmiris in the Valley want has always been unbridgeable (1)”. A major gap in this regard has been pointed out by Shinzani Jain, “The absence of reportage on the everyday life and turmoil of the people makes it hard for people in India to gauge the nature of the conflict, scale of resistance and the demands of people in Kashmir (3).” Not only is the lack of reportage a problem but also the misrepresentation and reinforcement of dominate ideology of the nation. “The language of news and debates that have no space for balance or accommodating different opinions only make the audience hypertensive” (Bashir 2). The photojournalists in Kashmir are contributing in a novel way in bridging this gap by using photography to depict the events in Kashmir and to relay them to the outside world so that the truth gets known.

Empowerment through Cameras: Rise of Photojournalism in Kashmir

People’s understanding of Kashmir depends on the information that is available to them, largely through media. In this regard, the photojournalists have contributed in reconstructing the image of the protestors, militants, the Indian troops and paramilitary forces in Kashmir.

News photography carries the power of representing what has been and thereby acts as evidence, which is more accurate than any other medium that mimics reality. It became an outlet for presenting the repressed or curbed social realities. “When a picture conveys a strong impressions of movement, it usually gives somebody looking at it a feeling that he has participated in the action, at least that he saw it happen” (Fox and Kerns 131).

Many who feel oppressed due to the situations in the valley, have sought to give voices to their dissent through various means. A number of books such as *Curfewed Night* by Basharat Peer, *Our Moon has Clots: A memoir of a lost home in Kashmir* by Rahul Pandita, *Kashmir Behind the Vale* by M.J.Akbar, *Of Occupation and Resistance: Writings from Kashmir* by Fahad Shah, *The Lamentations of a Sombre Sky* by Manan Kapoor, *Kashmir: A Case of Freedom* by Arundhati Roy and Pankaj Mishra, etc. have presented the condition of Kashmir and the plight of Kashmiris to the world. However, there is more to the story. The subjectivity of autobiographical memoirs and propagandist ideologies of media representations cannot be denied (Aslam 3). Many in India, still remain unaware of the real horrors that conflict-ridden Kashmir goes through at the hands of either militant forces or army or both. While many in Kashmir are trying to present an original narrative through words, quite a few of them have turned to cameras in order to show resistance or to throw light on the reality they experience in their day-to-day lives.

“Even as Kashmir being a hot bed for journalists all over the world particularly Indian journalists, there was a lack of local taste to this noble profession of journalism for a long time” (Bazaz 1). The face of photojournalism in Kashmir has been changing. “A professional breed has already marked their presence on the scene and is doing wonders, whether they work for a local, national or international media agency” (Bazaz 5). As per the progress of the world, the citizens in Kashmir have also become aware and in sync with latest platforms of expressions. Things have become more visible. “The days when Doordarshan and All India Radio could pass off a fisherman as a militant and an insurgent as a terrorist are gone. Things have changed” (Parrey 8-9). The advent of Social Media and availability of digital cameras has created a revolution. Barthes pointed out in *Camera Lucida*, “The age of the photograph is also the age of revolutions, contestations, assassinations. ... (94)”

In his book, Basharat Peer talks about more and more Kashmiri boys wanting to join military in early 1990s in order to bring about a change; there is, now, a sudden rise in the number of people wishing to take up cameras. Increase in the number of Kashmiri youth turning to cameras to depict the reality of conflict for the contemporary audience, is redefining photojournalism in the region. As it turns out, most of these young photojournalists are those individuals who were once victims of police or militant brutality themselves. A photojournalist’s job in the region, as described by Shome Basu, “is witnessing Kashmir, known to be the world’s most militarized zone, a part of geopolitical fault line between India and Pakistan since 1947” and representing it to the outer world (1). In the words of Trisha Gupta, “Photography in Kashmir has emerged in a cultural context where there is almost no local film-making, and little space for art”. Fahad Shah expresses similar thoughts in the book *Of Occupation and Resistance: Writings from Kashmir*:

The curbs on freedom of speech in Kashmir and the indifference to local requests and demands have led to the emergence of several rap singers (or learners of rap), underground graffiti artists, painters, writers, photographers and filmmakers. There are websites and blogs that express the realities within Kashmir, or narrate brutal tales from the conflict. We therefore witness the rise of Independence voices.(loc 133, par. 3; loc 141, par. 2)

The rise of photojournalism in Kashmir is, thus, a very important step towards spreading awareness about the actual situation of the place. “In a world where ‘photographers, their subjects and spectators all share the recognition that what they are witnessing is intolerable’, as film-maker and writer Sanjay Kak suggests in his introduction, photography becomes the exercise of a civic skill” (Gupta 2).

Shooting through Lenses: A Profile of Kashmiri Photojournalists

Photojournalism in Kashmir got the required impetus after the establishment of *Media Education Research Centre*, which was opened in 1985 in Srinagar. One of the most prominent photojournalists to have studied at Media Education Research Center (MERC) is Showkat Nanda, whose works have appeared in numerous publications including *The Washington Post*, *Al Jazeera*, *Vogue*, *The Vox Magazine*, *The Sunday Guardian*, *British Journal of Photography* and *Columbia Missourian*. He is an award winning Kashmiri photojournalist who “grew up hard in Indian-run Kashmir, a child of war, iron-fisted rule and relentless tragedy” (Nieves 1). Showkat was barely 7 years old in 1989 when his cousin Parvez was killed in police firing in Baramulla (Gupta 6). Months later, his 17 years old brother Sajad, who had joined the ‘Jammu Kashmir Students Liberation Front’, “died in an accident while crossing the Line of Control” (Gupta 6). He recalls in the chapter titled *The Pain of Being Haunted by Memories*, “Despite having a penchant for visuals and fascination for photography, I grew up with the dreams of becoming a successful doctor (loc 489, par. 2)”. By the time he was aged 12, he adds, “I stopped dreaming about my future because everything was so uncertain. Survival became the topmost priority for children like me (loc 489-96)”. As a child, he witnessed deaths, violence, gunfights, blasts, curfews and loss, all of which shaped his identity and his life’s course. In the late 1990s, on getting inspired by an American woman journalist who was visiting Varmul “to report a suicide attack on an Indian army garrison by militants . . .” (loc 496, par. 2), and who suggested to him that he could become a writer or a photographer, so that he could tell his story to the world, he decided to become a press photographer. After finishing his master’s degree in Mass Communication and Journalism, he went to study at Missouri School of Journalism, USA (Taylor 2). He won many awards including the *National Press Photo Award*, the most prestigious photojournalism award in India, in 2011 (Shah, loc 3791, par. 1), the “Picture of the Year” award at MFI National Press Photo Contest, 2011 and CSE Climate Change Photography Award, in 2015 (Taylor 9).

Showkat's works which "appear rooted in personal loss" are reflective of his painful experiences (Gupta 6). He addresses the nature of subjectivity involved in his profession in these words, "It's hard to be neutral when your kitchen turns into a battlefield. I have a point of view" (Nanda, loc 579, par. 3). During one of the events when he was shooting in Kashmir's Baramulla town, after a 12 years old boy who was shot in the chest died in his lap, he recalls his reaction, "I wanted to scream. I wanted to throw stones. Not one, not two, but millions of them. But, apart from clenching my teeth, I could do nothing. With the burden of journalism hanging around my neck, I felt powerless. It was dangerous for a journalist to take sides, I had been told" ("The courage of a stolen childhood" 4). Just a few minutes later, he saw a young boy, who was the dead child's schoolmate, running "towards the paramilitaries throwing stones at their armoured vehicle, seemingly without worry about being chased, beaten, arrested or shot" ("The courage of a stolen childhood" 4). He took the picture of that boy throwing stones as symbolic of defiance². A year later, in 2010 when he was covering a demonstration in Baramulla, he found that the policemen and paramilitary soldiers had started firing at the protestors with guns, stun grenades and teargas canisters. Amidst the chaos and cries that ensued, he remembered the death of young boy who dies in his lap a year ago and expressed his rage by throwing stones at a bulletproof armoured vehicle ("The courage of a stolen childhood" 8). He writes:

Over the years, while working as a photojournalist, I have seen streams of tears falling down the cheeks of mothers and sisters; I have heard the screams of dying people, widows and orphans. I want to tell those who think that I have humiliated³ my profession about how humiliated I felt while witnessing the humiliation of my people. I don't know if my getting involved made a difference. But I made a statement that whatever was happening was absolutely horrendous. I did it because before being a journalist, I was a man who belonged to this society and people. I realized my responsibility and I acted on it. (Nanda, loc 586, par. 2)

Another Kashmiri Indian photojournalist who has been working with Associated Press since 2008 is Altaf Qadri. Though young in age, Qadri has been a recipient of many international awards and prizes. Being a photojournalist based in Kashmir, his works offer an insider's perspective on things. He grew up during difficult times of uprising in Kashmir. He recalls his decision about choosing to become a photojournalist in an interview with *121 Clicks*, "One evening Indian Border Security Force personnel raided my neighborhood after separatist rebels attacked their patrol. I was coming from a mosque and that was the first time when I was used as a human shield by the forces"(1). He further narrates how his uncle came to his rescue after 4 hours of detention as gunpoint and how he was thereafter sent to New Delhi for safety purpose. He continues the narration, "This human shield incident made a

² To see the picture, please refer to link, <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/spotlight/kashmirtheforgottenconflict/2011/08/201181712134503487.html>

³ Here, Showkat Nanda is referring the aforementioned incident where he threw stones at the armoured vehicles while covering an incident (turned violent) in Baramulla town in August 2010.

mark on my psychology and now my primary goal was to make outside world aware of the grass root situation of Kashmir conflict and I wanted to depict the true picture of its people who were suffering from everyday violence". His photographs depict violence, pain, injuries and pathos in the life of Kashmiris. *The New York Times* described his work as having a "sophisticated eye and highly effective technique."

Qadri's photographs are compelling and extraordinary for they convince the viewer of the motive of the photographer; which he well explains in his own words during an interview, "I believe merely taking pictures and get them published in newspapers and magazines is not enough. It should bring about a change in the whole world" ("Interview with Photojournalist Altaf Qadri" 2). It will perhaps be right to say that two of the most prominent Kashmiri photojournalists viz. Showkat Nanda and Altaf Qadri turned to cameras as a form of resistance. They were both themselves victims of conflict and violence.

Some other important Kashmiri photojournalists are: Javed Dar, Dar Yasin, Javeed Shah, Shahid Tantray, Habib Naqash, Fayaz Kabli, Showkat Shafi, Danish Ismail and Tauseef Mustafa. At one point or the other, these photojournalists have felt the power of photography. Danish Ismail, who is currently working with international news agency *Reuters*, recounts an incident where he spotted a few children near a house on fire in Budgam (Zargar 2). He further recalls, "We jumped across the house fence to make way for them". Suddenly, a trooper aimed his gun towards Danish. He tried to let the trooper know that he was a photojournalist by pointing his camera towards him (the trooper). "But he threatened to shoot me," Danish recounts adding, "I will shoot you too, I told him" (Zargar). Associated Press Photographer Dar Yasin was recently was in news for a photograph of him, running with an injured girl in his arms; the photograph⁴ had gone viral. The girl (a class 12 student), named Khushboo Jan, had been injured while protesting against security forces in Srinagar. Dar Yasin was there at the place of incident to cover it but when he saw the injured student, he handed over his camera to someone else and lifted the profusely bleeding girl up to get her a cab to the nearest hospital. The photograph was captured by photojournalist Faisal Khan and Dar Yasin's act was hailed as "humanitarian and responsible".

While some photojournalists chose the profession in order to represent the harrowing times they had been experiencing as residents in Kashmir, others ventured into the profession to find safety. Javed Dar and Dar Yasin are two such photojournalists. "In those days, when you left in the morning, you didn't know if you would come home in the evening. I thought if I get a press card, it might save my life", said Javed Dar at a recent book launch event of book called *Witness/ Kashmir 1986-2017*(Gupta). Edited by Sanjay Kak, this recently launched book created waves across the media and intellectual circuits. It contains photographs taken by nine photojournalists based in Kashmir and becomes a chronicler of history of Kashmir over these three decades. Photojournalist Dar Yasin was also heard saying at the book launch,

⁴ To see the picture, visit <<http://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/like-my-daughter-photojournalist-drops-camera-to-save-girl-hit-by-stone-during-kashmir-protest/story-UgKyjjRhA4dl9rHNegzLHI.html>>

“Pictures gave me something. When I go out with my camera I still do feel strong and powerful, like a soldier with a gun”. As a man with a press card, “a strategic tactic” one could stand out from the “from the crowd in a landscape strewn with army and police barriers (Gupta 3).”

While it is true that having efficient photojournalists is a necessity in Kashmir, one has to beware of the hazards and the challenges that come with it. Not only are photographs subjective representations but a plethora of them also led to desensitization in the viewers. What troubles many critics of visual culture and media about the profession is that it descends into voyeurism. According to Arthur Kleinman and Joan Kleinman, “Images of trauma are a part of our political economy. Papers are sold, television programs gain audience share, careers are advanced through the appropriation of suffering” (8). While photography is framing, Parrey reminds us while quoting Susan Sontag that, “Framing is exclusion”.

The need to tell the story, lack of true representation and a sense of expressing resistance through art, could be some of the reasons for the rising number of photojournalists in Kashmir. “Is it the unique tragicomedy of spectacular natural beauty and a gruesome conflict that has consumed generations?” asks Parrey. The work of photojournalists based in Kashmir provides a view taken by “somebody who’s already there” (Gupta 1) and therefore contain ‘punctum’ i.e. they have the ability to “prick” or touchingly wound the viewer. According to Barthes, ‘punctum’ is that rare detail or quality in the photograph, which personally touches the viewer thereby giving the photograph a private meaning and it very attractive. In his words, it is the “element which rises from the scene, shoots out of it like an arrow, and pierces” him (26). He writes, “A photograph’s ‘punctum’ is that accident which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me)” (27). Jacques Ranciere makes the distinction further clear by writing, “We recognize here the principle of the opposition between the *studium*, conceived as the informative content of the photograph, and the *punctum*, conceived as its affective force, irreducible to transmission of knowledge” (87). The photojournalists can themselves relate to the pictures they create or get affected by them for have been living that reality and have memories attached to them. “Their work, then, is precisely the opposite of the outsider who jets into the conflict zone to get a great picture: It is a fine-grained, long-time engagement with the world around them, a turbulent world of which they are themselves part” (Gupta 2).

Dangers of Enframing: Hazards of Photojournalism in Kashmir

A Kashmiri photojournalist’s life is full of hazards and “inextricably entwined with the threat of violence” (Gupta 3) for unlike journalists who can witness and event and later on write about it at a safe place, the photojournalist has to be present at the site with a camera that is visible to everyone. Often these photojournalists are misunderstood; the police or military forces think of them as someone who is on the side of the protestors or vice versa the protestors think that he/she is involved with the police and paramilitary forces in helping them identify the protestors (Zargar 3). “Vulnerable as individuals, photographers in Srinagar began to move around in groups, with no fewer than three cars, a practice that is visible to

this day,” writes Kak⁵. There have been various instances in news, where photojournalists got injured or worse, got killed.

Srinagar’s Press Colony was renamed as Mushtaq Ali Enclave in the honour of photojournalist Mushtaq Ali who died on September 10, 1995 (Gupta 3; Zargar 1). As per the information given by *Committee to Protect Journalists*, Mustaq Ali, who was a photographer for Agence France-Presse and a camera operator for Asian News International, “was killed in a parcel bomb explosion on September 10, 1995 at Press Colony. Pertinently, senior journalist Yousuf Jameel and Greater Kashmir Photo Editor Habib Naqash were also wounded in the explosion”. There is also *The Kashmir Press Photographers Association* to maintain solidarity among photojournalists in Kashmir.

There have been many instances of assaults on Kashmiri press photographers. Photojournalist Showkat Shafi was attacked while covering the “protests against Indian rule in the old city” in 2011 (“Photojournalists beaten by police in Kashmir”¹). “He was verbally abused and beaten with sticks and had multiple bruises on his body (“Photojournalists beaten by police in Kashmir” 2)”. Another photojournalist Naqash “has escaped many life threatening incidents” (Zargar 2). Fahad Shah tells us, “In November 2011, during the protests in Srinagar after Friday prayers, four journalists were beaten up the Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) and local policemen. Umar Mehrraj (Associated Press), Showkat Shafi (a freelancer with Al-Jazeera), Yawar Kabli (Getty Images and Kashmirdispatch.com) and Shahid Tantray (Dainik Bhaskar) were assaulted. Mehrah said that the forces were shouting, ‘Uthao, uthao video ab (now try and take a video)’” and broke his camera.⁶ Shahid Tantray was arrested and beaten by Police for capturing pictures of policemen taking “away five boys in handcuffs in a local court” (Shah, loc 149, par. 2), after the 2011 amendments in *Public Safety Act*, whereby the minimum age of a person who could be detained under PSA was raised from 16 to 18. He recalls, “After my release my family took me to the bone and joint hospital in Barzulla and the doctors found my neck and ankle bones fractures. I remained bedridden for next 25 days” (Shah, loc 155, par. 3).

The risks involved in this occupation, make photojournalism a daring and dangerous profession. What Caroline Brothers wrote in *War and Photography: a Cultural History* regarding images of war, seems equally relevant in case of photographs of conflict ridden Kashmir:

Danger hovers at the edges of all such images; the passions they record are always the most extreme. The possibility of dying that is their subtext, for their subjects as much as the photographer, means they make urgent claims on our attention, allowing us both to feel a sense of our own mortality and to hold that sense at bay. The

⁵As per the quotation cited by Trisha Gupta in her article “Framing Kashmir”.

⁶ Fahad Shah further cites the article “Journalists beaten up, One Detained” in *The Kashmir Waala* published on 25 November 2011.

forcefulness of their messages makes them unlike any other genre of image, the power of their desire to communicate impelling them towards representations that touch us more deeply and more directly. (loc 101-102)

Conclusion

Just like any other profession, photojournalism also has its own set of ethics. There are various concerns regarding the profession such as manipulation, desensitization, authenticity and subjectivity. However, the profession survives and time and again proves its worth. There are multiple aspects of photojournalism in Kashmir which need to be studied such as the interpretation of photographs, how do the pictures affect the viewers and what impact do they have, photojournalism as a tool for bringing out social change, etc. The visual analysis calls for a deeper study of photographs taken by these photojournalists, to place them in proper context and apply various tools of interpretations on them. One has to study photographs with the help of critical works on aestheticization of suffering and the ethical, socio-cultural, psychological and political impact it has on the viewers. The role of photojournalist is an important one as they are chroniclers of all the events that take place. In the words of Javed Dar “In case of Kashmir, every Kashmiri is a witness but a photojournalist has a different role to play. A photojournalist tells people the story of people” (Fatima 2).

Kashmiri photojournalists have been a part of struggle closely and have suffered losses as well, but continue to serve the cause. Previously, much of the history of Kashmir had gone undocumented pictorially. “As the book’s editor Sanjay Kak notes in his introduction to *Witness/Kashmir 1986-2016/ Nine Photographers*, “Inexplicably, some of the most argued events of these decades are absent from the photojournalism of the time. For example, the migration from the Kashmir valley of more than 200,000 Pandits, its Kashmiri-speaking Hindu minority, as victims of fear and violence” and thanks to the contemporary photojournalists that the world is now able to see the suffering of people in Kashmir. In the absence of freedom of press in Kashmir, of which Marx was a huge advocate, the photojournalists who are doing a commendable job by capturing the ‘paradise’ in pain, which leads to be a bigger change than the one brought about by guns. The local and visual narratives created by photojournalist in Kashmir raise questions, throw light on the unseen and create a different kind of discourse, which reconstructs a new social reality.

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