
KABRISTAN-LAND OF GRAVES

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ABSTRACT

Kabristan, meaning 'graveyard' in Urdu, is an attempt to represent the paralyzed potential of the long-standing conflict of Kashmir, highlighting a mixture of anthropological ingredients which look temporarily dormant like tombs but about to explode into a new massive stage of violence. The project was developed in Srinagar, the valley's main city and the core of Kashmir's cultural and political history, and it blends different aspects of the relation between people and the pressure of the past, primarily perceived as a deadly and pressurizing atmosphere that intertwines with inner and outer landscapes, past and future, grief and anger, introspection and violence, political utopia and bitter realities of the conflict.

KEYWORDS

Kashmir, Conflict, India, Pakistan, Violence, Separatism

BIO

After completing his Ph.D. in anthropology at the University of Messina, Simone dedicated himself to conveying his academic background into filming, narrative writing, and photography. During his ethnographic research in Indian Kashmir, he got especially interested in the moral background surrounding political violence and the relations between aesthetic and ethics of the conflict. His first documentary, "After Prayers", was realized with the support of Wenner Foundation Grant and was awarded at Vienna Ethnocineca and Film Southasia Simone has written extensively about Kashmir in several Italian magazines and has published a monograph (Linee di controllo, Meltemi). He is 2019 Deeper perspective photographer of the year at IPA with his photographic project Kabristan-Land of Graves.

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Since 1947 Kashmir's region has been at the core of a controversial dispute between India and Pakistan, who fought three wars over it in 1947, 1965 and 1999. Moreover, since 1989, an anti-Indian guerilla warfare has erupted in the Indian side of the territory. The separatist insurgency, massively supported by the Muslim majority population, was fuelled by Pakistani army, and deeply embriated in Islamic political ideologies, formally covered by the slogan “Azadi”, meaning freedom in Urdu. The guerilla warfare in the long term was brutally crushed by the Indian army, and, after 2001, the Azadi movement witnessed a widespread downfall and a general disappointment towards separatist politics. Notwithstanding this, Kashmir is still the most militarized place on earth and a nuclear flashpoint, besides being a permanent low intensity conflict area, where political violence, separatist and military violence, the culture of martyrdom and resistance are imbricated in every aspect of social life.

Kabristan, meaning ‘graveyard’ in Urdu, is an attempt to represent this paralysed potential, this mixture of anthropological ingredients ready to explode into a massive new stage of violence. The project, based on long-term ethnographic research was developed in Srinagar, the valley's main city, and it blends different aspects of the relation between people and the pressure of the past, primarily perceived as a deadly and pressurizing atmosphere which intertwines with inner and outer landscapes. It is mainly the feeling of a calm preceding a predictable storm that I tried to portray throughout a series of visual gravestones, differently balanced in their aesthetic and metaphorical composition, giving the impression of an intimate tension between past and future, grief and anger, introspection and violence, political utopia, and bitter realities of the conflict.



PHOTO 1: Abdul Hameed Sofi staring at his son's grave in the main martyrs' graveyard of Srinagar. Kaiser Hameed was tortured and killed by Indian forces at the age of 16, during 2016 agitation.



PHOTO 2: Central Reserve Police members dealing with riots in Srinagar downtown after Friday's prayers. Kashmir, with over 700.000 soldiers on duty on its territory, is the most militarized place on earth. Most of the troopers come from the poorest areas of India and belong to Hindu religion.



PHOTO 3: An abandoned truck in an army dismantling area in Bishember Nagar area.



PHOTO 4: Oyoub was among those who started the armed insurgency in the valley at the end of the eighties, after being trained in Pakistan during Russian-Afghani war. He was a commander of Hizbul Mujahideen group in Srinagar, till he lost his sight due to a mine explosion in 1993.



PHOTO 5: A barber shop decorated with Allama Iqbal's portraits. Iqbal, also called the “philosopher of Pakistan”, was among the main intellectuals who supported the idea of a Muslim state in the subcontinent. Even nowadays he is very popular among the Muslim majority population of the valley.



PHOTO 6: Layers of scratched posters of Jammu&Kashmir Liberation Front, portraying Maqbool Bath and others among the early martyrs of the anti-India armed struggle. Beside being the organization that launched the armed struggle, in 1994 JKLF has formally abandoned violence as a political path.



PHOTO 7: Bashir (19 years old), portrayed inside a vandalized Hindu temple. Sameer is often involved in stone-throwing riots (kanijang, stone-battles) against Indian soldiers which use to take place near the main mosque after Friday's prayers. He spotted several injuries on his back and forehead due to pellet-gun often used by the army. The temple, hidden in Srinagar's old city, was abandoned by the Kashmiri Hindus when they fled in early nineties and it has become a popular hideout for local teenagers.



PHOTO 8: Jamia Masjed (Friday Mosque) on the eve of Eid festival. This is the historical stage of separatist and pro-pakistani politics since the Indo-Pakistani partition of 1947 occurred. At the time Kashmir, which was the only Muslim majority state in the subcontinent which ruled by a Hindu maraja, became the “casus belli” for the first war between India and Pakistan.



PHOTO 9: Chill out atmosphere in tea-stall in the heart of the old city during a strike called by the separatist organizations. These political groups, which have become structural in the geopolitical dynamics, have lost their grip on the local population due to the internal fragmentation and the inefficacy of their strategies. Hanging on the stall's inner wall, as usual in the subcontinent, there's an ancestor's portrait.



PHOTO 10: Sunked houseboat in Chinarbagh area, Srinagar. Houseboats, once filled by tourists coming from over the world, nowadays are often empty due to the turmoil. In Kashmir the tourist business in general has been deeply affected since the armed struggle has started in 1989.



PHOTO 11: Masked youth preparing for after prayer's stone-pelting riots in Srinagar's old city.



PHOTO 12: Indian soldiers waiting for after prayers' clashes to start near Jamia Masjid.



PHOTO 13: A stray dog roaming nearby a Kashmiri Hindus' abandoned house in Habba Kadal area. The Hindus of the valley, once the ruling minority in the valley, have left their property when they fled due to the insurgency in early nineties.



PHOTO 14: A stone-pelter teases Indian soldiers during Friday riots. Next to him a hand-painted portrait of Mirwaiz Yousuf Shah. The Mirwaiz's (main preachers) dynasty, due its influence on confessional politics in the valley, embodies the anti-India mobilization. The main separatist organization of the valley, Hurryat conference, is presently headed by Yousuf's grandson, Umar Farooq Mirwaiz.



PHOTO 15: A low cast family squatting a Moghul ruin in Srinagar. Moghul dynasty conquered and ruled Kashmir till the 18th Century.



PHOTO 16: An ancestor's portrait hanging inside a grocery shop.



PHOTO 17: A man waiting for the horror show to begin at an amusement park.



PHOTO 18: A girl roaming inside the ruins of a building where two militants from Lashkar-e-Toiba militant outfit were spotted and martyred by Indian army.



PHOTO 19: Makdoom Sahib's grave, which today has become one of the main shrines of Srinagar. As many other sufi saints he is remembered as one of the first Kashmiris who spread Islam in the valley between 14th and 16th century. On the windows, guarding the place and giving blessings, there are the so-called mutawallis, believed to be the saint's heirs.



PHOTO 20: Children playing near the grave of Sheikh Abdullah, the first prime minister of Jammu&Kashmir, historically considered the main responsible of the controversial accession to India. His dynasty and his party (National Conference) are the main proxy of Indian electoral politics in the valley. Nowadays almost nobody goes to visit Abdullah's grave.