

Opinion – Speaking Truth to Power in Kashmir

Written by Shubranshu Mishra

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SHUBRANSHU MISHRA, SEP 25 2022

On 26th April 2018, Parveena Ahanger, mother of a disappeared, took to Facebook to write a moving obituary for a fellow mother, Rehti Begum, whose son disappeared after being picked up by the personnel of Central Reserve Police Force in 1990 in Jammu and Kashmir. Since 1994, Rehti Begum had been working with the Association of Parents of Disappeared Persons (APDP) to find the whereabouts of her missing son and many others who have disappeared in Kashmir since the 1990s. In her memory, Parveena, who is also the founder chairperson of APDP, wrote she would carry forward Begum's unfulfilled search for her son. One may wonder how many national newspapers might have found this obituary for one mother of the disappeared from another news-worthy enough to publish without being deemed too controversial?

In her book *Precarious Life*, Judith Butler reminds us of the San Francisco Chronicle's refusal to publish public memorials of two Palestinian families killed by Israeli forces because the newspaper deemed it offensive to its readers. As Butler asks, under what conditions does 'public grieving constitute an "offense" against the public itself, constituting an intolerable eruption within the terms of what is speakable in public?'. The act of public mourning thus carries with it the power to unsettle and offend mainstream narratives by bringing to the fore the truth about disappearances in Kashmir. In so doing, these parents of the disappeared in Kashmir have rejected the depoliticisation of grieving as a private act more acceptable to the state.

Parveena Ahanger has, on multiple occasions, described the events of her son going missing after being picked up by the security forces and her decision to continue the long search to find him. I have followed her struggle since 2005 and she has repeated the same story to me during my research, to other reporters, to fellow protestors, and to the people she meets in public events. She did so again in London while speaking at the University of Westminster a day after Begum's death. Ahanger, whose son was picked up in August 1991, noticed that her personal tragedy was a story shared by several households in many other parts of Jammu and Kashmir especially in the early 1990s. She started to visit other parts of Kashmir to meet with the families of the disappeared and mobilised them to fight their cases together. It was then that the APDP was formed in 1994, with the help of lawyers and human rights activists and under the leadership of Ahanger. On the tenth of every month, several women, men and children assemble at Pratap Park in Srinagar to publicly mourn and demand the whereabouts of their sons, husbands and fathers who have gone missing after having been 'arrested'.

This deliberate act of gathering together every month in a public space is an attempt to both reject the relegation of mourning to the private realm and ensure that the names of the disappeared are preserved in public memory. These public protests are practised amidst the lingering threat of what the state terms 'crowd control' aimed at public gatherings in order to 'maintain law and order'.

Having been to a number of their peaceful protests, I have always found it extraordinarily brave of these families to narrate their personal stories in a public space through photos, placards, poetry, chants, silences and tears. When these parents narrate the story of their loss, they produce new and unique social relationships between themselves and formulate a space of politics to seek justice. It is when these public meetings started to take place that people began to take notice of disappearances in Kashmir. Journalists started to write columns in the local newspapers and lawyers and activists joined the monthly sit-ins to mobilise support.

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Looking at Parveena's case file at the APDP office in 2014, I read a comment made by an Additional District and Sessions Court judge in Jammu and Kashmir, also quoted in one of the earliest reports of Amnesty International on disappearances in Jammu and Kashmir and Punjab. The judge commented, 'One shudders at the thought of a situation in which the petitioner [the victim's mother] presently feels totally helpless to obtain or collect any sort of information from the authorities about the whereabouts of her son'. As Parveena recounted, 'The Army offered me ten lakh rupees to withdraw my case but I did not accept. I knew I am going to keep searching for my son until I am alive. The money would not have brought him, dead or alive'. Having experienced several hurdles to have her case heard in the court, her file was sent to the Union Home Ministry for a sanction to prosecute the officers of the Indian Army and no decision was taken for four years until 1997. The case stands with an open date. The open date has brought no closure for Parveena. She says, 'I just want to see him once. I cannot find peace when I think of him being beaten up by the security forces. I want to know whether he is dead or alive. That will be a closure for me. The court is the place of justice, but that is a farce in Kashmir. Not even the state human rights commission has come to my rescue'.

It should be noted that it is an extremely daunting task to track the cases of disappearances in Kashmir. These men were arbitrarily arrested without a warrant by the various branches of the security forces operating in Kashmir. There were often no official records of the arrests and therefore detainees were hardly ever produced before a magistrate within twenty-four hours after the arrest, as required by law. It is from there that the ordeal of the family members began: first by going to the special interrogation centres where the detainees were initially taken. Often facing no breakthrough in their search, the family members filed reports at the local police station and then eventually sought a legal remedy in the form of a habeas corpus petition in court, which often remained pending as there was hardly any official acknowledgement of the arrest. In cases meticulously documented by human rights organisations, it is shown that the disappeared are often young men from families living in abject poverty.

Parveena pleads, 'People have died and there are graveyards for them but nothing for the ones who have disappeared. We had laid a foundation stone for a memorial at Eidgah in the memory of those who disappeared, but that too was uprooted by the security forces. There are graveyards for those who were killed, jails for those who were arrested. The families at least know the whereabouts in those cases. This was supposed to be a memorial of those who disappeared.' By removing the foundation stone at Eidgah, the state gives out a message that those lives, forced out of sight, are indeed ungrievable and as a result depoliticises public grieving. The parents of the disappeared persons, by this logic, are lives rendered worthless by denying them the very human act of grieving. The state can bear grieving as long as it is private. It is public mourning, which rejects the apparatus of depoliticisation of mourning, that the state finds unsettling and takes offence to. Parveena expresses her anguish as she appeals, 'show us a picture of the dead body at least, so that we are relieved that our sons have died'.

Nominated for many international awards, and having received the prestigious Rafto Prize in 2017, Parveena has become the face of the struggle of all the families and continues to mobilise support and build pressure on the Indian government. As she reiterated in London in April 2018, 'I want the world to know about our ordeal'. The disappearances of people point to the question of what makes for a grievable life, but the interruption it brings to the lives of those searching for them instead leads to the question of what it means to lose someone, especially if this loss is not complete. Parveena announces with pride, 'I will fight till the end of time, my time at least. I have a relationship with the victims, more than my own family members. I cannot sit quietly until every son returns home....I see myself as a mother of all those who have disappeared.' I asked her if she has been intimidated by the security forces and she says, 'they do not do it any longer. I have nothing to lose'. Her vulnerability of being exposed to the possibility of violence has no effect on her subjectivity any longer, as she does not see that anything can go worse from here. In the incomplete loss of her son and her exposure to violence, she cultivates a space for politics through public grieving and speaks truth to power.

About the author:

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