

Review - “Kashmir: the case of freedom”

Thursday 15 March 2012, by [New Red Indian](#) (Date first published: 6 March 2012).

***Kashmir: The Case for Freedom*, by Arundhati Roy, Pankaj Mishra, Hilal Bhat, Angana P. Chatterji, and Tariq Ali, Verso, London. Paperback, 160 pages
ISBN: 9781844677351. October 2011. \$14.95 / £9.99 / \$18.50 CAN.**

In the summer of 2010, protests erupted throughout Kashmir, the predominantly Muslim part of what India claims to be its northernmost state, Jammu and Kashmir (Kashmiris have always asserted their independence from India). Throngs of young men and women defiantly hurled rocks at Indian security forces and set tires on fire to prevent armored vehicles from entering into neighborhoods. Their chants were bold—“Go, India, Go!” and “*Azadi* (Independence) for Kashmir” and “Quit Kashmir” (the last being a reference to the slogan of the Indian movement against British colonialism: Quit India). The rare media outfits that did cover the protests began calling the movement, the Kashmiri Intifada, drawing explicit comparison to the other longstanding occupation in Palestine. For fear of having international opinion turned against it, the Indian government quickly clamped down on all media coverage of the resistance in Kashmir and opened its playbook to its favorite page: the rock-throwers in Kashmir were quickly dubbed Islamic terrorists.

At the same time, the repression in Kashmir against the population was brutal. Protests were met with shootings, lathi (baton) charges, the firing of tear gas, curfews, mass arrests, shootings, disappearances, and torture. The viciousness of the crackdown has its basis in the suspension of any legal oversight or consequence for the Indian security apparatus; since 1990, Kashmir has come under the purview of the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) which allows, among other things, any soldier or officer to fire upon any group of five or more people or anyone suspected of having a weapon, arrest anyone without a warrant and conduct home invasions. It also gives military personnel full immunity from prosecution for their actions. Additionally, Kashmir is also one of the most heavily policed and militarized places in the world, with estimates of Indian security forces in the region at well over 700,000 (the Government of India refuses to release official numbers). It bears underlining that the population of Kashmir is approximately 5.5 million, which means that there is one security personnel for every eight Kashmiris, a ratio which beggars Mubarak’s Egypt. The carte blanche given to the police and military and the constant rhetoric of Islamic insurgency have proven to be a deadly and humiliating mix for ordinary Kashmiri civilians. In one shocking video that was uploaded to youtube, Indian soldiers were seen parading young Kashmiri men naked through their village en route to a military camp.

Kashmir: The Case for Freedom, with contributions by Tariq Ali, Hilal Bhatt, Angana Chatterji, Pankaj Mishra and Arundhati Roy and selections of poems by the 16th-century Kashmiri poet, Habbah Khatun, comes at an important time, as new political and economic realities put the resistance of the Kashmiri people back on the map of global protest. The book is essentially a handbook for human rights activists across the world, who have seen the protest movement in Kashmir grow but who have been left confused by the obfuscations which pass for journalism and

the lies which are official politics in India, Pakistan, and the United States. The overwhelming conclusion that any reader can come to after reading the book is the simple and straightforward one that Arundhati Roy arrives at: "Does any government have the right to take away people's liberty with military force? India needs azadi from Kashmir just as much—if not more—than Kashmir needs azadi from India."

Kashmir has long tradition of religious syncretism, cultural innovation, and political resistance, but an equally long legacy of feudal, colonial, and now sub-imperial conquest. The crux of the contemporary problem stems from the opportunistic way that the independence and partition of the Indian subcontinent was carried out and the vicious way that those terms are enforced on the population. When British rule was established in Kashmir in 1846, Kashmir (recently conquered by the Sikh invader Ranjit Singh in 1819) was sold off to Dogra royalty (the Hindu rulers of neighboring Jammu) for 7.5 million rupees, 6 pairs of shawl goats, and 3 shawls (under the absurd Treaty of Amritsar). Dogra rule was economically ruinous for the population who were reduced to a condition of absurd poverty; the few young people who could, escaped to other places in India, where they were radicalized and returned to raise slogans of freedom, justice, and land reform. Before the partition of India, the dominant politics of the movement for Kashmiri independence, led by Sheikh Abdullah, were a heady mix of socialism and nationalism, not political Islam as is often claimed by more contemporary analysts.

When the British left India, the 565 prince states which had maintained a degree of political autonomy through treaties with the British were given the choice of acceding either to India or Pakistan or remaining independent. Maharaja Hari Singh, the ruler of Jammu and Kashmir, still hadn't decided; leaders of the Muslim League were attempting to woo him to Pakistan, while his Hindu sympathies seemed to incline him in favor of India. Leaders in Pakistan decided not to wait and planned an invasion. Hari Singh, worried about being deposed militarily, quickly negotiated an accession to India in exchange for military support. But under the terms of the agreement, Kashmir was to be allowed a referendum to determine the will of the people on the question of accession. Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, despite publicly proclaiming his support for the plebiscite (as Arundhati Roy's excellent collection of excerpts of his speeches shows), ultimately reneged on his promise. The Indian army was able to repel the Pakistani invaders only up to a point; the current Line of Control which divides Kashmir more or less marks the results of that confrontation. Since then, Kashmir has become a pawn in the cynical and deadly game between India and Pakistan. India uses Kashmir to claim that it is a democratic society (but does so by rigging elections, importing pliable Hindu rulers, imprisoning elected leaders, brutally oppressing the population), while Pakistan claims that it is interested in Kashmiri independence (despite having flooded the Valley with guns and an intolerant variant of Islam and denying independence to its other occupied territory, Balochistan).

The book makes two important contributions to our understanding of what has happened in Kashmir since that point. The first has to do with the form of the resistance, which has shifted over the years from secular nationalism to Islamist politics and back again. The period between the 1940s and the early 1980s was dominated by the secular, nationalist forces in Kashmir organized under Sheikh Abdullah who initially sought some kind of compromise with the Indian state for greater autonomy within a larger federation. When even democratic dialogue broke down and India reneged on promises, a few groups (like the Jammu & Kashmir Liberation Front) broke away from the dominant nationalist coalition and began waging a guerrilla struggle. At the same time, Pakistan flush with arms and militants it was recruiting and training for the American-sponsored resistance to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, began both recruiting Kashmir youth to jihadi outfits and began to send Islamist groups into Kashmir as well as providing weapons and training to secular groups as well (though they eventually stopped backing these groups all together). The devastating effects of that

policy on ordinary Kashmiris are documented in Hilal Bhatt's personal essay in the collection. But by the late 1990s, Islamist organizations had exhausted whatever appeal they may have had as their social policies came into conflict with Kashmiri ideologies and their inability to produce a military solution meant that ordinary Kashmiris were the ones suffering for the barbaric Indian crackdown that followed those terrorist activities. The last decade of resistance has been characterized by secular, democratic opposition to the policies of the Indian state, a reality which goes against all of the mainstream propaganda that Kashmir is another front in the war on terror.

The second has to do with the staggering scale of violence that the Indian state perpetrates against the Kashmiri population (the condition of the Pakistani administered section while poor, is not nearly as bloody). As Angana Chatterji puts it, "Kashmir is a landscape of internment, where resistance is deemed 'insurgent' by state institutions." [Chatterji and her husband, Richard Shapiro, have been targeted by the Indian government for their views on Kashmir and were both recently fired from their jobs at the California Institute of Integral Studies, in part, for their outspoken political advocacy.] Part of the reason that Kashmir is so brutally repressed is because the Indian state is now governed by an ideology which requires the fiction of a massive security threat in order to justify exorbitant expenditures on its military and police forces. This fiction is propped up, as Chatterji argues, by an ideology which amalgamates Hindu chauvinism, neoliberalism, and authoritarian statecraft. The result has been the wholesale criminalization of even the mildest form of public protest. Most recently, the police filed sedition charges against Jammu and Kashmir Board of School Education for showing a man in blue carrying a stick under the Urdu letter "zoi" for "zaalim" (oppressor). The police have charged everyone affiliated with the book with criminal conspiracy, defamation, and provocation with the intent to breach peace, since the innocuous depiction was assumed to be a police officer. In another instance, an English professor, Noor Mohammad Bhat, was thrown in jail for administering a "provocative" examination assignment.

Despite making the case for an independent Kashmir and offering a brilliant indictment of the Indian government's claim to being the largest democracy on the planet, the book falls short on one important point, namely in pointing out a strategy by which that independence can come about if armed struggle, mass protest, and even political compromise have all failed in turn. The unfortunate reality in Kashmir is that it is extremely similar to Palestine, where the indigenous populations lack the necessary social force to repel the violence of occupation forces and then are forced into taking part in the opportunistic diplomacy of larger states around them. But like Palestine, the Kashmiris have allies in both Pakistan and India who have no interest in the occupation of Kashmir, in fact whose lives would immediately be improved if both Pakistan and India were to stop spending Himalayan sums on security personnel and instead spend money on eradicating poverty. The Indian and Pakistani working classes have common enemies—their own states—and the end to the occupation in Kashmir will only be the result of their unified struggle. This though is only the slightest of criticisms; the spirit if not the explicit argument of the Arab Spring runs throughout this entire book.

New Red Indian

[Special thanks to Huma Dar for suggestions and edits.]

P.S.

* <http://newredindian.wordpress.com/2012/03/06/review-kashmir-the-case-for-freedom-tariq-ali-et-al/>