


Joyless Films, Artists Public Domain & Film Desk Present:

Zero  
bridge  


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The debut feature film,  
Written and Directed by Tariq Tapa

Theatrical premiere Feb. 16<sup>th</sup>, 2011 at New York's Film Forum  
Nationwide release to follow

Nominee for Awards at the Venice Film Festival, Independent Spirit  
Awards, and Gotham Independent Film Awards

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96 mins | Kashmir/U.S.A. | Shot entirely on location in Kashmir

Languages: Kashmiri & Urdu | Subtitles: English & Italian

### Film Forum writes:

In the tradition of hard-hitting neo-realist filmmaking comes the debut feature of Tariq Tapa, a US-born filmmaker of Kashmiri/Jewish-American descent. Having spent his childhood summers in India-controlled Kashmir with his father's family, he was committed to making a film of quotidian life, far from Bollywood fantasies and Western news reports of terrorism: Dilawar is a teenage pickpocket whose escape plans are complicated when he develops an uneasy alliance with a woman (herself fleeing an arranged marriage) whose passport he has stolen. ZERO BRIDGE is a story of two young people's struggle to retain their humanity, despite poverty, the traditional culture into which they've been born, and the fatalism, sexism and casual cruelty of their families.

**"Gritty, powerful... a real find."** – *Variety*

**"Packs a punch... Powerful."** – Reuters

**"Astonishing."** – *Filmmaker Magazine*

**"CRITICS' PICK! Packs an impressive emotional wallop."** – *LA Weekly*

**★ ★ ★ ★!** **"A bull's eye.** Made on a shoestring, ZERO BRIDGE is **a surprise from start to finish and it will move even those with hearts of stone. The direction is as intuitive and spontaneous** as Srinagar [the setting] is precarious, dangerous and claustrophobic." – Julien Welter, *Arté* (France)

**"Sharp-eyed... Plunges us into texture, into strands and counter-strands of Srinagar life ... Exemplifies yet again a wizardry of film that has been with us at least since neo-realism began... ZERO BRIDGE succeeds."** – Stanley Kauffmann, *The New Republic*

**"Made for a song with a non-pro cast and DV camera gear out of his backpack, Tariq Tapa's debut feature shows the young Kashmiri-American as a filmmaker of enormous promise and precocious maturity. Tapa's poetic neorealism is less a stylistic intrusion than a keeping of faith,** through the film's deliberately uneven pacing, with a life devoid of rhythms to count on." – Ella Taylor, *Village Voice*

**"Suspended between the new Iranian cinema of Abbas Kiarostami and American independent cinema."** – Marco Mueller, Venice Film Festival, 2008

**"A moving slice of life** from a corner of the world usually seen only in news reports or as a mountainous backdrop for Bollywood musicals." – Mike Hale, *The New York Times*

**"Excellent!** Provides an unusual glimpse into Kashmiri life." – Maria Garcia, *Film Journal International*

**"Tariq Tapa – who shot much of this vérité-style film by himself – does a beautiful job attuning us to Dilawar's drifting routine...(Tapa) has a notably keen and compassionate eye,** particularly for faces and locales." – Keith Uhlich, *Time Out New York*

**"Amazingly mature and enjoyable, with realistic performances and a great look."** – V.A. Musetto, *New York Post*

**"An exemplary work of retro-neorealism,** telling a devastating, small-scale story against the stark backdrop of an embattled no-man's-land, **in strokes that feel simultaneously fable-broad and finely detailed."** – Ben Mercer, *The L Magazine*

## Short Synopsis

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A hopeful human portrait of a teen pickpocket, whose chance encounter with one of his victims upends his escape plans in this gritty, moving story about daily life in Kashmir.

## Synopsis

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*Zero Bridge* is the story of Dilawar, a rebellious seventeen-year-old Kashmiri boy who lives on the outskirts of Srinagar city with his strict uncle, a mason who took in Dilawar after he was abandoned by his adoptive mother. To help make ends meet, Dilawar recently abandoned school to become an apprentice in his uncle's mason crew. Dilawar hates his current life and secretly plans to leave his uncle to join his adoptive mother in Delhi. To do so, he supplements his income by participating in some shady activities: taking money to do math assignments from his old school classmates, and by picking pockets in the city's markets.

While on an errand at a local shipping office, Dilawar meets Bani, a bright young woman who has recently returned to Srinagar after completing her studies in America. Although Dilawar recognizes Bani as one of his recent pickpocket victims, Bani does not recognize him. Over the course of many visits to the shipping office, Dilawar warms up to Bani. He eventually enlists her help with the math assignments, although Bani is unaware that she is helping him earn extra money. They enjoy each other's company, and their friendship gently grows. Meanwhile, Dilawar continues his other illegal activities, undeterred. The consequences of his actions eventually cause havoc in Dilawar and Bani's life, threatening their friendship and both of their futures.

## a b o u t t h e d i r e c t o r

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Tariq Tapa was born in New York City. He made his debut feature *Zero Bridge* in Kashmir over nine months with a cast of only non-professionals and no crew. It premiered at the 2008 Venice Film Festival and was nominated for two Independent Spirit Awards in 2010.

## director's statement

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Every summer when I was a child my father brought my mother and I to Kashmir to visit his family. When war broke in 1988, the visits stopped. Years passed before I went back. Although I didn't grow up in Kashmir, my interest in it grew over the years after those visits, primarily for the rich material that such a world provided for stories. For years I was afraid to make a movie there, so I wrote short stories and collected research. When I turned twenty-four I began work in earnest on what became "Zero Bridge."

In all my work I've been obsessed with a certain theme: the weight of the past on present behavior. To me that theme is the secret subject of every story, and of everyone's life, including mine. It can credibly accommodate a variety of different forms. Kashmir appealed to me as a place in which I could set that theme. It's the perfect setting for it because the stakes of life in Kashmir are already high, which means that a film there would resonate on multiple and simultaneous levels of meaning. But most people don't know a lot about Kashmir, so where to start? I wanted to give the viewer at least given an even chance to discover (or for some, re-discover) it. So I created a main character who, because of his youth, became the perfect way to explore it – because he himself would still be navigating this particular world, trying to learn its name. And, like the region itself, torn between its two warring parent-nations, he too would be an orphan. By opening the story on a microscopic note, I thought it might have a chance of ending on a macroscopic one.

The question of independence – whether it is possible, or warranted – is of course the flash-point in the discussion about Kashmir. (It is also, as any parent knows, the central preoccupation of every young person). So, I decided this young orphan should also, quite naturally, be seeking his own autonomy. That formulation became compounded and complicated by the fact that independence is, among other things, always a moral issue, fraught with ambiguities. So, "Zero Bridge" had to be told from the point of view of a morally ambiguous main character; someone who, as another writer said, could exist only within his obstinate finality. Once I made this decision for the main character, I had to give every character a moral ambiguity and a past to privately contend with so that each individual was rendered "in the round."

This approach to character then dictated my approach to action. I had to rigorously restrict the story's events to each of my characters' daily experiences and preoccupations; to come to each individual on his own terms and to allow the viewer to do the same. We would see and hear only what these characters do as they live their lives, most of which are tooth-and-claw struggles for survival. If any of these individuals suddenly developed a political consciousness, the story would ring false. Realism is not reality. It's just one of the tools of storytelling, and like any tool it has to be used thoughtfully or else it doesn't work.

But realism was not all I was after. My goal is to disappear fully from my work. My highest aspiration is in achieving the anonymity of someone making folk art. But I'd hurry to add that I was not interested in creating an allegory, because allegory creates abstractions out of the flesh-and-blood of life and I was interested in exactly the reverse of that. However, I did want the real-life dilemmas in "Zero Bridge" to feel as spare and as direct as a folk tale in terms of their emotional stakes, so that anyone anywhere could understand it and be moved. The longest-enduring art in the world has always been folk art, despite the trend in the Industry and in Academia to subscribe to the cult of personality.

Cinema no longer exists in Kashmir. Its theaters were converted to military structures two generations ago. It has no labs or studios. Today people watch soaps and blockbusters on satellite TV. History has robbed this generation of cinema's poetry and community. So without realizing it, my private formal concerns became a compass-bearing for my collaborators as we began working in uncharted terrain. Only after they could see I wasn't asking them to reveal their politics – just their hearts – did they agree to participate, albeit with trepidation about the task itself. But once they saw that film directing, for all of its complexities, is finally about the tension between two things – preparation, and attention to detail – did they realize it had much in common with the applied crafts by which their families survived. That deglamorized and de-mythologized cinema for them, by stripping it down to its essential components. It freed us up to begin our work together.

As we worked, I became more convinced than ever that a simple story introducing the lives of a few Kashmiri citizens and their common hopes and fears would reveal their humanity more fully than the usual Western documentaries on the Kashmir Situation; or for that matter, the Bollywood products which treat Kashmir purely as an exotic backdrop. None of the outside voices describing Kashmir fully captured people's daily experiences. Needless to say, life there is more complex – more precarious, more gossamer – than the blunt dialectics of terrorism and tourism ever allow. Yet the details of Kashmiri daily life remain little known to the rest of the world.

But like everywhere else, the reality of daily life there leaves much that is unspoken. And I wanted to photograph an unspoken story, because unspoken stories are what the cinema does best. Ultimately I was trying to present an intimate, tactile sense of life there by dramatizing how these particular characters' connections and individual dreams are set amongst the forces which govern daily life – family, religion, politics, law, economics, and fate. I believe that by studying in close-up the ways people do business; worry about their children; flirt; give advice; play sports; eat dinner; worship; tell jokes; lie to each other; and dream – in short, the way they live – that the viewer would, by association, then grasp the larger forces at work. Only by being rigorously specific could "Zero Bridge" speak of what is universal. The result, I hope, is a portrait of a particular society, seen through the eyes of some of its youngest and most vulnerable members.

A great writer said he'd never heard of a crime that he couldn't also commit. With "Zero Bridge," I wanted to begin the story with the commission of a petty crime, and then follow its rippling effects outward; so that the viewer would gradually be lead towards the story's deeper implications not by political rhetoric, but by the rhythms of his own beating heart.

# production notes

## Interviews with the Director

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### **Where and what is Zero Bridge?**

*“The city planners made a mistake, because when they built an eighth bridge, nobody knew what to call it. So they simply decided to call it “Zero Bridge” – to reset the clock, as it were, rather than go forward.”*

The bridge itself has a lot of significance, and so I chose its appearance and its timing in the story – at the beginning and at the end -- quite deliberately; not only for its visual and dramatic possibilities but also for the multiple meanings its actual history would lend to the characters and their situation.

In the opening shot of the film, you see a wooden bridge prominently in the background. That is Zero Bridge, and it was built over 200 years ago by British colonialists and Christian missionaries who, by virtue of having taken over the trade post settlement which became present-day Srinagar, involved themselves in planning the capital city’s arteries and architecture. Much of their work remains in place today, even if the region’s control keeps shifting hands from one group of outsiders to another – a phenomenon stretching back throughout the region’s entire 2,000 year history, across the reigns of the Mughals, followed respectively by the Afghans, the Sikhs, the British, until the India of present day.

During its Industrial Age-era planning, Srinagar was then known to outsiders as “the city of seven bridges” so that traders on the Great Silk Route (called “the crossroads of Asia”) would recognize it when they came across it on their way to any of the several bordering countries. But the city planners made a mistake, because when they built an eighth bridge, nobody knew what to call it. So they simply decided to call it “Zero Bridge” – to reset the clock, as it were, rather than allow History to go forward; an apt metaphor.

But today, this wooden structure is now called “Old” Zero Bridge, and is only open to foot traffic. Further complicating matters, a new, concrete bridge was erected. The concrete bridge, on which the main character sets foot at the beginning and ending of the film, is commonly called “New” Zero Bridge. Today it is one of the main thoroughfares of Srinagar, which is now the capital city of what is now Indian-controlled Kashmir. Both bridges cross the Jhelum River, which itself runs through the middle of the city, and which eventually flows across the “Line of Control” -- the 550-mile political border separating the armies guarding Indian-controlled Kashmir from those guarding Pakistani-controlled *Azadi* (“free”) Kashmir. For citizens of Srinagar traveling by bus, Zero Bridge is a common connecting station for those heading out of Kashmir, as the main character attempts to do. The Kashmir conflict still lurks today, unresolved. An unresolved ending seemed most apt.

Families live in houseboats on the banks of the Jhelum, beneath Zero Bridge. They take in tourists and make handicrafts to support themselves. On a personal note, my family used to live there in a houseboat as well. My parents were married at an inn just beside the bridge.

### **How did the story come about? Was it scripted?**

*"I was in Kashmir for three months before I had the story for "Zero Bridge"... Using material from my short stories, I fashioned a first draft screenplay in a few weeks."*

I began by expanding one of the short stories into a screenplay, for a different film. I did over a year's worth of pre-production and arrived alone with a backpack's worth of equipment in September 2006, only to have everything fall apart in the first month. Fortunately, I still had all my equipment and the other short stories. So I started over again - from scratch - on a new film. The result is "Zero Bridge," which finished shooting in May 2007. But I don't mourn all that lost work on the first film, because I think it helped me to respond more intuitively during "Zero Bridge." A great writer said: "Visions come to prepared spirits."

It helped that I'd wanted to make a cycle of films in Kashmir for almost a decade. But it seemed impossible, so to keep the flame burning I did other things: for years, I kept a running file of short stories, drawings, short videos -- basically a show bible -- organized around panoramic themes of contemporary daily life in Srinagar. I was inspired by Joyce's Dubliners, and by Dickens. Certain characters would reappear in each other's stories. I kept them in various notebooks. The stories were loosely based on memories of my times there visiting family; things I read in local papers; stories my dad would tell about his youth. I was just a magpie, really, collecting all this material. Kurosawa said "creation is memory." And I feel that so much of writing is about gaining access imaginatively to what you already know, experientially. So when the time came to go shoot years later, I brought this material with me for inspiration. It was great to have a bible to reference whenever I found myself getting caught up in so many different ideas. (Other stories I want to film in Kashmir, for this and for future films in the cycle, come from these short stories.)

When I arrived, my cousin Hilal showed his friends the short stories in my show bible but he crossed out my name to get their objective reactions to what I -- an outsider -- had written. The reactions were positive; people were entertained and some even felt it was the work of some new local writer.

I was in Kashmir for three months before I had the story for "Zero Bridge." I wanted to write something accurate to how Kashmiri daily life had changed from my memories and received stories, but I wanted to write about matters close to my heart. Using ideas and events from the stories, I fashioned the first draft of a 140-page screenplay in a few weeks.

But immediately upon finishing the screenplay, I realized it was useless. None of the first-time actors I wanted to cast would understand how to analyze a script the way a trained actor would, much less make sense of the strange screenplay format. So I put the screenplay aside and distilled it down to a 10-page scene outline that just described the important scenes, who was in them, what happened and why, what the important dialogue was, etc. That's what we rehearsed with for three months. And that now closely resembles the finished movie.

I didn't initially anticipate being my sole crew, but the decision to record sound while shooting and directing the actors all simultaneously came really by circumstance. I realized that, in that environment, it was a better use of my time just to plunge in entirely

on my own than to wait around recruiting and coordinating a crew. Besides, people shoot documentaries that way all the time, so why not a fiction feature?

To begin, I showed the cast DVDs I brought with me - films by Olmi, Lean, Kurosawa, Dreyer, Capra, Ozu, Rossellini, Vigo; but also *Chinatown* and *The Purple Rose of Cairo* and the Bruce Timm-*Batman* animated series and many other personal favorites I was drawing from for this film. Each week was another cinematheque, with everybody in the room clustered around my laptop. We bonded over that. They started to see how I wanted to do *Zero Bridge*.

The initial impulse to capture a city under military control through the eyes of an adolescent adrift came partly from *Germany Year Zero*, while the desire to capture the devil-may-care attitude of schoolboys came from *Zero for Conduct*. Aside from the aptness of the bridge metaphor I described earlier and the obvious lineage its title draws from those two films, *Zero Bridge* also drew its inspiration to find the drama and poetry of daily life from the films of Renoir and of Olmi, whose *Il Posto* and *The Tree of Wooden Clogs* delighted the cast. They too were inspired by the spontaneity and respectfulness in Maestro Olmi's work. I decided to apply those same qualities to all aspects of the production while remembering to keep things as personal as possible.

And then actually getting to meet Mr. Olmi at Venice in 2008 for the world premiere was a once-in-a-lifetime experience. I mean, there I was in Kashmir making my little no-budget movie, some broke film student with a video camera and some DVDs, and whenever I felt like praying, I'd watch one of his movies (made 40-50 years ago!) and I'd feel better and find the strength to keep going; as if he were right there, speaking right to me. And then, just a year later we met face-to-face and spent a few days together in Venice! It was like magic! He also saw "Zero Bridge" in a private screening and what he said to me privately about it afterwards I'll never forget. I told him how much his films meant to me, and asked if he recognized all the scenes and moments I ripped off from his movies. He had no idea what I was talking about and just laughed and kept giving me big hugs and later I cried like a baby. I absolutely love him with all my heart. And I'll always be grateful to the festival for arranging that meeting, and to Artists Public Domain for putting up the finishing funds to screen there. He's one of those souls, like Renoir, who has remained committed to his art and to a career making movies that, whatever their genre or budget, have testified to the joy of just being alive, however tough living life itself can be. I tried to convey that with my movie, and I hope I succeeded.

### **Why did you shoot it the way you did?**

*"All of Dilawar's scenes are handheld; while all of Bani's scene's are on a tripod. The handheld shots are meant to underscore Dilawar's perpetual nervous anxiety about survival; while the tripod shots with Bani underscore the circumscriptions of her life."*

I chose the camera style for two mutually reinforcing reasons, one thematic and the other technical. First, I wanted to avoid the visual clichés about Kashmir's vistas. I wanted to let the viewer know immediately not to focus on the landscape, and thus by implication, the politics. That this would not be a Bollywood musical with two lovers singing by a stream. The landscape tends to hypnotize newcomers to the region, and I wanted keep the viewer engaged with the characters at all times. Staying close to the actors' faces was an unspoken

way of saying: “Stick with their humanity.” As I said in my statement, I wanted to keep the story restricted to the main character’s daily experiences and immediate perceptions. Keeping the camera close was a way for the viewer to feel as if he were bearing witness.

The other reason was that I knew I would have to shoot in 24p DV. This was late 2006, before today’s conveniences of High-Def storage solutions. Remember, I could only shoot on what I could bring in one backpack, and there just wasn’t enough hard drive space. So it had to be DV. Shooting DV, like any format, has its ups and downs. It’s horses for courses. The advantage of DV is that the smallness of the cameras preserves the intimacy that a first-time cast need, and it made our production light on its feet. Having shot in the format a lot before, I thought the smeariness and graininess of DV would work well for the vision of life in Srinagar I was after; and during the Digital Intermediate, I kept asking the colorist to drain the image to make things look more mundane. DV also tends not to handle wide shots too well: too much loss of detail.

But what DV does handle very well are close-ups, which is what I wanted anyway. My shooting strategy was very straightforward: all of Dilawar’s scenes are handheld; while all of Bani’s scene’s are on a tripod. The handheld shots with Dilawar are meant to underscore his perpetual nervous anxiety about survival; while the tripod shots with Bani are meant to underscore the circumscriptions of her life. For their scenes together, it’s a mixture of the two camera styles. Not many viewers so far have consciously noticed this strategy, but if you go back and look at the film again, you’ll see it’s rigorously adhered to.

#### **What was your process for casting and rehearsing with the lead?**

*“I handed him a 500-page notebook and told him to fill up the notebooks with Dilawar’s thoughts, as if they were his own.”*

I wanted exclusively first-time, non-professionals. I did not, for example, want actors from Delhi or Mumbai. I wanted only local talent, locations, and music: every choice had to rigorously follow this dictum. Many of the cast had never even seen a camera, much less been in front of one. And none had any desire to be on camera until I met them and individually persuaded them to participate over a few months.

First, I did the traditional casting method for the role of Dilawar and his friends. My cousin Imran (who was helping me as a production assistant) and I went around the city on bicycles with a bucket of glue and a brush to plaster a stack of audition posters. I also paid the government propaganda channels to run an ad on TV, as a crawling text at the bottom of the screen. I looked at about 70 boys who showed up to audition for Dilawar. I had them do different physical activities, perform some stories from their own lives about when they felt most ashamed, most proud, etc. to try to see how they presented themselves, how accessible they were to their emotions, and if they could relax with somebody watching them do something intimate, like washing their face. After a month, I still hadn’t found my lead. The night before the last audition call, I was in a panic because we had to start shooting in three weeks.

That night, my cousin Imran and I were playing chess when I suddenly knew that he was Dilawar. I didn’t want to just come right out and ask him to do it, so I began to test him in little ways. I began inviting him into the acting workshops I was holding and examined

how he did with the other (first-time) actors. He did very well, really bringing his own personal history to the role and enhancing what I had written. So I offered him the lead part. I handed him a blank 500-page notebook and told him to fill it with Dilawar's thoughts, as if they were his own. That helped him get into character, and it kept him occupied while I continued pre-production.

I also showed him "The 400 Blows" and "Il Posto". He got very excited about being in a film like this. All he had ever seen before were Bollywood romances and Hollywood action movies; never movies about someone just like himself, movies with people who had never performed before. That's when he began to see my point: that anyone can act, as long as the person is correctly cast, made to feel like a collaborator, and is given simple, specific directions to keep his performance as un-self-conscious and as physical as possible.

### **How did you cast the other leads?**

*"People in Kashmir didn't understand why I didn't have any dance sequences, or why there was no propaganda. What kind of movie was I really trying to make? Many people were suspicious."*

The week I arrived in Kashmir, my first task was to figure out what the casting pool was like. To do this, I had a ruse: I offered my filmmaker services to small businesses in need of some promotional videos. One of these companies was a 40-man mason outfit. I went to their site and shot for a whole day while the construction crew was doing its work. The result was the short documentary "Day of Concrete". It was there that I met Ali Muhammed Dar. He was interested in what I was doing and we became friends. I knew he had to have a part in the movie I was going to make, even though, at that time, I was still gathering wool and adapting my show bible to the world around me.

I insisted on casting exclusively first-time, non-professional performers, people who didn't have aspirations to act for the camera. This was generally met with a lot of resistance. People in Kashmir didn't understand why I didn't have any dance sequences, or why there was no propaganda. What kind of movie was I really trying to make? Many people were suspicious.

After casting Ali and Imran, I still had to cast Bani. I found Bani after posting notices at several girls' technical colleges – not at drama schools – in the city. I decided to cast Taniya for the role after I had her practice several scenes with Imran. Once I saw the chemistry between them, I knew it would work.

That was enough to start shooting. During the frequent interruptions in shooting, I often ran into people whom I cast to fill out the bit players.

### **What was the experience like making a film in Srinagar, Kashmir?**

*"Trying to plan something as seemingly simple as three people meeting one another at a location just to shoot a simple dialogue scene for two hours becomes a real struggle."*

Kashmir is a controlled territory of India, basically a war zone. This situation causes logistical nightmares simply because one has no control over one's own destiny in a place

where personal safety, civil rights, a fixed price economy, communications, and infrastructure are all deeply, maddeningly uncertain most of the time. A lot of time was spent waiting, planning, anticipating, dealing with endless setbacks – such as strikes, violence, protests, curfews.

Due to the series of natural, political, and economic disasters that have devastated the region over the past several decades, there is very little industrial infrastructure in Kashmir, and virtually none for making or viewing feature films. No major studios or labs exist except for a couple of very small local channels which mostly handle business PSAs. The only video shooting that's done is for weddings and local news. In the past twenty years the movie theaters have all been converted into police and military structures. (That is, until recently, when one theater did bravely re-open but sadly its business has been poor). I sincerely doubt that anyone there currently under the age of 30 has ever sat in a theater and seen a film. History has robbed this generation of cinema. For pleasure, people watch soaps and blockbusters on satellite TV. In Kashmir, cinema is the word for what exists only between commercials.

So, to propose making a movie there - especially with no crew and no money - really means getting a lot of blank stares. It was like walking up to people on the street and asking if they wanted to build a rocket ship. Not only did we get no help, but people began to think we were up to trouble. So, we had to work discreetly and we had to reinvent the wheel of film production at every step of the process, including things like: halting shooting in order to find electricity and fuel during shortages; or halting rehearsals due to police curfews, bomb blasts, or demonstrations. Sometimes, if we needed something to accomplish a given task and the thing we needed didn't exist, we'd have to teach ourselves how to make it. And when we couldn't do that, we had to just learn how to continue without it. And each day, the entire film nearly fell apart because of anything that would intrude right at the last minute. It was exhausting. But, because we were starting from ground zero every day, it gave us the feeling that we were also inventing cinema itself as we went along, as crazy as that sounds. We were purely going along by what we could carry on our backs or what we could solve with our hands. It was a very savage or primitive way of working, but I think it taught me to appreciate the things about filmmaking that I took for granted.

There were also natural setbacks, such as snowstorms and avalanches, which, because of the poor infrastructure in the region, could bring the whole city to a halt for days on end. This happened regularly. So, there would often be little to eat because the main supplies road had been cut off, and there were no gas canisters to cook with or to keep warm in winter. For instance, there was a two week-period taken just driving around on a motorcycle, going from one black market to another, looking for gas to buy.

Overcoming any one of the possible obstacles was a matter of luck and physical endurance. The likelihood of overcoming many such obstacles in a single day, or the odds of myself plus three other actors overcoming many of these obstacles within the same window of time decreases the odds of getting to shoot quite dramatically. Trying to plan something as seemingly simple as three people meeting one another at a location for a simple dialogue scene for two hours becomes a real struggle. I had to reorganize the shooting schedule constantly. There was no rest from these for 9 months.

Over the course of those 12 weeks, we probably shot 30 days at most. No day was ever more than 4 hours, usually just 2 or 3. So everything had to be extremely economical and precise during rehearsals and when I planned my coverage, because actual shooting time was so limited. Then at night, my cousin would translate the footage, by time-code, on my laptop. We wound up with 1500 pages worth of transcripts, which were later on invaluable during editing.

**Describe a typical shooting day.**

*“Once at the location, we usually had to observe the custom of sitting and having tea with the location owner. During this I’d get the camera and microphones set up.”*

My cousin Hilal (who acted as my assistant-director) would call the actors beforehand to let them know when and where to show up. Then, on the day of the shoot, Hilal, Imran (Dilawar) and I would pile onto our motorcycle to go to the shooting location. Once at the location, we usually had to observe the custom of sitting and having tea with the location owner. While my cousins did this I’d get the camera and microphones set up.

If I couldn’t use the shotgun mike because of too much wind noise, then I’d wire the actors for sound. If it was an indoor scene, like in the office, I would gaff tape the radio microphones’ body transmitters to the ceiling instead of to the actors’ waists, and then just dangle the mike wires down to just above the actors’ heads, out of frame. This way I could circumvent the lack of a boom operator. As long as I knew the shot would be framed tightly on the actor’s faces, the “dumb-booms” would hear everything clearly.

Then we’d actually get the scene on its feet and shoot it. I’d make performance adjustments to Imran in English and in Kashmiri, and make sure the dialogue was set before we started shooting. I could only communicate to Ali through Hilal’s translation. Frequently I would ask Imran to draw his performance from the 500-pages of character thoughts, which he wrote in Dilawar’s notebook. (Later I recorded him reading this and used it as voice-over).

Since I was shooting it like a documentary, I had a little leeway with continuity but not that much. Most times we could only shoot something a couple of times before we’d have to move. Basically, I learned to work quickly while also keeping performance, camera, sound, story, and continuity all in my head at once during each take. That was tiring, but it was manageable in the time we had to work with. It was so difficult shooting “Zero Bridge” that in the 9 months I stayed in Kashmir, I was only able to shoot less than 40 hours of footage. Still, I got what I needed to make the story work and had enough options when editing back in the US.

Monitoring both picture and sound while also directing the actors and giving notes on their performances, all at the same time, was hard. But sometimes it could be a lot of fun, because it gives the feeling of seeing and hearing exactly what you’re getting as it’s happening, just like shooting a documentary.

While shooting, I kept the story outline folded up in my pocket. I referred to it all the time to explain the action to the actors (or to Hilal, the translator). I never storyboarded any

shots, but I did decide whose point-of-view each scene was from, and what the turning point of each scene was. Then, all I had to do was just make sure that those two things were clear and convincing in the actors' performances. Those were my only two criteria. It usually only took a few hours to get a scene done.

Once we started to shoot, things tended to happen very quickly. The result was that it focused everyone's energy – mine and the actors' – so we actually wound up doing most scenes only a few times, some even just once. Occasionally, I would re-shoot on a different day a few scenes I felt could have been better or different, but the re-shoots always lacked that same intensity of knowing we had only one chance to get it right.

### **Are there any interesting anecdotes from the shoot?**

*"...I didn't find out he was a gangster until I showed up with my camera and microphones."*

On the day we shot the scene with the black market passport dealer, that part still had not been cast. For weeks I had been "reassured" by one of the other bit actors that he knew the perfect guy and I would meet him when the time was right.

Well, it turned out that this person was a well-known and feared underworld figure in Srinagar. He had a code name. One of his less violent pursuits was being in the black market. But he owned a shop and had other front businesses, which is where we eventually agreed to meet and we were frisked as we entered.

I didn't find out he was a gangster until I showed up with my camera and microphones. (Repeat experiences had taught me to just be ready whenever the moment presented itself, so I didn't expect anything risky.) So, I met this gentleman – who was very nice, offered tea, and was a lovely host. He absolutely looked like the part I had in mind, and I liked the way he carried himself and thought he would work fine as an actor. When the subject of money came up, he was surprisingly blasé about it. He seemed to understand my situation and just wanted to help. So I said "Great, let's set up, here's the scene..." and as I was talking he wasn't really listening because he suddenly started changing his clothes; completely changing his appearance, making himself look, eventually, like a Kashmiri version of Stallone as Rambo, complete with black wife-beater and headband.

I said "What is this?" and he said "You wanted a tough guy, right? I'm looking tough for you." I explained that he was already quite tough the way he was naturally. There was a pause and he looked at me, confused, so I explained: "It's a more realistic kind of story, not Bollywood." Another pause. Then he grimaced and yanked off his headband, muttering, "Ugh, not another one of those 'art' movies." I convinced him to do it anyway, and I think he's great in the movie.

I have a hundred other anecdotes, but I think that story sums up everything about independent filmmaking, no matter where or who you are in the world.

### **How did you capture and translate scenes? Or keep your equipment safe?**

*"Because Kashmir can be quite cold in winter, and there is no central heating, I'd wait for the portable gas heater to get the room up to 50°F before I turned on the equipment."*

I went to Kashmir in September 2006 with my MacBook, external hard drives, and a one-chip Sony Handicam (which I used to capture the mini DV tapes). To protect this equipment from condensation resulting from temperature changes, or from the dust and insects, I kept all the equipment in a few layers of Ziploc bags.

Every day after a shoot, I would capture the day's tapes into the MacBook. Because Kashmir can be quite cold in the winter, and there is no central heating, I would wait for the portable gas heater to get the room temperature up to 50°F before I turned on the equipment. While the tapes were being captured, I'd charge the camera batteries and plan the next day of shooting.

When the day's tapes were captured, Hilal would look at the footage in Final Cut Pro and transcribe the dialogue in English into a MS Word document, indicating the beginning of each sentence by its corresponding timecode.

### **Where did you get the music? How did you record the sound?**

*“Later, Niyaz and I met four other musicians in a friend’s small house in the middle of a quiet field – the perfect place to have a recording session, because there was no traffic, and certainly no electricity or air conditioners. (One actual technical advantage of making a film in Kashmir is that it’s easy to record great sound).”*

For the music of the film, I wanted to use very traditional Kashmiri folk songs that everyone in Kashmir would know. I had learned Kashmiri folk songs from the cassettes my father used to play on the car radio when I was growing up. Years later, I found myself finally not only appreciating this music but actually being quite moved by it. Not knowing anything about music, I just wanted something simple, easy to remember, that could capture a variety of moods depending on where and how I wanted to use it in the film.

I met the leader of a musician group, Niyaz Patloo, during one of the audition sessions. When we started talking about music, I played some of these folk songs for him on my computer. Later, Niyaz and I met four other musicians in a friend’s small house in the middle of a quiet field – the perfect place to have a recording session, because there was no traffic, and certainly no electricity or air conditioners. (One actual technical advantage of making a film in Kashmir is that it’s easy to record great sound). I gaff-taped two ends of a rope between the two corners of the quietest room in the house, so that the rope hung across, like a laundry line. Then, I clipped all three microphones I had onto the rope, so that they faced downward, towards the corner of the room. The musicians sat close together in the corner and played, so that their acoustics flowed outward nicely and hit the sweet spot on the binaural mikes, recording into the MiniDisc. For a few hours, they played the same theme over and over again, in a variety of instrumentations and tempos and keys. It was low-fi record producing!

On the days we couldn’t shoot, I’d rehearse, rewrite, or record sounds for the soundtrack. Intent on having a soundtrack of strictly native Kashmiri sounds, I recorded a whole sound library’s worth of ambience, effects, and music all native to Kashmir. I would write sounds into the script in order to use them to help tell the story instead of relying on too much dialogue, and then I’d go find and record those sounds. Things like prayer calls, nature,

traffic, radio, and Kashmiri folk music all helped flesh out the world of the story. Plus they were royalty free.

I recorded all the ambient sound for the film as well. On days when our shoot got cancelled (quite often), I would often keep up creative morale by visiting the location alone, except I would bring along my microphones and mini-disc recorder, tuck my Sony headphones underneath my wool cap, incognito-style, and would just make many ambient recordings at each location in the movie, from multiple angles and with multiple microphones. So, when I returned, I had a whole sound library of native, distinctly Kashmiri ambient tracks and effects to work with.

By being so rigorously specific about every choice - including the casting, the locations, the sounds, and the music - I was trying to present a total vision of what life is like there.

### **Talk about the editing process.**

*“We started “lining” the transcripts the way assistant editors traditionally do with a post-production screenplay (in which they make vertical lines showing how a given scene was covered during the production). We lined printed versions of the transcribed dialogue.”*

When I returned from Kashmir, my co-editor and I took three months sifting through the 45 hours of video, 20 hours of audio, and all 1500 pages of time-coded translations saved as MS Word files. Most of the material recorded for the production consisted less of extensive coverage of the same material, and more of different stories I was originally trying to tell in this one movie. We went through all of that material a second time, and started “lining” the transcripts the way assistant editors traditionally do with a post-production screenplay (in which they make vertical lines showing how a given scene was covered during the production). Except, I didn’t shoot the screenplay I wrote, exactly, so we lined printed versions of the transcribed dialogue.

We also made index cards for each scene, and organized them on a wall-sized cork board – just the whole story of the movie laid out on the wall. We rearranged the cards several times for weeks as we tried to find scenes that would “hang together” as groups, to try to build sequences. Based on the arrangement of the cards, we made our first assembly, which came out to 3hrs and 6 mins and which we screened around Thanksgiving 2007. In that version, there were several more supporting characters and subplots in Dilawar’s life, and every single character had an interior monologue playing as a voice-over. Eventually, we cut almost all of that material and focused the story on Dilawar’s main dilemma.

In September, I moved back to Los Angeles, while my co-editor remained in San Francisco. We each had one external hard drive with exact copies of the original media. We shared Final Cut Pro project files through emails. We would alternate editing the film sequences. When one editor finished an editing pass on a sequence, we would email it to each other (the recipient would download it, open it, and re-link media). We would discuss the latest edit, before the other editor tackled the sequence further. Over the course of the winter months, we went through twenty-four versions of the film, each version getting progressively shorter, tighter, denser; until we finally locked picture at 96 minutes.

### **How did you prepare the film for its launch?**

With the completed, mixed film, I applied and was quite honored to be invited to the 2008 IFP [Independent Feature Project] Narrative Lab, where I got to meet other filmmakers and distinguished members of the independent film world. The film got a good reaction and we received tons of support from IFP, which was just the perfect place for us to be, what with where we were with the film and how we needed to start thinking about positioning it to festivals. Then, shortly after the Lab, we began receiving invitations to some high-profile film festivals. I was excited, but needed help bridging the gap in order to attend and screen at a large festival. IFP really came through again in a big way. Through the generous efforts of [then-IFP Executive Director] Michelle Byrd, I was quite blessed to be put in touch with Hunter Gray and Paul Mezey of Artists Public Domain, and we were on our way.

## principal cast bios

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**Mohamad Emran Tapa** (Dilawar) attends Greenland High School in Nigeen District, Srinagar where he lives with his family. *Zero Bridge* is his debut.

**Ali Muhammed Dar** (Uncle Ali) is a full-time mason and carpenter who lives with his family in Nishat District, Srinagar. *Zero Bridge* is his debut.

**Taniya Khan** (Bani Sheikh) studied computer science at St. Xavier in Shimla, India. She lives with her family in Ladakh, Kashmir. *Zero Bridge* is her debut.

## principal crew bios

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**Josée Lajoie** (Co-Producer, Co-Editor) was born and raised in Montreal, Canada. In the United States, she began her second career as a filmmaker when she received a Master of Fine Arts from the experimental animation program at Cal Arts. She now works as a technical director of animation in the San Francisco Bay Area.

**Hilal Ahmed Langoo** (Co-Producer, Translator, Assistant Director) studies computer science in Srinagar where he lives with his mother and sisters, who also appear in *Zero Bridge* as Bani's family. This is his first foray into filmmaking.

**Ben Huff** (Sound Editor and Mixer) is a sound designer and documentary filmmaker currently living in Southern California. His most recent project, *Never Mind the Fences* focuses on the underground music scene in Wichita, Kansas. Aside from his film work, Ben is also a prolific musician who produces and performs around Los Angeles.

# artists public domain

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Artists Public Domain, Inc (APD) is a supporting organization and public charity as recognized by the IRS in section 501(c)(3). APD was formed to assist in creative endeavors in the arts, specifically those relating to film and video. APD supports the Independent Feature Project (IFP) with cash donations that directly fund grants to filmmakers and programs at the IFP. APD also funds and produces short films, features and documentaries. The organization also donates post-production services and office space to low budget features and documentaries.

Artists Public Domain is run by a board of five people, all of whom have other full time jobs in film. The board is made up of Tyler Brodie and Hunter Gray of Verisimilitude Films, Paul Mezey of Journeyman Pictures, Alex Orlovsky of Hunting Lane Films, and Joana Vicente of the IFP. APD has no employees and no board member is paid for their time, allowing for low overhead and all of its resources to go directly to projects and grants.

In the last year APD has supported film and video projects of fiction, non-fiction, and experimental nature ranging in budget from \$8,000 to \$120,000. While there are no strict guidelines as to what projects are selected or how they are executed, they all seek success in conveying the vision of the artist as opposed to creating commercial profit.

## film desk

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Film Desk was founded by Jacob Perlin in 2008. The company's mission is to introduce, or re-introduce, international classics to audiences through theatrical releases and DVD distribution.

Film Desk's first theatrical release was the North American premiere of Philippe Garrel's *I Can No Longer Hear the Guitar*, originally released in France in 1991, but never previously released theatrically on these shores. Other US premiere theatrical releases from the Film Desk include Michelangelo Antonioni's *Le Amiche* and Alain Cavalier's *Le Combat dans L'ile*.

Some of Film Desk's theatrical re-releases, in new 35mm prints, include Francois Truffaut's *Wild Child* and *Small Change*, and Charles Chaplin's *Monsieur Verdoux*. Currently Film Desk is releasing Jean-Luc Godard's *Every Man for Himself*.

Prior to *Zero Bridge*, Film Desk has released one other new film, *The Windmill Movie*, the debut feature by Alexander Olch.

**FILMMAKER Magazine Names Tariq Tapa one of its  
“25 New Faces of Independent Film”, Summer 2008.**

“Everything I used to make this movie, from soup to nuts, fit in one little backpack,” says Tariq Tapa, whose “Zero Bridge,” a neorealist tale of unexpected friendship and moral complication set in the Indian-occupied city of Srinagar, Kashmir, is set to explode on the festival circuit this year. Tapa, who not only directed this first feature but shot, edited and recorded sound for it, says he wish he’d had one extra crew member, but “financial and logistically, it wasn’t possible. Also, I didn’t know what would come up in [Kashmir], and I didn’t want anything to happen [to the crew member] and have it on my conscience.”

Tapa was born in New York City to a Kashmiri Muslim father. “I spent every summer and extended vacations [in Kashmir] with my father’s side of the family,” he says. “But when the war began in ‘89, I didn’t see them in a decade. When I went back in 2002, my cousins and I had grown apart. I thought it would be interesting to make a movie because no one knows about daily life in Kashmir, and it was also a way for me to reconnect with my family and heritage.”

“Zero Bridge” is my first feature. I made it in Kashmir with no crew, a cast of non-professionals, no money, and the cheapest equipment on the market. To the best of my knowledge, it’s the first narrative film in 40 years that was made in (and which is about) life in a Kashmiri city.”

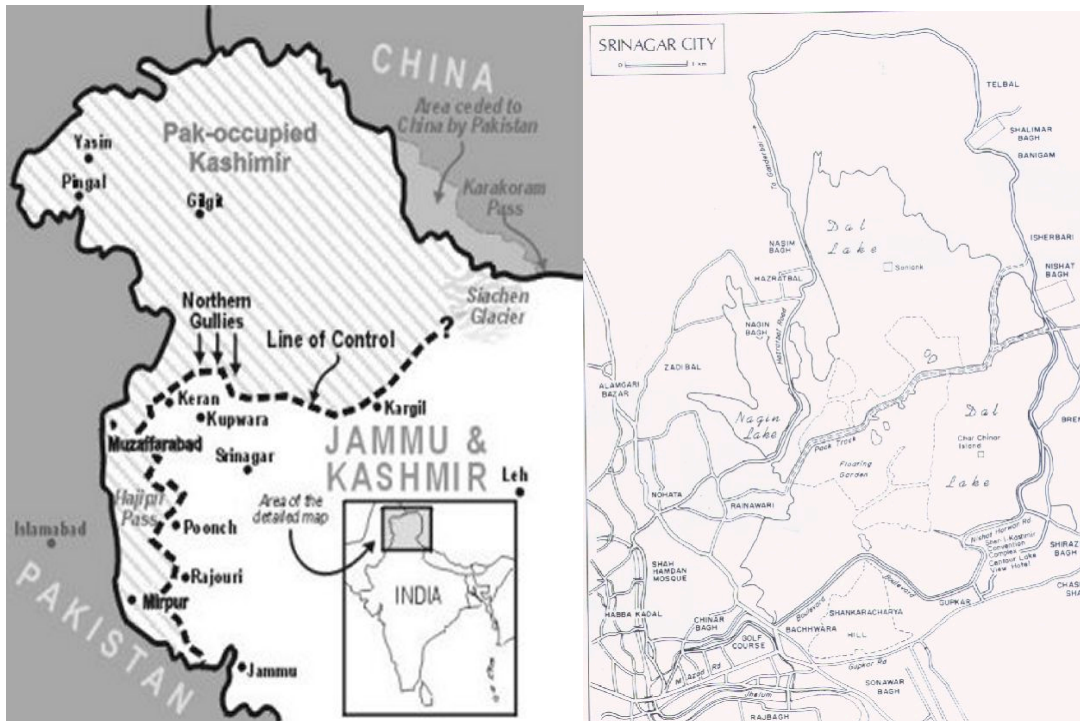
“I grew up on E4th Street between 1st and 2nd Avenue in the East Village in the 80’s and early 90’s. When I saw “Taxi Driver” at age 10, my street was exactly like the world I saw on screen. I became obsessed with that movie, because it was the first one I saw that engaged with my world and could tell me - without words - what life was like. It was a revelation that movies could actually do such things.”

The L.A.-based Tapa, who graduated from CalArts and Rice, and whose short films have screened at the Centre Pompidou and the Museum of Modern Art, received a Fulbright Scholarship to travel to Kashmir and make “Zero Bridge.” The film tells the story of a teenage pickpocket, Dilawar, who plans to escape from both Kashmir and his strict uncle but whose plans are complicated when he forms a bond with a woman whose passport he has stolen. Tapa says that his first job when arriving in Srinagar was to convince the community there that he “was on their side.” He says, “Tempers could flare very quickly because of cultural and political issues [having to do with] traditional and conservative Muslim. We were often mistaken for doing something illicit. Or, they didn’t understand the kind of movie we were making. They’d say, ‘Where are all the tiger and the dancing women?’ I’d say, ‘Well, it’s a story about people’s lives,’ but the concept of this kind of movie doesn’t exist over there.” In order to teach the community, including the non-actors who star in the film, about his kind of filmmaking, Tapa showed them DVDs of such movies as *The Tree of Wooden Clogs*, *The Bicycle Thief*, and *Il Posto*.

After surviving production — “We were constantly getting interrupted; there’d be a car bomb, or a policeman nearby would get shot,” he remembers — and a lengthy postproduction process that included 25 separate cuts, Tapa, who also attended the IFP Rough Cut Lab in 2008, now expects to premiere his film at one of this season’s top festivals. He’s also preparing two more features: one which he’ll shoot in the US, and then, in the future, another picture to be shot in Srinagar.

— Scott Macaulay

# An Overview of Kashmir



GEOGRAPHY AND GOVERNMENT: Surrounded by mountains, the southern two-thirds of the Valley is Indian Jammu and Kashmir (“J&K”), India’s northernmost state, bordering Tibet and China. Northwest is *Azad* (or “free”) Kashmir – a self-governing state under Pak control. The Valley is 84 miles long, 25 wide: 10% of J&K’s 84,000 sq miles. Over 50% of the population is in the Valley. A 1972 treaty renamed the 550-mile border the Line of Control. Only two roads lead in and out of Srinagar, the capital of J&K.

PREVIOUS HISTORY: J&K was cobbled together by the Hindu Dogra ruler Ghulab Singh, who acquired the Valley from the British in 1846, adding it to Ladakh and Jammu. Singh created an ethnically and religiously diverse state ruled by a religious minority. Today J&K’s population exceeds 13 million, with over 1 million inhabiting Srinagar; 95% of the Valley is Muslim, equally Sunni and Shia.

CONFLICTS SINCE 1947: Ghulab Singh’s great-grandson kept the princely state of J&K intact and independent until October 1947, when, after modern India and Pakistan were formed, Pakistan invaded and he chose to join the state with India: conflicts ensued. Indo-Pak wars over Kashmir were fought in 1949, 1965, 1971, 1990, and 2002. From 1989-1996 mercenary guerrillas fought occupying CRPF (Indian army). Every year since 2006 unarmed civilians have led bloody uprisings against the CRPF.

LIFE IN THE VALLEY: The spoken language is Kashmiri, which has no alphabet of its own and is written in Urdu. Virtually all signage is in English, which only 25% of Kashmiris can read given the state’s confirmed 75% illiteracy. The CRPF that controls the Valley are Hindu and speak Hindi, causing friction. The main industry is tourism – which caters to a

mostly Western and Indian clientele – and whose signature is its houseboats on Dal Lake. The three continuing, crippling threats to tourism are political violence, blackouts (e.g. separatist strikes and government curfews), and the decline of Dal Lake. J&K's economy has never risen above 1% of India's total yearly GDP.

DAL LAKE: Sitting in the center of Srinagar at 7,000 feet above sea-level, Dal has sustained Kashmir's entire civilization; its tourism, its fisheries, and – in another Indo-Pak dispute – its hydro-electric power grid. Due to pollution and climate change, the lake's future is dire.

## Srinagar, Kashmir in the news

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**Kashmir's Fruits of Discord**  
**The New York Times, November 8, 2010**  
**By ARUNDHATI ROY**

A WEEK before he was elected in 2008, President Obama said that solving the dispute over Kashmir's struggle for self-determination — which has led to three wars between India and Pakistan since 1947 — would be among his “critical tasks.” His remarks were greeted with consternation in India, and he has said almost nothing about Kashmir since then.

But on Monday, during his visit here, he pleased his hosts immensely by saying the United States would not intervene in Kashmir and announcing [his support for India's seat on the United Nations Security Council](#). While he spoke eloquently about threats of terrorism, he kept quiet about human rights abuses in Kashmir.

Whether Mr. Obama decides to change his position on Kashmir again depends on several factors: how the war in Afghanistan is going, how much help the United States needs from Pakistan and whether the government of India goes aircraft shopping this winter. (An order for 10 Boeing C-17 Globemaster III aircraft, worth \$5.8 billion, among other huge business deals in the pipeline, may ensure the president's silence.) But neither Mr. Obama's silence nor his intervention is likely to make the people in Kashmir drop the stones in their hands.

I was in Kashmir 10 days ago, in that beautiful valley on the Pakistani border, home to three great civilizations — Islamic, Hindu and Buddhist. It's a valley of myth and history. Some believe that Jesus died there; others that Moses went there to find the lost tribe. Millions worship at the Hazratbal shrine, where a few days a year a hair of the Prophet Muhammad is displayed to believers.

Now Kashmir, caught between the influence of militant Islam from Pakistan and Afghanistan, America's interests in the region and Indian nationalism (which is becoming increasingly aggressive and “Hinduized”), is considered a nuclear flash point. It is patrolled by more than half a million soldiers and has become the most highly militarized zone in the world.

The atmosphere on the highway between Kashmir's capital, Srinagar, and my destination, the little apple town of Shopian in the south, was tense. Groups of soldiers were deployed along the highway, in the orchards, in the fields, on the rooftops and outside shops in the little market squares. Despite months of curfew, the “stone pelters” calling for “azadi” (freedom), inspired by the Palestinian intifada, were out again. Some stretches of the

highway were covered with so many of these stones that you needed an S.U.V. to drive over them.

Fortunately the friends I was with knew alternative routes down the back lanes and village roads. The “longcut” gave me the time to listen to their stories of this year’s uprising. The youngest, still a boy, told us that when three of his friends were arrested for throwing stones, the police pulled out their fingernails — every nail, on both hands.

For three years in a row now, Kashmiris have been in the streets, protesting what they see as India’s violent occupation. But the militant uprising against the Indian government that began with the support of Pakistan 20 years ago is in retreat. The Indian Army estimates that there are fewer than 500 militants operating in the Kashmir Valley today. The war has left 70,000 dead and tens of thousands debilitated by torture. Many, many thousands have “disappeared.” More than 200,000 Kashmiri Hindus have fled the valley. Though the number of militants has come down, the number of Indian soldiers deployed remains undiminished.

But India’s military domination ought not to be confused with a political victory. Ordinary people armed with nothing but their fury have risen up against the Indian security forces. A whole generation of young people who have grown up in a grid of checkpoints, bunkers, army camps and interrogation centers, whose childhood was spent witnessing “catch and kill” operations, whose imaginations are imbued with spies, informers, “unidentified gunmen,” intelligence operatives and rigged elections, has lost its patience as well as its fear. With an almost mad courage, Kashmir’s young have faced down armed soldiers and taken back their streets.

Since April, when the army killed three civilians and then passed them off as “terrorists,” masked stone throwers, most of them students, have brought life in Kashmir to a grinding halt. The Indian government has retaliated with bullets, curfew and censorship. Just in the last few months, 111 people have been killed, most of them teenagers; more than 3,000 have been wounded and 1,000 arrested.

But still they come out, the young, and throw stones. They don’t seem to have leaders or belong to a political party. They represent themselves. And suddenly the second-largest standing army in the world doesn’t quite know what to do. The Indian government doesn’t know whom to negotiate with. And many Indians are slowly realizing they have been lied to for decades. The once solid consensus on Kashmir suddenly seems a little fragile.

I WAS in a bit of trouble the morning we drove to Shopian. A few days earlier, at a public meeting in Delhi, I said that Kashmir was disputed territory and, contrary to the Indian government’s claims, it couldn’t be called an “integral” part of India. Outraged politicians and news anchors demanded that I be arrested for sedition. The government, terrified of being seen as “soft,” issued threatening statements, and the situation escalated. Day after day, on prime-time news, I was being called a traitor, a white-collar terrorist and several other names reserved for insubordinate women. But sitting in that car on the road to Shopian, listening to my friends, I could not bring myself to regret what I had said in Delhi. We were on our way to visit a man called Shakeel Ahmed Ahangar. The previous day he had come all the way to Srinagar, where I had been staying, to press me, with an urgency

that was hard to ignore, to visit Shopian.

I first met Shakeel in June 2009, only a few weeks after the bodies of Nilofar, his 22-year-old wife, and Asiya, his 17-year-old sister, were found lying a thousand yards apart in a shallow stream in a high-security zone — a floodlit area between army and state police camps. The first postmortem report confirmed rape and murder. But then the system kicked in. New autopsy reports overturned the initial findings and, after the ugly business of exhuming the bodies, rape was ruled out. [It was declared that in both cases the cause of death was drowning.](#) Protests shut Shopian down for 47 days, and the valley was convulsed with anger for months. Eventually it looked as though the Indian government had managed to defuse the crisis. But the anger over the killings has magnified the intensity of this year's uprising.

It was apple season in Kashmir and as we approached Shopian we could see families in their orchards, busily packing apples into wooden crates in the slanting afternoon light. I worried that a couple of the little red-cheeked children who looked so much like apples themselves might be crated by mistake. The news of our visit had preceded us, and a small knot of people were waiting on the road.

Shakeel's house is on the edge of the graveyard where his wife and sister are buried. It was dark by the time we arrived, and there was a power failure. We sat in a semicircle around a lantern and listened to him tell the story we all knew so well. Other people entered the room. Other terrible stories poured out, ones that are not in human rights reports, stories about what happens to women who live in remote villages where there are more soldiers than civilians. Shakeel's young son tumbled around in the darkness, moving from lap to lap. "Soon he'll be old enough to understand what happened to his mother," Shakeel said more than once.

Just when we rose to leave, a messenger arrived to say that Shakeel's father-in-law — Nilofar's father — was expecting us at his home. We sent our regrets; it was late and if we stayed longer it would be unsafe for us to drive back.

Minutes after we said goodbye and crammed ourselves into the car, a friend's phone rang. It was a journalist colleague of his with news for me: "The police are typing up the warrant. She's going to be arrested tonight." We drove in silence for a while, past truck after truck being loaded with apples. "It's unlikely," my friend said finally. "It's just psy-ops."

But then, as we picked up speed on the highway, we were overtaken by a car full of men waving us down. Two men on a motorcycle asked our driver to pull over. I steeled myself for what was coming. A man appeared at the car window. He had slanting emerald eyes and a salt-and-pepper beard that went halfway down his chest. He introduced himself as Abdul Hai, father of the murdered Nilofar.

"How could I let you go without your apples?" he said. The bikers started loading two crates of apples into the back of our car. Then Abdul Hai reached into the pockets of his worn brown cloak, and brought out an egg. He placed it in my palm and folded my fingers over it. And then he placed another in my other hand. The eggs were still warm. "God

bless and keep you," he said, and walked away into the dark. What greater reward could a writer want?

I wasn't arrested that night. Instead, in what is becoming a common political strategy, officials outsourced their displeasure to the mob. A few days after I returned home, the women's wing of the Bharatiya Janata Party (the right-wing Hindu nationalist opposition) staged a demonstration outside my house, calling for my arrest. Television vans arrived in advance to broadcast the event live. The murderous Bajrang Dal, a militant Hindu group that, in 2002, spearheaded attacks against Muslims in Gujarat in which more than a thousand people were killed, have announced that they are going to "fix" me with all the means at their disposal, including by filing criminal charges against me in different courts across the country.

Indian nationalists and the government seem to believe that they can fortify their idea of a resurgent India with a combination of bullying and Boeing airplanes. But they don't understand the subversive strength of warm, boiled eggs.

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**BETWEEN THE MOUNTAINS**  
**The New Yorker, March 11, 2002**  
**By ISABEL HILTON**

When the French doctor François Bernier entered the Kashmir Valley for the first time, in 1665, he was astounded by what he found. "In truth," he wrote, it "surpasses in beauty all that my warm imagination had anticipated. It is not indeed without reason that the Moghuls call Kachemire the terrestrial paradise of the Indies." The valley is sumptuously fertile. Along its floor, there are walnut and almond trees, orchards of apricots and apples, vineyards, rice paddies, hemp and saffron fields. There are woods on the lower slopes of the surrounding mountains—sycamore, oak, pine, and cedar. The southern side is bounded by the Pir Panjal, not the highest mountain range in Asia but one of the most striking, rising abruptly from the valley floor. The northern boundary is formed by the Great Himalayas. At the heart of the valley lie Dal Lake and the graceful capital, Srinagar.

For Europeans, Kashmir became a locus of romantic dreams, inspiring writers like the Irish poet Thomas Moore, who didn't even need to visit it to understand its charms. "Who has not heard of the Vale of Cashmere," he wrote in 1817, "with its roses the brightest that earth ever gave." So seductive was this landlocked valley that, like a beautiful woman surrounded by jealous lovers, Kashmir attracted a succession of invaders, each eager to possess her.

The Moghuls established their control in the sixteenth century. Kashmir became the northern limit of their Indian empire as well as their pleasure ground, a place to wait out the summer heat of the plains. They built gardens in Srinagar, along the shores of Dal Lake, with cool and elegantly proportioned terraces—with fountains and roses and jasmine and rows of chinar trees. The Moghul rulers were followed by the Afghans and, later, by the Sikhs from the Punjab, who were driven out in the nineteenth century by the British, who then sold the valley, to the abiding shame of its residents, for seven and a half million

rupees to the maharaja, Gulab Singh. Singh was the notoriously brutal Hindu ruler of Jammu, the region that lay to the south, beyond the Pir Panjal, on the edge of the plains of the Punjab.

Under Singh, the Kashmir Valley was conjoined in the princely state of Jammu and Kashmir. According to one calculation of the purchase, the ruler of the newly formed state had bought the people of Kashmir for approximately three rupees each, a sum he was to recover many times over through taxation. For the maharaja and his descendants and their visitors, the valley was a luxurious paradise; they enjoyed fishing and duck shooting, boating excursions on Dal Lake, picnics in the hills and the saffron fields, moonlit parties in the magnificent gardens. In the penetrating cold of the winters, the visitors, and the maharaja, left the valley to itself and returned to Jammu.

Kashmir was also a natural crossroads. The Silk Route, with its great camel trains from China, passed to the north, and the country's mountain passes opened routes to the Punjab, Afghanistan, and Jammu. Through them successive intruders brought different cultures that added layers to Kashmir's own. The Kashmiri language was a mixture of Persian, Sanskrit, and Punjabi; the handicrafts for which the valley was celebrated were Central Asian; and the religious faith was variously Buddhist, Hindu, Sikh, and Muslim. Sufi masters left a legacy of music and tolerance in their Muslim teachings. A Sikh who had lived many years in Srinagar described the culture of the valley as an old cloth so covered in patches that you can't see the original.

Today, the valley is predominantly Muslim, but, as part of the maharaja's portmanteau state of Jammu and Kashmir, it still shares its destiny with other faiths and peoples: the Hindus of Jammu, the Buddhists of Ladakh, as well as Gilgits and Baltis, Hunzas and Mirpuris. There had been conflicts between the communities in the past, but by the mid-twentieth century Kashmir was an unusually tolerant culture. It escaped the intercommunal violence that Partition brought to the neighboring Punjab when the British left the subcontinent, in 1947. Kashmir's violence was to occur later, as the two new states of India and Pakistan became the latest of Kashmir's neighbors to fight over it.

Today, Kashmir is partitioned—Pakistan controls slightly less than a third, India some sixty per cent, and China the rest. Most of Kashmir's twelve million people are concentrated in Indian-held territories, and the rest are mainly in Pakistan-held ones; relations among its many communities are now marked by mutual mistrust. And since the late eighties a bewildering number of combatants have fought a savage, irregular war that, in a steady daily toll of killing, has cost, depending on whom you believe, between thirty to eighty thousand lives. On the side of the Indian state, the participants include the local police, the Border Security Force, the Central Reserve Police Force, and the Army, supported by various intelligence organizations and a motley group of turncoat former militants who have muddied the public understanding of who, over the years, has done what to whom. Opposing them are a proliferation of Islamic militant groups. At one time, there were more than sixty of them. Several are fundamentalist and deadly—like the Lashkar-e-Taiba and Jaish-e-Mohammed, which are based in Pakistan (and have been listed as terrorists by the United States) and were recently banned by Pakistan's President Pervez Musharraf. The largest group, the Hizbul Mujahideen, is Muslim but not, its supporters insist, fundamentalist, and most of its activists, who number around a thousand, are Kashmiris.

Surrounding the insurgency is the wider, implacable hostility between India and Pakistan. But at its core is the story of a people who, for five centuries, have been longing to call their homeland their own. Last October, I was permitted to go into what Pakistan calls Azad (“Free”) Kashmir, a territory that Pakistan maintains is truly autonomous but which depends entirely on the country’s military and money for its continued existence. India calls the territory Pakistan-occupied Kashmir. The entity has existed ever since Pakistan wrested this northwest third of the original state of Jammu and Kashmir from Indian control in a war that followed the 1947 Partition. For Pakistan, that war was the first step toward a liberation of Kashmir’s Muslims from India. Once liberated, Pakistan hoped, the Kashmiris would join Muslim Pakistan.

At the time of Partition, Jammu and Kashmir was still ruled by a Hindu maharaja, Hari Singh, a descendant of Gulab Singh. The maharaja was one of five hundred and sixty-two fabulously rich feudal monarchs whom the British had manipulated in order to maintain their grip on much of India. At Partition, these states were given a choice of joining India or Pakistan. Independence was not on offer. Most joined India. The maharaja dithered for months, unable to decide between two equally unattractive options. As a Hindu, he did not like Pakistan. As an Indian, he did not like the British. As a prince, he cared neither for the antifeudal Mahatma Gandhi nor for the local Muslim leader, Sheikh Abdullah, who favored autonomy for Kashmir but without its maharaja. Then, on October 20, 1947, armed tribesmen and regular troops from Pakistan invaded Kashmir. The maharaja appealed to India for support and hastily agreed to sign the now famous Instrument of Accession to India: the state of Kashmir and Jammu was accepted as part of the new federal union of India; in exchange, it was, exceptionally, granted a semiautonomous status. (India would control only matters of defense, foreign affairs, and communications; everything else was to be run by Jammu and Kashmir’s own parliament.) Pakistan, furious, refused to accept the legality of the accession, and Pakistan and India fought their first war over Kashmir.

In Pakistan, what is remembered was a promise made by the Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru to hold a plebiscite in which the people of Kashmir could make their preferences clear. That plebiscite was never held. India blames Pakistan: in 1949, after a ceasefire was agreed to under United Nations supervision, Pakistan failed to withdraw from Azad Kashmir, a betrayal that, India says, vitiated the commitment to the plebiscite. Today, there are few routes that connect Azad Kashmir with Pakistan proper.

[In the mountain village of Chakothei] tensions were unusually high. The United States bombing of Afghanistan had begun, and the military’s view was that India might take advantage of the situation—troop movements had been detected. Yaqub’s list of the casualties incurred in the last thirteen years of what he saw as Kashmir’s freedom struggle against India was startling, even if undoubtedly exaggerated: 74,625 killed, 80,317 wounded, 492 adults burned alive, 875 schoolchildren burned alive, 15,812 raped, 6,572 sexually incapacitated, 37,030 disabled, and 96,752 missing ---

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