

‘Non-lethal weapon’? India is blinding young Kashmiri protesters - and no one will face justice

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The steel pellets used by police and troops are officially a ‘non-lethal weapon’, but those wounded will live in partial or total darkness.

Two sets of images have haunted me these last few days. One is a series of photos of people splashing bucketloads of water to wash away blood from the streets of Kashmir, where Indian forces have shot dead at least 45 people since 9 July. Thousands came out to protest and mourn the death of a rebel leader who was killed in an encounter with the Indian army and police [1].

The other set of images is that of scores of young men with bandages on their eyes, before or after undergoing surgery to remove tiny steel pellets from their retinas [2]. Indian forces deployed in Kashmir now routinely use pellet guns to stymie roadside demonstrations.

The first image is of something I have witnessed nearly all my life. The Indian troops and state police who enforce India’s rule over Kashmir have been shooting at Kashmiri protesters for as long as there have been protests. And that is a long, long time [3]: 27 years if you count from the start of the armed and popular uprising against India in 1989; 70 if you chart the history of the subcontinent from 1947 when Kashmir was left unresolved as the British departed; and more than eight decades if you go back to July 1931 [4], when the then king’s troops killed 22 protesters.

The second set of images is relatively new, as it’s the fruit of “non-lethal” weapons introduced in Kashmir in 2010. But the pictures haunt you nonetheless, as you peer into the bloodied, plum-sized eyes of those who suspect they may never see again.

Such is the ferocity of the response of the Indian military occupation to the latest uprising that nearly 2,000 people suffered grievous or moderate injuries in just two days. In some kind of revanchist frenzy, paramilitaries attacked ambulances, shattered windows and cut off intravenous drips. The government of India and its loyalist representatives have clamped down on communications, social media and civil liberties; there is a near-total curfew everywhere [5]. Phones don’t ring in south Kashmir, where most of the killings took place, and the internet is mostly blocked.

A friend who’s visiting Kashmir reported that the “gravely ill can’t get to hospitals and can’t find medicines”. In short, yet another crushing siege in the decades-long relay of sieges. The world doesn’t need to know. India is a democracy.

In its intransigence over Kashmir, the Indian state has, among other things, waged a narrative war, in which it tells itself and its citizens via servile media, that there is no dispute, that it’s an internal matter – and whatever troubles there are in the idyllic valley are the work of jihadis from Pakistan. This gives the state easy demons to portray and then slay.

The Indian state now appears to believe its own fantasies, which it acts out by shooting its way out of a crisis every time Kashmiris voice their anger or political demands. It's as though India must perform rituals of brutal violence on the Kashmiri body to keep it tamed. In 2008, 60 people were shot when Kashmiris protested at the grant of hundreds of acres of land to a temple trust [6], because they believed this was an Indian attempt to change the demographic of their Muslim-majority region. In 2009, protests raged for weeks after the rape and murder of two female family members from Shopian in northern Kashmir was dismissed by the authorities as a drowning [7].

In 2010, 120 people, including teenagers, were butchered on the streets [8]. Hundreds of families were devastated, gifted eternal grief by a draconian state. Not one member of the armed forces was charged, let alone convicted, for those killings. And that's precisely why the soldiers kill again and again. That summer, when scores of adolescents were slain in the alleys, people gasped at the sheer scale of mayhem, but some also believed it might not happen again. It's too much, I heard said.

Policymakers in Kashmir and Delhi then deliberated upon what kind of weapon to deploy on a people the majority of whom quite simply don't want to be with India. They never have. The state came up with something that might thwart and injure protesters, but not kill them. A buckshot gun, a pellet grenade, a "non-lethal weapon", we were told. The lexicon of conflict in a place such as Kashmir engenders normalisation of even the most ghastly thing. It felt to me then that many were relieved that Kashmir's young would no longer face full-size deathly bullets, but tinier steel pellets instead. At least they won't die, it was said.

Over the last week, doctors in Kashmir have performed about 150 eye surgeries to try to remove pellets from retinas. Most of the patients will lose their eyesight, one doctor said. "It's a fate worse than death," said another. No other country has wilfully blinded scores of youths.

Meanwhile the dead have been interred in martyrs' graveyards. Most localities, in city and country, have one so as to remember their slain. Those wounded will live in partial or total darkness all their lives.

Kashmiris say *Azadi* - or independence - is an infinitely better option.

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P.S.

* The Guardian. Monday 18 July 2016 11.56 BST Last modified on Monday 18 July 2016 16.51 BST: <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/jul/18/india-blinding-kashmiri-protesters-justice-teel-pellets>

Footnotes

[1] <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jul/11/kashmir-death-toll-23-protests-shooting-burhan-wani-independence-violence>

[2] <http://www.firstpost.com/india/pellet-guns-in-kashmir-is-it-right-to-use-this-non-lethal-weapon-that-can-blind-forever-2895428.html>

- [3] <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2002/jun/09/india.kashmir3>
- [4] <http://www.kashmirlife.net/13-july-1931-a-chapter-of-kashmir-61908/>
- [5] <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jul/09/india-imposes-kashmir-curfew-after-death-of-rebel-leader>
- [6] <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2008/aug/12/india.kashmir>
- [7] <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2009/may/31/kashmir-rape-deaths-indian-soldiers>
- [8] <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2010/sep/22/kashmir-dead-hopes-of-2007>