

# Kashmir and the fire this time

The disputed region continues to be besieged by almost a million Indian troops and policemen.

**Niya Shahdad**

Every summer in Kashmir begins with the question of fate. The sun, having traveled through a long, dormant winter, stretches wide open to mark the return of color and noise, electricity and traffic, cricket, weddings, song and gluttony in our gardens. Desire and humor ride through town and for a moment we meet life, not as it is known to be but perhaps as it was meant to be, before the dice is rolled yet again: What will light the fire this time?

Around midnight on Aug. 4, the night before India's Hindu nationalist government led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi unilaterally erased Kashmir's autonomy, Srinagar, the largest city in Indian-controlled Kashmir, my home, and other parts of the Valley of Kashmir were beginning to be sealed into a valley of soldiers and checkpoints between which laid quiet, dimly lit homes, like mine, with their internet, phone lines and cable television severed.

The week that led to this night began with the Indian government deploying tens of thousands of troops in Kashmir, already the world's most densely militarized zone, and ended with the government's emergency evacuation of thousands of pilgrims, tourists and nonresident students under the guise of a potential terror threat.

In between the troop deployment and the siege, Kashmiris — about seven million people — moved in all directions, stocking food, fuel and cash, under the weight and panic of what could happen tomorrow. Days of ru-

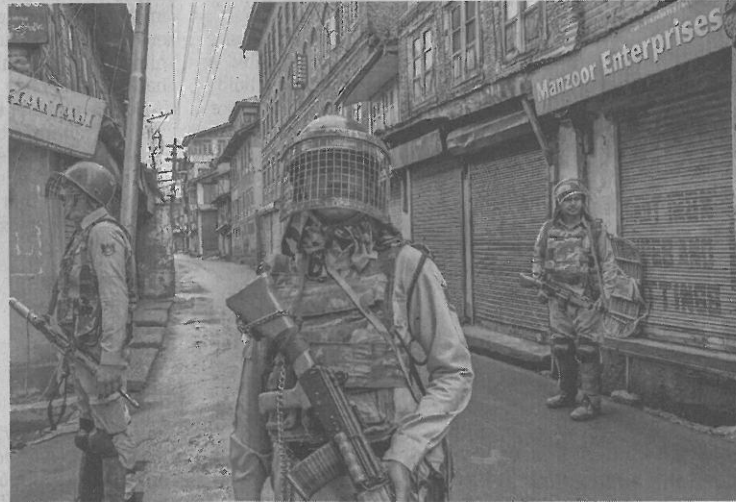
mors, government orders and denials began to settle into the shape of three probabilities: the end of Kashmir's autonomy, the beginning of a war with Pakistan or both.

Terror, in its most primal form, is unleashed in Kashmir through the fine balance between what is made known and what is kept unknown. The final message of that fourth night of August arrived from the corner of a distant room, where an old, forsaken landline rang out of the dark. I rushed to answer it, but in a moment indicative of what was to come, it merely echoed my voice back to me. Home was now a space of siege beyond which we could neither see, nor hear, nor tell, nor move.

I lay awake next to my mother and heard the moonless night oscillate between the sound of paramilitary trucks driving past our neighborhood and the sound of Beiga, the guardian of our home, walking through the house to check that our gates had locks on them. Now and then, my mother would turn from her sleep and ask, "Has something happened yet?"

The next morning, on Aug. 5, in New Delhi, the Parliament of India passed the bill to erase our autonomy, statehood and residency rights and privileges.

The blades of military helicopters circling above my roof on that cloudless, blue morning in Srinagar threw me out of the dream I had collapsed into and toward the window. I pushed it wide open and watched three black helicopters flying above our garden and then over a skyline of poplar trees and crimson roofs. A book that lay open on the windowsill had been revisited, more than once that week, for its quietest page: "Is this the promised end? Or an image of that horror?"



ATUL LOKE FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Soldiers on the streets of Srinagar, in Indian-controlled Kashmir, this month.

Downstairs, my aunt, Asifa, entered through a side door and alarmed us with her sudden arrival amid the curfew. My mother and I rose to our feet and asked her whether something had gone wrong, but she continued to take off her shoes, in silence, and waited to sit herself down on the carpet before she could tell us in a steady, cautious voice, "They took him last night," and then let go of her breath. Her husband, my 63-year-old uncle, a businessman and civil society leader, had been arrested by Indian forces.

Asifa spent the day repeating a crippled search for her husband that decided, each time, in between the two rows of troops that had seized the bridge in our neighborhood. The world outside had been reduced to 900 meters — about half a mile — into which

my aunt would disappear every couple of hours. Inside, we paced restlessly until she would return, quieter than the last time.

Late that evening, we remembered we still owned an aged radio that sometimes worked when placed at the right angle. I carried it into the living room, where my mother, my aunt and I waited in silence for the song to end. Then a stranger's voice on Radio Kashmir broke the news to us: "*Modi sarkar ne aaj riyasat-e Jammu Kashmir ko daffa 370 ke tehat hasil khususi ayeeni taraji ko khatam karne ka faisla kiya hai*" ("Modi government has decided to abolish the special status granted to the state of Jammu and Kashmir by Article 370 of the constitution.")

There it was: the annexation of our

land, and of the life that has survived upon that land. We looked at one another as the stranger's voice continued to pronounce our fate, and wept. My mother gulped her tears and said, to no one in particular, "Kashmir has been finished off."

The days that followed were spent in the lonely presence of what we now knew, and the vast absence of the freedom to respond to it. Time was measured by listening to the frequency of scattered traffic and planning the next hunt for news. But we remained trapped inside a sensation of stillness even as we climbed stairs and paced gardens. Home had turned into a large waiting room.

After dark, a battle would begin between the wild, stray dogs that claim the streets of our neighborhood for sleep and the troops that occupy it at every corner. The old gang of dogs barked, in chorus and in revolt, at the silent march of the half-masked, fully armed soldiers prying on their ground. Once the barks stretched into howls, it meant the soldiers were returning from the farther end of the road.

A few miles from my home, in the inner city, where the protests are more intense and the oppression harsher, the orbit of siege was made from tear gas and chili grenades, lead pellets and aerial fire. The soldiers barged into homes and stole teenage boys from their sleep. From dawn to dusk, Kashmir lies naked under the gaze and practice of almost a million Indian troops and policemen.

Four days into the siege, a local newspaper made it home. Beiga wanted me to search for reports on how the world had responded. But there were none, and for the first time in a weeklong daze, we felt a sensation

SHAHDAD, PAGE 9

---

# Kashmir and the fire again

SHAHDAD, FROM PAGE 7

of familiarity.

Only upon leaving Kashmir the following day did I realize that there had also been no record of what, precisely, had happened there.

The newspaper was a document of silence.

It did not inform us that 17-year-old Osaib Altaf, cornered by soldiers on a footbridge in Srinagar, had jumped into the Jhelum River and died; that at least 2,000 people had been jailed without charges; and that my uncle, one of them, was not in Kashmir but inside a jail in Agra. Nor would it be able to record, in the days to come, that 152 people had been injured by pellets and tear gas; that the family of Mohammad Ayub Khan, a 60-year-old salesman, found out after four days that tear gas fired by Indian troops had suffocated him to death; that a man walked 34 miles to call his son in New Delhi and let him know that his family was alive; that pharmacies were running short of lifesaving medicines and a young woman flew in from New Delhi and then walked 11 miles to bring insulin to her father.

But inside my final evening in Kashmir, as I sat in our besieged garden, all I had in my hands were newspaper pages full of notices of wedding cancellations. Soon the silent day was separated from its silent night by a voice on the loudspeaker. It rode through town in a military jeep while announcing the fate of curfew: "*Apne gharon mein se mat nikalna. Karwai ki jaayegi.*"

("Don't step out of your homes. Action will be taken.")

Beiga cursed them under his breath, and then smiled at me weakly. "They won't let us out for very long this time," he said, lifting himself up to go inside. "Not before winter."

Only then did I think of the hazy, morning dream that I had been awakened from. Within it, the toothless madman from our neighborhood ran through a white valley on its first day of winter and screamed the unbelievable truth, "Kashmir has come back! Kashmir has come back!" He danced with rapture and knocked on every door in town, trying to wake us to the miracle unfolding outside: Snow fell and brought back every quarter of Kashmir that had been erased many seasons ago. He danced alone.