

## **#TheIndiaDialog Working Paper Series**

Working Paper (WP–2024–30, August 2024)<sup>1</sup>

# **A Visual Dialogue on Kashmir's Conflict and Displacement Veer Munshi<sup>2</sup>**

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<sup>1</sup>The views presented here are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the position of either Institute for Competitiveness or Stanford University. Working papers are in draft form. This working paper is distributed for purposes of comment and discussion only.

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## A Visual Dialogue on Kashmir's Conflict and Displacement

*Kashmir shrinks into my mailbox,  
My home a neat four by six inches.*

*I always loved neatness. Now I hold  
The half-inch Himalayas in my hand.*

– Agha Shahid Ali Khan (*Postcard from Kashmir*)

These words of the poet are very relevant to Kashmiris all across the globe. Some people who have migrated for safety while some people who have migrated for work will claim their incessant love and devotion to their homeland and, at the same time, they would be able to describe the turmoil curtailing the state's orientation quite distinctly. While these lines project the permanent state of displacement, they also reflect on the distance created between the displaced and their desire to return home. In other words, one may witness the shrinking of Kashmir's socio-political paradigm to the size of our mailbox. Khan's words remain pertinent to this moment in history, where we are regularly exposed to the horrors of violence and severe alienation with no particular sight of hope. In my work, I have looked at these ideas frequently. Questions on nationhood and mental wellbeing of the people of the valley have also been essential reflections in my art. As much as these questions remain vital to Kashmir, they are relevant to all states afflicted by everyday events and circumstances.

Given the rise of media in various mediums, this is a crucial moment for the Indian artists to explore their skills and their voices beyond tactile factors. The Canadian philosopher Marshall McLuhan's fear of the end of the print medium to make space for the electronic medium has turned out to be somewhat true with an emphasis on the medium being the message. For artists who have painstakingly performed intricacies and detailing with their own hands, this is an age of advantage where they can shift focus on the message while the medium becomes an evident skillset. Here, again, the medium plays a vital role of transferring ideas or tools of communication. Similarly, my engagement with various mediums only resolve to emphasise my thoughts or sights.

India's independence is merely seventy-seven years old (2023) with a ghastly history of violence. The violence, of course, was considered genocidal, but, over the years, the event has led to more deaths. My work examines the conflict of this Partition and its affectations at large with regards to nation-state building and the futuristic sight of civic life.



ZULJINAHA- resin hand painted in karikalm kari technique-

72/60/36 inches -2016

Kashmir's political climate has been fluxed with censorship and vigilance. Given the designs of nature or environment and, perhaps, agencies of organised and disorganised violence, the Arts has obtained a special position of reflection. Albeit philosophical and hypothetical, the Arts tends to glance over the unheard or unvoiced sensory engagement and thoughts of the people at large. My voice doesn't carry the weight of the collective but it reiterates the collective imagination for peace. Over the years, this has become essential to my art-making in order to look past the given or the sensationalised reports on the valley.

Another very relevant objective is woven in this endeavour of art-making where my work enables the Arts and crafts movement in India in the immediate context. The movement is an enabler for the artisans and craftsmen of the nation, where the practice of living traditions features as an essential intervention on the contemporary high arts. The papier mâché tradition has an important place in my work, where the pulped paper is effectively a means to explore the kar-e-kalamkari traditions of Kashmir. Therefore, my work is mostly a visual dialogue on Kashmir – a state caught in the beauty of conflict and resolution, where the conflict shifts from one end to another.

There is a strong sense of melancholia on the subject of Kashmir, where those who belong to the state find it hard to look away or to even look at the everyday encounters. The poetry in the media representations lays heavy on our consciousness, where we are made to witness our own past and present with no proper resolution towards a future. It became imperative to intervene in this crisis of representation, where the voices had to belong to those carrying their own narratives of exodus that took place in the 1990s of the Hindu Pandits. The Muslim population retained their **healing wounds** own divide based on beliefs of the Wahabis and the Sufis without any clear sense of direction. Once again, the Hindu-Muslim divide orchestrated during the Partition had become evident in these grounds.

The politics of this divide became a source of inspiration for many thinkers, artists, writers, and other active participants of the entertainment section in the country. India's secularism reached a point of recourse that needed to be seen closely. The critical industries shone light on the several views of this construct, heightening the course of reflection. My visual world developed a similar engagement of meditation and a history of aesthetics that channeled my artistry towards a more nuanced interaction. Mediums, which initially didn't receive the kind of expertise or recognition that it has received now, turned into a necessary tool to expose the deepest and resilient thoughts.



from pandit houses photograph 2014.

For instance, the series *Abandoned Houses* (2008-now) started as a point of my visit to Kashmir after fifteen years of the exodus, where I was supposed to look for my ancestral home. This house was where I was born and raised during my initial years of childhood until the event of my departure. As soon as I reached Srinagar, I found several abandoned houses that belonged to Pandit owners. It became necessary that I presented these houses as they were without altering its meaning or its visual language. Photography came as an ideal support to pursue the truth as it was the closest to the realistic genre of art-making. The medium essentially presented these houses in their most earnest states and it didn't alter any expression of that moment. Of course, I never found the house I was looking for but I found my roots in a state of abandonment. Since a lot of my practice is a means to return to my lost home in Kashmir, these houses too signified the devastation left at the wake of the Partition.

This particular oeuvre of art-making initiated a bare and intricate engagement with the Arts. My practice didn't restrict itself to painting on flat-surfaces anymore and it acquired a flavour of archiving and historicity. Simultaneously, painting had become particularly a deliberate act of imagined realities and boundaries that could be distinctly rhetoric in schools of figurative and abstractions. The distinction between the two kinds of art-making was also dissolved in the photographic representation of sight, where the barriers between and beyond are limited to what was being shown as subject. The background was merely the aesthetics of natural beauty against which these houses stood depicting their lost residents or the erstwhile charm. The architecture of these houses were distinct from its neighbourhood houses as they quite literally assumed the history of Kashmir without the recent clamour for modernisation or minimalism. A grand arching balcony above a doorway or tall windows surrounding the buildings were staple structures of these houses that were lost to turmoils as opposed to being safeguarded as means to everyday life and the whole idealisation of shelter.

Another interesting threat loomed on these properties in the form of gentrification, where these lands were being allocated for newer infrastructures. This needed more care in the means of its archiving and representation. Photography as a tool made these reflections available for better visualisation and engagement. Therefore, my art acquired a language in mediums that helped me to visualise beyond my initial trainings in the Arts at MSU, Baroda in Gujarat.

## **Conflict and Chaos**

In 2014, a terrible flood occurred. All channels of communication were blocked and there were no means to reach out to the people of Kashmir. Several flood related operatives began to function in order to resurrect life in the affected areas. In an absolute state of dismay and fear, I began to draw portraits of my people: The barber who had shaved my beard, the butcher who had sold me some meat, the lady who had offered warm tea, the neighbour who lived across my friend's house, my friend who accommodated my impromptu plans, and so many others. As I thought of them, I drew them, hoping to safeguard their presence in my memory.



Memory aligned itself with the ongoing events and, in some sense, this situated a sense of artistic expression that was prayer-like in essence. It was necessary not to forget the people living in Kashmir bearing the brunt of chaos and violence with resilience and courage. This act was done in empathy and in political health to look closely at the loss. Loss had become a constant sense, where the lacking's had turned into burdens especially for those witnessing these events. The overarching theme was not just to engage but to send out hope and the promise of this hope into the collective sphere where I belong or even acquire my personhood.



FALLEN HOUSE- wood board -96-216-120inches 2015.

This collection of portraits on paper was then placed inside a house made of wood as an installation at the India Art Fair in 2015. The *Fallen House* (as it was named) had the lattice designs on the windows which remained shut. A video ran on a loop inside this installation, showing a strong gush of water carrying life and property flowing outside a make-belief window. Towards the end of the video, the desolation and desperation of the people is visible on a woman's face who holds her hands against her ears to show how she witnesses the calamity but finds it hard to comprehend or even reason with it.

In my art, I have often explored the psychosomatic experiences associated with loss and violence, which I have either depicted in their stark elements or in metaphoric references. This installation bridged the gap between media and the event where art built a special bond between the two.

Again, I felt the need to memorise my roots in other ways and, this time, I created a space to bring artists of Kashmir together after thirty years of separation. The show was named *Concourse* (2016). An old, abandoned industrial building in Srinagar stood waiting for this reunion which accommodated at least sixty artists. Some of these people were meeting for the first time after their departure from their homeland. These people were mostly related to the Arts and their discussion centred around their memories of parting with their land and how they have been able to secure a life after their exiled status in various states or countries.

This included a wooden installation in the shape of a maze. People could walk inside it and it would come to a point from where moving in any direction was not possible. This was a commentary on daily life.

Interestingly, the night before the day of the event, there was a heavy downpour that literally threatened the entire day's plans and I was certain that most people would not turn up. Eventually, people did come and they sat together to memorise and celebrate their roots. This incident proved the strength of belonging and the collective memory that aligned my show to reality, almost making it important to look at the unresolved nature of the exodus and the Partition.

Soon, the historicity of Kashmir began to make more sense in my art and I longed to explore the role of history through the documented past. Here, history was not just written but revisited through folk-lore and folk-tales in artistic expressions through folk-styles. Kalhana, one of the oldest historians of India, mostly concentrated on the history of Kashmir's rulers. His *Rajatarangini* (Engl. transl. *River of Kings*) – an epic narrative in Sanskrit – accounts the history of two millennia of ruling dynasties – from its origins to the time of Kalhana in 1148 CE. In this narration, we are exposed to the wealth of intelligentsia of ancient times when the potentates would patronize the Arts, literature, and architecture as a sign of peace and prosperity in their kingdom. Under their rulership, we are also exposed to the advent of Buddhism and the influences on architecture.

Later, in the 14th century, the Islam religion spread through Mir Sayed Ali Shah Hamdani – a sufi preacher from Persia. This again added to the cultural practices, which is evident till this day and relevant to my art. At the same time, it maybe important to remember that the Quran in Kashmir dates as far back as 1237 AD.

Eventually, inspired by this religious and cultural milieu, I borrowed a language from architecture of all who had ever graced the land with their practices and created a shrine out of wood. The coffins inside carried colourful skeletons made of papier mâché traditions. The structure of the shrine

clearly shows the influence of religious architecture, such as the pagoda from the Buddhist temples and the lattice work from Islamic mosques.

The installation quite closely explored the predominance of violence in the state. Death is the final outcome. Loss becomes thematically centralized to engage with violence because there is no hope beyond death in conflict.

Image 4- A place for repose



A PLACE FOR REPOSE-14 caskets 24/10/8 inches-resin wood velvet hand painted in kari kalm kari traditional technique -2018

I curated a space at the Kochi Muziris Biennale in 2018 around the shrine for other artists to create an interactive experience, where I could draw a strong statement on 'Kashmiriyat', which translates to the cultural pride of Kashmir. Hospitality and debates are all important means to exist and that is the soul of this place. But, before one could enter the space, one had to go through the scrutiny of the security guards, staged by two performance artists. This worked as a commentary on the ongoing political vigilance associated with Kashmir.





SHRAPNEL -acrylic on handmade paper -

60/120 inches-2010

It is necessary to remember that a lot of my art documents the practice of violence. The shrapnels, which I found heaped on roadsides, became a source of inspiration to demonstrate conflict, pain, and events of violence. Their shapes and existence intrigued me and made me look at their aesthetics. After all, beauty has a history of violence and the history of monuments of India have presented that in so many ways. So, I set out to create an aesthetic language of this violence to expose their deepest impacts.

Again, my sculptures of hanguls have also played a role in spreading the message on forced migration. These hanguls were made in this hope that they find roots in different cities across the country marking the presence of Kashmir all across the country. Kar-e-kalamkari detailed on their backs, they were staged with a backdrop of cityscapes or in isolation. Their endemic and endangered status stands as an allegory on the conflict and displacement.

### **Arts and Crafts**

Information became central to my interest in the Arts and crafts communities in India, which helped further the cause of empowering this community. I found the kar-e-kalamkari details very intricately woven to my visualisations. This is when it was mandatory to look at the larger picture, where I realised that due to the various upheavals that ruled the Kashmiri consciousness, economic and social empowerment never really found a place here. It was necessary to look at ways to include the various art practices which were being implemented in the handicrafts and handlooms industries to promote tourism during the late 1950s till the 1970s. One has to go back to the making of India post

its independence when princely states had to be coerced into forming India. It was only in the late 1950s when the crafts communities found any kind of development. The state formation led the crafts communities to find boundaries for their practice: this was done to facilitate tourism and strategize industrial economies in the crafts section.

The high arts in India clearly found its own niche where artists were supposed to have a more academic and global engagement which resulted in the modernists movement in India. During the 1990s, a shift took shape in my art. Something drew me to look at the vernacular art form and engage with it to find ways to help create awareness for the living traditions. It wasn't just about the Arts anymore, it was also about the artisans and craftsmen who were now looking for ways to earn their living. Lack of respectability for their practice had already made their next generation move towards other professions. My art became a tool to intervene in this shift. Perhaps, my art grappled with creating a platform and a newer language in the same art form while it looked at the plight of our lives.

Gathering my life long work, I set out to create a message of health and healing. Images of caste karigars or craftsmen and intellectuals featured in my art. They represent events and stories of peace and resilience



HEALING WOUNDS-hand painting on mdf wood-48/94 inches-2023

This collection provides hope for the future while it also speaks of the ongoing 'Arts and crafts movement' in India as a result of our longing to return to our roots or to even rethink our collective journeys. It intends to stage a counter-violent discipline to look at history and political divides. This time I also include the famous Kashmiri carpets in my work, promoting the aesthetics of the woven product in cut-out wood for canvas. The painting on top recreates an engagement with the kar-e-kalamkari traditions which in the ancient times were painstakingly placed on architecture for décor.

A message of peace is elaborately portrayed in this collection as a pursuit for the future. Bold colours depicting the aesthetics and skillset of the region embolden this process for the community to look at their own practice for business opportunities and platforms to keep artistic traditions alive.

All in all, the shrapnels remain significant as wounds and as markers of the violence that has shaped life here. My practice engages not just with the questions on daily occurrences but also beyond the basic knowledge of history and aesthetics, where art meets expression and empowerment as modalities for the future. Finally, it is important to remember the 14th century Bhakti poetess Lal Ded who had observed a very pertinent point on the uncertainties of the future and still remains true to the immediate moment in Kashmir.

I'm towing my boat across the ocean with a thread.  
Will He hear me and help me across?  
Or am I seeping away like water from a half-baked cup?  
Wander, my poor soul, you're not going home anytime soon.