some years have become touchstone and inflection points in modern Kashmir's tortured history: 1931, the popular uprising in the Valley against the British; 1947, the accession crisis and resulting from it the advent of two rival armed forces; 1953, the Indian government's dismissal and arrest of Sheikh Abdullah, Kashmir's prime minister; 1989, the eruption of the separatist insurgency. Now, how do I think we can add 2019 and the unilateral revoking of Jammu and Kashmir's special status in the Indian constitution?

A Desolation Called Peace: Voices from Kashmir
Edited by Ather Zia and Javaid Iqbal Bhat
HarperCollins Publishers India, 2019, 288 pp., Rs 499

ANDREW WHITEHEAD

Creating a counter-memory

A Desolation Called Peace: Voices from Kashmir

The editors have assembled accounts from women and men, across generations and communities, to fulfil their principal goal, that the anthology "counteracts the official and nationalistic histories" of both India and Pakistan. "These native voices create a much-needed counter-memory", they assert, "recorded by people who have lived the years, and are part of the everyday grassroots resistance as it exists on the ground". The difficulty with such an explicitly political purpose is that the range of voices is limited. The fairly uniform anti-India viewpoint reflected in these writings will well represent the outlook of most Valley Kashmiris — but it is not the only Kashmiri voice. There is no one here reflecting the mainstream Kashmiri Pandit narrative — and that would have been a useful point of comparison. In this regard, the allegiance to the two main Kashmiri political parties, National Conference and People's Democratic Party, are corrupt or craven: the argument that India's hold on Kashmir is not going to weaken, so Kashmiri might as well make the best of it, is at least worth hearing, even if the events of 5 August 2019 make it much more difficult to sustain.

Weighing these shortcomings is the book's success in exploring the links between the personal and political, and giving a range of first-hand accounts of what it's been like to be a Kashmiri. Peace has proved so elusive in the Valley — not merely sinning in the same direction but the same mistake. This is the essence of the book, as Junaid explains at a situation where we see corpses a few feet away but we cannot do anything about it?

Abdul Qadeer Dar writes of displacement with the hindsight in which the electoral support for the Muslim United Front in 1987 was erased from the record. Abdul Qadeer Dar writes of displacement with the hindsight in which the electoral support for the Muslim United Front in 1987 was erased from the record, the resurgence of the Line of Control, activity as a militant commander in the Valley and suffering in their torture chambers. He now helps to run an organisation which supports victims of torture.

Mona Bhan, from a Pandit family, powerfully recounts her grandfather's failing in 1953 as Kashmir's accession to India and her mother's rejection of attempts to recruit her as an informer. The human rights activist Khurram Parvez tells of how his grandfather was killed by Indian troops in the notorious Gau Kadal massacre of January 1990; how in 2004 his friend and colleague Aasia Jeeleli died and he lost a leg in a targeted attack on the vehicle.

Whether literal truth or parable, you get the point.

The editors' aim is to compile "an ethnographic memory" and fill in one of the biggest blanks in how the Kashmir crisis is perceived: what happened between the early 1950s and late 1980s to make Kashmiris so angry and despairing?

Among other contributors, Mirza Waheed is acknowledged as the outstanding among a talented group of contemporary Kashmiri novelists whose work is infused by a fury at the indigenties Kashmiris suffer. He relates a memory from his teenage years in Srinagar which continues to haunt him and from which he has drawn in his fiction.

I was sixteen at the time of what I sometimes remember as the almond tree, our tree. I was still around when Junaid heard from his mother a story about the writer. One day, in the early 1990s, when Kashmir was simmering in rebellion against the Indian state, a paramilitary soldier is said to have peered over the wall into Abdul Mohiuddin's compound in Lal Bazaar, Srinagar, and impudently asked the old writer if there was an antakana (terrorist) hiding inside. Mohiuddin, who was lying on the grass and soaking in the spring sun, stood up and replied sardonically, "I am the antakana here, and I fight with my pen."

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