

Mumbai (Dongri)-Gujarat-Mumbai-Kashmir

Pages from my Diary

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I was born on February 28th, 1979. I spent two precious years of my childhood, from the ages of two to four, in Dongri, a Muslim-dominated area in Mumbai. Dongri is an old apart of the city, not unlike Paharganj in Delhi. It has old structures, shrines, small industries where sweets and masalas are manufactured. It is an area which has a charm all of its own. There are certain areas in Mumbai City such as Nagpada, Agripada, Dongri and Mohammed Ali Road that are essentially Muslim dominated areas, and are popularly (!) referred to as 'tense' areas, especially during volatile times (like during an India-Pakistan cricket match). I am now beginning to understand why these areas are popularly known as 'tense'.

I cherish the childhood years that I spent in Dongri. I grew up in what I would call 'a mixed cultural environment'. I grew up visiting different religious carnivals, listening to *qawalis* and Samantha Fox, Michael Jackson and Madonna – all at the same time. I have lived the experience of Mumbai through Dongri and the surrounding *Imambada* area, which is known for its kite-making industry. The kite of my life is made up of many coloured scraps of paper, and this is what makes it all the more interesting for me.

I am Muslim, but perhaps this identity was never very crucial for me. I almost looked at it as a negligible portion of my life, nothing too significant to define me. Riots took place in Mumbai during December 1992 to January 1993, yet these never affected me drastically, though my own family and friends experienced violence during the riots. In fact, the riots produced in me a sense of solidarity, an 'Indian-ness' which manifested itself through concerns for the betterment of this country. I began to work assiduously towards doing what I thought was 'good for my country'. I looked at myself as if I was the very essence of 'Youth', somebody who had an inner power and a deep potential to contribute to the advancement of the Indian nation.

Ten years down the line, on February 28th, 2002, my beliefs and convictions received a jolt. Where were I, and the Indian nation, heading towards? For my birthday on that day of that year, I received a piece of news – "a compartment of the Sabarmati Express carrying *Kar Sevaks* is burnt at Godhra", "communal riots hit Gujarat". Prior to this, September 11th had occurred. I guess September 11th began to work on my unconscious and began to make me slightly conscious of my Muslim identity. But Gujarat made me completely conscious of my Muslim and Indian identity. And to top it all, in March I undertook my first visit to the state of Jammu & Kashmir. Then began a process of confrontation – deep confrontation, violent confrontation, profound confrontation, vehement confrontation – with and

about myself, my beliefs, my relationship with the Indian State, my Indian identity, my Muslim-Indian identity and my Indian-Muslim identity.

My visit to Kashmir was important and interesting. Sitting in Mumbai, I had never really thought much about Kashmir. Perhaps Kashmir affects the Delhi person more than it affects me, the Mumbai person. Gujarat affects me, the Mumbai person, more than the Delhi person.

I want to bring in here a piece which I wrote in my diary on March 29th, 2002:

Kasheer¹: An Outsider's Experience of the Valley

While I am writing my thoughts and perspectives on Kashmir, my mind drifts towards the magnificent mountains which surround Kashmir from all sides. Mountains have this amazing capacity to make you feel humble. Yet mountains are not arrogant. They are omnipotent, omniscient.

Sitting in my little flat in Mumbai, all I can see from outside my grill window are huge concrete buildings. Buildings look hopelessly helpless. After all, all they can do is to stand and keep standing. Mountains have life; buildings are lifeless.

Last year, I developed an enchanted attachment with the idea of visiting Kashmir. This attraction developed as a result of my interactions with Kashmiris and people working towards restoring peace in the Valley. All along, I had never given very serious thought to Kashmir. My interest in Kashmir developed because of my association with an organization which was trying to understand the nuances of the India-Pakistan conflict. This led me to participate in many discussions about Kashmir, but I could never really understand the complexity of the issue.

While in Mumbai, one of my main sources of information about Kashmir was the media, particularly newspapers. Everyday, all the knowledge that I got about Kashmir was to do with the troubles occurring there. This would bring various pictures and images to my mind. I thought of Kashmir as a place with old and dingy brick houses, masked men, lifeless streets and scared people huddled inside their houses. Some of my interactions with people working in the region gave me a gloomy picture of Kashmiris and I began to think of them as people who have no hope and who are somehow 'going through the motions' of life.

March 7th, 2002

[Cut to Jawahar Tunnel!] As I passed through the darkness of the 4.55-kilometer long tunnel, I suddenly found my mind becoming empty and blank. As the vehicle moved out of the tunnel, I experienced a feeling of being absorbed by the Valley. Moving further, I was completely lost in the remarkable beauty surrounding me. The snow-capped mountain peaks seemed to join me in my laughter as I discovered ecstasy in being insignificant and minute. The roads along the towns were peopled with scenes of women drying clothes, children with rosy cheeks playing and enjoying themselves, willow trees, countryside landscapes, and so on. In the midst of all this wonderment, my mind began to feel restless. I tried to analyze the reasons for this sudden unease. What could it be? Could it be this large expanse of nature? Could it be a different culture?

I realized that this unease was due to the uniformed guards standing on the roads with

their guns. The presence of the BSF and the Army men every furlong gave me a terribly disconcerting feeling. I felt like someone was trying to stop me – stop me from thinking, stop me from being free. Though the soldiers were merely standing on the roads and none of them did anything to me, I could feel, psychologically, that an authority was being imposed upon me.

For somebody who comes from a free city, this experience can range from mild disturbance to profound devastation, depending on how well you can handle yourself. This very insight forced me to think about freedom and what freedom means to me. How free are we?

Kashmir forced me rethink the institution of governance in India. India is diverse, and I need not say much about its diversity because it is a lived experience. Delhi is as foreign to me, a Mumbai resident, as it is to a non-Indian (whom we would call foreigner!). So I am a foreigner in different parts of India just as much as a white, black or an oriental tourist is! The idea of an 'Indian Identity' forced me to think very hard, both during the Gujarat riots and the Kashmir experience, about lots of questions. For instance, does someone have the right to define for me what is Indian?

After Gujarat, perhaps every Muslim seems to have come under scrutiny, and this scrutiny is about 'patriotism' and about proving allegiance to the Indian state. Every incident after Gujarat has made me wonder, "Whom else do I have to satisfy about my Indian-ness, and how often will I keep doing this?"

The media has played a crucial role in this regard. Indian cricket victories, terrorist attacks (wherever they occur), terrorism legislation – all form the headlines of newspapers. Each piece of reportage works on my subconscious. Bollywood films run to full houses if they talk about Pakistan, Islam, Muslims and terrorism in the most jingoistic manner – the louder and more vulgar the dialogues, the greater the applause, the more full houses! Every little insignificant aspect of life, including sport and entertainment, becomes commercially popular if it is 'patriotized'. Patriotism is the new mantra of advertising!

Here is a piece which I wrote in April 2003, while Gulf War II was going on:

I do not live in a war zone. I live in a state of terror. Terror, which is perpetual, which assumes various proportions. There is terror inside of me, outside of me. Terror about who is lurking in those distant shadows. Is it my enemy or my foe? Oh, it is the security guard! He is here for my security. He has a naked gun in his hand. The gun is ignorant, but the guard is not. The strength, might, and power of the gun give me courage to muster up courage. I am feeling safe. My breath is calm and smooth. So is my heartbeat. I am safe.

Suddenly, the guard advances towards me. His naked gun advances too. He comes close enough, looks into my eyes, peers. His looks are piercing. He says, "Sorry pal, I have to shoot you down. I have to shoot you so that you become (vulgar) news. The headlines should shriek, 'We gunned down an enemy spy'".

What is my crime? What is my sin?

"Nuffing! Nuffing's your crime; Nuffing's your sin. You are simply going to be a martyr, a martyr of the 'Other Side', and a source of security for 'Our Side'. You see, buddy, there are many whom I have to protect, many whom I have to assure that the world is a safe place to be in, to live in, as long as I am there. So put your faith (and money) in me (and my guns).

For as long as I am there, you will be there. Your progeny will be there. Safe, calm and soothed. And you, buddy, will help me comfort the souls of this world, souls who are in un-rest and discomfort because the Other is there. The enemy is there.

"And they, these perturbed and disturbed souls, need to be protected, and made to feel secure. Your death shall bring them security. Your dead body shall unnerve their perturbed souls. Your death will be their joy".

"But what about tomorrow", I asked, "Whom will you gun down tomorrow? How long will you continue to make them feel safe, feel secure, feel soothed? Will they ever cease to be insecure?"

"No, not until I know", said he, "...as long as there are weapons, as long as there are bombs, as long as there are walls in people's minds, as long as people don't know. (the unknown enemy is always greater than the known), as long as we don't let them know, fear will prevail. The state of terror shall continue. And there shall be martyrs like you. Whom we shall slay alive".

Saying this, he shot a bullet into my skull

And the next day, I, an unknown citizen, became known. I became The Enemy.

Kashmir inspired in me a journey of exploration. Till today, I remember that I was introduced to everyone in Kashmir as, "...she is from India!"

Today I can afford to laugh about this, but back then, it was astonishment, a sense of irritation and at times, even anger, to be introduced as an Indian when all that I had known always was that "Kashmir is a part of India". I was more Indian in Kashmir, but when I am back here, in my own and known domain, I am questioned about my Indian-ness. Not directly; yet, everyday and through every indirect means! What kind of atmosphere is being generated? I know, and I am afraid of admitting this to myself, but how long can I protect myself from the truth?

The journey that I underwent through the Kashmir experience motivated me to bring this experience to more people of my generation. In June 2003, I organized the first exchange programme of students from Mumbai to Kashmir. Here are a few words from a diary that I kept during that trip

July 1st, 2003

My visits to Kashmir have been a process of building relationships with individuals whom I had not seen before, but had heard a lot about (through the media of course!).

"At a certain point I lost track of you.

You needed me. You needed to perfect me:

In your absence you polished me into the Enemy.

Your history gets in the way of my memory."

Agha Shahid Ali, "Farewell" from *The Country Without A Post Office*

Kashmir was 'the Other' for me. But travelling to Kashmir changed me; I could not be the same person that I was. How could I? I had seen the other face of India, the face of militaristic democracy. My idea of India changed. Today, my idea of India is very personal to me. India is dear to me, but Indian governance is not. I trust India, but not her governors. I relate to India, but not to the people who claim to be her 'guardians'.

Kashmir has been my journey of learning, of understanding the relationship between the individual and state, the individual and society; of understanding culture and identity from a new paradigm. I owe my growth to Kashmir, to the moments of introspection, the intricate questions which disturb me as much as they disturb others around me. Kashmir has taught me to question everything – from my beliefs, to everything happening around me.

Kashmir is not just a hotbed of conflict and a volatile region in South Asia; it is a case of skewed democracy, of not respecting people's wishes and aspirations. Kashmir is not the only case; the same issues are at stake in the North-East of India, Palestine, and elsewhere. Each of these struggles has valuable lessons for us. But Kashmir is important. The purpose of undertaking this exchange was to re-examine 'reality' with one's own eyes, with the eyes of the mind. There are no ultimate solutions, no final answers, but there is a journey to tread – the journey of asking questions, of looking for options, of collaborative partnerships, and above all, of keeping the mind open and not accepting anything as final – and mapping the road. This journey motivated me to pursue and organize the exchange that took place from June 8th to June 26th.

Gujarat made me pessimistic and worrisome, but today I am beginning to realize that there is a need to take stock of the situation and move forward. I do not know what consequences will emerge from efforts like these and the different efforts of several others throughout the world, but what needs to be done has to be done. It is said that the greatest noises of the world come from silences; I want to speak.

July 1st, 2003

Silences can be deafening. Silences can be loud. I will tell you a story:

A story of every house. It happens in my house as well. Father and I fight because we do not agree. We do not agree on values, on issues, on thoughts. But while we fight, mother is in a state of tension, a state of nerves (her nervous system is completely nervous, tense). She is struggling with her nerves. She wants Peace.

She intervenes, says, "Be Silent! We should not fight. After all, we are a family. We should maintain Peace". Father and I stop. I am speechless before her tears. Father says, "Look what you have done to your mother. You have shattered her Peace. You have shattered the Peace of this House!" (Have I?) I stop. There is calm in the house, but I am seething from within. I was not heard. I was not given space to express myself. Do I want this Peace?

NOTES

1. Kashmir was known as Kasheer until the British came and changed the name to Kashmir.



War Correspondences

FIRST PERSON PLURAL