

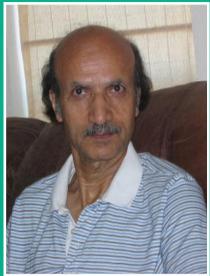
An exile from Kashmir, the author is invited to Srinagar to receive an award. He goes there after eighteen years and stays just for two days. During that time he covers lot of ground, traveling to different places, catching up with the enormous changes that have taken place in the valley.

The narrative unfolds in short episodes as the author moves from one place to another, traveling back and forth in time from the days of his childhood, comparing what was with what is, and looking into the future for how it is going to be.

The travelogue is one of the first to bring the reader to know the truth beyond the rhetoric that has masked the real tragedy of ordinary Kashmiris, and describes candidly how the guiding principles of their lives - of unity in religious diversity - got a severe mauling and changed the identity of the people.

The narrative brings out the tragedy of the Kashmiri Pandits, who were driven into exodus of unparalleled magnitude in modern times. Two decades later, their institutions, their estates and their temples lie in shambles. Their gods are abandoned and forlorn, looking for the devotees who have fled in fear.

The author poses the query: What hope for a reconciliation and reconstruction of the devastated social and cultural edifice that was the hallmark of Kashmir?



**Dr. Kundan Lal Chowdhury** is a medical professional, poet and writer. He has three published anthologies, and was conferred the Best Book Award for Excellence in Literature by Jammu and Kashmir Cultural Academy for his work, *The Enchanting World Infants*. Besides poetry, he writes short fiction, essays, commentaries and book reviews. He has also written a series of true medical stories under the

title *My Medical Diary* that encompass a period of four decades of his career as a practicing doctor.

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Homeland after Eighteen Years (A 48-hour Travelogue in Kashmir) K L Chowdhury



# Homeland after Eighteen Years

(A 48-hour Travelogue in Kashmir)



**K L Chowdhury**

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(A 48-hour Travelogue in Kashmir)

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# Homeland after Eighteen Years

## (A 48-hour Travelogue in Kashmir)

**K L Chowdhury**



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**To Kashmir, the Homeland that was**

I am grateful to Rauf for his insightful inputs while driving me to different places. With young people like him, there still is hope for Kashmir.

*For a man who no longer has a homeland, writing becomes  
a place to live.*

**(Theodor Adorno)**

## Introduction

I was invited to Srinagar to receive the 'Lifetime Award for the Best Book in English' for my anthology, *Enchanting World of Infants*. I would be going there after eighteen years. That is a long time, nearly a generation. It was a hard decision on many counts.

First, going back just for a brief visit, after having been violently thrown out, is a painful proposition, when all you expect to witness is the decay and death of the values you cherished and the eclipse of the plurality and syncretism that Kashmir boasted of to the rest of the world. However, I would go with an open mind.

Second, I had declined previous invitations to visit Kashmir as a participant in inter-faith dialogues, because of the threat perception to my life for having endeavored to expose the true face of terrorism that went under the charade of Azadi, and for championing the rights of Kashmiri Pandits to return to Kashmir. Over the years, even as terrorism has beaten a retreat for some time and threats to life receded, there has been a further consolidation of aggressive Islam in Kashmir, and of a relentless trend to cultural and religious exclusivity by the systematic suppression and extirpation of other religious communities. How would I face the changed milieu?

Third, my mother with many disabilities was bedridden after a recent hip fracture. She called for a round-the-clock attention. My absence, even for a short time, would put Leela, my wife, to great strain.

Fourth, the award ceremony on 4 October was under a thick cloud. In the aftermath of the fierce controversy over Shri Amarnath Yatra (the Hindu pilgrimage to the holy cave), which had tragically polarized society across a religious and regional divide and caused hysteria of protests and processions, strikes and shut-downs, mayhem and violence lasting several months, the Muslim separatists had given a "Lal Chowk Chalho" call for Monday, 6 October. Several thousand people were expected to participate in the long march to the historic Lal Chowk in Srinagar. This was purported to be a demonstration of mass support for Azadi and an act of defiance against the State administration and the Republic of India. Anything was possible under the circumstances - pre-emptive arrests, cancellation of all important events, curfew, violence, etc.

Yet, the heart longed for Kashmir, for just one glimpse of her. The restless soul not only sought solace in her lap but also yearned to comfort her for the hurt and humiliation heaped on her. Here was the opportunity I would fain grab with both my hands, for time was ticking away and who knew what the future had to offer?

I had vowed that if I ever returned to Srinagar, my first port of call would be the Siva temple on top the Shankaracharya hill. Since 1983, when I moved into my own house in Inidra Nagar, I would climb the hill to the temple almost every morning till the day we were forced out of Kashmir. It had always been an invigorating and soul-stirring experience that I sorely missed in exile. There was also a burning desire to visit Rajveri Kadal, where I was born, and to walk the lanes where I had spent my childhood.

Now was the call!

Rauf, the son of my deceased friend, would take me around during my 2-day stay. How much ground would we be able to cover under the circumstances was beyond any guesswork. But, we would give it our best shot. It was going to be a bird's eye view, after all.

Here, in verse, is how it happened.

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### The Debate

There is a debate in the family  
whether I should travel to Srinagar  
to receive the award in person  
or ask them to send it to me  
after the scheduled function.

Kashmir has never left my thoughts  
ever since I left her, 18 years back.  
Every night when I go to bed,  
every morning when I wake up,  
every time I dream a dream,  
and every day when I cogitate,  
I roam the lanes and by lanes  
of the home where I was born,  
the school where I learnt my three Rs,  
and the hospital where I worked and taught.  
That was my small beautiful world  
that I would loathe exchange  
even for paradise.

I often recall my friends in Kashmir  
and remember them  
beyond their religious identities,  
and before the time  
there was anything like 'them' and 'us'.

The pantheon of gods around Hariparbat  
that I frequented as a boy,  
the lakes Dal and Manasbal  
where I often rowed with my spouse,  
and the hills and mountains  
that I climbed with my children,  
have defined my memories in exile.  
I would die to be there again  
for once,  
if only once.

But there are fears and doubts.  
Eighteen years is a long time,  
a new generation has taken birth  
and a generation passed away,  
and much has changed  
since we were forced from Kashmir –  
the paradigms and perceptions,  
the human relationships,  
the tactic and rhetoric,  
the political affiliations,  
the sub-continental equations.

More importantly,  
would I be safe from the militants  
even if the threat perceptions  
are now said to be remote?  
Was I not on top of their hit list  
for voicing my thoughts  
against their heinous crimes?

Leela is supportive but concerned:  
 "You never trust a desperado  
 out to prove a point;  
 you could be their best bet,  
 an easy target."

And my siblings and children  
 settled in many continents  
 are even more apprehensive,  
 for distance magnifies threat perceptions,  
 and lends an exceptional poignancy  
 to feelings of concern  
 for your kin.

Even as I am convinced  
 that I am remote from their calculations,  
 as remote as a thought in the mind of the dead,  
 yet, a doubt lingers in my mind:  
 If some militant got it into his head  
 to shoot me down  
 how will I face my mother and spouse,  
 how will I answer my children?  
 Am I being selfish?  
 Am I too covetous for the award?

And finally, but not the least,  
 my mother's state of health is a concern;  
 would my wife be able to cope alone  
 with a bed-ridden ninety-year old,  
 on the edge of oblivion?

I wished the ceremony were deferred  
 and held in Jammu rather than Srinagar,  
 since the dissidents are hell bent  
 on the proposed march to Lal Chowk  
 on Monday, the 6th of October.

Am I flying into the eye of a storm?  
 Am I flying into danger?

To receive an award in person  
 is an honorable proposition;  
 stronger is the urge for a reunion  
 with people and places  
 where I spent all my childhood and prime,  
 and my middle years till I was forty-nine;  
 where my forefathers lived and died,  
 where my soul doth reside.

Besides, what a season to visit the valley,  
 to see her again in autumnal glory –  
 the splendour of the flaming Chinars,  
 the sparkling springs and placid lakes,  
 the roses, marigolds and chrysanthemums,  
 the blue skies and golden sunsets.

No, there is nothing to stop me,  
 for it does seem  
 that the award is just an excuse  
 thrown my way by providence  
 to fulfill my intense longing  
 for a rendezvous with the valley.

*Day One*

**Friday, 3 October 2008**

**On Board Jet Airways, Jammu- Srinagar**

How come I feel so composed and calm  
when my heart should be in a flutter  
to hug my homeland in half an hour?

Having waited 18 years, 5 months and 3 days  
where is the thrill of a lover  
when the hour of reunion is finally here?

I have pined long years of separation;  
why are my emotions so dumb and deprived  
when the time has finally arrived?

I look out from the window -  
the snowy ranges are out of sight  
and ominous clouds of dissent and anger  
hover over the valley of Kashmir.  
There is a strange mismatch  
between the tranquility in my mind  
and the turbulence in the air.

I look inside the plane -  
few passengers, fewer visitors,  
when they should have been swarming  
in this season of song and dance,  
of mellowing fruit and harvest,  
of Kashmir at her fiery best.

As the time arrives, I look out again  
for an aerial peek at Mother Kashmir  
before I land and tightly hug her.

Soon, we lose height, to find in view  
rows of hutments I had never seen,  
in various shades of grey and green.  
They are the barracks, I am told,  
for the soldiers defending the airport.

Out of the plane, it is 33 Celsius.  
It is dull, it is hot, it is sultry  
and the haze in the atmosphere  
hides the mountains in the periphery.

The airport has gone international  
and the tarmac could be anywhere -  
Delhi, Dublin or Delaware -  
not the Srinagar airport  
that had always been so friendly and familiar.

But, for now, I feel like a stranger,  
a mere nobody.

There is not one familiar face  
in the crowd of passengers,  
nor in the officials,  
who look at me in passing  
with a bored yawn  
from behind the counters.

Pray, who am I?  
What brings me here?

There is still no feeling inside me  
of that moment of eternity  
when one touches the feet of Mother  
after a long absence from her.  
Am I moving in a dream?  
Or, is it not my homeland  
but a different place altogether?

### **Welcome**

Suddenly I am somebody  
when a Sikh driver and a Muslim official  
of the J&K State Academy  
of Arts, Culture and Languages,  
waiting at the gate to receive me,  
ask if I am Dr. Chowdhury.

My baggage is hustled into a van  
as they receive another awardee  
who has traveled in the same plane,  
and yet another, unknown to me?

“Welcome to Paradise”  
reads a signboard on a street pole  
as we drive outside the airport.  
A picture of Habba Khatoon,  
with a popular couplet from her,  
hangs from another pole;  
and from yet another  
a rather outlandish one of Lalla Ded,  
that brings to mind her haunting vaakh:  
“My precept gave me a lone mantra,  
asking me to withdraw from outside  
and to delve deep within.  
That became my goal and gospel  
and I started dancing nude,  
without the worldly trappings.”

Yes, if we desire salvation  
from the tragedy that besets our land  
we need Lalla's divine vision  
to tread the path of self-introspection  
and cast off the baggage of ignorance.

I see a short stretch of a new driveway  
with young Chinars in the divider,  
and a new generation of poplars on the sides,  
as old as my absence from here.

As we go down the airport plateau  
there is no evidence of fall yet,  
but dull grey and green leaves in decay,  
while new constructions come into view  
where paddy fields once held sway –  
private residences built in style,  
shopping malls flowing over the pavements,  
new mosques in green with crescents,  
their minaret's spiking the sky,  
and school buildings  
rising many floors high.  
What a mix of education and religion!

O, where are the fiery Chinars of October,  
where the bracing breeze,  
and where the sweet nip in the air?  
Am I too early in the month here?

The streets are rather sparse with people-  
some in skullcaps, long shirts and shalwars,  
others bearded, chatting on the shops.  
Because it is Friday afternoon,  
the driver explains,  
people are resting after the prayer.  
It also happens to be the third Eid  
(the hangover lasts a full week here);  
and the call by the Hurriyat  
(that conglomerate of many-hued separatists),  
for Monday march to Lal Chowk  
has cast a pall of fear in the air.

### First Glimpse of the Lord

Gone are the farmlands and fields,  
gone the pastures and rural scenes.  
Shops with big billboards  
line the streets on either side,  
while fences, strong and high,  
insulate the private lots  
from the evil eye.

Our first halt is at Lal Mandi,  
the office of the Academy,  
where the driver stops  
to report the arrival of the awardees.

I come out of the van, and,  
what an arresting sight!  
Mountain ranges in the background  
and beloved Shankaracharya right in front,  
towering tall over this ancient city  
in its breathtaking profundity!  
The heart gives a loud thud  
for that joyous climb up the hill -  
my everyday rendezvous  
before our forced exodus.

My salutations to you, Siva;  
you are my first port of call  
and I am here to fulfill my vow  
that if I ever returned to the valley,  
to you would I make my first bow.

### Vitasta

I look on my left at the Vitasta  
that has meandered merrily  
from the dawn of history,  
and, on her sacred shores,  
reared generations of its progeny.

Alas, what offers the sight  
is a lazy, almost stagnant stream,  
duckweed and refuse,  
and an occasional animal carcass,  
floating on her sullied surface.

There is no evidence, whatever,  
of her youthful voluptuous sway  
but bare banks sloping up to the bund,  
and the river in deep depression,  
bemoaning the valley's transformation.

We cross a new bridge across the river,  
unspectacular and architecturally poor,  
that supplants the zero bridge just near,  
and blights the beauty of the bund here.  
We turn right soon after  
and move into a high security zone -  
the Government Guest House,  
the Stadium, and the Amarsingh Club -  
fortified by a wire-mesh fence,  
and gun-wielding personnel on guard.

### Cricket

Here in this dilapidated stadium,  
 young boys in white shirts and trousers,  
 absorbed in the game of willow,  
 strike a familiar secular scene,  
 quite different from the much feared picture  
 of youth brandishing grenades and guns  
 that one hears about Kashmir.

But was cricket just a sporting game ever  
 in our religiously charged atmosphere?  
 Were we not always at the receiving end  
 of the fire and fury of partisan mobs  
 during India- Pakistan matches here?  
 Were we not stoned and sworn at  
 if India happened to win a match,  
 and taunted, teased and pushed  
 for the ignominy of her defeat?  
 Were we not forced to join their revelry  
 when India lost,  
 and in their mourning  
 in her victory?  
 Did we have the right to betray or express  
 our opinions and sentiments freely?

Was it not in this cricket stadium,  
 somewhere in the nineteen eighties,  
 when, to the utter disbelief of the Caribbean's,  
 the spectators gave them a standing ovation,  
 cheering every run they scored,  
 while hooting the Indian players down,  
 and rejoicing at the fall of their wickets,  
 in the first and only cricket international  
 ever played in Srinagar?

That day, the crowds ran amuck,  
 renting the skies with their slogans,  
 waving green flags with crescents,  
 pelting stones at the Indian fielders,  
 writing an epitaph for cricket here.  
 Verily, the boys fancied the Kalashnikov  
 over the famously indigenous willow.

Are we witnessing a change of heart now?  
 Are the boys fed up with the gun  
 and wanting to return to some fun?

### Chinars

If they have escaped the axe  
of the militant and the greedy politician,  
it is only here in this high security zone  
on the right bank of the river.

Elsewhere, the Chinars are getting extinct  
like the indigenous Kashmiri Pandit.

Yes, the Chinars here stand lofty as ever,  
a profound feature of the valley's grandeur,  
as ancient and sacred as one can remember,  
a recurring subject of poetic metaphor,  
the sentinels of the ethos of Kashmir.

But, to my utter dismay,  
not a leaf has changed color till date,  
the colors I had come to see -  
golden, fiery red and rusty -  
that would leap to the sky like flames,  
and help dispel  
the dull, dreary and dismal mood  
that hangs heavy on the valley.

I miss the evocative autumnal scenes  
of mounds of fallen leaves,  
that would dot every street and lane  
in village, town and city.

I miss the familiar smell  
of spirals of smoke  
that went up lazily  
when the mounds smoldered slowly  
and turned to soft charcoal  
for use in the kangri -  
that inimitable, invariable companion  
which warms the heart and bosom  
of every Kashmiri.

### Inside the Circuit House

Here is where state guests are lodged  
and I remember having once been here  
to have a look at a Central Minister  
who fell sick while on a holiday  
but lost his even sicker temper  
because it took me time to reach here.

I am conducted to a room,  
a rather bleakish place,  
cluttered with furniture,  
but the walls bare,  
the door lock dysfunctional,  
the bed sheets discolored from disuse,  
the faucets leaking in the bathroom  
and a miniscule bar of soap  
that keeps slipping through the fingers.

In the dinning room (for a cup of tea),  
poorly lighted and rather dingy,  
there is a breath of recognition  
in the two waiters  
who greet me smilingly.

They cannot be more than twenty  
and I would not know them  
nor would they know me,  
yet there strikes a note of familiarity  
beyond the pale of understanding,  
like acquaintances from faraway times,  
like old friends or relations,  
like a father meeting his separated sons.

They are like the young Chinars that I saw  
along the driveway from the airport,  
a new generation, to me unknown,  
strangers, yet so much like my own.

I never experienced that *déjà vu*  
in my eighteen years of wanderings  
away from my home in the valley.  
Pray, what is the common chord  
that strikes between them and me?  
Why this feeling out of the ordinary?

Is this what defined Kashmiriyat,  
that sprang from a unique harmony  
between the Pandits and the Muslims -  
a fellow feeling that had survived  
down many a century,  
till it took a beating from the gun  
and changed the human equation?

Yet, all may not be lost,  
for it seems to me  
that the feeling still survives  
somewhere deep in the Kashmiri psyche.  
Otherwise how does one explain  
this warm feeling in my heart?  
Or is it just an illusion,  
a wishful thinking,  
a make-believe situation?

Is it that I am welcome here  
only as long as I am a guest  
and not when I wish to return  
to my homeland for good?

There is an adage in Kashmiri:  
Strong are the bonds of blood  
that, like chains of gold,  
do not easily break.  
How I wish it were true  
for every human relationship  
beyond religious and political divide,  
beyond time, place and age.

### **A Welcome Hug**

Rauf is the son of my deceased friend,  
my one surviving link with the valley  
since I was forced to flee.  
He arrives soon after  
and hugs me tightly,  
a long and welcome hug  
(we had met only a month earlier  
when he was in Jammu on official duty).  
Part of the hug is certainly his own  
but a larger share is from the valley  
(he did not have to tell me).

“I am here to drive you around,”  
Rauf tells me,  
“that you may convince yourself  
that militancy has run its course  
and it is time for you to return.”

“But,” I ask him, as I get on his car,  
“the strikes and hartals go on,  
the protests marches never cease,  
the bombs blast, the guns fire,  
and there is violence in the air?”

“Yes, a few incidents here and there  
have become a part of our culture;  
but, it will pass, I am sure,  
for the common man is fed up  
with the cries for Jihad and Azadi,  
and craves for peace and harmony,”  
replies he.

“People have seen through the militants,  
and the leaders who stoke their passions.  
Be it the subversives and separatists,  
be it the politicians and the ideologues,  
they all have their axe to grind;  
they give a damn for the common man  
who is dragged into this  
for no fault of his.”

### Shankaracharya

We start with the first call of duty  
and drive up the Mt. Shankaracharya,  
to the temple,  
after passing through the security  
at the foothill.

Lame foot on the accelerator  
(he contracted polio in infancy  
but fought the handicap bravely  
not unlike his noble father,  
who battled crippling spondylitis  
till his unfortunate demise at fifty),  
he drives almost recklessly,  
negotiating the curves fast,  
and faster, as we climb the steep road,  
offering a kaleidoscopic view of lake Dal  
through the thick jungle.

He speaks with passion, without a pause,  
mourning the slow death of the lake,  
through encroachments by predators -  
humans who claim it from the periphery,  
and killer weeds that grab it from within.

He is on a high,  
 almost intoxicated with joy  
 for showing me around,  
 in his own car  
 (his father died a pauper  
 and left nothing behind  
 except a fair name and good will).

“Do you watch TV?”  
 he asks me suddenly,  
 Not really, I reply,  
 except for a few channels –  
 BBC, Animal Planet and Discovery.  
 “What about Peace Channel?”  
 It is quite enlightening,  
 Dr. Zakir’s discussions, especially,” says he.  
 “I heard that name somewhere,” I reply.  
 “A great exponent of religions,  
 he traces them all to Abraham,  
 whom the Jews acknowledge  
 and the Muslims, and the Christians too.  
 Jews and Muslims and Christians  
 are children of Abraham, he says,  
 and, so are the Hindus, he believes.”  
 “Yes, we are children of the same God,” I reply.  
 “The word Brahma  
 is a Hindu derivation from Abraham.  
 Don’t you agree?” asks he.

I just smile  
 for I wonder if he would accept  
 that Brahma is a great concept,  
 that Brahma has been there much before  
 any of the religions he named,  
 that Brahma and Creation go together  
 Yet, was it not gratifying -  
 a Muslim youngster wanting to strike  
 a common thread between religions?

After a dizzying drive  
 a thousand feet up from the base  
 we come to a halt at the top of the hill,  
 and I ask Rauf to stay behind  
 sparing him the long flight of stairs  
 to the temple.

Even as I read on a notice board,  
 ‘No cameras allowed beyond this point,’  
 from a strange impulse,  
 I ask the sentry on duty  
 to let me carry the camera with me.  
 But, my argument fails to convince  
 for he has orders to carry out,  
 he tells me almost apologetically.

Not the least dismayed,  
 I almost run up the stone stairs,  
 hundred odd steps to the end,  
 and on to the plateau  
 now almost shrunk to a small courtyard,  
 what with structures that have come up,  
 obliterating the view of the world  
 that we would enjoy in days of yore.

Army shacks, tents and a lavatory  
 blight this hallowed patch of hill,  
 and a wire-mesh fence all round  
 has closed the trekking routes,  
 that I would often traverse -  
 from the north and from the south,  
 from the east and from the west.

The only redeeming feature  
 is a small Chinar of my times  
 now grown to a strapping youth,  
 adorning this small plateau here.

Just as I start to climb  
 the short flight of steep steps  
 to the sanctum sanctorum  
 I hear a voice from behind  
 "Namaskar, Doctor Sahib,"  
 and I turn around  
 to find a smiling face  
 that I cannot place.

"I have been your patient, sir,  
 Maharaj Kishen is my name.  
 What a delight to see you here;  
 and if I may dare,  
 it will be a great honor  
 to serve you a cup of tea  
 after your audience with the deity."

Oh that is so gracious of him,  
 but, rather than a cup of tea,  
 could he arrange to get my camera  
 through the security,  
 I ask him unabashedly?

Who is he, I wonder?  
 What is he doing here?  
 Why did I ask him a favour?  
 Did I put him in some discomfiture?  
 But, before I could stop him  
 and find an answer  
 he dashed away in a hurry  
 with a gesture that implied  
 he would not leave it untried.

**The Audience**

Oh how I have cherished this moment,  
 imagined it again and again,  
 and dreamt it every night,  
 to be face to face with you,  
 if only once,  
 my Siva,  
 my lord!

For, neither your beautiful visage  
 nor my faith in you  
 dimmed even a bit  
 in the course of time;  
 the flame of my devotion  
 unwavering in the storms of exile.

Oh, how those large red-chocolate ovals,  
 standing out to shine ever bright  
 against the greenish-grey background  
 of this sanctified granite rock,  
 kept my faith alive  
 these lonesome years!

Oh, how I always marveled  
 at the Master Artist  
 who mixed those colors  
 and chiseled that shape!  
 For, never was a stone as sacred to me,  
 never a lingam inspired such divinity,  
 never an image, icon or deity  
 raised such visions of eternity.

Now, when I find you again,  
 in flesh and blood,  
 and the eternal spirit of divinity  
 that has enthused millions like me,  
 my hands tremble  
 as they move to feel you –  
 your electrifying cool balmy touch  
 that has been denied me  
 in the hot arid plains  
 for eighteen long summers.

Come, let us hug each other  
 in a mighty long and lingering embrace  
 to fill the void of lost years,  
 so I take a good measure of you  
 as you take of me.

Come, there is so much to share,  
 so much to speak to each other,  
 to unfreeze congealed memories,  
 to recompense the pangs of separation,  
 and to drink deep of your ambience,  
 so I take the impressions back with me  
 to last me till we meet again.

Come, let's make the best of what we have  
 for time is short,  
 as it always is when lovers meet.

Is it just a coincidence  
that I see no one else here,  
but only you and me?  
Or is it again your benevolence  
that you arranged a special rendezvous  
on purpose?

I have come empty handed,  
no pine cones to offer  
that I used to pick on the way,  
no flowers, no herbs,  
no blandishments.  
I will not waste my time  
giving you a bath with milk,  
massaging you with honey and ghee,  
lighting a lamp and burning incense.  
I have come to offer myself,  
my entirety,  
my essence.

### **An Overview**

What a view from here,  
that stretches beyond infinity,  
a soulful view  
that mattered so much to me  
and my family.

If there is anything that has not changed  
it is the mountains in the distance,  
and the high pilgrimages nearby,  
that beckoned me in days of yore –  
the Hershewar, Sarshewar and Mahadev  
that I scaled in my lonely climbs  
up these lofty ranges.

Nor has the sky changed here,  
the beautiful azure blue,  
nor the languorous clouds of myriad shapes  
that linger amorously on the mountains peaks  
with a deep love-sickness that I have imbibed  
and permeates my heart like a sweet ache.

All else has transformed –  
the lake Dal,  
once the city's shining jewel,  
sorrowfully shrunk to a sad pool;  
the tiny island, we called Nehru Park,  
now a part of the larger land mass  
that has been claimed from the lake;  
houses and hotels dotting the landscape  
where floating gardens, water lilies  
and swans once held sway;  
the Vitasta that meandered down the city  
dancing like a beautiful belle,  
now hidden in the jungle of concrete;  
and Srinagar, as viewed from here,  
a jumble of tinned rooftops and balconies  
crowding each other out -  
a stark evidence of the insatiable hunger  
for land, water and space,  
transforming into a tinsel town  
this paradise of rivers, springs and lakes.

**Encore**

It was with a mixed emotion  
I took leave of you, my lord,  
and walked backwards  
till you were out of view,  
and then, turning round,  
climbed down the steps fast  
to where Rauf waited for me below.

But you must have laughed  
when I said "Till we meet again,"  
for, when I bowed before my exit,  
I saw a smile on your face,  
a signature smile that you give  
when you are at your benevolent best.

Lo, on the last but one rung,  
I find Mahraj Krishen again,  
(my camera in his pocket),  
signing me to retrace my steps  
all the way up,  
for an encore.

He makes light of my apology  
for having pushed him  
to do a wrong thing.  
How can it be wrong for a devotee  
to want to capture the images of the lord,  
he asks me.

So here I am again,  
to ask your pardon  
for this innocent transgression  
that only you make happen.

I take shots from all your sides,  
yet, what sides am I talking of,  
the perfect oval that you are?  
Can anyone really capture  
your formless form  
in a painting, picture or sculpture?

### **A cup of Tea**

After I have taken pictures  
of the lake, the sky, the city,  
appears Mahraj Krishen again  
with a steaming cup of tea.

The temple priest joins soon after  
pleading with me  
to give him a quick look  
for he has been ailing for long  
from some mysterious illness  
that gives him fever and weakness.

He calls it divine intervention  
that Siva called me on purpose here,  
for it was only a day earlier  
that he had been counseled  
to take the bus to Jammu  
in order to consult me there!

Isn't that providential, my lord;  
isn't that quite like you?  
Or, are we humans too credulous  
to make so much  
of mere coincidences?

But even statistics fail to explain  
so many happenstances together,  
for, not only do you earn me the award  
and contrive my long-cherished visit to you,  
not only do you arrange the ceremony here  
against all the odds in this vicious atmosphere,  
not only do you arrange me the camera  
that is not allowed to anybody,  
but, you also get the physician  
to an ailing patient  
right to his door,  
sparing him an arduous journey.

As I think about it,  
and endeavor to tread delicately  
the thin line between science and spirituality,  
I know, you must be laughing again  
at my childlike impetuosity.

### Dal Lake

Down the driveway  
and along the boulevard  
we are on the shoreline  
of lake Dal.

But, what meets the eye  
is a dismal picture.

There is not a visitor in evidence,  
when tourists should have been flocking here;  
not a boat sailing on the water,  
when the gentle cadence of the oars  
pulling the spring shikaras  
should have been music to the ears.

O where is Abdullah,  
who would row me for hours  
on the placid waters  
in his 'Prince of Lake',  
and gift me the best of nadru  
harvested from the lake's bosom?  
That crunchy feel of the lotus root,  
the invariable dish in our home,  
still lingers in my mouth  
after nearly two decades.

The lake Dal is shrunken and sad,  
 her waters turbid green,  
 duckweed floating on the surface,  
 red algae that nourish on human excreta  
 choking it from within.  
 She is dying, this fair maiden -  
 a sign of the ominous times we live in!

Ever since I remember,  
 the State Government has been floating  
 sham projects and schemes  
 under the pretext of retrieving the lake  
 from the jaws of the greedy grabbers  
 and the claws of the killer weed.  
 Alas, the billions that have been pouring in  
 from the Central Government in New Delhi,  
 and the international funding agencies,  
 have been sucked into the black hole  
 that the lake Dal has become.

The mandarins and ministers,  
 the politicians and project managers,  
 the high officials and the lowly workers -  
 one and all -  
 have joined in the big loot,  
 while the hapless lake Dal  
 dies a slow but certain death.

### Zeishta

Along the erstwhile Palace Road,  
 that also leads to the Governor's house,  
 through a maze of security barricades,  
 we drive on a low hill  
 to a short flight of stairs  
 to the Zeishta temple.

I do not find the small waterfall  
 that welcomed you here at the entry.  
 Has it dried up or been diverted  
 to water some greedy minister's farmhouse?

What a pity that odd structures -  
 shops and hutments -  
 have come up even in this hallowed place,  
 blotting Patee Mahal out the view,  
 eating up the vast open space  
 where mendicants found solitude  
 during the day  
 and fairies danced at night ?

This used to be my favorite Sunday haunt,  
 as also the climb up this mountain  
 through the densest jungle I ever trekked,  
 rife with black bear and bramble  
 that I brushed with so often.

Even Zeistha, the presiding deity -  
mounted in the middle of the spring,  
resplendent in garish robes,  
fenced around with iron grills,  
crisscrossed with blinking light bulbs  
of so many colours  
that create an eerie ambience -  
looks out of place, all askance.

Her once sparkling water  
has turned dirty brown and green  
from candy cakes, flowers and herbs  
that the devotees toss in as offerings.  
A subtle stink rises from within  
forcing one to make a retreat.  
O, where are the aesthetics  
we often brag about,  
where the sense and sensibility!

### **Indira Nagar**

Is this Indira Nagar where I lived,  
re-christened Iqbal Colony  
by the fervent faithful  
to whom the Hindu sounding name  
was like a red rag to the bull?.

It seems right in retrospect,  
for now I see Muslim nameplates  
on the erstwhile Hindu gates.

More guesthouses have come up here,  
and more floors added to houses  
that have risen up and up  
filling the vacant land and air,  
the sky blotted out of view,  
the street choked with vehicles,  
and noise, dust and smoke  
spread like a pall of gloom  
over this once quiet neighborhood.

I cannot recognize my house,  
outflanked and dwarfed by others  
that have sprung up all round.

Yes, it is just a house,  
 a ghost of what it used to be;  
 no longer the home  
 where my children grew up,  
 my father practiced law,  
 my mother indulged guests,  
 and my wife and I doctored the sick  
 with compassion and zest.

The garden has turned into a marsh,  
 stink and desultoriness ruling the roast,  
 the lawn taken over by wild grass,  
 the flowers by weeds!  
 O where are the roses and sunflowers;  
 where the marigolds and the mums  
 that bloomed here in wild abundance;  
 where the creeper and the vine,  
 where the poplar and the pine?

The neighbors have filled their lots,  
 and raised their ground levels,  
 their effluent gravitating into mine  
 turning it into a receptacle  
 for waste and brine.

The ground floor is dark and wet,  
 dampness rising to the bare walls,  
 and the paint peeling off everywhere.  
 The floors are stripped of matting,  
 the doors cracked and creaking,  
 the curtain-less windows a squeaking,  
 the bathrooms stained and stinking.

The living room looks sepulchral,  
 the kitchen fallen silent for ever.

Our bedrooms look like dingy cells,  
 the clinic a forgotten refuge of patients,  
 the thokur kuth an archeological curiosity  
 and the icons, idols and images of gods  
 gathering the dust and rust of time.

The power lines are in tatters,  
 the plumbing has run into rot,  
 the furniture and fixtures are all but gone,  
 gone the view of the Shankarachariya hill,  
 of Mahadev and the Zabarwan range,  
 gone too the archives and the library,  
 gone the paintings and the photo gallery!

What remains is just a memory.

No, this house cannot be my home,  
 for home is where the hearth is,  
 hearth is where there is warmth,  
 warmth is where there is life and love.  
 This place is lifeless, loveless and cold,  
 and filled with an overwhelming absence -  
 of the house deity,  
 of the inmates,  
 of the very soul  
 that makes a home.

When I started from Jammu  
I asked Leela if she had any message.  
"I pine for Kashmir," she said with feeling,  
"Say my hi everywhere you go,"  
and, as an after thought, she said,  
"Kiss each brick of my home  
that I so much miss."  
She had literally and metaphorically  
overseen this home rise brick by brick,  
like the birds their nest, feather by feather.  
No, I will not waste her sacred kisses  
after witnessing this desecration  
of her nest.

### A Night at Circuit House

It feels so strange  
to be sleeping a night out  
in this guest house,  
while my own home, just a mile away,  
beckons me to its once warm bosom.

All my life, since I was born,  
this will be the first night ever  
that I sleep under an alien roof.

Sharing this room with a stranger  
(I did not know Mohan Singh before;  
he is another awardee  
who writes in Hindi),  
is another first-time experience.  
I envy him his blessed sleep  
that came to him instantly  
the moment he turned off his bed light  
while I kept tossing till midnight.  
I swallowed a sleeping pill,  
and yet could barely manage a wink,  
only to be woken up soon after  
by the sudden blaring of the loud speaker  
that pierced through the open window  
from a mosque across the river.

Thankfully, the huge Chinars  
dammed the pitch a little bit,  
but, at the first glow of dawn,  
the kites on the Chinars took over  
and, soon after,  
a clutch of crows  
joined the chorus.

With the first rays of the sun  
the sky came to, and the river too,  
and I quietly slipped out  
for a long morning stroll  
in the lawns of the guest house  
and along the river bank,  
that used to be my favorite haunt.

The subtle fragrance of the roses -  
yellow, white and pink -  
breezed into me  
and chased weariness away,  
but it were the golden marigolds,  
the marigold of Kashmiri vintage,  
that gladdened my heart as never before  
and brought back the spirit of devotion,  
for, they have always remained  
an invariable article  
of our religious tradition.

I picked one and tossed it in the water  
as my offering to the vale of Kashmir.

*Day Two*

**Saturday, 4 October 2008**  
**(On a Cross-country Drive)**

Rauf arrives 7 AM on the dot.  
On empty stomachs, we trot off.  
There is little time to lose  
and long distance to traverse -  
the distance of eighteen years  
in just a few hours -  
before the award ceremony  
begins at three.

### **Jawaharlal Nehru College for Women**

We drive along the cricket stadium  
to the Residency Road,  
to the famous Regal Chowk  
and on to the Maulana Azad Road.

There has never been any objection  
to a street, park or an institution  
being named after a Muslim  
in beloved Kashmir,  
even it be of a non-Kashmiri  
like that of the Maulana,  
after whom this road is named.

But, passing by the College for Women,  
I still do not see the celebrated name  
of Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru  
on the hoarding at the gate -  
a name that should have been cherished  
by every Kashmiri in so many ways.  
For, not only was he a son of the soil,  
and the first Prime Minister of India,  
but he also gave Jammu and Kashmir  
her special, semi-autonomous status,  
that bestowed on her  
a more than equal rank in the nation.  
Yet, when this College for Women  
was rechristened after his name,  
the violent protests did not stop  
till the proposition was dropped.

O, what intolerance!  
What ingratitude!  
Does it not call for a deeper study  
of the warped Kashmiri psyche?

### **My Parental Home**

We turn right along the S P College Lane,  
famously called 'love lane'  
that led to my parental home,  
where I lived for twenty years,  
the home which carries in its breast  
a part of my life, the very best.

At the gate, Rauf asks me  
if I would like to go in and see?  
He does not know  
that we have sold off the property already.

We had resisted the sale  
for more than a decade  
while it had turned into a caravanserai  
where people came and went away,  
some carrying off a heirloom,  
others leaving a mess behind.

Before it was finally sold,  
seven families, unknown to me,  
and to each other unknown,  
had made it their abode,  
while a part of its beautiful lawn  
had been sliced off by the neighbour  
and merged with his own.

My fervent pleas and petitions  
to the powers that be,  
to secure and restore my estate,  
had fallen on deaf ears.  
It was then  
that I was constrained  
to sell it for a song  
before the other neighbours too  
eyed their share of slices  
and swallowed all of it for free.

No, I have no heart to go in,  
to see the desecration and ruin  
of a dear home that nurtured me,  
a home where I welcomed my bride  
and raised a loving family.

I have no desire to meet the new owner  
to ask how my home fared under his care.  
I still smart under the guilt and shame  
of abandoning her  
for reasons whatever.

I heave a long and cold sigh,  
and kiss this home a goodbye.

### **Ramchander Temple**

On the left,  
just opposite the gate of my home,  
it is shocking to find  
the vivisection of Ramchander Temple -  
the front yard sliced off  
and merged with the road,  
exposing the temple to the traffic,  
its sanctity violated,  
and the sanctum laid bare  
like a maiden stripped off her gear.

But, this is not the first time  
that we have been forced  
to sacrifice the symbols of our faith  
for the common good,  
and to buy peace  
with the neighbourhood.

This was no inconsequential temple,  
(no temple really can be)  
but one of the most sanctified,  
where we held festivals each year,  
in Spring and in fall,  
during the nine days of Ramanavami,  
and picnicked in the sprawling lawns,  
sharing sheerchai and telewaroos,  
nadermunjas and pakoras.

Here, children played in the yard,  
blowing conchs and wooden whistles,  
flying gas balloons and kites,  
while the elders prayed inside.

I have no heart to go in  
and seek a darshan,  
for I will have a lot to answer  
to the deities inside  
that we worshipped every day,  
and a lot to hear from them.

**Barbarshah**

I ask Rauf to drive on,  
soon to cross the Barbarshah bridge  
across the dying Chunth kol  
now like a faded green ribbon,  
as duckweed hides the shame  
of a once beautiful dame.

We turn left here  
on to Nai Sarak,  
where many boys offered arrest  
during that historic agitation  
when a Pandit girl, Parmeshwari,  
escaped with a Muslim boy  
and was converted to Islam forcibly.

That, alas, was the turning point  
from where there was no looking back,  
as the State administration geared itself  
to teach Pandits a lesson,  
and, through discriminatory legislations,  
punitive orders, and proclamations,  
applied the squeeze,  
forcing us  
into a silent exodus  
till the militants took over  
and did the rest.

### Habba Kadal

We turn right to Habba Kadal,  
once the hub of Kashmiri Pandits,  
their cultural center,  
their identity,  
their pride.

Alas, I do not find a single Pandit  
in the two chowks on its two ends,  
none crossing the bridge either,  
or watching the river  
on whose shores we grew up  
and our culture thrived.

I recall how,  
on mornings like this,  
the place would be alive with people  
and a bustling center of activity.

Early shoppers -  
ladies with dejhours hanging from their ears  
and bindis dotting their foreheads -  
would haggle with the vegetables vendors  
and flock near the dairy stores  
for milk, yoghurt and fresh cheese.  
Their men in turbans and pherons  
would queue for hot loaves from bakers,  
others asking the butchers for tender cuts,  
and yet others shopping for Kangris,  
and for readymade winter garments  
from the hawkers on the pavements.

What presents now is a sad spectacle,  
a rickety curvy cadaverous bridge,  
empty streets and shuttered shops,  
and spectral houses with busted gates  
crying for their missing inmates.

A languorous vapor  
covers the surface of the river,  
as if to hide from view  
the tragic story she wants to tell,  
of blood and gore,  
and of her shame.

O, where is the famous clinic  
where Leela's father, Dr. Chogtu,  
practiced medicine,  
treating all his patients free,  
lending a touch of his spirituality?  
Where is the famous bookshop  
of the flat-nosed Muka Mazeir,  
where we traded old books for new,  
year after year after year,  
when we moved a grade higher?  
Where is Taraq Halvai's tuck shop  
where we snacked together  
on his boiled-potatoes- in-yogurt special,  
on our way back from school,  
often cheating him  
for a serving or two?

### Kanya Kadal

We turn right and along,  
and, just before the Kanya Kadal Bridge,  
I see the portly milkmaid's shop  
on the left of the road  
in a deep-set corner  
where it has been  
ever since I remember.  
She held her customers  
in awe of her temper,  
selling all mix of milk and water,  
and second-grade adulterated cheese,  
that still tasted better than elsewhere!

We cross the bridge over the Kiti Kol,  
a flood diversion canal, like the Chunt Kol,  
from the river uptown to the river downtown -  
two of the several channels  
dredged centuries ago  
to save the main body of the city  
from floods that often ravaged her.

The canals, like the Nalei Maer,  
that gave the city a Venetian flavor  
in days of our childhood,  
are fast turning into drains and gutters,  
and receptacles for the town's waste.

It makes me wonder  
that while the Kashmiris are so zealous  
about their right to self-administer,  
how ruthlessly they are guiding the valley  
on a mindless, self-destructive course  
with their culture of greed and grab  
that impels them on a ruthless spree  
of filling up the water bodies,  
nibbling at verdant lands and forests,  
and knocking down the hillocks,  
expropriating every inch of available space?

Pray, how is India to blame  
for this State-sponsored vandalism,  
this unabashed incest of paradise?

### My Clinic at Chotta Bazar

On the left is Chotta Bazar  
that always used to be  
the hub of raging separatists,  
Islamists and religious bigots,  
who sought every opportunity  
to create a ruckus  
and disturb the fragile peace  
between communities.

It was here I practiced medicine  
for more than twenty years.  
It was here I had to deal  
with these rabble rousers  
who looked for the flimsiest excuse  
to hold you to ransom  
for being what you were -  
a Kashmiri Pandit ready to please.

They once held me hostage  
because I couldn't examine a woman  
who happened to walk in  
just when I had closed the clinic  
and was in a hurry  
to attend to an emergency.

Angry mobs besieged me instantly,  
charging me of being a Hindu chauvinist  
who refused to examine a Muslim patient,  
raising slogans that rent the air  
against the whole Pandit community -  
expletives I had never heard before,  
abuse that one could barely stand.  
They stoned my window panes;  
they broke the windshield of my car;  
they gheraoed me for a full hour  
and would not let go  
till the police arrived  
and the inspector apologized on my behalf  
to restore order.

That was how unruliness prevailed  
in the better days of yore.  
That was how cases were decided –  
the victims asking for pardon  
and the criminals walking free!  
Now that the bashing boys  
have been banished from here,  
the fanatics and hate-mongers  
will have to sort it out  
amongst each other.

It is with a mixed feeling  
I look at the windows of my clinic  
that was seized soon after I left,  
not unlike the mass taking over  
of our leftover properties.

It is heart-wrenching to visit your home  
that has been vandalized and ruined;  
it is humiliating to enter a temple  
that has been defiled and desecrated;  
but it is a knock-out feeling  
to find your workplace usurped.

For an unexplained reason,  
a sense of renunciation fills my heart,  
and I feel sorry for them  
for tainting their hearts and hands  
with the crime of snatching  
others' bread and homestead.

I ask Rauf to drive on  
via Karan Nagar to Chattabal,  
and on to Safakadal, across the river,  
where my younger sister ran a busy practice  
till she left in that wave of mass exodus  
with the rest of us.

She has wandered ever since  
in a vain bid to resettle -  
in Gurgaon, Delhi, Hyderabad -  
agonizing over lost years of work,  
pining for home that was burnt down  
soon after she left.  
Like my wife and me,  
she was in the Medical College faculty,  
giving her best to the community.

That, alas, is the story of all of us!

### Eidgah

We drive from there to, what were,  
the sprawling grounds of Eidgah,  
where our rivals settled scores  
for losing cricket matches against us  
by physically beating us in return,  
while we bravely fought back  
even as we were vastly outnumbered.

Were match-fixing known then  
we would never have considered  
losing the contests to them  
to escape the violence,  
for we loved to win at all costs.

It is on the land here in Eidgah  
that Tibetan refugees were settled  
and assimilated in the cultural milieu  
because they were Muslims  
even as we, the indigenous people,  
have been uprooted and cast away,  
because we are not.

I often fail to understand,  
how a religion that preaches compassion  
can truly bind people of an alien stock  
when its votaries strive to extirpate  
people of the their own flock  
because they belong to a different faith?.

**Vicharnag**

We drive on to Vicharnag,  
that famed religious center of Pandits  
around which a whole culture thrived,  
now lying abandoned and forlorn,  
a wasteland,  
a relic of its glorious past!

It was here,  
by the side of this hallowed Spring,  
seven kilometers from the city,  
where scholars would spend a lifetime  
to deliberate (vichar) and to study.

It was here  
that the almanacs were written  
year after year, that guided the everyday lives of  
people  
throughout the calendar year.

It was here  
that students came  
from far and near  
to learn in the company  
of scholars, saints and seers.

It was here,  
in the sprawling precincts,  
under tall poplars and mighty Chinars  
that devotees flocked to pay obeisance.

It was here  
that the Kashmiri New Year  
was ushered in every year  
with great fanfare.

Now, there is not a soul around  
when it should have been abuzz  
with pilgrims and morning worshippers,  
for it was here  
that the terrorists struck first  
and murdered the high priest,  
way back in nineteen eighty eight.  
Then there was no looking back.

Alas, this fount of knowledge,  
this ancient seat of learning,  
this epicenter of discourse,  
is now like a blot in the landscape.

The spring, nearly 35 feet square,  
that once sparkled with nectar  
has turned into a cesspool -  
dirty grey weed choking it within,  
blobs of moss floating on top,  
and stink rising from the surface,  
threatening to suffocate.  
Where a bath once did rejuvenate,  
I dare not dip even my finger  
lest it contaminate.

The carvings on the stones  
that lined the spring -  
sculptures of gods and goddesses -  
are all smudged with pigment and moss.  
The Badrapeeth in the middle  
with Siva mounted in full splendor  
is to be seen nowhere.  
Have they taken a plunge in shame,  
or satiated the thirst of an iconoclast?

The temple that housed our gods  
has now become their tomb.  
The dharamshala is a ghost house,  
sans doors, sans windows, sans people -  
a haunt for languorous pigeons,  
now fluttering, now cooing,  
and now making love,  
oblivious of the desolation below.

A strange sense of nudity prevails here,  
a shame that I desperately feel like hiding.  
The sprawling lawn has turned into a bog,  
with sewage seeping in from houses all around  
that besiege the place in a viselike grip.  
Soon, they may take the place over  
and convert it into another khanakah  
as they did centuries ago  
with the abode of goddess Kali  
on the right bank of the Vitasta.

Dear Vicharnag,  
you, that once epitomized our scholarship  
and culture,  
now symbolize its death and decay!

Dear Vicharnag,  
as I stand in front of you  
taking the desolation in,  
the solitary Chinar sheds its leaves  
in the cheerless autumn breeze,  
like tears from my eyes.  
We both weep at your tragic demise.

As I stand here, stunned and speechless  
and look at the ruins helplessly  
for an answer to my query:  
Is this the end of our culture,  
of what we valued and held so dear,  
Rauf looks at me in sympathy  
and I motion to him  
that it is time to move on  
to a place that may help dispel  
my somber mood.

**Rauf's Home**

Straight we drive to his new home,  
his own, with a garden patch in front.

With what pride he leads me  
into his two-storey cottage  
to show me around -  
the three bedrooms,  
a traditional kitchen with modern gadgets,  
a lobby that combines a dining space,  
a furnished room for his mother,  
bathrooms, balconies, balustrades.

Were he alive,  
his father would have been a proud man!

His well-groomed kids - a son and a daughter -  
salaam me with great respect  
and affectionately address me as Dadu.

To be addressed thus,  
because I had been their Dadu's friend,  
is flattering no doubt,  
and a sobering thought  
that the culture we once prided in  
still survives somewhere  
in this blighted land,  
once hallowed by a long tradition  
of spirituality and syncretism.

Sitting on the carpeted floor,  
we breakfast on loaves of bread -  
hot and fresh from the baker's oven,  
battered, peppered and salted.

O, how I relish the tea  
from a traditional samovar  
that I miss in exile  
like so many simple joys  
that came from living in Kashmir.

In an emotional parting,  
Rauf's mother blesses me,  
"May Kahnove protect you  
and your family."

I avoid looking at her,  
for I can not hide back a tear,  
that I would not like someone to see  
who looks up to me as her brother.

### Rauf's Sister

It is to the house of Rauf's sister  
that we now speed fast.

This is another emotional reunion  
with a woman I had last blessed  
when she was a lovely bride,  
now graying at her temples  
and a mother of two –  
a son, gentle and respectful,  
pursuing an MBA career,  
and a daughter, graduating in Biotech,  
pretty and demure,  
with an outlook soundly secular.

They proudly show me their certificates  
like they would to their own grandfather,  
sharing with me their visions and goals,  
their hopes about their future.

They are the other side of the story here,  
of young men and women  
who would like to go about their lives  
unscathed by the militant creed.

Suddenly, I become sentimental:

"It is girls like you who make us proud,  
who refused to be bludgeoned into submission,  
who braved the acid attacks and abuse,  
who dared the false purveyors of religion.  
It is you that are the hope of this land;  
it is on your promises that exiles like me  
might be tempted back to the valley."  
"Insha Allah," shouted the boy.  
"Amen," muttered the girl.

Another tearful departure,  
like from my own daughter.  
"Come back," they call out,  
when I settle in the car.  
I do not look back at them;  
just wave my hand  
as we drive away.  
How unbecoming it sounds  
to betray the tide of tender emotion  
to the younger generation.

### Ganesha

We are soon at the Shahi Darwaza,  
the main gate that leads you  
within the wide boundary wall,  
(famously known as the Kalai)  
that was built long ago  
in stone masonry and lime  
around the Hari Parbat fort  
and the vast stretches of land  
that sloped down the foothills.

As children, we often walked the wall  
(our own version of the Great Wall)  
on our way to pay obeisance  
to the pantheon of gods within the precincts,  
or to play cricket, football and hockey  
in the vast tracts of fallow of land  
that I find obliterated now  
with mushroom human habitation.

A few leaps from the gate  
is a nondescript structure  
that merges with the hill,  
the famous Ganesha Temple.

I have come for my salutations  
to this elephant-headed god,  
the fount of wisdom,  
whom we always invoke  
when we begin a day  
or a new task.

This is the same Ganesha  
where the devotees flocked every morning,  
where bells never ceased to chime  
and the sound of conchs  
echoed from the craggy hill,  
where the smell of incense wafted  
to the blue sky above.

Inside the temple,  
the pilgrims would jostle for space  
to light a lamp, offer a flower,  
and chant a hymn and a prayer.

Others who could not get in  
vied with each other,  
as they queued in the lane  
outside the temple,  
sticking their arms through the window,  
pleading with the priests sitting inside  
to tie a naerband on their wrists,  
to daub their foreheads with vermilion,  
and to pour a spoonful into their cupped hands  
of the sacramental water  
that they would gratefully quaff  
and feel blessed.

Today, there is an eerie hush  
and stark emptiness -  
the temple bolted from inside  
and not a soul anywhere around.  
A police constable in mufti,  
whom I mistake for the priest,  
opens the door for me  
and disappears quickly,  
possibly, I think,  
to get puja paraphernalia ready.

To savor each moment of the audience  
and make up for lost years of idolatry  
I enter the temple gingerly -  
a low-ceilinged room  
at the base of the Hari Parbat hill,  
built around an irregular mound  
flanking the northern slope.

Smearred with deep vermilion,  
the mound of rock here  
is naturally shaped  
like the potbellied Ganesha  
with an elephant head and a curled trunk,  
who has evoked such adulation  
down the ages.

But, now, the rock is defaced and laid bare,  
the image tarnished beyond repair,  
and dear Ganesha,  
deserted by his devotees,  
looking worn, forlorn and melancholy.

A lingum of Siva nearby  
is parched and dry,  
for there is none  
to wash him with milk and water,  
none to adorn him with a flower.

The windows of the room are shut,  
shafts of light piercing through the chinks  
create an eerie spectacle within.  
Cobwebs weave gossamer patterns  
in the crevices, cornices and corners  
and mice scurry on the floors.  
A bleak ceiling stares at you,  
and a stifling silence  
echoes from the bare walls.

The lamps are wickless and dry,  
the bells have fallen silent,  
there are no hymns to the gods,  
and there are no flowers,  
no frankincense.

I stand dumb and stupefied,  
taking the desolation in,  
melting with the shame  
of having deserted my gods,  
yet, posing a question in return:  
Why did they prove gods of clay  
and left their devotees no choice  
but to leave everything behind  
and run for their lives.

I open a window  
to look outside at the lane  
that led us to an undulating trail  
round the Hari Parbat hill  
along the foot hills  
and through almond orchards,  
to the temples of our pantheon of gods  
that hallowed this land –  
Haeri, Sharika and Sapt Rishi,  
Devi Angan and Chakreshwar.  
But, I do not find any trace of the lane  
which has been assimilated into  
a private backyard,  
where a lady is sweeping a verandah.  
She looks at me, all smiles,  
and greets me with a namaskar,  
inviting me come have a cup of tea.  
I salaam her back gratefully,  
shutting the window again.

Even the Hari Parbat hill  
has been renamed Kohi Maran  
by the powers that be  
that are on a name changing spree.  
That is how Shankaracharya hill  
has been named Suleiman Teng,  
and Anantnag of innumerable springs,  
as Islamabad.  
How artificial and unnatural  
the new names sound to the ear,  
like naming London as Jeddah  
and Paris as Medinah!

As I begin to withdraw from here,  
loathe to leave the gods alone  
in that cold, closed chamber,  
gathering the dust and moss of time,  
and fading slowly into obscurity,  
the man who opened the temple door  
reappears, now in a police uniform,  
and bolts the door behind me.  
It is then that I realize he was no priest,  
but a sentry on duty!

### Makhdoom Sahib

We take a short drive to Kathi Darwaza  
(the second big gate to the precincts),  
from where a new flight of stairs,  
that I had never seen before,  
takes us to the imposing shrine  
of the celebrated Makhdoom Sahib.

It is a lovely sight from the stairs.  
On the right, the slopes uphill,  
with dense new plantations,  
look beautiful.  
At the top, the fort is ever sublime,  
its ramparts renovated in red lime.

The Afgani mosque in fading brown stone  
sits on a plateau  
at a lower level from the shrine,  
and flanks the stairs on the left  
overlooking the Malakhah,  
the sprawling public cemetery  
that would fill fear in everybody.

I am reminded of a childhood lore  
about this public burial ground,  
that ghosts with lights on their heads  
beguiled wayfarers during nights,  
and skeletons popped up from the graves  
and robbed them of their belongings!

Rauf tells me  
that the Afghani mosque is being restored  
to its pristine glory.  
He speaks of another mosque  
inside the Hari Parbat fort  
that people want rebuilt.

Well, I have not seen, I tell him,  
nor heard of a mosque inside the fort  
but just a small temple of Durga  
where we used to worship  
on every Nuareh and Baisaki,  
when the fort was thrown open  
for the general public.

“A mosque there has always been  
that is almost extinct now,  
partly from the ravages of time  
and partly from the abuse of soldiers  
camping inside the fort,” he insists.  
What of the temple, I ask?  
Well, if there was one,  
they should renovate that too,  
he replies,  
his tone consolatory!

I think with myself:  
The legend of Hari Parbat hill  
and the pantheon of Hindu gods on it  
is interwoven with the Kashmiri Pandits,  
the aborigines of Kashmir since eons.

The fort came much later,  
built by the Afghan Duranis,  
who would only have build a mosque  
and the temple must have come after  
when the Dogra Hindus took over.  
No doubt, there is enough space  
Both for a temple and a mosque,  
but more importantly,  
when will we rise above  
the mosque and mandir controversy  
that has created bad blood everywhere  
and sullied the image of our country.

The shrine of Makhdoom Sahib,  
the venerated Muslim saint,  
is accessed through  
two long flights of stairs,  
from the north and the south.  
It is a splendid two-storey structure  
standing on several pillars  
on the southern slope of the hill,  
amid a large sprawling complex  
of bathrooms, corridors, prayer halls,  
and a huge courtyard  
paved with chiseled stones.

When you come to think of it,  
this shrine with a magnificent design  
has come up right on top  
of the unpretentious Ganesha,  
the most revered of Hindu temples.  
Is it all by sheer coincidence  
that they built and superimposed  
on our gods and deities -  
be it during the despotic rule  
of the fanatical Muslim kings,  
be it during the secular democracy  
that Kashmir is now supposed to be?

Helpless, we make do  
with the replicas and clones  
that we have built in our exile  
of our temples and shrines.

We console ourselves  
 that in the context of our faith  
 the structures do not really matter,  
 for we see god everywhere -  
 in each individual  
 and in each living creature.  
 We see Him  
 as much in a mosque  
 as in our temples,  
 as much in this dargah  
 as in our hearts.  
 Even the dumb stones speak god to us  
 and we worship the earth and the oceans,  
 the trees, rivers and mountains,  
 the sun, stars and springs.

I find many believers here,  
 men, women and children,  
 praying, shedding tears, tying knots,  
 their faces lit up in faith.  
 But I fail to understand  
 how one faith can thrive  
 on the damnation of another;  
 how can love for one  
 nourish on hatred for the other?

There is nothing wrong  
 in any faith as such,  
 yet, it is often the faithful  
 who turn their faith into frenzy  
 and bring a bad name to it.

We climb down the northern stairs  
 to where they meet Ganesha again..  
 I see the same baker's shop  
 as when I was a little boy,  
 from where I would buy bagels  
 and feed the street mongrels  
 that never seemed to have their fill.  
 I see their progeny now,  
 tails wagging at me,  
 as if in recognition from bygone days.  
 They jump at the morsels I toss at them  
 that they catch in their mouths  
 with the same ease and finesse.  
 Verily, inconstancy is a human trait  
 whose loyalties change so often so fast,  
 while animals remain ever so steadfast.

In my childhood,  
 mother would thrust me  
 with loose change and a pocketful of rice  
 to give away in alms to the beggars  
 that lined the two sides of the street  
 from the main road to the Ganesha temple.  
 Thankfully, I see no beggars today;  
 they seem to have followed the devotees  
 to their exile all the way!

### Pokhribal

Saddened by Ganesha's state  
I have no heart to visit Chakreshwar  
and the other temples around the hill  
when the traditional access is denied,  
the walkways assimilated by neighbours,  
and the gods besieged and hemmed in.

Yet, I decide to visit Pokhribal  
on the backwaters of the lake Dal,  
a lovely spring and an old temple  
we frequented in summer so often,  
to drink of the water and enjoy a swim  
during our teenage escapades.

We pass through a security check  
and walk inside the sprawling estate  
now turned into a fortification,  
a sanctuary for an army contingent.

The people in towns and hamlets,  
sore about Indian military presence,  
have denied them space anywhere,  
driving them into the last refuge –  
the left-over properties of Pandits  
and their temples and estates,  
that have survived the terrorist deluge.

I enter the sanctum sanctorum  
to find it dark, dingy and in disrepair,  
the walls pasted with tattered pictures  
of gods and goddesses on calendars,  
the idols a picture of utter neglect.

The spring looks like a cesspool,  
the water so murky and opaque  
that you refuse to believe  
it is the same nectar  
that we drank tumbler after tumbler  
and never seemed to have our fill.

The army personnel, for a change,  
appear quite carefree and relaxed,  
washing, showering, oiling themselves,  
others enjoying a cup of tea,  
and yet others lazing around,  
their radios tuned to film songs.

It is not for me to grudge them  
a break from their strenuous duties,  
but, are they not rather negligent  
of the gods inside Pokhribal?

With the army on guard, or without,  
our temples and shrines, no doubt,  
have run into a state of utter ruin,  
the gods unattended and forgotten.

Who is worse off, I wonder -  
the gods here sans their flock,  
or the flock in exile sans their gods?

### A Hurricane Drive

We drive out of Pokhribal  
fast along Nauhatta and Jamai Masjid,  
to Nalei Maer and Saraf Kadal,  
to Bohri Kadal and Baba Demb -  
my favourite haunts of yore,  
that I can barely recognize now.

I feel sad about Baba Demb,  
the once lovely lagoon  
that has turned into a marsh.  
It is disappearing fast, Rauf tells me,  
into the greedy gullets of the guzzlers  
of water-bodies  
and the pot bellies of the poachers of land.  
If they could, rues he,  
they would even swallow the sky.

It is from Baba Demb  
we would board a Donga  
for school picnics to Nishat and Shalimar.  
It is from here  
we sailed to the tiny atoll  
that housed the Bhairav of Mangleshwar.

Sadly, Mangleshwar too suffers  
from utter neglect and ruin  
like the other institutions and temples  
of the exiled Pandits.  
This quaint little islet  
has turned into a swamp  
and the Bhairav is deserted and sad,  
a place of pilgrimage no more.

I ask Rauf to drive me on  
to the most cherished place,  
the place I think about so often  
in my musings in exile -  
my ancestral home in Rajveri Kadal.

**Rajveri Kadal**

Rajveri Kadal!  
How sweet you sound to the ear;  
what memories your name revives!

Rajveri Kadal!  
I have carried you in my heart  
ever since I sprang from you,  
and played in your lap.

It all seems like yesterday!

Yet, when I am back  
after nearly two decades,  
I can barely recognize you,  
for there is very little left here  
except your name.  
But who knows,  
you too might receive a new name  
in the rush to rename  
places, institutions and landmarks,  
and to rewrite the history of Kashmir?

There are no landmarks left  
that would vouch for you  
in the changed landscape  
of this place.

Nalei Maer,  
(the canal that cut through you  
and gave you a distinct identity)  
in which we fished and swam,  
was filled up long back,  
and the arched bridge of stone across it  
lives only in memory.  
How often we lazed on the brick parapet  
listening to the gentle cadence of boats  
in the water flowing by  
and watching the swarms of crows  
cutting across the sky,  
as we discussed, debated and devised  
our adventures for the next day.

Where is the mound in the square  
that marked the grave of a forgotten fakir  
where children often sat together  
to draw inspiration from his folklore?

Where is the public tap outside my home,  
that 24-hour fount of cool water  
sweeter than I remember,  
that grand confluence of the neighbourhood  
where women washed, bathed and gossiped,  
and there never was an argument?

Where are my loving neighbours -  
 the Gujris, Hajis, and Hajams;  
 the Khans, Mirs and Maulivis -  
 who pampered us quite a bit  
 because ours was a solitary Pandit home  
 in the whole Muslim neighbourhood?

Where are the cowherds and milkmaids,  
 the cap makers, the barbers,  
 and where the fishmongers  
 that drew swarms of shoppers  
 to make you so famous,  
 dear old Rajveri Kadal?

Neither do I find the chemist here,  
 nor the tobacconist, nor the butcher.  
 My father smoked no other tobacco  
 when we moved residence miles away,  
 nor bought mutton anywhere  
 except from the family butcher here.  
 The dhobi and the barber  
 from dear old Rajveri Kadal  
 came to offer their services  
 wherever we moved residence.  
 Such was the attachment with the place,  
 such was the bonding with people.

The maze of lanes that I knew  
 like the lines on my palm  
 and walked blindfolded upon,  
 are nowhere in evidence.  
 O, how they connected me  
 to people and places;  
 how often have I roamed them  
 in my imagination in exile!

O, where is our lawn with flower beds  
 that my father nurtured with passion?  
 Where is the vegetables farm  
 that we tended with great care?  
 Where is the sprawling backyard  
 in which the cowherds dumped dung  
 and spread it out to dry  
 in round flat loaves and dung cakes,  
 that served as ready fuel  
 for the hearth and the kangri.

It was there in that backyard  
 we played football and cricket  
 and held contests with rival teams?  
 I do not understand how and why  
 those friendly contests  
 between us and the neighbours  
 could have turned into deadly conquests  
 and swept us off our land  
 hurling us into exile.

O, where is the deep well  
 in our vegetable farm,  
 deeper than I ever remember,  
 from which we drew pails of water  
 for a cool bath in summer?

Remember, dear Rajveri Kadal,  
 when a cousin once fell into the well  
 and was pulled out unscathed,  
 by a valiant Muslim neighbour?  
 Far from demanding a service fee,  
 he was too humble and shy  
 even to accept our gratitude;  
 such was the fraternal spirit  
 that knit our communities.

Remember, how she giggled  
 (as if she had taken a pleasurable plunge)  
 when she found the whole neighborhood  
 praying for her with bated breath,  
 as the milkmaids beat their chests  
 and the children wept and wailed?

All I see of my ancestral house  
 that had braved the tides of time  
 for nearly a century,  
 and had birthed me  
 and five generations of my dynasty,  
 is a small mound of earth!

They have hacked you down,  
 my dear home -  
 nibbled at you,  
 taken you away, brick by brick,  
 and plank by plank,  
 stripped the papyrus and shingle off your roof,  
 gouged the doors and windows out,  
 dug out the plumbing,  
 pulled away the wiring,  
 and even scooped away the mud!

What a dream house you were,  
 beautifully architected,  
 with a high plinth and a proud façade,  
 built with ancient Maharaji bricks,  
 khutamband ceilings and lattice windows,  
 and a second floor balcony  
 that stretched far out in space  
 like a wharf on the sea!

Can loot be ever so complete?  
 An earthquake, a flood, a bomb blast  
 leaves a wreck in its wake;  
 arson leaves behind its telltale signs  
 of ashes, cinders and debris;  
 but this here is total plunder,  
 a clean up procedure,  
 leaving behind not a trace of history.

All that remains is a mound of earth  
like an unmarked, unsung grave.  
Dust thou were, my dear home,  
unto dust hast thou returned.

Is there someone watching,  
and about to stop me,  
as I scoop a clod of the dust  
from where I have sprung -  
to take it back with me  
as the last relic of my past?

Gone with my first home  
is also a larger part of me.  
O, why did I undertake this journey  
if it was only to carry back  
the humiliation and hurt  
of a golden period of my life?

### **My Elementary School**

We drive three furlongs to Budger  
to rediscover my primary school  
where I learnt the three Rs  
and picked my childhood friends –  
more Muslims than Pandits.

In that age,  
we were blissfully unaware  
of separate identities,  
there being nothing like 'them' and 'us',  
and the teachers poured their soul  
to impart the best of humanities.  
The Maulvi taught Urdu and Arabic,  
and the Panditji taught Sanskrit and Hindi;  
the former was also the muezzin,  
the latter also the temple priest,  
and the morning azan from the mosque  
and the chimes of bells from the temple  
rang together in a soulful melody  
of brotherhood and coexistence.

Alas, neither there is the school now,  
nor the memory of those times!

Like my home,  
 the school is yet another casualty  
 to the frenzy of Azadi.  
 I am told,  
 it had to be burnt down,  
 for, education could wait  
 when Azadi was at stake,  
 and the boys had to weild the gun  
 in place of the pen.

As we drive to Ali Kadal nearby,  
 I draw another cold sigh  
 for I shudder to think  
 that a similar fate might have befallen  
 my Rangteng High.

Along the way  
 I try to recall and locate  
 the house of Ved Lal, my father's associate,  
 of Nilakanth Bazaz, his lifelong friend,  
 of Gopi Nath, his rummy playing mate,  
 of Bansilal, my classmate,  
 and of so many others –  
 friends, relatives, and neighbours.

I can't find anyone here  
 in the changed topography.  
 Some have passed away,  
 others have moved on,  
 yet others remain unknown  
 to the new generation -  
 the new breed that now lives  
 in what remains of those homes.

The new Ali Kadal Bridge  
 looks surprisingly alien,  
 and does not seem to connect.  
 The old was so familiar,  
 and imposing in its obsolescence!

The baker's shop in the corner,  
 from whom I would buy every morning  
 hot loaves of bread for the family  
 (so much mouth-watering were they  
 I would munch a couple on the way),  
 is nowhere in evidence.  
 No one knows where the baker fled  
 and whether he is living or dead.

Wherever you inquire,  
 the Kashmiri Pandits are spoken of  
 in past tense here -  
 they were,  
 they have been,  
 they had been.  
 Who were they, anyway,  
 they might ask, one day?

**Karan Nagar**

This predominantly Pandit mohalla  
has got a complete makeover  
since it was taken over  
after they fled.

A quiet residential neighborhood  
has morphed into a commercial center -  
multi-rise buildings having come up  
everywhere,  
and a car bazaar is buzzing  
where domestic peace prevailed earlier.

The arched gate of the Medical College  
beckons me as before.  
Should I or should I not enter  
inside this dear institution  
where I spent the best years of my life,  
as a physician and teacher?

The impulse is stronger than reason  
and I ask Rauf to drive in.  
Students, doctors and nurses I see,  
not one that I can place,  
not a face that turns towards me,  
for it is 18 years since I left  
when most of them were kids  
and some not even born.  
My generation has moved on  
and the new generation  
does not even know my name.

I am no more than a non-entity  
in a place that was like a second home,  
where I worked for a quarter century;  
a place that resonates inside me.

I hear the echo from that time  
when chants of Jihad rent the air  
and the medicos came out in processions  
skipping lectures and ward rounds!  
It was a strange frenzy  
that had caught the imagination  
of students, nurses and the faculty  
who would skip their duty  
for the mirage of Azadi.

A group of inspired students  
came to my chamber one of those days,  
soliciting my participation as a faculty member  
in a protest march they had organized  
to the local office of the U N Military Observers  
Group.

I snubbed them for neglecting the patients  
and trashing their studies  
in favour of the politics of protests,  
but lost quite some winks of sleep  
for the possible consequences  
at the hands of my own students!

I ask Rauf to turn back,  
for, beyond fond memories,  
this place holds no interest for me,  
even as I spent my prime here  
and endeavored to give my best  
to my patients and students,  
trying to impart the values of life  
beyond the art of healing.

What place for values and ideals  
where religious bigotry holds sway,  
where divisions and discord prevail  
over reason and rationality?

### **Lal Chowk**

We drive out of the Medical College,  
along the familiar Dewan Bagh road,  
to the Shali Store and Exhibition Grounds  
and up along the new flyover  
to the famous Lal Chowk,  
the Red Square of Srinagar  
that has always been the Kurukshetra  
for the many agitations and uprisings,  
a rallying place for the mass hysteria  
that is stirred up from time to time.

Lal Chowk has once again  
come to symbolize  
the smoldering sickness  
that consumes Kashmir  
as the shadows loom large  
of the proposed long march  
on Monday, the 6th of October.

The separatists, who have given the call  
for people to herd in Lal Chwok,  
are an unenviable bunch of malcontents  
who, every often, raise banners of revolt,  
inflicting endless shutdowns and hartals,  
bringing life in the valley to a grinding halt.

They are glib fundamentalists,  
 who thrive on the religious sentiments  
 of the gullible Kashmiri masses  
 and drive them like herds of sheep  
 into a self-destructive course,  
 flaunting wild dreams  
 of Nizame Mustafa and Azadi.

Pray, what is this Azadi all about  
 except a freedom from free thought,  
 from progress, from reason,  
 from tolerance, from syncretism?

An eerie hush has descended on Lal Chowk  
 like a prelude to a tragedy,  
 even as the shops are open,  
 and people go about their business;  
 no sign whatever  
 of the turbulence underneath.

Is it the lull before the storm?

There are a few bunkers in evidence,  
 and fewer soldiers at vantage positions,  
 their faces eager to befriend,  
 even as they are ready to defend.

### Gagribal - Buchwar

On along the old Polo Grounds  
 to the foothills of Shankaracharya again  
 for a short stop at Gagribal  
 to buy a box of apples for the Wakhlus.

Why are apples here,  
 in this land of Delicious and Ambri,  
 more expensive, and almost double the price,  
 than in Jammu, I wonder.

The Kashmir trader was always notorious  
 for cheating and making a quick buck,  
 but the greed seems to have grown manifold  
 and the grab culture got a big boost  
 in spite of the ferment of religious piety!

That reminds me  
 that it was here at Gagribal  
 that the Income Tax officials  
 who had flown from New Delhi  
 to uncover the black money  
 of the big hoteliers and businessmen,  
 were humiliated, hounded and beaten up?  
 The papers, files and documents  
 that they had seized from the defaulters  
 were thrown in the lake Dal  
 by the crowds who were made to believe  
 that India was taxing the Kashmiris.

That was in more peaceful times,  
before terrorism had raised its ugly head,  
but ever since, the Central agencies,  
be it of the Income Tax or the Sales Tax,  
dare not even contemplate  
raiding the defaulters in Kashmir.

For that matter,  
during the worst years of militancy,  
the people would not even bother  
to pay the bills of electricity and water.

On to Buchwar, to Wakhlu's  
who are waiting to host us lunch.  
A single Pandit family for miles around,  
they come to spend the summer here  
under the long shadow of gun culture,  
to escape the scorching Indian summer  
that has scorched the soul of the exiles.

Over many pleasantries with this genial couple  
(my younger daughter is married to their son)  
we take a quick lunch and a cup of tea  
when my brother phones from London,  
eager to know how I fare  
while on my visit here.

He has left the valley five decades earlier,  
yet, London is only a surrogate home,  
while his soul resides here.  
He registers every event in the valley  
with a far greater intensity  
than those who live it directly.  
Such is the longing for roots,  
such is the pull of homeland!

I tell him what I feel like -  
a stranger on home turf -  
even as I reassure him  
that I feel quite secure,  
and that I will be inking my impressions  
in a travel diary,  
for all to see.

### The Award Function

A magnificent institution,  
the Sheri Kashmir Convention Center  
is like another fading jewel  
in the lap of the mountains  
on the shores of the lake Dal.

Sprawling lawns merge with the lake  
that reflects the mountains in a mirror image,  
but deftly hides the new breed of wild  
that infest the high ranges here –  
displacing the rare species  
of Hangul, black bear and tiger -  
a wilder breed that wield the guns,  
a breed whose writ still runs.  
No surprise, therefore,  
that the place is bustling with policemen,  
and entry to the convention center  
is only after a due identification.

The auditorium is grand,  
the podium well decorated,  
the gathering large  
in spite of the fear in the air.

Shri N N Vohra, the Governor  
arrives without much fanfare  
and the ceremony begins soon after.

In his welcome address,  
the Secretary rattles out a long wish list  
for more favours for the Academy  
and more funds from New Delhi..

A group song of welcome –  
boys in kurtas and shalwars,  
girls in white frocks and dupptas,  
(surprisingly, all bare headed) –  
sets the tone of the function.

One by one,  
the awardees are invited to the stage,  
their profile is read out  
and the Governor felicitates them in turn  
with a Shawl and a cheque,  
a clock and a memento.

The awards over,  
the Governor, in his address,  
grants all the wishes of the secretary,  
like the boons that a benevolent deity,  
quick to please the suppliant,  
bestows with, "So be it."

Yet, nothing ever seems to satiate  
the insatiable Kashmiri appetite –  
no boons, no grants,  
no bonanzas, no freebies.

And nothing helps to bring them  
 closer to the Indian nation -  
 neither the high altitude rail link  
 nor the international airport,  
 neither the Koshur Channel nor Akash Vani,  
 neither the special status nor Article 370.

All her wealth might India shower  
 and bestow all her love and care,  
 the Kashmiri heart is elsewhere.  
 Alas, it is a one-way love affair!

I don't know the Governor personally,  
 but, his dignified bearing,  
 and the tone and tenor of his address  
 speak of a genuine person  
 who would like to pull Kashmir  
 out of the present impasse  
 after the Amarnath Yatra controversy -  
 the Kashmiris paranoid and unyielding,  
 the Jammuites rebellious and angry.  
 He took over as the Governor  
 just when the valley was on fire,  
 yet, he lost no time  
 to don the role of a firefighter.

I wish him luck in his endeavor  
 to quell the fires of discord  
 and win the people over.  
 That he stuck to the date and time  
 for this award function,  
 in the face of the raging storm,  
 speaks a lot about his determination.

### **Dinner with the Dhars**

As the evening draws near,  
 we return to the Circuit house,  
 and Dr. Dhar arrives soon after  
 to pick me in his car.

I am visiting the Dhars first time in Srinagar  
 since his son and my daughter  
 tied the nuptial knot far away in Delhi  
 three months after the exodus.  
 Kashmir was out of bounds then  
 for a wedding celebration.

It is a veritable botanical garden  
 with the flora special to Kashmir  
 that they can boast of here.  
 The almond, the apricot, the walnut,  
 the apple, the cherry, the pear,  
 the willow, the pine and the Chinar,  
 and shrubs and plants - common and rare -  
 name it, and they are all here  
 in this place,  
 blessed by their presence.

Dr. Surendra Dhar,  
and Vimla, his doctor spouse,  
are rare specimens of human courage  
who preferred to stay back in Kashmir  
even after that 83-day ordeal  
when he was kidnapped by the militants  
and held hostage in far flung mountains  
along the Symthen Pass,  
and beyond.

His saga, chronicled in his work,  
The Story of a Frozen River,  
is a bold attempt to unravel  
the contours of militancy here,  
and to explore the psyche of the captors  
and the mind of people in captivity.

The couple is holding it out  
and manage to live on their terms  
even when their kindred have fled.  
They are loved and respected,  
not just because they dared,  
but because they reach out,  
and give their best to the patients.

Can they become the role models?  
Can they, along with the residual Pandits  
(just a couple of thousands by the latest census),  
be the inspiration for the exiles to return?

To drinks, dinner and discussion  
on subjects serious and trivial,  
all touching our daily lives,  
all related to Kashmir –  
the unpleasant past,  
the uneasy present,  
and the uncertain future.

### Back to the Circuit House

Dr. Dhar drops me back  
and I find a good gathering here  
of other awardees and some visitors  
enjoying an after-dinner chat.

A well groomed Pandit lady,  
with an upright stance and a confident step,  
(what is she doing here, I think to myself)  
comes near and introduces herself  
as one Ms Sumbly.  
She is a Central Government official,  
who often comes visiting here  
to oversee various fast-track projects  
about maternal health and child care.  
Another is Rakesh Handoo,  
of the Srinagar Door Dharshan,  
who stuck to his post in the face of danger.  
He asks if he could interview me  
and telecast my impressions  
about the award function.

One shudders to recall  
how Pandit Lassa Kaul, the then Director,  
was murdered in cold blood  
when militancy was at its acme  
in nineteen ninety.  
He was killed like many others,  
because he was what he was,  
a true Indian and a Kashmir Pandit  
who would not be dictated by the militants  
to air their programs  
that would help boost militancy.

These are the few Pandits who,  
like the Dhar couple,  
serve Kashmiris in so many ways,  
and help to keep the last vestiges alive  
of the many-hued culture of Kashmir  
that is fast threatening to become insular.

They are the creaky bridges  
that connect the two communities;  
they are the last surviving links  
between the Muslims and Pandits;  
they are the last outpost  
of the Indian ethos in Kashmir.

Can they be the inspiration for our return?

### The Mindset

I get an answer to that question, soon after,  
when I happen to chance upon in the gathering  
a top *government functionary*  
who rues that good doctors and teachers  
have become scarce in Kashmir  
after the Pandits 'fled'.

I was incensed by that word  
for it is a common canard,  
a myth perpetuated by people like him,  
that the Pandits 'fled' Kashmir,  
that they deserted their homes and hearths  
for the unknown terrains of exile,  
that they did not love their land  
and ditched the struggle for Azadi,  
that they were afflicted suddenly  
with a strange wander lust;  
because they were lured by Jagmohan.

"We need your services," he says  
"doctors like you are hard to find.  
You could fly here on the weekends  
and examine any number of patients.  
You can put up in a hotel or a hut;  
we can arrange the very best."

"What use coming here," I ask,  
"if it is to stay as a guest  
and not in my own home,  
and if it is not to return for good?  
And what about all other Pandits  
who did not flee of their own will  
but were forced into exodus  
like the rest of us?"

"Do they really want to return?" He asks.  
"Do the Muslims want them back?" I ask.

He hesitates a while before he speaks,  
"Yes, we want them back,  
but, there will have to be a consensus  
amongst different groups and factions,  
for there can be no guarantee  
against militants and fringe elements.  
Even we don't feel safe,  
yet, we did not choose to run away.  
We braved the bullets from both sides  
while you deserted mother Kashmir  
and made it good wherever you went.  
Besides, your many leaders give the impression  
that you do not want to return."

I got my answer,  
for, like others of his ilk,  
he had betrayed his mindset  
at the very outset  
with his refrain that we had 'fled'  
and ditched the Muslims  
whom we left behind to face the bullet.  
He did not have to make it clearer  
that we were really not welcome,  
that our return was conditional,  
that they needed our services and not us,  
that we could stay as guests  
but not as rightful citizens.

Was there any fun  
carrying on the discussion?  
For, it is not the common man  
but the *bureaucrat* and the manager,  
the politician and the minister,  
who do not want the Pandits back.  
It is they who debate and legislate  
and are in a hurry to confiscate  
our institutions and estates  
and not let us return to Kashmir.  
It is they who are the worst offenders  
of our human rights,  
and not the common Kashmiri Muslims,  
who, like Rauf, would want us back.

Militancy is but an extension,  
of the no-holds-barred State terrorism  
that has been unleashed upon us.

*Day Three*

**Sunday, 5 October 2008**

### Curfew

Another night in the guesthouse,  
another night of wakefulness  
as I collect my thoughts in the stillness  
and wonder more and more:  
Will Kashmir ever be like before?

Happily for me  
the muezzin from across the river  
jolts me out of depression  
with another cascade of prayer.

I await the phone call from Dr. Dhar.  
He has insisted that he will drive me  
to Parea Mahal and Cheshma Shahi  
as early at dawn as can be,  
when fairies come dancing from the hills  
and angels descend from the skies,  
when the place is at its paradisiacal best  
for a quiet rendezvous.

I pick the phone on the first ring,  
my heart beating in anticipation.  
"I am sorry,  
curfew has been clamped in the valley.  
The curse has fallen yet again here  
and we can hardly go anywhere,"  
laments Dr. Dhar,  
his sonorous voice turned somber.

I am stunned for a while  
even as I got the answer  
to that recurring question  
I was asking myself all night -  
whether Kashmir could ever find  
peace and harmony again.

Soon, I wake up to another *déjà vu*  
of those days of endless curfews  
before we were forced to take flight.  
It was a part of life then;  
it seems a part of life now.  
Curfews, hartals and shut downs,  
protest marches and demonstrations,  
violence, killings and bomb blasts -  
they will possibly remain for ever  
embedded in the Kashmiri culture.

Nothing seems to have changed here  
about the creed of violence and fear,  
and yet everything has changed for us  
after our unfortunate departure.  
The valley has taken on  
a distinctly Islamic flavor,  
and the many-hued garden  
is no longer there.

It is a chronic sickness that afflicts Kashmir,  
 a virulent virus of blind obedience to unreason  
 that proliferates in the tissues and organs  
 of the civil society,  
 causing an indolence of the spirit,  
 and a negativity that rules the mind.  
 I wonder if the Kashmiris know  
 what they really want  
 for, none has answered that question  
 straight or to my satisfaction.

And there is another conundrum  
 I have not been able to resolve -  
 is it really worthwhile coming back here?

I had reserved a part of the morning  
 to visit my friends and acquaintances,  
 though those who really mattered  
 are either dead or have fled,  
 or live out of the city.

I had to offer a belated condolence  
 on the demise, twelve years back.  
 of our family friend, Haji Abli Bhat.  
 Before he died of a stroke,  
 he had his burning wish fulfilled  
 to visit us in Jammu,  
 and to find out how we fared in exile.

I owed another condolence  
 to the adopted son of Biba Masi,  
 our worthy neighbour.  
 She was a barren old widow  
 who cleaned windows and mopped floors  
 and did odd jobs for others.  
 She was poor but proud,  
 and lived a life of piety,  
 but died cursing the militants  
 for forcing the Pandits into exile  
 and bringing ruin upon Kashmir.

I had also planned to visit Hafeeza,  
 a kindly woman from Ishabar,  
 that famous hamlet at the foot hills  
 where people found spiritual solace,  
 where the great Swami Lakshmanjoo  
 found enlightenment and bliss.  
 She came with a gift for my wife  
 of the first pick of cherries from her farm  
 as a token of her affection  
 year after year.

Since all these visits are cancelled,  
 how do I spend the whole morning  
 and part of the afternoon  
 till the flight out of Srinagar,  
 I wonder?

Why not switch back  
to my erstwhile routine  
and write a chronicle  
of my 48-hour sojourn  
since I landed here?

Writing seems the only recourse  
to some peace in turbulence,  
a catharsis for the pent up emotions,  
a pick-me-up for the melancholy spirit,  
a penance for our failings and follies,  
an exorcism to drive evil spirits away  
that have possessed the valley.

There was nothing inspirational  
in this hurricane trip so far,  
and my cherished visit to Paree Mahal,  
that might have lifted my spirits,  
was not to be.  
Possibly, because it had always been  
my most favorite haunt,  
where I often hiked with my children  
whom I would have missed so badly.  
Possibly,  
because the fairies of Paree Mahal  
have also gone in hiding like the Hangul,  
or been driven far away like the Pandits.  
Possibly,  
because I have to pine for and wait  
for a propitious time to come here again.

For now, let the rabble rousers self-indulge again.  
For now, let them have another field day.

### Adieu

Life has come to a standstill  
as the van takes us  
along empty lanes and deserted streets,  
passing by shuttered shops  
and silent neighborhoods.

There are police pickets here and there,  
outside State government buildings,  
and on the two ends of the bridges  
that we cross on way to the airport.  
Other than that,  
and except for a stray dog scratching lazily  
under the shade of a tree,  
Srinagar has turned into a ghost city.  
Even the birds on the poles and power lines,  
have sensed the mood and turned dumb,  
and there is an airlessness in the atmosphere  
that pervades everywhere.  
If there are souls in the city  
they are entombed inside the houses  
for I do not even hear a whisper.

We stop at barricades manned by soldiers,  
to display our identity cards and air tickets.

I am seized with deep melancholy  
 as I look through the windshield  
 trying to take in the last scenes  
 of the receding city.  
 I look at the helpless Vitasta  
 tracing the tragic course of history  
 as she seems to flow down hesitatingly.  
 I sweep a glance at the ring of mountains,  
 the silent sentinels of the valley,  
 and feel like being ferried into space  
 to the silence of an interstellar journey,  
 far away from fear and uncertainty  
 and yet, feeling the pangs of separation already.

Soon we reach Srinagar International  
 and I wonder about the billboard  
 that welcomes you to 'Paradise' on arrival.  
 There is no matching signpost of farewell,  
 but if there were one, it might rightly read,  
 "From Paradise turned into hell."

### The Return Flight

('A man's homeland is wherever he prospers.  
 - Aristophanes)

Going through the formalities of the travel,  
 I am bereft of emotion, strangely so,  
 as on the day I started from Jammu.

As we take to wings,  
 the valley looks graceful  
 in her autumnal mantle -  
 familiar little hamlets coming to view  
 and vast stretches of fallow land,  
 that sets me thinking again:  
 There is no dearth of space here,  
 and we could be settled back  
 in these expanses  
 without encroaching on any one,  
 without disturbing the hamlets.  
 We could again be  
 back in our homeland,  
 and a part of the landscape,  
 again to live in peace and harmony.

But, if there is no place for you  
 in human hearts,  
 what use the space on land?

I see clouds speeding past the window  
as we are hauled up in space,  
obliterating the view of the valley,  
breaking for a while my soliloquy  
as I come to grips with the reality  
of the utter unpredictability of the valley.

In Kashmir, even when it is bright and sunny,  
and the sky blue, beautiful and bold,  
there is always a menacing cloud  
lurking behind those cliffs,  
ready to burst  
and bring devastation in its wake,  
blow hamlets and towns away,  
not just the peace and harmony  
that I was thinking about.

Soon we cross the Pir Panjal  
and what a contrast -  
vibrant green fields of all shapes,  
squares, rectangles, and circles;  
river tributaries crisscrossing the land;  
and flat rooftops kissing each other,  
making a statement.

For once, my heart turns inside  
with an exceptional fondness for this land  
that hosted us full eighteen years  
and made us feel so welcome,  
so secure.  
How come we never owned it  
as it owned us?

As we touch the Jammu tarmac,  
smiling faces greet me,  
familiar people who know me by name,  
whom I have begun to trust.  
Suddenly, I get a feeling,  
first time in these long years,  
that I am returning home.

No, I am not a refugee;  
this place belongs to me,  
and I belong here.  
A homeland for me  
is a place  
which gives me back my identity.

## Notes

Azadi – Freedom

Bindi – A saffron/vermillion mark on the forehead

Chowk – Market square

Dargah – Shrine

Dejhours – Metallic (generally golden) ornaments, worn by married Pandit women

Delicious and Ambri – Two famous varieties of Kashmiri apples

Dupttas – Scarves

Hangul – A rare species of stag In Kashmir

Hartals – Shutdowns

Kahnove – the one with eleven names

Kangris – firepots

Kurtas and shalwars – Shirts and trousers

Mohalla – Neighborhood

Nadru – Lotus root

Nadermunjas and pakoras – Fried lotus root and potatoes

Naerband – Sacred thread tied round the wrist by Pandits

Nizame Mustafa – The Islamic dispensation

Pherons – Long robes

Sheerchai and telewaroos – Salt tea and bagels

Spring shikaras – Luxury boats with spring seats

Thokur kuth – Prayer room installed with a Siva lingam

Vaakh – Quatrain

## **Review excerpts of Homeland after Eighteen years**

**(A 48- hour Travelogue in Kashmir)**

**Writing in picturesque language, meticulously following minutest details, Dr Chowdhury makes the reader keep him company and share his moods. He adopts ‘James Joyce’s’ technique of flash backs and without restraint dives deep into the waters of his past, giving nostalgic expressions to what has been – mostly pleasant – and contrasting it with what is – all ugly and jarring. A must read for all.**

**Prof. R N Kaul, Kashmir Times**

**At a subtle level of perception, the anthology entitled “Homeland after Eighteen years”, by Dr K L Chowdhury, seems to be a poetic bioscope, presenting myriad scenes and sights of the historical city of Srinagar and its outskirts. At a subtler level, it is a work of pure poetic magic that casts a spell on the reader, preparing him for flights of imagination. Such is the poetical treatment given to an otherwise gloomy content of the narrative that the reader would love to read the book over and again, for, verily “Our sweetest songs are those that tell of the saddest thoughts.”**

**Prof M L Raina, Rising Kashmir**

**Dr. Kundan Lal Chowdhury is a late starter in the field of poetry. But he seems to be making up by the sheer fecundity of his poetic output. Nothing is beyond the reach of his lyrical grasp**

**M.K.Kaw, Naad**

**The narrative reveals a linguistic excellence that ensures a fusion, juxtaposition and a concord in terms of content and technique. The overpowering element of simplicity is perhaps the best medium for profundity of thought and emotion**

**Prof. M L Misri, Kashmir Insights**

**Dr. K L Chowdhury is an award winning writer, physician, and a poet. The strength of his narrative is his deep feeling for the valley and the people. Through an emotional upsurge he displays a lot of bitterness, affection and nostalgia before he ends with realism. His poetry is homespun and rhymes well.**

**Pushp Saraf, Border Affairs**

**Dr. K L Chowdhury succeeds in conveying his agony and that of his community over his forced migration in a manner that strikes a deep chord. Through this travelogue, the author has confirmed what we already know – that he is our top poet in English language - a poet who has captured the essence of an era.**

**Bilhan Kaul, Shehjar**

**The travelogue develops into a gripping narrative in the annals of diasporic literature. The reader finds it virtually impossible to put down the volume, once he or she starts to read it. Chowdhury, thanks to his racy poetic profundity and rapidity, makes the reader accompany him all through his journey till his return flight.**

**Prof. K B Razdan**

**Chowdhury's book is a must for all those Kashmiri Pandits who still believe in their dream and for all those non-Kashmiris who have been indifferent to their emotional trauma.**

**Tej Nath Dhar, *Organiser***

**Through the medium of his four anthologies, published during the last decade, Dr K L Chowdhury has, in his inimitable style, taken poetry out of the realm of elitism and brought it to the common man, to our bedrooms and drawing rooms. Because of their universal appeal, his books are a must read for every one, especially for all the denizens of Jammu and Kashmir who will find in them a translation of their thoughts and sentiments, their frustrations and fulminations, their urges and aspirations.**

**O N Kaul, Milchar**

**Dr. Chowdhury's insight into the human heart is markedly Shakespearean. Re-visiting Kashmir, his lost homeland, after eighteen long years of exile Chowdhury writes about it in that vein of stoicism at times and with the courage and freedom of the spirit telling the reader not what he 'ought to' write but what he actually 'feels'. In many ways it reads like a 'spiritual diary,' to use T. S. Eliot's memorable encomium for Tennyson's *In Memoriam*.**

**Dr. G. K. Das, Miraas**