

Imagining Afzal Guru

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Olina Banerji analyses mainstream media narratives and public discourse following Afzal Guru's execution.

Earlier this month, Mohammad Afzal Guru was hanged by India for his involvement in the 2001 attack on India's parliament in which nine people were killed. Although most of the evidence against him was circumstantial, Guru was sentenced to a double death sentence in 2005. His hanging in Delhi's Tihar Jail aimed to satisfy the "collective conscience of society", in the words of the Supreme Court judgement. Many in India are now questioning the manner in which Guru was executed—without pity and, as some say, *due justice*. The execution has also spurred further debate on the *death penalty in India*. As the Indian state and human rights activists grapple with this controversial hanging, and its *fallout in Kashmir*, it is worth analysing dominant media narratives and *public discourse* following Guru's execution.



For years, Guru was mostly forgotten, except by a handful of rights activists and prolific social commentators. He also became a convenient prop to media discussions whenever a bomb went off in a suspected terrorist attack. For the saffron cadre of the BJP, Guru became a political score point, a way to criticise the UPA's 'soft stand on terror'. Not least, he was a powerful reminder of *the alienation of Kashmiris by the seat of power in Delhi*.

When Vinod K. Jose, Executive Editor of *The Caravan*, *met Afzal Guru* in the High Risk Ward of Tihar Jail in 2006, Guru had already been imprisoned for five years and was awaiting his death at the hands of the state. Jose recalls how he walked to the main road outside the jail along with families of other convicts. "It was like being part of a funeral procession," he says. At the time, Jose interviewed Guru in the hopes of presenting a different narrative about him from the one being popularised by the mainstream media, and the interview was a brave – and rare – attempt at peeking behind the iron curtain of the state.

Ironically, Guru has been more humanised in weeks since his hanging than ever before. Details about his family – his wife Tabassum and child Ghalib – and his past before he crossed over to become a militant are emerging like postscripts to a history that until now was written by the courts, the politicians and the mainstream media. Representation, especially for perpetrators of Islamic terrorism, is often a biased exercise during which strategic editing, voice-overs and camera angles work to alienate people like Guru from our moral social consciousness.

Despite the glimpses into alternative possibilities, the media narrative that has always defined Guru for the Indian public continues to dominate. Guru's coerced "[confession](#)" following the parliament attack was used from the start by the media as proof of his guilt—and continues to be cited today, even though it was dismissed as evidence by the courts. In recent days, media commentary about Guru has inevitably been accompanied by a familiar photo of him wearing Arabic headgear and sporting a long beard, and he is often depicted with a fiery noose around his neck. Other media representations of Guru dwell extensively on pictures of him wearing a skull cap and *kurta*, sandwiched between law-enforcement officials, thus aligning him with a set ideology that, according to popular perception, works to denigrate the Indian state. Indeed, public discourse about both the Supreme Court judgement that assuaged the nation's 'collective conscience' and the 2001 attack that aimed to destabilise the "seat of democracy" in India indict Guru as an enemy of the state and, by extension, the people it governs. Such discourse reinforces constructions of the slain terrorist as the evil 'other' and the state as a decisive, functional, wholly democratic entity.

Of course, retribution is easier than deliberation, especially in the contentious matters of the marginalised. Whether or not Guru was guilty of conspiring against the state (and there are enough arguments in support of both interpretations), his secretive hanging strikes an uneasy parallel with the extra-judicial killings of alleged terrorists in the Kashmir Valley. Guru's execution was videographed and his body kept dangling for more than half an hour, but the killing itself will never be part of the public imaginary, just like the ones in [AFSPA-controlled Kashmir](#) and the [north-east](#) that continue to occur but remain invisible. On the other hand, images of the parliament under siege, of ministers and guards scurrying for cover, of tearful remonstrations by the attack victims' families are played on a loop. None of these killings are justifiable, but it's apparent the mainstream media is able to parse out victims into heroes or villains.

This argument is certainly not a defence of terrorism of any sort. What the rights lobby attempts to introduce to public discourse are the reasons behind the endemic violence in which Guru was one participant. While many aspects of history drown in the bloodlust that made Guru's execution a savvy political move, what remains, rather uncomfortably for those in power, are historical questions about why Kashmir devolved into a hotbed of insurgency. It is no accident that Guru's empty grave in Kashmir lies alongside that of Maqbool Bhat, who founded Kashmir's main pro-independence militant group, which later became the political Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Front; Bhat was hanged in Tihar Jail about 29 years ago and his execution sparked a major wave of anti-India sentiment in the Valley. There are growing fears that the events of the last few days, namely the curfew and the media ban in Srinagar, will only further [incite Kashmiri youth](#) against the Indian state.

Beyond ideology, pertinent questions also need to be asked about the powerful effects of a basic human instinct—survival. "I noticed," says Jose towards the end of his [2006 interview](#) with Guru, "that most relatives who had come to see prisoners on death row belonged to poor socio-economic conditions—their sandals, dress and conversation easily conveyed that. It was at that point, like a fitting thought, I remembered a statement made by the then Indian President APJ Abdul Kalam that the poor people constituted majority of the prison population in India." Between arguments of good and evil, state and terror and opportunistic politics, basic markers such as economic sustainability and equality take a back seat. What were the reasons that forced Guru and many like him to take up arms in the first place? Mainstream media narratives work to obscure those origins.

How many of us really know where Guru's hometown of Sopore lies? Could we point it out on a map? Do we know what economic and political conditions prevail there? Or will we ignore these questions as relating to that 'othered' Kashmir, where 'terrorists' come from, as the state- and media-dominated public discourse would like us to do?

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