

Will of Kashmiris ca

AZADI

By Arundhati Roy

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FOR the past 60 days or so, since about the end of June, the people of Kashmir have been free. Free in the most profound sense. They have shrugged off the terror of living their lives in the gun-sights of half a million heavily armed soldiers, in the most densely militarised zone in the world.

After 18 years of administering a military occupation, the Indian government's worst nightmare has come true. Having declared that the militant movement has been crushed, it is now faced with a non-violent mass protest, but not the kind it knows how to manage. This one is nourished by peoples' memory of years of repression in which tens of thousands have been killed, thousands have been 'disappeared', hundreds of thousands tortured, injured, and humiliated. That kind of rage, once it finds utterance cannot easily be tamed, re-bottled and sent back to where it came from.

For all these years the Indian State, known amongst the knowing as the Deep State, has done everything it can to subvert, suppress, represent, misrepresent, discredit, interpret, intimidate, purchase - and simply snuff out the voice of the Kashmiri people. It has used money (lots of it), violence (lots of it), disinformation, propaganda, torture, elaborate networks of collaborators and informers, terror, imprisonment, blackmail and rigged elections to subdue what democrats would call "the will of the people". But now the Deep State, as Deep States eventually tend to, has tripped on its own hubris and bought into its own publicity. It made the mistake of believing that domination was victory, that the 'normalcy' it had enforced through the barrel of a gun, was indeed normal, and that the peoples' sullen silence was acquiescence.

The well-endowed peace industry, speaking on peoples' behalf, informed us that "Kashmiris are tired of violence and want peace". What kind of peace they were willing to settle for was never clarified. Meanwhile Bollywood's cache of Kashmir/Muslim-terrorist films has brainwashed most Indians into believing that all of Kashmir's sorrows could be laid at the door of evil, people-hating terrorists.

To anybody who cared to ask, or, more importantly, to listen, it was always clear that even in their darkest moments, people in Kashmir had kept the fires burning and that it was not peace alone they yearned for, but freedom too. Over the last two months the careful-

even minor protests about civic issues like water and electricity inevitably turned into demands for Azadi? To threaten them with mass starvation amounted to committing political suicide.

Not surprisingly, the voice that the government of India has tried so hard to silence in Kashmir has massed into a deafening roar. Hundreds of thousands of unarmed people have come out to reclaim their cities, their streets and mohallas. They have simply overwhelmed the heavily armed security forces by their sheer numbers, and with a remarkable display of raw courage.

Raised in a playground of army camps, check-posts, and bunkers, with screams from torture chambers for a sound track, the young generation has suddenly discovered the power of mass protest, and above all, the dignity of being able to straighten their shoulders and speak for themselves, represent themselves. For them it is nothing short of an epiphany. They're in full flow, not even the fear of death seems to hold them back. And once that fear has gone, of what use is the largest or second largest army in the world? What threat does it hold? Who should know that better than the people of India who won their independence in the way that they did?

The circumstances in Kashmir being what they are, it is hard for the spin doctors to fall back on the same old same old; to claim that it's all the doing of Pakistan's ISI, or that people are being coerced by militants. Since the thirties the question of who can claim the right to represent that elusive thing known as "Kashmiri sentiment" has been bitterly contested. Was it Sheikh Abdullah? The Muslim Conference? Who is it today? The mainstream political parties? The Hurriyat? The militants? This time around, the people are in charge. There have been mass rallies in the past, but none in recent memory that have been so sustained and wide-spread. The mainstream political parties of Kashmir - National Conference, Peoples Democratic Party - feted by the Deep State and the Indian media despite the pathetic voter turn out in election after election, appear dutifully for debates in New Delhi's TV studios, but can't muster the courage to appear on the streets of Kashmir. The armed militants who, through the worst years of repression were seen as the only ones carrying the torch of Azadi forward, if they are around at all, seem content to take a back seat and let people do the fighting for a change.

The Separatist leaders who do appear and speak at the rallies are not leaders so much as fol-

Independence Day, the city of Srinagar shut down completely. The Bakshi stadium where the governor hoisted the flag, was empty except for a few officials. Hours later, Lal Chowk, the nerve centre of the city, (where in 1992 Murli Manohar Joshi, BJP leader and mentor of the controversial "Hinduisation" of children's history text books, started a tradition of flag-hoisting by the Border Security Force), was taken over by thousands of people who hoisted the Pakistani Flag and wished each other "Happy belated Independence Day" (Pakistan celebrates Independence on 14th August) and "Happy Slavery Day." Humour obviously, has survived India's many torture centres and Abu Ghraibs in Kashmir.

On the 16th of August more than 300,000 people marched to Pampore, to the village of the Hurriyat leader Sheikh Abdul Aziz, who was shot down in cold blood five days earlier. He was part of a massive march to the Line of Control demanding that since the Jammu road had been blocked, it was only logical that the Srinagar-Muzaffarabad highway be opened for goods and people, the way it used to be before Kashmir was partitioned.

On the 18th of August an equal number gathered in Srinagar in the huge TRC grounds (Tourist Reception Centre, not the Truth and Reconciliation Committee) close to the United Nations Military Observers Group in India & Pakistan (UNMOGIP) to submit a memorandum asking for three things: the end to Indian Rule, the deployment of a UN Peace-keeping Force, and an investigation into two decades of war crimes committed with almost complete impunity by the Indian Army and Police.

The day before the rally the Deep State was hard at work. A senior journalist friend called to say that late in the afternoon the home secretary called a high level meeting in New Delhi. Also present were the defence secretary, and intelligence chiefs. The purpose of the meeting he said, was to brief the editors of TV news channels that the government had reason to believe that the insurrection was being managed by a small splinter cell of the ISI and to request the channels to keep this piece of exclusive, highly secret intelligence in mind while covering (or preferably not covering?) the news from Kashmir. Unfortunately for the Deep State things have gone so far that TV channels, were they to obey those instructions, would run the risk of looking ridiculous. Thankfully, it looks as though this revolution will, after all, be telecast.

On the night of August 17th the police sealed the city. Streets were barricaded, thousands of armed police manned the barriers. The roads leading into Srinagar were blocked. For the first time in eighteen years the police had to plead with Hurriyat leaders to address the rally at the TRC grounds instead of marching right up to the UNMOGIP office which is on Gupkar Road, Srinagar's Green Zone, where, for years, the Indian establishment has barricaded itself in style and splendour.

On the morning of August 18th people began pouring into Srinagar from villages and towns across the valley. In trucks, tempos, jeeps, buses and on foot. Once again, barriers were broken and people reclaimed their city. The police were faced with a choice of either stepping aside or executing a massacre. They stepped aside. Not a single bullet was fired.

The city floated on a sea of smiles. There was ecstasy in the air. Everyone had a banner; house-boat owners, traders, students, lawyers, doctors. One said "We are all prisoners, set us free." Another said "Democracy without freedom is Demon-crazy". Demon Crazy. That was

trapped between 'two guns', both usually hated, has, pardon the pun, been shot to hell.

A sudden twist of fate, an ill-conceived move over the transfer of 100 acres of state forest land to the Amarnath Shrine Board (which manages the annual Hindu pilgrimage to a cave deep in the Kashmir Himalayas) suddenly became the equivalent of tossing a lit match into a barrel of petrol. Until 1989, the Amarnath pilgrimage used to attract about 20,000 people who traveled to the Amarnath cave over a period of about two weeks. In 1990, when the overtly Islamic militant uprising in the valley coincided with the spread of virulent Hindutva in the Indian plains, the number of pilgrims began to increase exponentially. By 2008 more than 500,000 pilgrims visited the Amarnath cave, in large groups, their passage often sponsored by Indian business houses.

To many people in the valley this dramatic increase in numbers was seen as an aggressive political statement by an increasingly Hindu-fundamentalist Indian state. Rightly or wrongly, the land transfer was viewed as the thin edge of the wedge. It triggered an apprehension that it was the beginning of an elaborate plan to build Israeli-style settlements, and change the demography of the valley. Days of massive protest forced the valley to shut down completely. Within hours the protests spread from the cities to villages. Young stone pelters took to the streets and faced armed police who fired straight at them, killing several. For people as well as the government, it resurrected memories of the uprising in the early nineties. Throughout the weeks of protest, hartal (strike) and police firing, while the Hindutva publicity machine charged Kashmiris with committing every kind of communal excess, the 500,000 Amarnath pilgrims completed their pilgrimage, not just unhurt, but touched by the hospitality they had been shown by local people.

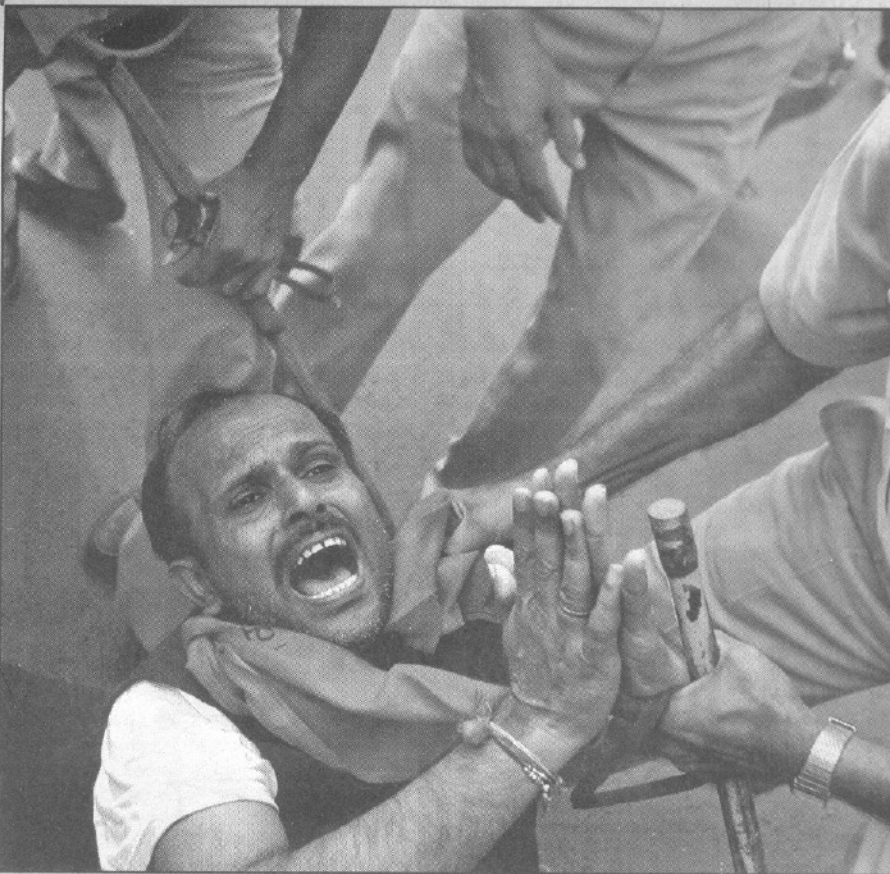
Eventually, taken completely by surprise at the ferocity of the response, the government revoked the land transfer. But by then the land-transfer had become what the senior separatist leader Syed Ali Shah Geelani called a "non-issue".

Massive protests against the revocation erupted in Jammu. There too the issue snowballed into something much bigger. Hindus began to raise issues of neglect and discrimination by the Indian state. (For some odd reason they blamed Kashmiris for that neglect.) The protests led to the blockading of the Jammu-Srinagar highway, the only functional road-link between Kashmir and India. The army was called out to clear the highway and allow safe passage of trucks between Jammu and Srinagar. But incidents of violence against Kashmiri truckers were being reported from as far away as Punjab where there was no protection at all. As a result, Kashmiri truckers fearing for their lives, refused to drive on the highway. Truckloads of perishable fresh fruit and valley produce began to rot. It became very obvious that the blockade had caused the situation to spin out of control. The government announced that the blockade had been cleared and that trucks were going through. Embedded sections of the Indian media, quoting the inevitable 'Intelligence' sources, began to refer to it as a 'perceived' blockade, and even suggest that there had never been one.

But it was too late for those games, the damage had been done. It had been demonstrated in no uncertain terms to people in Kashmir that they lived on sufferance, and that if they didn't behave themselves they could be put under siege, starved, deprived of essential commodities and medical supplies.

neous energy of a caged, enraged people that has exploded on Kashmir's streets. The leaders, such as they are, have been presented with a full-blown revolution. The only condition seems to be that they have to do as the people say. If they say

twisted logic of a country that needed to commit communal carnage in order to bolster its secular credentials. Or the insanity that permits the world's largest democracy to administer the world's largest military occupation and continue



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things that people do not wish to hear, they are gently persuaded to come out, publicly apologise and correct their course. This applies to all of them, including Syed Ali Shah Geelani who at a public rally recently proclaimed himself the movement's only leader. It was a monumental political blunder that very nearly shattered the fragile new alliance between the various factions of the struggle. Within hours he retracted his statement. Like it or not, this is democracy. No democrat can pretend otherwise.

Day after day hundreds of thousands of people swarm around places that hold terrible memories for them. They demolish bunkers, break through cordons of concertina wire and stare straight down the barrels of soldiers' machine guns, saying what very few in India want to hear. Hum Kya Chahtey? Azaadi! We Want Freedom. And, it has to be said, in equal numbers and with equal intensity: Jeevey Jeevey Pakistan. Long live Pakistan.

That sound reverberates through the valley

The unimaginable sums of public money that are needed to keep the military occupation of Kashmir going, is money that ought by right to be spent on schools and hospitals and food for an impoverished, malnourished population in India

to call itself a democracy.

There was a green flag on every lamp post, every roof, every bus stop and on the top of chinar trees. A big one fluttered outside the All India Radio building. Road-signs to Hazratbal, Batmaloo, Sopore were painted over. Rawalpindi they said. Or simply Pakistan. It would be a mistake to assume that the public expression of affection for Pakistan automatically translates into a desire to accede to Pakistan. Some of it has to do with gratitude for the support - cynical or otherwise - for what Kashmiris see as their freedom struggle, and the Indian state sees as a terrorist campaign. It also has to do with mischief. With saying and doing what galls India most of all. (It's easy to scoff at the idea of a 'freedom struggle' that wishes to distance itself from a country that is supposed to be a democracy and align itself with another that has, for the most part been ruled by military dictators. A country whose army has committed genocide in what is now Bangladesh. A country that is even now being torn apart by its

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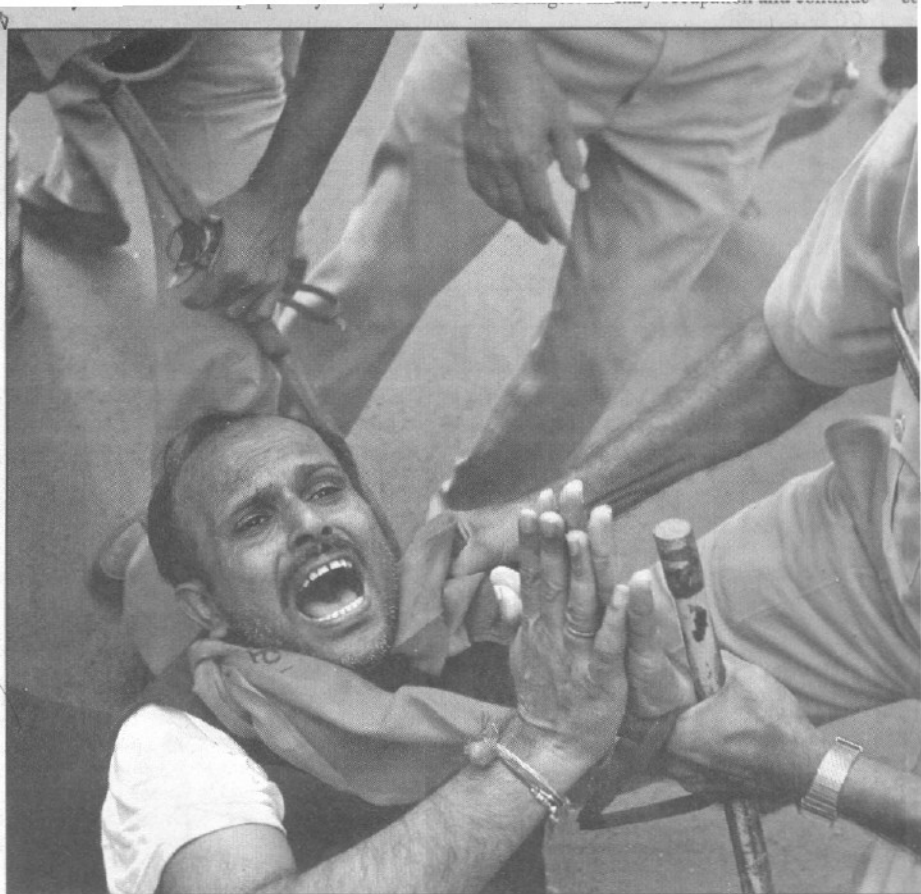
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But it was too late for those games, the damage had been done. It had been demonstrated in no uncertain terms to people in Kashmir that they lived on sufferance, and that if they didn't behave themselves they could be put under siege, starved, deprived of essential commodities and medical supplies. The real blockade became a psychological one. The last fragile link between India and Kashmir was all but snapped.

To expect matters to end there was of course absurd. Hadn't anybody noticed that in Kashmir



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That sound reverberates through the valley like the drumbeat of steady rain on a tin roof, like the roll of thunder during an electric storm. It's the plebiscite that was never held, the referendum that has been indefinitely postponed.

On the 15th of August, India's

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Srinagar | We Want Freedom



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everywhere the cry Pakistan se rishta kya? La Kashmir ko khoon se seencha, yoh Kashmir that the threat of violence has receded and there

everywhere the cry Pakistan se rishia kya? La illaha illallah. What is our bond with Pakistan? There is no god but Allah. Azadi ka matlab kya? La illaha illallah. What does Freedom mean? There is no god but Allah.

For somebody like myself, who is not Muslim that interpretation of freedom is hard - if not impossible - to understand. I asked a young woman whether freedom for Kashmir would not mean less freedom for her, as a woman. She shrugged and said, "What kind of freedom do we have now? The freedom to be raped by Indian soldiers?" Her reply silenced me.

Standing in the grounds of the TRC, surrounded by a sea of green flags, it was impossible to doubt or ignore the deeply Islamic nature of the uprising taking place around me. It was equally impossible to label it a vicious, terrorist



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jihad. For Kashmiris it was a catharsis. A historical moment in a long and complicated struggle for freedom with all the imperfections, cruelties and confusions that freedom struggles

Kashmir ko khoon se seencha, voh Kashmir hamara hai (The Kashmir we have irrigated with our blood, that Kashmir is ours!)

The slogan that cut through me like a knife and clean broke my heart was this one: Nanga bhookha Hindustan, jaan se pyara Pakistan. (Naked, starving India, More precious than life itself - Pakistan.) Why was it so galling, so painful to listen to this? I tried to work it out and settled on three reasons. First because we all know that the first part of the slogan is the embarrassing and unadorned truth about India, the emerging superpower. Second because all Indians who are not nanga or bhooka are - and have been - complicit in complex and historical ways with the elaborate cultural and economic systems that make Indian society so cruel, so vulgarly unequal. And third, because it was painful to listen to people who have suffered so much themselves, mock others who suffer, in different ways, but no less intensely, under the same oppressor. In that slogan I saw the seeds of how easily victims can become perpetrators.

It took hours for Mirwaiz Umar Farooq and Syed Ali Shah Geelani to wade through the thronging crowds and make it onto the podium. When they arrived they were born aloft on the shoulders of young men, over the surging crowd to the podium. The roar of greeting was deafening. Mirwaiz Umar spoke first. He repeated the demand that the Armed Forces Special Powers Act, the Disturbed Areas Act and the Public Safety Act - under which thousands have been killed, jailed and tortured-be withdrawn. He called for the release of political prisoners, for the Srinagar-Muzaffarabad road to be opened for the free movement of goods and people, and for the de-militarisation of the Kashmir Valley.

Syed Ali Shah Geelani began his address with a recitation from the Quran. He then said what he has said before, on hundreds of occasions. The only way for the struggle to succeed he said, was to turn to the Koran for guidance. He said Islam would guide the struggle and that it was a complete social and moral code that would govern the people of a free Kashmir. He said Pakistan had been created as the home of Islam, and that that goal should never be subverted. He said just as Pakistan belonged to Kashmir, Kashmir belonged to Pakistan. He said minority communities would have full rights and their places of worship would be safe. Each point he made was applauded.

Oddly enough the apparent doctrinal clarity of what he said, made everything a little unclear. I wondered how the somewhat disparate views of the various factions in this freedom struggle would resolve themselves - the Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Front's vision of an independent state, Geelani's desire to merge with Pakistan and Mirwaiz Umar balanced precariously between them.

An old man with a red eye standing next to me said, "Kashmir was one country. Half was taken by India, the other half by Pakistan. Both by force. We want freedom." I wondered if, in the new dispensation, the old man would get a hearing. I wondered what he would think of the trucks that roared down the highways in the plains of India, owned and driven by men who knew nothing of history, or of Kashmir, but still had slogans on their tail gates that said "Doodh maango to kheer denge, Kashmir mango to chir denge." (Ask for milk, you'll get cream; Ask for Kashmir, we'll cut you open.")

that the threat of violence has receded and there is some space in which to debate views and air ideas, it is time for those who are part of the struggle to outline a vision for what kind of society they are fighting for. Perhaps it is time to offer people something more than martyrs, slogans and vague generalisations. Those who wish to turn to the Quran for guidance, will, no doubt find guidance there. But what of those who do not wish to do that, or for whom the Quran does not make place? Do the Hindus of Jammu and other minorities also have the right to self-determination? Will the hundreds of thousands of Kashmiri pandits living in exile, many of them in terrible poverty, have the right to return? Will they be paid reparations for the terrible losses they have suffered? Or will a free Kashmir do to its minorities what India has done to Kashmiris for sixty-one years? What will happen to homosexuals and adulterers and blasphemers? What of thieves and lafangas and writers who do not agree with the 'complete social and moral code'? Will we be put to death as we are in Saudi Arabia? Will the cycle of death, repression and bloodshed continue? History offers many models for Kashmir's thinkers and intellectuals and politicians to study. What will the Kashmir of their dreams look like? Algeria? Iran? South Africa? Switzerland? Pakistan?

At a crucial time like this, few things are more important than dreams. A lazy utopia and a flawed sense of justice will have consequences that do not bear thinking about. This is not the time for intellectual sloth or a reluctance to assess a situation clearly and honestly. It could be argued that the prevarication of Maharaja Hari Singh in 1947 has been its great modern tragedy, one that eventually led to unthinkable bloodshed and the prolonged bondage of people who were very nearly free.

Already the specter of partition has reared its head. Hindutva networks are alive with rumours about Hindus in the valley being attacked and forced to flee. In response, phone calls from Jammu reported that an armed Hindu militia was threatening a massacre and that Muslims from the two Hindu majority districts were preparing to flee. (Memories of the blood-bath that ensued and claimed the lives of more than a million people when India and Pakistan were partitioned have come flooding back. That nightmare will haunt all of us forever.)

There is absolutely no reason to believe that history will repeat itself. Not unless it is made to. Not unless people actively work to create such a cataclysm.

However, none of these fears of what the future holds can justify the continued military occupation of a nation and a people. No more than the old colonial argument about how the natives were not ready for freedom justified the colonial project.

Of course there are many ways for the Indian state to continue to hold on to Kashmir. It could do what it does best. Wait. And hope the peoples' energy will dissipate in the absence of a concrete plan. It could try and fracture the fragile coalition that is emerging. It could extinguish this non-violent uprising and re-invite armed militancy. It could increase the number of troops from half a million to a whole million. A few strategic massacres, a couple of targeted assassinations, some disappearances and a massive round of arrests should do the trick for a few more years.

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jihad. For Kashmiris it was a catharsis. A historical moment in a long and complicated struggle for freedom with all the imperfections, cruelties and confusions that freedom struggles have. This one cannot by any means call itself pristine, and will always be stigmatized by, and will some day, I hope, have to account for, among other things, the brutal killings of Kashmiri pundits in the early years of the uprising, culminating in the exodus of almost the entire community from the Kashmir valley.

As the crowd continued to swell I listened carefully to the slogans, because rhetoric often clarifies things and holds the key to all kinds of understanding. I'd heard many of them before a few years ago at a militant's funeral. A new one, obviously coined after the blockade was Kashmir ki mandi! Rawalpindi! (It doesn't lend itself to translation, but it means - Kashmir's marketplace? Rawalpindi!) Another was Khooni lakir tod do, aar paar jod do. Break down the blood-soaked Line of Control, let Kashmir be united again.) There were plenty of insults and humiliation for India: Ay jabiron ay zalimon, Kashmir hamara chhod do (Oh oppressors, Oh wicked ones, Get out of our Kashmir.) Jis

would resolve themselves - the Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Front's vision of an independent state, Geelani's desire to merge with Pakistan and Mirwaiz Umar balanced precariously between them.

An old man with a red eye standing next to me said, "Kashmir was one country. Half was taken by India, the other half by Pakistan. Both by force. We want freedom." I wondered if, in the new dispensation, the old man would get a hearing. I wondered what he would think of the trucks that roared down the highways in the plains of India, owned and driven by men who knew nothing of history, or of Kashmir, but still had slogans on their tail gates that said "Doodh maango to kheer denge, Kashmir mango to chir denge." (Ask for milk, you'll get cream; Ask for Kashmir, we'll cut you open.)

Briefly, I had another thought. I imagined myself standing in the heart of an RSS or VHP rally being addressed by LK Advani. Replace the word Islam with the word Hindutva, replace the word Pakistan with Hindustan, replace the sea of green flags with saffron ones and we would have the BJP's nightmare vision of an ideal India.

Is that what we should accept as our future? Monolithic religious states handing down a complete social and moral code, "a complete way of life"? Millions of us in India reject the Hindutva project. Our rejection springs from love, from passion, from a kind of idealism, from having enormous emotional stakes in the society in which we live. What our neighbours do, how they choose to handle their affairs does not affect our argument, it only strengthens it.

Arguments that spring from love are also fraught with danger. It is for the people of Kashmir to agree or disagree with the Islamic project (which is as contested, in equally complex ways, all over the world by Muslims, as Hindutva is contested by Hindus). Perhaps now

future holds can justify the continued military occupation of a nation and a people. No more than the old colonial argument about how the natives were not ready for freedom justified the colonial project.

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The unimaginable sums of public money that are needed to keep the military occupation of Kashmir going, is money that ought by right to be spent on schools and hospitals and food for an impoverished, malnourished population in India. What kind of government can possibly believe that it has the right to spend it on more weapons, more concertina wire and more prisons in Kashmir?

The Indian military occupation of Kashmir makes monsters of us all. It allows Hindu chauvinists to target and victimise Muslims in India by holding them hostage to the freedom struggle being waged by Muslims in Kashmir. It's all being stirred into a poisonous brew and administered intravenously, straight into our bloodstream.

At the heart of it all is a moral question. Does any government have the right to take away peoples' liberty with military force?

India needs azadi from Kashmir just as much - if not more - than Kashmir needs azadi from India. ■