

Kashmir's fruits of discord

Now Kashmir, caught between the influence of militant Islam from Pakistan and Afghanistan, America's interests in the region and Indian nationalism (which is becoming increasingly aggressive and "Hinduised"), is considered a nuclear flash point. It is patrolled by more than half a million soldiers and has become the most highly militarised zone in the world.

ARUNDHATI ROY

A week before he was elected in 2008, President Obama said that solving the dispute over Kashmir's struggle for self-determination -- which has led to three wars between India and Pakistan since 1947 -- would be among his "critical tasks." His remarks were greeted with consternation in India, and he has said almost nothing about Kashmir since then.

But on Monday, during his visit here, he pleased his hosts immensely by saying the United States would not intervene in Kashmir and announcing his support for India's seat on the United Nations Security Council. While he spoke eloquently about threats of terrorism, he kept quiet about human rights abuses in Kashmir.

Whether Mr. Obama decides to change his position on Kashmir again depends on several factors: how the war in Afghanistan is going, how much help the United States needs from Pakistan and whether the government of India goes air-craft shopping this winter. (An order for 10 Boeing C-17 Globemaster III aircraft, worth \$5.8 billion, among other huge business deals in the pipeline, may ensure the president's silence.) But neither Mr. Obama's silence nor his intervention is likely to make the people in Kashmir drop the stones in their hands.

I was in Kashmir 10 days ago, in that beautiful valley on the Pakistani border, home to three great civilisations -- Islamic, Hindu and Buddhist. It's a valley of myth and history. Some believe that Jesus died there; others that Moses went there to find the lost tribe. Millions worship at the Hazratbal shrine, where a few days a year a hair of the Prophet Muhammad is displayed to believers.

Now Kashmir, caught between the influence of militant Islam from Pakistan and Afghanistan, America's interests in the region and Indian nationalism (which is becoming increasingly aggressive and "Hinduised"), is considered a nuclear flash point. It is patrolled by more than half a million soldiers and has become the most highly militarised zone in the world.

The atmosphere on the highway

between Kashmir's capital, Srinagar, and my destination, the little apple town of Shopian in the south, was tense. Groups of soldiers were deployed along the highway, in the orchards, in the fields, on the rooftops and outside shops in the little market squares. Despite months of curfew, the "stone pelters" calling for "azadi" (freedom), inspired by the Palestinian intifada, were out again. Some stretches of the highway were covered with so many of these stones that you needed an S.U.V. to drive over them.

Fortunately the friends I was with knew alternative routes down the back lanes and village roads. The "longcut" gave me the time to listen to their stories of this year's uprising. The youngest, still a boy, told us that when three of his friends were arrested for throwing stones, the police pulled out their fingernails -- every nail, on both hands.

For three years in a row now, Kashmiris have been in the streets, protesting what they see as India's violent occupation. But the militant uprising against the Indian government that began with the support of Pakistan 20 years ago is in retreat.

The Indian Army estimates that there are fewer than 500 militants operating in the Kashmir Valley today. The war has left 70,000 dead and tens of thousands debilitated by torture. Many, many thousands have "disappeared." More than 200,000 Kashmiri Hindus fled the valley. Though the number of militants has come down, the number of Indian soldiers deployed remains undiminished.

But India's military domination ought not to be confused with a political victory. Ordinary people armed with nothing but their fury have risen up against the Indian security forces. A whole generation of young people who have grown up in a grid of checkpoints, bunkers, army camps and interrogation centers, whose childhood was spent witnessing "catch and kill" operations, whose imaginations are imbued with spies, informers, "unidentified gunmen," intelligence operatives and rigged elections, has lost its patience as well as its fear. With an almost mad courage, Kashmir's young have faced down armed soldiers and taken back their streets.

Since April, when the army killed three

civilians and then passed them off as "terrorists," masked stone throwers, most of them students, have brought life in Kashmir to a grinding halt. The Indian government has retaliated with bullets, curfew and censorship. Just in the last few months, 111 people have been killed, most of them teenagers; 3,000 have been wounded and 1,000 arrested.

But still they come out, the young, and throw stones. They don't seem to have leaders or belong to a political party. They represent themselves. And suddenly the second-largest standing army in the world doesn't quite know what to do. The Indian government doesn't know whom to negotiate with. And many Indians are slowly realising they have been lied to for decades. The once solid consensus on Kashmir suddenly seems a little fragile.

I was in a bit of trouble the morning we drove to Shopian.

A few days earlier, at a public meeting in Delhi, I said that Kashmir was disputed territory and, contrary to the Indian government's claims, it couldn't be called an "integral" part of India. Outraged politicians and news anchors demanded that I be arrested for sedition. The government, terrified of being seen as "soft," issued threatening statements, and the situation escalated. Day after day, on prime-time news, I was being called a traitor, a white-collar terrorist and several other names reserved for insubordinate women. But sitting in that car on the road to Shopian, listening to my friends, I could not bring myself to regret what I had said in Delhi.

We were on our way to visit a man called Shakeel Ahmed Ahangar. The previous day he had come all the way to Srinagar, where I had been staying, to press me, with an urgency that was hard to ignore, to visit Shopian.

I first met Shakeel in June 2009, only a few weeks after the bodies of Nilofar, his 22-year-old wife, and Asiya, his 17-year-old sister, were found lying a thousand yards apart in a shallow stream in a high-security zone -- a floodlit area between army and state police camps. The first postmortem report confirmed rape and murder. But then the system kicked in. New autopsy reports overturned the initial findings and, after the ugly business of exhuming the bodies, rape was ruled out. It was declared that in both cases the cause of death was drowning. Protests shut Shopian down for 47 days, and the valley was convulsed with anger for months. Eventually it looked as though the Indian government had managed to defuse the crisis. But the anger over the killings has magnified the intensity of this year's uprising.

Shakeel wanted us to visit him in



Shopian because he was being threatened by the police for speaking out, and hoped our visit would demonstrate that people even outside of Kashmir were looking out for him, that he was not alone.

It was apple season in Kashmir and as we approached Shopian we could see families in their orchards, busily packing apples into wooden crates in the slanting afternoon light. I worried that a couple of the little red-cheeked children who looked so much like apples themselves might be crated by mistake. The news of our visit had preceded us, and a small knot of people were waiting on the road.

Shakeel's house is on the edge of the graveyard where his wife and sister are buried. It was dark by the time we arrived, and there was a power failure. We sat in a semicircle around a lantern and listened to him tell the story we all knew so well. Other people entered the room. Other terrible stories poured out, ones that are not in human rights reports, stories about what happens to women who live in remote villages where there are more soldiers than civilians. Shakeel's young son tumbled around in the darkness, moving from lap to lap. "Soon he'll be old enough to understand what happened to his mother," Shakeel said more than once.

Just when we rose to leave, a messenger arrived to say that Shakeel's father-in-

law -- Nilofar's father -- was expecting us at his home. We sent our regrets; it was late and if we stayed longer it would be unsafe for us to drive back.

Minutes after we said goodbye and crammed ourselves into the car, a friend's phone rang. It was a journalist colleague of his with news for me: "The police are typing up the warrant. She's going to be arrested tonight." We drove in silence for a while, past truck after truck being loaded with apples. "It's unlikely," my friend said finally. "It's just psy-ops."

But then, as we picked up speed on the highway, we were overtaken by a car full of men waving us down. Two men on a motorcycle asked our driver to pull over. I steeled myself for what was coming. A man appeared at the car window. He had slanting emerald eyes and a salt-and-pepper beard that went halfway down his chest. He introduced himself as Abdul Hai, father of the murdered Nilofar.

"How could I let you go without your apples?" he said. The bikers started loading two crates of apples into the back of our car. Then Abdul Hai reached into the pockets of his worn brown cloak, and brought out an egg. He placed it in my palm and folded my fingers over it. And then he placed another in my other hand. The eggs were still warm. "God bless and keep you," he said, and walked away into

the dark. What greater reward could a writer want?

I wasn't arrested that night. Instead, in what is becoming a common political strategy, officials outsourced their displeasure to the mob. A few days after I returned home, the women's wing of the Bharatiya Janata Party (the right-wing Hindu nationalist opposition) staged a demonstration outside my house, calling for my arrest. Television vans arrived in advance to broadcast the event live. The murderous Bajrang Dal, a militant Hindu group that, in 2002, spearheaded attacks against Muslims in Gujarat in which more than a thousand people were killed, have announced that they are going to "fix" me with all the means at their disposal, including by filing criminal charges against me in different courts across the country.

Indian nationalists and the government seem to believe that they can fortify their idea of a resurgent India with a combination of bullying and Boeing airplanes. But they don't understand the subversive strength of warm, boiled eggs.

Arundhati Roy is the author of the novel *The God of Small Things* and, most recently, the essay collection *Field Notes on Democracy: Listening to Grasshoppers*.

©2010 The New York Times (Distributed by The New York Times Syndicate).

Holiday steps into 46

Since then, barring Baksal closure for some time, the journal had never had to look back; it continued publication, catering for its clientele as an apostrophe to our English journalism. Its intellectuality, with a sheen of urbanity, was never a barrier in relating to any issue of national life.

SYED BADRUL HAQUE

HOLIDAY, the premier English weekly, celebrated its forty-sixth founding anniversary on November 12. In the realm of English journalism of our country, the event is

surely a milestone, for no other contemporary English journal could survive that long. It was his sheer obligation to the nation that propelled the founder-editor A.Z.M. Enayetullah Khan to bring out the weekly even in the face of great difficulties and personal suffering, which eventually

paid off handsomely.

A look back into the emergence of Holiday will be rewarding to any curious mind. It was one of those morning hours in the sixties at the memorable old Press Club where I happened to be on the same table sipping tea with I.H. Burney of Outlook fame, then serving the then Pakistan Observer as a senior editorial hand in Dhaka. Enayetullah had joined us on the same table when he broached his idea of launching a weekend journal called Holiday, a bold and novel idea in those adolescent days of newspaper industry. Burney welcomed the idea but cautioned Enayetullah of the pitfalls that lay in sustaining such a venture.

Undeterred, Enayetullah remained firm in his determination. After a brief flirtation with a multinational company, he finally brought out his cherished journal almost single-handedly against heavy odds with fringe support from his professional colleagues, which however, was no less crucial at that point of time.

Since then, barring Baksal closure for some time, the journal had never had to look back; it continued publication, catering for its clientele as an apostrophe to our English journalism. Its intellectuality, with a sheen of urbanity, was never a barrier in relating to any issue of national life. It has a glamour and romantic halo which our print media had never had

before. Notably, these days, when our political culture resembles a soap opera more than an epic, Holiday never lagged behind in constructive engagement for a healthier quality of life for our citizenry.

Enayetullah's writing under the Editor's Desk column was a compulsive draw for any student of national affairs. His elegant prose, however long-winded at times, was a treat for any discerning reader although some held it did not lend easily to ordinary readers. Benda Deluran, a Danish student of art and culture who lived here for long, said that Enayetullah's writing was sweet enough to dull the bitterest pill.

With the exit of Enayetullah Khan, our journalism has since been in a sorrier state. Farewell to sunshine was perhaps the right metaphor to describe the exit of the redoubtable editor from this mortal world. Holiday, with its able successor, editor, Sayed Kamaluddin, sails smoothly on the wave of its rich legacy woven through forty-six summers.

The slogan Holiday chose to print in its dateline was pregnant with thoughtful meaning much beyond its title. It reads: "The Holiday. Because life isn't." What could be truer than this?

Syed Badrul Haque is a senior journalist and a contributor to The Daily Star.

Asian Games fire up in Guangzhou

Compared with the metal drums and the representation of ancient printing machines at the Beijing Olympics' opening ceremony, which was directed by China's world-renowned movie director Zhang Yimou, Guangzhou's celebration was more about the soft elements that surround local people in their daily lives.

LEI LEI

TWO years ago, 2,008 drummers told the world with thunderous noise and virtuosity that Beijing was ready for the big party that was the Olympic Games. In Guangzhou on Friday (November 12) evening, everything started with a drop of water.

Unlike the display of raw power seen

during the opening ceremony of the Beijing Olympic Games, the southern city of Guangzhou displayed that region's distinctive character with beautiful and delicate performances that incorporated water and flowers during the celebration on Haixinsha Island in the centre of the city to mark the beginning of the 16th Asian Games.

It is the second time a Chinese city has

hosted the Asian Games -- the first time, the capital hosted the event in 1990.

The Guangzhou Asian Games, which will run from November 12 to 27, have attracted athletes from all 45 members of the Olympic Council of Asia (OCA).

The Guangzhou Asian Games have attracted 9,704 athletes, 184 more than participated in the Doha Asian Games four years ago and a new record.

The event will also break another record -- the 476 gold medals up for grabs in 42 sports are the most ever.

Six new sports have been added, including cricket, dance sport, wushu and dragon boat racing.

"After six years of diligent preparations, the city of Guangzhou in the People's Republic of China is about to show us the fruit of all of their hard work and effort in the form of a great 16th Asian Games, the biggest sports event in Asia,"

said Sheikh Ahmad Al-Fahad Al-Sabah, president of the OCA during the opening ceremony that cost 380 million yuan (\$57 million).

"Once again, we are about to witness Asia's best athletes battle it out over 16 days of intense competition while displaying sportsmanship and serving as ambassadors for Asia," he said before Premier Wen Jiabao declared the games open.

Compared with the metal drums and the representation of ancient printing machines at the Beijing Olympics' opening ceremony, which was directed by China's world-renowned movie director Zhang Yimou, Guangzhou's celebration was more about the soft elements that surround local people in their daily lives.

From the very beginning, the one-hour performance made full use of water, which is considered to have bred the unique culture of the people of the

Lingnan -- the name of the geographic area of southern China.

The drop of water at the beginning became a fountain, rain, a swimming and diving pool, a river and the sea during the performance.

The palm leaf and kapok flower, products of two common local plants, also spoke of the local people's love of nature.

Performers with lanterns representing 200 fishing women and brave sailors reminded the audience of the city's connection to the sea that it has fought with and worked with over the centuries to make its living.

In front of eight sail-shaped hanging LED screens -- the world's largest -- 180 performers presented a four-dimensional show in the air with 1,320 operators on the ground.

Forty-five holy water girls put water collected from all of the countries and

regions into a basin, symbolising the vision of the Guangzhou games -- Thrilling Games, Harmonious Asia.

The basin rose to be the main caldron for the Asian Games flame and rested in the centre of a bridge that was also built to represent harmony.

The last five torchbearers also emerged from the water -- Wu Guochong, the first of the five, is China's dragon boat team leader and he ran onto the stage straight from the Pearl River.

The last torchbearer, He Chong, the Asian and Olympic Games diving gold medalist, lit a huge Chinese firecracker with the help of two children and fireworks rose to light the main caldron, which realised a perfect combination of water and the games' flame.

Lei Lei, China Daily. © Asia News Network. Reprinted by arrangement.