

A Kashmiri's 'Encounter' with Delhi

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It was the summer of 1996. My brother, Syed Abdul Rehman Gilani, had come to Kashmir from Delhi to spend his vacation at home. One day, out of the blue, he announced that he was going back. He said that he would have to cut short his vacation as he had to attend to some pending research for his M.Phil. dissertation.

For some time I had been thinking of doing a computer course, and my brother suggested that Delhi would be a good place for this. On impulse, I decided to accompany him.

On 16 June 1996, we set off in a taxi for Jammu. By dusk we had reached. This was my first visit to Jammu, the city of temples, after the birth of militancy in the state of Jammu & Kashmir in 1989. Given the hustle and bustle of this city brimming with life, it was hard to believe that it had anything even remotely to do with ravaged Kashmir. The armed conflict in the Kashmir Valley seemed to have turned into a blessing in disguise for this part of the state. Jammu had really made impressive strides, especially because of the largesse of development funds that had been diverted to it. Suddenly, the grudge that most Kashmiris held against the Jammu-ites became understandable to me. This was an entirely different world. Srinagar and Jammu, the twin capitals of the same state, were realities that were poles apart. A trip from Srinagar to Jammu seemed like a journey from a prison to the free world outside.

We went straight to the railway station. Here we met another Kashmiri traveller who was also going to Delhi. We checked our reservations and boarded the train. After setting our luggage in place, we sat chatting with our fellow Kashmiri for a while. He was a Delhi-based businessman dealing in Kashmiri handicrafts. When the train started rolling out of the station, I went and lay down on my berth. My brother stayed sitting, talking to our newfound friend.

I couldn't sleep. I got off the berth and started pacing up and down the compartment.

There were very few passengers on board. Everyone was asleep, apart from two men who were sitting in the corner seat enjoying a drink together. I sat down in the window seat facing them. One of them looked at me, smiling, as if he was saying, I hope you don't mind. I smiled back at him. After some time he offered me a drink, which I politely refused. A few minutes later he again looked at me and smiled. I managed to force another smile and then turned to look at the landscape through the window. After about ten minutes, he leaned towards me with folded hands, smiled and then proceeded to touch my feet. He was very drunk, and not in a condition to listen to anything, so I kept quiet. As he bent to touch my feet again, I got up and scolded him: Why do you people drink if you cannot control yourselves?

Heedless of what I was saying, he persisted in his effort to touch my feet. *Maibaap*, you are my mother, my father; do what you have to, but don't do it here. I have my family travelling with me, my little children. Please do not do it here. I had no clue of what was on his mind. I tried to move to another seat but he held on to my leg, making it impossible for me to move. I am not speaking nonsense, *maharaj* (sir), I am only making a humble request. I know you are going to put a bomb on the train. Do it by all means, but not in this compartment, please. Put it somewhere else, in the adjacent compartment if you wish. Have mercy on my children. Do not do it here, for God's sake!

This man was now giving me the jitters. I was in a real quandary about how to deal with the situation. Keeping a cool head seemed to be the only way of avoiding a confrontation. Very calmly, I tried to reassure him. Look, you have had a bit too much to drink, You need proper sleep to get sober. Let me help you to your berth. My efforts were in vain. My wife, my small children he kept wailing in the same vein.

Meanwhile, his companion also staggered into the fray. But unlike his obsequious friend, he was rather aggressive. Show me your identity card! he demanded, stretching out his hand as if I was bound to comply with this order. But before I could say anything, his friend took him away to the corner and whispered something into his ear, and somehow managed to make him sit down.

I am sorry for his foolishness, the scared man said again. He has gone crazy, but don't worry, I will make him understand. We are returning from our pilgrimage to Vaishno Devi in Jammu, we had gone for *darshan* (viewing) of the *Mata* (mother goddess). I have three small children. Look at them, they are asleep over there.

I had had enough. I said to them Look, I have nothing to do with you or your family, and let me make it clear that I am just a student. I am not carrying any bombs with me to blow you up. Now I would like to go to sleep, and I do not want to be disturbed any further.

I went back to my berth. Now the two were talking loudly amongst themselves, but I drifted into sleep, thinking that the trouble had passed. But it was not to be. After about half an hour, I was rudely woken up by the aggressive one of the two. Once again he demanded, Show me your identity card! It seemed that he was hell-bent on examining my identity card. Why should I show you my identity card? Who are you? I asked. His reply was loud, arrogant and immediate. I am a citizen of this country, and you are a terrorist.

My brother had woken up by then. He asked me what was going on, and I briefly told him what had happened. He went to talk to the two drunk passengers still lurking in their corner

seats. He told them off sternly and finally persuaded them to calm down and go to sleep.

Now it was the turn of our newfound Kashmiri friend to get his word in. Thank God they have fallen asleep. I thought that we were in serious trouble and was thinking of a way to get out of this compartment. He had been awake throughout the episode, but had chosen to stay silent. Suddenly he turned towards me in anger and said, But why must you advertise your Kashmiri self? I was really surprised, and asked, Do you think it was all my fault, then? Of course it was, he replied. We Kashmiris are not like others. We must be aware of our position and behave accordingly. But I was really taken aback by what came next. And this beard he continued, pointing to my little more than a few-days-old stubble, I just cannot understand what is wrong with all you young Kashmiris. Why do you have to grow beards in spite of knowing all the problems it causes for all of us? The first thing you must do on reaching Delhi is to get rid of it. Otherwise you will end up making life difficult not only for yourself, but for all those who are around you. I can assure you that is was all because of your beard. That is what put us all into this extremely dangerous situation.

He went on in this vein for some time, narrating anecdotes about people he knew who got into extremely difficult situations just because they sported beards. I do not remember all his stories, because in the middle of his ranting I fell asleep.

This incident has left its mark on me. It has given me a deep insight on the meaning of being a Kashmiri Muslim. From that day on, I have never travelled by train between Jammu and Delhi. I prefer to take the bus instead, even though it is not as comfortable, but at least it does not disturb my peace.

When we finally got to Delhi, we took a three-wheeler to the campus. It was my first encounter with the heat of Delhi's summer. Even after the hellish experience of the journey, I was ill-prepared for the scorching heat. The seat was so hot that just sitting was a form of continuous torture. I was cursing the moment I thought of leaving Kashmir for Delhi on a whim.

We got off outside Mansarovar Hostel in Delhi University, near Mall Road, where my brother was then staying. Our Kashmiri fellow traveller and friend had to go further. Before we said goodbye, he reminded me again to shave my beard.

My brother took me straight to the dining hall. It was the first time that I had dined with so many unfamiliar faces. I was even hesitant to put food onto my plate. My brother noticed my unease and whispered, Don't worry, it's *halaal*; look, I am also eating the meat. He had thought that my hesitation was because of the meat, which I had not even noticed.

After lunch I followed my brother to the canteen where we had some tea. He introduced me to his friends and to his roommate. That evening we all went to Nizamuddin for dinner, and then we visited another friend in Mukherjee Nagar. For me, staying out this late at night was an entirely new experience. Sunset had marked the end of our social life, at least ever since militancy had begun in Kashmir. At times the streets were deserted even in the afternoon, and the only sound that we would hear outside was either that of a dog barking, or the heavy footfalls of armed security personnel and the passing roar of their patrol cars.

It all seemed strange. On the one hand I was happy to be away from a life characterised by restrictions, apprehensions and uncertainties; on the other hand, I could not help thinking

of the deprivations and humiliations that had become a routine part of our daily lives in Kashmir. It left me agonised. I felt homesick and went to a nearby phone booth to make a call home. My mother was shocked to know that we were out at this hour. I tried my best to put her anxieties to rest by saying that this was what was normal in Delhi, and that there was nothing to worry about. But son*f*, she said, One should still be careful*f*. She was as concerned as ever.

The next day, I woke up to the sound of a blast. I ran out of the room to find out what had happened. But to my surprise, I found that no one else was alarmed. I asked a student who happened to be standing at some distance what the noise was about. Must be fireworks, it is the marriage season*f*, he said, looking at me with a surprised expression. It was evident that I was new to Delhi.

My brother took me to a computer institute in Shalimar Bagh. I chose to enrol in a one-year part-time course. The classes were to begin the very next day.

As I left the hostel for the computer institute the next day, I saw a police car parked near the bus stop outside the hostel. I fumbled in my pockets for an identity card. But this was an involuntary action. I had no identity card with me. I walked a little further till I drew close to the vehicle and stopped in my tracks. I stood still there for a while. A policeman sitting in the car leaned out and asked me, What happened?*f* Nothing*f*, I replied. He kept staring at me but didn't ask anything else. Meanwhile my bus arrived, and I boarded it.

I felt relieved to be away from the orbit of his glare, but the thought of this encounter would recur, over and over again. Perhaps I should not have stood there. I wonder what the policeman would be thinking about now. Thank God he did not ask me any questions. How would he have reacted if he came to know that I was Kashmiri? I could have been in trouble again. I should not behave so foolishly*f*. During the past eight years in Kashmir, rarely had I been able to cross the path of a security forces vehicle without being questioned or thoroughly frisked.

I arrived at the institute only to discover that there was going to be no class that day, as the instructor had not come. So I decided to use this opportunity to get an identity card prepared for myself from the institute office. The receptionist asked me to leave a photograph and particulars. I wanted the card immediately, but she said that it would take at least a week. I tried very hard to persuade her of the urgency of the matter, but only ended up annoying her. How could she understand what meaning an identity card has for a Kashmiri?

In Kashmir, it was just unimaginable that anyone could step out of the four walls of a house without an identity card. There is a long list of people who have to pay a very heavy price for not possessing this indispensable document. There are some who have had to spend months altogether in Army detention centres, while others have had to face ruthless torture that has maimed them permanently. No wonder people in Kashmir are often seen making regular rounds of the concerned offices for weeks on end to get this document prepared, and are willing to spend large sums of money to bribe a clerk to obtain an identity card.

After a week's waiting, I finally got my identity card. Just a few days later I had occasion to put it to good use.

I was returning from the computer institute by bus. When it reached Kingsway Camp, it was stopped by a police picket for checking. A policeman got on and glanced at each passenger as he walked down the aisle. When he spotted me, he stared at me for a moment and then asked me to get off from the bus.

When I had disembarked, he asked me for some details about myself. I answered his questions and showed him my identity card. It was my card, I suppose, that satisfied him more than my answers; he let me go. But before leaving, I asked him why he chose to pick me out of all the passengers. I felt there was something suspicious about you, he answered, honestly. I asked him, Was that because of my beard, or because I look Kashmiri? He did not reply, but turned his attention towards another bus which had just arrived at the picket.

When I returned to the hostel, I reported what had happened to my brother. His reaction surprised me. As long as you roam around with a beard, such things are unavoidable, he said. But I was not convinced, and felt an instant aversion to the idea of sacrificing my beard.

I was the only Muslim and the lone Kashmiri among the students at the computer institute. We were 17 students: ten men, seven women. In the beginning I kept to myself. But I discovered soon that all of them had started calling me the angry young man. To get rid of this label, I started entering their conversations. But soon an incident occurred that once again put a distance between me and my fellow students.

There was a One-Day cricket series going on at that time. India had already lost a match to Pakistan. This defeat, which the students termed humiliating, was the topic of discussion on one of the days. Mohammad Azharuddin, the captain of the Indian cricket team, was under attack in our classroom. I thought this was justified, as he happened to be the skipper, and the fans of a losing team are within their rights to criticise the captain. But as the conversation unwound, I was shocked to realise that their criticism was pinned on to the fact that he happened to be Muslim. I could not tolerate this, and so expressed my disapproval by asking whether it was fair to assume that if the team wins under Tendulkar despite his bad individual performance, then the credit will still go to Tendulkar, and if the team loses under Azharuddin, despite his good individual performance, the fault will still be attributed to Azharuddin.

One of my classmates responded to what I expressed by saying, You don't know how bad these Muslims are, they always support Pakistan. I asked him, I am a Muslim, should I understand that this is your opinion about me as well? As I said these words, I could see the colour drain from their faces. No one spoke with me for a few days. Later, I came to know that they had somehow assumed all along that I was a Kashmiri Pandit.

I had a similar experience at the Mansarovar Hostel as well, where everyone knew me as Abdul Rehman Gilani's brother. But the bone of contention there would be Kashmir.

I found most of the students I had an opportunity to interact with terribly ill-informed about Kashmir. Whatever little they knew seemed to emanate from guide books, which depicted Kashmir as a perfect holiday destination, or from news reports, which, to say the least, distorted reality beyond recognition.

They would ask me about Kashmir, and I would tell them whatever I knew. But following this, most would never speak to me again; and should I chance to meet them, they would express their disapproval of my views, or perhaps of my very being, with a caustic remark or rude gesture casually thrown in my direction.

A student who once heard me talking with someone else warned me against openly discussing Kashmir. He told me about another Kashmiri student who had once lived in the hostel, who got beaten up very badly by the other hostellers for his outspoken views about Kashmir. While I decided to follow his advice, it was painful to see all these research scholars blinded by their own prejudices.

As the monsoon set in, I contracted a strange illness that sapped all my energy. I suffered a raging fever for over a month. It left me unable to do anything. Finally, following a doctor's advice, I returned to Kashmir.

I came back after a long while and rejoined the computer course. I also joined a Bachelor of Commerce course through correspondence, and enrolled in a certificate course in Arabic in Delhi University. All this kept me occupied for a while. Moreover, I now had a friend also staying in Delhi. His brother had just been transferred to a branch of the Jammu and Kashmir Bank in Azadpur, and my friend had come to stay with this brother. I was really happy to have him around. I would often go to see them at their rented flat in Adarsh Nagar. I always looked forward to their company.

Then it was August 1997. The golden jubilee of India's independence. The residents of the Mansarovar Hostel had planned a march through the university to celebrate the occasion.

I was alone in my brother's hostel room when a student came to inform me that the march was about to start and that I should join in. Then he went to the other rooms, to relay the same instruction. After a while he returned to tell me to hurry up. I told him that I would change my clothes and come in a while. He was at our door again in a few minutes, insistent that I participate. I went with him. I saw that half the participants held flaming torches in their hands. I was offered one. Under the circumstances, I felt it would be unwise to refuse. There was loud patriotic chanting of *Bharat Mata ki Jai* (Hail to Mother India)!f The march began.

It reminded me of the crackdowns in Kashmir, when the Indian army would summon people from their homes, get them to line up and force them to chant *Jai Hind* (Victory to India)!f while on the way to some large open space in the locality. This perhaps was the method by which they hoped to integrate the people of Kashmir into the mainstream of the Indian Republic.

I went to Adarsh Nagar the following day to meet my friend. I was sitting with him and his brother when a group of Kashmiris arrived and asked my friend's brother (the bank officer) to accompany them to the police station, to intercede with the police in order to secure the release of some of their friends who had been detained. They said that it was nothing really serious, that it had happened because it was usual for Kashmiris living in Delhi to be picked up and detained every year for a few days around 15 August (Independence Day) and 26 January (Republic Day).

I stayed in the Mansarovar Hostel with my brother until he got a job as a lecturer in

Zakir Husain (Evening) College. He then rented a flat in Pitampura and brought his family from Kashmir to stay with him. But we soon had to move from Pitampura as it proved too far a commute from the university where we both had to go daily. We moved this time to a second-floor rented flat in Mukherjee Nagar, which was a lot closer.

We were quite uneasy during the first few weeks in our new home, as the landlord and his family seemed a bit wary of us. They would enquire about the slightest sound they heard from us upstairs. But as time passed, our families started getting along. They told us that their neighbours had initially warned them about us. They had advised them against renting the place to Kashmiris, as it was well known (to them) that Kashmiris were Terrorists. Each time they heard a loud sound coming from upstairs, they would tell our landlord's family to check whether we were busy making bombs.

I got to know Mukesh, our landlord's nephew, quite well. He had recently opened a cyber café on the ground floor of our building. I would spend hours with him in the cyber café, surfing the internet, or chatting with him. Sometimes we would go for late-night walks to a nearby tea-stall, just before he closed the café, and have a cup. Mukesh's father was also friendly with me. All this changed after 11 September 2001 and the attacks on the World Trade Center in New York. Something gave way. I began to feel a deep sense of unease and insecurity, both as a Muslim and as a Kashmiri. I found most of the Muslims and Kashmiris that I met in those days overwhelmed with apprehensions about the future. Everyone thought that things would get much worse for them in the coming days.

Then came the fateful day of 13 December 2001. It was the month of Ramzan, the day after Shab-e-Qadr. We were woken up by the landlord, who told us to switch on the television. In silence and utter disbelief, we all watched the attack on the Indian parliament. My sister-in-law was the first to voice our apprehensions when she said, *Ab kisi Kashmiri ki shaamat aayegi* (Now some Kashmiri is really going to get in trouble). She did not realise that that it would be her own husband.

My brother was picked up on 14 December 2001 while he was on his way to the mosque on Mall Road for Friday prayers. Then the special cell of the Delhi Police came looking for us as well. I was detained along with two cousins. My brother was being tortured in a room nearby. One of the constables asked me, What do Kashmiri militants look like? I answered, What do you think they look like? One of the policemen guarding us said, We have heard that they have long hair, long nails and long beards, and they are so dangerous that they can even eat people alive. I laughed and said, Kashmiri militants look like you and me. I could see that they did not believe me.

A few days later they released me and my cousins, but continued to detain my brother. The police dropped us back to our Mukherjee Nagar flat. Our landlord's family was now visibly scared of us. Their children refused to play with my brother's children. That night I went out to make a long-distance call to Kashmir from the neighbouring phone booth. The owner refused to let me use the phone. I went to another booth; there too I was turned away. Then my sister-in-law went to a third one. The man who owned this one politely told her that it would create problems for him if any of us used his phone. After that we sent my

five-year-old nephew Aatif to another booth, thinking that at least a child would not arouse fear or suspicion. We were mistaken. Finally we had to go all the way to Kingsway Camp, a neighbourhood where no one knew us, to make a phone call.

I realised that from now on I would be identified as the brother of a terrorist, and so by analogy, as a terrorist myself. On one occasion a notary refused to notarise an affidavit I needed for admission to a university course, saying that I was a terrorist. Another notary finally did what needed doing, but only after I had paid him Rs 500 as compensation for the risk he said he would incur by notarising the affidavit of a terrorist.

It took two years and the overturning of a death sentence before my brother was acquitted, because there was no evidence against him, and because the prosecution's case relied so exclusively on flawed translations of an illegal phone intercept. But all through those two years, all that I encountered was fear and suspicion. For the Kashmiri and the non-Kashmiri alike, I was the brother of a man who had been called a terrorist. Once a terrorist, always a terrorist; once the brother of a terrorist, always the brother of a terrorist.

I have spoken to many people in Delhi, to Kashmiri Hindus and Kashmiri Muslims as well. I find that both communities live in fear. But there are two different kinds of fear. The Kashmiri Hindus live in fear of the terrorist. This fear is shared by the majority of people living in Delhi. It is a fear constructed to reinforce the divisions in society between Indians and Kashmiris, between Indian Muslims and Kashmiri Muslims, and between Kashmiri Muslims and Kashmiri Hindus. This fear has pushed each community into different parts of the city and has created Muslim ghettos where Kashmiri Muslims live and feel a fragile kind of safety. The media in Delhi systematically promotes the fear of the Kashmiri terrorist.

But the very real fear felt by Kashmiri Muslims living in Delhi is never a part of public discourse. The fear of being picked up at any time, the fear of being killed in a false encounter, the fear of being tortured, the fear of not being able to get a house on rent, the fear for what might be happening to relatives left behind in Kashmir. The experience of waiting outside the gates of Tihar prison for the weekly *mulaqat* (meeting) with my brother through the two years of his captivity, have given me an insight into the world of hundreds of Kashmiris like myself who have close relatives in the prison. I began to understand their special fears and their special vulnerability. Our vulnerability.

But this shared insecurity did not bring us any closer. It stood as a wall between us, between our families. There is not a single space in the city of Delhi where Kashmiri Muslims meet together, just to be with each other, though everyone I have spoken to has expressed a desire for this space. Our shared insecurity stands like a wall that divides us from ourselves.

This is what it is like to be a Kashmiri Muslim today in Delhi.

This text has been edited and excerpted from the final report of the author's research project as an Independent Research Fellow (2004-05) with Sarai. The report has subsequently taken the shape of an expanded text, *Manufacturing Terrorism: Kashmiri Encounters with Media and the Law*, to be published by Bibliophile South Asia, New Delhi, in association with Poles Apart Trust, New Delhi (forthcoming, 2006).