

Vale of Madness

Text and Photographs by Justine Hardy

The lies have heaped up over the decades, rendering the truth impotent, and filling the psychiatric wards with collapsed psyches.

THERE IS AN EXHAUSTED EXPRESSION used to describe the damage of war. It has become so jaded that it usually gets lost in shades of grey, buried beneath the latest pyrotechnics of both the verbal and military kind that zing at us with all the gloss of an over-budget blockbuster. Now and then the phrase resurfaces, usually when a journalist, suffering from frontline fatigue, simply runs out of things to say about the same old darkness. And so we are told, once again, that: “truth is the first casualty of war”.

The phrase slides straight out of our consciousness, like the conversation of an ageing maiden aunt, rendered meaningless because no one is paying attention, because, like the greying aunt with her falling features and slightly odd hobbies, no one is particularly interested anymore.

The thing about that aunt though is that she is not past her prime. She is perhaps just being looked at in the wrong light. Give her a good haircut, move her out of the glaring neon lights, and she still has the ability to grab our attention, and to break hearts.

That aunt is Kashmir, made haggard by more than 20 years of distortions, her psyche sand-papered down by the lies, her latest strange hobby, throwing stones. But move her into a different light and the image changes.

Truth is not the first casualty of war. It is ever a relative concept, and it's apparent loss is a by-product of conflict. The truth of war is that everyone starts lying, about everything, all the time. A houseboat owner tells a naive tourist that the firing from the city across the lake is only firecrackers being set off to celebrate Diwali, even though the

Pandits are long gone, their empty houses echoing with the crossfire that is bouncing back across the lake. A mother lies to a soldier, begging at his heavy boots as he points his gun between her eyes, because she will do anything to save her son's life. A soldier lies to his family when he calls home, telling them that he is fine as he drums his head against a concrete wall, tearing the skin as he speaks in his need to feel something, anything. A son lies to his mother that he is fine, hiding the marks of his interrogation beneath his *pheran*, his thick woollen winter outer skin. A mother lies to herself that she is fine even though she cannot remember how to make dal anymore, though she has made it every day of her adult life. And then the point comes when no one can remember what is a lie and what is not, and then no one is fine anymore.

I am always interested by one of the most standardised questions that I am asked about Kashmir. It is more of a statement than a question: “What is wrong with these people? We throw so much money at them, and all they do is throw stones at our *jawans*, our boys.”

Let me use someone else's words to answer that question, those of a Kashmiri gentleman of some standing in his community.

“I don't know what is wrong with we people now. It is as though we have all gone mad. And the ones who think that they are fine, they are the maddest of all.”

This is a gentleman with enough life experience to be able to discern the difference between pubescent rage being vented at irrational moments, and a generation whose tolerance is so low that they are ready fodder for anyone who wants to harness that hor-





Above and overleaf burnt out Pandit homes in Srinagar

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monal rage, transforming them into a very fast and effective army of stone-pelters.

The lies, both inside and outside Kashmir, have heaped up over the decades, rendering the truth impotent, and filling the psychiatric outpatient departments of Srinagar with collapsed psyches that have been tipped out of sanity by the sheer weight of their distorted reality.

There is a statistic about Kashmir that gets handed around, and trotted out by journalists when they are writing about the situation there now. "Dr X, a leading psychiatrist in the state, says that 90 per cent of the population has been affected by a psychiatric disorder at some point in the past 20 years." I have quoted it myself, though I hesitate to use it now because the enormity of it is too hard for most people to grasp, in context. The figure flies past, unheard, unabsorbed. The figure is now several years old and I do not

think that anyone has checked with Dr X to see whether he would revise his estimate now. He probably would not.

There are around 3,500 bona fide registered psychiatrists in the whole of India. That is roughly one per million people, based on current figures of those requiring mental health treatment. Compare that to, say, Australia. There it is 1:100, as in one psychiatrist for every 100 people in need of care.

India as a whole is on a trajectory of increasing mental health problems that render those 3,500 men and women the equivalent to turning a wheelbarrow on its side to hold back a tsunami. Those 3,500 really have only one thing available to them — medication. And if the mental problems of the country at large are being blanket-medicated then, by comparison, Kashmir is being carpet-bombed with prescription anti-psychotics, sedatives, anti-depressants, sleeping pills

and codeine, except in the case of the last thing on the list, codeine. That is not being prescribed, however, as an over-the-counter and easily available form of medication, it is the most widely used opiate that people are downing by the bottle-load to "get out of it". It is the most common drug of choice in Kashmir, for everyone, from housewives to backstreet bootleggers.

So, the question is this: what can be done to treat a people that are apparently suffering from an epidemic of psychological damage, brought on by an extended period of violence that, for anyone under the age of 23, has been the only way of life they have ever known?

To me that question splits into three ideas: the first is, to what extent does a collective sense of victimhood become in itself a cause of psychological damage? Secondly, does blanket medicating make those people taking prescription drugs feel isolated from their families and friends, their two main sources of emotional support? And thirdly, how does impaired psychological functioning impact on the political situation in a place like Kashmir?

Victimhood is a posture in the same way that success is a posture, or victory, or failure. Each of those is usually based on a real set of circumstances: watching your children get into college, winning the Cricket World Cup, losing your job, or trying to survive a perpetual round of daily violence. There are many victims in Kashmir, men, women and children who have been sucked into the vortex of a situation that seems intractable in its continual round of violence. Once victimhood has seeped by osmosis into the psyche of an entire people, it becomes all-pervading. Victimhood destroys hope, and without hope people stop taking personal responsibility for their actions as everything becomes the fault of their circumstances. The moral compass spins off. What that society once deemed as being wrong becomes the norm: for example, taking money for telling a partially-invented story about a disliked neighbour that can only result in the neighbour's arrest, imprisonment, torture or death.

Medication is not a problem when properly prescribed and monitored, but the

carpet-bombing method has the potential to break down many of the vitally cohesive structures of any society. In the context of Kashmir, and indeed much of the rest of the country, for a village girl to be taken to a psychiatric outpatient department carries a stigma that will mark her like a brand. If the girl is unmarried it will be seen as a permanent stain on her character, regardless of how temporary her condition might be. In an already overly-nervous society, this kind of stigma can cut a girl off from her friends, while the side-effects of some medications can lead to her isolating herself from her

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Once that sense of personal responsibility has gone what hope is there for a lasting peace agreement?

A merchant's abandoned house in the old Pandit neighbourhood of Rainawari.

family, even if she is part of a large extended family. The more isolated she becomes the more likely she is to show symptoms of paranoia, on top of her original psychological problem. More symptoms mean more prescriptions, more side-effects, and so the cycle continues.

The third point is probably the most inflammatory, but there are close links between psychological damage in a society and the potential of that society to make political progress. The nub of this lies in future leadership. What kind of internal leadership can grow and mature in a place where a sense of

victimhood has created a sense of isolation, and that sense of isolation translates into a pervasive idea of abandonment? And if abandoned, if without hope, then well, wouldn't you throw stones, even if you knew it was against your better judgement? In this kind of society, conditioned by violence, it is the raw visceral response that holds strong sway over the rational. Once that sense of hope and personal responsibility have gone what kind of lasting peace agreement can any internal leadership come to if it is operating on the basis of day-by-day crisis management, at best?

It is for all of these reasons that, after 20 years of watching Kashmir from the inside, and the outside, a vital step seemed to be to create a mental health support system. I am now part of such a system, training young Kashmiris to understand how growing up in Kashmir has affected them and their families. This prepares them to support and guide others in mental crisis. With this understanding of the impact on their own lives, these young Kashmiris can begin to explore a maturing sense of responsibility, within themselves, and within their society. It is a small step, but in addition to being misunderstood, like the greying maiden aunt, Kashmir has also become partially disabled, and so it has to learn to walk again, one baby step at a time.

Peace is a word that, like truth, has been so overused that it has lost some of the profound impact of its meaning. To so many of us peace might be that moment in the day when we know that all is well in our world, that there is an evenness, a symmetry, and in that moment it can seem as though the world is flowing smoothly around us. For most Kashmiris peace does not mean a final or smooth resolution to their conflict. It means a moment of mental stillness, an escape from the hallucinations, nightmares, and obsessive-compulsive thoughts. This is where lasting peace begins.

In 2008 Justine started Healing Kashmir, an integrated mental health project in Kashmir. She is working with a local and international team, running their mental health centre, suicide helpline and outreach programme. For more information see: www.justinehardy.com

