



Remaking Life in Neo-Liberal Times:

Normalcy, Conflict and Displacement in Jammu and Kashmir¹

Ankur Datta South Asian University

Since 1990 the valley Kashmir has been marked by conflict between militant groups and proponents of independence and the Indian state, which has resulted in the militarisation of the landscape, loss of life, violence and displacement. However from time to time there are claims of the return of normal life in Kashmir. In this paper I am interested in what claims of normalcy and the remaking of normal life signify for people affected by conflict and displacement. I will first consider discussions of normalcy with regards to Kashmiris in the Kashmir valley. While the conflict is understood in terms of competing South Asian nationalisms, I situate 'normalcy' in relation to contemporary studies of conflict and neo-liberalism. Then, I will proceed to draw on research among the Hindu minority of Kashmir, better known as Kashmiri Pandits, who have been displaced from the valley since 1990 and who remain in exile since. I am especially interested in the lives of young Pandits who are caught on the one hand between their depiction as victims of chronic displacement from Kashmir and on the other hand seen as privileged victims who have been able to remake and recover privileges which their families had lost. Thus this paper will attempt to: 1) Suggest that normalcy consists of a set of claims as opposed to an actual condition; 2) Kashmir should be seen in light of both nationalist logics and neo-liberal transformations in the region, indicating that there is an accretion of different historical processes in areas marked by long term conflict.

Key words: neo-liberalism, nationalism, youth, violence, displacement, Kashmir

In early 2013, Afzal Guru, a Kashmiri man accused of participating in a major attack on the Indian Parliament was executed after several years of controversial investigation. Following his execution the Kashmir valley was affected by large demonstrations against the Indian state. The Indian state responded to the demonstrations repressively resulting in days spent in strikes and curfew. But by the 18th of February 2013, the Times of India reported:

Normalcy returned to Kashmir valley on Monday after nine days of curfew and strike in the aftermath of the execution of Parliament attack convict Mohammad Afzal Guru. The markets in Srinagar and other major towns were abuzz with activity as shopkeepers opened their outlets this morning. Government and private offices and other commercial establishments opened as per their normal schedule. Public transport was also seen plying on the roads (PTI 2013).

Other sources of news in India published similar reports with an emphasis on the 'return to normalcy'. But what do we mean by 'normalcy'? The report featured above offers one possible definition with reference to the reopening of markets and workplaces. Yet such reports are contested by the very fact that Kashmir is affected by an ongoing conflict and is one of the most heavily militarised areas in South Asia. In this paper I am interested in what claims of normalcy and the remaking of normal life signify for Kashmiris. I will first consider discussions of normalcy with regards to Kashmir. While the conflict in Kashmir is understood in terms of competing South Asian nationalisms, I will try to situate 'normalcy' in relation

to contemporary studies of conflict and neo-liberalism. I will then proceed to draw on research among the Hindu minority of Kashmir, better known as Kashmiri Pandits, who have been displaced from the valley since 1990 and who remain in exile since. Much of my research was conducted in a camp colony established in 1990 in the city of Jammu in southern Jammu and Kashmir. The camps accommodated a prominent section of displaced Pandits. By 2011 the camps had been dismantled with populations shifted to a new township in Jammu. Nevertheless the camps had become symbolic of the Pandit experience of conflict, which I have discussed elsewhere (Datta 2016; Datta 2017).

Before I present my material I shall begin with a second, modest intention of this paper, which is an attempt to engage with contemporary Kashmir. A discussion of the 'Kashmir conflict' begins with the history of British colonialism in the 19th century, the formation of Jammu and Kashmir as a princely state and then the partition of British India whereupon Jammu and Kashmir become the unfinished agenda between Indian and Pakistani nationalist politics. While this history is critical, the current conflict began in a decade which saw significant socio-economic and political changes with the liberalisation of the Indian political economy. I will also try to situate this paper in relation to these changes and see whether discussions of Kashmir can be contemporaneous to discussions of neo-liberalism in later 20th and early 21st century India. Hence I shall begin with a discussion of the current conflict in Kashmir as context before discussing lives and experiences in greater detail.

Towards a contemporary reading of Kashmir

British colonialism in India was premised on the direct administration of territories and the existence of *Princely States*, which were principalities that retained their rulers and their own administration but who acknowledged overall dominance of the Colonial administration. By 1947, the Princely states were expected to accede to either India or Pakistan. Jammu and Kashmir was one of the most prominent of the

Princely states formed in 1847 following the end of the Anglo-Sikh wars. One of the factors in facilitating a British victory was the apparent neutrality of the ruler of Jammu, Gulab Singh who was a former vassal of the Sikh Kingdom of Punjab. Following the conclusion of this war, the Kashmir valley, which was a part of the Sikh Kingdom, was sold to Gulab Singh by the British who recognised him as the Maharajah of the Kingdom of Jammu and Kashmir. Unlike other princely states, Jammu and Kashmir wielded considerably more power at a regional level as it formed a buffer zone between British interests in India and Russian imperial expansion. Consequently Gulab Singh became a Hindu king presiding over a Muslim majority kingdom (see Rai 2004). This dynamic would seemingly play an important part in the 20th century following the end of British colonialism.

The conflict over Kashmir is typically understood through the 'two nation-theory', which marked the partition of the Indian sub-continent (eg. Thomas 1992; Varshney 1991). Pakistan's claim on Kashmir was based on the presence of a Muslim majority in the former kingdom, while the presence of this very majority backed India's claim on the state as a secular pluralist republic (Behera 2000: 30). While the roots of Kashmiri nationalism can be traced to the period of colonial rule when a mass movement demanding independence was organised from the 1930s against the Maharajah of Jammu and Kashmir (Rai 2004; Zutshi 2004), the current conflict also emerged out of the flawed relationship between Jammu and Kashmir and the Indian state. Following the accession of the state to India, many Kashmiri leaders were often removed from office if their politics lay at odds with the Indian state (Puri 1993). Politicians who were supported by India were accused of corruption, which increasingly delegitimised the Indian state for Kashmiris. The rigging of state elections in Jammu and Kashmir in favour of politicians supportive to the Indian state in 1987 is regarded as the trigger for contemporary Kashmiri nationalist aspirations. Thus the relationship between Jammu and Kashmir and the Central Indian authorities was marked by a 'denial of democracy', with the reduction of the powers of representative government through repression,

fraudulent electoral politics and subversion of federal autonomy (Bose 1997: 19). Consequently, since 1989-90, Jammu and Kashmir have been the site of a conflict following the outbreak of a movement for self-determination in the Kashmir valley. This movement found expression in both a popular movement and insurgency against which the Indian state initiated a violent policy of counter insurgency and extreme militarisation of the landscape. The exodus of the Hindu minority of Kashmir, the Kashmiri Pandits, also took place in the first year of the current conflict.

Most attempts to explain the conflict in Kashmir begin from the context of colonial and post-colonial politics in 20th century South Asia. But is a contemporary reading of Kashmir possible, which not only acknowledges the importance of the nation-state idea, but also accounts for other possible transformations in the region? The relevance of political economy had been posed by Prakash (2000) who argues that Kashmiri discontent may have also been spurred by the poor management of industrial programmes and socio-economic reform in the state. Actions taken by the Indian state, such as the arrest of Sheikh Abdullah who started the reforms, as well as improper monitoring of the allocation of the benefits of reform resulted in the emergence of a close alliance emerged between land owners, political classes and bureaucracy (Prakash 2000: 321-324). Studies of political-economy in the region remain comparatively limited and it constitutes a dimension that warrants further engagement².

While 1989-90 is treated as the start of the ongoing conflict, it is also the period associated with liberal economic reforms in India. Hence the conflict in Kashmir and other socio-economic transformations in the region are coeval and which may exceed the way nationalist histories in the region are understood. Scholarship from contemporary India has shown that neo-liberalism is not merely about the emergence of the free market but about the transformation of the state, class and status, caste, communities, consumption, space and place and an overall transformation of self among other concerns (eg. Fernandes 2006; Srivastav 2009).

While neo-liberalism has become a part of our vocabulary, writers like Jamie Cross argue instead that formations of liberalisation in India such Special Economic Zones (SEZ) are perhaps not radical breaks in regions where much of the economy depends on informal and casual labour operating in the absence of any state safeguards (2010: 357). In that sense the transformations brought about by liberal economic reforms are not entirely a rupture with a prior political economy but rather build upon pre-existing inequalities. Nevertheless as Ortner (2011) suggests, writers could approach neo-liberalism as a set of narratives through which particular shifts can be discerned. Like nationalism, neo-liberal ideas call forth certain dispositions or aspirations. For example the notion of freedom itself has acquired particular significance in the context of neoliberalism. As David Harvey points out, concepts of individual freedom and dignity are critical in neo-liberal discourse concerning the foundation of free and unregulated markets (2005:5). Kashmiri claims for *azaadi* (freedom), a word that evokes an emotional and existential quality, have to contend in a world where a different conception of freedom is put forth for adoption³. Can the conflict in Kashmir be re-located in the emergence of a neoliberal regime in India? In other words, can our frameworks with regards to Kashmir and Kashmiris reflect the contemporary where different processes are contemporaneous?

Approaching Violence, Conflict and Displacement in Neo-liberal times

Over the past few years there has emerged a range of scholarship that situates the experiences of societies affected by conflict in the context of neo-liberal transformations. Authors like Balibar (2008) and Bauman (2001) locate the difficulty of developing a sociological framework of conflict and war in the context of globalisation and the 'war on terror'. They may focus on different issues such as labour as seen in Hoffman's (2007) work on post-conflict life in Sierra Leone where former fighters are organised into potential peace keepers to secure and produce a flexible work force for the informal sector. However the experience

of violence as refracted by the emergence of capitalist economic systems also draws our attention to structural violence and its effects on racial and ethnic conflict (Goldstein 2005, Hickel 2014). Scholars have also commented on the displacements of population when conflicts compel populations to migrate and seek work as a free floating insecure labour force (Green 2011).

Studies of humanitarianism are particularly interesting for complicating the debate. As Feldman and Tiktin (2010) argue, humanitarian activities in the face of conflict are tied to the protection of sacred human life, though the ways to achieve such aims vary according to considerations of governance and rights (Feldman & Tiktin 2010: 9-13). As seen in different contexts such as asylum policy or discussions within Humanitarian organisations (Fassin 2005; Fassin 2007), there has been a tendency to avoid political and historical context. However the temporal disruption caused by conflict and displacement cannot be ignored. An example which reveals the role of time and change emerges in Stef Jansen's study on refugee repatriation in Bosnia. Jansen writes about how the Balkans was shaped by a 'double rupture' comprising post-war reconstruction and transformation from a socialist regime to neo-liberal reforms (2006: 190). However Bosnian conceptions of home drew nostalgically for the stability of a pre-conflict and in this case a pre-neo-liberal world, which came to odds with post-war programmes promoted by different agencies (Jansen 2006: 193).

The engagement with situations of conflict in India in the time of liberalisation has been documented in different settings. There have been several publications on Maoism and counter-insurgency in central India (Kunnath 2009; Sundar 2016). While this movement in India has a history that goes back to the 1960s, recent commentators have paid particular attention to the manner in which the Indian state frames a policy of counter insurgency and the closer relationship of the state with corporate interests especially in light of the dispossession of rural and marginalised societies from land (eg. Bhan 2014; Levien 2013; Mohanty 2016).

Various writers already suggest the possibility of

relating neo-liberal ideas with regards to Kashmir. For example, Haley Duschinski argues that Indian state policies convert Kashmiris into a 'threat to the national order' and coincides with an expansion of armed forces associated with countries undergoing market expansion and extreme nationalist movements (2009: 698-699). In another vein, Cabeiri Robinson (2014) looks at development discourses in Pakistani administered *Azad Jammu and Kashmir* following the earthquake of 2005. With the arrival of a new humanitarian regime and foreign aid workers, a tourism industry began, first on its own and then promoted as a development project. Yet Robinson writes that there was a deep seated unease at the seeming side-lining of the larger political question of Kashmir and what Kashmiris themselves thought. In studies from other parts of the region such as Ladakh, there has emerged a close interweave of democratic ideals, civil society and economic aspirations with the militarising state (Agarwal & Bhan 2009). Hence the neo-liberal is recognised almost as a kind of presence, even if does not seem obvious in the face of conventional narratives on Kashmir. How do we then bring these concerns to the foreground?

A Claim of Normalcy in Kashmir

In 2012 an article titled 'Sorry, Kashmir is happy', was published by Manu Joseph as the cover story of a prominent English Language Indian magazine. Joseph's article promises an alternative reading and begins with a number of claims:

Kashmir's intellectual elite, which includes writers, melancholy poets, artists, Facebook revolutionaries, filmmakers and at least one rapper who owns a hood, have since resumed what Kashmir's elites have always done.

Trauma in Kashmir is like a heritage building-the elite fight to preserve it. 'Don't forget,' is their predominant message, 'don't forget to be traumatised'. They want the wound of Kashmir to endure because the wound is what indicts India for the many atrocities of its military. This might be a long period of calm, but if the wound vanishes, where is the justice?... So nothing disgusts them more than these words: 'Normalcy returns to Kashmir'; 'Peace returns

to the valley'; Kashmir wants to move on' (Joseph 2012: 18).

If we treat victimhood as a field of politics (Jefferey & Canda 2006), the article at first appears to be quite interesting. Joseph begins by describing a public gathering in rural Kashmir organised by the District Magistrate where he notes that there was no word about 'politics'. The report of the meeting leads to the Magistrate's deputy, Shah Faisal, a young Kashmiri who achieved prominence for the best performance in the entrance examination to the Indian Administrative Service, the bureaucratic elite of the Indian state. Shah Faisal's story is used by Joseph as a larger statement of changing aspirations of Kashmiri youth away from politics in terms of the desire for to achieve personal ambitions and lifestyle. The article ends with an encounter between Joseph and two young Kashmiris:

He and his close friend take me to Café Coffee Day, which is filled with young people. Both the men work for Aircel. They say what many educated young people in Kashmir say - can we move on? Can we have development first instead of waiting forever for the Kashmir issue to be solved? We want industries to come here, we want MNCs and malls. We want to watch a cricket match in Srinagar. "We want KFC", one of them says as they burst out laughing (Joseph 2012: 21).

Joseph's article focuses on young Kashmiris and the personal ambitions appears to be an alternative to the over politicisation of life in Kashmir and its representation in India. He openly criticises 'Kashmiri intellectuals' for not representing what Kashmiri youth 'really want'. But is there more to this article?

The interest in ordinary desires of people whose lives are affected by political conflict has often emerged in anthropological engagements. Rather than treat the ordinary and mundane as separate from extraordinary violence, as Veena Das (2007) suggests, the two must be seen together as the ordinary is often the space of recovery from violence. This does not however mean that a descent into the ordinary implies the end of violence. While Joseph appears to direct our attention to such a space in Kashmir, could a more nuanced reading of Kashmiri lives have been offered? Writing about Palestinian lives during the sec-

ond intifada, Kelly discusses how conflict is experienced by a vast majority of its victims:

More time is spent watching TV, waiting for buses or preparing food, than it is shooting guns, hiding in basements or burning houses. More people want to be dentists, accountants or teachers, than warlords or soldiers. However, in the recent growth of the ethnography of armed conflict, there has often been a danger of over-determining violence, ignoring the mundane nature of most political conflicts. In order to understand how people live through violence, an examination of the ordinary is just as important as the apparently extraordinary or exceptional. (2008: 353)

Kelly's discussion is especially enhanced by his informant, Khalil who pursued his ambition in studying accountancy instead of participating in political acts of resistance to Israeli occupation. However Kelly does not see this as apolitical when Khalil emphasised to him that 'by stopping at home, by refusing to go through a checkpoint, by letting your life be disrupted, you were doing the work of the Israeli army for them' (2008: 358). Thus ordinary mundane aspirations are deeply political acts. Is this a dimension that is being missed in Kashmir by commentators?

Areas marked by national struggles and resistance to state oppression, are often subject to the multiplicity of political ideologies and sentiments. Joseph may have met Kashmiris in the valley who want well-paying jobs and to eat at Kentucky Fried Chicken. However an interest in the ordinary does not mean that people in areas marked by national liberation movements are not interested in politics. Rather it is politics of another kind. Does Joseph's article consider this possibility? His reading, while critical of dominant politics, eventually results in an apolitical as opposed to a 'counter political' reading (Spencer 2007).

Joseph's article has expectedly been criticised. As one response argues:

Put another way, just because Kashmiris seem happy (and I don't think that Kashmiris as a species are an unhappy people), it doesn't logically follow that there are no political problems in Kashmir; just because Kashmir's hoteliers are looking forward to having more tourists in their properties next year does not mean that there are no political discontents in Kashmir. ... Did Manu Joseph expect to see unhappy, unsmiling, un-hospitable, unkind, ungraceful

Kashmiris when he went 'sight-seeing' Kashmir... You are right, Kashmir is happy (and they have a right to be happy) but their happiness is no reason why their political, civil and human rights should be trampled upon. So since Kashmir is happy, does it mean that they should 'just move on' forgetting the past? (Jacob 2012)

Joseph's approach can also be situated in a field where commentators avoid politics and history by using the 'economic'. An example of this is a report by a former Indian bureaucrat who argues that the conflict persists due to the lack of economic opportunities for Kashmiris which has been exploited by different political groups. If economic investment takes place in Jammu and Kashmir, whereby the state which has remained 'closed' is 'opened' like the rest of India, peace might be a possibility along with the improvement of relations between India and Pakistan (Habibullah 2004: 12). While the report is sympathetic on the surface to Kashmiris (without challenging statist paradigms or the role of the Indian and Pakistani states), its embedding in a discourse of international development implies that the focus on the economic elides the political. This is also apparent whenever normalcy in Kashmir is reported in terms of the opening of shops and markets after curfews and strikes. It is my contention that an apolitical engagement with Kashmir suggests a tendency of neo-liberal transformations to influence the lenses we wear when we regard the world. Comaroff and Comaroff write:

It is a culture that ...re-visions persons not as producers from a particular community but as consumers of a planetary marketplace; persons as ensembles of identity that owe less to history or society than to organically conceived human qualities. (2000: 304)

Critical to millennial capitalism is an emphasis on individual consumption. The 'me' becomes generalised into the 'we' and the 'personal' is the only politics available at hand (Comaroff & Comaroff 2000: 305). The emphasis on individual Kashmiri aspirations and their desires of consumption can be read as a desire for things that are ordinary, which holds the possibility for the political. Yet, the prominence given to personal ambition and consumption may be related to the impact of neo-liberalism which focuses

on individuals at the expense of politics and history. In other words Joseph's claim of normalcy is perhaps a claim of the times we inhabit. But is it a claim Kashmiris make? Or is it a claim others like to see Kashmiris adopt?

Remaking normalcy in displacement

Among the other casualties of the conflict in the Kashmir are the Kashmiri Pandits, the Hindu minority of the Kashmir valley. Due to the breakdown of law and order and a series of selective assassinations of Pandits, most of the community had fled from their homes, relocating to the city of Jammu in the southern part of the state and different parts of India. The exodus of the Kashmiri Pandits has been controversial on two counts. First, the scale of displacement was significant, with a vast majority of the community leaving Kashmir within a few months of the outbreak of conflict. Secondly, the cause of the exodus has been subject to debate. There are two causes which are commonly understood to have precipitated the exodus (Evans 2002). One of the reasons for mass migration pertains to large scale public protests and selective assassinations, which led to the community to feel targeted by insurgents. Another cause is attributed to the Indian state which, at the behest of the Governor at the time, engineered the exodus to prevent casualties among supporters of the Indian state, and discredit the movement for independence. These two views while extreme, suggest the ambiguity that marks the issue.

The Pandits are given the official nomenclature of 'migrants' in Jammu and Kashmir, which enables them to seek special state welfare or 'relief' meant for people displaced in Jammu and Kashmir since 1990. The forms of support (including food, financial aid and housing for a section of displaced Pandits in the forms of camps) however have been largely of short term nature. Many Pandits often criticise the Indian state for the poor quality of assistance and rehabilitation they have received over the years and over the attention being focused on the Kashmir valley. As Duschinski (2007) writes, the sentiment that persists among Pandits is expressed in the phrase 'India

displacing Indians for the Sake of India'. A long term engagement with Pandits leads to a narrative of displacement, exile and dealing with the loss of home.

While the Kashmiri Pandits constitute a minority of the Kashmiri population, they have historically been associated with power in the region, having been prominent landowners in the past and securing employment in state bureaucracies in the pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial periods of South Asian history (Pant 1987; Sender 1986). This history has contributed to an image of the Pandits as a community of influential elites in the region. This inheritance of the past, seemingly intangible and irrelevant, adds to the burden of displacement.

The sense of loss was especially acute among communities inhabiting camps in Jammu which were established in 1990 to accommodate homeless Kashmiri Pandits until their disestablishment by 2011⁴. While the camps only accommodated a section of registered 'migrant' families, they became iconic and came to represent the history of Pandits in exile. Families were forced to lead their lives in the ubiquitous One Room Tenement (ORT), the main housing unit in the camps which consisted of a 9 X14 feet room⁵. The conditions in the camp were a constant reminder of the gulf between lives lived in the past with life in the present. Yet many Pandits in the camp and beyond had over time, remade lives to varying degrees of success. Like forced migrants elsewhere, it is in the 'decent into the ordinary' (Das 2007) that we can begin to appreciate another aspect of the history of the Pandits. Pandits continue to observe duties of the life cycle, provide for the education of their wards, maintain kinship obligations and forge new friendships.

Another prominent welfare measure was the reservation for Kashmiri Pandit students in institutions of higher education. The reservation of places in educational institutions has a long history in India as part of a general programme of affirmative action to encourage members of marginalised castes to acquire an education. A similar programme had been developed for Kashmiri Pandit youth in the early 1990s which became seen as an asset by many Pandits. As a result many Pandits would argue that while the displacement had its 'de-merits' in the loss of home, it has also

its 'merits' as these reservations would help their children acquire an education and find well-paying jobs. Hence the reservations for the Pandits was seen as a stepping stone to a newer and larger world and it is not uncommon to hear of how some young people have gone ahead in the private sector and work in fields their parents had never thought of. This is a significant shift as in Kashmir the state was the most prominent source of formal employment, especially for an older generation of Pandits. However not everyone could benefit from this programme as poorer Pandits often lacked the finances to pursue an education outside Jammu and Kashmir. Other than those who participated in the education reservations programme, I had also met many younger Pandits who had left to look for employment in other cities and had to return to their families when they became unemployed encountering the lack of security in the private sector. However they return to Jammu and Kashmir to see that employment in the State sector has also gradually diminished.

Pandit youth are thus faced with intimations of the past and the possibilities and uncertainties of the present and future. Perhaps this will be clearer through the story of Rohan⁶, a young Pandit man and one of my most important respondents from the field. Rohan had come to Jammu as a boy with his family after fleeing Southern Kashmir in 1990 and had lived in Purkhu camp for many years. He completed his schooling in Jammu at one of the better schools in the city rather than attending the camp school and eventually attended university in the state. Rohan's family inhabited an odd location. They were better off financially than their neighbours in the camp as Rohan's father, a former employee in a government office in Kashmir, worked as a clerk in a small business in Jammu while his elder brother worked as a policeman in the state. Hence his family slowly rebuilt some semblance over everyday life since 1990, first in one emergency camp and then from 1994 in Purkhu camp. In 2011 they had moved from the camp to an apartment in a new township built for displaced Pandits after the camps had been shut down.

Rohan, would often talk about how superior life in Kashmir and Kashmiri Pandits were compared to

life in Jammu and its different inhabitants. However even though Rohan attended university and was a 'graduate' he found himself working part time when we first met. His father would say how his son dreamed far too much and needed to look for a proper job. After I left the field I returned to Jammu; I kept in touch with Rohan on the phone and also during shorter visits. Rohan had eventually quit the job he had and began work as an administrative research assistant at a hospital. Over the years he had given up his wish to pursue an education in management studies and began to apply for a job under a scheme for displaced persons in Jammu and Kashmir in state department offices in the valley though he has been unable to secure an appointment for almost five years. When I spoke to him once in 2016 on the occasion of a festival observed by the Pandits he told me that he still worked at the hospital, that he was still in a job and still in a city he wanted to get away from and head to something which in some ways was his due as a Kashmiri Pandit, had the conflict not happened.

When we met during my last visit in early 2017, the scheme had stalled owing to bureaucratic mismanagement and disputes. Rohan told me that was trying to get together other applicants from his cadre to make an appeal to the state authorities managing recruitment though he was also aware that they there was nothing else they could do. The employment scheme meant for Kashmiri Pandit 'migrants' had attracted the interest of nearly 3000 applicants who had even held protests in Jammu demanding that the recruitment begin. However when I discussed Rohan's experience with others in Jammu there was a sense that people like him should look to other avenues. As a friend based in the city remarked:

It is time someone gave the Pandits some tough love. Look to the private sector. Forget this scheme. Besides, they will be posted in Kashmir maybe as a teacher in a village school. They will be teaching children whose parents speak openly about azaadi. Why do they want to go back? Private sector is where the future is!

Conclusion

This paper has tried to explore the meaning and claim of normalcy in the context of Kashmir. I have drawn on the discourse of normalcy in the context of Kashmiri Muslims and on anthropological research on Kashmiri Pandits living in exile in Jammu. In both cases I have tried to situate the discussion of normalcy in the context of mundane or ordinary aspirations and desires. I have also tried to suggest that discussions of normalcy must be situated in the context of dominant national paradigms, which incorporates an awareness of newer ideologies, either in the form of possible values or settings and contexts. While discussions on the conflict regarding Kashmir will always begin with decolonisation in South Asia, there should be room where other changes and transformations from different time periods also begin to leave their mark.

When we speak of normalcy, are we discussing ordinary life? Ordinary life is evident everywhere, among Kashmiris living in camp colonies for displaced persons and among Kashmiris leading lives the valley under military and state surveillance. Yet, the fact that Kashmiris lead lives under militarisation or in exile cannot be ignored. Claims of normalcy seem to presume a bifurcation of times between conflict and peace. Kashmiris-Pandits and Muslims are affected by conditions - military oppression and exile - that are on-going. The Kashmiri Muslims as subjects of an area under militarisation are constantly held suspect by the Indian state. The Kashmiri Pandits are displaced persons whose persistent status as 'migrants' sets them apart from other citizens.

While both Muslims and Pandits are caught in divergent histories and opposed politics, the discussions of and on them, complicate the meaning of normalcy. Normalcy may be a word that is used easily in the context of Kashmiris, but it might more useful to treat it as a *claim* rather than an actual state of existence. This is evident in Manu Joseph's article about Kashmiris in the valley and their aspirations. This is evident among the Kashmiri Pandits who imagine a world of opportunity amidst dispossession. These claims of normalcy with their emphasis on consumption and professions are seen in the shadow of

economic liberalisation.

What the two cases raise is a further question: whose claim of normalcy are we dealing with? In the case of Kashmiri Muslims in the valley, the claim for normalcy appears to be that of the Indian state and the media. Normalcy at first appears to be a suspension of violence, not its cessation. Much of the attention and discussion in the Kashmiri Pandit case has been with regards to attempts to remake life and leave a displaced present behind. However the achievement of the obligations of ordinary life does not mean that they have come to terms with displacement and the controversial history specific to their condition. Furthermore as Rohan's story suggests, he and many other Pandit youth are looking for a life to be realised in the state sector which until the late 1980s was an important source of employment, and which no longer applies in South Asia with the gradual shift to the private sector and receding of the state. The Pandits thus face a rupture similar to the kind that Jansen, whose work I refer to earlier, identifies for Bosnians.

Articles by authors such as Joseph (2012) may be of interest for those seeking to interrogate the meaning of normalcy. However their emphasis on consumption and individual aspirations or on resumption of markets and businesses must be pushed further and acknowledge the history of violence, and the oppression of struggle. They remain a partial representation of how Kashmiris imagine an ideal life and most probably represent the imagination of commentators. Similarly, some Kashmiri Pandits may indeed make it to engineering colleges and well-paying professions, which may be treated as proof of the success of some members of the community. However this does not acknowledge the fact that there are those who do not succeed, and for whom the ideal way of life for a Pandit and his/her lived experience will not only diverge, but will be a source of continued suffering, complicating the kinds of rupture the displaced face. To reiterate, ordinary life is deeply political. A new framework is needed that takes into consideration the effect of contemporary socio-economic and ideological processes, and which moves beyond conventional paradigms.

Notes

¹ This paper is developed from a shorter paper titled 'Seeking 'normalcy' in Neo-Liberal times: notes from two Kashmiri Communities' which was presented at the ICES Ethical Futures Conference in Colombo on 29 May 2013. I am grateful to the participants of the conference for the feedback. I am also grateful to Divya Vaid, Sarbani Sharma and Aatina Malik for their comments on an earlier draft of this paper.

² The role of Article 370 in the Indian constitution may also be relevant to a deeper engagement with political economy in the region. As per article 370, Jammu and Kashmir is a part of the Indian union but maintains its own constitution. The role of the Indian state in Jammu and Kashmir is limited to defence, foreign affairs and communications though evidence indicates that the article can be bypassed. Nevertheless it mediates the spread of commercial policies to the region from New Delhi. It is beyond the scope of this paper but it will be interesting to see whether Article 370 influences the possibilities of transformation in the political economy in the region (see Noorani 2011).

³ I am grateful to Lawrence Liang for pointing this out.

⁴ Since 2011, all camp populations were relocated to a single township on the outskirts of Jammu.

⁵ All families carried out their daily lives in a single room. However the camps were also sites of tremendous creative activity as residents often built on and around the ORT constructing additional structures such as kitchens, bathrooms and even shop spaces.

⁶ Pseudonym used.

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Ankur Datta teaches at the Department of Sociology, South Asian University, New Delhi, India. His work addresses questions of displacement and dislocation, violence, place-making and the politics of victimhood in Jammu and Kashmir. He is the author of *On Uncertain Ground: Displaced Kashmiri Pandits in Jammu and Kashmir*, (2017), Oxford University Press, New Delhi. ankurdatta@soc.sau.ac.in
