



Inclusion and Exclusion: Emergent Social Milieus in Kashmir's Suburbs

DAVID DEVADAS
daviddevadas@gmail.com

Introduction

This paper is about the development of suburbs in Kashmir over the past quarter century. The former polarity between city and hinterland is becoming blurred in these suburbs, both physically and culturally. This paper is divided into two parts. The first gives a macroscopic overview of how the concepts and contours of community are being re-imagined in these suburbs. Part Two provides glimpses of the same processes on a microcosmic scale, presenting the ongoing socio-economic and cultural changes as organic processes. The intention is that this micro-view will, in combination with the macro-perspective presented in Part One, give a multi-dimensional impression of community-formation in suburban Kashmir.

Part One describes hitherto uncommon forms of exclusion in these suburbs, even to the extent of apparent social fragmentation. On the other hand, new patterns of inclusion are also becoming evident, some of them trans-local, virtual, even global in scale. Part Two presents a set of vignettes from my participant observations (Robben & Sluka 2012: 3) during fieldwork at a Kashmiri suburban wedding in the late summer of 2011. Through my participant observations at rituals and preparations in the bride's household, I present glimpses of emergent facets of inclusion and exclusion in relationships based on family, friendship, religion, gender and linguistic-ethnic community.

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1. Emergent Communities

In order to adequately understand contemporary developments in urbanism in Kashmir, it is worthwhile first to focus briefly on what the



term 'city' has traditionally meant in that particular context. The term has had a special resonance and meaning in common usage in Kashmir, which goes beyond the meaning of the generic term. For, 'city' has traditionally been used as a synonym for the city of Srinagar, the capital of Kashmir. Even today, one might come across people saying in Kashmiri: "mai chhu paga sitee gasun," ("mai kal shehr jaoonga" in Urdu, or "I am going to the city tomorrow" in English). One is tempted to attribute this usage to a past in which the patterns of life were simple. But that sort of idealisation of the past might not stand close scrutiny. No doubt life and its patterns were always more or less complex, ambivalent and in flux. However, economists, sociologists, political scientists and historians of empires and colonies would perhaps recognise aspects of the polarity between centre and periphery in this contextual usage of the term 'city'.¹ In Kashmir, this polarity is a well documented facet of the economic (Hangloo 2000), social and political aspects of life through the past several centuries (Pandit 2006; Lawrence [1895] 2000).

Let me clarify at this point what I mean when I use the term 'Kashmir'. The word is often used as shorthand for the state of Jammu and Kashmir, which came into being following the treaties of Lahore² and Amritsar³ in 1846. However, I use the term to describe the Valley of Kashmir, which is an identifiable geographical area – a fertile oval which is generally quite plain but is surrounded by high mountains. While the entire state is around the same size as Great Britain, which brought it into being, the Valley comprises only about five percent of the total area. However, the Valley contains about a third of the population of the state of Jammu and Kashmir. It has been a distinct political entity through much of history and has great geopolitical importance today. The bowl of the Valley, which is relatively densely populated, is about 120 km long and about 40 km wide at many points. The linguistic-ethnic group which describes itself as Koshur or Kashmiri is concentrated in the bowl of this Valley.

As I have already pointed out, the city of Srinagar has occupied a vital, central position in the life of the Kashmiri communities of the Valley. It is not only geographically at the centre, but also has remained economically and politically central through history (Pandit 2006).⁴ In times past, agriculture played a more important part, not only as a sector of economic production but, even more so, of employment. Through much of the period from the mid-18th to the mid-20th centuries⁵, land ownership was concentrated in the hands of landlords or of the state.



The substantial majority of these owners lived in Srinagar, or in the metropolitan centres of colonising powers beyond. Tillers and sharecroppers lived in the rural hinterland, often paying two-thirds and at times more of their crops to landlords and to the state.

Another important source of employment, production and income was the embroidered Kashmiri shawl, and other handicrafts made of materials such as walnut wood, papier mache and copper. Here too, the city was the hub of wholesale, retail and factory work, although many rural households participated in these trades through cottage manufacture. During Dogra rule, residents of Kashmir's hinterland had to pay a tax on goods which they wanted to bring into the city for sale. The tax was claimed at barriers on the roads through which one entered the city. It was payable even for wood that rural residents brought, often on their backs, to keep city dwellers warm during winter. People were often in terror of the tax collection authorities. This tax is only one indicator of the polarity between city and hinterland, which extended to the realms of politics, education and culture (Bazaz 1941).

The economic bases of the polarity between the city and the rural hinterland were severely undermined by the radical land reforms which took place from 1950.⁶ Another factor that contributed significantly to undermining the traditional city-periphery polarity was the pattern of government employment. From the 1920s onwards, government employment began to become the chief economic aspiration of many Kashmiri people, the very large majority of whom are Muslim (Bazaz 1954). Efforts were made, more so from the 1950s onwards, to meet this aspiration: more and more persons from rural and hitherto impoverished families were employed in government jobs. A significant proportion of these were from rural areas (Devadas 2007: 91). Over the past half-century, these employment trends have, in combination with the land reforms which continued until 1975, deeply unsettled the traditional polarity between the city and the peripheries. Education, healthcare, and roads and other modes of connectivity too became increasingly available in the hinterland.

This paper looks at the ways in which concepts of community are being re-imagined by the residents of these suburbs, as the traditional polarity between the city and the rural hinterland changes. I use the term community here in terms of the linkages that are organically being established between networks of association and support (Boissevain 1974: 1). My focus is primarily geographical, regarding the new re-



sidential areas surrounding the city of Srinagar and the other towns in the Valley that now qualify to be termed cities, i.e. Anantnag and Baramulla. I call the new settings in the outskirts of these cities suburbs. It is important to note that the residential spaces for which I use the term suburb in the context of Kashmir are comparable to the sorts of spaces that are described with the same word in places like Germany. These suburbs are not slums to which the rural poor migrate in search of work, as may be the case in some other settings. In Kashmir, building and moving to a residence in one of these areas is considered by most of those who do so as representing upward social mobility.

I categorise suburbanisation in Kashmir, specifically the city of Srinagar, into two phases. The first phase lasted from the 1930s until the 1960s, the second phase started in the 1980s and continues until today. The first phase took place in a far more planned manner than the second, mainly under the administrations of Maharaja Hari Singh and Bakshi Ghulam Mohammed, who was the Prime Minister of the state on the Indian side of the Ceasefire Line⁷ from 1953 to 1963. Some of the suburbs which were developed in this first phase⁸ have a Londonesque layout and architectural style. Rows of houses in each particular suburb were built on the same architectural pattern. My work is on the second, continuing, phase of suburbanisation. It has been far more unplanned than the first phase. Processes of community formation in these new suburbs too are more organic and, sometimes, multi-faceted.

In this second phase, suburbs have been colonised in both directions – by families moving from the inner city as well as from the rural hinterland. Some have even moved from forest settlements at the edges of the Valley. The suburbs which I am focusing on are new.⁹ They barely existed a quarter-century ago, at which time most of the land on which they now stand were fields or even marshland.¹⁰ They therefore represent a very contemporary trend. Looked at simply from the perspective of location, they represent a physical overlap between city and hinterland. These spaces thus are sites in which the traditional polarity between the city and the rural hinterland is blurring. More than just a physical overlap, however, these suburbs are sites for the evolution of new social milieus. Perhaps more importantly, even as they continue to evolve in the suburbs, these social milieus have already to some extent become normative patterns that are gradually spreading to other parts of the Kashmir Valley.



1.1. New Modes of Socialisation

These new patterns represent a radical shift from the modes of socialisation that were common in both the inner city areas and in rural areas in the past. Strong bonds of local association were hallmarks of these earlier settings. Houses in both those locales tended to be open for visitors, who generally came unannounced. People spoke to each other from urban upper storey windows and from rural gardens, verandas and upstairs windows. In past centuries, the urban areas that today are often called Downtown Srinagar, Old Town Baramulla and the inner city of Anantnag had some identifiably typical features. Instead of the walls that surrounded many cities around the world¹¹, Srinagar's natural defences were formed by the river on two sides and a huge lake and mountains on the other two. Baramulla and Anantnag too had the river on one side and mountain slopes on the other.¹² Within these natural boundaries lay dense urban sprawls of three to five storey buildings made of wood, stone and either adobe or brick. Although there were some exceptions to this pattern of urban construction (particularly among the upper crust), these buildings were typically built close to each other, with narrow lanes between them. Many of these buildings had enclosed balconies on the upper floors, which extended across part of the adjacent alley or road. From these, the children, women and other members of households could, and did, talk to their neighbours in adjacent buildings, or to people passing on the street below.

Typically, houses in both urban and rural milieus were never locked. Neighbours and relatives walked in and out. Visitors were generally entertained in the kitchen, particularly in winter. Rural houses were even more open than urban ones. It was common enough for even distant relatives to arrive, having travelled long distances, without any forewarning. They would expect to stay, sometimes for indefinite periods. To drop in for a cup of tea or a game of cards has been common enough, even across socio-economic strata. In a society in which women and men often socialise separately, the sites of community life most often were the kitchen and the verandah. Sometimes, men were also received in a matted or carpeted, but otherwise unfurnished, room that often doubled as a (or the only) room for sleeping at night and for other activities by day.

The social milieus that have developed in the suburbs over the past couple of decades are radically different. Many of the houses in



these suburbs are large, with many rooms, and could be described as mansions. These houses often have a toilet on each floor; some have a separate toilet attached to each bedroom. However, the feature of Kashmir's suburbs that is likely to strike a casual observer first is the walls around each individual property. Typically, each suburban house is surrounded by a two to three meter high wall, built around a garden or yard. The gates are almost as high as the walls and generally have a metal sheet over the slats or other features of the gate in order to prevent anyone from looking in.¹³ These gates are sometimes bolted from the inside. In such cases, a visitor must ring the bell from the road outside and, only if the gate is opened, may be admitted to even the garden. Walls are not only a noticeable motif of these suburbs, they may also be seen as a metaphor for the sort of social milieu, the lifestyle, the attitude to community, which is developing in these suburbs – and, by extension, in Kashmir. They seem to physically represent, indeed create, a very different societal reality from ones that used to exist in the areas from which most suburban residents have migrated.

Many residents of such suburbs explain these walls and gates in terms of 'security'. Without a doubt, there has been a critical need over much of the past quarter-century to secure one's family against social and political disorder – various sorts of men with arms, street violence, and the increasing levels of crime that are noticeable in urban Kashmir.¹⁴ However, although the most common conscious reason for these high walls is security, it is worth exploring the anthropological and sociological processes that lie behind, around – even despite – these walls; processes which, at least to a casual observer, appear to cause social exclusion.

1.2. Exclusion

An obvious question that comes to mind is whether, and to what extent, these walls represent exclusion – an attempt to assert ownership of private space. For, they empower one with the agency to admit or not admit neighbours, relatives, family friends and work associates. In the particular context of Kashmir, a few questions come to mind. One is whether this evident insularity is a response to the violent, uncertain and dangerous environment in Kashmir. Further, could it denote rejection of an unresponsive and inefficient government? Could it also be a reflection



of alienation from a government and system deemed to be illegitimate?

If, indeed, the perceived illegitimacy of the system were a reason, an obvious paradox is evident: a substantial proportion of those who live in these suburbs are employed in government. Despite this fact, the walls around their houses are not the only indicators that they and their families have withdrawn from community in the form that it exists in the inner-city. Voting figures¹⁵ at polling booths indicate clearly that they are far less likely to vote than their rural compatriots, even though boycotts imposed under the threat of militant reprisals are generally far more potent threats in rural than in urban areas – and many senior government employees have armed security with them wherever they go, even at their homes.

As for the question regarding whether this withdrawal behind private walls may be associated with perceptions of government inefficiency and unresponsiveness, a couple of vignettes of suburban reality might give some insights. Even a casual visitor to these suburbs may be struck by the contrast between the opulence within many of the houses there and the squalor of some of the public spaces outside those walls. To begin with, the roads within these suburbs are narrow, sometimes unpaved or barely paved. For, while building boundary walls, residents often leave just enough space for two vehicles to squeeze past each other, and barely any space for pedestrians if two cars do pass each other. Generally, these suburbs have no municipal sewerage system. Houses are built over or beside an underground sump, from which sewerage is manually removed when it fills (ILO 2010). The other thing that is immediately noticeable is garbage. It generally gathers in heaps at unmarked spots along the road, which organically grow into refuse piles. So much so that a survey conducted under the auspices of India's Union Ministry of Urban Development in 2010 listed Srinagar as the fourth dirtiest city in India.¹⁶

This visible physical evidence indicates that these walls are only one aspect of a wider withdrawal from civic involvement. One could also ask whether the withdrawal of families behind these high walls represents social fragmentation. The framing of such questions, however, tends to reflect a negative perception of what these walls represent. It is also possible to point one's inquiry in other directions. For example, could one not fruitfully ask whether these evolving suburban lifestyles represent a kind of modernity? The word modernity of course immediately opens an epistemological Pandora's Box (Eisenstadt 2005: 3). To be sure, most



of the residents of these suburbs perceive and describe themselves as being 'middle class' – and the emergence of a milieu which may be described by that term is sometimes viewed as a move towards modernity. These suburbs and the lifestyles therein certainly fit with one of the many meanings that attach themselves to the term modern – of a contemporaneous lifestyle, as different from established past practices.

Another way in which the word has been interpreted is as a move away from relatively feudal, agrarian ways of living, towards industrial and post-industrial modes of production, occupation and consumption – Giddens describes modernity as "roughly equivalent to 'the industrialized world'" (Giddens 1991: 15). Although the trend in Kashmir, particularly among those moving from rural areas to these suburbs, is away from agriculture, it is not necessarily towards industry. Indeed, many of those who participated in traditional production – weaving, embroidery and handicrafts – tend to give these up as they move to these suburbs. A large majority of those who inhabit these suburbs work in, or aspire to work in, the government or in professions. One might add that, in the context of Kashmir, there is often an overlap between government employment and professions. For, most doctors, engineers and teachers aspire to be employed by the government. It is worth noting in this context that the proportion of the population of the Jammu and Kashmir state in India that is employed in government is about five percent. The comparative figure for Gujarat is 0.9 percent.

To turn to another development that is often taken to be an indicator of modernity, the trend in these suburbs is towards living in relatively unitary families. Some of the families that move to these areas leave an older generation – as well as other members of their erstwhile joint families – in their earlier dwellings, either in the countryside or in the inner city. However, the new social milieu in these suburbs do not seem to conform to another measure of modernity: it would be worth examining whether gender and inter-generational relations in the unitary families living behind those high suburban walls are more egalitarian than they used to be. Indeed, a Kashmiri woman who moves from an agrarian setting to these suburbs might lose the relatively influential position she had in her village home. Many Kashmiri women have traditionally managed their farms, not only the cattle but also the paddy fields. They often ruled their households from their kitchens even while they deferred formally to their husbands and other older males as titular heads of their households.



1.3. Trans-local Communities

There is another dimension of suburban life patterns which makes those walls virtually irrelevant. This is the fast spread of telephony and internet services. Kashmir has a very high density of SIM cards and phone usage, including GPRS.¹⁷ Particularly young residents of these suburbs spend substantial time on the internet, particularly on social networking sites, and on the telephone. Phone company records indicate that night time usage is extremely high. This may have to do with the cheaper rates that some service packages offer – even free talk time for a few hours after midnight. So, another aspect of the very walls that would seem to exclude is that they also help to link – virtually. For, the privacy of separate rooms for young residents can allow them to make new lifestyle choices, such as talking to friends and lovers late at night without interference from parents and other authority figures. Another question arises then: could trans-local communities be forming from behind those walls, which might to an extent replace the local community of physical neighbours? Social networking sites provide easy access to any number of such trans-local communities. Internet access combines with credit cards to bring shopping and other consumption possibilities right into the home. In addition, phones and private cars give easy access to communities that may not be counted as relatives or neighbours in a traditional sense but might become as vital a source of support in the contemporary context.

Some of these communities – online as well as physically accessible – are religious. Groups such as Jamaat-e-Islami¹⁸ and Ahle-Hadith have a large number of adherents in many of Kashmir's suburbs – although their influence is by no means restricted to suburbs. The most obvious evidence of their influence is the number of Jamaat-e-Islami and Ahle-Hadith mosques that have recently been built. Some first generation urban residents, particularly professionals, tend to join such religion-based organisations. This adherence appears to provide a veneer of respectability to some. To others, it gives migrants to these suburbs access to a network of associates which could serve as a support system in their new environment.¹⁹ The relative numbers of new mosques and educational institutions affiliated to these religious groups would indicate that they have the greatest impact on the wealthier of the suburbs.

At one level then, the physical walls surrounding suburban houses in such areas would seem to reflect the ideological walls that some



of these groups' proponents promote among their adherents (Sikand 2011). Yoginder Sikand has argued that:

The spread of conservative and supremacist versions of Islam in recent years in Kashmir, as represented, for instance, by the Jamaat-e Islami, the Tablighi Jamaat and the Wahhabi Ahle-Hadith, has only further exacerbated these exclusivist tendencies and perceptions. Many of those associated with or influenced by such movements regard Hindus (and other non-Muslims) as deviant and godless, and, in many cases, simply by definition as 'enemies of Islam' and as allegedly collectively engaged in a grand global conspiracy against the faith. Close social interaction with non-Muslims and following their ways is frowned upon, in many cases, sternly condemned, for this is seen as threatening to dilute the Muslims' own commitment to Islam. Ideally, in this worldview, Islam and its followers must dominate over others. 'Islam has come to dominate the world,' they insist.²⁰

It is true that the beliefs and preachings of such groups are exclusivist, even tendentious – and that they have substantial influence in some of these suburbs. To the extent that these groups' preachers often focus on global issues and project Muslims as a group under worldwide siege, they build walls on a global scale. If one accepts Sikand's description, one might be tempted to view the physical walls of Kashmir's suburbs as overt parallels, and metaphors, of the ideological walls which such religious movements seek to build. The seclusion they provide from traditional socialisation might promote involvement in such trans-local, even global, movements, just as seclusion behind those walls and the privacy of individual rooms promotes involvement with groups accessible by phone and internet.

1.4. Nascent Alternative Communities

However, mosques and the educational institutions which they control are not the only sites for socialising in Kashmir's suburbs. New kinds of local community are emerging, particularly in some of the less wealthy suburbs. Most obviously, suburban neighbourhoods cut across traditional community structures based on occupation. The inner city



of Srinagar was organised on the pattern of medieval Islamic guilds.²¹ Therefore, some inner city areas contained a concentration of families from a common occupational group – groupings which may be viewed as castes. Many Kashmiris resist the idea that a caste system exists among Muslims but, as with many different religious groups across South Asia, caste has been noted as a facet of Kashmiri Muslim society (Ahmed 1978).²² In suburbs, families from very different (traditional) occupational backgrounds live next door to each other. There is little evidence of residential enclaves of persons with a common occupation. If there is occupational commonality, it relates to government employment, but this can take many forms. A police officer's house may be flanked by that of a doctor on one side and of a teacher on the other.

In fact, instead of the medieval pattern of occupation-based enclaves, a hierarchy of status appears to have emerged between various suburbs around Srinagar. It would be inadequate to ascribe this hierarchy simply to wealth. Rather, factors such as education, social background and ease with metropolitan cultures combine with wealth to determine the hierarchical status of a particular suburb. Perceptions regarding the status of a suburb influence factors such as rents. However, the structures and infrastructure of the different suburbs are evolving in similar patterns, e.g. the seclusion of individual families behind high walls, narrow roads, and the absence of sewerage systems.

While caste/occupational divides appear to be easing fast in these suburbs, the blurring of other sorts of identity-based divides is slower. However, those processes too are evident: some of the emergent social networks in these suburbs tend to include persons and families from different religious, sectarian and ethnic identity groups. There is some evidence of relatively new ties being formed between neighbours who might be Shia and Sunni, Sikh and Muslim, may belong to different caste groups, and different linguistic-ethnic groups such as Pahari, Gujjar²³ and Kashmiri. This appears to be more apparent in less wealthy suburbs than in wealthier ones. A noteworthy aspect of the processes by which these new inclusive social networks are being formed is that they are often led by women and young people. This is a counterpoint to mosques – and, to a large extent, educational institutions – which are dominated by men, often middle-aged or older men.

Schools are a major site for the formation of these new community (or, depending on one's viewpoint, inter-community or inter-identity) networks. Students whose families might identify themselves by such



linguistic-ethnic labels as Pahari or Gujjar, such sectarian terms as Shia or Sunni, or religion-based categories such as Sikh or Muslim, form friendships which often last after they have finished school. My anthropological research in two of these suburbs shows that relationships formed between students often extend to relationships with the student's family, as young people visit each other's homes, eat there, and even sometimes sleep over. In fact, schools are not the only sites where students meet, interact and form new networks. This also takes place in playgrounds, gymnasiums, billiards and pool centres, internet cafes, neighbourhood snack shops and other such sites of socialising.

My field research shows that women, particularly housewives, too, sometimes form close associations with relatively new neighbours. This is manifest not only in everyday coming and going but also in their participation in organising weddings in each other's homes. Some of the women who thus help each other did not know each other until they became neighbours by shifting to that suburb a few years ago. In the past, it was common in both rural and urban areas for families, particularly women, of the neighbourhood to work hard together to organise and co-host weddings. However, these women generally belonged to families which had been neighbours for generations. This pattern of mutual assistance has organically been carried over to some of these suburbs, only now it becomes a way to form networks of bonding, sometimes across identities that tended in the past to sometimes divide.

In the past, in both the rural hinterland and the inner city, community²⁴ consisted of local neighbours and a network of distant relatives. Members of the extended family could be dispersed far from one's home but they would generally arrive at a home where a wedding was to take place several days earlier and would work together with the immediate family like co-hosts. They also tended to assemble for the Chahrum rituals on the fourth day following a death.²⁵ In rural areas, one's neighbours meant more or less the entire village, barring those families and networks with which one's own family or network was engaged in a feud of some sort. However, even these would generally be invited to a wedding, and would visit when someone died.

My research shows that these concepts of community are changing among at least some suburban residents. Although a person or family's network of support still includes at least part of the immediate neighbourhood and the dispersed extended family, circles of friends have become far more important as those upon whom one relies in



times of trouble, or of celebration. This is particularly evident among younger residents of some of Kashmir's suburbs.

The following part of this paper sheds more light on these trends.

2. Part Two: Community at a Wedding

In this second part of this paper, I rely on notes from my fieldwork in a Kashmiri suburb during September 2011. I spent a week living in the house of the bride during a Muslim wedding, where I conducted hitherto unpublished anthropological field research. This house too is surrounded by high walls, which seclude the family far more than when it lived in an inner-city area. The new networks of association and support which are being formed by members of this family became evident during the wedding celebrations, preparations and related rituals. The following vignettes present a microcosmic view of some of the emergent patterns of exclusion and inclusion which have been described in general terms in Part One.

This part focuses on three strands of community formation, as they became evident during this particular suburban wedding. The first is the replacement to some extent of the extended family by a circle of friends as the ones who took primary responsibility as organisers and co-hosts at this wedding. A sub-theme of this first strand of community formation is the inclusion of different linguistic-ethnic groups – a Pahadi among Kashmiris in this particular case. The second strand of community formation concerns the participation of neighbours from different religion-based communities in each other's social functions – in this particular case, the inclusion of Sikhs in the celebration of this Muslim wedding. The third strand is nuanced. It focuses primarily on inclusion and exclusion on the basis of gender. In this context, I focus on customs based on different interpretations of Islam. Also, based on my own experience as a non-Muslim, non-Kashmiri participant observer at this wedding, I refer to my access to those of the wedding functions in which mainly only women participated in the context of the outsider-insider paradigm (Hage 2006: 1).



2.1. Communities as Networks of Support

An aspect of community bonding that was clearly discernible at this wedding involved the circle of the bride's brother's friends. To an extent, it provided a counter-point to the loosening of bonds between members of the extended family, which was also evident at the wedding. Both these trends were evident in the extent to which the brother's friends on the one hand and the extended family on the other appeared to take upon themselves the responsibility to organise the wedding rituals and celebrations, and to behave as co-hosts. It was in the almost unconsciously undertaken acts of shouldering, or not shouldering, responsibility that the strength of the emergent bonds of community was evinced. Throughout the week that I spent living in the house of the bride before and during the wedding, her brother's friends functioned as the organisers and co-hosts of the wedding – much more so than the extended family. Some of these friends worked hard for several days, often staying overnight. It was this brother and his friends who carried the burden of the hard work involved in preparing the tent under which the feast was to be served, negotiating with the professional chefs who cooked the feast, buying the meat, cutting the salad, buying the wood on which the feast was cooked, arranging the lights and other decorations, and actually seating and serving the guests. These friends were not immediate neighbours but lived in nearby suburbs.

At least half-a-dozen of the friends slept there for the main three or four nights of the wedding, strategising till late about which of them would undertake what chores the next day. Those late night sessions were also processes of further bonding: the young men would joke, play cards, smoke, watch film clips together on a laptop, or play practical jokes on one another – e.g., spraying foam on one who had gone to sleep. When the time to work came, however, most of them showed a great sense of responsibility. On the mehandi-raat²⁶, the eve of the wedding, four of the brother's friends laid out rugs, mattresses and sheets for the night's singing, while the bride's cousins lounged around or went up the nearby hill for a walk, and older male relatives sat and smoked or watched the chefs preparing the feast in a neighbouring yard. It rained heavily on the day of the wedding. Yet, this brother and his friends, along with only one of his cousins, formed a chain to carry the platters on which the feast was served across the approximately 70 metres from where it was cooked to the halls in which it was served.



Over the previous few weeks, these friends had spent a lot of time and energy driving their families' cars to distant places to deliver invitations. For, one of the legacies of the days in which community was far less dispersed is that an invitation to a Kashmiri wedding must be delivered in person by a relative of the bride or groom. To send a card by post or courier would be seen as a snub; the recipient of a posted invitation would almost certainly not attend, and would most likely hold a grudge for years.

One of the brother's friends had left his work in Jaipur a thousand kilometres away to come and work at this wedding. The grandfather of three of the other friends (brother or first-cousin to each other) died on the night before the mehendi-raat. Yet, one of them was there the next evening to take charge of serving tea to those from the groom's family who had brought the mehendi (henna) for the bride. He later told me that this was his duty. He pointed out that within moments of their telephoning the bride's brother that their grandfather had died, the brother had appeared at the hospital, leaving his sister's wedding celebrations. The brother had also gone for the funeral the next morning. This friend of the bride's brother spoke of being able to trust one's friends more than relatives. During my interview with him, which focused on the importance of friends and relatives respectively, he said "I hate relatives" – they are "ungrateful."

Another of the brother's friends, who describes himself as Pahadi (a linguistic-ethnic term), spoke of being able to choose one's friends and not one's relatives. Friends have a connection of the heart, he said, "relatives are forced on you."²⁷ This Pahadi friend is married and has a child. Yet, he stayed at the bride's house for three nights. The bride's brother and a couple of his cousins seemed to treat him with great familiarity, like a brother. One of them explained that he had been a schoolboy when he first got to know this Pahadi friend through his cousin. So, he looked upon this Pahadi friend as a mentor and elder brother.

In the past, in both city and village, this pattern of bonding and taking responsibility at social functions was mainly the function of the extended family. The bride's father told me that relatives used to come to the home where a wedding was to take place several days before the wedding, and that relatives used to work hard to arrange the wedding. On the day before the three main days of wedding rituals, he told me he was upset that his sisters and brothers and their children had not yet



come. He complained that they were behaving like guests – implying that they should be behaving as co-hosts.²⁸ It is a fact that joint families were the norm 60 or 70 years ago, but the situation has gradually changed. Even two decades ago, he and his three younger brothers lived in the same house. The other three remained under the same roof until just six or seven years ago. Since this was the first wedding in the next generation, his expectations from his siblings appeared to be based on his experience when they were still a joint family. As it turned out, his second brother never came at all for this wedding; nor did one of the four sons of his third brother. This third brother now lives in a suburb of another city.

2.2. Inter-Religious Engagement

It was obvious at this wedding that norms for engagement between neighbours who think of themselves as belonging to different communities are in the process of evolving. This is particularly true about relations between religion-based communities. A number of Sikh families live in this suburb, some of them in a row of houses right across the narrow street from the house of the bride. More than a dozen Sikh women, generally middle-aged, visited the bride's house at around 11 p.m. on the eve of the wedding. Their visit was evidently timed to take place after the groom's relatives who had brought the henna had left, and before the singing and dancing that accompany the application of henna had begun. The Sikhs were served pastries, boiled eggs and savouries such as samosas. No meat was offered, since Sikhs do not generally eat halal meat.²⁹ The mother of the bride told me later that she had taken a live chicken to the home of each of 13 neighbouring Sikh families earlier that day for them to slaughter and cook in their preferred way. The bride's mother said this was not common – that she had gone out of her way to do this. The Sikh women told me that it was commonplace to present a live chicken to neighbours from Sikh and Muslim families respectively, instead of cooked food.

These differing narratives make it evident that norms for engagement are nascent and still evolving. This became even more obvious when tea was brought to the room where the Sikhs were seated. Some of the Sikhs accepted it. Then, while the bride's sister was still taking round the tea tray, one of the visitors said, "we don't drink tea."³⁰ After she



said that, some of the others refused the tea. Two of them said they had a stomach ache. One or two of those who had already accepted the tea continued to drink it.³¹

To my questions, the Sikhs readily replied that everyone lived together amicably and participated in each other's weddings, funerals and other social events. However, their descriptions of how this took place used the pronouns 'we' and 'they' liberally – for example, "four of them eat together off one trami"³² or "our weddings take place during the day" or "there is no singing and dancing at our mehendi ceremonies."

2.3. Gender Inclusion and Exclusion

My participant observation at this suburban wedding was crucial to my discovering that circles of friends have become more important than in the past, sometimes replacing the extended family in the organising of such key social rituals as those surrounding a wedding. For, I occasionally joined the bride's brother's friends while they bonded at night. My role as a participant observer was even more crucial to discover the level of openness to an 'outsider' such as me. My experience was mixed. Within the family of the bride, my hosts, I was welcomed with a level of openness that I had not expected. For example, I was initially hesitant to enter the room where Sikh women were being entertained. However, when she noticed my curiosity, the bride's mother led me in and introduced me. The Sikhs too did not seem to mind at all. Everyone seemed to want to help my research into community life in the suburbs. Their attitudes indicated that there was nothing negative to observe.

I also had not thought I would be allowed to observe the first function of the wedding festivities on the previous evening. This was a function for women and it took place on the top floor of a three-storey house. I was not only male, I was an outsider. The men of the family sat in rooms on the lower floors, chatting and smoking. However, when I asked questions about what was happening upstairs, I was urged to go up and see. I stopped in the corridor on top of the stairs, thinking I would watch from the door. But when the bride's mother saw me, she enthusiastically welcomed me in. That day, ghee³³ had been applied to the bride's hair and body and now perhaps 30 or 40 women (mainly the extended family, friends and a few neighbours), dressed in fine salwar-kameez, lehenga or phiran³⁴ suits, were singing traditional Kashmiri wedding songs. A



couple of them played the rhythm on earthen Tumbaknaris.³⁵ Being unsure about the norms of purdah³⁶ this household would observe, I was relieved to find even the bride's grandmother and other women of that generation beaming at me when I was seated in the room.

I found that, when the groom and his party arrived for the actual nikaah, wedding ceremony, the level of inclusion was reduced. Segregation of men and women too was much greater. The bridegroom and his baraat (i.e., the groom's party) were seated and then feasted in the same large top-floor room where I had been welcomed to join the women of the bride's family. I had been encouraged by the welcoming responses to my presence at the festivities over the past two days. So, when a little girl who was perhaps twelve years old told me she wanted to see the groom, I took her up those stairs to peep into that room. Suddenly, I found I had gone too far. The girl was urgently and angrily shooed away from the door by the bride's brother and cousins. They seemed quite upset. They later explained to me that the bridegroom had brought his family's favourite maulvi³⁷ to conduct the nikaah and this maulvi had set a strict condition, that no woman should be visible.

Apparently, the groom's family (or at least their maulvi) was less gender-inclusive than the bride's family. Two facts may possibly be relevant in this context. One, the groom's family does not live in a suburb; they hail from a village. Two, the groom has worked in Saudi Arabia for several years. He had come from there for just a few weeks for the wedding. Neither of these facts is a definitive reason, however. I have experienced great inclusivity in other Kashmiri villages, and was invited for a lavish tea at the groom's house a few days later. I would like to point out here, again without positing it as definitive proof of a relationship between gender tolerance and what might broadly be described as Sufi faith, that the bride's family turned to pirs (ritual healers often connected with Sufi traditions) as well as to doctors when she fell ill soon after the wedding. Prayers and blessings and amulets were sought.

Conclusions

Emergent networks of community in Kashmir's new suburbs sometimes include members of identity groups based on different religions, sects and language or ethnicity. Such inclusive networks appear to be more



common in suburbs than in either the inner cities or rural areas, from both of which locales residents of these suburbs have migrated. Families belonging to a particular occupational group are even less likely to live in proximity with each other than those belonging to a particular religion, sect or linguistic-ethnic community. Even where families of a particular identity group live in proximity in a suburb, they tend to be less exclusively concentrated than in the inner city.

Not only are the new networks of community in these suburbs nascent, norms for engagement between and among them are evolving, sometimes awkwardly. However, even as these norms are being re-imagined, it is apparent that circles of friends with whom suburban residents choose to associate are, in at least some cases, replacing the extended family as the primary bulwark of support. At times, these circles of friends include persons from different religious, sectarian or linguistic-ethnic backgrounds. Schools and other locales of youth socialising are key sites for the formation of these new, inclusive networks. Housewives too sometimes take the lead in associating with relatively new neighbours.

The high walls between individual houses in Kashmir's new suburbs tend to fragment extended families, even society at large. There are other signs of withdrawal from physical community, particularly in wealthier suburbs. However, despite those walls around individual houses, the unavoidable interactions that take place in these new suburban neighbourhoods tend to blur sociological divides between communities based on religion, sect, language and occupation. On the other hand, seclusion can in fact promote alternative modes of inclusion, despite physical exclusion. For, the privacy that those walls allow gives residents, particularly younger ones, opportunities to participate in virtual networks and markets, and to connect over the telephone. Participation in trans-local networks, some of them religious, some of them even global, is also growing.

Endnotes

- 1 A counterpart of this usage is the common pejorative use of terms such as 'grahistu' (which originally refers to a farmer; equivalent terms in English would include 'bumpkin' and



- 'yokel') for people from beyond Srinagar, even if they hail from a city such as Baramulla.
- 2 Between the British East India Company and the Sikh Empire.
- 3 Between the British East India Company and Maharaja Gulab Singh of Jammu.
- 4 According to Rajtarangini, the 11th century chronicle composed by Kashmiri poet Kalhana, the city was established by the Emperor Ashoka (3rd century BCE).
- 5 Afghan rule (1756-1819), Sikh rule (1819-1846) and Dogra rule (1846-1952).
- 6 The Big Landed Estates Abolition Act, the first of the major reforms, limited ownership to 186 kanals (about 22 acres). The rest was distributed to tillers without compensation to the landlord. In an interview by the author, noted Kashmiri economist, journalist and former chairman of the J&K Bank, Haseeb Drabu, described Kashmir's land reforms as the most radical anywhere in the world outside the Communist bloc. Personal Interview, 27.08.2005, Srinagar.
- 7 The Ceasefire Line, agreed between India and Pakistan on 1 January 1949, was converted with some minor changes into the Line of Control through the Simla Agreement in 1972.
- 8 For example, Wazir Bagh and Karan Nagar.
- 9 Among them, one may list Rawalpora, Hyderpora, Bemina, Buchpora and Zakura in the vicinity of Srinagar, KP Road on the outskirts of Anantnag, and Sangri and Khoja Bagh around Baramulla.
- 10 Bemina is an example of a new suburb that was largely marshland. It gets flooded when there are heavy showers even today.
- 11 The Mughals, having conquered Kashmir during the reign of the Emperor Akbar, built a wall around a part of the city, but this was probably meant to protect only the enclaves of the rulers. It extends around a hill to the northeast of the city and there are remnants of a Mughal wall near the Foreshore Road northwest of the Dal Lake.
- 12 The city expanded across the river during times of prosperity such as the reign of Zainulabedin (1420-70) but shrank largely to the north and east of the river in periods such as the 19th century.
- 13 In recent years, high walls and gates are being constructed



- in rural areas too but, as with most architectural fashions for dwellings, this may be viewed as attempts to copy urban culture.
- 14 The reference here is to crimes such as murder, which are unrelated to militancy/insurgency/freedom struggle (at least on the face of it). Cf. Hashmi, Syed Junaid. 2007. Crime Rate 13 Times More than Militancy in Jammu and Kashmir. *Countercurrents.org*, 13 July, https://www.google.de/search?tbm=bks&hl=en&q=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.countercurrents.org%2Fsikand090810.htm#bav=on.2,or.r_cp.r_qf.&fp=ba9f04f10f741148&hl=en&q=.+Hashmi%2C+Syed+Junaid.+2007.+Crime+Rate+13+Times+More+than+Militancy+in+Jammu+and+Kashmir.+13+July%2C++countercurrents.org&tbm=bks [retrieved 19.08.2013].
- 15 See, for example, voter turnout figures on the website of the Chief Electoral Officer Jammu and Kashmir for the assembly elections of 2008, (constituencies 18-25 are in Srinagar city). http://ceojk.nic.in/AC_Voter_Turnout_AE_2008.htm [retrieved 19.08.2013].
- 16 Srinagar scored less than 20 on a scale of 100. http://twocircles.net/2010may11/picturesque_srinagar_among_indias_four_dirtiest_cities.html [retrieved 19.08.2013]
- 17 In private conversations with the author, officials of phone service providers claimed that SIM density and usage is the highest in South Asia. However, they could not make corporate records available.
- 18 The Jamaat-e-Islami Jammu and Kashmir has a separate constitution, membership, shoura (council) and amir (head) from the Jamaat-e-Islami Azad Kashmir, the Jamaat-e-Islami Hind and the Jamaat-e-Islami in Pakistan.
- 19 Regarding urban businessmen and rich peasants, particularly orchard owners in Kashmir (orchards had been exempt from land ceiling) during the spurt of wealth in the 1970s, Praveen Swami notes that "Backing the high traditions of Islam as articulated by Jamaat-e-Islami and Ahle-Hadith, was a means of both gaining respectability and possessing a cultural ethos distinct and superior from the syncretic, freewheeling practices of the peasantry" (2007: 160).
- 20 Sikand, Yoginder. 2010. Competing Nationalisms and Religions and the Kashmir Conflict. *Countercurrents.org*, 9 Aug., <http://www.countercurrents.org/sikand090810.htm>



[retrieved 19.08.2013].

- 21 Even today, localities are known for particular occupations, e.g. Zainakadal for goldsmiths, whose caste title often is Zargar, and Wazapora for wedding chefs. Cf. Irwin, John. 1955. *Shawls: A Study in Indo-European Influences*. London.
- 22 Walter Lawrence ([1895] 2000) uses the term 'tribe' and the Kashmiri word 'kram' in his chapter on "Races and Tribes."
- 23 Lawrence (ibid.: 215) notes that Gujjars lived in the mountains around the Valley.
- 24 I use the term 'community' here in the sense of a network of association and support, rather than as an exclusive grouping based on religious, sect, ethnicity, caste or other identity.
- 25 Relatives, neighbours and associates of the deceased gather for prayers at the grave on the fourth day after a death. Traditionally, the family of the deceased often prepared a feast, put up tents and made arrangements to serve tea in samovars (large, ornate jugs with chimneys at the centre, these are often of carved copper) along with bakery products.
- 26 Traditionally, relatives of a Kashmiri groom bring henna to the bride's home on the evening before the wedding. This is applied upon her hands, arms and feet in artistic patterns during the night, while the gathered relatives and neighbours are entertained with music. In many homes, women from among the relatives sing traditional wedding songs, accompanied by the tumbaknari rhythm instrument. Many families, more often in suburbs than elsewhere, hire a professional singer, who is generally accompanied by several musicians and a transvestite dancer.
- 27 Notes from author's field research.
- 28 Notes from author's field research.
- 29 Halal meat is from animals slaughtered in accordance with ritual Islamic prescription. The Sikh religion prescribes slaughter according to the jhatka method.
- 30 Notes from author's field research.
- 31 Some Kashmiris of different religions limit co-dining only to raw or uncooked food. However, there are others who eat together, even off the same plate. I have attended Kashmiri Muslim weddings where vegetarian food was prepared and served separately for Sikh guests and others who wished to eat separately.



- 32 The platter on which the Kashmiri feast is traditionally served. Some Kashmiris use it for meals at home too.
- 33 A dairy product, often described as clarified butter.
- 34 Traditional women's suits, often embroidered.
- 35 An earthen Kashmiri folk instrument which is used during weddings.
- 36 Literally meaning a veil, the word refers to the segregation of women from men.
- 37 Preacher and religious scholar who often officiates at such rituals as marriage.

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