

# The idea of India and Kashmir

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KASHMIR has been bracketed with India in postcolonial modernity. In spite of the legal ambiguities surrounding its accession to the Indian Republic, and against the wishes of the majority of Kashmir's population, Kashmir remains central to India's imagination of its identity. It is widely viewed through its geopolitical framing as an area of 'strategic' significance and as an arena for contesting Pakistan's ambitions to destabilize India. Kashmiris are, thus, at the receiving end of a governmentality (in the Foucaultian sense) that is sustained through a biopolitics of power structures that function through coercion and suppression.

The illegitimate exercise of state power – any form of governance that is maintained with a prolonged enforcement of unjustifiable and undemocratic laws like PSA and AFSPA by the brute force of hundreds of thousands of uniformed personnel, and which results in tens of thousands of Kashmiris being killed and displaced, thousands missing and disappeared, thousands of juveniles routinely suffering abuse in jail, numerous lives marred by rapes, curfews and pre-emptive detentions, hundreds of young people killed and tortured over one summer alone, is most certainly illegitimate – in Kashmir has complicated links with history and memory.

History and memory are dynamic generational experiences. Who we are and what we do is deeply linked to how we remember our coming into

being (as nations and as individuals), and what the present has presented us with, affects our hopes for the future. Kashmiris demand *azaadi*, a freedom to self-determine. This is a fundamental fact that may, at times, be convoluted by other desires such as development, employment, infrastructure, growth, prosperity, but it is not exhausted by them. *Azaadi* is not just about a better life, it refers to a freer life; a life where the Kashmiris do not face an erasure of their dignity and a denial of their identity. The call for *azaadi* – whatever form it takes – is as central to the Kashmiris, as Kashmir is to Indians.

Behind this one word 'azaadi', there is a caravan of historical and personal memory: the injustices of the pre-Indian independence Dogra rule, the Quit Kashmir Movement and the New Kashmir Manifesto of the 1940s, then, over the many decades of the 20th century, the undemocratic undoing of Kashmiri governments by Delhi, the rigging of Kashmiri elections, unsympathetic governors, gruesome violence from the military and militants that polarized the ideological landscape, corrupt machinations of the Kashmiri political elite, and the countless everyday ignominies that have to be endured by a population that lives under intermittent siege in a militarized zone of continued conflict.

In the media everywhere, the most visible face of the sentiment of *azaadi* are the Kashmiri youth. In a way, the term 'youth' is a misnomer. It presents us with the image of radicalized young men, while excluding the continuing resistance put forward

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\* Nitasha Kaul's debut novel *Residue*, about Kashmiris outside of Kashmir, was short-listed for the Man Asian Literary Prize in 2009.

by women and the older folk. The aspirations of young Kashmiris can range from those of the 10 year old Danish Bashir who wants to be a big *sangbaz* or stone-pelter when he grows up, to Shah Faesal, the first Kashmiri to top the IAS examination. Moreover, in many cases, the designation 'youth' is not age-determined; the so-called 'Islamic rage-boy' of Kashmir (Shakeel Ahmad Bhat) is a man in his thirties, unemployed and tortured, who was charged with the PSA nine times between 2008 and 2011. A news article reported, sans irony, that he had 'inherited separatism' from his father who had been associated with the separatist plebiscite front of Sheikh Abdullah's time. This inheriting of separatism is precisely what tells us that the roots of Kashmiri quest for identity go much further back than the late twentieth-century phase of militancy.

For Kashmiris, the question of Kashmir is a question of memory. Memory in its many guises. The collective memory of their people who have been brutalized by the military occupation. The memory of individuals who went across the border into Pakistan, became militants for the cause, and died or disappeared. The memories of a childhood where soldiers might poke school-bags with guns and a man in chains might be brought to a school hall to take a school examination. The fading memory of the long-displaced Kashmiri Hindu minority which once thrived in the valley. Rather Rashomon-like, in many substantive ways and on many significant matters, the memory of Kashmiris significantly diverges from the memory of Indians.

The young generation in India can look forward to some of the benefits of growth, development, economic and social liberalization. Their choices and actions are not immediately framed by the compass of their commitment

to the dignity and identity of their nation. They do not need their icons in order to liberate them from the suffocating tyranny of stereotypes. The young generation in Kashmir has grown up with two decades of fairly intense violence and frequent curfews; they are often related in some way to people who have died, disappeared, been raped, or humiliated. Their identity is continually subject to conflict. Their choices and actions can immediately be branded traitorous, opportunistic, glorious, or iconic in terms of the larger cause of Kashmir.

Statistics from a 2006 USAID report show that about one-fifth of the world's population is between 15 and 24 years; 85 per cent of these one billion people live in the developing world where nearly all of the world's current conflicts take place. Half of the world's unemployed are also youth. Globally, the 1990s witnessed the death of two million children and youth in armed conflict, and the disablement of another five million worldwide. Undoubtedly, growing up amid conflict and exposure to violence from an early age significantly harms physical and psychological well-being. This is all-too-evident in Kashmir where a majority of the population suffers from some kind of post-traumatic stress and depression-related psychological disorders. While the reports about young Kashmiris (including girls and soldiers) taking up music or forming rock bands receive media coverage, there are also the numbers about depression which reveal that since 1989 when the conflict turned violent, the patients seeking psychiatric help have gone up dramatically.

The last two decades of conflict have increased stress levels considerably and the mental health of Kashmiris has suffered. The handful of psychiatrists (alongside the many street clinics that unofficially prescribe

anti-depressants pointing to the drug abuse problem) in Kashmir are under pressure from the increasing numbers of people who are psychologically struggling with their lives in an unpredictable environment of prolonged violence. On one visit to Srinagar in the early years of the last decade, the young man who drove the auto-rickshaw that I had hailed, abruptly turned around in fearful terror at the crackling sound of an empty plastic bottle that I carried. Reassured at the sight of the object in my hand, he explained that he had been jumpy because the sound was akin to that made by a gun.

As of January 2013, over a thousand Kashmiri youth, including females, continue to be in different jails in Jammu, due to their support of the movement for Kashmiri freedom. According to a High Court Bar Association report, they often lack legal aid, medical facilities, and their personal religious beliefs are not upheld in the matter of dietary habits. The Human Rights groups have also repeatedly drawn attention to the detention of minors in the Kashmir Valley. There are instances of school-age boys who are handcuffed, beaten and tortured after having been detained on charges of rioting and arson.

After the 'summer of killing youth' in 2010, a police study reported that '60 per cent of those killed were children and youth and 68 per cent of the 120 killed had fathers who were illiterate.' The deprived socio-economic status of many stone-pelters indicates their greater vulnerability and suffering. What a contrast to the Indian media commentators who write 'Sorry, Kashmir is happy', where they paint the picture of a valley where the people simply yearn for KFC, and it is the noxious elites abroad who foment dissent.

For many young people in Kashmir, the internet is a medium to express themselves more freely. Yet, this cyber-activism has also been heavily circumscribed since the summer of 2010, when two videos of 'Kashmir's Abu Ghraib' were posted on Youtube; these showed the abominably depraved humiliation of Kashmiri detainees by the Indian security forces. The Indian government claimed (as it did in the Shopian rape case) that these were setups, but there is no reason to disbelieve the truth of those images for anyone who has seen the Indian forces in action against the Naxals. Since that summer of killings in Kashmir, there have been escalating levels of surveillance of young Kashmiris, particularly on Facebook. There have been constant reports of the police arresting the youth in Kashmir for their online activity, sometimes pre-emptively, in order to 'keep them out of circulation'. Is this a sign of life under a democracy?

The Kashmiris are not just pelting stones in their protest against the Indian state. They are also penning words and making art – satires that ridicule the disingenuous 'platinum pain' of their elites, poetic profiles of the heart and mind of a protestor, translations of an older generation's work, political novels and memoirs, articles published online that starkly depict the suffering of the people, blogs and posts on Facebook that seek to fill in the gaps in the mainstream Indian and international understanding, paintings that depict their besieged state, MC Kash style protest rap.

Academic and policy-making studies find the structural factors behind youth exclusion anywhere to be un- or under-employment and lack of livelihood opportunities, insufficient unequal or inappropriate education and skills, poor governance and weak political participation, gender inequali-

ties and socialization, and a legacy of past violence. In addition to these, the proximate factors are recruitment, coercion and indoctrination, identity politics and ideology, leadership and organizational dynamics, and trigger events. Going by such analyses, the outbreak of prolonged violence in Kashmir is hardly surprising.

'I am a Kashmiri. I have not come here to talk politics. The pain and suffering of this place is my suffering too,' Rahul Gandhi had declared this in Kashmir in 2011. He went again in 2012 and along came the captains of Indian industry. Each time, the students of Kashmir University were addressed. Is this representative of the Indian state reaching out to the Kashmiris? A young Kashmiri journalism student from the audience – who was not allowed to carry a pen into the interaction – aptly blogged in NYT, 'How are we supposed to trust people who in turn do not trust us.' There was much talk of business and communication, but little of politics on these visits. This is not unusual. The Indian establishment might believe that development alone will bring peace, but this peace will not last if the political aspirations of the Kashmiris are not attended to.

The Kashmiri call for azaadi is a call for political, economic, and social justice. Investment and infrastructure might diversify the existing pie and create a newer elite to counterbalance some entrenched power structures, but it will not resolve the issue from the ground up. The political demand and economic welfare are not mutually exclusive, we need to give due consideration to the politics of the economic. In any case, the Kashmiri people's dignity cannot be restored until draconian laws are lifted, the military occupation ended, and dissent allowed to flower in a truly democratic vein.

Kashmir is not a problem because of the Kashmiris. It is a problem because of India's refusal to recognize the grievances of the people of Kashmir without reducing them to the question of religion (and/or religious leaders)-inspired separatism or as an outcome of developmental failures alone. By increasing the surveillance of online activity by young Kashmiris, by detaining people under unjustifiable laws, by asserting that the stone-pelters were paid to do what they did, the Indian state zooms in on the symptoms, not the cause. The cause stares them in the face: that due to a combination of various factors (which exclude neither the misrule and interference in Kashmir from 1950s till 1980s nor the Islamist militancy in the region in the 1980s and 1990s), the people of Kashmir are not satisfied with the state in which they find themselves. Which population would like to be governed by a comprador elite, by military occupation, by being subject to laws which provide carte blanche power to the security forces?

What kind of signal does India send out when it refuses to repeal unjust laws or reduce its military operations? When it bans well-regarded US academics writing on Kashmir from visiting the region (the case of Richard Shapiro and Angana Chatterji)? When security forces punish and abuse family members of those involved in the struggle for azaadi? When an innocent man on a secret tryst to meet his girlfriend is shot for being a terrorist (the 21 year old Magray from Handwara who was shot at and then fired with a grenade by the Indian Army as he crossed a bridge)? When professors at Kashmir University are arrested for charges that include setting a question paper that required the students to discuss whether stone-pelters are heroes? When Indian media portray-

als (in films, for example) of Kashmiris struggling for their rights always depicts them as Islamist-inspired, irrational, ungrateful, and ultimately, unjustifiable? When, between 8000 to 20000 people (Amnesty estimates), have been detained under the PSA in the last two decades? When Indian activists and lawyers such as Gautam Navlakha and Prashant Bhushan are beaten up in public for stating their views on Kashmir?

India is the world's largest democracy; it is also a potentially big global market and an increasingly Hinduized region which is marked by a spectrum of prejudices that do not dissipate with neoliberal economic growth miracles. The targets of overt or covert discrimination, harassment and abuse in India include not just the Kashmiri Muslims but also the people of the 'Northeast', the people of Telengana, Naxals and Maoists, the 'lower' castes, women, the disabled, and many many more. The mainstream Indian middle classes are themselves getting increasingly irate at the ubiquitous corruption and vicious violence towards women, as was evident in the collective protests in the recent years and months.

Representation is a matter central to democracy. How can a government expect to be seen as legitimate when its accountability to its subjects is near-completely absent? Bureaucracies, politicians, and businesses aside, what is the dominant image of the Indian government on the ground in Kashmir? Secretive, Mercenary, Bullying, Vengeful, Islamophobic. Or, if you prefer: Soldiers, Barricades, Guns, Curfews, Executions, Sell-outs, Spies. Delhi becomes not just the capital city of opportunities, it is the epicentre of an arbitrary and often brutal exercise of power.

Who can forget the famous line in the Wikileaks cable from the Ameri-

can Ambassador to India to the US State Department in 2006 where he said – 'Kashmir politics is as filthy as the Dal Lake.' Pointing to the corruption of the politically connected Kashmiri elite and the lack of development work in spite of the rivers of money that go to the state for development, he had written: 'Money from Pakistani and Indian intelligence agencies and foreign extremists has distorted Kashmiri politics and incentivized leaders to perpetuate the conflict... it also calls into question whether the Kashmiri elite truly want a settlement to their problems. The minute a deal is struck, some must surely worry that the funds will dry up.' Elsewhere, I have analyzed this kind of scenario in terms of the Mandarin-Machiavelli dynamic which comes to us from imperial geopolitics.

Kashmir simmering with conflict serves many interests. Like many other postcolonial societies, India has high levels of economic, social, religious, casteist, and ethnic conflict, and in many cases this can be channelized into electoral gains. Kashmir becomes a useful issue for the government to show its 'strong' credentials when faced with the rising right-wing electoral pressures. Conflict, or the looming threat of potential conflict, is also lucrative for the defence establishment. Moreover, bureaucratic and diplomatic thinking mired in traditionalist paradigms (which answers to power rather than to people), would view Kashmir in the context of Islam and Pakistan and see it as a link in the AfPak scenario. In the defence and management speak of trust-deficits, peace-dividends, returns to normalcy, collateral damage and so on, the mass graves, the half-widows, the jailed youth, the dead, missing, raped, and depressed people of Kashmir, they all stay silent. The juggernaut of Indian

democracy moves on. There are resonances in India too. Which is why the Tamils often support Kashmir, and the Maoist Naxals have plainly stated their support for Kashmir's right to self-determination or azaadi.

As the Indian establishment becomes hostage to the forces of amoral commerce, its values go for sale. The founding premise and promise of India has become deeply compromised. Recently, the judgement of the Supreme Court in the Afzal Guru case stated that he must be executed in order to satisfy the collective conscience of the people of India. It is the collective conscience of Kashmir that must now be satisfied. What kind of state hangs a man on the basis of circumstantial evidence to satisfy the 'collective conscience' of the people, informs him on the morning of his execution, and his family days afterwards, and with trenchant symbolism buries his corpse in prison alongside that of another Kashmiri martyr-militant? Who punishes a dead body ad infinitum? Whether or not Afzal Guru's crime satisfied the rarest of the rare case criterion needed to execute a human being, the Indian state, in the curfewed aftermath of the hanging, certainly staged a rarest of the rare mis-en-abyme – the Kashmiri body in the Indian state prison and the body of Kashmir in the prison of the Indian state.

In his first eve of Republic Day speech to the nation on 25 January 2013, President Pranab Mukherjee ended with the following words: 'Even the British sensed that they were leaving a land which was very different from the one they had occupied... The spirit of India is written in stone.' Were the word British to be replaced with Indians, and the word India with Kashmir, the stone-pelters' message of azaadi would become clear.