

Janice in Kashmir, 2011

In spring of 2011, Josh Dewald contacted me about a short stint in Kashmir, India. It would be billed as operations help but was, in actuality, a second opinion on the program director, Usmaan. I readily agreed being just back from a fantastic personal trip to India. It would be a chance to see more of that exotic country.

I left 1 April touching down briefly in Dehli before heading up to Srinagar and my 2-month stay on an old British Victorian houseboat on Lake Dal surrounded by majestic Himalayas.

I walked about half an hour to work passing Kashmir University, a large mosque and various shops. Meals were included in the price of the rent. Every morning a very polite house boy showed up with a pot of wonderful masala tea and an English breakfast. He also brought me dinner and put hot water bottles in my bed at night. My landlord was a recreation of the British era, Mr. Baat. He loved to tell me stories of past grandeur.



My home on the old British houseboat.



The Victorian inside complete with wood-burning stove.



The majestic mountains above Dal Lake.



Mr. Baat reminiscing about the glory days.

Our Scotland office had voiced deep concerns over the management of the office indicating that the work was generally of high standard but the office was chaotic with little direction. It was inefficient and lacking normal operational systems. Usmaan's reputation was that he took on too much and couldn't manage his time. Reports were lacking or very late. Projects were behind and over budget. Mercy Corps was expecting to win some new grants and was not sure management would be able to handle them as two senior management staff had recently resigned. Scotland felt existing staff was weak as most were journalistic or academic friends of Usmaan.

Over the next two months, I grew to deeply dislike Usmaan. I summed him up as a bully, full of himself, stubborn, erratic, petulant, unfair, vengeful, dictatorial and a know-it-all. He was determined to be right always and had the staff cowed. He monopolized every conversation and talked incessantly yet I understood that he was smart, a good writer and speaker and seemed to know how to open doors in the community but I warned Josh that he could put our projects at risk with his management style. Reports were late. Projects unfinished or poorly executed. Operations slowed such as paying staff salaries due to Usmaan's negligence in meeting deadlines. He ran the office like a private fiefdom. Project coordinators complained that he took over their work and decisions when the mood hit him without consultation. He used Mercy Corps drivers for personal use and came and went when it pleased him, often arriving well after noon. I was also warned by

some staff that he was involved with politics which could be a very big risk to our existence in this civil war-plagued part of India. I duly reported all of this to Josh. Still, Josh kept him on. I learned some time after returning to US that Osman had been detained and deported by the Indian Government on a return from England after visiting his wife who lived there. It was unclear what the charge was, but he was finally let go by Mercy Corps. There was speculation in one of the newspapers that he was a US spy for the successionist movement. Our program in Kashmir was fairly short-lived after that.



When the Brits left 60 years ago, they also left a political mess in Kashmir. It's rather complicated but the end result was that the people of Kashmir were not given a choice in their future as promised but were annexed to India. They are primarily Muslim and want their own state/country or to unite with Pakistan. Anyhow, they hate the Indian government and feel occupied by a foreign power. An estimated 80,000 people have been killed in the fighting. Additionally, a much smaller conflict occurred in the 90's which left bitter feelings in which a Hindu group living in the Kashmiri Valley known as pandits was harassed and terrorized by right-wing Muslims and fled the area. From time to time, fighting breaks out between Pakistan and the Indian military or turmoil breaks out within the country as was the case the summer before I arrived when the young people went on a rampage against the Indian authorities. Kashmir continues to be one of the most militarized places in the world. They blame everything on India and refused to cheer for them

during the World Cup. While I was there, a well-known cleric and leader of one of the separatist factions was assassinated. We closed the office early and stayed home for a few days until the turmoil died down. It appeared to be a rather normal occurrence.

The conflict had taken an extreme toll on the economy which had a growth rate nearly 1/3 that of the rest of India. Youth had been particularly hard hit. Both private sector and government jobs were stagnant hindered by corruption and a slow bureaucratic system.

Projects. Mercy Corps was fairly new to Kashmir having started its programming only that year although they had been in country doing research and supporting various local NGOs since 2004 until they finally secured their registration to manage programs. On my arrival, there were two medium-sized projects funded by the Government of Scotland and two smaller agriculture business projects funded by the Phoenix Fund. Both projects were aimed at providing a more hopeful future for youth. The belief was that if youth had an opportunity for meaningful work and learned how to negotiate their needs through peaceful means, that the country would have a chance at reducing violence and engaging in peace. Through focus groups with young people we learned that they trace their problems to the ongoing political environment and deeply ingrained corruption.

RAFT (Relationships and Alliances for Transformation) aimed to provide stakeholders both youth and government officials, with conflict management/negotiation skills through training clinics and joint work projects and to strengthen the relationship between young people, business leaders and the local government officials by providing opportunities for the various stakeholders to discuss the causes of violence and how to address them by using the skills they developed.

SKYE (Start-Up Kashmir Youth Entrepreneur Development Project) was undertaken in collaboration with the Kashmir Chamber of Commerce to develop youth entrepreneurship. The program undertook business development trainings and mentorships leading to a program for 200 young people to receive funds to start their own businesses. This was especially important in this community experiencing a youth bulge where 600,000 youth were unemployed. Young folks would be incentivized through campaigns, competitions, training workshops, support services, and apprenticeship/internship experiences to start a business. Through these endeavors, it was argued, youth would have new skills and viable business strategies that would help them effectively access and take full advantage of private and government support such as the seed capital fund. Skye was expected to compliment the Jammu & Kashmir Government's "Entrepreneurship Development Fund that provided seed capital to 5,000 prospective young entrepreneurs.

In addition to RAFT and SKYE, two small agricultural projects were underway—**bee keeping and potato seed** farming. Both were projects offered to youthful entrepreneurs after trial projects indicated they were both potentially successful opportunities. Support included mentoring, business development, financial partnership and market development. I was able to visit both projects and impressed with the young people involved in these projects and their hope/belief for a prosperous future. I also found out that no one from our office management had ever visited the projects. Most were already farming and most had left school early due to lack of money. I sought advice from our olive oil and bee keeping projects in Lebanon and our Mercy Corps in house experts on market development as these Kashmiri enterprises were going well, but lacked market networks. They didn't know how to sell what they were beginning to produce.

Unfortunately, best laid plans....due to our office mismanagement, the projects suffered. The conflict training manual was never produced even though it was supposed to have been handed out at the youth business summit. Books (Getting to Yes) had not been passed out as planned. The coordinator for RAFT resigned and then tried to recruit our staff for his new work place. Usmaan arbitrarily appointed inadequate interns without using any kind of process. Reports to donors were painfully late.

My personal life. The good news was that the rest of the staff were friendly and helpful and eager. I was asked out on the weekends. I got a chance to go with Shalzia, her special friend (whom she later married) and Kashif (staff) to a very lovely alpine town, Pahalgam, located at about 9,000 feet and surrounded by mountains on all sides. The Lidder River, similar to the McKenzie, runs down through the valley. On the way up, we passed field after field of mustard which they distil into cooking oil often used in North India. We met up with her uncle who became our tour guide around town where he had been the local bank manager. We stayed in a beautifully situated but scruffy old wooden hotel operated by Sikhs. Unfortunately, I was soon to learn that Usmaan disliked Shazia intensely and would eventually sack her. Had I known this rub, I would not have gone with her. However, I have kept in contact with her over FB and she eventually married the fellow Usmaan thought was too radical and has a little boy.





Two other outings were equally as gorgeous—Sonamarg and Yousmarg, both located in the Himalayas alongside beautiful mountain streams/rivers. At Yousman, we rode horses down some rather harrowing paths into a small river valley but at Sonamarg we eschewed the horses in favor of some short hikes. Two other staff (Mehran and ??) accompanied me and Shalzia into those beautiful, remote parts of the world.





The rocky trail in Yousmarg.



Some sweet new friends.

Srinagar also provided ample interest and beauty for weekend visits. The Indira Gandhi Tulip Garden, floating markets on Lake Dal, lovely old mosques, various villages just outside the city replete with nomads herding their sheep through the towns, and colorful life in the downtown. The crown jewel, however, is likely the Shalimar Gardens, a remnant from Mughal times.