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An investment in peace

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“Athwaas” uses dialogue and personal narrative to try and bring back syncretism once natural to the Kashmir valley.



Rebuilding relationships: Highlighting what was once a common history and heritage.

For those who know her, Ashima Kaul is an avowed secularist, committed to non-violence and communal harmony. She is simultaneously acknowledging and proud of her Hindu heritage as she is of her Kashmiri identity. “I feel more comfortable with Kashmiri Muslims than with non-Kashmiri Hindus,” she says candidly.

Yet when in the winter of 1996 Kaul, now a resident of Delhi, made that long journey back to her native Baramullah, she found relationships frozen. What greeted her were deafening silences — of gutted and abandoned Kashmiri Hindu houses and Muslim graveyards where tombstones jostled with each other for space. Kaul’s intense pain set her off on a path, different from those of political rhetoric and militarised spaces.

A personal battle

In the memorable winter of 2008, as more and more Kashmiri women battled it out in the political space, contesting elections and casting their ballot, another Kashmiri woman has launched her own battle — for dialogue and rebuilding relationships. Kaul has just captured on film the turbulent and moving journey of Athwas — an initiative of Kashmiri women. In 2000, “Women in Security, Conflict Management and Peace”, a Delhi-based initiative of the Foundation for Universal Responsibility, brought together a few Kashmiri women from diverse backgrounds who had experienced conflict in different ways. The idea was to enable them to

listen to each other.

The rationale — for women the personal inevitably blurs into the political and it is the feminist principles of compassion and healing, of reaching out to the other that ultimately triumph. The group called itself “Athwaas” meaning ‘handshake’ in Kashmiri. The core group of Athwaas later travelled to different parts of the Valley and also to the camps of the displaced Kashmiri Pandits in Jammu, listening to the stories of pain, suffering and, also, of resilience.

“Athwas: a Journey” is a 30-minute documentary in English, Urdu, Hindi and Kashmiri, with English subtitles, produced by Public Service Broadcasting Trust (PSBT). It does not attempt to explore the roots of either the militancy that erupted in the Kashmir valley or the state reprisals that followed. It apportions blame to no one. It simply deals with and tries to heal the trauma that haunts the inhabitants of every community living in the valley. A gendered narrative of the collective trauma of Kashmir’s people, it highlights the fact that there remains a constituency for peace. It uses the only methodology that works: dialogue. Interviews with women of different faiths and communities, from different walks of life, lawyers, social workers, students, teachers and housewives build up the many personal histories that comprise the complicated issue of Kashmir and its multiple realities.

No one view

The film steers clear of simplistic reductionisms like innocent Kashmiris vs. iron-fisted state or that of Kashmiri terrorists vs. Mother India. All are given space and no one view is privileged over the other. The camera highlights the changed silhouette of Srinagar where police checkpoints and barbed wire have been integrated into the landscape.

But Kaul does not stop there. The camera zooms in on narrow filthy alleyways and claustrophobic one-roomed tenements where adults flee away from the lens of the camera — ashamed of the reality of their current lives.

New geography

A new kind of geography came up on the outskirts of Jammu too in the wake of the armed insurgency in Kashmir and Kaul captures on film the “migrant camps” that sprouted overnight to accommodate fleeing Kashmiri Hindus from the valley. Purkhoo, Mutthi, Mishriwalla still tragically remains unknown and unheard of words for a majority of Indians and, of course, for the world at large. Yet they accommodate camps where live, what till today remains India’s largest ethnically cleansed population, the Kashmiri Hindus. The coming new year will see them enter their 20th year in exile without any signs of repatriation to Kashmir in sight.

“Athwaas: A Journey” tries to highlight what was once a shared space, a common history and heritage. The haunting strains of the *azaan* blend in with the joyful chiming of bells from the Shankaracharya temple. The voice of Mir Munir, a Muslim poet and singer singing the *vaks* of Lalla Ded, a Shaivite mystic who 700 years ago had implored Kashmiris to remember that Shiva lived in all beings often forms the backdrop to the interviews. Kaul has attempted, through dialogue and personal narratives, to bridge the fissures that erupted in this shared space and to bring back a fast fading syncretism that had been the dominant way of life in the not-so-distant past of the Kashmir valley.

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