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# Dangerous Archive: The SB Photographic Collection

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## Abstract

In India's troubled Kashmir Valley, as in many conflict and post-conflict zones, the memoryscape of war is a battleground between remembering and forgetting that is characterized by fragmentation, gaps, and silences. Institutional photographic archives preserving the history of the conflict do not exist and archival efforts in Kashmir are suppressed by the Indian state. This forced erasure of memory of the war is part of a state-driven effort to silence internal dissent in Kashmir, suppress the exposure of human-rights violations against civilians, and counter Kashmiri claims for independence. For the Indian state these are dangerous memories which directly reject the foundational ideal of a pluralistic and secular Indian democracy.

In attempts to challenge this narrative of silence, grassroots organizations and individuals in Kashmir have collected and archived historical photographs of the conflict, which began in 1989 and continues to this day, from a variety of sources. This essay examines the production and public presentation of one of the most notable, and one of the only, private photographic archives documenting the conflict in the region: the collection of political activist SB. His photographs represent a 'radical archive'[1] that uses images as visual and political rhetoric to attempt to reassert Kashmiri agency over control of public memory of the conflict and challenge the active repressive forgetting perpetrated by the Indian state. Differing from post-structuralist readings of the photographic archive as a site of individual discipline and marginalization by those in power, this essay argues that SB's archive is a site of resistance that seeks to make visible and consolidate the collective memory and identity of wartime victimhood and oppression through the political and mnemonic acts of collection, preservation, and public exhibition of photographic material. However, like all archives, SB's collection is a selective site of memory that is informed by a subjective ideological perspective and uses the evidential, mnemonic, and affective qualities of the photographic medium as a form of visual activism to promote a specific political reading and tone of the war's history in the present in order to shape the future.

Mariam Ghani, "What We Left Unfinished: The Artist and the Archive," in *Dissonant Archives: Contemporary Visual Culture and Contested Narratives in the Middle East*, ed. Anthony Downey (London: I. B. Tauris, 2015),

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