

INTERVIEW

Solidarity With the People of Kashmir - “Now that fig leaf is gone. What remains is open, brutal military control”

Sunday 18 August 2019, by [BHATTACHARYA Tithi](#), [KRISHNAN Kavita](#) (Date first published: 18 August 2019).

India’s brutal occupation of Kashmir is only getting worse. The situation there demands our attention and those struggling for justice need our solidarity.

On August 5, the Indian government abrogated Article 370 of the Indian constitution which had, since 1947, accorded a special status to the northern state of Jammu and Kashmir (J&K), including a separate constitution and autonomy over internal administrative matters.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi in a forty-minute address to the nation combined perfectly his Bharatiya Janata Party’s (BJP) Hindu nationalist and neoliberal agenda by claiming that abolishing Kashmiri autonomy would boost economic development and curb Islamist terrorism in the region.

The abolishing of Article 370 had to be carried out by force. Since August 5 the Indian government has brutally cut Kashmir off from the rest of the world by installing paramilitary rule and suspending internet and phone services.

At great personal risk, a team of Indian activists defied their government’s threats and traveled to Kashmir to record the voices of those suffering there.

Here, *Jacobin* contributor and activist Tithi Bhattacharya talks to Kavita Krishnan, a leading Indian feminist and a member of the fact-finding team, about her experience in Kashmir.

Tithi Bhattacharya (TB)

For readers who may not know the roots of the current crisis in Kashmir, can you tell us how we got here? What role did British colonialism play?

Kavita Krishnan (KK)

The long-standing conflict in Jammu and Kashmir, as of so many other disputes in the subcontinent, has its roots in British imperialism. Independence was accompanied by a bloody partition and communal violence between Hindus and Muslims. Most of the Muslim-majority regions that lay along the border between the two countries were granted to Pakistan.

There were many “princely states” that had the option of remaining independent or to accede to one of the newly independent nations. Jammu and Kashmir was one such princely state. Its geopolitical location and the fact that it was a Muslim-majority state made it logical for the state to choose to join Pakistan.

But Jammu and Kashmir had a Hindu ruler, Maharaja Hari Singh, who was not in a mood to join

either India or Pakistan. And for the people of the state, both Kashmiri Muslims and Kashmiri Pandits (Hindus), their identity as Kashmiris was important to them. As a result, between August and October 1947, Jammu and Kashmir remained independent.

In October 1947, faced with an armed attack by Afghan tribal militias backed by Pakistan, Maharaja Hari Singh turned to India. He then signed the Instrument of Accession with India, a contract that allowed Jammu and Kashmir autonomy in all matters except defense, foreign affairs, and communications. The Instrument of Accession clarified that it did not bind the state to India's Constitution. It also stipulated that the decision of the ruler to accede to India must be ratified by the people of the state through a referendum. The Constitutional contract, guaranteeing Jammu and Kashmir a high degree of autonomy in all but the above-mentioned three areas, was negotiated by the Kashmiri and Indian leadership and incorporated into India's Constitution as "Article 370."

Kashmiri people at the time felt that their "Kashmiriyat" (Kashmiri identity) and autonomy would be safer in a secular, democratic, diverse, federal India rather than Pakistan. Sheikh Abdullah, then a popular leader of the Kashmiri people, said, "Normally, under the principles governing the Partition of India, our riyasat (princely state) of Jammu and Kashmir should have gone to Pakistan, but we chose India for its secularism, its democracy and its caring nature towards the citizens of Jammu and Kashmir".

Other states in India also have provisions similar to Article 370, protecting their lands and culture, but those provisions are not backed a legal contract like the Instrument of Accession.

In the years that followed, however, Governments of India hollowed out Article 370 and subjected J&K to successive betrayals.

Which other state of India has had its leader (Sheikh Abdullah) imprisoned for two decades? Which other state has only been able to have state governments that are client regimes of New Delhi? Which other state of India has mass graves where thousands of custodial killing victims are buried — without a massive outcry in the media and Parliament?

By abrogating Article 370 (and Article 35A) which represented the tattered symbols of the promise of Kashmir's autonomy, the Modi Government has burned the Constitutional bridge connecting Kashmir and India. Previous politicians would wave the fig leaf of Article 370 (along with regular elections to the state Assembly and Parliament) as evidence of the Constitutional contract binding Kashmir and India. Now that fig leaf is gone. What remains is open, brutal military control over the Kashmiri people.

TB

You just returned from Kashmir. What can you tell us of the situation there?

KK

The whole of Kashmir was a prison. All communication with the outside world — the internet, landline, and cell phones — had been suspended. Every street was blockaded by the paramilitary and razor wires blocked all movement. Even the local J&K police were reduced to traffic policing — all power lay with the paramilitary. People were extremely distressed — angry and anguished. They repeatedly told us that they felt humiliated and enslaved. In particular, they felt that the Islamophobic Modi had deliberately chosen to unleash this assault before the BakrEid festival. There was an air of fear and mourning everywhere.

While wires and gun-wielding soldiers and the blockade on communication were disturbing — there was an even more disturbing, insidious form of control. This was the widespread illegal detentions of

children as young as nine or ten years old.

We met the mothers of many such boys who clearly did not want to voice their worst fear — that their sons might be “disappeared” and the police/army could simply deny ever having had them in custody. In one Pulwama neighborhood, we were listening to a man tell us how little faith he had in our assurances that we would tell the truth back in Delhi. Just then a woman came up to us, held my hand and tearfully said something angry to us in Kashmiri. The man translated, “She is saying, ‘the “security forces” took my son in 2005 and never returned him. It’s useless talking to you — can you get him back?’” While I knew about such disappearances, it was monstrous to see children being used as a means to control an entire people.

Modi and his lieutenant Amit Shah have repeated the age-old imperial logic for domination: Kashmiri women needed liberating. A diplomat in the former Congress run government, Nirupama Menon Rao, claimed that Kashmir was two hundred years behind “the rest of India”.

We found, on the contrary, that rural Kashmir has a high level of education, and no sign of the kind of abject destitution and poverty that defines rural North India. Kashmiri girls and women were particularly assertive. “How can we celebrate Eid when our brothers are in custody,” one of them said to me. “Forces barge into our homes in the night to take away our boys and men.” Like many parts of the world, there is a taboo on talking about sexual assault in Kashmiri society. Still, some girls said, “Yes, we are afraid of being molested during such raids.” Asked about Modi’s claims of liberating them, young women responded with angry derision:

Who will liberate us?! The BJP leaders who are saying men in UP or Haryana (where the sex ratio is low) can now source fair brides from Kashmir?! Are we apples or peaches of Kashmir — goods to be looted by our conquerors?

Their rage was palpable.

Seeing the faces of boys scoured by pellet guns, eyes bloodshot and blinded, was like an accusation. We felt complicit in this atrocity that is being committed in our name.

TB

Is Modi simply an inheritor of policies adopted by previous Indian heads of state toward Kashmir or are he and his party, the BJP, adding a special twist to the moment?

KK

Previous Indian governments dominated by the Congress Party had a multipronged approach to Kashmir: create client governments; talk of “winning hearts and minds”; convince the international community that elections and Article 370 prove that Kashmiris are with the Indian Government; and at the same time unleash a regime of custodial killings, mass graves, pellet guns, and massacres of unarmed protestors.

The Modi Government’s policy offers no respite. It gives liberals no place to hide, no way to talk of “winning hearts and minds.” As Kashmiris put it, “the Congress would stab us in the back, BJP stabs us up front.” The BJP’s is a slash and burn policy. It isn’t really concerned about “managing” Kashmir, or “managing” its image internationally. It is happy to set Kashmir on fire — and bake its political bread in this fire. So, consistent with its Hindu nationalist imagination, it projects Kashmir as a land of rebellious Muslims who, as all Muslims are wont to do, love Pakistan and hate India. And so it projects Modi and Shah as the bold conquerors of this “rebellious” province.

TB

Mainstream media is reporting that the support for Modi's move to suspend Kashmir's autonomous status is high in India. Is this correct, and if so, why?

KK

The answer here is both yes and no. Yes, Indian schools have never really taught the history of Kashmir's accession and the facts about the Kashmir dispute. So many are getting their history lessons from a viciously fascist, propagandist media now. Even among the well-meaning liberals, there are many who welcome the Modi Government's move.

But — and I think this needs to be stressed — there have been huge protests all over India against the move by students, workers, women, Dalits, and Left and social movement organizations. Dalit and feminist activists have pointed out that when the BJP says Article 370 on Kashmir was a “temporary” provision in the Constitution that eventually had to go, we should remember that the BJP says the same thing about affirmative action laws regarding oppressed castes and tribes: that they, too, are a “temporary provision” that should have gone long ago.

If they could just “dissolve” or “annihilate” the independence of Jammu and Kashmir overnight and turn it into two Union territories, they could just as easily do the same to any other Indian state they see as “disobedient.” If Tamil Nadu doesn't accept Hindi imposition, perhaps they will demote it to a Union territory called “Tamil Pradesh”? If they have gotten rid of one Article of the Constitution so easily, it gives them the confidence to chip away further at the infrastructure of the secular, democratic, federal Constitution. In his speech on August 15, Modi boasted that he did away with at least one “redundant” law a day in his first five years in office, and no one even knew about it. These “redundant” laws include labor laws and environmental protection and workplace safety laws!

It takes courage for anyone in India to speak the truth on Kashmir right now. The Modi Government has passed laws allowing individuals to be easily branded “terrorists.” The ostensible excuse is “lone wolf” terrorists (India has seen none of this kind yet). But the actual intent of the law is to ban all dissent in the name of national security. So each of us speaking out against Modi's Kashmir policy is now at the risk of arrest at best, and violence by fascist/far-right terrorists at worst.

TB

What is Pakistan's role in Kashmir? What should our approach be to interstate relations between India and Pakistan on this issue given that both countries are nuclear powers?

KK

Pakistan's role in Kashmir is both dubious and dangerous. Indeed, Pakistan provided precedence for what the Indian Government has just done. They turned parts of Pakistan-administered Kashmir into “Centrally Administered Territories.” As a recent UN Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) report on human rights in Kashmir noted, Pakistan, too, has no respect for the views of Kashmiris. Kashmir is a pawn in their policy toward India. None of this helps the Kashmir cause. It only helps the Hindutva far-right because it helps squeeze out independent voices in India as well as Kashmiri voices, and turns the Kashmir issue into an India vs. Pakistan problem.

Back in Kashmir, a young man grinned when we asked why Kashmiris raise pro-Pakistan slogans or support Pakistan in cricket matches. He said “We know of the undemocratic conditions in Pakistan. We don't really envy Pakistanis. But we praise Pakistan to tease Indian soldiers — we realize that any mention of Pakistan is especially galling to them!”

TB

Do you think the Kashmir question is embedded in the consolidation and spread of

Islamophobia globally?

KK

Certainly, global Islamophobia has helped consolidate the politics of Hindutva in India and South Asia and specifically in Kashmir. The BJP is able to project Israel's treatment of Palestine and of Palestinians as a model for its treatment of Indian Muslims, of Kashmir, and of Pakistan as well. Islamophobic stereotypes have also served to persuade a section of liberal opinion that to support Kashmiris is to support an "Islamic State."

What people don't realize is this: the Islamization of the Kashmir movement is a product of the Hinduization of the oppression they face. When Army trucks bear Hindu symbols, when prayers in mosques are banned, when the total abrogation of basic rights in Kashmir is casually rationalized by influential liberal commentators in India, it is natural for the only Muslim-majority state in India (J&K) to feel they're persecuted and oppressed because they're Muslim.

TB

What can we on the international left do to stand in solidarity with the Kashmiri people?

KK

Kashmir, and the antifascist movement in India, urgently need solidarity. With India being a huge market, we find international governments as well as influential commentators loath to count Modi and his chilling sidekick Shah among the likes of Trump, Bolsonaro, Duterte, Erdogan, or Putin. So Obama writes an op-ed in praise of Modi. Bear Grylls shoots a show in a forest with Modi — without any mention of how Modi is getting rid of India's forest protection laws, and handing over huge tracts of virgin forest to his corporate crony Adani, who is also destroying Australia's Great Barrier Reef with Modi's backing! So — please amplify reports about the real situation in Kashmir, and hold discussions where Kashmiri scholars and writers can be heard respectfully. Screen films on Kashmir. And also please recognize and protest the ways in which Modi is trashing democracy in India.

P.S.

• Jacobin. 08.18.2019:

<https://www.jacobinmag.com/2019/08/jammu-kashmir-narendra-modi-bjp-india-pakistan-article-370>

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