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HOW TO SUSTAIN A STRIKE: Rules, Routines, and the Essential in Kashmir

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Too long a sacrifice
Can make a stone of the heart.
O when may it suffice?
That is Heaven's part, our part.

—William Butler Yeats ("Easter," 1916)

> Given when you live under suppression, you have no control of that which belongs to you but has now been snatched from you . . . they took over your private spaces, they search your pockets, nothing is left to you . . . the only thing you can do is restrict your own movement in protest . . . you will not cooperate . . . [you] won't do anything that is normal.
>
> —Kashmiri journalist, 2017

In July 2016, following the assassination of a popular militant commander, Burhan Wani, residents of the Kashmir Valley launched a general strike against the Indian state that seemed to have no end.[1] Yet amid the strike's indefiniteness

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a new kind of routine emerged that dramatically reshaped daily life. Every Wednesday evening by 6 PM, the Joint Resistance Leadership (JRL), an amalgamation of Kashmir's pro-freedom organizations, would release a strike "calendar" for the following week (see Fig. 2).[2] The calendar—disseminated through newspapers, social media, and word of mouth—outlined the strike's weekly schedule.[3] For example, on any given Tuesday, the men of each neighborhood might have been asked to raise pro-freedom slogans or to collectively offer prayers (*namaz*) on the streets; on a Friday, there could be a call to march toward the headquarters of the United Nations Military Observer Group in India and Pakistan (UNMOGIP) in Srinagar, the regional capital.[4] In addition to this schedule of protest activities, the calendar specified the time at which the strike was to begin and end each day, as well as its duration and intensity throughout any given week. A strict week of the strike, for example, called for no evening "relaxation" (*dheel*, literally, to loosen). During such weeks, the strike was to be upheld all day and all night, with the streets betraying an empty, ghostly quality. During a milder week, in contrast, the strike would be relaxed after 6 PM for shops to open and for people to safely come out of their homes. Amid this radical restructuring of daily life, the strike calendar aimed to provide order and routine. The revolution, it turns out, would be scheduled.

As weeks and months of the 2016 strike went by, and this schedule gained an anticipated yet anxious regularity, Kashmiris deliberated the costs: How long would the strike last? What, if anything, would come of it? And would the sacrifices be worth it? The strike calendar, as well as statements issued by the JRL, reflected these concerns. The calendar was gradually adjusted so that the evening "relaxation," which at the beginning of the strike started at 6 PM, was eased to 5 PM, and eventually, to 4 PM. By the third month, weekend days were designated as "full-day relaxation" to provide respite amid growing financial losses and concerns that the strike constituted a form of "economic suicide." Despite waning in strength and participation, however, the strike continued. In the subsequent months, from about July 2016 to February 2017, Kashmir's resistance leadership released more than two dozen strike calendars, marking one of the longest-running general strikes in the region's history.

This article examines how Kashmiris labored to sustain the 2016 indefinite general strike. Drawing on twenty-two months of ethnographic fieldwork (2016–2018) conducted at a prominent bank in Srinagar, as well as with shopkeepers, journalists, and other city residents, it argues that sustaining the indefinite strike required not only self-discipline and solidarity but also, paradoxically, breaking the strike. On the one hand, a successful general strike was a total one: shops shuttered, everyone in their homes following the strike calendar, a display of unity and resistance against the Indian state.[5] On the other hand, many workers, from bank employees and government servants to shopkeepers, returned to work or kept their storefronts half-shuttered. They described doing so to provide for public needs and essential services, but also, especially over time, for their own livelihoods.

In the following pages, I demonstrate how deliberations about properly observing the 2016 general strike hinged on what was considered "essential" work and activity—essential enough to warrant breaking the strike. Here I refer to two kinds of strike breaking: the first constitutes a rest from the strike, a literal break. These breaks (relaxations or *dheel* in local parlance) were built into the strike calendars, providing respite and renewal and hence the capacity to continue striking. They proved to be indisputably essential. The second kind of strike breaking, a matter of great contention, involved going to work *during* designated strike hours, in contravention of the calendar. While many Kashmiris understood that employees in the formal sector (such as the state government and banks) faced potential termination if they did not return to work, the very act of resuming work was nonetheless seen as a betrayal. It also provoked resentment about the uneven costs of the strike across Kashmiri society.

I witnessed these contestations unfold from the unusual vantage point of a large urban branch of the Jammu and Kashmir Bank (J&K Bank). Formed in 1938, the J&K Bank is a semi-state institution that has been a dominant financial player in Kashmir during the past three decades.[6] It is associated with the (Indian) state but also imagined as a symbol of Kashmiri national sovereignty, particularly following the outbreak of a pro-freedom movement and armed struggle in 1989. During the 2016 uprising, I saw the bank's employees embody the institution's liminal status as they navigated the complex terrain of work and mourning, of breaking the strike while sympathizing with the cause of their fellow Kashmiris. My interlocutors did not describe this as a contradiction, but rather as a complex, pragmatic choice. They suggested that their labor provided the much-needed infrastructure that kept the economy running: in keeping the economy afloat, they allowed the strike to continue for longer. In other words, even though their return to work diluted the absolute nature of the strike, the bankers' actual labor provided a degree of stability, indirectly sustaining the strike and the greater cause of self-determination. It was in these complex and ambiguous ways their labor could be considered essential.

Anthropologists and other scholars studying political mobilizations have highlighted the importance of the labor they involve, not only via acts of protesting (Feldman 1991; Bonilla 2010; Thorkelson 2016; Sharma 2020) but also in the form of the care work required for maintaining households and communal life amid upheaval (Winegar 2012; Weinbaum 2013; Mittermaier 2014). Notably absent within much of this scholarship is attention to the *financial* infrastructures and labor that support and make possible political movements. This elision is perhaps because financial considerations and principled political activism are often assumed to be incompatible, the former eroding the sanctity of the latter (Bloch and Parry 1989; Maurer 2006; Keane 2008). I was struck, for example, by the visible discomfort of some board members of the Kashmir Chamber of Commerce when I inquired about the economic losses produced by strikes during an informal discussion in late September 2016. One of the board members replied, "Rs. 130 crore/day ($2 million)," but quickly added, when another member admonished him for openly citing the figure, "We have made it clear in our press releases that it is the human loss we are concerned about—we can't recover that loss." He reiterated the point, "Economic loss can be recovered in five, ten years." It made sense to me why these chamber members would underemphasize economic loss, given that the strike was as much an act of mourning as it was a sign of refusal. And yet this tense exchange suggested that economic considerations were never far below the surface. In attending to financial labor and provisioning, this article aims to illuminate the pragmatic and ambivalent aspects of political action—the negotiations and compromises, as well as the everyday routines, involved in sustaining political struggles.

Since the late 1980s, when an armed freedom struggle erupted in the Kashmir Valley, the Indian state has retaliated against the region's residents, the majority of whom are Muslim, with extreme forms of disciplinary restriction and corporeal violence. The various counterinsurgency strategies deployed over the past thirty-five years include extrajudicial killings, enforced disappearances, prolonged sieges and curfews, and psychological operations (Bhan, Duschinski, and Zia 2018; Bhan, Duschinski, and Misri 2022). During the 1990s, at the peak of the insurgency and counterinsurgency, more than 70,000 civilians were killed, nearly 10,000 individuals disappeared, and many more injured and tortured, largely by the state armed forces (HRW 2006). While a denouement in both the armed struggle and the broader movement for self-determination (*tehreek*) occurred in the early aughts, a resurgent activism arose in Kashmir starting in the summer of 2008. This renewed movement brought large-scale street protests along with stone-throwing and general strikes, as a new generation of Kashmiri youth rebelled against India's ever-expanding military occupation of the region (Kak 2011; Kanjwal 2019). But these largely nonviolent street protests, too, met with violent state reprisals, including the use of "nonlethal" weapons that maimed and disabled hundreds of civilians in the summers of 2010 and 2016 (Amnesty International 2017; Misri 2020).

Given, then, that mass street protests would be met by state repression and that joining what remained of the armed struggle meant imminent death, the general strike was, according to some, the only path available.[7] Although there had been significant criticism since 2010 about utilizing the general strike (Bazaz 2014), in July 2016, as Kashmiris responded to the killing of civilian protestors, the strike was ready at hand, a humble but potent form of refusal. Above all else, the strike offered an opportunity to reclaim one's bodily and temporal autonomy. As the journalist friend quoted in the epigraph put it, "Given when you live under suppression, you have no control of that which belongs to you . . . the only thing you can do is restrict your own movement in protest . . . you will not cooperate . . .[you] won't do anything that is normal." Mohamad Junaid (2020a) has referred to this self-imposed restriction on the Kashmiri body as a "civil curfew," the "mimic inversion" of the state-imposed curfew. He cites a shopkeeper from southern Kashmir who uncannily mirrored my friend's sentiments: "They can force me to stop going about my life, but they can't prevent me from doing so on my own" (Junaid 2020a, 10).

A dogged stubbornness permeated the strike—self-abnegation as a sign of the people's willingness to sacrifice short-term economic benefit for the greater good of Kashmiri sovereignty, akin to the notion of *sumud*, the steadfastness or "staying power" that Palestinians describe as necessary for sustaining the movement and themselves during the Intifada (Allen 2008; cf. Thorkelson 2016). In Kashmir, people described this staying power as a mark of distinction; it was common to hear people talk about how Indians in the mainland would not have lasted more than a few days on strike. In this way, the strike was as much a performance for the collective Kashmiri self as for its many other audiences (Jean-Klein 2001; Rutherford 2012; Chatterjee 2016; Bishara 2017). In a context of extreme repression, it allowed Kashmiris to demonstrate their distinguished capacity to self-sustain and to sacrifice and, in so doing, offer a counterpoint to the Indian state's wrongdoings. While there were slim hopes that the latter would be moved to accept the strike's demands of demilitarization and an end to human rights violations, the hope remained.[8]

Notwithstanding the tenacity and moral standing of the strikers, non-cooperation could not be absolute. There were checks to cash and school fees to submit. There were marriages to be celebrated, however modestly, and babies to be delivered. There were rickshaw drivers and street vendors who depended on daily wages and shopkeepers who needed to repay the bank or wholesalers (cf. Saraf 2020). Over many months in 2016, in addition to talking extensively with bank employees, I spent time with individuals across sectors, especially journalists and shopkeepers, discussing the day's news along with the efficacy of the indefinite strike. Throughout these spaces, I witnessed a fierce reckoning emerge involving questions of loyalty, commitment, and the thresholds of sacrifice. If, as Yarimar Bonilla (2010) suggests, the strike provides an opportunity to engage in a "prefigurative politics"—to create and imagine an alternate polity—this essay attends to the fissures of the prefigurative moment and what might be learned from them.

STRIKES AND SACRIFICE

We are living through a historic strike wave. Across the world, labor strikes have resurfaced as potent forms of protest. In the wake of the global COVID-19 pandemic, precisely through a stark awareness of their essential labor, workers across sectors have unionized and struck work in pursuit of livable wages and safer workplaces. In addition to important material gains, the success of strike actions has reignited a sense of worker power and a "revaluation of the strike" as "a positive good rather than a necessary evil" (Baker 2023). At the same time, as in all strikes historic and contemporary, the question of how to sustain such refusal and how to deal with attempts to break the strike—by the state or the employer or fellow workers—remains ever present.

Alongside this strike wave, there has been a resurgent interest in strikes across academic disciplines (Bonilla 2010; Weinbaum 2013; Spivak 2014; Bargu 2014, 2016; Gago 2020; Albernaz 2022; Mitchell 2023).[9] Among the most important of these recent interventions is the cultural historian Joseph Albernaz's (2022) alternative genealogy of the general strike. Albernaz argues that it was the refusal of work by enslaved populations that inaugurally "generated" the general strike. In so doing, he unsettles the oft-told origin story of the general strike as having been founded by the English radical William Benbow, and the latter's 1832 pamphlet advocating a month-long "national holiday" from work (1977). In place of this history, Albernaz offers the writings of Benbow's contemporary, the British-Jamaican abolitionist Robert Wedderburn, as well as the latter's "maternal source(s)" and "the enslaved themselves" (2022, 549). Wedderburn's 1817 periodical, *The Axe Laid to the Root*, called on Jamaica's enslaved plantation workers to refuse work by "appoint[ing] a day wherein you will all pretend to sleep one hour beyond the appointed time of your rising to labor" (qtd. in Albernaz 2022, 543). According to Albernaz (2022, 543), for Wedderburn this "one reclaimed hour" was "to become charged with collective force, and to pry open time itself, leading to a revolution that would build on the achievement of the Haitians." In connecting the general strike with abolition, Wedderburn via Albernaz asks us to consider other figures of resistance beyond the striker as white male industrial worker.

This provocation provides an opening for centering the question of labor within the anticolonial (and anti-occupation) strike, an often-overlooked element within resistance movements. Aimed at both refusing and appealing to an occupying or colonial force, the anticolonial strike has historically involved the cessation of work and business across industries (the general strike) or acts of self-mortification (the hunger strike). Such acts of non-cooperation, I suggest, constitute a kind of negative laboring—the labor of self-sacrifice and self-restraint.[10]

Mohandas K. Gandhi's anticolonial movement is perhaps the most foundationally associated with non-cooperation, particularly his experiments with boycotts, fasts, and general strikes (*hartals*). Gandhi understood the strike as a voluntary, nonviolent effort to "strike the imagination of the people as also to strike the imagination of the Government."[11] To maintain the strike, and non-cooperation more broadly, required self-discipline and self-sacrifice; non-cooperation was "not justice based on violence but justice based on sacrifice of self, justice based on *yajna* and *kurbani* [sacrifice]" (Gandhi 1996, 65).[12] As Karuna Mantena (2012, 463) has argued, for Gandhi, the non-cooperative act "would prove most efficacious, most demonstrative of conviction, when the *satyagrahi* [one who practices *satyagraha*, a philosophy of nonviolent resistance] visibly sacrificed tangible benefits (in terms of money and prestige) and bore adverse consequences (such as being jailed or fired) in a forthright and disciplined manner." It would be such self-discipline and willingness to sacrifice that would "convert" (rather than coerce) one's political opponent (Mantena 2012, 463).

A similar but intensified logic is present in the hunger strike, where the mortifying body signals both the strength of one's convictions and the illegitimacy of the state. In her examination of the use of hunger strikes and "fasts-unto-death" among leftist political prisoners in Turkey, Banu Bargu (2016, 6) suggests that we attend to a "logic of sacrifice that is opposed to our conventional notions of instrumental action." While acknowledging that hunger strikes were "calculated responses" to particular prison conditions, she argues that "they were not necessarily limited in their political purpose to those conditions. Rather, they were acts of corporeal, existential, and total resistance and refusals to participate in one's dehumanization" (Bargu 2016, 16). In this regard, Bargu (2016, 330) notes, the fasts-unto-death can be better understood via their "expressive aspects, irreducible to the specific demands they make." In another context, drawing on Bobby Sands's prison hunger strike depicted in the film *Hunger* (2008, dir. Steve McQueen), Bargu (2014, 19; emphasis added) calls the hunger strike an "insurgent sacrifice," one that "points, however briefly, to a dignified life beyond domination *but one it cannot sustain*." Extending Bargu's analysis to the indefinite Kashmiri strike allows for a contending with the criticisms it has faced regarding its efficacy and tendencies toward self-harm. Neither romanticizing self-abnegation nor presuming the self-evidentiary nature of its claims facilitates a more careful examination of the charisma, value, and sustainability of the strike's sacrificial labor.

In Kashmir, the strike—spontaneous or organized, day-long or indefinite—has long formed a part of the region's "repertoire of contention" (Tilly 2003), from the mid-nineteenth-century labor strikes of shawl weavers to the political strikes deployed in the 1920s and 1930s during anticolonial and anti-monarchical uprisings.[13] Strikes would continue well after Partition, including a major series of strikes and shutdowns in December 1963 through January 1964 following the theft of the Prophet's hair (*Moi-e-Muqaddas*) from Srinagar's Hazratbal Mosque (Kanth 2018).

Then, in the late 1980s, Kashmir entered a period of armed struggle. The strike, however, did not disappear. Instead, strikes and spontaneous shop closures occurred alongside armed militancy, each their own method of resistance. As a local pro-independence activist put it, "In the 1990s, there was a strike almost every day—nobody would call for it, but people would just automatically down their shutters and close shop when a militant commander died." In addition to these spontaneous commercial shutdowns, members of the local state apparatus—civil servants, police officers, and at least one senior manager of the J&K Bank—went on strike during this period (*Times of India* 1990; Kaul 2011). However, as militancy waned by the early aughts, undone both by the counterinsurgent state and by internal divisions, so too did mass protests and strikes.

After a lull of nearly a decade, in June 2008, large-scale street protests returned, accompanied now by the indefinite strike. Triggered by the Jammu and Kashmir state government's decision to transfer ninety-nine acres of forest land to the board of trustees that oversees a yearly Hindu pilgrimage—seen as a step toward demographic change—the protests called for an immediate reversal of that decision. There were also renewed calls for Kashmir's freedom (*azaadi*) and right to self-determination. Although the resolution to that summer of protest proved complex, a new era of mass, non-violent protest had arrived in Kashmir (Roy 2008). Intermittent protests continued throughout the following year, including in the summer of 2009, following the rape and murder of two young women (also sisters-in-law) in the southern Kashmir town of Shopian; the town would observe forty-seven consecutive days of general strike that summer (Hoffman and Duschinski 2013). The strike's efficacy and the scope of its demands became a topic of public debate during this period. Yet despite concerns that strikes were hurting the economy and its people, they remained a compelling form of refusal.

Large-scale protests once again returned to Kashmir in the spring and summer of 2010, and with greater force and intensity. Responding to the Indian army's extrajudicial killing of three civilians in April and the killing of a young Kashmiri student as he was returning home from after-school classes in June, the 2010 mobilization was marked by widespread street protests and stone pelting. More than 110 Kashmiri youth were killed and many more blinded and maimed during the protests. The indefinite strike was again deployed; the fervor with which the calendars were followed seemed to indicate a potential turning point (Kak 2011, xviii; Handoo 2015). However, by the end of the summer, disillusionment set in. The pro-freedom leaders guiding the strike, including the most senior, Syed Ali Shah Geelani, were seen to have ended it without tangible gains or concessions by the Indian government.

According to a veteran activist, after the disappointments of 2010, an informal consensus held that the indefinite strike should not be used again: it had become counterproductive and was only hurting Kashmiris. Day-long strikes would still be carried out, marking important days in the Kashmiri nationalist calendar or in protest against civilian killings, but indefiniteness would be avoided. Then came 2016.

ROUTINIZING THE UPRISING: The Calendar and the Curfew

On July 8, 2016, a twenty-one-year-old militant commander of the Hizbul Mujahideen, Burhan Wani, was killed, ambushed alongside two associates in a jointly coordinated mission conducted by the Jammu and Kashmir Police and the 19 Rashtriya Rifles, a counterinsurgency wing of the Indian army. Often referred to as the "poster boy" of the resurgence of armed politics in Kashmir in the early 2010s, Burhan was a beloved figure among supporters of the Kashmiri self-determination movement, and his assassination a watershed event. As pictures of Burhan's lifeless body flashed across WhatsApp messages and Facebook posts—accompanied by angry and mournful inscriptions—it became clear that something truly momentous was about to happen. A friend summarized the mood as "electric."

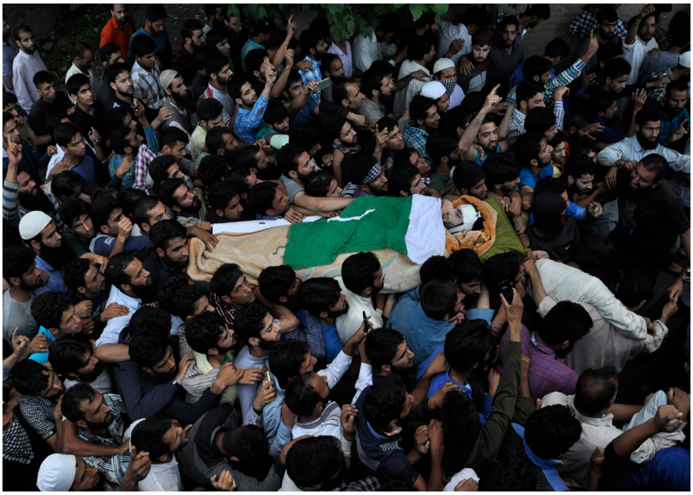


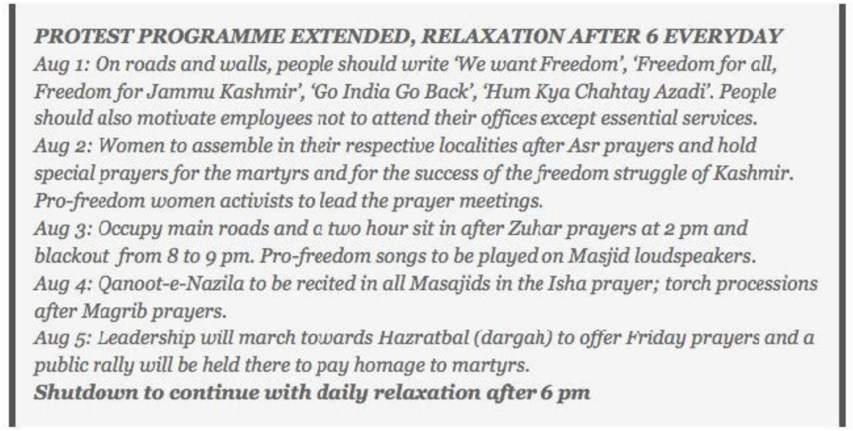
Figure 1. Burhan Wani's funeral, Tral, Kashmir, July 9, 2016. Photo by Syed Shahriyar.

The next day, tens of thousands of mourners attended Burhan's funerary rites in his southern Kashmir hometown of Tral. They did so in defiance of the state's curfew orders, preemptively put in place in anticipation of large crowds. Mourners walked up to fifty miles to reach the site of the funeral, which lasted all day and included twenty-two rounds of funeral prayers (Inzamam and Qadri 2016). Images from the prayers showed densely packed bodies in a four-acre open field, their mouths forming the shapes of slogans and their hands pointing at the sky, occasionally gripping a phone camera to capture the event. In addition to the funeral prayers in Burhan's hometown, crowds gathered in various parts of Kashmir to hold prayers and participate in street protests. In response, the armed forces fired bullets and pellets, killing twelve civilians and injuring more than two hundred on that single day.

The JRL called for a complete shutdown (*bandh*) and strike (*hartal*) for the next two days in response to the civilian killings. Over the following week, the strike was extended several days at a time, with each extension a reaction to the growing number of deaths. By July 16, a week after Burhan's assassination, forty civilians had been killed and hundreds badly injured. It was clear that another rebellion was underway in the Kashmir Valley—and with it, growing momentum for extending the strike, perhaps indefinitely. The JRL released this uprising's first extended calendar, for the week of July 19 to 24.

Unique to the "extended" strike calendar was a detailed schedule for people to follow. For example, on July 19 and 20, people were encouraged to observe a "complete shutdown," and on July 21, the shutdown would last until 2 PM, after which it would be "relaxed" for the public to replenish "essential supplies." As mentioned earlier, these relaxations (*dheels*) constituted important moments of respite that structured people's days. Akin to curfew relaxations, where the state allowed the public to move around freely, *dheels* were eagerly anticipated. They formed necessary parts of sustaining people's lives during an extended strike. This was also precisely what made them objects of the state's ire.

On July 21, just as the strike's relaxation was to begin, the Jammu and Kashmir Police "strengthened" the curfew and prevented shops from opening and people from leaving their homes. This was seen as a deliberate attempt by the state government to counter the JRL's alternate schedule (Bazaz 2016). A news story confirmed this theory, citing a Jammu and Kashmir police officer saying that "people have to resume work when the government allows them and not when Geelani [the senior pro-freedom leader] says so" (Bazaz 2016).



PROTEST PROGRAMME EXTENDED, RELAXATION AFTER 6 EVERYDAY

Aug 1: On roads and walls, people should write 'We want Freedom', 'Freedom for all, Freedom for Jammu Kashmir', 'Go India Go Back', 'Hum Kya Chahtay Azadi'. People should also motivate employees not to attend their offices except essential services.

Aug 2: Women to assemble in their respective localities after Asr prayers and hold special prayers for the martyrs and for the success of the freedom struggle of Kashmir. Pro-freedom women activists to lead the prayer meetings.

Aug 3: Occupy main roads and a two hour sit in after Zuhar prayers at 2 pm and blackout from 8 to 9 pm. Pro-freedom songs to be played on Masjid loudspeakers.

Aug 4: Qanoot-e-Nazila to be recited in all Masajids in the Isha prayer; torch processions after Magrib prayers.

Aug 5: Leadership will march towards Hazratbal (dargah) to offer Friday prayers and a public rally will be held there to pay homage to martyrs.

Shutdown to continue with daily relaxation after 6 pm

Figure 2. Strike calendar, August 1-5, 2016.

The officer's formulation revealed not only the competing jurisdictions of the state and the resistance leadership but also the threat posed by the strike to the state's presumed authority over its citizens' time and mobility.

Let me return now to the artifact that reflected and produced this alternative regime, the calendar. Its weekly release provided rhythm and ritual, both directing strike activities and metonymically representing the strike. At times it felt as though the calendar was the strike, such that to anticipate its release was itself a strike action. This is not to say that the calendar's suggested activities were uniformly followed or its rules unbroken. Instead, the calendar became the concrete expression of the strike; the calendar's continual release, week after week, marked the strike's indefiniteness. Take, for example, the following calendar, issued three weeks into the 2016 uprising.

The calendar announces what is to be done each day and when (including sometimes for what duration of time). The language of the calendar beseeches as well as commands; it is normative but also flexible. Shops, businesses, and workplaces are expected to remain shut until 6 PM, after which they are free to open during the "daily relaxation." A host of activities are offered as suggestions for routinizing daytime energies: "occupy main roads" or "offer special prayers." Finally, the calendar notes that "people should motivate employees not to attend their offices except for essential services" (more on which below). In outlining these rules, the calendar enacts the "normative" strike, an aspirational practice of producing solidarity and a coherent collectivity.

What I found remarkable as I lived through the initial months of the strike was the way people grew accustomed to its rhythms and rules until it became part of their habitus, acquiring the status of expertise. It seemed as if everyone knew what to do, a tacit choreography learned through years of experience. A notable feature of this routinized expertise was the subtle reading of signs of the "situation" (*haalat*) and concomitant shifts in behavior. For example, on days marked by a particularly egregious spell of civilian killings and injuries, a solemn pall was cast over all public activity, including a dampening of noise and motion. People spoke in lower tones and moved at slower paces. The calendar for the following week would likely be stricter, with briefer periods of strike relaxations. As mentioned earlier, the state would respond to this tightening of the strike by intensifying curfew, citing anticipated violence and the threat of "unlawful assembly."[14] Locked in a schismogenetic cycle, the curfew and the strike complexly shaped daily life in Kashmir and did so in divergent ways depending on one's residential location, occupation, and class status (Bateson 1972; Sharma 2020; Mushtaq and Amin 2021; Wani and Farhad 2022).

For example, in downtown Srinagar—considered the city's political center—a strict curfew was usually imposed by 8 AM for much of the 2016 uprising. People would buy groceries early in the morning, as early as 4 or 5 AM, not long after morning Fajr prayers. Markets would pop up and close down just as quickly. This morning provisioning proved crucial, not only because of the stricter enforcement of curfew in this area but also because evenings in downtown proved much harder to predict; a stone-throwing incident at the end of the day, as the paramilitary forces retreated, could lead to an escalation and a further tightening of curfew. Indeed, downtown Srinagar was under strict curfew for nearly fifty-one days (Ashiq 2016). It was briefly lifted in late August 2016, only to be re-imposed days later.

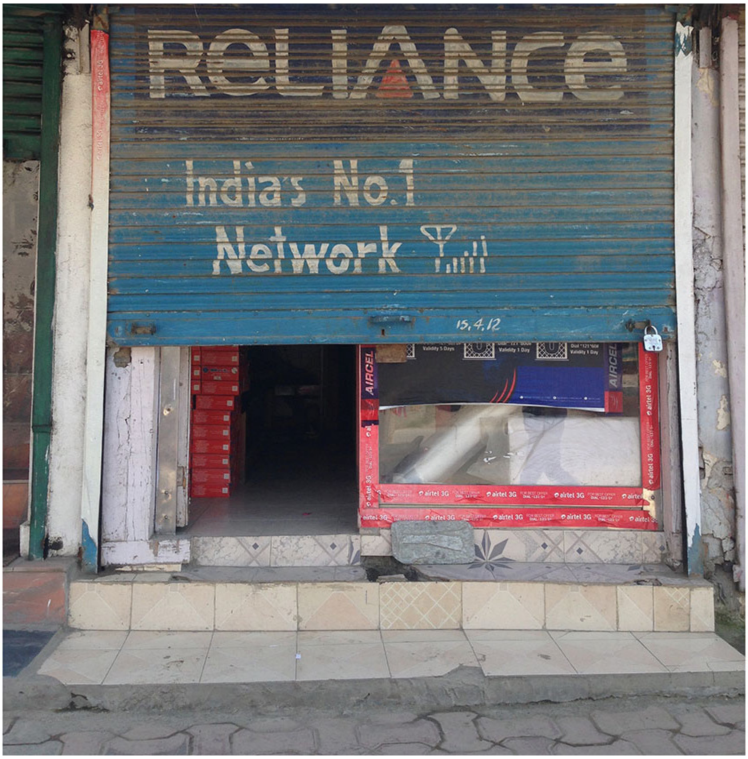


Figure 3. Half-shuttered shopfront in an upscale residential area of Srinagar. Photo by Nishita Trisal.

In stark contrast, Srinagar's uptown, wealthier neighborhoods experienced far fewer restrictions, especially after the initial weeks of the uprising. By August, markets in these areas opened during the morning and shut around noon. Most shops in these neighborhoods would keep their shutters half-down (Fig. 3) to indicate that someone was inside and able to provide services. I came to understand this half-shutter practice as the shopkeeper acknowledging that things were "not normal": the shop was open, but only temporarily and tentatively. The half-shutter practice was abandoned whenever the situation in other parts of the city escalated and the risk to stay open—even if partially—was too high. The half-shuttered shopfront came to exemplify the liminality of certain kinds of commercial spaces and actors, a point I highlight in greater detail in the next section.

People in the commercial heart of the city—Residency Road and Lal Chowk—where the paramilitary and police forces maintained a watchful presence, adhered closely to the strike calendar. One rarely found shops open on strike days, but they would open as soon as the relaxation came into place. This area was symbolically crucial, with most images broadcast in Indian media highlighting the empty streets and shuttered shops of Lal Chowk (literally, Red Square). When I asked shopkeepers in the area how they were dealing with the strike, one described getting used to the new timings, a reversal in schedules. He explained that instead of waking up early and getting ready to go to their shops, they now stayed at home during the day and left by 3 or 4 PM. Shops were kept open until later in the evening to make up for the daytime losses. They were also now open on Sundays, which the strike calendar almost always declared a time of "full" relaxation.

Along with adjusting and reversing their daily schedules, people across neighborhoods participated in care and solidarity work within homes, at local mosques, and in hospitals, where hundreds of injured boys were being treated. Soup kitchens (*langars*) and makeshift aid camps were set up outside hospitals; additionally, neighborhood mosque committees created treasuries (*baitul maal*) from which money was distributed to those in need. As an interlocutor from the bank put it, "in such times of crisis, people come to an understanding [*logon mein samaj aati hain*] that they need to help others to survive." Similar to the "ethics of immediacy" that Amira Mittermaier (2014, 55) suggests arose during the 2011 Tahrir Square protests, in Kashmir the 2016 unrest and indefinite strike produced new forms of communal self-reliance.

The state, in response to the strike's continuation week after week, deployed a number of tactics to break it. In addition to preventing markets from opening during relaxation, another tactic involved operating alternate markets to replace the striking shopkeepers. In early September 2016, vendors suddenly started setting up shop in the location of the city's so-called Sunday Market, not far from the commercial area observing the strike. A number of people reported that the Sunday vendors had been forced by the Jammu and Kashmir police to keep their stalls open every day. One journalist mentioned that these "scabbing" vendors were being given Rs. 500 ($7.50 USD at the time) per stall per day; another interlocutor, a bank employee, reported that the vendors had been told that if they didn't open their makeshift stalls when ordered to do so, they would never be allowed to operate them again. In addition to this forced strike breaking, the government unleashed the police, paramilitary forces, and the state surveillance apparatus on anyone protesting or caught near a protest site. More than 10,000 arrests occurred from July to December 2016.

As the government clamped down on the strike, attempting to break it by all means, the public showed signs of breaking too. Within a month of the start of the uprising, salaried employees of the Jammu and Kashmir state government and the Jammu & Kashmir Bank—two of the region's largest employers—faced pressure to resume work or risk suspension. These were the employees to whom the calendar had alluded, the ones who needed to be "motivated" to not go to work except to perform essential services. Left unspoken was what constituted the essential and who had the authority to determine it.

NEGOTIATING THE ESSENTIAL: Between Strike Breaking and Strike Enforcement

Kashmiris were debating the essential long before COVID-19 thrust that term into global prominence. In a way, what counted as essential appeared self-evident: the reproduction of the (biological) self and society through the continuation of critical infrastructure and services.[15] In actuality, these discernments were ambiguous, relational, and transformed over time. With the state's administrative apparatus at a standstill, it became unclear who was responsible for governing and what was considered critical activity. At the level of the household, these activities could include buying groceries, visiting the doctor, or seeing an ailing family member in a nearby neighborhood. At the municipal level, the essentials were infrastructural provisions such as trash collection, electricity, and, especially, medical services.

Doctors and hospital staff were the most obviously essential of workers, since so many people—young boys, particularly—were being admitted with gunshot and pellet gun wounds from protest sites. Overnight, cars displayed improvised Essential Services signs for ease of movement through barricaded roads (Fig. 4).

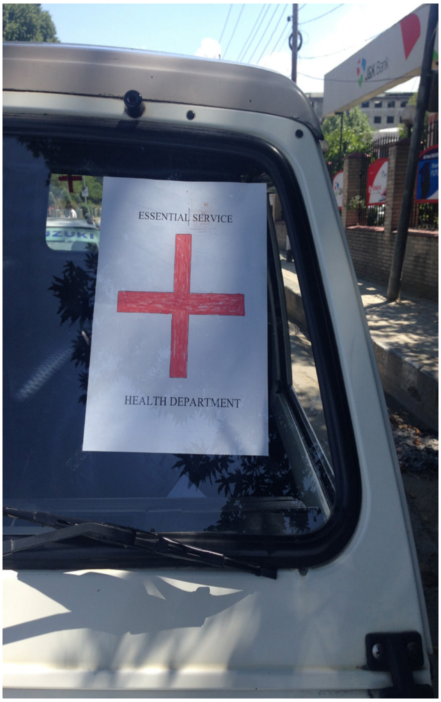


Figure 4. DIY Essential Services sign on what appears as a civilian vehicle in Srinagar. Photo by Nishita Trisal.

The signs meant to resemble a curfew pass, allowing protection both from the state's armed forces, who policed the curfew (and were known to attack even hospital vehicles), and neighborhood boys looking to enforce the strike.

As the threat of strike breaking increased, these "boys" (*ladke*)—not officially affiliated with the JRL, but rather self-appointed volunteers or enforcers—stood guard in their neighborhoods, asking questions of adults as they left, especially those who did so in cars. Broken windshields on vehicles and auto-rickshaws became commonplace, the work of the "boys" as well as the armed forces. In response, people stopped taking their cars out or driving through neighborhoods known for being pro-freedom strongholds. Rickshaws refused to travel to these areas altogether or charged slightly higher rates because of the risk.

Within this milieu, workers who did not neatly fall within the remit of essential services faced ostracism. These included employees of the J&K Bank. Like the shopkeepers with their half-shuttered storefronts, they were caught in between. Their services and labor were needed, even essential, but were they essential *enough*? I had been told at the beginning of the 2016 uprising that the bank was often the reason the strike would fizzle out, because it would find a way to keep working and thus contribute to the strike's dwindling. In reality, people needed banking services—to deposit checks, transfer money, consult a loan officer about repayment. Still, the bank remaining open, defying the strike, also caused suspicion.

Take, for instance, a telling disruption on August 3 at the bank branch where I had been conducting fieldwork. Early that day, news began circulating that an ATM guard employed by the Jammu & Kashmir Bank had been shot dead the previous night, his body found on the side of a road (some say near the ATM, next to his scooter; others said his body was "dumped" near a local hospital). When I reached the branch around 1 PM, the gate was closed, and those lingering outside were told to go to the alternate, back entrance. A large crowd was gathered outside that entrance, anxious to enter the bank's premises. I overheard the man pictured in the checkered shirt (Fig. 5) say in frustration that he absolutely had to submit his university fees that day, otherwise he would lose his seat.

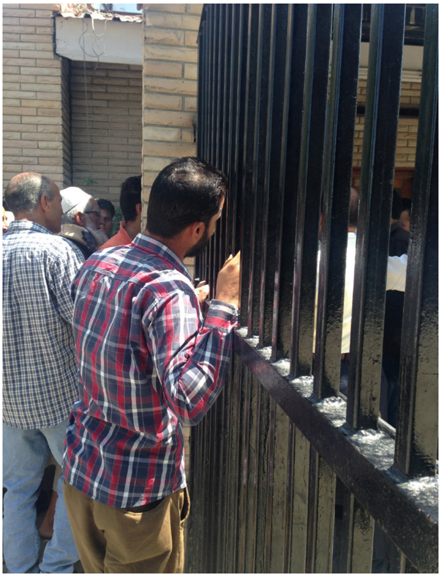


Figure 5. Waiting outside a closed bank branch. Photo by Nishita Trisal.

I later came to learn that the branch had been shuttered from the front because some boys had barged in at around 11 AM and taken photos and videos of the employees. According to one of them, the boys had made veiled threats: "Don't you have to go home at night?" In response, the branch manager had sent home most employees. A few remained and were handling a rush of customers, mainly pensioners whose monthly payments had recently been deposited. "The situation isn't good [*haalat theek nahin hain*]; we're winding down," one of the employees said as he entered transactions into his computer. I was struck by the ambiguous position in which these bank employees found themselves: essential to the work of customers and at the same time the target of strike enforcers.

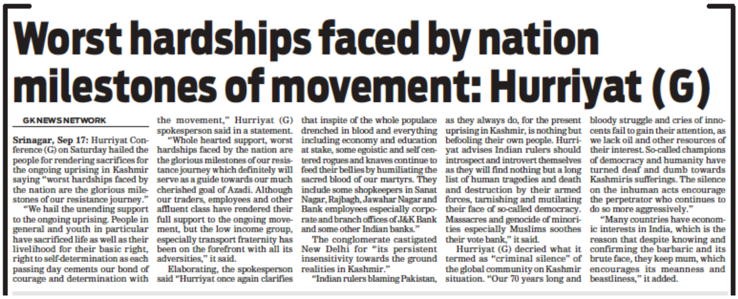
Aware of the delicate balance they were striking by going to work, many bank employees reported traveling via back roads and side streets on scooters and by foot. Throughout the first months of the uprising, some wore their house clothes (*ghar ke kapde*) to not draw attention to themselves as going to the office. Others described carrying their lunch in old, dirty bags that would be easily overlooked. I heard of another case, of a bank employee at the corporate headquarters who brought the same bag of vegetables to and from work, so that if anybody stopped him, he could just say that he had gone out to get provisions. I was told that such social pressure was to be expected and even sympathized with. As an interlocutor at the bank who lived in the heart of downtown Srinagar put it: "When there is a strike [*hartal*] and we attempt to come to work and are sent back [home] by the boys, we go back happily [*ham khushi se waapas jaate hain*]. Somewhere, we feel like we are supporting the cause."

For many like my bank interlocutor, the boys' violence did not resemble state violence. But this did not mean that it was any less difficult to negotiate. In late August 2016, nearly two months into the uprising, I was having lunch with some newly made friends at the bank's corporate headquarters. As we ate, one of them, Armaan, looked up from his cell phone: the General Medical College (GMC) branch of the bank had just been attacked. Its windows had been broken, but employees had managed to escape from a side door. The mood at the table, already grave, darkened.

Armaan continued: people were at that very moment holding funeral prayers (*janaza*) at the hospital for a boy from downtown Srinagar who had succumbed to his injuries. Another person who had joined the table interrupted Armaan's reporting: "But Geelani sahib [the senior resistance leader] had said that hospital [bank] branches should be left open." Armaan replied, "The mourners were angry, though. They said [to the bank staff], ‘People are dying, and you are working’ [*log mar rahe hain aur aap kaam kar rahe hain*].”

Within these tense conditions, to work rather than mourn, or make money rather than suspend activity, suggested going along with things as they were rather than as they should be. As noted above, many bank employees I knew felt this dilemma viscerally. At the same time, they asserted that showing up to work was their job, their way of helping. In the words of one bank officer, “We’re responsible for the economy, to make sure it keeps running. Who else will do it otherwise [*Aur kaun karega*]?” But not everyone shared the view that showing up to work—at the bank or at a government office—meant supporting the movement. I asked a friend sympathetic to the “boys” why the bank and its employees were being targeted. He said, “If people don’t have money, what will they do . . . won’t they come on the roads? We want that people will have nothing, so that they will come on the roads. We want a fight—to end all of this, once and for all.” For this friend, the bank staying open enabled the liminal situation to continue; it was only the total strike that would pave the way to a resolution (cf. Feldman 1991).

In mid-September 2016, the senior resistance leader, Syed Ali Shah Geelani, released a statement that appeared in several newspapers, accosting banks as well as shopkeepers in certain neighborhoods for consistently breaking the strike (Fig. 6). The statement began by noting the sacrifices made across class and generation: “People in general, and youth in particular, have sacrificed life as well as their livelihood for their basic right, right to self-determination.” He continued, “Traders, employees, and other affluent classes have rendered their full support to the ongoing movement”; and, “the low-income group, especially the transportation fraternity, has been on the forefront with all its adversities.”



Worst hardships faced by nation milestones of movement: Hurriyat (G)

GK NEWS NETWORK

Srinagar, Sep 17: Hurriyat Conference (G) on Saturday hailed the people for rendering sacrifices for the ongoing uprising in Kashmir saying “worst hardships faced by the nation are the glorious milestones of our resistance journey.”

“We hail the unending support to the ongoing uprising. People in general and youth in particular have sacrificed life as well as their livelihood for their basic right, right to self-determination as each passing day cements our bond of courage and determination with the movement,” Hurriyat (G) spokesperson said in a statement.

“Whole hearted support, worst hardships faced by the nation are the glorious milestones of our resistance journey which definitely will serve as a guide towards our much cherished goal of Azadi. Although our traders, employees and other affluent class have rendered their full support to the ongoing movement, but the low income group, especially transport fraternity has been on the forefront with all its adversities,” it said.

Elaborating, the spokesperson said “Hurriyat once again clarifies that inspite of the whole populace drenched in blood and everything including economy and education at stake, some egoistic and self centered rogues and knaves continue to feed their bellies by humiliating the sacred blood of our martyrs. They include some shopkeepers in Sanat Nagar, Rajbagh, Jawahar Nagar and Bank employees especially corporate and branch offices of J&K Bank and some other Indian banks.”

The conglomerate castigated New Delhi for “its persistent insensitivity towards the ground realities in Kashmir.”

“Indian rulers blaming Pakistan, as they always do, for the present uprising in Kashmir, is nothing but befooling their own people. Hurriyat advises Indian rulers should introspect and introvert themselves as they will find nothing but a long list of human tragedies and death and destruction by their armed forces, tarnishing and mutilating their face of so-called democracy. Massacres and genocide of minorities especially Muslims soothes their vote bank,” it said.

Hurriyat (G) decried what it termed as “criminal silence” of the global community on Kashmir situation. “Our 70 years long and bloody struggle and cries of innocents fail to gain their attention, as we lack oil and other resources of their interest. So-called champions of democracy and humanity have turned deaf and dumb towards Kashmiris sufferings. The silence on the inhuman acts encourage the perpetrator who continues to do so more aggressively.”

“Many countries have economic interests in India, which is the reason that despite knowing and confirming the barbaric and its brute face, they keep mum, which encourages its meanness and beastliness,” it added.

Figure 6. *Greater Kashmir* **news article, September 17, 2016.**

But others, the statement suggested, had proved less than ideal supporters, especially shopkeepers and office workers: "Some egoistic and self-centered rogues and knaves continue to feed their bellies by humiliating the sacred blood of our martyrs. They include some shopkeepers in Sanat Nagar, Rajbagh, Jawahar Nagar, and bank employees, especially corporate and bank offices of J&K Bank, and some other Indian banks." In connecting strike breaking with acute economic self-interest—the feeding of one's belly—the resistance leadership strengthened the discourse around commitment to the cause and the attendant sacrifices required. Later, however, I learned that the leadership had privately communicated their support to the bank employees' union, suggesting that they, too, understood that the work of sustaining the strike constituted a wholly ambivalent matter.

Junaid (2020b, 169; emphasis original) has recently argued that loyalty in Kashmir operates as a "moral discourse, or a set of 'ought' statements and judgmental claims seen as a priori true." He suggests that it is amid conditions of colonial occupation that such a moral discourse "acquires its social-pathological content." Here, loyalty

> demands an undivided and unconditional positioning of the self on one side of a political divide. Those perceived to be straddling the divide, exhibiting aspects of or affiliations with both sides, and generally those who remain unclassifiable, produce what anthropologist Mary Douglas calls "a universal feeling of disquiet (even of disgust)." (Junaid 2020b, 169)

Commercial actors such as bank employees clearly emerged as a source of disquiet. As liminal figures—breaking the strike by providing financial services considered essential, but ambiguously so—they complicated the ideal subject of loyal resistance (cf. Fazili 2018). They also exemplified the paradox of needing, at times, to break the strike to sustain it.

THE STRIKE'S THRESHOLD

As months of strikes and curfews wore on, it proved difficult to keep spirits high: people described feelings of a life curtailed or suffocated, similar to the women Jessica Winegar (2012) reports as anxious and "fed up" (*zahqana*) at home during the January 2011 Egyptian uprising as their male counterparts took to the streets. Friends in Kashmir would joke that they had gained weight and become unhealthy while sitting idly at home during curfews and strikes (cf.

Misri 2020). When the internet and telecommunications were not shut down, they would turn to social media, news portals, and mobile phones to consume hourly updates of where in Kashmir the situation had escalated and how many had been injured or dead. These media provided a space of togetherness but also of a remarkable loneliness, leading to a mix of emotions—anger turned to sadness turned to exhaustion turned to boredom turned to restlessness turned to disillusionment and then often to togetherness again.

In addition to exhaustion, people felt the economic losses piling up. The most severely affected were those who depended on daily wages: public transport workers, street vendors, informal workers (Naqash 2016). Many critics with otherwise pro-freedom leanings argued, as they had during previous summers of protest, that the extended closure of shops, businesses, and schools constituted a form of "economic self-harm" that only served to weaken the Kashmiri people and strengthen the Indian occupation. "In the process of hurting the enemy, you end up hurting yourself," one person put it.

* * *

The conclusion of the 2016 strike proved a non-event. In December and January, strike calendars were continually released, but they were followed less and less, until finally around February 2017, one week there simply was no calendar. Although both the government and media discourse suggested that it was the November 2016 demonetization of 86 percent of Indian currency that led to the denouement of strikes—connecting the specter of counterfeit currency with the funding of protests—in reality it was the mix of reasons highlighted in this piece that led to the strike eventually running out of steam. The hard lessons of the strike suggested that its normative vision was complicated by the pragmatics of daily life—the servicing of essential activities, the need to sustain one's household. In short, commerce, money, and banking could not be wished away, and neither could those who provided such services.

As we neared July 8, 2017, the one-year anniversary of Burhan Wani's assassination and the beginning of the 2016 uprising, there was fear that another cycle of unrest and indefinite strike was around the corner. On the day of the anniversary itself, curfew was imposed across the Kashmir Valley, and a strike was observed to mark the anniversary of bloodshed and rebellion. There were stories told that people had seen Burhan's face in the full moon the night before. But the large-scale unrest did not materialize. Many of my interlocutors explained that Kashmiris were too tired now and that it would be a few more years until another indefinite strike would be attempted.

Slowly, things returned "to normal"—or to the new abnormal, as it were—with shops open, friends celebrating weddings, attending classes, and going about their lives. But there was a nagging feeling about the 2016 uprising and strike, one that I was only able to name after coming across Sherine Hamdy's (2012) reflections on the pessimism that arose in the wake of the 2011 Egyptian uprising: "Did it actually happen?"

CODA

Much has changed in Kashmir since the 2016–2017 indefinite strike. The most prominent of these changes occurred on August 5, 2019, when the Indian government, through a "circuitous, three-step route," dismantled the constitutional arrangements that had previously governed the relationship between the central government in New Delhi and the state of Jammu and Kashmir (Ghosh 2019). These arrangements included Articles 370 and 35A, provisions within the Indian Constitution that provided limited legislative autonomy to Jammu and Kashmir and guaranteed employment and property rights for its residents. In addition to unilaterally nullifying these provisions, the Indian parliament also voted in August 2019 to bifurcate the state of Jammu and Kashmir into two union territories, the first time in the republic's existence that a state was "downgraded" to a union territory.

Following August 2019, Kashmir was placed under a months-long communication blockade, one of the most draconian in modern history. Local political and civil society leaders were jailed or detained. Human rights organizations and media houses were raided and their staff called in for questioning. Harassment, intimidation, and repression continues unabated. In the face of this relentless onslaught, the strike has seemed to disappear, or at least is no longer at hand as a last resort (though see Chakravarty and Zargar 2019). This absence begs the question of how to think about the momentous 2016–2017 strike today. What might that set of events have to teach us about the dramatically altered circumstances that Kashmiris inhabit today?

As this article has described, during the 2016 uprising, Kashmiris drew on the general strike (*hartal*) and the suspension of economic activity to refuse the Indian government's militarized status quo. Much work was required to sustain this refusal—from providing mutual aid in hospitals and neighborhoods to self-disciplining and restraint, what I have called the labor of self-sacrifice. But a more mundane form of work was also needed—that of facilitating economic activity. My interlocutors narrated their continued work at bank branches amid the strike as essential to keeping the economy (and, by extension, society) running. Although often in contravention of the official strike calendar, this constituted their contribution to the Kashmiri cause of self-determination.

Many critics did not view the employees' labor as a legitimate contribution, or indeed as a sacrifice (cf. Weiss 2014). A sacrifice entailed giving up something; in the case of the strike, it meant bearing financial losses, whether in the form of lost wages or a day's business. That the bank employees (and government servants) did not have to face this kind of financial loss because of their uninterrupted monthly salaries was a source of resentment and ideological divergence. Moreover, the fact their labor was put toward financial matters seemed doubly crass or morally dubious.

As I have suggested, bank employees, too, felt ambivalence toward their work, even as they also understood it to be providing an essential service. Attending to their own negotiations of their complex and disquieting positioning sheds light on the gray zones that constitute much of political life, in sites of militarized occupation and beyond. Such liminal figures suggest that we look beyond the ideal subject of resistance alone—not because there are no principled stances to inhabit but because sustaining movements also requires pragmatic considerations by actors in situations not always of their choosing.

ABSTRACT

*This article examines the 2016–2017 general strike (*hartal *or* bandh*) in Indian-controlled Kashmir, the site of a nearly eighty-year struggle for self-determination. Drawing on twenty-two months of ethnographic fieldwork (2016–2018) conducted in the capital city of Srinagar amid and in the aftermath of the indefinite strike, I show how the strike and the suspension of daily life it entailed was sustained through novel spatiotemporal techniques that coordinated and routinized the actions of the Kashmiri public. Yet sustaining the strike was not only defined by routine and self-restraint. Instead, as the article demonstrates, certain forms of financial labor, too, prolonged the strike—but they did so, counterintuitively, by breaking it. I focus in particular on Kashmiri bank employees, who were at times seen as betraying the strike, but who described their continued work during strike hours as essential for keeping the economy and hence society running. By emphasizing bank employees' liminal position of breaking the strike while supporting the cause of Kashmiri self-determination, I highlight the labor, sacrifice, and ambivalence that sustain—and threaten to unravel—political mobilizations.* [general strike; financial labor; essential service; banking; self-sacrifice: Kashmir]

NOTES

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1. The Kashmir Valley (pop. 7 million) is an ancient lake basin eighty-five miles long and twenty miles wide. It serves as the historical center of Kashmir's self-determination movement.
2. The JRL brought together three of the most prominent pro-freedom or resistance leaders in Kashmir—Syed Ali Shah Geelani, Mirwaiz Umar Farooq, and Yasin Malik.
3. *Hartals* and *bandhs* are often used interchangeably in South Asia to refer to general strikes. *Hartal* is a term popularized by the Indian anticolonial leader, M. K. Gandhi, to refer to the suspension of work and business as an act of non-cooperation, combining the words for market (*hatt*) and lock (*tala*). The term *bandh* means "closed."
4. To deliver a petition demanding that the United Nations make good on its long-promised referendum for Kashmir. See Zia and Duschinski 2018 for a history of people's marches to the UN office in Srinagar.
5. A general strike involves "a complete withdrawal of labor and productive economic activity across a preponderance of major sectors" (Albernaz 2022, 539).
6. J&K Bank is neither wholly private nor wholly state-owned. It is the only bank under the Reserve Bank of India's jurisdiction whose majority shareholder (currently 69 percent) is a state and not the central government. It is officially classified as an "old-generation private-sector bank."
7. As the Kashmiri religious leader Mirwaiz Umar Farooq put it, "We are not being allowed to raise our voice against the oppression. There are restrictions on protests, seminars and now even on our meetings. No door is open for us except calling for strikes" (*Kashmir Observer* 2018).
8. The complete set of demands were: 1) Recognize Kashmir as a disputed territory; 2) Demilitarize the bulk of the approximately 700,000 armed forces in the region; 3) End human rights violations and the impunity for past violations; 4) Release political prisoners.
9. For classic works on the general strike, see Luxemburg 2008; Sorel 1999; Benjamin 1996; Du Bois 1999. Spivak 2014 provides a useful overview of this literature.
10. There is a long-standing anthropological literature on ritual sacrifice that is beyond the scope of this article. I instead draw upon what Mayblin and Course (2014, 313) refer to as the "other side of sacrifice"—the "salience of sacrifice beyond the realm of ritual." I have found especially useful Erica Weiss's (2014) discussion of Israeli conscientious objectors and the relational, recognition-based nature of self-sacrificial acts.

11. Evidence before Disorders Inquiry Committee, January 20, 1920. *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, vol. 16, 386. https://www.gandhiserve.net/about-mahatma-gandhi/collected-works-of-mahatma-gandhi/016-19190802-19200131/
12. *Yajna* and *kurbani* both refer to ritual sacrifice—the former is derived from Sanskrit and the latter from Arabic.
13. One of the first recorded labor strikes in Kashmir, by shawl weavers, took place in 1847, followed by another in 1865. In the latter, the maharaja of Jammu and Kashmir's armed forces killed twelve workers (Kumar 2022; Zutshi 2004, 84). In the 1920s, strikes were a common means of protesting working conditions, particularly during the 1924 Srinagar Silk Factory agitation (Zutshi 2004; Rai 2004). By the time of the 1931 popular uprising against the Dogra monarchy, public processions and *hartals* had become thoroughly popularized.
14. In Kashmir, the District Magistrate is authorized to invoke Section 144 of the Indian Criminal Procedure Code (CrPC) after receiving written directions from the local police about "disturbances" (including a strike call) within his or her territorial jurisdiction.
15. For a useful discussion of how the term *essential worker* was deployed in the United States during the COVID-19 pandemic, see Lakoff 2020.

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