

India's occupation and suppression of self-determination: Kashmir's Struggle for Freedom

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The occupation in Kashmir should be seen for what it is: a brutal suppression of self-determination.

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The rivalry between India and Pakistan has again assumed center stage — this time over literal beef.

Last month, a far-right Hindu fundamentalist group, Hindu Sena, hurled ink and oil at Engineer Rashid Ahmad, a Kashmiri lawmaker, outside a New Delhi press conference. The provocation? The lawmaker allegedly served beef — a strict taboo for many Hindus — at a party he hosted. The attack came on the heels of an incident during a Kashmir state assembly session in which members of India's ruling party, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), punched and kicked Ahmad for the aforementioned transgression.

Shortly thereafter, members of Shiv Sena, another Hindu fundamentalist group, attacked an activist who organized a book launch in Bombay for the Pakistani foreign minister. Indian airwaves have been bursting with news of Shiv Sena threats forcing Pakistani artists to cancel concerts in India, and a Pakistani-staged play being overrun by Shiv Sena activists.

Commentators on either side of the border are furiously writing and opining: on the rising attacks on Muslims in India, on the climate of intolerance since the BJP took power, on the interminable cycle of violent reprisals against minorities in Pakistan — all set against the backdrop of the India-Pakistan rivalry.

Valuable as all this commentary may be, it shares a key deficiency. Once again, Kashmir — the brutal occupation of which has cast a long shadow over the subcontinent for over sixty years — has been drowned out in the shuffle.

Because while all this was happening, a Hindu mob in the Udhampur neighborhood of Kashmir burned to death Zahid Rasool, a Muslim teenager, over rumors that he had slaughtered cows. Following Rasool's murder, protests erupted in the Kulgam and Anantnag districts of Kashmir. At the time of writing, two dozen protesters have been killed in clashes with police, and state authorities and police have instituted a curfew in the state capital, Srinagar, and other parts of

Kashmir.

At Rasool's funeral, the crowd shouted "go India, go back" and "we want freedom."

The Occupation

Drowning out Kashmir is very much a top-down strategy in the subcontinent. Since October of last year, Pakistani and Indian troops have been consistently trading gunfire along the Line of Control (LOC) that divides Indian and Pakistani-occupied parts of Kashmir. Skirmishes have even spread to the border between Indian-occupied Kashmir and Pakistan's Punjab region.

State press releases about the skirmishes, comically reminiscent of every military encounter between India and Pakistan since 1947, follow a well-worn script: India accuses Pakistan of inciting conflict to help separatist elements gain power in Indian-occupied Kashmir. Pakistan denies the charge and insists Indian forces fired first — and the cycle continues ad infinitum. Meanwhile, 6,000 civilians in Indian-occupied Kashmir have fled their homes, and 12,000 Pakistani villagers have been evacuated.

Earlier this year the BJP forged a coalition with a Kashmiri political party, the People's Democratic Party (PDP), to form a government in the Muslim-majority state of Jammu and Kashmir. At the swearing-in ceremony, Mufti Muhammad Saeed — the Muslim head of the PDP — heartily embraced Prime Minister Narendra Modi. The PDP's spokesperson hailed the alliance as "a miracle of democracy."

In Kashmir, the lower- and middle-class people who make up the vibrant movement for "azadi," or freedom, are less enthused. The long history of election rigging and corruption — which has brought to power Kashmiri governments sympathetic to the Indian occupiers — has made the Kashmiri populace wary. Rather than a miracle of democracy, the BJP-PDP alliance is seen by many as merely an addendum to a long line of unrepresentative governments.

And with the sharp right turn India has taken of late, things could get even worse.

For its part the BJP recoils at any mention of human rights abuses in Kashmir or the incredible power of Indian security forces in Kashmir. Since 1989, the 700,000-strong Indian security forces — even without the substantial presence of troops and assorted armed groups in Pakistani-occupied Kashmir — have made the Kashmir Valley the most densely militarized zone in the world.

Indian intelligence and security forces — the Indian army, the paramilitary group Central Reserve Police Force (CPRF), and the police — have a brutally tight grip over the roughly two-thirds of Kashmir that India occupies. And they have the law on their side. The Public Safety Act has justified the detention (and torture) of hundreds of people suspected of acting against the state, while the Armed Forces Special Forces Act (AFSPA) gives Indian security forces unimaginable power. Under the AFSPA, Indian soldiers are authorized to search homes without warrants, detain residents, and enjoy broad impunity from prosecution for rape or murder.

These statutes have created an environment in Kashmir where forced labor, torture, murder, and wanton acts of rape are commonplace. Mass graves are routinely discovered in the Kashmir Valley — only to be ignored by the state. And the interest of both the Indian and Pakistani public in the Kashmir crisis has waned.

In the last two decades, large protests have broken out innumerable times in the Kashmir Valley

against the CPRF — only to be brutally suppressed. And then, without fail, Indian political parties blame Pakistani-funded militant groups for the demonstrations.

There is indeed a long and sordid history of Pakistani-funded militancy in Kashmir, particularly across the Line of Control in Pakistani-occupied Kashmir. But even when the Azadi movement stages massive peaceful demonstrations with no such connections, the veracity of Pakistani involvement is deemed unimportant to the official story.

Denial of culpability — despite concrete evidence of routine, ongoing violence against Kashmiris — is so pervasive in India that little was made over Wikileaks cables released in 2010 that confirmed Indian forces had systematically tortured hundreds of detained Kashmiri civilians for many years. As far back as 2005, US diplomats were briefed by the International Committee of the Red Cross about CPRF torture, including beatings, electrocution, and sexual humiliation of Kashmiri detainees.

Earlier this year, a former chief of the Indian intelligence agency RAW revealed in an interview that Indian intelligence agencies regularly bribed terrorists and Kashmiri political parties like the National Conference and the PDP. His comments made waves in Indian media outlets, but like most stories of the occupation, received little attention in international media.

While a number of Indian and Pakistani intellectuals have tried to give voice to the marginalized, the story of the Kashmiri independence movement remains one of a forgotten people; an intifada that, unlike in Palestine, has failed to incite global outrage. As India's neoliberal prestige has taken shape over the last decade, its crimes in Kashmir have been struck from the record.

As Pankaj Mishra says:

"Kashmir has turned out to be a 'great suppression story' . . . Intellectuals, preoccupied by transcendent, nearly mystical, battles between civilization and barbarism tend to assume that 'democratic' India, a natural ally of the 'liberal' West, must be doing the right thing in Kashmir, that is, fighting Islamofascism."

The Forgotten Intifada

In January 2010, sixteen-year-old Inayat Ahmad was killed by paramilitary soldiers in Srinagar. His death triggered a slew of killings at the hands of Indian security forces. Later that month, thirteen-year-old Wamiq Farooq was killed by a police tear-gas shell; sixteen-year-old Zahid Farooq soon after by Border Security Forces; seventeen-year-old Tufail Mattoo in June by another police tear-gas canister.

Huge demonstrations broke out. The brutal repression that followed made the summer of 2010 the bloodiest chapter of the Kashmiri uprising against Indian rule since 1989.

The uprising was populated largely by young people armed only with stones. Over the four summer months, 112 people were killed (almost routine in that saw seventy thousand killed under the occupation between 1989 and 2011. The government declared curfews (a commonplace occurrence in occupied Kashmir) that made it impossible for people to leave their homes for weeks or months on end.

But routine as this violence may have seemed, things are changing in Kashmir. Indeed the narrative told by Kashmiris themselves has fundamentally shifted in the past decade.

Sanjay Kak published a volume in 2013 called “Until My Freedom Will Come: The New Intifada in Kashmir,” broadcasting the voices of Kashmiri activists and writers for what seemed like the first time. Their voices connected the modern struggle against Indian occupation with Palestinian resistance against Israeli occupation by using the word “intifada” to describe the events of 2010.

The resistance has sustained itself since 2010 despite vicious reprisals by Indian security forces. As Hilal Mir, a Srinagar-based journalist, says:

"With each humiliation, every killing, every act of oppression, the sentiment is growing stronger, especially among the young generation, many of whom, inspired by young, educated militants who post their video speeches and pictures on Facebook, are again picking up arms. A small bunch of militants remain the only active mode of expression of the sentiment . . .

The political component of the resistance has been suppressed by the state. Street protests are put down with brutal force. Expressions of dissent in the media or other mediums come at a heavy cost to those who express them. Stone throwers and young resistance activists who can mobilize people are on the run. Police have been raiding their homes, harassing their parents to crush their will."

So far, these stories of resistance have failed to gain traction. Five years on, discourse about the intifada remains largely confined to Kashmir. Kak says this failure stems from the media's tendency "to report Kashmir from its own perch, which is of over-riding concern about India Pakistan relations . . . and to a lesser extent, the significance of the BJP-PDP coalition."

The Indian occupation, meanwhile, remains unchallenged. At the same time Prime Minister Modi was meeting with Mark Zuckerberg to extol the virtues of social media in a recent US trip, the Jammu and Kashmir security forces were busy instituting an Internet crackdown in Kashmir to prevent "anti-peace" elements from gaining access to social media.

The Genesis

The textbook history of the Kashmir crisis dates it back to Britain's 1947 partition of the Indian subcontinent. Clement Atlee's arrival in Downing Street marked the imperial power's definitive acceptance of the Indian call for independence. Atlee's government sought to decolonize India via a "transfer of power" in regal British fashion — swiftly and surgically. Instead, the transfer precipitated one of the bloodiest episodes in modern history, leaving at least a million dead and millions more uprooted and plundered in the carnage brought forth by partition.

The British recognized two new dominions — India and Pakistan — as successor regimes, but the political elites of both states, the Indian National Congress and the All-India Muslim League, were woefully unrepresentative of large swathes of territory they sought to control.

The problem of the princely states exemplified this perfectly: the British Raj recognized the sovereignty of princes over their states in return for their collaboration with and loyalty to the British Empire. Jammu and Kashmir was deemed a category "A" princely state owing to its size, natural resources, and strategic value.

Ruled by the autocratic Maharaja Hari Singh of the Dogra family — which had reigned since 1846 — post-partition Kashmir was rife with unrest. Leading the clarion call was the National Conference headed by Sheikh Abdullah, a fiercely nationalist Kashmiri party. When partition was finalized, the Maharaja, like many other princes, sought independence — a demand not entertained by either India or Pakistan.

In October 1947, armed tribesmen backed by the Pakistani military carried out a series of raids in Kashmir that resulted in mass plundering, looting, arson, rape, and the torture of Hindus. Both the Maharaja and the National Conference requested Indian help to end the chaos. In return, the Maharaja agreed to sign the instrument of accession, and on October 25, 1947, Kashmir became a part of the Indian Union. Indian troops arrived immediately to protect the border of what was now legally Indian territory.

The first India-Pakistan war over Kashmir soon followed. A UN-mediated ceasefire was arranged in January 1949, and the Line of Control (the legitimacy of which was not accepted by either state) has served as the *de jure* border between the two states ever since.

This, at least, is how the history of Kashmir is conventionally framed — in *realpolitik* terms, as solely a territorial conflict between India and Pakistan.

Since the 1947 dispute, Pakistan and India have officially gone to war in Kashmir twice — in September 1965 and in the summer of 1999 in Kargil. They came dangerously close to war in 2001 after the strike on the Indian Parliament and in 2008 after the terrorist attacks in Mumbai. These episodes form the headlines of a prolonged series of aggressive outbursts since 1947. On a broader scale, the irresolution of the Kashmir issue has precluded any meaningful peace settlement between India and Pakistan.

But here's what the history textbooks used to teach Indian and Pakistani schoolchildren tend to gloss over: the self-determination, will, and narrative of Kashmiris themselves.

As Kak explains, the modern resistance movement sees the history of Kashmir as “a continuous state of oppression for more than five centuries. The end of Dogra rule as a consequence of 1947 is not read as the end of the oppression — incorporation into India is seen as only a continuation of that state of affairs.”

Sixty-seven years after a UN plebiscite was called for to allow Kashmiris to determine their own fate, such a vote still hasn't been held. Since 1948, India has consistently and categorically rejected holding a referendum; and while Pakistan has repeatedly called for one to take place, it has also continually rejected any possibility of an independent Kashmir.

The Kashmiri people, in effect, have been held hostage by the Indian-Pakistani rivalry for over six decades.

And what it has been a pitched rivalry. While the Indian state has occupied the valley, the Pakistani state (according to a wealth of Indian, US, and British intelligence) has functioned largely through militant proxies. In 1947, 1965, and throughout the 1990s (culminating in the Kargil War), the *modus operandi* of the Pakistani establishment has been to organize and support armed militias in Kashmir, with the aim of fomenting rebellion within Kashmir. This would, in theory, create the conditions for a renegotiation of borders, while freeing Pakistan of all involvement.

With the end of the Afghan War in 1989, the Pakistani establishment focused more intently on Kashmir. Jihadi outfits including Lashkar-e-Taiba, Hizbul Mujahadeen, and Harkat-ul-Ansar all had bases and recruiting centers across the border in Kashmir and received massive strategic and economic support from the ISI (the Pakistani intelligence agency) and the army. Hundreds of militant insurgents acquired their training in ISI-operated camps. To date, the notorious organizers of terrorist activities such as Hafiz Saeed are provided safe haven in Pakistan to freely spout their anti-Indian vitriol.

The surge in India's military presence coincided with terrorist activity conducted by these outfits.

The recruitment of local Kashmiri people in pro-Pakistan militias, the steady supply of arms, and the presence of Pakistani agents in Indian Kashmir fostered a deep sense of paranoia in the Indian state about a foreign-sponsored rebellion in Kashmir. But it is primarily a civilian population resisting Indian occupation which bears the brunt of this fear and paranoia.

Because unfortunately for Pakistan, it has had limited success. Pakistani involvement in Kashmir, ultimately, has made it easier for India to delegitimize and discredit the authenticity of the Kashmiri liberation struggle. The new generation of resistance in Kashmir does not see Pakistan as an ally — many have long recognized Pakistani policies as a product of self-interest and adventurism.

The Kashmiri call for “azadi” is not a call to join Pakistan but a demand for freedom and an end to oppression.

The Myth of Democracy

Internationally, the media turns a blind eye to the brutal Indian occupation largely because of the pervasive fiction that the county is a vibrant democracy. Kashmir is a refutation of this characterization.

For most of its history, Kashmir’s electoral landscape was dominated by the National Conference (NC) and the personality of Sheikh Abdullah, who remained the most powerful voice in Kashmir until his death in 1989. Abdullah, seen as too secessionist, had been charged with sedition and dismissed from office in 1953 by his friend and comrade Jawaharlal Nehru.

But despite his confinement in prison or via house arrest for most of the next decade, Abdullah’s popularity and stature remained undiminished. He led the NC to a sweeping victory in 1977 and assumed the office of chief minister — an appointment New Delhi was willing to tolerate as long as Abdullah did not raise the inflammatory call for independence.

By 1989, any indication that the Indian state might be mildly tolerant of the idea of an independent Kashmir had disappeared. India under Indira Gandhi was particularly obsessed with quashing purportedly disloyal elements, a policy that manifested itself with the ruthless repression of the independence movement in Punjab. In 1982, Sheikh Abdullah’s son Farooq Abdullah took over as head of the party, and in the elections that followed, the NC again emerged victorious.

But the government was short-lived — Gandhi summarily dismissed Farooq Abdullah and instead installed G. M. Shah, a marginalized member of the same party, as chief minister. In 1986, Shah was charged with corruption and forced out of office. Subsequently, Abdullah signed an agreement with the new prime minister, Rajiv Gandhi, and was allowed to resume the office of the chief minister.

By this time, a new generation of Kashmiri youth, accustomed to the unrepresentative and corrupt nature of Kashmiri politics, began to see the NC as accommodative toward the Indian state. With the shift in sentiment, Kashmiri politicians were robbed of any remaining legitimacy.

The next state elections were contested by a Congress-National Conference alliance and their opponents — the Muslim United Front (MUF). The MUF included people like Shabir Shah, Yasin Malik, and Javed Mir, all of whom would be critical leaders in the 1989 insurgency. After the engineered and fraudulent 1987 elections, a radicalized Kashmiri youth sought bolder options. Starting in 1989, a popular uprising gripped the valley, and militia-led violence quickly escalated. Indian military and paramilitary outfits surged into Kashmir. They haven’t left since.

While Kashmir had no elections for the next six years, during the mid-1990s, the Indian state began developing a political approach to counterinsurgency to complement their military offensive. Crucial to this has been collaboration with major political parties such as the NC and the PDP, established by Mufti Mohammad Saeed in 1999 as the other mainstream party in Kashmir. In all subsequent elections — 2002, 2008 and 2014 — New Delhi has ensured that one of these pro-India parties takes office and forms a coalition with the incumbent government in Delhi.

Today, this is the BJP-PDP government. Again, Hilal Mir describes the situation well:

“The BJP-PDP government . . . in reality is the perpetuation of the client-master relationship that has defined the politics practiced by Kashmir-centric pro-India political parties like National Conference and PDP vis-a-vis New Delhi. Only in this case, the Indian state, represented by rabid Hindu nationalists, appears to have shed the niceties it would wear in the past.”

Mir continues:

“The BJP leaders of Jammu and Kashmir, going by the cumulative assessment of their statements and actions during the past seven months, are not much different in their outlook towards the majority Muslim population than the Dogra autocracy, which Kashmiris remember as the worst in the more than 400 years of foreign rule.”

The Struggle for Self-Determination

In Kashmir, electoral politics recedes to the background in the face of the occupation's daily brutalities. During the 2010 intifada, horrific cellphone videos began showing up on Kashmiri social media. The first, called the “Kashmir Naked Parade” video, showed paramilitary soldiers and policemen jeering at four Kashmiri men as they were forced to walk naked through harvested fields. Another video showed a naked, half-conscious man being dragged on the ground by uniformed men before being sodomized by bamboo sticks.

The videos quickly came to stand in for the subjugation of an entire people, and as Shuddhabrata Sengupta has noted, bear a shocking similarity to videos and pictures of Israeli forces abusing Palestinians in Gaza and the Iraqi prisoners tortured by US troops in Abu Ghraib.

Unlike Palestine or Abu Ghraib, however, the discourse and imagery of the occupied people of Kashmir — and their resistance through poetry, art, social media, and street protests — have failed to capture the global imagination in the same manner. They are somehow lost in the canonical history of the Indian-Pakistani rivalry, or hidden behind the gleaming image of a rising India.

But as the long occupation of Kashmir rumbles on, the resistance will too.

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P.S.

* “Kashmir's Struggle for Freedom”. Jacobin. 11.6.15:
<https://www.jacobinmag.com/2015/11/kashmir-india-pakistan-modi-bjp-congress/>

* For links, see the original article.

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