

Women's Voice: Fact Finding Report on Kashmir September 17th - 21st 2019

[Kindly note. To protect the identity of the people we met, all names in the Report have been changed. We have not named the villages we visited for the very same reason]

These are lines by Comrade Abdul Sattar Ranjoor. We held these as a beacon during our four-day sojourn in a locked and shuttered land called Kashmir.

Spring buds will flower
Nightingales' pain will abate
Lovers wounds will start healing
Sickness will leave the ailing
Heart's longing of Ranjoor will be fulfilled
When the poorest will rule
Wearing the crown of glory

(Ranjoor was killed in 1990)

A team of 5 women visited Kashmir from September 17th-21st 2019. We wanted to see with our own eyes how this 43 day lockdown had affected the people, particularly women and children.

The team consisted of Annie Raja, Kawaljit Kaur, Pankhuri Zaheer from National Federation Indian Women(NFIW), Poonam Kaushik from Pragatisheel Mahila Sangathan Delhi and Syeda Hameed from Muslim Women's Forum.

Besides spending time in Srinagar, we visited several villages in the districts of Shopian, Pulwama and Bandipora. We went to hospitals, schools, homes, market places, spoke to people in the rural as well as urban areas, to men, women, youth and children. This Report is our *chashmdeed gawahi* (eye witness account) of ordinary people who have lived for 43 days under an iron siege.

Shops closed, hotels closed, schools, colleges, institutes and universities closed, streets deserted but with large number of Armed Force personnel was the first visual impact as we drove out from the airport. To us it seemed a punitive *mahaul* that blocked breathing freely.

The picture of Kashmir that rises before our eyes is not the populist image; shikara, houseboat, lotus, Dal Lake. It is that of women, a Zubeida, a Shamima, a Khurshida standing at the door of their homes, waiting. Waiting and waiting for their 10, 12, 14, 15, 17, 19 year old sons. Their last glimpse is embedded in each heart, they dare not give up hope but they know it will be a long wait before they see their tortured bodies or their corpses... if they do. 'We have been caged' these words we heard everywhere. Doctors, teachers, students, workers asked us, "What would you do in Delhi if internet services were cut off for 5 minutes?" We had no answer.

Across all villages of the four districts, peoples' experiences were the same. They all spoke of lights, which had to be turned off around 8PM after Maghreb prayers. In Bandipora, where a young girl who made the mistake of keeping a lamp lit to read for her board exam in November 2019 on the chance that her school may open soon. Army men angered by this breach of 'curfew', jumped the wall to barge in. Father and son, the only males in the house were taken away for questioning. 'What questions?', no one dared ask. The two have been detained since then. 'We insist that men should go indoors after 6 PM. Man or boy seen after dusk is a huge risk. If absolutely necessary, we women go outside'. These words were spoken by Zarina from a village near Bandipora district headquarters. 'In a reflex action, my four year old places a finger on her lips when she hears a dog bark after dusk. Barking dogs mean an imminent invasion by army. I can't switch on the phone for light so I can take my little girl to the toilet. Light shows from far and if that happens our men pay with their lives'.

The living are inadvertently tortured by the dead. 'People die without warning or mourning. How will I inform my sisters about their mother's death?' Ghulam Ahmed's voice was choked. 'They are in Traal, in Pattan. I had to perform her soym without her children'. The story was the same wherever we went. People had no means of reaching out to loved ones. 43 days were like the silence of death.

Public transportation was zero. People who had private cars took them out only for emergencies. Women stood on roadsides, flagging cars and bikes for rides. People stopped and helped out; helplessness of both sides was their unspoken bond. 'I was on my bike going towards Awantipora. A woman flagged me. My bike lurched on a speed breaker. She was thrown off. I took her to the nearby hospital. She went in a coma. I am a poor man how could I pay for her treatment? How and who could I inform?' These daily events were recounted wherever we went. At a Lalla Ded Women's Hospital in Srinagar several young women doctors expressed their absolute frustration at the hurdles that had been placed in their way since the abrogation of Article 370. 'There are cases where women cannot come in time for deliveries. There are very few ambulances, the few that are running are stopped at pickets on the

way. The result? There are several cases of overdue deliveries that produce babies with birth deformities. It is a life long affliction, living death for parents". Conversely, we were told that several women are delivering babies prematurely due to the stress and *khauf* (fear) in the present condition. "It feels like the government is strangling us and then sadistically asking us to speak at the same time," a young woman doctor said as she clutched her throat to show how she felt.

A senior doctor from Bandipora Hospital told us that people come from Kulgam, Kupwara, and other districts. Mental disorders, heart attacks, today there are more cases than he could ever recall. For emergencies junior doctors desperately look for seniors; there is no way of reaching them on phone. If they are out of the premises, they run on the streets shouting, asking, searching in sheer desperation. One orthopaedic doctor from SKIMS was stopped at the army imposed blockade while he was going for duty. He was held for 7 days. Safia in Shopian had cancer surgery. 'I desperately need a check up in case it has recurred. Baji, I can't reach my doctor. The only way is to go to the city, but how do I get there? And if I do, will he be there?' Ayushman Bharat, an internet based scheme, cannot be availed by doctors and patients.

Women in villages stood before us with vacant eyes. 'How do we know where they are? Our boys who were taken away, snatched away from our homes. Our men go to the police station, they are asked to go to the headquarters. They beg rides from travellers and some manage to get there. On the board are names of 'stone pelters' who have been lodged in different jails, Agra, Jodhpur, Ambedkar, Jhajar.' Many of them not even know where their sons are kept. A man standing by adds, 'Baji we are crushed. Only a few of us who can beg and borrow, go hundreds of miles only to be pushed around by hostile jail guards in completely unfamiliar cities.'

At Gurdwaras we met women who said they have always felt secure in Kashmir. 'Molestation of women in rest of India about which we read is unheard of in Kashmir'. Young women complained they were harassed by army, including removal of their niqab

'Army pounces on young boys; it seems they hate their very sight. When fathers go to rescue their children they are made to deposit money, anywhere between 20000 to 60000'. So palpable is their hatred for Kashmiri youth that when there is the dreaded knock on the door of a home, an old man is sent to open it. 'We hope and pray they will spare a *buzurg*. But their slaps land on all faces, regardless whether they are old or young, or even the very young. In any case, Baji, we keep our doors lightly latched so they open easily with one kick'. The irony of these simply spoken words!

Boys as young as 14 or 15 are taken away, tortured, some for as long as 45 days. Their papers are taken away, families not informed. Old FIR's which are kept open is used to put their names for a crime which they never have committed. Phones are snatched; collect it from the army camp they are told. No one in his senses ever went back, even for a slightly expensive phone. A woman recounted how they came for her 22 year old son. But since his hand was in plaster they took away her 14 year old instead. In another village we heard that two men were brutally beaten. No reason. One returned, after 20 days, broken in body and spirit. The other is still in custody. One estimate given to us was 13000 boys lifted during this lockdown. They don't even spare our rations. During random checking of houses which occurs at all odd hours of the night, the army persons come in and throw out the family. A young man working as SPO told us. 'We keep a sizeable amount of rice, pulses, edible oil in reserve. Kerosene is mixed in the ration bins, sometimes that, sometimes koyla'.

Tehmina from Anantnag recently urged her husband, 'Let us have another child. If our Faiz gets killed at least we will have one more to call our own. Abdul Haleem was silent. He could see the dead body of his little boy lying on his hands even as she spoke these words. 'Yeh sun kar, meri ruh kaanp gayi,' he tells us.

A thirty year old lawyer from Karna was found dead in his rented accommodation. He was intensely depressed. Condolence notice was issued by Secy Bar Association. Immediately after that he was taken into custody. Why? We spoke to a JK policeman. All of them have been divested of their guns and handed dandas. 'How do you feel, losing your guns?' 'Both good and bad' came the reply. 'Why?' Good because we were always afraid of them being snatched away. Bad because we have no means now to defend ourselves in a shootout. One woman security guard said 'Indian govt wants to make this a Palestine. This will be fought by the us, Kashmiris'. One young professional told us, 'We want freedom. We don't want India, we don't want Pakistan. We will pay any price for this. Ye Kashmiri khoon hai. Koi bhi qurbani denge'.

Everywhere we went there were two inexorable sentiments. **First**, desire for Azadi; they want nothing of either India or Pakistan. The humiliation and torture they have suffered for 70 years has reached a point of no return. Abrogation of 370 some say has snapped the last tie they had with India. Even those people who always stood with the Indian State have been rejected by the Govt. 'So, what is the worth in their eyes, of us, ordinary Kashmiris?' Since all their leaders have been placed under PSA or under house arrest, the common people have become their own leaders. Their suffering is untold, so is their patience. The **second**, was the mothers anguished cries (who had seen many children's corpses with wounds from

torture) asking for immediate stop to this' brutalisation of innocents. Their children's lives should not be snuffed out by gun and jackboots.

As we report our experiences and observations of our stay in Kashmir, we end with two conclusions. That the Kashmiri people have in the last 50 days shown an amazing amount of resilience in the face of brutality and blackout by the Indian government and the army. The incidents that were recounted to us sent shivers down our spines and this report only summarises some of them. We salute the courage and resoluteness of the Kashmiri people. Secondly, we reiterate that nothing about the situation is **normal**. All those claiming that the situation is slowly returning to normalcy are making false claims based on distorted facts.

Poets speak for humankind. We began our report with lines from the Kashmiri poet Ranjor, we end with lines from Hindi poet Dushyant. Both indicate the way forward for Kashmir:

Ho gayi hai peerh parbat si pighalni chahiye
Iss Himalaya se koi Ganga nikalni chahiye

We Demand:

1. **FOR NORMALCY** Withdraw the Army and Paramilitary forces with immediate effect
2. **FOR CONFIDENCE BUILDING** Immediately Cancel all cases/ FIRs and Release all those, especially the youth who are under custody and in jail since the Abrogation of Article 370
3. **FOR ENSURING JUSTICE** Conduct inquiry on the widespread violence and tortures unleashed by the Army and other security personnel. AND free treatment to all those victims of torture
4. **COMPENSATION** to all those families whose loved ones lost lives because of non availability of transportation and absence of communication.

In Addition:

- Immediately restore all communication lines in Kashmir including internet and mobile networks.
- Restore Article 370 and 35 A.
- All future decisions about the political future of Jammu and Kashmir must be taken through a process of dialogue with the people of Jammu and Kashmir.
- A time bound inquiry committee must be constituted to look into the excesses committed by the army.
- Compensation to farmers

Summary:

1. Daily trauma faced by women and children
 - Molestation of girls
 - Living in the dark
 - "Will he return, is he dead?" The mother's cry for their sons
 - Women cope with traumatised school going children confined to home
2. State of transport
 - Ambulances stopped. Even ambulances carrying patients stopped at pickets. Women deliver premature
 - No means, no money for visiting family across the state
3. State of hospitals
 - Doctors stopped at pickets on their way to duty
 - No means of calling senior doctors in case of emergency
 - Scarcity of operational ambulances
4. Communication blockade
 - No means of communication in case of family sickness or death
 - All businesses at standstill due to blockage of all internet
5. Shutters down in all shops, no livelihood for the shop keepers and workers
 - Banks transacting minimum business
 - All seasonal fruits and vegetables rotting
 - No cash for the farmers