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The Kashmiri Women Demanding Answers

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Zia's ethnography of Kashmiri women activists seeking redressal for the enforced disappearance of their relatives resonates with the struggles faced by many across India's conflict zones.

As I wrote this essay from Assam, our neighbouring state of Meghalaya was under curfew. Violence erupted after a surrendered militant, [Cheristerfield Thangkhiew](#), was killed by the police at his home in Shillong in an 'encounter'. A month before, [Mangboilal Lhouvum](#), a 30-year-old daily wager from Manipur, found bleeding to death on the roadside, made a dying statement accusing an army officer of shooting him after an argument. A year before, [Jayanta Bora](#), a 23-year-old student in Assam, died in custody after he was arrested at midnight from his home in a joint operation by the army and the police. He was suspected to have links with the insurgent organisation United Liberation Front of Asom (Independent) and of having dealt with illegal weapons. Judicial inquiries were ordered in all three cases and investigations are underway, yet justice seems far away.

These are no new stories in India's North East region, where counter-insurgency operations have not only intruded on the privacy of human lives but have failed to distinguish between combatants and civilians over the last several decades. Draconian laws in India's conflict zones, particularly in Kashmir and the North East, legitimise the power of the armed forces to kill on suspicion and then framing the dead as insurgents or enemies. These stories of wanton violence are normalised under the state narrative of security and the civic virtue of patriotism.

Against this backdrop, Ather Zia's *Resisting Disappearance: Military Occupation and Women's Activism in Kashmir*, with its engaging conversations on enforced disappearances with the activists of the Association of Parents of Disappeared Persons (APDP) in Kashmir, resonates with the struggles, silences, and shared grief of families from North East India. Zia's work goes beyond Kashmir and is a testimony to the thousands of lives left un-grieved in conflict zones. Reading the book reminded me of the circles of suspicion shaping civilian lives, of the re-eruption of underground activism by insurgents when the state fails to negotiate politically, and of the ensuing civilian deaths and disappearances.

Staging resistance

Zia's ethnography is about the women members of APDP, an organisation co-founded by Parveena Ahangar and Parvez Imroz in 1994. After Ahangar's 17-year-old son Javaid was abducted and subsequently 'disappeared' she began to mobilise parents of disappeared people from the valley. The disappeared include sons, partners, brothers, and fathers, who were lawyers, businessmen, students, labourers, farmers, and government workers. Over 10,000 people, both combatants and non-combatants, have disappeared in Kashmir.

At the very beginning of the book, Zia refuses to use 'missing' for these disappeared people. She uses 'disappearance' to signify how people were 'made to disappear' rather than having gone missing. As Zia writes, enforced disappearances became "part of a tacitly approved repertoire of punishments used to suppress the Tehreek, the popular name for resistance movement in Kashmir." (5)

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As Zia describes it, Kashmir sees two types of civilian protests: the *jaloos* (procession) which occurs when a well-known militant is killed, and the *muzahira* (demonstration) led by activists like that of the APDP. While participation in a *jaloos* is spontaneous and led by grieving family members and villagers during funerals, a *muzahira* is pre-planned and uses mourning as a political act against extra-judicial killings. Zia reflects on these as distinct, and not transposable, kinds of protests. It is within these latter funereal protests that she locates the changing gender roles in Kashmir.

The APDP organises sit-ins every month at Pratap Park in Srinagar where the mothers, half-widows, sisters and daughters publicly mourn and protest. They connect to the outside world with their stories of despair in locating their disappeared family members. Besides, the APDP members "mobilize demonstrations, pursue court cases, collect documentation, seek audiences with army or

government officials, and scour prisons and morgues in search of the disappeared” (6). Women making these otherwise masculine interventions marked a difference from earlier times when men took part in funerals and women grieved privately.

Zia frames the everyday acts of resistance of the women as “affective law” through which they have kept the memories of the disappeared people appear in public view (33-36). For instance, Zooneh used to keep the door of her home ajar, hoping for the return of her son Syed Ahmed, who has disappeared ever since the Rashtriya Rifles, a counter-insurgency regiment, arrested him in 2002. The door continues to remind us of Syed’s absence and marks his mother’s perennial hope of seeing him return. It is this work of mourning by the women that Zia frames to be affective politics. Zia also lucidly describes the actions of the women protestors — wearing black garments and headbands, and holding up laminated photographs of the disappeared — as a performative act of resistance against Kashmiri society’s patriarchal milieu as well as the masculine militarisation in action.

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While acknowledging the existing feminist scholarship on Kashmir, Zia recounts the deliberately forgotten events of violence and recovers the silenced stories of the mothers and the half-widows, who have been hardly represented so far. Her work brings out the stories of the half-widows, a term initially used by the Kashmiri media to address the wives of those who have disappeared. It is only after four to seven years that the disappeared are considered to be dead. Until then, the wives of the disappeared men could not remarry, lacked inheritance rights, were expected to dress and act appropriately, and were vulnerable to sexual harassment and unwanted male gaze.

Even though there has been an urgent shift in gender roles owing to men’s safety in Kashmir and women’s presence in the public sphere is observed, women are expected to be feminine and passive. According to Zia, APDP’s activism is shaped by the notion of the *asal zanan* (good woman) where women’s modesty is reflected through their motherly attributes. The APDP is not just concerned with the search for the disappeared but also supports grieving families through monthly provisions and fundraising. This marks the debilitating burden of living under military occupation.

Resisting Disappearance shows how different genres: poetry, photography, or ethnography can tell the same story through different lenses, effectively and inclusively. It focuses on ‘postmemory’ in describing the lives of the children who either never met their disappeared family members or were too young to remember; and on ‘countermemory’, represented through documented evidence against the government’s continuous denial of enforced disappearances. It is through the daily rituals of the APDP members in the search for their family members that memories get transmitted to the children.

Living under constant surveillance

Since 1990, Kashmir has been under the Armed Forces (Jammu and Kashmir) Special Powers Act and the Jammu and Kashmir Disturbed Areas Act laws that give the armed forces impunity from excesses committed during counter-insurgency operations. A range of troops engage in the operations: the Special Operations Group, the Rashtriya Rifles (RR), Jammu and Kashmir Police’s Special Task Force (STF), the Ikhwanees — surrendered militants pressed into counter-insurgency operations — and village defence committees, the civilian vigilante groups sponsored by the government.

Zia describes how this heavy militarisation constructs the “killable Kashmiri,” one who is killed “without remorse or accountability” (50). It is a quick reminder of the vulnerabilities of people living under constant surveillance where anyone could be suspected, staged as insurgents, arrested or shot at. Material markers, including the “keffiyeh (typically a Palestinian scarf or its South Asian version), beard, kohled eyes, and carrying a Quran or Urdu or Arabic scriptures” make the body of the male Kashmiri Muslim extremely vulnerable (52-53). So do immaterial markers: the demand for nationhood or the affinity of the Kashmiris to Pakistan through shared historical, geographical, cultural, and religious heritage.

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The observation of how these markers make Kashmiris the ‘other’ — and therefore ‘killable’ — is crucial, especially at a time when there has been a constant othering of the Muslim community in India, be it through the embarrassing public debates on banning beef consumption, the verdict on the construction of the Ram Mandir, or the Citizenship (Amendment) Act of 2019 that makes it near

impossible for Muslim refugees from Bangladesh, Pakistan, and Afghanistan to seek legal residence and citizenship in India. The narrative of ‘anti-nationalism’ that was deployed against students in Jawaharlal Nehru University in 2016 continues to take the nation on a roll in current times where students, human rights activists, journalists, and teachers continue to be booked under the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Amendment Act (UAPA).

Zia’s bold stand against state oppression would appear as seditious under the current regime. But such work also builds solidarity and hope when people from other parts of the country, say in North East India, continue to look for the disappeared and attempt to make sense of the extra-judicial killings.

Negotiating knowledge

Zia writes about the members of APDP as her “research partners” rather than ‘respondents’, signifying the trust and collaborative work that goes into the production of knowledge (17). As reflected in her thick ethnographic notes, she has closely observed their everyday lives at their homes or in Pratap Park during the monthly protests.

A dilemma that remains with me after reading the book is connected to the accountability of the ethnographer towards her research partners in deciding how much to write. It would have been interesting to read how Zia negotiated with the knowledge that she acquired in the field. She mentions that most of the members of APDP wanted their stories to be shared and publicised. But when stories and names of family-members-turned-activists are liable to be recognised, how far it is helpful for the activists when scholarship reveals the strategies of activists even as conflict is underway? For instance, when it documents the places where they hid their files or the ways they dressed up to escape surveillance?

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Zia’s most important contribution remains her illustration of women’s resistance in Kashmir. This resistance is displayed not just at Pratap Park but expressed in the everyday, in their very being. This aligns with my research on the memories of [extra-judicial killings in Assam](#) where women continue to don vermilion on their forehead signifying the living status of their disappeared partners, of young women desiring to marry for security, of aged mothers waiting for their disappeared sons, and of women left unmarried in fear of being killed for associating with insurgents’ families. In India’s North East, organisations like Manab Adhikaar Sangram Samiti (MASS), the Meira Paibis, and [Extra Judicial Execution Victim Families Association Manipur \(EEVFAM\)](#), amongst others have made relentless efforts in securing financial and legal aid to the vulnerable under the most dangerous situations of surveillance and threat.

Until reading *Resisting Disappearance*, I was aware of APDP and Parveena Ahangar. Zia’s intriguing work identifies other protagonists too, in the stories of APDP women who till recently were just ‘members’ or ‘victims’. This makes her writing an act of resistance in itself. Zia followed her research partners to religious institutions praying for the return of the disappeared, consoled them or was being consoled instead, became a fellow protestor on a public call for the women to come on the streets, or became a part of happy moments like weddings of the daughters of those disappeared. Zia’s roles as a therapist, as a translator for journalists, or as an ally to the Kashmiri women like Parveena, Zooneh, Sadaf, amongst others whose stories she writes, reflects an ideal commitment of researchers working in conflict zones, beyond the only aim of acquiring ‘data’. Such ethnography is possible only when the author is trusted by the survivors, victims’ families and the activists with their intimate memories of loss.