

Indian general elections: Kashmir and Indian democracy

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Virtually every news article about the Indian elections begins by reminding us that India is “the world’s largest democracy,” with 800 million eligible voters.

In other news, meanwhile, Kashmiris are boycotting the elections en masse.

What does it say about democracy when millions of people in a state think it’s a fraud? All over India, people have turned out in impressive numbers: 75 percent here, 80 percent there. In Kashmir, however, news reports about the early phases of polling have pegged voter turnout at 28 percent. Isn’t this low enough for Indians to ask what it is about these elections that is so unappealing to Kashmiris?

We all cherish the right to vote as a fundamental democratic right, and yet here we see a mass boycott of that very basic political right that we all hold dear. Why are Kashmiris so averse to voting in these elections? It isn’t enough to say that they are being misled by their leaders. That’s simply elitist—you’re thinking of Kashmiris as dupes, as robots controlled by self-serving humans. If Kashmiris respond to boycott calls in such numbers it is because they do not see these elections as anything other than a “military exercise” (as a press release by Jammu Kashmir Coalition of Civil Society recently put it), a way to legitimise a military occupation of their land. Like the Zubin Mehta concert did in September last year, elections in Kashmir provide an occasion for a military occupation to be given a democratic veneer.

Most Indians are probably aware of the present troubles in Kashmir, and figure that whatever is happening there was caused by some disgruntled militants. You’ve heard on the news that an Indian Army major and a jawan were killed by militants. Yes, that did happen on April 26, during an “encounter” with “terrorists” in which Major Mukund Varadarajan of the Rashtriya Rifles and a jawan (news reports rarely name the jawans who die, just the officers). Whatever happened next and whatever actions the government takes in response are now justified in your mind by the news of this encounter.

And so you discount the campaign of police retaliation that has followed, the curfews and the beatings, the lathi charges and firings. You may not have heard that on April 30, Bashir Ahmad Bhat, a 24-year-old man who ran a tailoring shop, was shot dead when CRPF soldiers opened fire with live ammunition against a group of stone-throwing youth. Young Bashir wasn’t throwing stones, his grieving father insists, challenging the CRPF to prove otherwise.

You may not have heard that Indian forces have carried out mass arrests in nocturnal raids to ensure “smooth conduct” of elections. You may not have heard that on May 2, a prominent scholar of Islamic Studies, Dr. Ghulam Qadir Lone, was arrested for making “anti-election” statements. Hundreds of students at Kashmir University protested his arrest, but you probably didn’t hear about this either. Nor would you have heard that in Bandipora in Baramulla constituency hundreds of youth were rounded up in night raids carried out by police and joined by the army. A news report describes the chilling effect of these raids on the people:

"Fearing arrests, many youth in the town have gone underground. Some parents told Rising Kashmir that they have sent their wards to safer places. "Army and police are hunting innocent youth so it's better to send them to some safer places till elections are over," said Ali Mohammad.

Many youth have moved to Srinagar and other places to stay with their relatives and friends. The recent arrests made in South Kashmir and Srinagar ahead of polls have also made them apprehensive of arrests."

The Jammu Kashmir Coalition of Civil Society (JKCCS) says that "around 2000 people have been arrested, mostly youth. Leaders like Syed Ali Geelani, Mirwaiz Umar Farooq, Yasin Malik, Shabir Ahmed Shah and scores of other political leaders and activists have been detained. Besides these political persons a very huge number of young people who are mostly students have been arrested, tortured and humiliated." In preparation for the last phase of the election, there's been a huge mobilization of army and police in Sopore, virtually outnumbering the local populace. What does it mean when you need to deploy 30,000 troops to ensure a "free" election? What does it say about the practice of "democracy"?

Marx once wrote that a nation that oppresses another nation forges its own chains. He was referring to the relationship between the English and the Irish. As long as the workers and the poor of England supported their government's domination of Ireland, they were only strengthening the classes that dominated them. The same logic applies in India today.

Here are some basic questions that every election-loving Indian democrat should ask: How does the forcible retention of Kashmir help in improving the lives of the hundreds of millions in India who lack basic needs like food, shelter, education, healthcare, a clean and safe environment, access to land and resources to lead productive lives? What does it cost to maintain a military occupation involving half-a-million troops in mountainous terrain, and how might those resources be put to better use? And it's not just about economics. What are the consequences of turning a blind eye to atrocities committed in one's name in far-off lands, and how long can one keep at bay the evil this breeds in society at large?

In February this year, a military court acquitted the army personnel involved in the infamous Pathribal fake encounter, in which five Kashmiris were killed and then passed off as "militants." More recently, in the village of Tsundur in Andhra Pradesh, 56 upper-caste murderers of Dalits have been acquitted of their crimes by a High Court ruling. These things are related.

Today, many are worried that an authoritarian and intolerant bigot might become the next Prime Minister. But how did such authoritarianism become acceptable to so many people? When generations have grown up learning to dehumanize and look down upon those considered "below" them in caste, something happens to human empathy. It withers away. The same holds true with colonial and neo-colonial occupations. Kashmir has become that space in Indian public culture where the police and army can be given free play, where repression can be made palatable, where judicial complicity can be overlooked, and where human rights can be violated with impunity, all in the name of "national unity" and "integrity."

We may not see the emergence of a Nazi-style fascist dictatorship come May 16. But it would be useful to think about how a culture that has learned to accept atrocities committed abroad might become incapable of preventing atrocities at home.

The Caribbean poet and intellectual Aimé Césaire wrote eloquently that the acceptance of colonial conquests abroad "distilled a poison into the veins of Europe," so that they were unable to confront the monster of Nazism when it bared its teeth at home. It's a lengthy quotation, but well worth

reading today if we substitute "Kashmir" for "Vietnam" and "Madagascar," and "India" for "France":

"First we must study how colonization works to decivilize the colonizer, to brutalize him in the true sense of the word, to degrade him, to awaken him to buried instincts, to covetousness, violence, race hatred, and moral relativism; and we must show that each time a head is cut off or an eye put out in Vietnam and in France they accept the fact, each time a little girl is raped and in France they accept the fact, each time a Madagascan is tortured and in France they accept the fact, civilization acquires another dead weight, a universal regression takes place, a gangrene sets in, a centre of infection begins to spread; and that at the end of all these treaties that have been violated, all these lies that have been propagated, all these punitive expeditions that have been tolerated, all these prisoners who have been tied up and "interrogated", all these patriots who have been tortured, at the end of all the racial pride that has been encouraged, all the boastfulness that has been displayed, a poison has been distilled into the veins of Europe and, slowly but surely, the continent proceeds toward savagery.

And then one fine day the bourgeoisie is awakened by a terrific boomerang effect: the gestapos are busy, the prisons fill up, the torturers standing around the racks invent, refine, discuss.

People are surprised, they become indignant. They say: "How strange! But never mind – it's Nazism, it will pass!" And they wait, and they hope; and they hide the truth from themselves, that it is barbarism, the supreme barbarism, the crowning barbarism that sums up the daily barbarisms; that it is Nazism, yes, but that before they were its victims, they were its accomplices; that they tolerated that Nazism before it was inflicted on them, that they absolved it, shut their eyes to it, legitimized it, because, until then, it had been applied only to non-European peoples; that they have cultivated that Nazism, that they are responsible for it, and that before engulfing the whole edifice of Western, Christian civilization in its reddened waters, it oozes, seeps and trickles from every crack."

It's not too late for Indians to speak out against the occupation of Kashmir, to call for an end to the Armed Forces Special Powers Act, to call for a withdrawal of all occupying troops, to support the Kashmiris' right to self-determination (azaadi), to challenge the priorities of a system built upon inequality and privilege, and in the process to reclaim and reinvent democracy at home so that it works for all the people instead of a tiny wealthy upper-caste elite.

Nagesh Rao

P.S.

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