A SLOW BLOOM:
The Life and Work of
Ashima Kaul of India (Kashmir)

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2014 Women PeaceMakers Program

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A NOTE TO THE READER

In the following pages, you will find narrative stories about a Woman PeaceMaker, along with additional information to provide a deep understanding of a contemporary conflict and one person's journey within it. These complementary components include a brief biography of the peacemaker, a historical summary of the conflict, a timeline integrating political developments in the country with personal history of the peacemaker, and a question-and-answer transcript of select interviews during her time at the Joan B. Kroc Institute for Peace and Justice.

The document is not intended necessarily to be read straight through, from beginning to end. Instead, you can use the historical summary or timeline as mere references or guides as you read the narrative stories. You can move straight to the question-and-answer transcript if you want to read commentary in the peacemaker's own words. The goal of this format is to reach audiences through multiple channels, providing access to the peacemaker's work, vision, lives and impact in their communities.

ABOUT THE WOMEN PEACEMAKERS PROGRAM

The Joan B. Kroc Institute for Peace and Justice's (IPJ) Women PeaceMakers Program annually hosts four women from around the world who have been involved in human rights and peacemaking efforts in their countries.

Women on the frontline of efforts to end violence and secure a just peace seldom record their experiences, activities and insights — as generally there is no time or, perhaps, they do not have formal education that would help them record their stories. The Women PeaceMakers Program is a selective program for leaders who want to document, share and build upon their unique peacemaking stories.

Women PeaceMakers are paired with a Peace Writer to document in written form their story of living in conflict and building peace in their communities and nations. While in residence at the institute, Women PeaceMakers give presentations on their work and the situation in their home countries to the university and San Diego communities.

The IPJ believes that women's stories go beyond headlines to capture the nuance of complex situations and expose the realities of gender-based violence, thus providing an understanding of conflict and an avenue to its transformation. The narrative stories of Women PeaceMakers not only provide this understanding, but also show the myriad ways women construct peace in the midst of and after violence and war. For the realization of peace with justice, the voices of women — those severely affected by violent conflict and struggling courageously and creatively to build community from the devastation — must be recorded, disseminated and spotlighted.[1]

BIOGRAPHY OF A WOMAN PEACEMAKER — Ashima Kaul

Ashima Kaul is a grassroots worker, journalist, policy analyst and social entrepreneur from India's Kashmir Valley. Born and raised in Kashmir as part of the ethnic minority community of Kashmiri Hindu Pandits, she and her family moved out of the valley when she was 15. A decade later, her extended family that remained behind was forcibly displaced to Hindu-majority areas of the region as violence broke out between Kashmiri Muslims and Hindus.

After later trips to Kashmir on journalistic assignments, Kaul was struck and saddened by what had transpired there since she left and decided to act: "I had to recover the dying, bullet-ridden soul of Kashmir, rebuild broken relationships, break the silence of women, give them a voice and establish new spaces for creation of a spirit of trust, solace and healing." Her first step was to facilitate a group dialogue with Muslim and Pandit women, leading to the creation of a formal dialogue group, Athwaas, or "handshake."

In addition to the Kashmir dialogue groups, Athwaas brought together 50 women to advocate for peace from women's perspectives, in a parallel platform from the official peace process initiated in 2005 that excluded women's voices.

Kaul later founded the Yakjah Reconciliation and Development Network. Yakjah, which means "being together," focuses on countering the violence in Kashmir by building relationships between different religious and ethnic groups through dialogue and development projects. The organization has a program on Youth Expression and Leadership, which holds cross-cultural workshops and exchanges across the region to involve young people in peacebuilding and developing their leadership skills. The program has reached over 400 youth so far, and includes a core group of 50 young men and women. As Kaul writes, "The youth form the critical mass. While they do carry the conflict legacy and can be indoctrinated in the name of religion, they also have the potential to lead for change."

Kaul is part of the Women Waging Peace Network of the Institute for Inclusive Security, and is a local correspondent for Insight on Conflict, a website published by the international NGO Peace Direct.

INTEGRATED TIMELINE

Political Developments in Jammu and Kashmir and *Personal History of Ashima Kaul*

(*Cultural Developments)

304-232 BCE Reign of Emperor Ashoka. Buddhism and Shaivism flourish side by side in Kashmir, receiving the emperor's patronage in equal measure. Srinagar is founded.

2nd Century CE King Kanishka conquers Kashmir for the Kushan Empire.

6th-7th Centuries Writing of the *Nilmata Purana*, a well-known ancient Hindu text. The epic poem chronicles the ancient history of Kashmir, including the creation of the Kashmir Valley and its original inhabitants: Nagas, Pisachas and Brahmins.

8th-14th Centuries Kashmir is ruled by a succession of Hindu kings.

1339-1561 The Valley becomes part of the Muslim Shah Mir Dynasty and is ruled by Muslim sultans.

1389-1413 Reign of Sultan Sikandar, who destroys a large number of temples and idols. In the middle of his regime, Islam becomes the prevailing religion in Kashmir.

16th Century Kashmir is conquered by Mughal Emperor Akbar.

1671-5 Life of Guru Teg Bahadur. During the reign of Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb, a group of Kashmiri Pandits (Kashmiri Hindu Brahmins) approach Guru Tegh Bahadur for help. He advises them to tell the Mughal authorities that they would willingly embrace Islam if the Guru did the same. Guru Tegh Bahadur is beheaded. He is popularly known as "The Shield of India" in reference to his sacrifice to protect the Hindus of India from conversion to Islam and to protect the religious freedom of other non-Muslims in Mughal India.

1751-1819 Kashmir is conquered by the Afghans and is folded into the Afghan Empire.

1819 The Sikh Empire takes Kashmir.

1846 First Anglo-Sikh War; Great Britain defeats the Sikhs. In the Treaty of Amritsar, Britain sells Jammu and Kashmir to Gulab Singh, who becomes the first maharaja of the princely state of Jammu and Kashmir, the second largest princely state in British India.

1925 Hari Singh becomes the maharaja of Jammu and Kashmir.

1931 July 13 — Revolt against the Dogra maharaja. Police kill 22 people in Kashmir Valley. The revolt is followed by the rise of Sheikh Abdullah to national prominence as a leader of the liberation movement (Muslim Conference) against the Dogra.

1947 August 15 — Independence of India and Pakistan. Poonchi and Pashtun (Kabali) raiders invade Kashmir.

October 27 — India accepts the accession of the maharaja to India. Indian forces land in Kashmir. Fighting between Indian, Pakistani and Kashmiri forces ensues over control of Jammu and Kashmir.

1949 The UN brokers a ceasefire between India and Pakistan over Jammu and Kashmir. The two countries agree to divide the state into two regions: Azad Jammu and Kashmir, which becomes part of Pakistan, and the Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir.

1962 Inconclusive war between India and China over the northeast portion of Ladakh.

1964 **December 9 — Ashima Kaul is born in Ratan Rani Hospital, Bar Bar Shah, Srinagar.**

1972 Simla Agreement between India and Pakistan establishes the boundary between Indian and Pakistani Kashmir, which becomes known as the Line of Control.

1975 The Kashmir Accord is signed between Kashmir and Jammu's chief minister, Sheikh Abdullah and India's prime minister, Indira Gandhi, over accession of Kashmir and Jammu to India and the state's special status in the Indian constitution.

1986 **Ashima becomes a journalist in Delhi.**

1987 **Ashima marries Ravi Bhatia, a crime reporter for the *Times of India*.**

Elections in Jammu and Kashmir are disputed. A militant insurgency in Kashmir rises.

1988 **Ashima's daughter, Raashi Bhatia, is born.**

1990 On the day of the inauguration of the Indian governor of Kashmir and Jammu, a demonstration in Srinagar leads to the killing of over 100 unarmed protesters, in what is known as the Gaw Kadal Massacre.

Kashmiri Pandits leave the Kashmir Valley in a great exodus.

July — India establishes the Armed Forces Special Powers Act in Jammu and Kashmir.

1991 53 Kashmiri women are raped by Indian security forces in Kunan Poshpora.

1992 **Ashima works as a journalist for Women's Feature Service.**

1993 55 Kashmiri civilians are killed, allegedly by Border Security Forces in Sopore in retaliation for a militant attack that killed one of their soldiers.

1995 **Ashima's son, Agastya Bhatia, is born.**

1998 23 Pandits are massacred by militants in Wandhama.

25 Hindu men are massacred by militants in Chapnari.

Ashima returns for the first time since the exodus to the Kashmir Valley.

Ashima does research for Sumita Ghose's project "The Role of Women in Violent Movements."

India and Pakistan conduct their first nuclear tests.

1999 The Kargil War erupts between India and Pakistan when militants enter Indian-administered Kargil from Pakistani-administered Kashmir.

2000 Militants kill all 35 men in the Sikh village of Chattisinghpora. In retaliation, soldiers from the Indian Army and a special operations group kill five men in the Anantnag district. Locals hold demonstrations and 1,000 demonstrators march on Anantnag to submit a memorandum to the deputy commissioner, throwing stones at a police post before marching to another village, Brakpora, where police open fire, killing seven and injuring 15, leading to more recriminations and inquiries.

Ashima becomes a consultant for Women in Security, Conflict Management and Peace (WISCOMP).

December 9 — For WISCOMP, Ashima organizes the first roundtable conference of Kashmiri women, "Breaking the Silence."

2001 **Summer — Ashima founds her first organization, Athwaas.**

October — Militants attack the Jammu and Kashmir state assembly, killing 38 people.

November — The Athwaas collective travels in Kashmir.

2002 **The Athwaas collective travels to Jammu refugee camps for both Muslims and Pandits.**

Ashima forms her second organization, the Yakjah Reconciliation and Development Network, and it holds its first camp in Delhi.

The National Conference is defeated in elections; the People's Democratic Party in coalition with Indian National Congress form the new government.

2003 24 Pandits are killed in the Nadimarg Massacre. India accuses Pakistan of involvement.

2005 **The second Yakjah camp is held in Gulmarg in the Kashmir Valley.**

2007 **The third Yakjah Camp is held in Jammu.**

2008 There is turmoil between Muslims and Hindus over the Amarnath land transfer.

The National Conference returns to power and forms a new government with the Indian National Congress.

2009 **April 6 — Ashima's husband, Ravi Bhatia, dies.**

2010 Unrest in Kashmir over the paramilitary killing of innocent Kashmiris is followed by the killing of 210 youth by the paramilitary.

Athwaas as an organization fragments.

Ashima leaves WISCOMP.

Yakjah is registered as an NGO.

2011-3 **Ashima is a consultant with the Global Education and Leadership Foundation.**

2014 Massive flooding in Jammu and Kashmir devastates Srinagar, creating mudslides and leaving several hundred villages submerged.

Ashima is selected to participate in the Women PeaceMakers Program at the Joan B. Kroc Institute for Peace and Justice at the University of San Diego.

CONFLICT HISTORY—
Jammu and Kashmir

The northernmost state in western India, Jammu and Kashmir is a region of hills and lakes, forests and fruit orchards, rice paddies and saffron fields surrounded by the Himalayas and bordered by Pakistan and China. The state comprises the regions of Ladakh, Jammu and the valley of Kashmir — known as the "Valley," the Kashmir Valley or the Vale of Kashmir. Throughout history it was often part of an empire, though it was at times an independent kingdom.

In the 3rd century BCE, the Kashmir Valley was conquered by Emperor Ashoka, who ruled over a huge swath of land from Bengal to Afghanistan to Punjab. Originally Hindu, Ashoka converted to Buddhism and sent Buddhist missionaries to the Valley. The city of Srinagar was founded during his reign. After he died, the Valley regained its independence but was conquered in the 2nd century CE by the Kushans, who were Buddhists. During this time, the Valley became well known throughout Asia as a center of intellectual and artistic accomplishment.

The 8th century brought a series of Hindu kings and struggles with the emergence of Islam in north India. By 1354, the Valley was prospering under successive Muslim sultans who presided over an increasingly Muslim region, although Hindus who had left the Valley returned and were treated with tolerance.

By the late 1500s, the Muslim Mughal Empire, comprised mostly of what is now India, conquered Kashmir and ruled the region until the early 18th century. The Kashmir Valley became a province that was administered by a governor. Akbar, the first Mughal emperor, was tolerant of non-Muslim religions, but a few generations later, the Emperor Aurangzeb ordered the persecution of Hindus and Shia Muslims, although Brahmin Hindus remained part of the administration. In 1751, Kashmir was conquered by the Afghans. While Kashmir's Hindus continued to be persecuted, subject to extortion and brutally punished in response to any form of opposition, a few Kashmiri Pandit families remained in government service.

In 1819, the Sikh ruler Ranjit Singh, who had conquered areas in the Punjab just south and west of Kashmir, also took the Valley. A governor was appointed for the region and Hinduism was asserted as the belief system under which the government operated. Just south of the Valley, the Jammu region was ruled by a vassal of Ranjit Singh named Gulab Singh, who was a Dogra Hindu. Dogra is a Rajput clan from northern, central and western India and parts of Pakistan. Gulab Singh, along with his two brothers, expanded their power in the name of the Sikh kingdom to include Ladakh. When Ranjit Singh died, in 1838, Gulab Singh took his place as the Sikh leader of the Punjab region and Kashmir, Jammu and Ladakh.

The Sikhs, who had maintained good relations with the British East India Company, then battled with the British for land, leading to the First Anglo-Sikh War in 1846. Gulab Singh maintained friendly, neutral contact with the British. When the Sikhs lost, the victorious British drew up the Treaty of Amritsar with Gulab Singh, awarding him the territories of Kashmir, Jammu, part of Ladakh, and Baltistan for 7.5 million rupees ($150,000 dollars according to the current exchange rate), "in recognition of his services to the British Crown." With the treaty in place, Singh became the maharaja of the princely state of Jammu and Kashmir in British India and the first ruler of Kashmir's Dogra Dynasty, which was largely controlled by the British Empire.

By the late 19th century, the Kashmir Valley became famous as a vacation spot for European officers and business people. They were also an avid audience for traditional Kashmiri crafts: shawls, embroidery, carpets, pottery and papier mâché. Srinagar was adopted as the summer capital of the princely state of Jammu and Kashmir, a role the city continues to perform to this day. The city of Jammu is the winter capital.

During this time, most local Kashmiris lived in abject poverty, except for a very affluent minority close to the Dogra rulers. Western European culture and architecture also came to the Valley. The British Church Missionary Society founded mission schools and hospitals. Kashmiri Pandits (Hindus) benefitted from the better education offered by the mission schools, but the Kashmiri Muslims, who were the majority of local people in the Valley, were mostly too poor to afford these schools and were excluded from all government service.

In 1925, Sir Hari Singh became maharaja. He spent millions of rupees on his coronation and appointed non-Kashmiris to his government. In response, Kashmiri Pandits spearheaded a movement known as "Kashmir for Kashmiris" that led to a law forbidding non-Kashmiri people from holding jobs in the public service or owning Kashmiri land. But the maharaja appointed Dogras from Jammu to top government positions, then Pandits. Kashmiri Muslims were still not represented, nor were they allowed to carry firearms or join the army.

In July of 1931, a Muslim butler named Abdul Qadir made a public speech in Srinagar calling for the people to fight against oppression. When he was arrested, crowds protested, leading to police retaliation. Twenty-one people were killed. Hindu shops were broken into and looted. Protesters were arrested, including Sheikh Mohammed Abdullah, a young, educated Muslim political leader. He and other political leaders who were detained in the Srinagar jail formed a new political party, the Muslim Conference. Abdullah insisted that the party's platform was a secular fight against oppression of the Muslim and Hindu poor in Kashmir.

In 1935, Britain signed the Government of India Act, allowing India's 11 provinces to form autonomous legislative bodies and create a central government that would represent the provinces and all 22 princely states. The Congress Party, led by secular socialist Jawaharlal Nehru, dominated the provincial governments.

In Kashmir, Abdullah's party changed its name to the National Conference and became allied with Nehru's Congress Party. Abdullah made plans for a secular, socialist "New Kashmir" that was approved by the Congress Party, which caused his more pro-Muslim colleagues to leave the party and revive the Muslim Conference.

In 1946, it was agreed that India would be divided into secular but Hindu-majority India and Muslim-majority Pakistan. The princely states — including Jammu and Kashmir — could decide to become part of one nation or the other. Abdullah launched the Quit Kashmir movement to protest leaving the decision to the Dogra maharaja. He wanted a plebiscite: a vote on the decision by the Kashmiri people. Abdullah was jailed.

At the same time, the leaders of the Muslim Conference were imprisoned for their actively Muslim political stance. The decision to join one nation or the other remained with Maharaja Hari

Singh. He was hostile to Congress Party-led India, which showed support for Abdullah, but did not feel comfortable joining Pakistan, which would leave the Hindus of Jammu and the Buddhists of Ladakh in vulnerable positions as minorities. He contemplated the idea of remaining independent.

On August 15, 1947, India and Pakistan became independent nations. Muslims from Kashmir's Poonch district and thousands of Pashtuns from Pakistan's Northwest Frontier border revolted against the maharaja's Dogra rule. The maharaja's troops could not prevent the rebels from raping and massacring Hindus and Sikhs and looting and destroying their property, so Hari Singh requested help from the Government of India. Britain warned him that military assistance would require his decision to accede the state of Jammu and Kashmir to India. According to Britain and India, on October 26, Hari Singh wrote a letter acceding Kashmir to India and signed the Instrument of Accession. On October 27, 1947, Britain and India accepted the maharaja's accession. Indian forces landed in Kashmir and fought the rebels.

Pakistan contested the circumstances of the maharaja's accession, concluding that the Pashtun-Poonch rebellion had the full support of the people. Britain asked the United Nations to settle the dispute. It arranged a ceasefire between Indian, Pakistani and Kashmiri forces in 1949 and established a ceasefire line and a UN peacekeeping force. The ceasefire line put a third of Kashmir in Pakistan; the rest stayed in India as the state of Jammu and Kashmir.

India made Sheikh Abdullah prime minister of Jammu and Kashmir. But after he grew more interested in creating an independent Kashmir that would determine its ties to both India and Pakistan based on a plebiscite, he was dismissed and arrested, then supplanted by one of his associates, who formally ratified the accession of the state of Jammu and Kashmir and changed the state government to resemble that of any other state in India. The state was now run by a Kashmiri chief minister and an Indian governor.

In 1965, Pakistan attempted to capture the state of Jammu and Kashmir. Pakistan asked China for support, as it had fought a war with India over the northeast portion of Ladakh in 1962. China pledged support but advised Pakistan to prepare for a long war, which Pakistan did not want. After five months, Pakistan agreed to a ceasefire with India. In 1966, both sides signed the Tashkent Agreement, which kept the boundaries of Jammu and Kashmir to the 1949 ceasefire line.

In the '60s, a new generation of activists emerged, educated at the free University of Srinagar, which opened in 1948. They were angry about Kashmir's high unemployment rate as well as the government's repressive laws against political dissent of any kind and perceived anti-Muslim activity. A new party, the Plebiscite Front, which advocated for Kashmir and Jammu's self-determination, and its armed wing, the Jammu and Kashmir National Liberation Front (JKNLF), were formed.

After India backed Bangladesh's successful war for independence from Pakistan in 1971, India and Pakistan signed the 1972 Simla Agreement to settle their boundary differences. The 1949 ceasefire line in Jammu and Kashmir became known as the Line of Control.

Sheikh Abdullah returned to Kashmir in 1972, after a state election gave power to Indira Gandhi's Congress Party. Abdullah changed his political focus from a Kashmiri plebiscite to Kashmiri internal autonomy within the Indian government. The Congress Party named him

Kashmir's chief minister. In 1975, Gandhi and Abdullah signed the Kashmir Accord, agreeing to maintain Article 370 of the Indian constitution. Jammu and Kashmir would retain special status and non-Kashmiris would not be allowed to own property in the state, but the state would be ruled by an Indian-appointed governor and a chief minister named by the state's elected legislature.

In the 1970s, Kashmir had no real industry beyond tourism. Young, middle-class Kashmiris turned against the secularism of India and asserted their cultural and religious identities as Muslims, Hindus, Sikhs and Buddhists. Some young Muslims became part of fundamentalist Islamic movements that had become popular in the Middle East. The Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Front (JKLF), an offshoot of the JKNLF, also formed in 1977 to fight for the independence of Kashmir using violence, if necessary.

Sheikh Abdullah and the National Conference Party shunned these movements. He espoused Kashmiriyat, a secular umbrella culture of Kashmir and Jammu that included tolerance for all religions and cultures contained within its borders, and cooperation with India.

In the early '80s, Sheikh Abdullah died and his son, Farooq Abdullah, now head of the National Conference Party, acted as chief minister. Indira Gandhi invited his party to form an alliance with her Congress Party. Farooq Abdullah refused, wanting to remain independent. The National Conference won the election but the Congress Party, and Indira Gandhi's ministers, worked hard to undermine his power. He was dismissed by the Indian governor of the state, Jagmohan, who gave himself exclusive power. Jagmohan angered Muslims by barring them from key jobs in the new government, snubbing Muslim culture in the state's educational curriculum and sanctioning the sale of alcohol in bars throughout Srinagar. Peaceful strikes by Kashmiri Muslims ensued.

Rajiv Gandhi, who succeeded his mother, Indira, sought to ally the Congress Party with the National Conference. Abdullah, wanting his power back, agreed to the alliance. He became the new interim chief minister under an alliance between the two parties. In doing so, he lost the support of fundamentalist Muslim activists who were anti-India.

The next elections, in 1987, saw the rise of a new party, the Muslim United Front (MUF) and other new fundamentalist Muslim parties, as well as the right-wing Hindu Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). Widespread charges of rigging followed the elections, won by the National Conference. Youth joined one or another of the new politico-religious parties. Multiple paralyzing strikes broke out. Sniper attacks became more common. Bombs were thrown in Srinagar. The director-general of the police was attacked and a member of the JKLF was killed during a standoff with the police. The JKLF was held responsible for most of the attacks and its members were labeled "militants." India claimed that Pakistan was supporting the militants.

Many of the militants were young, well-educated and under-employed doctors, engineers, teachers and policemen who were alienated by Indian government policies and lack of job opportunities. Older militants from the JKLF, Hiszb-ul Mujahadeen and other groups provided the impetus for the new generation's active resistance, citing their struggles and the failure of peaceful solutions. Police and security forces reacted violently to the rise in insurgency, with innocent civilians often caught in the crossfire. Both the security forces and the insurgents were accused of rape, torture and indiscriminate killing. Abdullah's political power was sidelined by Muslim parties,

nearly all of which developed a militant wing. The insurgency-led strikes throughout the Valley took up a third of the year's working days. Militant groups murdered Kashmiri Pandits, including the BJP leader, and Pandits began to fear for their lives.

In December 1989, Rajiv Gandhi lost the general election in India. His successor, V.P. Singh, appointed a Kashmiri Muslim, Mufti Mohammed Sayeed, as his home minister. The JKLF, in response, kidnapped Sayeed's daughter, Dr. Rubaiya Sayeed. They demanded the release of five militants in exchange for Rubaiya. V.P. Singh's government agreed to the exchange. The released militants were paraded through the streets of Srinagar. According to some sources, Pandits were beaten and molested in Shopian in south Kashmir as part of the celebration.

In January 1990, Abdullah abdicated his power to Indian Governor Jagmohan. Jagmohan's new government relied on the right-wing Hindu BJP for support and targeted the militants. House-to-house searches in Srinagar led to 300 arrests. On January 20, the day of his inauguration, Kashmiris demonstrated in Srinagar to protest the arrests. Unarmed protesters were shot at from both sides by Indian paramilitary troops. More than 100 people died.

In defiance of the government and paramilitary, loudspeakers from mosques across the Valley encouraged Muslim Kashmiris to come out into the streets, exclaiming, "God is great! We want freedom! Oh tyrants, oh infidels, leave our Kashmir!" They also played recorded songs eulogizing the Mujahadeen resistance to Soviet occupation in Afghanistan and slogans urging the return of Kashmir to Pakistan. Processions of Muslims from all over Kashmir marched in Srinagar. More Pandits were tortured, raped and killed.

In July 1990, the Armed Forces Special Forces Act provided Indian security forces with the power to shoot, kill, search and arrest without a warrant and immunity from prosecution. Security forces reportedly went on violent sprees, setting fire to shops and homes and brutally abusing civilians who were alleged to be helping separatists.

By the end of 1990, almost all Kashmiri Pandits, up to 350,000 people, left the Kashmir Valley for Jammu, Delhi and elsewhere. Refugee settlements with overcrowded, unhygienic living standards were formed for the many Pandits who could not afford to live anywhere else. The pattern became part of daily life in the Valley: attacks by militants on specific targets, reprisals by the government, calls to flush out militants and find their weapons, then calls by the militants for strikes.

In 1991, in Kunan Poshpora, security forces were reported to have gang-raped 53 women. Border Security Forces also killed 43 people in Sopore in 1993, in retaliation for the death of two of their soldiers who died in a militant attack. Militants were also accused of rape, extortion, kidnapping, acid attacks, murder, drug dealing and corruption.

Toward the end of the decade, militant violence against Hindu civilians resurfaced. Among other atrocities, 23 Pandits were gunned down in Wandhama, a village north of Srinagar, and 25 Hindu men who were part of a wedding party were killed in Chapnari, a small town in Jammu.

India also conducted its first nuclear tests in 1998, and Pakistan announced that, under the circumstances, it was forced to conduct nuclear tests as well. The international community, fearing a nuclear arms race between both countries, turned their focus to the conflict in Kashmir.

The Kargil district, close to the Line of Control, was a site of particularly heavy fighting between the Indian and Pakistani armies. In the spring of 1999, 600 militants moved into mountains in the area, threatening security on the highway and blocking Indian supply routes. Both countries launched air attacks, killing many civilians. Pakistan threatened to use nuclear weapons if the Kashmiri conflict was not resolved. By July, under pressure from the United States, Pakistan agreed to withdraw its forces and abide by the boundaries of the Line of Control but demanded that militants withdraw from the Kargil area. Kashmiri militant organizations rebuffed Pakistan's attempt to control them, and Pakistan's Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif was overthrown in a bloodless coup by General Pervez Musharraf, who then declared martial law.

Musharraf pledged to improve relations with India and de-escalate troops along the border. In the wake of the attack on the United States on September 11, 2001, he denounced the Taliban and announced his alliance with the U.S. in a "War on Terrorism." In October 2001, a militant drove into the Jammu and Kashmir state assembly building in a car full of explosives, killing 38 people. Then the Indian Parliament in New Delhi was attacked, and India blamed Pakistan for harboring the terrorists who were part of organizations that trained and supported Kashmiri militants. The U.S. also urged Pakistan to shut down "foreign terrorist organizations." Musharraf vowed to support Kashmir while at the same time taking action against any Pakistani involved in terrorism. India closed its border with Pakistan and carefully monitored the Line of Control.

By 2002, the Kashmir Valley was economically and morally depressed. Indian and Pakistani armies were positioned along the Line of Control; rural areas of the Valley were occupied by Indian forces and regularly attacked by militants. At least 5,000 rural women were widows; many more had husbands who disappeared. More than 50,000 children were orphans. Domestic violence increased but was not treated as an important issue. The Pandit community remained in exile.

In that year's state elections, in which voter participation was at least 40 percent, the National Conference was routed out. The People's Democratic Party, in coalition with the Indian National Congress, formed the new government. Mufti Mohammed Sayeed, whose daughter had been kidnapped by militants in 1989, became the chief minister.

The following year, armed militants dressed as members of the Indian military killed 24 Pandits, including women and children, in the Nadimarg village in northern Kashmir. India accused Pakistan of being involved in the massacre.

India and Pakistan agreed to open up trade routes across the Line of Control in 2008. That same year, armed gunmen opened fire on civilians in many areas of Mumbai, India. More than 160 people were killed. The only attacker to survive said that he and the other attackers were members of Lashkar-e-Taiba, which operated mainly in Pakistan and had several training camps in Azad Kashmir. India stopped peace talks with Pakistan.

In 2008, the National Conference, led by Farooq Abdullah's son Omar, came back into power in Jammu and Kashmir and formed a government with the Indian National Congress. Violent incidents between local groups, youths and Indian security forces reignited.

That year, India and the government of Jammu and Kashmir agreed to transfer 99 acres of forest in the Valley to a board that would set up facilities for Hindu pilgrims visiting the Hindu

Amarnath shrine. Many Kashmiris, particularly Muslim separatists, saw the agreement as a threat to their religious identity and sense of nationhood. Crowds of up to 500,000 gathered for protests against the transfer of the forestland to Hindus. Police killed six demonstrators and injured 100. When the government canceled the controversial proposal, pro-Hindu protesters blocked highway traffic and threatened to shut down Jammu city. One Hindu man committed suicide in public. Muslim and Hindu demonstrators clashed with police and paramilitary forces, leading to arrests, violence and multiple deaths. Both sides were spurred on by opposing Kashmiri political parties.

In 2010, three men associated with Indian security forces killed three innocent Kashmiri Muslim men — claiming they were militants — in exchange for a cash award. Thousands of Kashmiris came out to protest Indian security forces and the Indian government. Riots between protesters and paramilitary police led to the deaths of innocent young boys and a rise in stone pelting all over the region. A year later, Chief Minister Omar Abdullah announced amnesty for the 1,200 young men accused of throwing stones during the protests.

In September 2014, raging monsoon floods caused massive flooding in both Jammu and Kashmir, killing at least 280 people in India. Several thousand villages were hit and hundreds were submerged. Srinagar was devastated. The 2014 assembly election in Jammu and Kashmir saw the defeat of the National Conference, the slim win by the People's Democratic Party run by Mahbooba Mufti, daughter of former Chief Minister Mufti Mohammed Sayeed, and the rise of the BJP, the Hindu nationalist party of India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi. Omar Abdullah resigned as chief minister, leaving his office vacant.

After a long history of sustained turbulence, it remains unclear whether there will be any change in the state's economy or in clashes between the Indian military and Kashmiri militants in the region.

NARRATIVE STORIES OF THE LIFE AND WORK OF ASHIMA KAUL

Standing First

A small, dark-skinned tomboy with a bowl haircut and straight bangs bicycled on her grandmother's perfectly manicured lawn. She rode around and around the blossoms of floppy purple hibiscus, perfumed pansies and roses in the garden's centerpiece, making circles in the grass as fast as she could and shouting out, "Mama!" Ashima was 9 years old, and the garden was part of her father's family's ancestral home in Shaheed Gunj, Srinagar, Kashmir.

"Aaah-sh-ma," yelled her father's mother, known by many in Srinagar as *Maharani* — Queen. Maharani Kaul's bespectacled, frowning face peered out from between the white curtains in the window on the upper floor where she sat on her daybed surveying her beloved garden. "Get off the lawn," she insisted.

"No, I won't!" Ashima yelled back.

"I'm coming with my stick."

"Come. You won't be able to catch me."

Ashima pedaled even faster, confident that she would not be punished. Her grandmother and her father's younger sisters, who lived in the house too, never disciplined Ashima. Instead, they played cards with her. Ashima's skill at games like Rummy and Sweep, even Solitaire, earned her their appreciation, as did the Lipton tea she fixed for them in the little pot that her parents had bought for her. As the first grandchild in her father's family, she was pampered by her regal widowed grandmother and her aunts. Her parents were a different story.

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Ashima knew that her handsome, almond-eyed father, Mohan Kaul, had high expectations of her. He was often away on work assignments for the Kashmiri police force, but when he was home, he sometimes had a drastic way of showing his presence and concern for his daughter's studies.

To help 4-year-old Ashima perfect her English ABCs, he insisted she memorize and recite her letters to him in the living room without a single mistake. "A for apple, B for bat, C for cat…" By the time Ashima reached the letter "Q" she forgot the word that went with it, and the letter that came after. So her father picked her up, brought her outside to the canal beside their home and dunked her head in the cold water. Ashima couldn't breathe, but she could hear.

"Will you study or not?" he shouted. Then he yanked her head out.

"Yes, I will," she replied between gasps for breath.

Of course she would. Ashima was sure she was capable of anything. She was, after all, the granddaughter of Maharani Kaul, creator and teacher of the first finishing class at the college for girls from elite Muslim families. There were other role models, too: her other grandmother, her aunts and her own mother. All were smart, outspoken women who taught at primary schools or secondary colleges.

But Maharani Kaul was the matriarch. She always wore her white widow's sari, but did away with any other external marks of marriage that were traditional to her Kashmiri Pandit Hindu heritage. She granted her daughters the freedom to do and wear whatever they wanted as well. Her kitchen was the destination for Pandit festivals like Pan, which involved all the women in the extended family working together to make sweet *roth* pancakes. At the ancestral house in Srinagar, Maharani Kaul was definitely in charge.

When Ashima was small, she lived with her parents and younger sister in rooms on one side of the ancestral house; her grandmother and aunts occupied the rooms on the other side. Often, while Ashima and her immediate family ate dinner at their end of the house, Ashima would hear her parents argue about her grandmother's influence on their lives.

"How could you give away my ornaments, my entire gold set of earrings, necklaces, bangles and rings to your sister?" Ashima's mother complained, over and over.

Her father would throw up his hands. "You know how it is. My mother insisted."

"But nobody even asked me. Why can't you stand up to her?"

Ashima was sure she was in charge, too — even at age 6, waiting with her nursery schoolmates for the bus to take them all home. When the bus did not arrive, she convinced six of her friends she could guide them to their houses. Not one of them had ever walked such a long distance before, but Ashima was not fazed; she would follow the path of the Jhelum River — just like the bus did — leading her friends through Raj Bagh, the area of Srinagar near the school, past big houses, well-kept gardens and groves of pointy-leafed maple trees. After what seemed like many hours and thousands of miles traipsing with school backpacks under the warm spring sun, she thought it would be a good idea for the children in her care to rest. She suggested they take a break on a cement slab by the riverbank.

Ashima was sitting with her friends, enjoying the cloudless sky and cool river breeze when she heard the clop-clop of a horse behind them and a man screaming: "What do you think you're doing?"

It was her father. He got out of the horse-drawn tonga he was riding in and marched up to Ashima and the other children. "Don't you know what trouble you've created?"

What's the problem? Ashima thought. *Nothing happened. You should know me; I would have taken them home. I'm the granny of them all.*

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Usha Kaul, Ashima's slender, small, always smiling mother, expressed her high expectations for her eldest daughter with far less drama than her father, but with much more frequency. She scolded Ashima for indulging in card games with her aunts and grandmother. She was too smart for that. She should be studying. She should be first in her class, the best. Ashima, wanting to please her mother, drove herself to be first — in everything.

When the time came for smallpox vaccinations at St. Mary's-St. Joseph's, the convent school that Ashima and her younger sister Archana attended, Ashima and the other children in class two were sent to the convent hospital. Seven-year-old Ashima stood with her classmates in front of the nuns and their table full of vaccine shots. Like the other children, she was afraid of getting the shot in her arm, afraid of the pain, the scar. Some of her classmates cried. Others simply held back. But Ashima rolled up her sleeve. "It's nothing," she claimed, "let's go." She sauntered to the table, gave her bare arm to a nun, and smiled at the pain of the inoculation. The other children followed her lead.

Though she was older by only a year and a half, Ashima was also the leader with her sister, Archana. In Baramulla, 50 kilometers north of Srinagar, where her family had moved when Ashima was 7, her parents often went out to parties and left the two girls alone in their apartment. One night, the adults did not return at their scheduled time.

"Where are they?" asked Archana. "They were supposed to be back by now." She was tired of reading storybooks and playing Ludo.

Ashima offered to turn on the radio. They could listen to the latest Hindi film songs. Archana began to whimper.

Ashima told her not to worry. She went to the kitchen and fixed a cup of tea, then made a plate of rice, potatoes and mutton that their mother had left for them in the pressure cooker. Her sister ate and drank, relaxed a little, but soon became agitated again.

"Come sit on my lap," said Ashima. She held Archana, this sister who was almost her size, with the same chin-length bowl haircut and pajamas as hers, and rocked her to sleep. Ashima was in charge, in control. Nothing could go wrong.

The next morning, her parents had still not come home. But before leaving for their party the night before, they had locked the door from the outside. Ashima was determined to get out of the apartment and find out what was going on. Archana was too afraid to join her.

Ashima dragged a stool from the kitchen into the living room and used it to scramble up onto the living room windowsill. The drop was about 12 feet. She grabbed the drainpipe to her left and shimmied down it to the sill of an open window on the ground floor. Then she jumped down into the front yard. Hopefully Auntie, the mother of her Muslim playmates in the building, would know something about her parents. She knocked on her door.

Wearing a loose, gray *pheran* tunic over a longer gray robe and a simple *dupatti* to cover her hair, Auntie opened the door and smiled down at Ashima. "What is it, dear?"

"What are you doing out here?" shouted Ashima's father, striding into the yard through the iron main gate of the apartment complex, dressed in his evening suit, followed by her mother in her glittery evening sari.

Ashima crossed her arms. "I was looking for you."

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At 10, when Ashima reached class five, her mother was her teacher. To everyone else, Mrs. Kaul, with her bewitching smile and light, song-like laughter, was fun-loving and warm. But with Ashima, she was stricter than ever. She told her daughter she did not want to be partial. She would look for ways to lower Ashima's marks on her tests and papers. Whenever Ashima raised her hand to answer questions in class, she was never called on. But no matter how tough a teacher her mother tried to be, Ashima stood first in her class, as she had from classes one through four.

Ashima was thrilled. She could now pick out a bicycle for herself, the gift her mother promised her if she came in first in class five. Her parents took her to Srinagar, to the bike shop in the Main Residency Road Market, where she picked out a Hero brand ladies bike bluer than a clear Kashmir sky. She called the bike Raju and told it about the boy who looked at her the wrong way after history class. She couldn't wait to show off her new bike at school — and ride it around and around her grandmother's garden.

We Never Bothered to Have a Son

"I hope I have a son, not a daughter," said Ashima's aunt.

On the terrace of her maternal grandmother's house, 10-year-old Ashima, who had been sitting cross-legged on a *charpei* cot doing the math homework she was assigned over her winter break from school, stared at the newly rounded belly of her aunt, who shared a cot with her mother. They often spent the long winter holiday with her mother's family, who lived 500 kilometers south of Kashmir, in Amritsar, in the Punjab province.

The white winter afternoon sun highlighted the metal knitting needles that Usha manipulated so nimbly to knit the sleeve of a white sweater. She reminded her pregnant sister that she already had a son.

And a daughter, too, thought Ashima.

"I know, but my in-laws want a pair of sons," said her aunt.

Ashima walked over to the cot and put her hand on her aunt's pregnant belly. She closed her eyes. "I get this feeling that you are going to have a boy." She was sure of it.

Her aunt laughed. "I hope so. In fact, if it is a boy, I'll buy you a pair of silver ankle bracelets."

A few months later, her aunt gave birth to a boy and Ashima received the bracelets. She was so pleased to be right. But she knew that her own parents did not share her aunt's desire for boy children. Whenever the subject came up, at family gatherings, with neighbors and friends, Usha and Mohan Kaul stood up for their girls. "We never bothered to have a son," her mother would say. "We are proud to have two daughters," her father would add.

Ashima carried her parents' pride inside her with fierce intensity whenever she rode Raju. From the first day of class six throughout the autumn, she pedaled Raju for five kilometers along the Baramulla-Srinagar highway from her home in the new section of Baramulla city to St Joseph's and back.

One sunny afternoon, when the poplars that lined the highway were just beginning to turn from thin green feathers into yellow flames, Ashima rode her bicycle home from school beside the horse-drawn tongas, army trucks and jeeps that peppered the road. She told Raju about how she had scored the highest number of goals in hockey practice that day. The sky was so clear she could see snow-capped mountain peaks beyond the countryside's tree-topped hills.

Ashima passed the Indian Army offices and housing, then the cinema, and turned off the main highway to the new part of the city. She rode toward a group of boys, all six of them wearing white pants and shirts and carrying the same school bags. They were not from her school, but they were definitely from a school somewhere nearby and appeared to be the same age as the boys in her class.

"Look, a girl riding a cycle!" one boy shouted, pointing at her.

"Is she a girl or a boy?" another barked.

Ashima's face and ears burned.

"She's definitely a boy," a third boy joined in. "She has a boy's haircut."

Ashima clenched her teeth until her jaw ached. She pedaled quickly past them.

The group whistled after her. "Her body doesn't look like a girl's."

Ashima slowed her bike to a stop on the dusty road and pushed down her kickstand. She marched up to the boys. They were all about as tall as she was. One by one, she slapped them hard on the cheek. They stared at her, their eyes wet with tears, their mouths open. Too dismayed to say or do anything.

She walked back to Raju and rode away, sure that if boys could ride bicycles, so could girls.

And if boys could accompany their fathers on social occasions, she would, too. When her father received an invitation to a Muslim friend's wedding reception, and her mother decided not to go because she did not speak Kashmiri and did not want to sit segregated with the other women, Ashima pleaded with her father to take her. "Why not?" he said.

She also insisted on joining her father when he went to his office or the local police station to meet with colleagues, or to restaurants where he and his friends smoked and talked. To be the only girl sitting among men telling stories in a smoke-filled room was a lot more fun than cooking in the kitchen with the women in her extended family. And she could spend time with her father, who often traveled away from home for work.

One of her favorite friends of her father's was Jelali Uncle. He was not really her uncle, but was an eminent journalist from the *Press Trust of India* who had been part of Kashmir's communist movement during India's struggle for independence from Britain. Jelali Uncle used to tell stories about India's partition in 1947, when raiders came to Baramulla to rape and pillage. Jelali Uncle had joined the National Militia Party, a group of left-leaning Muslim, Pandit and Sikh Kashmiris who came together to resist the raiders. They had a slogan: *Beware — we Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs are together.*

Jelali Uncle's stories, full of dramatic fights, martyrs and narrow escapes, were even more exciting than the adventure novels she read voraciously at her father's cousin's extensive library in Srinagar or bought at the college bookstore in Baramulla. His writing as a journalist was also full of stories she saw in the many newspapers her parents read. Next to those, his byline — Prana Jelali — was always prominently displayed.

Ashima, too, loved to write. She had a pen pal her age, the daughter of a Sikh friend of her mother who had moved from India to Canada. Like Raju, Ashima's pen pal was a confidante, the recipient of letters that contained detailed stories about her family, her school, her life in Kashmir.

Whenever Ashima wrote, whether it was about Kashmir snow, her friends, or whatever was on her mind, she felt closest to herself. She imagined being a famous journalist with bylines in prominent newspapers, just like Jelali Uncle.

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At the government college for women in Jammu, the city where Ashima's family moved when she was a teenager, she was an excellent student and captain of both the debate and cricket teams. She stood first — except when it came to the college uniform. All the girls at her college were ordered to wear a white *salwar kameez* — a long tunic and ballooning harem pants — with a white shawl. To Ashima, they were conventionally feminine confining clothes. She never bothered with the shawl and wore straight pants with simple men's short *kurta* tunics. In the mornings, when she stood on the school lawn with the rest of her classmates for class inspection, the head girl would pick her out and shout at her for breaking the school dress code.

I'm an adult, thought Ashima. The dress code was definitely unfair. After a couple of weeks of being singled out by the head girl, she went to the principal's office.

"Alright, I will wear a salwar kameez," Ashima told the head of the school. "But that means I'll have to quit the cricket team. I can't practice in those clothes."

The principal shook her head. It would be a pity to lose the captain of the cricket team. She promised to tell the head girl to leave Ashima alone.

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Most afternoons, when she was riding home from college on the bus, a group of boys a little older than 16-year-old Ashima got on a few stops later and sat too close to her and her classmates. They made loud comments about the girls and tried to talk to them. She ignored them, but on one bumpy afternoon ride home, the boys made particularly vulgar remarks about Ashima's breasts.

"I don't give a damn about you guys," she blurted out.

A tall boy sitting next to her leaned in too close to her face. "I'll set you right. I'll take off your spectacles and crush them."

Ashima looked the other way, pretending not to listen.

"I'll teach you a lesson one of these days," he continued.

She wanted to slap him but he was taller than her and flanked by a gang of four other boys. She stayed silent. At home she told her father about the boy who had Eve-teased[2] her on the bus.

Two days later, when she and her father were at the local market buying vegetables, the tall boy drove by on his motorbike and parked near them. Ashima grabbed her father's sleeve. "That's the guy who was Eve-teasing me." Later, her father informed the police. The boy was arrested and put in jail for two days.

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When Ashima graduated from college, with excellent grades as expected, her father made it clear that he and her mother expected her to study medicine. *Of course*, thought Ashima, *all Pandit parents want their children to be doctors or engineers. The humanities are for dumbwits.* She dreamed of studying literature, but she did not want to disappoint her parents. So she got her degree in science at the University of Jammu.

But when her father put the application for the Jammu Medical College entrance exam in front of her, she couldn't stop crying. "I will not!" she screamed.

"If you don't take this exam, I will not pay for your continued studies," her father replied. She took the test. It was one of the most difficult exams she had ever taken. Most students did not pass. But she did.

The exam was only the first step toward entering medical school. The next was to be cleared for an interview. Ashima's father drove all the way from Jammu to the Srinagar Medical College to find out which students had been accepted for interviews.

"Your name is on the list," he phoned from Srinagar. "You've been selected." He was ecstatic. That night, Ashima could not sleep.

A couple of days later, she went to an office in the medical college for her interview. She sat opposite four men and one woman, all professors or administrators, and stared past their faces at the wall behind them. Her stomach ached. "Please," she said. "My father instigated this. I don't want to be a doctor. Give my seat to someone else."

"Are you sure?" asked one of the professors.

Ashima had spent her childhood bending rules, pursuing what she wanted. She was now an adult. Being different was who she was. "I'm sure. I want to be a journalist."

A Hunger for Stories

"I know of a story for you," said Ashima's friend Amjad, who called her one dry, cold December evening in 1996. "Why don't you go and do it?"

Ashima was staying with her parents in Jammu during her daughter's winter break from school in Delhi. She didn't expect to be working there. But Amjad, a lawyer, knew she was always hungry for a good story.

That hunger had driven her to pursue a career as a journalist in Delhi, where she wrote freelance news and human interest articles. Stories had also sparked her interest in a crime reporter at the *Times of India*, Ravi Bhatia — the man she had married. When she became a mother, she used her husband's typewriter to write stories she never showed to anyone. As soon her daughter, Raashi, entered school, Ashima began freelancing again.

"What story? Tell me," she said to Amjad.

"Go to the Gandhinagar hospital, to the family planning section, and see for yourself."

A few days later, on a chilly January morning, she left her toddler son, Agastya, and 8-year-old Raashi, with her mother and father and took a short public matador ride to Jammu's Gandhinagar hospital.

Inside the old government building, she found the outpatient department for family planning: a large, dank, drafty hall, crowded with nearly 200 Muslim women in their 30s and 40s who stood, sat and crouched with their husbands and children, waiting for laparoscopic sterilization in the doctor's room next door. Women who had completed the procedure sat or lay on the cold ground on a lawn outside the doctor's office.

The waiting area was thick with the howl of babies, the smell of rice, spinach, meat and chili peppers from the hot boxes that families had brought with them, the musty scent of damp winter wool sweaters and pherans mixed with the strong odor of human bodies.

Ashima approached one of the women. She looked young, maybe early 30s — maybe the same age as Ashima—but the skin on her face was rough and dry; her feet were cracked. She sat in the middle of the crowd with her husband, who cradled their infant child.

Ashima introduced herself and asked where the family was from. The husband named a village in the Kupwara district. She had never heard of the village, but the Kupwara district was at least 380 kilometers northwest of Jammu, close to the Line of Control that separated Pakistani Kashmir from India's Kashmir Valley. "Why are you coming so far from the Valley?"

"Family planning is banned in Kashmir," said the woman in a broken Kashmiri that Ashima could barely understand.

"Who bans it?" Ashima asked the woman's husband, hoping that she could decipher what he was saying with more ease.

Her husband shook his head. "The Mujahadeen. They might come and stay at our home. Or the Fauji. Our wives." Stammering and sighing, he told her the stories he had heard about Muslim militants and groups of Indian Army soldiers who entered ordinary people's homes at different times, ate their food, slept with their wives. The laparoscopic procedure that he and his wife were waiting for was preemptive. "If they conceive, it would be a big dishonor for us." The baby squirmed in his arms. "After two or three kids, we want to go for family planning so at least she won't conceive."

Ashima was horrified but did not want to offend the couple. She also wanted to know more. "Why aren't the government hospitals in Kashmir offering this facility?"

The husband looked at her with red-rimmed eyes. "We can't be seen going to hospitals there. The Mujahadeen would kill us." So they traveled the nearly 400 kilometers to Jammu for the procedure. That night they were going to sleep at the Jammu bus station, then return to their village the next day.

The story was similar for each woman she spoke to in the waiting area. They came to Jammu from their rural villages in the Kashmir Valley, from Kupwara, Bandipora, Handwara, Baramulla, the Lolab and Gurez Valleys, beautiful mountain-framed green areas where Ashima had spent weekends with her family and friends when she was a young girl. They had picnicked, put together impromptu roadside barbeques, visited Hindu temples, stole corn from farms, relaxed by the Jhelum River, fished for trout in the Kishangarh River, stayed in a bungalow by calm Lake Wular where she played cards all night and saw a bear from a nearby forest plodding through the grass. But she had no memory of the people who actually lived in these places.

Where was I when all this happened? she wondered.

Ashima felt shaken. She'd read news reports of the conflict in the Kashmir Valley, of clashes between militants and the army. But now the conflict was alive — happening in the rural vacation spots of her childhood, affecting ordinary Muslim people like the women right in front of her. Here was an important story that was not in any magazine or newspaper.

She was already writing about women: assignments for Women's Feature Service, topics ranging from violence against women to a finishing college for women in Delhi. But she yearned to do a more exclusive journalistic story — something different. She would write about these women from the Kashmir Valley.

Ashima continued her interviews at the hospital and in the evening interviewed more families at the bus station. Doctors confirmed the fact that family planning was banned in Kashmir. Her article was published in the *Hindustan Times*. "Amazing," said friends and colleagues. They had no idea these things were happening.

During Raashi's summer break from school, while her children stayed with her parents in Jammu, Ashima sat outside the two major Jammu jails, interviewing the wives, mothers, daughters and sisters of Kashmiri militants who were imprisoned there. Many of the women insisted that their loved ones in prison were innocent. The women spent many sleepless nights worrying about their beloved brother, husband, father or cousin whose life was suspended in limbo by the court system.

Life was difficult in the absence of their men: the loneliness, the lack of monetary support, the long and arduous trips to the Jammu prison.

Ashima knew these stories would make a good article, but she was simply collecting bits and pieces of these women's lives. She needed to get the complete picture. She needed to go to Kashmir. But how? She had left the Valley as a teenager when her father was posted in Jammu. Who did she still know there? How dangerous was it? What would her husband and parents think? What about her children? And how could she afford a plane ticket from Delhi and a place to stay in the Valley?

"Can you take care of Raashi and Agastya for two or three days? I've got an assignment in Srinagar from Women's Feature Service," Ashima told her mother and father when she was in Jammu again for Raashi's next school break. "Women's Feature Service is making all the arrangements. Don't worry." She lied. She arranged everything herself. She did not tell her husband she was flying into the Kashmir Valley. He did not want Ashima spending too much time away from the children. To him, her most important job was at home, as a wife and mother.

When Ashima boarded the 25-minute Indian Airlines flight from Jammu to Srinagar, she brought a pen and paper, the names and numbers of two journalist contacts in Srinagar, the memory of an old family friend — another unofficial uncle — who owned a hotel in the city, and a suitcase full of fear. Not only was she leaving her children behind, but she was heading to an area with constant bombings, killings, beatings, burnings and other forms of violence instigated by Pakistani-backed militant groups and the Indian Army and security forces.

Earlier that year, militants had massacred 23 Kashmiri Pandits, mostly women and children, in a town in northern Kashmir. Journalist friends in Delhi had warned her to watch out for militant spies everywhere, even at the airport. Ashima booked her ticket under her married name, Ashima Bhatia, a Punjabi name, rather than Kaul, her distinctly Kashmiri Pandit maiden name. Most Kashmiri Pandits had fairer skin than she did. She could pass for Punjabi.

As the plane began to descend, Ashima closed her eyes. This was the second time she had ever been on an airplane. She couldn't believe she was about to land in Srinagar, city of her earliest childhood memories, her father's family's ancestral home — a city in the middle of the conflict in Kashmir.

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In the mid-'80s, when clashes between Muslim militants and Indian forces began and anti-Pandit riots broke out south of Srinagar, Ashima was in Delhi, immersed in a new life. She was in love. Her father and his siblings sold the ancestral home to pay for her wedding in 1987. Then she gave birth to Raashi. She felt guilty that the house had been sold for her sake, but she was preoccupied with her infant daughter.

Two years later, hundreds of thousands of Pandits left the Kashmir Valley after verbal threats and rape, violent torture and murder by Muslim militants drove them out. Very little was reported in the national or international media. Through relatives, Ashima heard stories of the refugee camps in Jammu, where many Pandits had settled because they had nowhere else to live. But

the stories did not stay in her consciousness; she never thought to go to the camps. She had a new home, a husband, a little daughter. She had left the Kashmir Valley years ago.

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When Ashima opened her eyes, the plane had landed. She followed the other passengers to the airport, which was lined with army convoys and jeeps — and possible hiding places for militant spies. Everyone she saw in every corner, from the waiting area to baggage claim, could be a spy. Her friends and colleagues had warned her that every Muslim in Kashmir was somehow involved in the militant movement.

She found the Srinagar Tourist Reception Center bus. From there she would find a way to get to the Wazir Bagh section of the city where her uncle had his hotel. She boarded the bus and sat behind the driver, imagining that he and rest of the passengers knew she was a Pandit and were conspiring to kidnap and butcher her. After all, Wandhama, the town where the latest Pandit massacre had occurred, was only 30 kilometers away.

A short, stocky woman in her 70s, dragging a huge cloth suitcase with both hands, attempted to board the bus. Other passengers helped her up the steps to the seat next to Ashima. *Is she safe*? Ashima wondered. When the woman stopped panting, Ashima asked if she was alone. She said she was a Kashmiri Hindu of Punjabi heritage who was just visiting for the summer from the United States, where she lived with her children. She was on her way to Wazir Bagh.

This woman isn't part of the conflict, thought Ashima. "I am on my way to Wazir Bagh, too. May I come with you?"

"Of course. I'm getting off midway and taking an auto rickshaw. Come with me." Ashima breathed a little more deeply. She promised to help the woman with her suitcase.

Riding through Srinagar, the red and white and brown and yellow gable-roofed buildings of the city looked so much smaller than she remembered. The streets appeared less lively, too. Bunkers made of sandbags protecting paramilitary guards holding rifles took the place of most of the city's pedestrians. Srinagar seemed to be covered in a veil of gloom.

Ashima arrived at the elegant, red-roofed Hotel Ellora. It looked the same and was still open and owned by her uncle. He greeted her warmly, asking about the whole family.

At 4:30 the next morning, in bed in her new attic room at the hotel, Ashima was startled from her sleep by a chorus singing Hindu prayers to the power and benevolence of the goddess Vaishno Devi, broadcast from a loudspeaker somewhere outside. Friends and family in Delhi and Jammu had told her that all outward displays of Hindu culture were gone from the Kashmir Valley. Where were these beautiful voices and rhythms coming from? Ashima threw on her jogging shoes and followed the prayers out past the gates of the hotel, down a road to an unmarked building. Inside, in a small temple, sat a group of Hindu priests. Ashima joined them. *This is my faith*, she thought. *It needs to be strengthened here.*

When Ashima told her uncle about her visit to the temple, he raised an eyebrow. "Please be careful. You walked into a B.S.F. camp." No one, particularly not a Pandit, could afford to be seen inside a Border Security Force camp. Anyone spotted there would immediately be labeled a collaborator with the Indian security forces, an agent for the Indian Army.

Ashima had never thought that people in Kashmir might hate the Indian Army or paramilitary forces. She had grown up near an army station in Baramulla. Her parents partied with people in the army. She vacationed with army families. *They were normal people*, Ashima had thought, *not people to be wary of*. But life in Srinagar had changed.

Uncle shared his own story about how he carefully managed his life in the changed city. Though not a Pandit, he was a Hindu. They were being targeted too. He left Srinagar in 1990, then came back to the hotel in 1995 and opened it up for representatives from companies selling necessities like light bulbs and pharmaceuticals, business people coming in from Jammu or Delhi. When the hotel first reopened, he kept the shutters down and gave part of his weekly payroll to the militants. He and his business survived.

Ashima wondered if she would survive her hunt for stories in the Valley. She made an appointment with one of the references she had been given, an editor for the *Kashmir Times*, but after half an hour waiting for him in his office, he still had not shown up. A very young reporter, who had been sitting in a corner of the office the entire time she'd been there, asked if she was waiting for someone. She told him about the editor.

"Who are you?" he asked. "What is your purpose?"

She told him she was a journalist. The editor had promised to take her to the Batamaloo area of Srinagar to interview a woman named Parveena Ahangar, whose son had disappeared.

"I will take you."

The young man, whose name was Ishfaq, a Muslim name, did not look odd or dangerous, but Ashima was nervous.

"This guy isn't coming. Why are you wasting your time? I can take you there."

Fear pressed on Ashima's chest. What kind of danger could she get into going with this young man?

"Come on," he insisted.

Ashima did not want him to know she was suspicious, so she followed him outside to an auto rickshaw with a driver and sat quietly in a corner in the back. As soon as Ishfaq sat down next to her, two more men — young and muscular — came out of nowhere and joined them.

If they wanted to, these men could easily hold her down. Ashima's throat constricted. She could barely breathe.

I am a Pandit. I am in danger. She repeated over and over. *They are going to take me to the militants*.

After a kilometer, one of the men got out. A few kilometers later, the second man left, too. Ashima felt dizzy.

Ishfaq took her to meet Parveena Ahangar inside her home. But in the middle of the interview, he stood up and announced, "I'll be back in a few minutes."

Ashima's shoulders clenched. Ishfaq did not look her in the eye.

He will take this opportunity to round up a group to come back and kill me, she thought.

She lost all concentration on the woman she was supposed to be listening to. Thirty minutes later, Ishfaq had not returned. Ashima was sweating. Her heart beat wildly. She could not stand the thought of waiting any longer for possible danger, so she told Parveena she had to be going. Parveena walked out to the courtyard with her. At the front gate stood Ishfaq, leaning on the fence, smoking a cigarette.

"You were taking so long, I had to get a smoke," he said.

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On the same trip, Ashima set up an interview with a member of the Jammu-Kashmir Liberation Front, the group that started the militancy movement in the early 1990s to fight for an independent Kashmir nation. She was escorted to her interview by a local Muslim photographer named Nisar. He had a sweet, happy-looking face. But she had just met him, so she remained cautious.

Inside the building where the Front had its office, she followed Nisar up a dark, narrow staircase, past walls covered with posters of Kashmiris being killed and brutalized. Bloody, contorted faces of people crying in agony, desecrated faces, startled Ashima on every step. She cringed. *What am I walking into?* She and Nisar stopped at a small office on the third floor, in front of a huge man in a black salwar tunic and loose black pants. Nisar left her there, claiming he had work to do. He promised to come back when he was finished.

Ashima looked up at the man alone in the dim room with her. He completely dwarfed her. He could easily harm her, or call his friends to take her to the militants, who would surely harm her. Her breathing was shallow but she forced herself to sit down and ask her questions.

He told the same story she had heard from every Muslim she had spoken to in the Valley over the last few days, from history professors to auto rickshaw drivers: The conflict started in 1947 when the maharaja agreed to fold the princely state of Jammu and Kashmir into the new nation of India; the government of India corrupted the local elections in 1987; the exodus of the Pandits from the Kashmir Valley in 1990 was a ploy by the right-wing Hindu governor of Jammu-Kashmir to segregate Muslims.

Ashima was losing her patience for this story that turned India into the villain and Muslims into victims, but she did not want the man to know her feelings about what he was saying. She did not want to call attention to herself in any way. She just wanted to get out of the interview alive. A knot formed in her stomach.

When will Nisar come back?

Then the man's tone changed from insistent to sorrowful. "You know, you are like Mother Teresa. You must write the pain of the women." He looked at Ashima with pleading eyes and a warm smile.

The fear that she would be harmed by every Muslim she met slowly began to fade. She found people she could trust to talk to her and take her places without hurting her. But the knot in her stomach did not go away; it tightened. The gloom was still palpable in her hometown. The coffee houses that she used to frequent with her father when she was a child had all shut down. Shops closed at 4 in the afternoon. No music was allowed in public places; there was no nightlife. Ashima's own cultural and religious symbols were stifled: non-Muslim cinemas had been shut down; her father's cousin's wonderful library, full of adventure novels that sparked her imagination throughout her childhood, had been destroyed; Hindu temples were unrecognizable behind bunkers, barbed wire and paramilitary guards.

She did not feel safe enough to be herself; she was still Ashima Bhatia, journalist, who could not express her opinions or positions about the conflict while in the Valley, could not reveal her Pandit identity. In the meantime, she had left her very young children at home. She had lied to her husband about where she was. By her second evening in Srinagar, the knot in her stomach grew so tight that she vomited.

The next day, Ashima boarded the Indian Airlines flight back to Delhi. She had spent her two-day trip listening to people recite their official one-sided positions on what was happening in Kashmir, but she knew she had not yet found Kashmir's real stories. She promised herself — no matter the cost — to find those stories.

Listening to Women

Out the window on the train back to Delhi from Jammu, Ashima barely noticed the passing landscape she knew so well: the barren hills, the yellow-green fields of rice in the midst of harvest and the towns of squat, flat-roofed, brick buildings. Her concentration was fixed on the resigned smile of the Kashmiri Muslim woman she had interviewed the day before, in late December 1999.

When silent, the woman wore her half-smile of resignation like a mask. During the interview, she mostly sat in silence on the floor in her kitchen in Baramulla, stirring a large pot of mutton stew and stoking the fire beneath it. She could not have been older than 34, Ashima's age. Her thin lips were pressed together; her gaze never left the pot. The resigned expression on her face was haunting.

She was one of the dozens of Kashmiri women whom Ashima had interviewed during her trips to the Valley in the winters and summers of 1998 and 1999. Many of the interviews were on assignment for Sumita Ghose, an activist who was researching the role of women in northern India's recent political movements.[3] This Muslim woman with the resigned half-smile had lost a husband to the conflict.

"He was a mason," the woman told Ashima in a hushed voice. "We had so little money. What you see here, our house and kitchen, he built by himself."

But someone in the neighborhood had personal problems with him. "That man was a *mukhbir*," she said, an informer on the Indian Army payroll.

The mukhbir told the local army camp commander, a major, that her husband sympathized with the militants and was giving them information about goings-on in the neighborhood. The major took her husband away to the local army headquarters for questioning. He died during the interrogation.

The woman stopped talking. Her lips compressed into her half-smile. She stirred her pot of stew.

Ashima waited for her to continue, wanting to be sensitive to the woman's feelings. After a long, heavy silence, Ashima simply asked, "How?"

The woman's eyelids fluttered. She stirred her stew in slow circles.

"*Zulm*," she finally said. Zulm, Ashima knew, meant torture in Kashmiri. It also meant oppression and injustice. Ashima also knew that common torture methods used by the army during interrogations of militant suspects included electric shocks and the immersion of a detainee's head in cold water. She could imagine any number of brutal ways he could have been killed.

"The major came to visit me," said the woman, adding another log to the fire.

He'd come to her door with a few of his soldiers and asked to speak with her. As soon as they entered her courtyard, he got down on his knees and confessed that he'd found out her

husband was innocent. He broke down crying and begged for forgiveness. For months, he returned again and again, each time pleading for her forgiveness and declaring that he could not bear his guilt. "If it were possible, I would bring back your husband," he'd told the woman. "But I can't."

Ashima waited for the woman to continue her story, but she remained silent, inscrutable. The woman's young son came into the kitchen and sat down by her. She stirred her stew.

"Were you able to forgive the major?" Ashima finally asked.

The woman still did not meet Ashima's gaze. She emitted a soft sigh as resigned as her faint smile.

"This man does not exist for me." Her voice trembled. She said that he was eventually transferred somewhere else.

What could be more punishing for a human being than to be denied your existence? The woman had severely punished the major, but where was justice for her and her husband? The Indian Army and the government never publicly acknowledged the awful crime that had been committed. How could reconciliation ever occur without that acknowledgement?

After another stretch of discomforting silence, Ashima asked, "Who supports you and your children?"

The woman shook her head. No one.

Passing almost-dry winter rivers on the train back to Delhi, Ashima mulled over the woman's fate. Even though her husband was innocent, the people in her neighborhood still ostracized her. She couldn't turn to the Indian government — they only gave money to widows whose husbands were killed by militants. She couldn't reach out to Kashmiri militant or separatist groups for support, either. She was isolated. Alone.

Ashima felt alone, too, on her trips to Kashmir. She missed her children and her husband, a reserved man. Ravi did not call her for long talks to find out how she was doing, if she was safe. At home, in Delhi, he expressed his disapproval of her trips away from her duties as mother and homemaker.

At the same time, Ashima's identity as a journalist and researcher was growing. Seeing her byline, first Ashima Bhatia, then Ashima Kaul Bhatia, alongside these new women's perspectives on the Kashmir conflict, helped compensate for Ravi's feelings about her work, and her own loneliness.

But after two-and-a-half years interviewing women in the Valley for Sumita and writing her own articles, the stories of these women — particularly those who lay outside the political rhetoric of the Indian government and Muslim militant separatists — had grown inside of her.

Like the story of the young woman with the heavy, unmade-up face, unwashed hair and faded, stained pheran that Ashima met in Baramulla. Her appearance spoke so loudly of her lack of

self-esteem. She was the daughter of a Muslim teacher at St. Joseph's, the convent school Ashima had attended as a child, the school where Ashima's mother also taught.

"Oh, Mrs. Kaul's daughter," said the teacher when Ashima came to his house for the interview. "How is your mother? What is happening with her?"

He invited Ashima to sit on the floor with him and his grown-up daughter. Throughout the interview, he hugged his pudgy knees and spoke with such detachment he seemed to be narrating someone else's life.

He told her that a popular Muslim militant in the area had taken a liking to his daughter, so a group of militants came to the house and took the girl against her will to a forced *nikah*[4] with the militant. As his new wife, she was obligated to share his fugitive life on the run from Indian security forces. Together, they hid in vacant Kashmiri Pandit homes until the pressure became so great that he fled to Pakistan. She stayed with her father and gave birth to the militant's child. When her husband returned, they resumed their unstable life and had another child.

In the meantime, the local police and security forces had learned about the daughter's marriage to the militant. They came to the teacher's house, inquiring after his daughter's whereabouts, and brought him to the police station to fill out reports. They took his teenage son to the station too, locked him up in a cell and interrogated him. He died in police custody.

Eventually, security forces gunned down the militant husband. The teacher was left with his husbandless daughter and two fatherless grandchildren.

"My daughter's life is ruined," he said to Ashima, finally showing his feelings. "Please, do something."

After the interview with the teacher, Ashima spoke to his daughter alone. She said she had lied to her father about the forced marriage; she willingly married the man who became the father of her children. Islam, Kashmiri independence, the Pandits, Pakistan, India, freedom, revenge, the rest of her family — none of these issues had anything to do with her life choices. She had been in love.

Ashima grew restless in her seat on the train to Delhi remembering this woman: her plain, heavy, inexpressive face, her unkempt appearance. Here, again, was a Kashmiri Muslim woman who was not a fanatical villain or a simple victim. Yes, she was the wife of a militant. But she was also a naïve, romantic young woman with little self-esteem or insight — and a dim future.

Ashima wished that the smaller, human stories of the women involved in Kashmir's conflict could be as much a part of the conflict discourse as the politics of the region. Where was the space for people's lives and individual relationships in the midst of the grand, violent issues of sovereignty, freedom fighting and state security? And where was the space to see the women in this conflict beyond the victim-perpetrator identities so expertly fashioned by both sides?

Ashima, too, was multifaceted: an ambitious reporter and wife and mother, roles that often did not mesh. Her husband never interfered with her work in Kashmir but he told her he did not

like her leaving the children in Delhi, or his ailing mother, who had come to live with them. Her life was not simple.

Another woman from the Valley who did not fit a simple profile — that of a militant wife devoted to her husband's cause — lived in Chindoosa, a village that Ashima had hiked through as a child. On the trek route to Poonch, Chindoosa was close to the Line of Control that separated the Indian Kashmir Valley from Pakistani Kashmir, and had become a launching pad for Muslim militants.

On a warm spring day, when Ashima and her driver arrived at the woman's home, they were greeted by a trio of Central Reserve Police Force guards wearing camouflage uniforms with bulletproof vests and carrying rifles. They let Ashima through the gate.

The beak-nosed woman, whose angular face was framed by a scarf, sat on her kitchen floor flanked by a young son and daughter. She was very frank. Her husband had been a local militant commander. He used to shepherd boys to and from Pakistan along the militant trek route into the Poonch region, then past the Line of Control into the mountains where they received training.

"He was in a frenzy," she said, her hands darting in the air like small birds. The Indian Army was always around. "I was so afraid for him. My heart used to pound. I couldn't sleep." She offered *namaz* — Muslim prayers — for his safety when he left but got into fights with him when he returned. In 1996, when Jammu and Kashmir's government changed hands and called for rebels to surrender in exchange for rehabilitation packages and jobs, she pleaded with her husband to surrender. He finally agreed, believing that under the new leadership he could become a politician and find a non-violent way to fight for justice. His rehabilitation package included the land in Chindoosa.

But the militants he had worked with saw him as a traitor. How could he motivate their sons to go to Pakistan to live a life of danger and then receive rewards for joining the other side? One evening he was killed by an unidentified gunman.

The woman turned her angular face and anxious eyes to her son and daughter. "How can I protect my children? Militants are everywhere." At home, her children were under the surveillance of Central Reserve Police Force Guards, but as soon as they left for school, they became possible targets for her husband's former group or one of its rivals. There were so many militant groups. What if one of them tried to recruit her son? The only men she could trust, the men she now called brothers, were the guards stationed on her property in Chindoosa.

What does protection mean for a woman in Kashmir? Ashima wondered as the train to Delhi chugged south through the yellow mustard fields of rural Punjab, then past towns choked with traffic. For the Muslim militant's wife, protection meant trust in her husband's former enemies. What did protection mean for Ashima in Kashmir? She lived alone when she worked in the Valley. At night, by herself in her hotel room, after hours of listening to the stories of these complex women, she would cry herself to sleep. She couldn't share with her husband or her parents just how much the stories she was listening to were becoming part of her.

Ashima could feel the rough, dusty shroud of loneliness that cloaked so many Pandits in the refugee camps on the outskirts of Jammu that she finally visited in 1999. They had been forced from their homes in the Valley in the winter of 1990 by anti-Pandit and anti-Indian slogans broadcast from mosques all over the Valley, from towns and villages, to the city of Srinagar. At that time, Pandits were also tortured, raped and murdered by Muslim militants. The Pandits' Muslim neighbors, helpless to stop the militant violence, remained silent.

Ashima imagined herself living in the dry, barren landscape of the camps in a tiny, one-room unit with a tin roof, attached to other one-room units, each housing an extended family, all sharing a block of communal toilets and a pump for water. She wondered what her life would have been like if her own Pandit family hadn't moved away from the Valley years before the exile. Would she have ended up at a camp? And once there, would she have a victim mentality, with little hope for the future, hatred and fear of all Muslims?

During her interviews, Ashima sat with Pandit women on the blanketed floors of their homes, each unit a small room crowded with family belongings. "This is what we now have," each woman would say, brows lifted in suffering resignation, voices wavering. They would point to a corner behind a curtain and the cement ledge where the kitchen sat: a gas stove, exhaust pipe and set of dishes. Some women broke down crying.

In Kashmir, they never had to live so close to their fathers-in-law. But here they had to do everything, even change their clothes, in front of them.

They complained about their husbands, too, many of whom sat outside their units drinking and playing cards. In their villages in Kashmir, these men had been gainfully employed.

"In Kashmir, we had a two-story house and land." Each woman would touch Ashima's knee. "You are a Kashmiri. You know."

Ashima knew, but she also wished these women would not be afraid to go back to the Valley and fight for their right to live there after nine years. But who was she to judge?

The women's most vivid memories seemed to be of their flights from the Valley. One bucktoothed, timid young woman told Ashima about how the elders in her extended family hired a truck to take her and her female cousins to Jammu in 1990 when they were teenagers. With only one uncle to accompany them, they were more afraid of being captured by militants, forced to marry and convert to Islam, than they were of being killed. They left their town in January snow and were stranded on the highway, freezing cold, because of a winter landslide. At one point they were so hungry that they bought cigarettes and ate them.

At every Pandit house that Ashima visited, she heard the story of their flight, what became of their homes and what Muslims had done to them. They were sure that nobody cared: neither the Indian government nor the Muslims. If Ashima said anything about visiting Kashmir and seeing the difficulty of Muslim women's lives there, doubt and mistrust immediately spread across the face before her. Every once in a while, if the woman trusted Ashima enough, the change in her face seemed to communicate, *I would empathize if they had not done this to us.*

As the train neared the garbage-covered tracks and crowded, broken-down shantytowns that neighbored the New Delhi railway station, a wave of grief overwhelmed Ashima. She could barely hold back tears for the women whose stories she held in her imagination, in her bones. She wanted to help them but she did not know how.

She remembered Naseem, whom she went to find at the Bone and Joint Hospital in Srinagar. Ashima had heard that shells from Pakistan had hit a town near the Line of Control. Naseem was one of the casualties. Ashima looked for her in the rows of beds lining the walls in a dark, foul-smelling ward on the hospital's first floor. Ashima could barely see more than the silhouettes of patients.

"Mama, you've come," said a weak, high-pitched voice.

She followed the voice to a little girl who was lying in bed, her body covered with a blanket. She was so small and thin she could not have been more than 5. Ashima's mothering instincts took over. She walked over to the girl and hugged her. Up close, the girl's dark, trusting, downturned eyes exuded pain and confusion.

"Will you go to mother?" she asked, now aware that Ashima was a stranger. "Can you tell her to come and meet me? Where is she?"

A man sitting by the girl introduced himself to Ashima and told her the little girl was Naseem, his niece. He lifted the blanket off Naseem's body. "See what happened?" The girl had only one leg and foot.

"Have you seen my father?" Naseem asked.

Ashima had to say no. The uncle took Ashima out of the ward. Both parents had been in the house when the shell had fallen, he told her. Both were killed. Naseem had been somewhere outside.

Making her way through the jostling crowds at the New Delhi railway station, Ashima could not forget Naseem's pain-filled eyes. No political reason in the world was worth the suffering of that little girl. Her own eyes filled with tears. Her cheeks grew wet. A sob rose in her throat. But she was in a public place, about to go home to Raashi and Agastya. How could she be an alert, present mother if she continued to fall apart like this? She had to do something.

A few mornings after her train ride, Ashima stepped out of her home into the cold, heavy, Delhi rain. She hired a rickshaw to take her to the Bangla Sahib Gurudwara, the beautiful white and gold, multi-domed Sikh house of worship. She needed to listen to *gurbani*, Sikh chants and hymns based on classical Hindustani ragas that were sung 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Ashima sat in a corner, listening to the unbroken songs praising the divine. She cried.

She cried for the widows of Muslim militants, for the widows of innocent Muslim men, for the Pandit women who had lost their hope, for Naseem.

She cried for the Kashmir Valley of the past, the home of her childhood, where her Pandit Hindu mother taught side by side at St. Joseph's with Muslim teachers and Ashima ate her lunches

with the sons and daughters of Muslims, Sikhs, Dogra[5] and Pandit Hindus. The Kashmir where her Hindu Pandit father was invited to a Muslim wedding and brought his daughter. *Was that co-existence merely a façade*? Ashima wondered.

Ashima cried for the Kashmir of the present, for all the hatred and mistrust between the Indian government, officers in the Indian Army, Muslims and Pandits. All the stories she had heard in the last two-and-a-half years. She was a person who worked for solutions, who wanted to take things forward. But the Valley was in monumental crisis.

Eventually, Ashima calmed down enough to go home. She visited the Gurudwara every morning for 40 days, a practice not uncommon in Hinduism, Sikhism and Islam. No one in her family suspected that her reason for going was to save herself from the emotions that were consuming her.

After 20 days, she began to feel lighter. She was no longer overwhelmed by the stories she had collected. But she wished that the ordinary women she had interviewed, both Muslim and Pandit, could hear each other's stories. If they could only listen to each other, they might hear something different from the stories they told about the other: that Kashmiri Pandit women had wanted to leave and were living comfortable happy lives in Jammu, that Kashmiri Muslim women were responsible for and deserved their own unhappiness.

Everything is snuffed, there is no space, thought Ashima. *These voices have to come out and speak and create that space.*

Holding Hands

"What do you think, Ashima?" asked the soft-voiced Finnish representative.

More than a dozen women, all sitting at the long, shiny, wood-veneered table in New Delhi's Finnish embassy — participants in the April 2000 invitation-only Women's Conversation — stared at Ashima, awaiting her reply.

For the last hour, she had been listening to her contemporaries, young to middle-aged Indian women, all well-known activists, journalists and scholars, discuss what was happening to women in the Kashmir conflict. But none of them had dug deeply enough into women's lives in Kashmir's remote rural areas. The picture they gave was incomplete.

Shouldn't the women of Kashmir speak for themselves? thought Ashima.

"You know, whatever we are sharing here is our perception," she said. "Why don't you listen to the women directly, hear what they have to say?"

That evening, she got a call at home from Dr. Meenakshi Gopinath. Ashima remembered regal, sari-clad Dr. Gopinath from the embassy meeting. She was principal of a prestigious women's college in Delhi and a founder and honorary director of WISCOMP — Women in Security, Conflict Management and Peace.[6]

"What you said at the meeting, did you mean it?" Dr. Gopinath asked.

"Of course I meant it." Ashima had spent the last two-and-a-half years immersed in the lives of diverse Muslim and Pandit Hindu Kashmiri women. Ashima was certain these women's voices needed to be heard.

"If WISCOMP organizes a roundtable for Kashmiri women, will you be able to facilitate it?" asked Dr. Gopinath. "And could you bring these women to Delhi?"

"Yes, I definitely will."

Ashima had no experience creating a conference or arranging travel to Delhi for the Kashmiri women she wished to invite — women who, for the most part, had never been part of a women's initiative and had never told their stories openly before. But she felt passionate about the project. At that time, there was no space for women from different religions and classes with different views of Kashmir to talk openly in public. She envisioned a safe space where these women could face each other, tell their own stories and see what might happen next. She had grown up in Kashmir; these were her people.

Ashima said yes to the job with bravado, but inside she wondered: *Will I be able to do this? Will the women come?*

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Ashima invited 20 women to "Breaking the Silence," a two-day roundtable discussion of issues that concerned women in Kashmir. The event would begin on her birthday, December 9th, and would be held at the India Habitat Center, an intellectual hub in Delhi where WISCOMP had its office. Participants included Kashmiri Pandit women living in exile in Jammu, Delhi and the Valley, and Muslim women from Srinagar and small towns in Kashmir. She chose wives of political leaders, separatists, people in exile, human rights and grassroots activists, writers, teachers, mothers. She chose people with opposing positions on the conflict from diverse religions and classes, with very different pictures of Kashmir.

During the three months Ashima was organizing the meeting, her heart pounded to the beat of her fears: *They will not trust me. They will feel that I'm trying to maneuver something.* The women had to seek permission from their families to go to the roundtable; their communities were watching.

When a few Kashmiri women who had agreed to participate called to back out, mutual friends told Ashima that someone she knew had convinced the women not to go, spreading a rumor that somehow the Indian government was involved in the roundtable. Ashima was shaken. In tears, she sat on the floor in her home in Delhi, trying to push the rumormonger out of her mental space. Then she prayed to the divine force to bring the rest of the women to Delhi. The success of the roundtable rested solely on her shoulders.

Finally, the women arrived.

Ashima took all the travelers from the Valley to the India Habitat Center, a civil society complex of buildings with glass ceilings, gardens and ponds, and a residency unit. During dinner that night and breakfast the next morning, the Pandit women sat at their own table as far away as possible from the Muslim women. The only woman who interacted with both tables — aside from Ashima — was Neerja Mattu, one of the few Pandits who had remained in Srinagar after 1990. She was a professor at a women's college where most of the Pandit and Muslim women at both tables had been her students. They responded with warmth to Neerja's motherly presence, even as they treated each other with icy indifference. Ashima's stomach churned as she watched, but she said nothing, wanting to remain neutral.

After breakfast, in the wood-paneled, carpeted room reserved for the roundtable at the convention center, the Pandit women carefully chose chairs next to each other. The Muslim women did the same. Dr. Gopinath led the meeting.

Kshama Kaul, a Pandit woman who lived in Jammu, and other Pandit women from the refugee camps, told stories of their overwhelming fear in the Valley in 1990. The Muslim militant targeted killings and kidnappings. The broadcasts from mosques of slogans like, *What do we want? Freedom. Oh tyrants, oh infidels, leave our Kashmir.* The shouts predicting that Kashmir would become part of Pakistan, that Pandit men should go away and leave their women behind. The stones thrown at Pandit homes.

When the Pandits accused all the Muslims in the Valley of driving them from their houses into a life of exile, some of the Muslim women at the roundtable protested.

"We were not in the streets," one woman said.

"We were not part of this," said another. "You cannot say all Muslims are responsible."

Another insisted that Jammu and Kashmir's Indian governor, Jagmohan, was responsible for the exodus and the Pandits had gone along with him.

The argument continued for the rest of the day.

In the evening, Ashima visited the roundtable participants individually in their hotel rooms. She asked each of them how they were and sat silently on the bed or a chair listening and nodding as Muslim and Pandit women spewed angry words about what the other had said and reiterated their view of what really happened in Kashmir. Ashima was not there to antagonize anyone; she stayed as neutral as possible, absorbing everyone's anger.

But there were two women, one Muslim and one Sikh, who thanked Ashima for the chance to get reacquainted. They had known each other in Kashmir but lost touch when the militancy began. Their words soothed Ashima's worried mind — at least a little.

Ashima and WISCOMP tried to ensure that the Muslim women at the roundtable who were fasting for *Ramzan*[7] had what they needed: time for their prayers and something appropriate to eat and drink at the allowed times. A few Pandit women, suspicious of all the attention these Muslim women received, asked Ashima if WISCOMP was a leftist organization that favored Muslim women over Hindus. She tried as calmly as she could to reassure them.

By the second day, two of the Pandits accused the rest of the group of not listening and not caring about their plight. They walked out.

"Please," Dr. Gopinath said when they returned, "we are listening to you; we want to listen to you."

In her room afterwards, Kshama hurled words of fury at Ashima. "Why didn't you defend us? Are you on their side?"

Ashima assured her that she was simply the facilitator. She was neutral. But her stomach ached. She did not want anyone to feel ashamed and small. She wanted the opposite.

The roundtable ended as Ashima feared: Each woman kept to her own community's narrative. No one talked about gender roles within Muslim or Pandit communities; no larger perspective emerged. Nevertheless, "Breaking the Silence" was a big step forward for the women of Kashmir; it was one of the first conferences about the conflict organized by and for Kashmiri women. Many of the participants thanked Ashima for the unique experience.

Ashima and WISCOMP decided to do a follow-up meeting in the summer of 2001, but this time Ashima wanted the group to meet in Srinagar. She invited the first roundtable participants and the Kashmiri women who had not been able to travel to Delhi in December. Most of the women were anxious to be part of the follow-up, but Kshama had to be convinced. Ashima tried over and over again to reassure her that WISCOMP had no leftist leanings, no soft spot for Muslims; they had compassion for what the Pandits had suffered. She also agreed to accompany Kshama on the

flight from Jammu to Kashmir — Kshama's first return to the Valley after 10 years of exile — and take her to her old temple.

The meeting took place just outside of Srinagar at the Welcome Hotel, where most of the participants were also housed. There were no formal conference rooms, so Ashima set up the meeting in a dining area separated from the public by sliding doors. Again, the women used the official narratives of their religious and cultural communities — and their husbands — to speak about the conflict in Kashmir. They could not abandon the political stance of their communities or families.

Ashima listened wholeheartedly to each woman's narrative. "I feel your pain," she would say to a Pandit woman who talked about the loss of her home in Kashmir. "I wish Muslim women could hear you." And to a Muslim woman who lost a parent to the conflict, she said, "I went to a Pandit refugee camp. They are so angry at Muslims. I wish they could hear about the pain and suffering you've gone through."

Inside, she prayed for the women to at least begin to understand and accept one another, but they still blamed each other for not seeing the conflict correctly. Accusations flew back and forth. The demand was mutual: "You tell us you're sorry."

During the next break in the conversation, Ashima stepped away through the sliding door. Since the first roundtable in December, she had envisioned inviting the participants to form a group that would visit the contrasting realities of women involved in Kashmir's conflict. She hoped that at some point during the meeting she might have the opportunity to bring up this idea. But the hostility between the women felt like a wall of ice. She prayed for universal help to reach out and manifest her idea.

Ashima returned to the meeting. As she was sliding the doors closed, a large, burqa-clad woman walked up to her.

"What is happening here?" asked the woman gruffly. She tried to look beyond Ashima to see what was inside the room.

A rough, thick-fingered hand emerged from the sleeve of the burqa. The knuckles were hairy. Heavy boots shuffled impatiently.

"Nothing is happening here," said Ashima, sure she was speaking to a man. "It's just a group of women."

"Women from Jammu?" asked the now unmistakably male voice.

"Yeah. We're having a nice kitty party and nothing else."

The man left. Now, more than ever, she felt eyes watching her in Kashmir. Journalists had been killed there because of their politics. She had to be sure to keep a very low profile and not get entangled in anyone's political movements. As long as she remained neutral, there was no need to be worried about being threatened or targeted. The women she worked with also had to stay within

certain parameters. They could not publically abandon the politics of the groups they came from. If they did, then their own families or communities would make it impossible for them to participate in a women's group.

She returned to the discussion and hoped for something to melt the wall of ice.

As hours passed, the Muslim women began to accept that the Pandit women's experiences were as fraught with difficulties as their own. Some even admitted, with genuine feeling, that they missed their Pandit neighbors. The Pandit women displayed empathy for the Muslim women who had lost a son or faced violence in the conflict — as long as the Muslim women did not deny the reality of their lives in refugee camps.

Ashima could feel the wall between the women begin to melt. The new warmth in the room was inspiring. Maybe now they would be more open to traveling together.

"I have an idea," she said to the group at the Welcome Hotel. She proposed they form a collective to visit the diverse realities in Kashmir and talk about them.

"I am interested," said Neerja.

"I'll have to speak to my father," said Ezabir.

Nine of them agreed to be part of this new, diverse coalition: Kshama, a Kashmiri Pandit who lived in exile; Neerja, the Pandit professor; three Kashmiri Sunni Muslims, Hamida, Bilquis and Quarrat-ul-ain; Ezabir, a Kashmiri Shia Muslim; Gurmeet, a Kashmiri Sikh; Khalida and A.R. Hanjura, a Kashmiri Muslim couple who ran an orphanage; and Ashima.

The idea for the Kashmiri women's collective had been growing in Ashima's imagination ever since she'd returned to Kashmir to interview Muslim and Pandit women. In 1999, when she visited the Pandit refugee camps for the first time, she dreamed of inviting the Muslim women she had interviewed to visit the camps to tell their stories and see the lives of Pandit refugees. Now the collective was becoming a reality.

"We need to name ourselves," said Ashima. "We need a Kashmiri word."

After brainstorming a handful of words, Neerja suggested *athwaas*.

Ashima embraced the name immediately. Athwaas meant handshake, but it also meant holding hands. In Kashmiri Pandit Hindu weddings, the bride and groom held hands and walked around the fire together. In the rest of India, the bride followed behind the groom, tied to him by a shawl. Athwaas was an agreement to come together as equals — a symbol of hope for Kashmir.

A Constituency of Women

In November 2001, as facilitator for the new Athwaas collective and the liaison between Athwaas and WISCOMP, Ashima organized the group's first trip: to Baramulla and the Village of Widows, both in the Kashmir Valley.

She booked a large room in Srinagar's Green Acres Hotel for herself and the two Athwaas members who did not live in the Valley: Kshama, the Pandit woman from Jammu, and Bilquis, a teenage Muslim girl from the Kulga district. Bilquis arrived late in the evening and told the caretaker that she would get up before dawn to pray and eat *sehri*[8] in honor of Ramzan.

Very early the next morning, hours before the sun — and before Bilquis — Kshama got up, lit a dozen incense sticks in the room and began reading from her Hindu religious text. Ashima woke up choking from the heavy smoke and Kshama's voice. Kshama continued to read after Bilquis woke, so the young girl left the room and sat in the dressing area outside the bathroom to pray and eat. Ashima was a bit annoyed with Kshama for being so insensitive to Bilquis's needs, but she said nothing. She understood the complexity of the Pandit woman's emotional attachment to Kashmir — the homeland that had pushed her and her people out in 1990. For Kshama, coming back brought anger, bitterness, a sense of loss and longing. The only way to establish her presence in Kashmir was by practicing her own faith in a way that anchored her and opposed the faith of "the other."

But Ashima also knew Bilquis's story. Her Muslim father had been killed by militants. When he was alive he had been close to a Kashmiri Pandit man who had asked him to care for his family's cow when they fled Kashmir in 1990. Her father did, even though militants harassed him, demanding to know why he kept a cow that belonged to a Hindu. When Bilquis's family left their home for three days to stay with a relative, there was no one to feed the cow. It died. Bilquis had cried while describing how distraught her father was over the cow's death. He felt he would never be able to face his friend again. A few months later, Bilquis's father was killed.

Ashima wanted to support Bilquis. She knew how difficult it was for this teenage Muslim girl — the youngest member of Athwaas — to come to Srinagar alone. She too needed her faith to anchor her.

Ashima was torn but refused to take sides. Athwaas would fall apart if she did. Instead, she carried the tension of both women inside her.

Two days later, a driver took Ashima, Kshama, Bilquis and four other members of Athwaas to the village of Dardpora — "Home of Pain" — in the Kupwara district, very close to the Line of Control between Indian and Pakistani Kashmir. In order to visit the village — a site of so much militant violence that it was also known as the Village of Widows — they needed to stop at the Kupwara police station to inform the police of their plan.

"You can't go to Dardpora without escorts," the superintendent told Ashima. There had been a recent violent encounter between the Indian military and a group of militants.

"But we're only visiting the women there," said Ashima.

The superintendent insisted, so Ashima, the other members of Athwaas and the driver followed a police bus packed with 20 officers past fallow winter fields and pine forests, distant snow-capped mountains, towns and villages, until they reached Dardpora.

They arrived late. The *sarpanch,* or the leader of the village, stood in front of the government school in the village's center, surrounded by empty chairs. There were no Dardpora women in sight.

"They were waiting for you, but now they've gone home," said the leader.

Ashima apologized for their lateness and humbly asked him to re-invite the Dardpora women, as they waited in the November cold for the women to return.

After an hour, 15 village women came back. They ranged in age from late 20s to late 40s. White winter daylight illuminated their thick wool pherans and well-worn headscarves, their chapped, pink faces, rough hands, and angry, tired expressions.

"You people come, the media comes; everyone comes and takes our photos, sells these photos to the world and makes money," one of the women complained.

"Nothing comes to us," added another.

They were from two ethnic communities in the village: the Gujjar, which was slightly uphill, and the Kashmiri, at the hill's base. Their husbands had joined three different Muslim militant groups and had killed each other in fratricidal wars.

The women of the village sat in the plain wooden chairs or stood on the frozen ground with Ashima and the members of Athwaas, talking about the difficulties of trying to survive without their men. They farmed the fields and went to the forests to cut wood. Some of the younger women were terrified of the Indian Army that patrolled the area, and the militants stalking in the woods. All of them shared stories of exploitation. When the women went to the district commissioner's office or any other office of social welfare, the men tried to cheat them out of their government grant money or take advantage of their loans by creating a mountain of unintelligible paperwork for them. They also forced themselves on the women, exploiting them for sexual favors.

The women from Dardpora showed the Athwaas group their well-kept simple homes of mud or stone. They served tea. In their homes, Ashima saw a cheerful glow light up the women's weatherworn faces.

"You are the first women's group we have met," said one of the village women.

"Thank you for coming all this way," said another.

The Athwaas collective agreed that they wanted to help the women of the village any way they could. Back in Srinagar, in the privacy of the Green Acres Hotel, Kshama accused Ashima of being pro-Muslim, more worried about Bilquis and her Muslim rituals than Kshama's Hindu practice. Ashima tried to reassure her that she needed to be fair to everyone in Athwaas.

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In the spring of 2002, when Ashima was organizing a second Athwaas trip, this time to some of the refugee camps in the Jammu district, she made sure that one of the stops was Purkhoo, a Pandit refugee camp, where the collective could meet Asha Sadhu, a Pandit woman originally from the Valley. Ashima had first met Asha in 2001, when she was looking for Kashmiri women who had lost dear ones in the conflict—women whose experience with loss could translate to understanding and empathy with other Kashmiri women who knew loss. Asha knew it well — she had lost her husband and one of her sons.

At the outset of her first visit with Asha at the Purkhoo camp, Ashima spotted a nameplate outside of Asha's unit announcing that the inhabitants were originally from Tangmarg, a village in Kashmir. When Asha came to greet her, Ashima shared a memory of picnicking near Tangmarg with friends as a teenager, sitting by the river eating apples. Asha shared her own fond memories of Tangmarg. She smiled as she recalled her childhood in the village. She came from the only Pandit family there and had many friends, all Muslim. She still missed them. Ashima felt an immediate bond.

She sat with Asha on the floor of her home, a small room crowded with boxes and quilts and decorated with photos of her husband and oldest son. In one corner, behind a curtain, stood her kitchen: a wooden ledge, a gas stove, exhaust pipe and dishes. Asha made tea. Then she told her story.

When Asha, her husband, two sons and father-in-law ran away from Tangmarg in 1990, they settled in a Pandit refugee camp outside of Jammu. It was difficult for her boys to get any kind of education, so the extended family packed up and moved in with a relative in Delhi. But the relative was not very welcoming — a story Ashima had heard from many Pandits in the camps. Asha and her family could not make ends meet in Delhi, so they moved again, ending up in the Purkhoo camp. After a few calm years there, a truck hit and killed her husband while he was driving his scooter. Asha could barely feed and clothe her sons and father-in-law on her monthly migrant relief money, so when the deputy inspector general of police came to the camp to find new recruits, her eldest son, only 18 years old, applied. He was accepted, trained and posted to the Secretariat in Srinagar.

"My heart was on tenterhooks when I heard he'd been sent to the Valley. But at least he was home," Asha sighed. Home, for her, was still in the Kashmir Valley.

Then, in October 2001, a suicide bomber drove into the state assembly building. Her son was killed while on duty. Asha confessed to Ashima that she was struggling to take care of her surviving family, navigate the government bureaucracy to collect insurance, and grieve for her beloved husband and son. Asha's soft, kind face clouded with grief.

Ashima thought this open Pandit woman could be a wonderful member of the Athwaas collective. She asked Asha if she would like to travel with the group.

"I would love to be part of it," said Asha. "But I'm in mourning and I am a Hindu woman so I can't travel. I do want to question our rituals because this same thing is not expected of my son or my father-in-law. But I cannot join you." Asha leaned her cheek on her hand in resignation.

If Asha cannot travel with us, thought Ashima, *we can travel to her.*

Athwaas members Ather, Khalida, Qurrat-ul-ain, Gurmeet, Ezabir, Hafisa and Hamida, all Muslim women, were eager to see what life was like for Pandit women in the camps. So was a woman new to Athwaas, Dilafroz.

But some of the Muslim women felt uneasy traveling to Jammu that spring. In February, a train in Gujarat had caught fire under suspicious circumstances. Several passengers were Hindu pilgrims returning from a religious ceremony performed at the site of a mosque that had been destroyed by Hindus in the 1990s. Fifty-nine people burned to death in the train. Local right-wing Hindus retaliated with massive anti-Muslim violence across Gujarat, killing at least 2,000 people. Hindu government officials seemed to sanction the riots by calling the train burning a terrorist act. Right-wing Hindus protested throughout the country in sympathy with the rioters — including Hindus in Jammu. They demonstrated daily in the streets, waving saffron-colored Hindu flags.

Khalida called up Ashima, wondering if Jammu was safe. Ezabir's father called her too, worried about sending his daughter to a hotbed of anti-Muslim sentiment. Ashima could not guarantee anyone's safety, but the success of Athwaas depended on her — and her alone. She desperately wanted this trip to take place. Her reputation was on the line. "Uncle, you needn't worry as long as I'm there. I'll personally pick up all the women at the airport, take them everywhere myself and make sure they are not harmed."

By the time she drove to the airport to wait for the women to arrive, the atmosphere in Jammu had calmed. But Ashima was still dizzy with anxiety. She had called Ezabir's father for a final confirmation that Ezabir would come to Jammu.

"*Insh'allah*, God willing," was his only answer. She had no idea if Ezabir would come. Insh'allah was Qurrat's, Gurmeet's and Khalida's answer, too.

At the airport, Ashima, feeling faint, stared at the gate, sure that no one would arrive. Then, in the midst of the arriving passengers walking through the gate, she saw Khalida's long, thin nose framed by the *dupatta* scarf that covered her hair and forehead. Ezabir, Gurmeet and Qurrat walked into the terminal behind her. Ashima's heart pounded as if it would burst from her chest. One after the other, all eight women arrived.

The next day, she took them to the Purkhoo Pandit refugee camp. Their last stop at the camp was Asha's government circuit house. The women of Athwaas sat crowded on the floor as Asha served Kashmiri *Kehwa* tea made with almonds and saffron. They raised their brows in sympathy when Asha apologized for the lack of adequate room in her unit. They sighed with her when she described life without her husband and son. They smiled when she told them, "I feel I've come back home," referring to her childhood surrounded by Muslim friends. And when she said, "Today, even God is in trouble. He needs our help, both sides, to overcome this tragedy," they nodded their heads in agreement.

"What happened was beyond everyone's control," said Qurrat. "We are all suffering."

Ashima could tell that the women's hearts were besieged by the conditions in the camps, the poverty, the stories of struggle and survival. Dilafroz became so emotional that she took money out of her purse and gave it to Asha.

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The trips that Ashima organized for Athwaas opened up a new world for the collective, the same way her interviews with women suffering from Kashmir's violent conflict had opened up a new world for her. Far away from the media images of the conflict and the rhetoric of political groups was the human reality for women on the ground. The Athwaas collective was beginning to see what she saw: that Kashmir's armed conflict was fought on the bodies of women.

The goals of Athwaas — Ashima's goals for Athwaas — were healing, reconciliation and accepting different realities. But if this group was to become representative of something, it needed a constituency of women beyond Athwaas's 10 members. After many discussions with the collective and brainstorming with Dr. Gopinath about strategies to build the community, Ashima decided to try organizing workshops.

A few months after Athwaas visited the Pandit camps, Ashima met with her friend Javed Ahmed Tak about helping with a workshop. Javed was a young paraplegic man from Bijbihara, a town near Srinagar, who had been badly wounded by militants. When she had first met him, he had expressed such overwhelming sadness, loneliness and anguish that she wrote letters to him every day to keep him from thoughts of suicide. They became close friends.

Ashima asked Javed to identify young girls from the Bijbihara area who might want to be involved in a workshop that would teach them self-care and train them to identify and get help for domestic violence issues. The idea gave him hope and energy. He volunteered to be the local coordinator for the workshop — Athwaas's first.

The members of Athwaas loved the idea — meetings where women could get together, participate in an activity and, most importantly, talk. Ashima called the workshops *Samanbals*, which in Kashmiri meant an informal meeting place for women, like the riverfront, where rural Kashmiri Muslim women used to wash their clothes, gossip and chat. Here was a way to build a constituency of women.

Based on their skills and contacts, Ashima and the other members of Athwaas thought of different ideas for the Samanbals. Neerja, who was a writer as well as a professor, coordinated writing workshops. Ezabir, whose father was the chairperson of the Voluntary Health Association of India, offered to create Samanbals for some of the association's health workers that would train them to become counselors for rural women. Ezabir could also use contacts from her own job with Kashmir's Rural Development Department to organize meetings in different rural districts. Khalida and A.R. Hanjura, who ran an orphanage in the Valley, had access to a wide network of skilled resource people and Kashmiri communities in need; they started small business programs for rural Kashmiri women in Dardpora.

Ashima helped coordinate the Samanbals by acting as the liaison between WISCOMP and Athwaas and by pushing different projects forward — like Athwaas' desire to help the women of Dardpora. She contacted the chairwoman of the Jammu and Kashmir State Women's Development Corporation, who gave WISCOMP the resources to donate cows to the women as an alternate, safe source of income. But when an earthquake rattled the Kupwara district in 2005, many of the cows were lost. Ashima and Athwaas returned to Dardpora to figure out a better small business plan.

The women of Dardpora wanted their own spinning wheels to spin cotton into yarn. Ashima and the Women's Development Corporation could not afford to give every woman her own wheel and cotton, and preferred to create a communal workspace in the village so both Gujjar and Kashmiri women could come together to work and talk to each other — instead of competing for limited resources. But Ashima and her colleagues did not take into consideration the women's realities. When would they have time to leave their farms and their kitchens to go spin cotton? And who would watch their children while they spun? Ashima and the Women's Development Corporation brought in a resource person to teach the women bookkeeping and time management skills, but the women were not open to these different ways of living and working, so the project was shifted to another village with women who wanted to spin cotton.

Ashima continued to work with Athwaas, facilitating trips and Samanbals, negotiating the group's relationship with WISCOMP and networking with other resources. She felt the need for something different gnawing at her but she ignored it. Instead, she worked harder, continuing to absorb the emotions of every woman she met that suffered because of Kashmir's conflict. She saw every widow and orphan as a victim she needed to help. And she could not take sides, could not have an opinion of her own.

When Kshama left Athwaas because she felt a lack of support for Hindus, Ashima said nothing. But the tension she felt from the Pandit woman's departure continued to weigh on her.

Another Form

It was amid the potted plants and canteens of the Indian Habitat Center that Ashima was introduced to Shabeen, a young Kashmiri woman who worked for a development organization. They shared a love of travel and cultural exploration and became fast friends. Lunch meetings turned into exchanges of Ashima's Hindu and Shabeen's Muslim rituals. Shabeen taught Ashima how to fast for Ramzan and took her to a Muslim community center in Delhi to break the fast and offer namaz. Ashima felt no shame reciting the blessings of another religion. Instead, she felt light. Her world expanded. Ashima then taught Shabeen how to fast for Navratri, the Hindu Festival of the Nine Days of the Goddess. Shabeen wanted to participate in every ritual that Ashima celebrated.

They agreed; they were not losing their own identities by sharing each other's religions. Their experiences brought them joy. "If we feel this way," Shabeen said at lunch one day, "why don't we bring in a few more Kashmiris in Delhi to join us?" They could form a group of Pandits and Muslims to meet over coffee, talk about what happened to the Pandits in Kashmir and discuss ways to reconcile differences between them.

At their next meeting, at a coffee shop, they each brought a few friends. Bilal, a Kashmiri Pandit, had been sent by his parents to live with his sister in Delhi in the 1990s. Renuka, a Pandit from South Kashmir, had lived in a migrant camp in Delhi. Sanjali was a Pandit Hindu from northern Kashmir. Shiban, a Pandit whose brother was killed by militants. On an informal, regular basis, they drank coffee, told their stories and listened to each other. They all wanted to do something to transform the conflict in their homeland, find a way to move Kashmiris forward. And they brought a variety of professional skills with which to do it: Bilal, who worked for the National AIDS Control Organization, was very active with NGOs throughout India; Renuka, like Ashima, was a reporter; Shabeen, who worked in a government office, could organize logistics and make phone calls; Sanjali ran a tutoring center for children; and Shiban was an accountant.

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One evening, Ashima arrived early to the group's meeting at the cigarette smoke-filled Press Club of India. Only Shiban was there. "Let's not waste time," Ashima said above the clatter of dishes and the din of other discussions. "By the time they get here, let's think of a name for our group — a Kashmiri name."

"Not Kashmiri," said Shiban. "If our group becomes international, no one will understand it."

"Have you heard of Al Qaeda? Do you know what it means?"

Shiban had to admit that he knew Al Qaeda meant "the base," even though he did not speak a word of Arabic.

"People will ask the meaning of this Kashmiri word and we'll explain," Ashima said. She had used this logic when she named Athwaas. "This way, our Kashmiri words will become internationally famous." Shiban nodded.

Ashima asked him to start saying words first, since he was far more fluent in Kashmiri than she was. "Think of something that captures the essence of how we connect."

He rattled off a dozen words that evoked a group of people connecting, before he said, "*Yakjah*."

The word meant "together." To Ashima, it sounded forward looking, assertive and confident — a stamp. She liked that word best. When the rest of the group arrived, she presented the name to them. They all agreed.

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Ashima felt a sense of ease with Yakjah that she did not feel with Athwaas. To her, Athwaas was Ashima, herself. But Yakjah — this loose group of professionals who came together informally — enjoyed each other's company, and was not trying to push any Hindu or Muslim, government or separatist political agenda. It was something different.

Yakjah decided to visit Bapu Dham, the refugee camp in Delhi where Renuka had lived with her family and where her father was the camp president. They met Renuka's father and the children of the camp at a hall in Bapu Dham, which was in a scheduled caste area, where the most disadvantaged caste in India resided. The Pandits lived there in a community center that was divided into separate small rooms by plywood boards. The living conditions were overcrowded and barely sustainable, but were more habitable than the conditions in the next camp that they visited, a former marriage hall in a local Delhi market where two dozen Pandit families lived separated from each other by thin cotton curtains and saris. Garbage was strewn everywhere. Ashima and her colleagues were shocked and saddened. They befriended a teenage brother and sister from the camp and invited them to become part of Yakjah.

Ashima could not imagine what their life was like but she wanted to know. One night she slept in their quarters with them. Rats and stray dogs prowled through the hall, scurrying over sleeping bodies. Ashima couldn't sleep. All night long she wondered: *How can human beings live like this? When will it end?*

She and Yakjah wanted to do something for these Pandit communities, but Ashima was not sure what that something might be until her sister Archana, who taught English literature, told her about Sanjay Kumar. He was the director of Pandies Theater. Archana had collaborated with him on a workshop in Delhi, and now he was spearheading a theater project for Delhi schoolchildren designed to promote communal harmony. Ashima immediately called Sanjay and invited him to a Yakjah meeting.

At a coffee shop with Sanjay and the group, Ashima made a proposal. "You're working with Delhi schoolchildren: Can you take some of your time and funds for some other children in Delhi who are not part of one particular school?" She told him about the Pandit children in the Delhi camps. A free theater workshop for them that ended in performances in the camps would be very therapeutic. Sanjay agreed. The Yakjah group volunteered to help, and together they put on two theater workshops focused on communal harmony. The children were ecstatic.

Ashima knew these inspiring workshops were like nothing the children of the Kashmiri conflict had ever experienced. After enthusiastically received performances by all three workshop groups in Delhi Haat, a huge marketplace where artists and craftspeople from all over India performed and sold their artwork, Ashima made an even more ambitious proposal. "If you really want to work on community harmony in Jammu and Kashmir," she challenged Sanjay, "you should do a workshop with the children of both places."

This time, Ashima contacted the Athwaas couple that ran the Yateem Trust Orphanage in the Valley. They chose a group of Muslim children from the orphanage to join the workshop, along with Pandit children from the Delhi and Jammu camps.

Again, Yakjah's members volunteered to help in any way they could. Bilal and Shiban contributed personal funds to rent a bus to chauffeur the children. Shahnawaz, a friend of Pradeep's from Srinagar, volunteered to chaperone the children of Jammu and Kashmir to Delhi. By bus, he drove eight children from the orphanage in the Valley to Jammu University. The next day, he picked up the first eight children, added another eight from the Pandit camps, and drove them all to an orphan village outside of Delhi that offered free room and board to the children.

Shahnawaz reported to Ashima: On the way to the workshop in Delhi, many girls puked on the bus, and the Pandit and Muslim kids refused to sit next to each other at mealtimes. But by the time they were finished with the workshop, all the children were eating from the same plate. The workshop was a success. Ashima felt the subtle vibrations of powerful forces beginning to unfold.

In Delhi, Ashima and some of the Yakjah group took the children on a city tour that included a visit to a famous Sufi shrine, Hazrat Nizzamuddin. When the bus stopped in front of the shrine's gold and white onion dome and elaborately painted colonnade, Ashima sprung from her seat and marched out onto the sidewalk. She turned around to check on the children. Everyone else was standing in line behind her except for the Muslim boys from Kashmir, who stayed in their seats on the bus.

"What happened?" she asked.

"We don't worship Nizzamuddin."

"But he's a Sufi saint," said Ashima, puzzled.

"This is un-Islamic," one of the boys replied, his eyebrows knit in total seriousness.

This is what is happening in Kashmir, Ashima thought. She did not want to force them. "I am not even of your faith, and I'm going inside. If anyone wants to follow me, you are most welcome. But if you don't want to, you can sit until we come back." There was nothing else she could do. She would have to leave them in the bus. Ashima walked toward the shrine. One by one, the boys joined the line of children behind her.

At the end of the tour, when the children were climbing back on the bus, one of the boys came up to her. "Ma'am. I just want to share something. Nothing happened to me."

"What were you expecting would happen?" asked Ashima gently.

"Ma'am, I still remain the same."

He's beginning to open up, thought Ashima. She wanted to hug him, but she simply nodded her head and smiled.

At subsequent coffee shop meetings, Ashima and her Yakjah cohort all agreed to continue the workshops. But they had no money. Sanjay, too, kept calling Ashima asking to work with the kids again. A new idea slowly took shape.

By 2005, Yakjah and Sanjay had a plan: a seven-day theater camp where smaller groups of children could create their own episodes, then weave them together into a whole play. The theme and title this time: "Understanding Differences." The location for the camp: somewhere in the Kashmir Valley.

Ashima, Sanjay and the rest of Yakjah volunteered to raise funds for the project. But even with all their contacts, they could not raise enough money. Shahnawaz suggested they ask the new president of the People's Democratic Party in Jammu and Kashmir, the daughter of the region's new chief minister. Both were related to Shahnawaz; he knew them well.

The People's Democratic Party, which ruled the country and the government of Jammu and Kashmir, was the most progressive party to come to power since the start of the conflict in Kashmir. Under Prime Minister Vajpayee and Kashmir's Chief Minister Mufti Mohammed Sayeed, a ceasefire was brokered between India, the militants and Pakistan. People were actually talking to one another.

Ashima sat on her bed in her flat in Delhi, too anxious to call the minister's powerful daughter to ask for financial support but too tied to this new project not to try. She meditated and breathed in courage. Then she called Mehbooba Mufti Sayeed.

"Yeah, Ashima, how are you?" asked Mehbooba, who knew Ashima as a journalist.

"I'm volunteering my time and energy to this project," said Ashima, trying to remember to breathe. She explained the theater camp and its past success with young teenage Pandit and Muslim children and gave Shahnawaz as a reference. "We don't have any resources. You are a politician; you have the resources. Please help us."

"We appreciate the work you are doing," said Mehbooba. "Ask Shahnawaz to call me."

He did, and everything was organized: accommodations in Gulmarg, a beautiful ski resort village near forests and a wildlife sanctuary, transportation, food and beverages. Yakjah's project would become a reality. Ashima was thrilled.

She worked with Yakjah to assemble a group of 50 children from locations throughout Kashmir and Jammu for the new theater project. Pandit children would come from migrant camps in Delhi and Jammu, along with Muslim children from the Yateem Trust Orphanage and Baramulla

in northern Kashmir and Bijbihara, and a group of Shia Muslim girls from an orphanage in the Ladakh region, east of the Valley.

In mid-May, less than a month before the theater camp was scheduled to begin, a car bomb blew up in the Lal Chowk area of Srinagar. The next day, an unidentified militant threw a grenade at an army security force vehicle just outside the missionary school in Srinagar, killing a couple of people and injuring several children. Ashima was nervous that parents would no longer want to send their children to a workshop in an area so close to violence.

But no one backed out. She and the other adults of Yakjah tried not to think about the huge responsibility resting upon their shoulders.

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The Muslim and Pandit children sat on the bus in separate groups on the way to the theater camp in Gulmarg, but soon after the drive began they started to mingle, then rearrange themselves into groups of chatting boys and girls.

"*Eena meena deeka; rum pump posh; rum pump posh*," sang the girls at the top of their lungs. "*Shava shava; roop hai, tera shaava*," the chorus of boys sang in response.

They sang nonsense words back and forth to each other with such loud, joyous voices that the bus vibrated. But it was 10 o'clock at night, and they were riding through a quiet forest on the Tangmarg-Gulmarg road. Ashima checked every shadow lurking in the trees for evidence of militants.

"Shhh, lower your voices," she said. "Somebody will hear us."

"We are here, ma'am," said one of the Muslim boys.

"Nothing will happen," said a Pandit boy.

A chorus of Pandit and Muslim boys told her not to worry.

By midnight, all 50 children, ages 11 to 15, had arrived and were settled in tents pitched in a Gulmarg meadow inside their own sleeping bags. Ashima gave her sleeping bag to a child who didn't have one and nearly froze trying to share a sleeping bag with her 8-year-old son. But just a couple of hours earlier, as their bus had neared Gulmarg, a leopard had crossed the road, right in front of them, bringing with it an electric current of excitement. She still felt that electricity in the air as she tried to sleep. She knew that something wonderful was happening.

The next morning, Ashima gathered the children into a line and walked them uphill a short way to the restaurant where the government had organized meals for the camp. When all 50 children had filled their plates and were sitting in the grass together, she stood in amazement at how calm and cohesive the group had already become.

After breakfast, she assisted Sanjay as he led a series of games designed to help the children introduce themselves and learn to work together. They qualified their names with an adjective that began with the same letter; they told two lies and one truth about themselves; they tried to keep a balloon in the air as a whole group. Sanjay's games made the children laugh and use their imaginations as they grew more comfortable with each other.

Then they were divided into five groups, each containing children of different religious backgrounds, from different parts of Jammu and Kashmir and Delhi. From their own personal experiences, each group had to weave together a story based on the theme of understanding differences. Groups picked out subtopics like gender differences, disabilities, militancy and religion.

One group of boys was stuck on the word "terrorists" — the Pandits wanted to use it, but the Muslims insisted they use the term "freedom fighters." Ashima was intrigued to see the different ways the boys understood the conflict in Kashmir. Their sensibilities were shaped by the words they received from their families and communities and whatever they saw on television. They shouted at each other, attempting to assert their own points of view, but Ashima did not hear hatred coming from any of them. They finally made an agreement, settling on the Urdu word *daku*: an armed robber who, historically, lived in a ravine.

In between workshops, Ashima and a few other adults led the children on nature walks and tours of the area. On an interfaith tour of Gulmarg, they stopped at a mosque, a temple and a church. At the Hindu Shiv temple, Muslim boys pointed to images of the Hindu goddess, Kali, and god, Ganesha, asking who they were, why the goddess had her tongue sticking out, why the god had the head of an elephant. The shrine's Muslim caretaker answered each question with great respect for both the children and the religion. Ashima was pleased to see how intrigued and open the children seemed.

When they arrived at the church it was closed, but they could view its stone and wood exterior and stained glass windows.

"Have any of you seen a church before?" Ashima asked. No nods, not one raised hand.

"But I saw the movie *Amara Akbar Anthony*," said one of the Muslim boys. "There was a church in it."

"I saw that movie, too," said a Pandit boy. Many of the children had seen the Bollywood movie, starring Indian film celebrity Amita Bacchar as a Christian character.

One afternoon, after Sanjay led the painting workshop, Ashima was sitting on the grass by a tent while a Pandit boy sat inside painting. Two Muslim boys from Bijbihara walked by him speaking Kashmiri.

"He's a Pandit," said one of the boys.

"How do you know?"

"I've seen them on TV."

They are so innocent, thought Ashima. Their lack of connection to other cultures by any means other than mass media was so sad. But she could see the children's perceptions of each other changing in small but palpable ways.

One night, in his tent, a Pandit boy from Jammu began coughing loudly. He grew red-faced and sweaty, his breath, shallow and rapid. His asthma attack rapidly worsened, and Shahnawaz and Ashima rushed him to the Gulmarg hospital, where he was put on a respirator.

When Ashima returned to the camp at 10 o'clock, she took an anxious inventory of the rest of the children. But she could not find two of the kids from Baramulla, a boy and a girl. Ashima's heart pounded in panic. The camp had been going so smoothly. Was everything about to fall apart? In the pitch dark, she searched inside tents, around the mobile toilets, up by the restaurant, praying that they had not wandered into a forest or down a road. Finally, behind a tent, she saw their figures in the dark. They were quietly offering namaz for the Pandit boy.

On their own, the group of Shia Muslim girls from Ladakh, orphans of the Kargil war between the Indian Army and Pakistani intruders, made up a song. Ashima wept as soon as she heard their high, reedy, girlish voices sing the first two lines:

> *Iss desh ko na Hindu ya Musalman Chahiye,*
> *harr mahzab jisko pyara ho woh insaan Chahiye.*
>
> This country does not need a Hindu or a Muslim,
> She needs a human being who loves all of this.

They taught all four stanzas to the entire camp, children and adults. The first two lines became the chorus and the end of every stanza.

At the premiere of "Understanding Differences" in the 400-seat capacity auditorium at Srinagar's Bachelors in Education College, a huge crowd had gathered to see what the children of the Pandies Theater had created — what Yakjah had facilitated. Every seat was filled and people were standing in the aisles to see the play, a tapestry of stories about differences that the children had culled from their own lives.

At the end of the performance, they all sang the Ladakhi girls' song. The auditorium reverberated with the voices of the children: *This country does not need a Hindu or a Muslim. She needs a human being who loves all of this.* Ashima's eyes filled with tears. The audience around her was crying, too. After more than a decade of conflict, the region was thirsty for creative expression.

The Crumbling

In the spring of 2007, while Ashima was finishing up a Yakjah workshop at the university in Jammu, she got a call from her 19-year old daughter, Raashi, in Delhi. Ashima's husband had been rushed to the hospital with an asthma attack. Ashima left all her work behind, rushed to the airport and booked the first flight home. Ravi was diagnosed with Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease. As the year wore on, his health continued to decline and she found it more and more difficult to leave Delhi. At the same time, international organizations began to seek her out for her work in Kashmir as the WISCOMP liaison with Athwaas, as a Yakjah facilitator and as a journalist. She worked as hard as she could, hoping that her successes would someday make Ravi accept her deep need to help the people of conflict-ridden Kashmir.

The next months were filled with new opportunities. As Athwaas gained more international attention as a peacebuilding organization, Ashima — as WISCOMP's local Kashmiri face of Athwaas — became more visible as well. WISCOMP assigned her to work with Peace Direct, a British organization that had begun supporting the Athwaas Samanbals. The American Center in New Delhi recommended her for two back-to-back international leadership programs in the United States. Ashima, who had never been to the U.S. before, spent a month and a half traveling from the east coast to Hawaii. Then she was invited to be part of the Institute for Inclusive Security's colloquium in Washington, D.C., and Cambridge Massachusetts. Peace Direct also wanted her to come to London to talk about her work in Kashmir. But Ravi's health continued to waver, so Ashima chose to travel only when he was well enough to be left alone. She put her trip to London on hold.

Meanwhile, conflict in Jammu and Kashmir flared over the Amarnath Shrine, pulling at her and Athwaas's other members. The shrine, a cave in the snow-covered mountains east of Srinagar, forms an ice stalagmite between May and August that has been worshipped by Hindus for millennia as a *Shiva Linga*, a sign of the Hindu God Shiva. But the shrine is in predominately Muslim Kashmir Valley; its caretaker is Muslim. In May 2008, the Indian government and the government of Jammu and Kashmir agreed to transfer 99 acres of forest in the Valley to the Shri Amarnathji Shrine Board, so that the board could set up temporary shelters and facilities for Hindu pilgrims. Many Kashmiris, particularly Muslim separatists, saw the agreement as a threat to their religious identity and sense of nationhood.

Ashima read about and heard friends describe the rallies — with crowds of up to 500,000 — to protest the transfer of forestland to Hindus who planned to build on it. Police fired into a crowd of demonstrators in Srinagar, killing six people and injuring 100. When the government canceled the controversial proposal, pro-Hindu protesters — certain their faith was being attacked — took to the streets. They threatened to shut down Jammu city. Protesters blocked highway traffic. A Hindu man committed suicide in public. Muslim and Hindu demonstrators clashed with police and paramilitary forces, leading to arrests. More violence. Multiple deaths.

Throughout the three months of struggle, Ashima urged the members of Athwaas to meet and talk about it. She hoped the group of Muslim, Hindu and Sikh women — whose mission was to build bridges of trust and reconciliation — would unite against the human rights violations perpetrated by both sides. She hoped they would find the common ground that eluded Kashmir as a whole.

"I can't talk about it," said Hamida, whose husband was a leader in the Muslim separatist movement. The other Athwaas women stayed equally silent.

Ashima lay awake, anxious. She wondered: *When religion is involved, does the moral courage to speak out leave us?* But she did not share her distress or her own opinion of what should be done, certain that her first responsibility was to keep the group together.

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In April of 2009, with Ravi on the mend, Ashima finally agreed to fly to London to talk with Peace Direct about Athwaas and her other work in Kashmir. On the night of her flight, Dr. Gopinath invited her to dinner at her apartment. Ravi wasn't feeling well and Ashima still had loose ends to take care of, but Dr. Gopinath insisted. Ashima did not feel she could say no.

In the living room of her home in Delhi, Ashima packed the last of her belongings for her flight while Ravi fixed himself tea and sat down by her on a low table in the living room. He looked like a dark wraith under the pale shawl he had wrapped around his shoulders and the long, white pajama kurta covering his body. His eyes, dark as tea leaves, always reflected his intelligent, independent character. But that night, for the first time, they also reflected sadness, openness. He looked so vulnerable sitting there. Whenever she left for work, he never got in her way; he had too much of an ego. But this time his eyes asked her to stay.

Ashima's heart raced. Devotion and passion still pulsed inside her for her husband. She wanted to hug him. She wanted to tell him about all the complexities in her work life, reach out to him with questions about their relationship. His family background, which led him to define women as homemakers and to disapprove of her work and travel to Kashmir, had created a chasm between them. They never talked through their differences. He never wanted to.

But she was stubborn, too — about her work, about seeing it through, about doing her best no matter what. She would only be away from Delhi for five days. He would be there when she returned. He always was. Ashima vowed to explain everything to Ravi, make peace with him and start afresh, as soon as her trip was over.

She memorized Ravi's face, the teacup in his hands, and picked up her suitcase and left. After dinner at Dr. Gopinath's, she flew to London. While she was there, Ravi suffered a cardiac arrest. He was not there when she returned.

Ravi was so smart, such a well-respected journalist in India, such a charming, handsome man, such a good, upright human being, and so closed. Ashima had spent more than 20 years in awe of him, taking responsibility for their failure to communicate, trying to make up for it by striving to gain Ravi's approval for her work as a journalist and grassroots organizer in Kashmir. While he was alive, he never gave her the approval and confirmation she desired. Then, suddenly, he was gone. There was no one to strive to please.

So Ashima looked inward. She had begun meditating as a way to heal her searing back pain after Agastya was born, and she continued the practice during the most stressful times in her life, especially when her work stirred up such overwhelming emotions that she had two nervous

breakdowns. After Ravi's death, she intensified her meditation practice, frequented Sufi shrines and sacred spaces in Delhi and Kashmir, and gave herself time to reflect.

During her reflections, she looked at the aspect of herself that she found most troubling: the constant striving to be the best, a motivation that had driven her since she was a child and dominated her relationship with Ravi.

It's not about the other person at all, she gradually understood. *It's about myself*. The approval she needed was within.

She walked to the unexplored edges of herself, questioned her core beliefs and examined her fears of failure, her anger, her bitterness, what made her joyous and content. She could no longer run away from herself. Instead, she began the process of self-acceptance, of both her positive and negative aspects. She envisioned herself as breath, a breath beyond her own fragile human body; breath as ethereal as the image of the moon seen from Earth, breath as the gift of remembrance.

She was crumbling.

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In 2010, the Kashmir Valley was wracked by new violent conflict. Ashima followed the events with constant concern. A volunteer with the Territorial Army of India, a former police officer and a counter-insurgent killed three Muslim men in the Baramulla district, claiming they were armed militants from Pakistan. When the truth came out — that the men were local Kashmiris who had been lured to the army camp with the promise of jobs then shot for a cash award — demonstrations, boycotts and shutdowns rippled throughout the Valley. Pro-Kashmiri independence rioters attacked police with stones and burned buildings and vehicles. The Central Reserve Police Force and the Jammu and Kashmir police fired teargas shells, rubber bullets and live ammunition at protesters, killing 112 people, including an 11-year-old boy and many teenagers. All of it—the violence, the unrest, the deaths — became fodder for rival political parties in Jammu and Kashmir.

What has gone wrong with police forces here? Ashima worried. Neither force was as well trained as the Indian Army. They had clearly lost their minds.

When the Indian government stepped in, sending top-level interlocutors to interview people all over the region, from civil society and youth to political and business leaders, Ashima approached the members of Athwaas. As the only organized collective of women in Kashmir and Jammu from diverse backgrounds, whose aim had always been to build peace in the region through dialogue, she wanted their voices to be heard, too — as a united group.

Hamida and the rest of Athwaas's Muslim members who were allied with separatist movements told Ashima they did not want to be part of an Indian government initiative. One member, Qurrat, confessed: "I can't publically go. There will be a backlash by separatists. They're watching us."

Gurmeet, a Sikh member of Athwaas and a friend Qurrat's, did not want to go if Qurrat was not going. Ashima tried to change the young woman's mind. "I'll get back to you," said Gurmeet.

Ashima asked Neerja to talk to the collective's undecided and recalcitrant members. Ashima hoped that Professor Mattu's influence, as the group's most senior and respected participant, would convince the other women to change their minds and work together.

A few mornings later, Ashima picked up the daily newspaper. On the front page was a large photo of the Indian government interlocutors meeting the Kashmiri civil society in Srinagar. The article under the photo listed Hamida and Qurrat among the participants in the dialogue the day before. They had gone to meet the interlocutors on their own. It felt like a stab in the back to Athwaas — and to Ashima herself.

But she was not surprised. She remembered a conversation between Athwaas members three years before, part of a meeting in Qurrat's beautiful living room. They were trying to figure out how to respond to the idea of a roundtable discussion initiated by Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh. The prime minister had proposed the roundtable as a way to resolve the region's long-standing problems. Ashima and five of Athwaas's members sat on round pillows made of multi-colored silk next to ladder-like shelves dotted with photos of Qurrat's children. Glass windows looked out onto meticulously tended flowers, freshly mown grass and apricot trees. This space, thought Ashima, was a wonderful expression of loving, feminine care.

"Don't you think women should be included in this peace process?" Ashima had posited.

"What peace process are you talking about?" asked Hamida. "There is no peace process."

"All the better that there is no formal peace process already set," said Ashima. "Then it's up to us, as women, to create a new one. We can define the process instead of waiting to be included in something already defined by existing political parties, by the state, by men."

"What are you saying about women?" Hamida asked, her voice rising.

Hamida refused to see the opportunity open to Athwaas. They could, as a group of respected Kashmiri women, defy the status quo that kept the conflict alive in the region. The roundtable could be a platform to create new ways of thinking about and building peace, ways defined by feminine principles of inclusivity, reconciliation and compassion. Athwaas could create a space as lovingly designed and tended as Qurrat's living room and garden for nurturing and healing to happen.

Instead, Hamida stuck to the same view of Kashmir that she held when Ashima first interviewed her, over 10 years ago, before Ashima became a consultant for WISCOMP, before Athwaas was born. A professor at the University of Kashmir, Hamida focused on feminist theory in literature. "What about the rights of a Muslim woman within the Muslim community and the oppression she faces by her own men?" Ashima asked her.

"Our first priority is to challenge and fight against the oppression of outside terrorists, the state, the military, the security forces," Hamida answered. "Later we will deal with our own men." That later never came.

Ashima saw that in the nine years of Athwaas's existence, in her nine years struggling to bring Kashmiri women of diverse backgrounds together to better the lives of all women in Kashmir and build a constituency of forward-thinking Kashmiris, nothing had really changed for the women she knew.

Hamida recognized the need to challenge the patriarchal structures outside of herself but not within her own community. The same had been true for Kshama when she chose to leave Athwaas because she felt her Pandit identity demeaned by the attention paid to Muslim members. Both women saw themselves as representatives of their communities, their politics, their religions, not as peacebuilders working toward common ground. The other Athwaas members were the same, and Ashima, as facilitator, never directly acted from her own beliefs. Instead, she became caught up in an emotional vortex, trying to placate the women and keep them together, afraid that if she spoke up, she would be accused of taking one side or the other.

But after Ravi's death, after she was able to look within herself, she could finally admit that what she wanted for Athwaas was never going to happen.

She also admitted her own emotional allegiance to her Pandit heritage. She was a Pandit, wanted to speak up about Pandits, felt, like Kshama, that the Muslim members of Athwaas ignored the Pandits of Kashmir. Ashima knew that Athwaas's Muslim members were empathetic toward the displaced Pandits they had visited in the camps, but they minimized their concern by shifting their attention to the Muslims displaced along the Line of Control. Hamida described the Kashmir conflict as a conflict between India and Kashmir's right to self-determination and *azadi*,[9] not a conflict between Hindus and Muslims.

In her heart, Ashima perceived the conflict differently. Maybe the Kashmiri Pandit narrative was not the majority narrative in Kashmir, but Pandit lives mattered. Adding the Pandit narrative to Kashmir's majority Muslim narrative would lead to reconciliation, religious inclusiveness, and healing, necessary steps for creating a peaceful, democratic Kashmir.

Ashima had constantly wracked her brain for ways to bring this spiritual, inclusive point of view into Athwaas's discussions, but she remained baffled. And she feared the Pandora's box of issues that lay beneath the surface within the group. The question was constantly coming back to her: *Would the collective break if these issues came out in the open?*

After Ravi's death and much self-reflection, Ashima made her decision: It was time to step away from Athwaas, away from WISCOMP. She needed time to be quiet and continue reflecting, she wrote to Dr. Gopinath, to figure out her life. Ashima was ready to change. She was ready to crumble.

The Opening of the Lotus

On the smooth, dry surface of a large rock on a bank of the Ganges River in Rishikesh, Ashima sat with her feet in the water, contemplating its stillness and the steep green hills that touched the Indian sky beyond the town's buildings. It was 2009 and she was at a two-day Sufi-Yogi Dialogue organized by the Global Peace Initiative of Women. All day, she had listened to Muslim and Hindu theologians discuss the shared spiritual roots of their mystical traditions — and how those shared roots could bridge conflicts between Hindus and Muslims in India, Pakistan and Afghanistan. The day had been long. Ashima welcomed the evening break by the river.

A man with deep-set eyes sat on a nearby rock. He appeared to be in his 30s, 10 or more years younger than she was. He looked back at her. They sat on their rocks in silence then got up together to go back to the hotel on the riverbank. On the way, he introduced himself as Lavlesh Bhanot. He was part of the conference, too. And he agreed with Ashima that many of the presentations, though fascinating, missed a vital component: how to practice, on a personal level, the interfaith aspects of Islam and Hinduism, not just examine them on an intellectual level.

Lavlesh also lived in Delhi, where he was a facilitator and educator. "What do you do?" he asked.

Ashima told him about Athwaas, its triumphs and troubles, how the group was fragmenting. She also told him about Ravi's death. Utterly painful as this experience was, it was also — with the help of her meditation practice — connecting her to a deeper inner awareness.

"It's only when I connect to my own being that I can allow solutions that are already there to surface."

She also told him about Yakjah, how she wanted to bring that deeper inner awareness to the young people in the workshops. "How do I plant this seed and bring it into a political, economic, social and cultural space, when I don't even have language for this process?" Ashima asked.

"Let's do a workshop together," said Lavlesh, with calm confidence. "I have the answer to what you're looking for."

He talked to Ashima about the mind and consciousness in reference to the self, how your perceptions are based on what you learn from your culture, society and family. In order to truly move beyond a cycle of conflict to a greater awareness of who you really are, you need to examine those perceptions and strip them away so that healing and transformation to a higher consciousness can emerge.

His ideas elated Ashima. They brought into focus what she'd been contemplating since she began meditating, and particularly what she had been thinking and feeling since Ravi's death. The root cause of conflict was not economic or political. Those were aftereffects. The root cause was the human mind itself. Lack of integration within caused economic and political disintegration.

After she returned to Delhi, Ashima contacted Lavlesh. They discussed creating a leadership workshop for Kashmiri college students that would incorporate meditation, exercises and

explorations of perception to guide the young people toward self-awareness and conscious leadership.

In 2010, after Ashima had stepped away from WISCOMP and Athwaas, Peace Direct approached her about partnering with Yakjah. Here were more people as excited about Yakjah as Ashima and her colleagues. Yakjah became an official NGO with Ashima as its director and Peace Direct providing new critical, financial and promotional backing for the workshops, the first of which was Ashima's collaboration with Lavlesh.

Together they designed a five-day workshop-in-residence for 50 students at the Gandhi Darshan Samiti, where a comprehensive exhibition on Gandhi was intermingled with facilities for students from all over the world on a beautiful 36-acre campus in Delhi.

Ashima invited Sanjay[10] to direct the first two days of the workshop. He would lead the students through exercises to open them to their new environment and each other. Rashmi Virendra, a teacher-trainer, would show slides on how the mind worked to create perceptions and illusions, setting the stage for Lavlesh's discussion about perception and consciousness. The students would be involved in games and discussions throughout the workshop, and watch films like *Invictus*, about Nelson Mandela's work for reconciliation as president of South Africa.

Ashima also coached Rashmi, who was staying at the Gandhi Darshan Samiti with the female students, on starting informal discussions with them at night about their definitions of gender, femininity and piety. She knew these girls' struggles well.

A Kashmiri Pandit journalist from the *Hindustan Times* — whose own family had migrated from the Valley 20 years before — wrote an article in praise of the workshop, announcing his newfound hope for Kashmir after meeting such positive young people. They didn't carry hate for "the other" inside them like the Hindu and Muslim Kashmiris of his generation.

Overjoyed by the workshop's success, Ashima worked hard to develop the process. The reports she had to fill out for Peace Direct helped her hone her ideas about positive change and transformation — the goal of the workshop — and develop indicators for measuring that change. Peace Direct also put together a yearly exchange between all the grassroots organizations they partnered with and were interested in, organizations from all over the world that taught Ashima even more workshop tools and theories.

Lavlesh's knowledge of the ways the mind works, his study of its perceptual processes and his deep understanding of how those processes transformed people's thoughts and emotions, remained a foundation of the new Yakjah workshops. Ashima tweaked his dialogues for the young students from Kashmir and Jammu, making concepts more accessible with examples from their lives. A concept like "perception forms an image" became a discussion about how rumors got started, how looking at a person and only seeing what you thought you knew created a distorted image that had very little to do with what was in front of you. Meditation practice was another foundation of the workshops.

The workshop developed into a three-level system that Yakjah implements. The first level is a two-day class linking perception and communication, with 40 to 50 local high school and college-

aged girls and boys, mostly from Jammu and Kashmir, who are members of India's Ministry of Youth or students in media studies or social work.

The class begins with a debriefing. Students sit in a circle with a Yakjah facilitator, who invites them to comment on hypothetical situations through a series of questions: "Who do you think a woman is?" "Who is a Kashmiri?" "How would you describe a truck driver?" The inevitable stock responses — "a woman is kind," "a Kashmiri is Muslim," "a truck driver is a Sikh man who drinks a lot" — prompt the class to re-examine their answers for stereotypes, prejudices and limitations. This discussion leads to a multimedia seminar about how the mind perceives: how sensory information, gathered though sight, smell, hearing, touch and taste, is processed by the brain and given meaning.

Then the workshops move to activities designed to heighten students' awareness of their senses — like the blindfold test. Twenty students are paired together: boys with girls, Muslims with Hindus. They stand in a square, one partner blindfolded, the other standing behind him or her. The seeing partner leads the blindfolded partner to the other side of the square using unique coded language, maybe flower names or facial features that signify directions like left, right and forward, so that the unseeing partner can distinguish his or her instructions from everyone else's. In the debrief following the exercise, many young people link the experience to their daily lives in Kashmir and Jammu. "We hear so many people say so many things, the political parties, the government, the militants. How do we find our own direction?"

In another activity, the students are divided into two groups. One forms a circle; the other has to break into that circle. Both groups have different rules about what they can and can't do. The result usually involves tickling, playful fighting, cheering and laughter. The game, of course, is a metaphor. "Think of the inner circle as a new idea," says the facilitator. "To break into a new idea, or change something in your own society or culture, there is always resistance. So break in."

From the first-level workshops, Ashima and Yakjah's other senior members invite 10 students from different regions in Jammu and Kashmir and Delhi who appear to be "leaders-in-the-making" — young people who are particularly articulate or responsive to Yakjah's process — to the second-level residential workshop. Yakjah holds these workshops on peaceful, well-maintained campuses near nature, in a region unfamiliar to the chosen students.

At this point, Yakjah's facilitators guide the students through meditations, visualizations and activities focused on healing, understanding and awareness of each other, which lead the students to Yakjah's third level: becoming advocates for each other. Students from Kashmir learn to speak on behalf of students from Jammu and Delhi and vice versa and learn nonviolent solutions to community issues. They become a "collective consciousness" of love, compassion and peaceful advocacy throughout the region, supporting each other in public, influencing their peers, their friends, their schools, their communities.

In one of the meditation exercises, one that Ashima herself facilitates, the young people lie down with their eyes closed. She asks them to become aware of their breath. "Envision what you want to do if you have only 60 years to live," she says. Then 50, 40, 20. One year, one month, one week, one day, one hour. When she says, "You only have time for the breath you take in and the breath you give out," the students breathe in and out for as long as they possibly can. Some of the

young people break down, crying. Afterwards, as they debrief, many of them say, *In the end, I just wanted to connect* or *I just wanted to breathe deeply*.

"This is actually what you need to do for the next 60 years," Ashima replies. "This is becoming aware."

The next step is a more in-depth discussion and multimedia demonstration of how the mind works and how thoughts and emotions can be transformed by thinking "out of the box," away from entrenched ideas about the self. The students examine what they're thinking and feeling and why they have those particular thoughts and feelings — where their emotions and logic come from. Then they share their stories. Ashima listens carefully to the young people's needs, for ways she might be able to help them.

They talk about their tumultuous lives, lives that may involve sexual harassment, drug use or, often, "stone pelting:" One Kashmiri boy who was involved with a group of stone-pelters felt comfortable enough with Ashima to ask for her help. He had been arrested by the police; his case was pending in court.

"What did you do?" Ashima asked.

"Nothing, Ma'am. I was there with the boys and we burned the railway station."

Ashima knew that this boy's anger — and much of the anger that young people born in Kashmir after 1990 felt — stemmed from the lack of government and high level of violence that permeated their lives. The only way they knew to express their anger and helplessness at injustice and discrimination in their communities was through violent stone pelting and other destructive behavior. Through Yakjah, Ashima created alternatives forms of expression for the boys. Right of Information Law workshops taught them how to access information from the government to improve their lives and the lives of people in their communities. And advocacy workshops taught them to look for nonviolent solutions — like letter-writing campaigns — to their problems.

Ashima met another boy who had been playing cricket near a group of stone-pelters and was arrested and put in lockup at a police station for seven days, even though he was innocent. Every day, his parents came to visit him with food they had prepared at home.

"My parents were able to forgive the policeman who did this, but I still can't," he confessed during a workshop. When invited to a second residential Yakjah workshop, he did not want to go, so Ashima went to his home. He greeted her warmly, happy that she had come to see him. She and his parents encouraged him to continue to be part of Yakjah, but he did not want to risk letting down his guard again. Ashima vowed to continue trying to reach him.

Another boy, who also pelted stones, thought Islam was the only great religion and accused Yakjah of being under Indian Army sponsorship and having a secret agenda to brainwash Kashmiri young people. Ashima and the other Yakjah adults thanked him for expressing himself, never told him he was wrong, but suggested there might be other ways to deal with his problems besides drug use and stone pelting. The boy, surprisingly, agreed. Ashima saw the flicker of transformation

beginning to light up his mind. At another Yakjah workshop, he shared that he had heard of Kashmiri Pandits and wanted to meet them.

"We are planning a dialogue with some students in Jammu who are Pandits," Ashima said. "But I am a Pandit, too. We don't have horns." He began corresponding with Ashima on Facebook and one day told her he wanted to do something to bring the Pandits back to Kashmir.

Ashima invited him, along with other Kashmiri boys from Yakjah workshops who had expressed an interest in Pandits, to join her on a field trip to the big festival held every year at the shrine to the Hindu goddess Kheer Bhawani. It was one of the most important shrines to Kashmiri Pandits, located in a town a few miles east of Srinagar. Pandits from all over India would be there. Ashima drove her own car from Delhi, picked up the boys from the Valley and drove them to the shrine. They sat under beautiful *chinar* maple trees with the other visitors and watched Pandits making offerings to the goddess. They checked the color of the water from the divine spring underneath the shrine, known to turn reddish black during turbulent times in Kashmir. At other times it was white or green. That day it was blue and covered with rose petals. None of the boys wanted to leave.

After visiting the shrine, Ashima took the teenage boys out for tea and food. One of the boys, who in the past had expounded insurgent rhetoric, shared the story of his childhood. His mother had died in an accident when he was 10. His father was a former militant. The boy had been in and out of trouble. He was a stone-pelter. The scar on his face was a bullet wound. "Now I want to be the best son to my father," he told Ashima.

The boy went on to study journalism in college and founded a web magazine. He volunteered with Yakjah, assisting other students during workshops and getting involved in community projects, like support for victims of the 2014 floods in Kashmir. He was becoming a conscious leader, an advocate for others.

Ashima was heartened by his transformation. His mind was like a lotus just opening up, its petals unfolding into full bloom: her vision for the youth of Yakjah.

Sowing the Seed in Another

When Ashima met the girl at Yakjah's first residential theater workshop in Gulmarg,[11] Rehana was a tiny 15-year-old with pale skin and a heart-shaped face that barely contained her long-lashed, large, dark eyes. She was part of a group of shy young Muslim girls from the Valley who wore headscarves and took full responsibility for picking up all the messes made by the Pandit and Muslim boys at the camp.

After a couple of days, Ashima approached them. "The boys must also take the responsibility for cleaning," she said, as gently but resolutely as she could. "It's not your job to do all of it." Rehana and the other girls obeyed. By the end of the workshop, Rehana and many of the teenage Muslim and Pandit students had become fast friends. Ashima frequently heard about her visits with other Yakjah alumni.

In 2007, Ashima reconnected with Rehana when she read a brilliant short story she'd written about her life in Kashmir at a WISCOMP writing workshop. Rehana also participated in the 2009 workshop in Delhi with Lavlesh[12] and showed herself to be an eloquent leader-in-training. But the next year, when Ashima called her, she was hysterical.

The entire Kashmir region was on edge. Three innocent Kashmiri Muslim men had been killed for a cash reward on claims that they were militants. Thousands of Kashmiris protested the Indian security forces and the Indian government, and riots between protesters and the paramilitary police led to the deaths of innocent boys and a rise in stone pelting all over the region.

In Rehana's town, right after Friday Muslim prayers, boys had run to the main road to throw stones at the paramilitary, who threw stones back and fired guns at them. She'd seen everything from the window of her home on the main road. The paramilitary threw stones at the walls of Rehana's house, too, breaking the windows, but she was more worried about the boys than herself. She was so afraid that they would be killed or wounded that she rushed out to the road and grabbed two boys, one after the other, and tore at their shirts. "Go back home!" she shouted in their faces. Then she pushed them toward the colony where they all lived, away from the police.

"I feel completely run down," she told Ashima over the phone. She felt cornered from both sides. The security forces were killing Muslim boys. "But when I protest, there are violations against me." She became a Muslim "other." But she was the same "Muslim Rehana" who had Pandit friends in the migrant camps in Jammu and Delhi.

"If this continues I will commit suicide," she said.

Ashima heard the overwhelming distress in the young woman's voice and feared for her life. After she hung up the phone, she called Yakjah's senior members. "We have to act now," she told them.

They gathered their limited resources and put together an intervention. Three senior members of Yakjah — Ashima, Pradeep and Shahnawaz — would invite Rehana and Wahid, another gifted Yakjah leader-in-training, along with five other Yakjah associates from Jammu, to a meeting about the recent violence in Kashmir. Then they would take the young people out to dinner

to meet a mutual friend of theirs, an Indian Army lieutenant colonel who had a way of winning people's hearts. He was honest and could acknowledge the wrongs perpetrated by the army, but Ashima warned him that he might not be comfortable with what the young people had to say. "But please," she asked, "you must listen to them."

At the meeting in Jammu, the older adults listened intently to the young people's anger. Then they took Rehana, Wahid and the rest of the group to a quiet restaurant in Jammu to meet the lieutenant colonel. They told the young people to say what was on their minds but to be respectful. He was their friend.

"We see the Indian Army as destroyers, not protectors of young people," said Wahid. Indian laws were too stringent against the young people. They felt alienated from the system and turned toward militant ideology, which, he knew, was wrong. "But the army needs to win back our hearts."

Ashima was proud of this tall, thin, Muslim young man, his ability to listen to his peers, articulate their point of view in a clear, calm way, and come up with a solution.

Then Rehana spoke with honest passion. Her eyes widened in dove-like vulnerability. "When the paramilitary come and search for young people, for the stone-pelters, they just walk into our homes and don't care about our privacy." Then her eyes shifted, taking sparrow-hawk aim at the officer. "If this kind of thing happened in Saudi Arabia, they would be hanged. Saudi Arabian Islamic laws should come here."

"Why would you want that?" Ashima asked, concerned by Rehana's dramatic response. "Do you know the repercussions of Islamic law?"

"We would have our own way of living. We don't want unknown people to walk into our homes. Islamic law would protect us." Her eyes widened again. "Under Hindu India, we always feel we are a minority. That's the fear that pushes us. That's why we ask for an Islamic state."

The lieutenant colonel examined Rehana with the concentration of a crow. "It is very challenging to separate militants from civilians," he said. He explained the hierarchy in the army and the paramilitary: The Indian Army had a disciplined accountability system built into it, as opposed to the ranks in the Central Reserve Police Force, who did not have to answer to one another, making it very difficult to maintain accountability within the paramilitary. But all security officers were grouped together by the public.

His eyes focused on Rehana with a seriousness to match hers. He gave her his card with his local numbers. "Any time there is an issue in your area, please let me know."

By the end of dinner, Rehana's face brightened, her gestures became gentler, her conversation, lighter. Ashima was almost sure that she would not commit suicide or become a radical separatist, but she could still sense the girl's anxiety. Later that evening, Ashima took Rehana aside and lovingly scolded the young woman. "Please remember: Yakjah is always there for you. Promise me you'll never say those things about suicide and radicalism again."

Rehana smiled. "I promise I will not. Yakjah is my family."

The next year, in 2011, Rehana told her story at the Yakjah theater workshop in Bhaderwah. Other students discussed the brutalities and violations of the law committed by the paramilitary and the Indian Army. One Hindu boy in the group, whose brother had been in the army and was killed in Kashmir, argued that the discussion was one-sided. "What about the sacrifices the army makes and the violations against them? Nobody wants to talk about that." He stormed out of the hall and went home.

But the next day, he came back. Ashima heard what happened from Rehana. She met him separately on campus and told him the story of her father, how he had made the wrong choice to become a militant. "If an army officer does something wrong," Rehana had told the boy, "his wrong has to be acknowledged, too."

What a firebrand, thought Ashima, proud of the young woman's honest, forthright support of the boy — which had obviously helped him. Rehana was persuasive and passionate, on her way to becoming a leader. Yakjah recommended her for an entrepreneurial fellowship, and she was accepted. The next step was an interview in Delhi, so Ashima invited her to stay with her.

The evening after the interview, Ashima sat with Rehana at the cane dining table in her Delhi home, chatting with her late into the night. She wanted to talk to the young woman about reconciling with her father's choices, choices that led to his militancy, his death and the death of others. It was an issue that a number of Yakjah's young people wrestled with. Rehana and those of her generation who had undergone a particular awakening and self-realization in Yakjah's workshops wanted to be part of creating a peaceful Kashmir, not part of the continued conflict that was destroying it. But to live by those principles, they had to disown their parents' worldview and, in some cases, their actions.

Rehana's father died when she was small. She still loved the man he was but had trouble coming to terms with the consequences of his decision to be a Kashmiri militant. Ashima knew that Rehana was courageous, but she was also very emotional. Could she acknowledge that her father had made wrong choices and still retain her newfound self-worth, the self-worth she needed to live according her own inclusive, peaceful worldview?

"The choices your father made and the person he was are two different things," Ashima insisted. He chose to be a militant based on ignorance. Nobody ever showed him anything different. At the true core of his being lay love and compassion. But he didn't know it. Layers and layers of external influences got in his way. "You need to separate the action from the person."

Rehana nodded her head. "I realize that," she said, over and over.

But Ashima knew that coming to this realization was not a linear journey. Someone can remain conflicted for a long time and have moments of vulnerability that could pull one back into the cocoon from which one had emerged. For over 15 years, Ashima had continued her own journey of self-discovery and transformation.

"Thank you for helping me," Rehana said.

Ashima felt very connected to Rehana, this smart, eloquent, passionate young woman with so much on her mind. She worried about the financial, physical and emotional survival of her single mother and younger brother, who she wanted to keep from falling into militancy. And she still grappled with the legacy of her father.

Ashima helped Rehana as much as she could, finding opportunities for her, counseling her and encouraging her. She recommended her for youth leader conferences outside of India and fought to get the young woman a passport, despite harassment from a government intelligence agency worker because of Rehana's Muslim background and her father's history.

A couple of months later, Ashima went to the Valley to stay overnight with Rehana and her family. Afterwards, in the taxi on the way back to Srinagar, Rehana lightly touched Ashima's petite right hand with her own small fingers.

"Ma'am, I've been wanting to tell you something. I have a feeling I know you from before."

Ashima felt the same way. That was why, through the young woman's emotional highs and lows, she always wanted to reach out. She felt confident in Rehana's inclusive vision of Islam, her willingness to bring up women's rights at the seminary she now attended. Ashima would keep encouraging her to blossom and pass on her strong views to her classmates.

"Madwoman," said Ashima, in loving jest. "You get to know that only now? I always knew that."

Ashima had scattered and planted her seeds. The rest of the distance, she sat in silence with the young woman. No more conversation, just connection, and the hope that Rehana and the other young people of Yakjah would continue to sow the seeds of deeper awareness — seeds of positive transformation in Kashmir.

A CONVERSATION WITH ASHIMA KAUL

The following is an edited interview with IPJ Director Dee Aker on October 16, 2014, with additions and clarifications based on interviews conducted by Alison Morse between October 3 and November 24, 2014, as well as additional thoughts by Ashima Kaul.

Q: Can you tell us about your grandmother and father and other people who influenced you when you were a child?

A: My grandmother, my father's mother, was a feminist. She started the first home science school in Kashmir and reached out to Muslim families, encouraging and motivating them to send their daughters to study. She believed that a woman had to step out, get an education and network. She used her Kashmiri Pandit culinary skills to impress the elite Muslim circle in their homes. She also invited them to her house. My father was a very bold police officer and a very honest one. Some of these values, and the values of growing up in St. Joseph's, the missionary school, where we had Irish brothers and sisters, and this syncretic culture that I imbibed, had a deep impact on me.

Q: Why did you become a journalist?

A: I always wanted to write and I always wanted to be a journalist. All Kashmiri Pandits and Muslims in those times wanted their children to be either doctors or engineers. My father wanted me to be a doctor. He urged me to take the entrance exam, which I cleared, but I refused the seat saying that I wanted to be a journalist. I wanted to express what was going on in my mind.

Q: Although you remained a journalist, you were transformed into an activist. Tell us about that.

A: I wanted to go back to Jammu and Kashmir for stories of women. I started visiting the jails in Jammu, interviewing women from the Kashmir Valley whose brothers or husbands were imprisoned.

I also started planning how to go back to the Valley. It wasn't easy. My family came down on me. "Are you crazy?" they said. "You want to go back to Kashmir? All of them are part of this movement. They will be a threat to your life." So I dropped my surname, Kaul, which reveals that I'm a Pandit. I had married a non-Kashmiri, so I took on my husband's name and I became a journalist from India: Ashima Bhatia. For almost two years I did not reveal that I was a Pandit. I lived in dread of being discovered.

I went to Kashmir and saw that all progressive symbols were burned or desecrated. Cinema houses and beauty salons were closed down. Morning prayers in schools became exclusivist. Sufis were killed and shrines bombed.

From 1998 to 1999 I researched and interviewed women in remote villages, villages that were picnic spots for me and friends and family when I was growing up. I met women from women's wings of separatist and militant groups. They shared their personal stories of joining the movement, taking pride in marrying Mujahadeen or offering their services to them. Many became couriers and nurses. I interviewed the chief of Dukhtaran-e-Millat, a radical women's organization that enforced strict

Islamic laws on women, including the wearing of burkas. Their women's brigade threw acid on women to enforce the dress code. She justified the use of violence. After four hours of conversation, it was amply clear that she was using religion to create a public space for her own emancipation, which her ideologue father and brother had denied her.

I also did interviews with women who had become victims of the militarization of Kashmir. In Kunan Poshpora they were raped by the army. In the "Villages of Widows," Dardpora and Wakoora, intra-fratricidal war between militant groups left hundreds of women as widows. They became each other's enemies and fought for resources.

Women heavily paid the price of the conflict. Disappearances, custodial killings, fake encounters by the military, unwanted pregnancies, abductions, enforced marriages and brutal killings by militants in the name of religion, nationalism and personal pride, vendettas, goals set by men — all this pushed the women to invisibility and silence. Women from both sides cashed in on their victimhood.

I took the pain and the narratives of these women home with me. I started realizing that writing wasn't enough. I had to do something about the situation. I had to bring these narratives to the foreground. That was when I went to the Pandit refugee camps. I thought that if I went to the camps before I listened to the women's narratives, I might be biased in my writing. I went to the camps afterward, and that was when the 1990 forced migration of the Pandits unfolded for me. I listened to these women, too.

Q: What did you do after you heard all these stories? Is that when you started your first organization?

A: I started seeing issues of identity and insecurity that arose from the conflict in Jammu and Kashmir. Women talked about their insecurities over being merged into what they thought was the larger Hindu India and how the state has responded to them. Since 1947, this whole process of nation-building, of many nations becoming part of the larger Indian idea, was left unfinished in the case of Kashmir. The Indian states are in conflict with their own citizens. That's what emerged in the stories of these women. They said: "What does a man at the border mean for me when I am insecure even in my private space?" So this hope, the notion of security and the fears that emerged from it were beginning to come into my space and I wrote about it.

Q: How did you bring the women together? How did you get them to start talking?

A: That's very interesting because the Pandit women perceived the Muslims as their perpetrators. The Muslim women thought that the Pandits were collaborating with the state. Trust had gone away. But it was interesting. I remember that whenever I went to meet the Muslim women, they took me to the kitchen and it was in the kitchen that they shared their most intimate experiences. It was the same with the Pandit women.

I remember once I wanted to interview Saymina. She belongs to the clan of the main clergy of Kashmir. While having dinner, every question I asked her was answered by her husband. So I told Saymina, "I want to speak to you." She said, "You get up early in the morning at 4 o'clock and come to the kitchen. I'll share a lot of things."

This is where I saw the possibilities of a dialogue emerging. Because within that private space they shared how they were oppressed by their own men. The same was true with the Pandit women. When each of them narrated their pain I asked them, "Would you like to share your story?" It was with the offer to tell their story rather than listening to another's story that I was able to bring the Pandit and Muslim women together. "Should we become a traveling group?" I asked them. "Let's collectively travel to each other's stories." With this idea, Athwaas was born.

Q: Can you tell us about the recent floods in Kashmir and how they've affected your work?

A: As you must all be aware, we recently had these devastating floods. On the night of September 6, 2014, Srinagar, the main economic, administrative, manufacturing and cultural hub of the Valley, was submerged underwater. People's houses were completely damaged. They had to become refugees in their own land.

The Jammu and Kashmir government has summer offices in Srinagar in the Kashmir Valley; they move to Jammu in the winter. So most of the Kashmiri Pandits who were working in these government offices were in Srinagar during the floods. They live in specific Hindu majority colonies in Srinagar and were stuck there. Their neighbors, the Muslim youth, came to rescue them. This bonding happened because a larger enemy came — the natural disaster. The floods showed us a human way of reaching out to each other. Most of the Pandits now want to go back and, with the Muslims, rebuild the Kashmir that was.

This has given us an opportunity at Yakjah. Yakjah has been very active with rescue and relief work during the deluge. It is the Pandit and the Hindu children, kids from other parts of the region, who are raising funds and transporting and distributing those funds to the families in Kashmir. It's an amazing sight to see. The work that I started in 2010 with the young people somehow is showing results.

In Baramulla, where I grew up, there is a center that Yakjah started for young people to come and listen to each other discuss most of the prejudices and politics that are dividing people. One of the issues that I want to really share here is about accountability. In private conversations, the Pandits and the Muslims share each other's pain. The Muslims seek forgiveness and they want to make amends. But in the public political discourse, there is no political accountability and the state does not look into issues of justice. The Pandits continue to perceive that within the Muslim community there is still protection of the ideology that caused the Pandit exile in 1990. In the public political discourse, if accountability is not happening, it's very difficult — even if it is happening in private conversations — to make a new political vision for Kashmir. That is one of the challenges: how to deal with issues of accountability, to bring justice.

Many women who have been abused sexually and young people who are in jails need justice. So does the Kashmiri Pandit community. In Athwaas we had women who were political writers and activists and their husbands were in separatist and Kashmiri Pandit political movements. It was difficult to bring together these women who had different political positions. That is why Athwaas, in 2010, fragmented and I started a new initiative, Yakjah, to look into these issues of identity and how we can broker peace.

Q: Can you talk a little bit more about the breakdown of Athwaas? What do you do when there are identity politics — in part based on very real grievances? How do you give the space to avoid the single narrative while at the same time not encouraging impunity or whitewashing abuses by any given side? How do you bring accountability into the picture where there might be a lot of radicalization among these different groups?

That was one of the reasons that Athwaas broke. The women were from very diverse backgrounds. They had experienced the conflict differently; they also had political positions. They were able to bond and reconcile within the Athwaas space, to build trust and friendship. But they also had loyalties to their own political positions. So the question with Athwaas became one of representation: Do we represent the state or political ideologies, or do we break from those and foreground a new space where we are able to feel secure in the culture?

This is where my work is now: how to break through those identities, histories, cultures and religions, what our allies have shared with us, those stories of growing up. These are important to us and we cling to them. How can we begin to release from them?

My current work is on bringing young people together. We work on memory and mind. That is where deconstruction starts happening, how to get out of the box which I believe is me. The box remains there, but you go through a whole process of not identifying yourself in that box so you can create a new space of oneness that you can connect to as a human being. When you start connecting to that space of oneness, you start seeing the world in a new way. There is a shift in perception.

What does this new perception bring? Perception is infinite and we need to include all of these perceptions in new peacebuilding strategies. Issues of justice therefore become more important. My justice is not denying your justice. How can we come together and work for the larger good?

Now I look back on the choices I made that were based on these parameters: What is the larger public good, what is good for Kashmir, what is good for each of our communities? That is how I made my choices. But how do you first resolve those conflicts within yourself? You have to turn the gaze inward, look at your own identity perceptions. What was I losing if I acknowledged that some major in the Indian Army has abused a woman? Why was I so scared and what were my fears of standing up and speaking out for the Muslim woman who was wronged? What are these fears and what is at stake for each one of us? That is where the inquiry has to begin, deep within you.

To create that space of oneness at the human level, at Yakjah we move beyond the Pandit Muslim space to also include the other ethnic minorities and communities in the region: Ladakh, which has its own political aspirations, and the Jammu region, which has its own political rules. How do they cut across each other and play on an individual's personality? How do we stop looking at each other from those politicized identities to acknowledge the humanness in each other? This is a whole journey of breaking the silence of memory and thoughts, and examining our responses to the conflict based on how we are feeling and what we are thinking.

Q: Do you address the Armed Forces Special Powers Act with the groups that you work with to create informed citizens and activists? In your personal opinion, do you believe that at some realistic point in your future that act will be repealed?

A: The Armed Forces Special Powers Act is in Kashmir and also in the northeast of India. Many activists are calling to repeal this act, which gives special protection to the armed forces in counterinsurgency operations, but in many cases has been misused and resulted in human rights violations.

The use of this act does come into our discourse at Yakjah. In the Jammu region, most of the young people's relatives are in the Indian Army. They see the act from their perspective: to protect the officer who is fighting insurgents. But the Muslims see the act as a violation of their individual and collective rights. Where do we find a meeting ground? At discussion forums and workshops, we come to a space where we build to understand.

I have a feeling that this deluge, these floods, will offer a new hope. It was the Indian Army and the Water Security Forces who reached out to the people to help them. Local hosting communities appreciated that role and so there is a new space that is emerging out of the floods. Communities are reaching out and the state is also beginning to acknowledge that Kashmiris are citizens of this country.

During these last few days I have been interacting with a few army officers and they are saying that we need to talk about the act because some of them also want healing. They want to confess what the burdens of their job are, what they've done. We talk about those army policies they might want to question. We are engaging and involving young officers in our groups to talk about these issues, so I do see hope. There is some space opening for this discussion to start on the Armed Forces Special Powers Act, and the kind of trust that is now building gives me the hope that we will be able to repeal it completely.

Q: You mention often how important it is to have peace within yourself first. How do you personally foster peace within yourself?

A: Listening to others' pain is painful, but to turn the gaze inside and question your own demons is much more painful. The struggle of transcending that conflict within was much more difficult than going back and listening to the stories of women. It's the most difficult thing to do, to become aware of what's happening within your own self. Where is this hate coming from? Where is this bitterness coming from? Going to the root cause of that emotion and becoming aware of the process of how your thoughts are formed is difficult. Where do these thoughts come from? You start inquiring about your own mind, the conditioning of the mind. I was able to make this journey of transcending hate and bitterness, becoming aware, connecting to my own self.

I think it's about healing those aspects of your mental space that you have brutally ignored. Who am I? Am I that Pandit, am I that Indian, am I that person who is unwilling to acknowledge what I was hearing at that point in time? Am I that person? Am I somebody else? Those questions led to this inner peace, and whatever happens now in the environment in the outside world, the crisis, the confusion, doesn't touch me in the way that it touched me before.

I came to know about this very interesting Tibetan word, *shenpa*, which means "the hook." What is it that triggers that emotion in you? How can you unhook that emotion and step out of that box to embrace it? It's there but it's not you.

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BIOGRAPHY OF A PEACE WRITER—
Alison Morse

Alison Morse is a freelance writer and educator. She received her MFA from Hamline University in St. Paul, Minn., where her thesis, a novel-in-progress about the war in the former Yugoslavia, won the Outstanding Thesis Award. Her articles, short stories and poetry have been published widely in print and online, and in 2012 Morse won the Tiferet Fiction Award. She teaches ELL to adult immigrants from all over the world and is a creative writing mentor to prisoners through the Minnesota Prison Writing Workshop. Morse is currently collaborating with visual artist Rachel Breen on artwork, stories and poems that make connections between the garment workers' struggles that led to the 1911 Triangle Shirtwaist Fire in New York City and the 2013 Rana Plaza collapse in Dhaka, Bangladesh.

Writing is Morse's second career. For 20 years prior, she was an animator for documentary, artistic and commercial projects and a teacher of animation. Wanting to express the content most meaningful to her with the least amount of technical interference, she turned from moving images to words. Now she uses character, setting, plot and narrative time — tools familiar to her as an animator — to tell stories that promote peacebuilding and human empowerment.

In 2011, Morse worked as a peace writer with Woman PeaceMaker Wahu Kaara of Kenya, and in 2012 with Ludmila Popovici of Moldova.

JOAN B. KROC INSTITUTE FOR PEACE AND JUSTICE
at the University of San Diego's Kroc School of Peace Studies

The mission of the Joan B. Kroc Institute for Peace and Justice (IPJ), based at the University of San Diego's Kroc School of Peace Studies, is to foster peace, cultivate justice and create a safer world. The IPJ was established in 2000 through a generous gift from the late Joan B. Kroc to the university to create an institute for the study and practice of peace and justice.

The institute strives, in Joan B. Kroc's words, to not only talk about peace, but also make peace. In its peacebuilding initiatives in places like Nepal and Kenya, the IPJ works with local partners to help strengthen their efforts to consolidate peace with justice in the communities in which they live. In addition to the Women PeaceMakers Program, the institute is home to the Joan B. Kroc Distinguished Lecture Series and WorldLink Program, and produces several publications in the fields of peace and justice.

ENDNOTES

[1] A version of this paragraph first appeared in the article "'Women Cannot Cry Anymore': Global Voices Transforming Violent Conflict," by Emiko Noma in *Critical Half*, Vol. 5, No. 2 (2007). Copyright 2007 Women for Women International.

[2] A euphemism used throughout South Asia for public sexual harassment, even molestation, of women.

[3] Sumita Ghose, a MacArthur fellow researching Indian women involved in violent conflict, had read Ashima's first articles about Kashmir in the *Hindustan Times* about Muslim women at the Jammu hospital and prisons. Fascinated by them, Ghose offered to pay Ashima's airfare and lodging in exchange for more stories of women involved in Kashmir's violent conflict.

[4] A traditional Muslim wedding

[5] The Dogra are an ethno-linguistic group in South Asia who live, for the most part, in Jammu, Kashmir and nearby areas in India and Pakistan. Many are Hindu but some are Muslim.

[6] Women in Security, Conflict Management and Peace (WISCOMP) is an initiative of the Foundation for Universal Responsibility of His Holiness, the Dalai Lama.

[7] Urdu for Ramadan, the month in which the Quran was revealed. Muslims worldwide observe the month with fasting, one of the five pillars of Islam, from dawn until after sunset.

[8] The pre-dawn meal eaten during Ramzan/Ramadan

[9] The Persian word for freedom

[10] Sanjay is the director of the Pandies Theater. See the story "Another Form" for more information about him and his work with Yakjah.

[11] See the story "Another Form" for more information about this workshop.

[12] See the story "The Opening of the Lotus" for more information about this workshop.