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The English Education of a Kashmiri

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"In a conflict-ridden space like Kashmir, can working-class people express and understand the world in a language that is not their own, while simultaneously aspiring to be upwardly mobile? Is that desire worth the struggle it takes to reach there?"

Two educated Kashmiri men picked up a quarrel. They began with English, then resorted to Urdu, and when even that did not work, threw a mouthful of invectives at each other in eloquent Kashmiri.

When class and power are performed publicly, Kashmiris show off their English: while fighting, at birthday parties, marriage ceremonies, and academic conferences. Being fluent in English is synonymous with being an intellectual, and speaking one's mother tongue a sign either of a backward villager or idiocy. But English is not a panin — *our own* — language for most Kashmiris. The early beneficiaries of English-medium education were the Kashmiri Pandits and, later, elite Kashmiri Muslims, who controlled most of the administration. Modern schools like Tyndale Biscoe, set up by missionaries in the late 19th century, continue to be a space for the elite. For working-class Kashmiri students like me, battling poverty and political conflict while pursuing academic ambitions, there are few avenues to access English and aspire for a better life.

A child of parents who never went to school and were illiterate, not speaking fluent English became a preoccupation for me. During my MA days in the University of Kashmir, when I worked on the side as a labourer, cleaning muck from the flood-hit state secretariat in Srinagar, I would try to read the English-language *Greater Kashmir* newspaper during tea breaks. But when the malik saw that a labourer had dared to read English, he immediately snatched away the paper and chided me: *None among seven generations of your family will be able to understand it.*

I felt choked. I wanted to teach him a lesson, but the spectacle of my tattered shoes and my blistered hands held me back. I sought his forgiveness and went back to work.

I was born in December 1992, though my parents don't know when exactly, in a remote hamlet in north Kashmir. It was in an attic, I am told, where my mother's spinning wheel and her body jostled for space to welcome me. My parents did not record my birth date and time; pen and paper had never been seen in our ancestral mud house.

|| My primary schooling was in Urdu. Kashmiri, our mother tongue, did not figure in the scene.

My father, a carpet weaver, entrusted me to a sarkari school to rid himself of my constant childish skirmishes around his workplace. These schools were a dumping ground, for working-class parents to cast off their children during the day. My primary schooling was in Urdu. Kashmiri, our mother tongue, did not figure in the scene. A particular teacher from the city would make fun of us: *You village wretches, why don't you get a proper haircut and nice shoes. You fart in the class. Stinking bloody rascals!* Our homework sometimes included fetching corn, cereal, cucumbers, and tomatoes for demanding teachers to pass us in exams.

Our teachers would draw a rat or a hare on the black-painted cement board and write the description below in Urdu. "Choocha"; "Khargoesh" — we would repeat after them. The only lesson I remember from my school textbook read *Mera nam Wali hai, mera nam Akbar hai* (My name is Wali; my name is Akbar). Akbar and Wali, two men depicted in illustrations with their hands up in the air, one fat and the other thin as a stick. I did not know who Wali and Akbar were or why their curious faces pestered us. What were they trying to say? Did it matter, I asked myself, that they did not exist in real life? Were their hands, pointed upwards to the sky, an early lesson for the performance security forces would subject us to later in life, when villagers would be marched through the streets, their *Hands Up!* like Akbar's and Wali's, into open fields where 'suspected' ones received blows with gun butts on their jaws?



A world ambushed by English

The spectre of English began to haunt me in high school and infused a sense of inferiority in me. Earlier, I had understood everything taught in Urdu and bridged through Kashmiri. Now I was forced to peer into an unfamiliar world that bamboozled me by its elusive nature. I could not understand anything in a ninth standard textbook. Our teachers too were baffled by the surfeit of English in their lives. That they had never been trained was an undeniable truth, the festering sore of a system of misgovernance. They themselves had sent their children to elite English medium schools.

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Simple additions and subtractions became too abstruse for me. Hisaab, tafreek, jamah, takseem, kenchi-zarab metamorphosed into *mathematics, subtraction, addition, division, multiplication*. It was as if Wali and Akbar's old world of Urdu had been attacked and colonised by soldiers bearing the ammunition of the English language: pronunciation, accent, grammar. *Known* felt like the Kashmiri word *kanoon, law*, but had to be pronounced without 'k'. We had heard of *kanoon* on Doordarshan, but never on the streets. The 'k' in *known* would be silent forever, like the Kashmiris; assumed to have been spoken without being ever allowed to speak for itself. We would giggle at the word *Jumhuriyat* because it had some semblance with Jum Khan, our popular Kashmiri anti-hero. *Jumhuriyat* felt easy to bellow out in a place where no shards of it were left anymore. But *democracy* would not reveal itself to our imagination even after regularly thrashings on our buttocks. All we had were years of funeral processions of democracy in Kashmir, sometimes led by gun-toting soldiers and sometimes carried out under curfewed nights.

We had a grammar textbook that I parroted without understanding anything about the workings of language. English grammar, with its many tenses and verb forms and adjectives and adverbs, tossed me about like our big-horned bull. *She* was a third-person singular pronoun but felt like my identity as a Shia Muslim, called Sh'ii in Kashmir. The idea of active and passive voice was slippery like the

Dal's frozen waters. Why was *John killed a rat* made out to be different from *A rat was killed by John*? I began to wonder about John because we would occasionally kill the rats who would steal the walnuts and the corn we stored at home for the winter, lining their stores even though we would many a times go to bed hungry. But I did not know who John was or why he had to kill the rat. What crime had the rat committed to be killed remained a haunting question. It would take me years to realise that in Kashmir one could be killed without any crime.

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The matriculation exams drew near. Sitting up late at night in our single-room home, the flickering flame of the kerosene lamp would accompany me through December nights whilst I wrestled with knowledge cloaked in English. I failed at this prospect of early enlightenment and resorted to rote learning without any effort to articulate my ideas.

In the Biology exam, they asked a very simple question: *How are vegetables dried and used during winters in Kashmir?* I knew the answer. I had helped my mother on many occasions to dry out tomatoes and bottle gourd slices on a tin sheet during the summers. But I didn't know enough English to express it on the answer sheet. I mustered courage and managed to write some words in a chutney of English, Urdu, and Urdu-fied Kashmiri: *First, we get vegetable, and then you cutting it tukde tukde.* I wrote a note at the end: sir, please pass karna, jawab ata hai magar English nahi ata hai, *I beseech you, sir, please mark me pass. I know the answer, but I don't know English.* When I checked my results, I showered a bucketful of blessings to the evaluator who had understood my agony.

The saddest lines

For college, I had to choose an area of study, something I would be interested in life long. I had gone fishing and asked my friend to fill the college application on my behalf. To my surprise, he had opted English Literature as my future hell.

The Kashmiri language has no quick way of falling in love; we had to borrow the English *I love you* to fall in love.

When term began, our professor taught us Pablo Neruda's *Tonight I Can Write the Saddest Lines*. For an hour, we did not raise our head to face her. We were blushing adolescents, trying hard to give the impression that we were *not enjoying* what appeared as erotica. We were scandalised that the poet talked about how he kissed his beloved and how he missed her and how he felt about love and forgetting. Not that we were strangers to love or emotions — most of us had had some love history. But the way Neruda talked about kissing and hugging was too much for us. We had never seen a man and a woman kiss, save the masculine attempts at indecent kissing in old Bollywood movies.

We were brought up in a culture where erotic love and its expression were policed. Love was carried out in whispers or best scribbled on little pieces of paper thrown in the beloved's way. “*Mujy tum achi lgti ho*” — she would blush at this sight of the love exposed on a piece of paper as she read the message late night away from her family. It was love, and its peak expression mostly unexpressed but understood in our language. The Kashmiri language has no quick way of falling in love; we had to borrow the English *I love you* to fall in love. It would never convey what we wanted to convey and felt worn out and fake like a politician's promise.

Our roads were war zones, our homes were torched, our people were taken to torture chambers, and we were busy studying Shelley's *Ode to the West Wind*.

We were in love with the idea of love and rarely caught a glance of our more imaginary than real beloveds during religious gatherings or in institutions. Teachers ensured gender segregation and put surveillance on our emotional history. As if all this was not enough to alter our sense of expressing love and desire, we had John Donne's poem *Go and Catch a Falling Star* in our syllabus. The cynical Donne was saying that a fair and a faithful woman was an impossibility. I mistook poetry as objective truth, which distorted my view of women. The boredom and ennui of learning Greco-Roman mythology and about Victorian women full of coquetry and mannerisms brought me down, even as my land seethed with anger and political strife. The experience of studying English and American culture that had nothing to do with my context, of a Kashmiri Muslim caught in a war zone, felt like the poet-saint Wahab Khar praising Chetan Bhagat for his mystical insights. Our roads were war zones, our homes were torched, our people were taken to torture chambers, and we were busy studying Shelley's *Ode to the West Wind*. My father's bedtime dastaans and daleels felt closer to

home. Laila and Majnun, Gul Bakawali, Ajab Malik, Nosh Lab, and Aknandun were our neighbours.

An impossible grammar

One day, while I was helping my father to weave carpets, I came across an advertisement for interviews for a contractual assistant professor position at a local university. I gazed at the offered salary of 25,000 rupees, like a child beggar would at an elite family feasting in a restaurant. Like a wretched gamester, I went to try my luck. During the interview, I faced the old crisis of English. Why was this language, defying my pursuits, and refusing to let me speak? Why was I not able to speak fluently? I had no faith in me because poverty had taken everything from me- the faith in my stars and the faith in life.

My students were more concerned about where the next encounter [...] would break out and whether we would live to see the next day or not. I had no grammar to offer them to safeguard their lives.

A miracle happened and I was selected for the job. Now I had to deliver lectures to MA English students, a job I was least prepared for. It made no sense to teach English and American literature to students who like me did not even know whether Europe and the US were the same or different territories. Like me, my students were more concerned about where the next encounter between security forces and militants would break out and whether we would live to see the next day or not. I had no grammar to offer them to safeguard their lives from the violence. The present tense would not melt away their fear; the past tense would not erase their violence-filled past, and my lessons on the future tense would not offer them hope of a better tomorrow. One day while I was teaching English Communication Skills, which I hardly possessed myself, there was an encounter between security forces and militants nearby. When the students protested, they received shells in response. We were caught inside a classroom, fearing that it was the end. I didn't want to be killed by a 'stray' bullet. It terrified me. I could see and feel the anger and fright in my students' eyes too.

We were all caught up in a grammar of violence with no route of escape in view. *They Sent Smoke Shells to the Sky* would have been a perfect tongue twister for a teacher like me trying to teach English to learners whose survival was at stake. Somehow, we survived.

Of neither the yarbali nor the academy

Meanwhile, the gulf between me and my family and villagers kept stretching to a point of no return. Nursing dreams of a better life, English took me far away from my family and my roots. It mixed my memory and desire while playing with the mud of history that I carried with me. My father looked up to me with much hope that I would someday be able to remove the curse of poverty from our lives. I longed to stroll with my school-dropout village friends and talk about stuff that mattered to us most: whether we were prepared for next harsh winter; whether the electricity would be consistent in the coming winter; whether there would be nocturnal raid in a nearby village; and whether we could smoke after dusk on the yarbali, the ghat steps along the river.

My education had undone me; its violence had seeped deep into the inner parts of my being. It had separated me from myself, from my family, my childhood friends and my village.

It had become impossible. My friends felt too reserved to talk with whom they considered an 'enlightened' man like me. They imagined I had moved far beyond them; that they were not worth me: that I was hallowed and not to be soiled by their gossip and their everyday. While I longed to be with them, my education had undone me; its violence had seeped deep into the inner parts of my being. It had separated me from myself, from my family, my childhood friends, and my village.

My intellectual curiosity was satiated by reading and failed attempts at engaging the academic world, but my emotional ties with my family, friends, and villagers would be strained. Even the academy, which I had looked up to as a haven of knowledge and enlightenment, was a space of invisible violence, full of people who had imposed self-styled intellectual postures. It expected you to generate research without ever training you properly. It was bound to end up in self-destruction because the system made you believe that you were not worthy enough if you didn't produce quality publications.

Academic prestige lay in publishing papers in top-tier journals. The cruel irony was that most of those journals belonged to the west and expected you to emulate them. This academic colonialism would ensure to produce subjectivities mimicking and expressing the world through someone else's lenses. After a reviewer of an article I submitted to a journal wrote that my language read as if a child had scribbled lines, I began to descend into despair and depression, doubting my worth.

English kept me tied even when I wanted it to let me go. They would not educate us in our own culture and language, and instead exiled us into a universe that was not ours. In a conflict-ridden space like Kashmir, can there be an articulation of a subject produced by the intersection of the violent effects of class, political conflict, and academic research? Can working-class people express and understand the world in a language that is not their own, while simultaneously aspiring to be upwardly mobile?

Is that desire worth the struggle it takes to reach there?