



Photo: Ron Summers



Photo: Alan Crawford

Kashmir: A Calm Between Storms

By David Hammerbeck

When flying into Kashmir, the first sign you see that the situation is different than in most of India is the airport in Srinagar, which in fact is an air force base moonlighting as a commercial airport. Buildings are swathed in camouflage blue, yellow, and green, the perimeter ringed by several layers of barbed wire; machine gun nests squat in the middle of transition areas, sand bagged and manned by armed personnel. Army helicopters and aircraft sit to the side of the runway outnumbering commercial airliners. All the accoutrements necessary for an active military air base in an area subject to outbursts of deadly violence and terrorist activities exist. Armed soldiers, efficient with a vague hint of cordiality make sure that no foreigner goes undocumented, that all whereabouts are accounted for.

Should you arrive in Srinagar via ground transport from Jammu, over 100 kilometers away, by the time you actually arrived in the capital of the state of Kashmir, you would have had to pass through several military checkpoints, registering your presence as a foreigner in this heavily militarized zone, and you would have also seen numerous armed patrols conducting surveillance patrols along the National Highway roadside, patrols with minesweepers, on the lookout for any sort of roadside explosive. I traveled this route upon leaving Kashmir. The soldiers, look drawn and taut from the demands of endless vigilance, dead serious, and very ready to use their weapons. Perhaps the reason they look so nervous, all 500,000 of them, is that they are overwhelmingly Hindu and Sikh, while the population of Kashmir, almost five million in all, is well over 95% Muslim. Facing these dominating numbers, they have a tendency to view every local not only as a likely terrorist, but potentially a *fidayeen* on their way to the market to blow themselves and dozens of innocent people, up. I could see the soldiers visibly relax when they saw me, tall, blonde, blue eyes with Nordic features. No threat. Some even smiled. A moment's break from the hours of mutual hostile scrutiny that make up every day.

The tragic story of Kashmir since partition is well known. Since the creation of Pakistan, this state in northwest India has served as a playing field for India's and Pakistan's antagonisms towards each other, a ground that has seen tens of thousands of innocent people killed and scores others maimed, tortured, raped, or forced to flee the carnage. India blames terrorists trained in Pakistan who infiltrate through the Line of Control to create havoc so that eventually Kashmir will become part of Pakistan. Pakistan blames the Indian army, which it says fabricates terrorist attacks, dressing its own soldiers or willing locals as "terrorists" who then carry out brutal attacks on Kashmiri villages. These in turn justify Indian Army counter measures such as wiping out entire villages and committing other barbaric atrocities. The Kashmiris blame both countries, but their voices count for little on the field of international politics.

But Kashmir also serves as a kind of screen for the projection of each country's fears of the other. You only have to watch Indian TV to see any of the number of films churned dutifully out by Bollywood chronicling the brave and valorous Indian Army's mission in defending this frontier state against the ever-present danger from their zealous and fanatical neighbor. The jingoism is hard to miss. Moreover, from watching these films you come away with the unflinching impression that without the constant vigilance from characters played by Hindu hunkies like Akshay Kumar or Hrithik Roshan, or even the occasional Muslim interloper (the ever present Shah Rukh Khan), India would be engulfed by Islamic invaders yet again, the perennial menace from the Northwest.

But then again, since India has lost a good chunk of the northern and western regions of the state—mountainous and sparsely inhabited areas that have been difficult to control since before the British tried to keep them sublimated, areas famous from Kipling's time and before with names like Chitral, Gilgit, Swat and the Baltoro—they clearly feel the need to vigorously defend what they have left, no matter how the Kashmiris feel. Now that the politically convenient illusion of a unified "India" is over 60 years old, to start ceding chunks of it away would only encourage similar movements already long active elsewhere in the country.

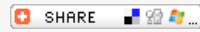
I visited the Kashmir valley and surrounding areas near the end of its longest spell of peace since the violence escalated in the late 1980s, having no idea that the idyll would be over just days after I left. The last serious outbreaks of violence, with the ensuing curfews and martial law, had occurred almost three years ago. In the meantime tourists had rediscovered the valley, business had staged a noticeable comeback, and trekkers were beginning to venture back into the mountains. The memory of the group of trekkers who had been abducted in 1995, with one beheaded and the others never found, had faded. There was talk of expanding tourist facilities in the highlands, especially in the Sonamarg Meadow area, on the main highway that leads to Kargil and eventually extending them to Leh, the capital of Ladakh in the Tibetan Buddhist region of India. Hawkers, touts and sellers welcomed back tourists with their effusive friendliness and relentless sales pitches. *Shikaras*, long narrow boats with canopies, plied the placid water of Dal Lake, ferrying visitors and locals alike by paddle from the shores of the lake to the houseboats laid out in well organized rows.

Even when there an abundance of boat traffic, the lake is resplendently magnificent—large and calm, interspersed with reed marshes, hydroponic gardens and surrounded by glaciated peaks rising to almost 20,000 feet. The air is pleasantly warm and dry but not too hot—a welcomed escape from the heat and dust of the plains of India in the pre-monsoon and

monsoon months.

This was no secret to rulers of Mughal India. Shah Jahan, builder of the Taj Mahal, also constructed as part of his summer residence the Shalimar Garden, a beautiful, fragrant, leafy refuge with gurgling waters descending in terraces to the shore of Dal Lake with the western ramparts of the Himalaya as a backdrop. Other gardens line the lake. The ornate Victorian houseboats bob on the lake like a flotilla of refugees from the Haight Ashbury. Beautiful mosques dot the city of Srinagar.

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Photo: Ron Sumners



Photo: Alan Crawford

Kashmir: A Calm Between Storms (cont.)

In the main areas of Srinagar, where tourists can be found and where business is conducted, you are never out of eyesight of the army. Driving through the poplar lined roads, past paddies, through orchards of walnuts, almonds, and apricots you spot them over and over. It becomes a bit like finding Waldo though usually a bit more obvious. Even on the highway to Kargil, a road dominated by huge convoys of military personnel, high in the remote mountains, you are always under the watchful eye of solitary sentries high up on hillsides, watching, watching, watching.

The valley of the Sonomarg Meadow ("the meadow of gold") stretches for over six miles west to east at 8,990 feet, surrounded by high peaks, with their crenellated ridges and jumbled, tumbling glaciers dominating the views to the south and west. From here, every summer, tens of thousands of Hindu pilgrims make the annual summertime *yatra* to Amarnath Cave, a cave with a large ice *lingam* formed by natural melting and seepage, revered by Hindus as a site inhabited by Shiva.

In the valley some basic facilities can be found as well as a sprawling Indian Army Base. I paid a visit to one place which hosted Hindu tourists on their way to the Amarnath pilgrimage: a tent camp, with brightly colored family tents, complete with queen-sized brass beds, a sitting room in front, Kashmiri carpets (what else) to cut down on the night. There were two dozen such tents, plus dormitory accommodations, and a mess tent. Wearing a cloak, an Afghan wool hat and a trimmed Captain Ahab-style beard, the host Hanif looked more like a Taliban elder than a septuagenarian Kashmiri native. His fierce look belied his hospitality and his love of nature and the outdoors; he had trekked all over Kashmir, Ladakh, Zaskar, Himachal Pradesh and even in the Himalayas of Nepal. We talked about trekking and the outdoors, but what he really wanted to know was about George W. Bush.

"I have one question," he stated, perhaps too innocently. I sensed something delicate coming, but didn't know what.

"Yes?"

"What does your president have against Muslims? He attacks Iraq, he makes war in Afghanistan, in his speeches he makes many unkind statements about Muslims. What have we done to him?" He paused; at this moment, as often happens in South Asia when you're the only American around, you mysteriously find yourself transformed through the perceptions of others from anonymous ex-pat to official representative for all American government policy blunders past, present and future.

I pointed out that Afghanistan, initially, had been in response to 9/11. But seeing how Hanif and his son were wearing very traditional Islamic garb, I didn't push it. "But the US has made many mistakes in Afghanistan since then. And of course Iraq...," I suddenly became inarticulate, my tongue flapping around as a host of blue epithets and standard, sarcastic political statements battled in the area of my brain that produces, usually, articulate speech. I merely gave them a Gallic shrug and said, "it's one of the biggest mistakes in US History." I paused, searching for that bit of emphasis that could, for this moment at least, smooth things over. "Most people think he is the worst American president ever. I think he is."

Hanif and his son seemed mildly placated, but still I could sense a very palpable dislike of Americans emanating from the son. He was pale-skinned and had blue eyes like many Kashmiris, who claim that these features are the legacy of Alexander the Great and his men who stayed behind in the mountain valleys near the Indus River. With his wispy adolescent auburn beard he bore an uncanny resemblance to Johnny Lindh, the young American captured in Afghanistan by US forces during the initial invasion, a land separated from Kashmir only by the northern bottleneck of Pakistan.

We discussed many other things, including the prospect of Westerners coming back as tourists. Perhaps Kashmir could return to the peaceful times that characterized it throughout much of its history. But my host clearly didn't want me laboring under any illusions, "I think that Western trekkers will be very welcome—Canadians, French, British, many. But ... I cannot recommend Americans coming here to trek."

With that thought to chew upon, I rejoined my wife in our jeep, and we headed back down the deeply cleft valley zigzagging from Sonamarg Meadows. We left the valley, and headed south down the national highway to visit in-laws in Udampur, just over the southern mountains that divide Kashmir from Jammu. From the temperate summer breezes we passed into the baking heat of the Punjab in mid-June.

Udampur, pleasant and featureless, should be visited only so as to avoid staying in the capital city of Jammu, which is far busier, and much hotter than Udampur. After a few days soaking up family hospitality, we passed through Dharamsala on our way back to Delhi. There on our second night back we turned on the television to find that Kashmir had erupted into violence again. Muslims, outraged over the government's ceding of public land to a Hindu trust (as part of the Amarnath Cave pilgrimage site), rioted. Shots were fired by the army, people killed, tear gas used, and martial law declared. Three years of calm disintegrated. Later, in a clumsily attempt to defuse the situation, the government backpedaled and called off the land

gift. Outraged Hindus in Jammu rioted. People were killed, and again martial law declared. Shops and businesses shuttered their windows. People had to scrounge for daily necessities. Highways were blockaded, and those who disobeyed curfews had their business ransacked, or burned.

When will it be possible to return? Even to see our in-laws in Udampur would be challenging; and while things seem to have calmed down in the past few months, it's only a matter of time. The Muslims of Kashmir still seethe at the Indian Army's presence, and are only slightly less angry at Pakistan's self-interested manipulation of the state. Many still dream of an independent Kashmir, a dream as beguiling as the reflection of the mountains on the terraces of Shalimar Bagh on a calm summer day. That reverie is as fragile as images reflected on the placid waters of Dal Lake. One gust of wind and the illusion vanishes.

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