

On Loving and Losing Kashmir

Kashmir is not only the name of an (inter)national problem where egotist nation-states or religious communities clash. It is a site of entangled myths and memories, a contested space of resistance and oppression, and most importantly, a place where millions of people live and breathe and die. Until the people of Jammu and Kashmir and their aspirations are given primacy, no just order or humane solution is possible.

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Let me begin this present thought-piece on Kashmir by making the straightforward statement (controversial in many quarters) – Kashmir is *not* just an India-Pakistan issue, it is certainly *not* a Muslim-Hindu issue. The longer we continue to operate within such paradigms, the more bitter the outcome would be.

By **Nitasha Kaul**

Kashmir is a boundary zone of modern states of India-Pakistan-China. At present, parts of Kashmir are occupied and claimed by India, Pakistan, and China. The history of this uniquely amalgamated region defies easy categorization. Having a historical legacy as a sacred site of early Himalayan Buddhism, Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) was a Muslim-majority state in a Hindu-majority India at the time of India's independence from the British; through most of the last millennium, it was variously ruled by central and west Asian originating Mughal-Afghan dynasties. In the nineteenth century, it was ruled by Sikhs from whom the British acquired it and sold it on to a Hindu Dogra king. As a people of the mountains who had been bartered by the British, Kashmiris have been acutely aware of the oppressions they faced. The distinctive identity of Kashmir has been shaped by multiple influences and rulerships. Kashmir's history is a knot of contested interpretations made worse by conscious attempts in India and Pakistan to claim ownership of that history.

Kashmiris were a people who were 'bargained' into Indian/Pakistani nationhood when the British left the region. They did not see themselves as belonging to any of the neighbouring countries until they were classified as such by the political games of the later part of the twentieth century. The centuries-old tradition of Kashmiriyat bears testimony to the identity of Kashmiris as a people who did not let their religious affiliations overwhelm their ethnic and regional commonality. From the mid-nineteenth century onwards, the practice of statecraft and governance came to be tied closely to statistics, enumeration and classification. In the colonies, the British tried to stabilize and centralize channels of power by classifying their subjects and dealing with them in terms of race, genetic stock, community leaders, and in case of India, religion. Hindus and Muslims were two important lenses through which people were perceived, roused, and then divided during Partition. In the case of Kashmir, this British formula was messed-up – the Muslims were the majority in Kashmir, but the ruler (Hari Singh) was not Muslim, the would-be Indian Prime Minister Nehru was Kashmiri Hindu but close to Sheikh Abdullah, the most prominent Kashmiri leader, a Muslim. The events in 1989 and early 1990s did lead to the mass migration of most Kashmiri Pandits from the Valley and communal discourses acquired unprecedented salience. But even today, despite

the efforts of hardcore Islamists and Hindutvawadis, Kashmir has not yet become a Hindu-Muslim conflict.

It is not only nationalism, but geopolitics too that has played a role in victimizing the Kashmiri people. The entire Himalayas, including Kashmir, had been constructed as a strategic geopolitical buffer in the imperial trajectory; the 'Great Game' was a kind of proto-Cold War as countries jostled for prestige and influence without fighting an actual war. When India and Pakistan were being carved up, Kashmir was coveted on all sides (this manic struggle over possessing Kashmir has led to multiple wars – 1947, 1965, 1999 – between India and Pakistan – both of whom use Kashmir as a propaganda pawn for their opportunistic and hypocritical purposes – and a continued boundary stalemate, including over the unpopulated Aksai-Chin area, between India and China).

When Pakistan and India came into being, Kashmir was attacked by one side to obtain it by force and its unrepresentative ruler was forced by the other side to sign an 'instrument of accession' as a condition of providing help in repelling the attack. Where were the Kashmiri people's aspirations accounted for in all of this? In India, they were promised self-determination but over the successive decades witnessed a tug of war between the centre and periphery during which governments in Srinagar were removed from power, puppets were installed, and elections were rigged. India saw the people of Kashmir as inherently 'alien' and 'untrustworthy', somehow always already 'tainted'.

The nations who claim Kashmir do not care for the Kashmiri people who inhabit the land of Kashmir. If they did, they would be able to see Kashmir as a 'peopled' place: especially over the last few decades, Kashmiris have been denied their basic human rights and freedoms – they have lived in the shadow of violence, an entire generation of young people has now grown up surrounded by guns, bunkers, barbed wires, curfews, searches, unmarked mass graves, torture and detention centres – and counting – those raped, those gone missing, those orphaned, those killed by the military and militants, those collaborating, those defecting, those crossing the borders, those being killed randomly as they go to buy chicken, play football, or visit their beloved.

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There are many ways of loving Kashmir.

Anywhere in the world, someone who has been to the Himalayan region, and has visited Kashmir at any time in their life, will narrate with tender nostalgia the beauty of the region. These individuals love Kashmir for the place that it was – the mountains, lakes, chinar trees, houseboats, wood carving, papier-mâché artefacts, Kashmiris in *pherans* carrying *kangris* – and for the place that it might again be at some point in the future.

However, nation-states do not love territories in the same way that individuals do. India sees Kashmir as an ‘integral’ part of the Indian nation. Pakistan, founded on the basis of ‘two-nation theory’ considers Kashmir to be a place that needs liberation from India and an assimilation into Pakistan. The Chinese government argues that everything that belonged to the traditional Tibetan state belongs to the ‘motherland’ of China and hence controls Aksai Chin. There is also the uncomfortable fact that what we love we often fight for. Thus, for the larger postcolonial states that surround Kashmir – India, Pakistan, China – Kashmir becomes an ‘issue’, a ‘problem’ where nationalist egos clash and lives are sacrificed in the name of national integrity and state security.

Now, calling a place an ‘issue’ in international relations is euphemism for restrictions on the human rights of the inhabitants of that area, using excessive force, perpetrating violence, and condoning bloodshed. In the case of Kashmir, its location is perceived to be ‘strategic’ since it simultaneously happens to lie at the boundary zone of partitioned nuclear weapon nations, rising Asian powers, democratic/theocratic/communist states, and also at the high altitude gateway to Central Asia. Kashmir’s geographical location, *per se*, is considered to be its biggest asset in geopolitical terms by the controlling states.

In addition, ‘issues’ that are ‘strategic’ in international relations, have a label of ‘sensitive’ attached to the discourse around them. In the case of Kashmir, this translates into limited access both to physical parts of Kashmir and to later twentieth century historical and archival records – written and cartographic – about Kashmir, into diplomatic discussions that are conducted without public knowledge or general consensus, into a raft of inter-departmental bureaucratic wrangling when it comes to changing laws and rules and altering budgets, and into a shaping of media coverage in line

with the dominant governmental view owing to the 'security' needs of the 'strategic' area, which is a 'sensitive' 'issue'.

Kashmir is not the only, or even the worst affected (think of Afghanistan or Palestine), divided zone in the world that has suffered from such cloak-and-dagger view of 'strategic' places and peoples in international relations. This is the legacy of the nineteenth century *realpolitik* that has persisted from the high noon of the traditional empire era to the present day ostensibly decolonized world. In this view, entrenched in military and management thinking, areas on the map are understood in terms of what mineral and water resources they have, in terms of what can be cultivated there, in terms of what roads can slice through those lands, and which disputed boundaries can be marked in bold lines and which in dotted lines. But, these colour-coded maps do not have a space for the aspirations of the people on the ground, their sense of belonging and identity, and neither is there the recognition of the drastic curtailment of people's everyday freedoms in the name of 'security' and militarized development. When we think of contemporary problematic issues, it is important to uncover the processes by which certain geographical regions come to be seen as 'strategic', and this, in turn, contributes to a limited discourse around them in which they are seen as being 'sensitive' topics.



Geographical imagination has played a central role in the global coming-into-being of modernity in recent centuries. Just as the overthrow of feudal social structures, dethroning of divine right monarchs, and questioning of the authority of the Church was essential to the internal enlightenment processes of remaking Europe, similarly, the colonization of distant places by visualizing an economy of maximal extraction with minimum effort and a politics that focused on carving elite-governed administrative areas answerable to the non-native centres of power, was important for the external spread of functioning European empires.

Geography, serving as the handmaiden of geopolitics, was thus typically about access, resource, and boundary-making. This became especially problematic in the mountainous regions of the non-West, where a variety of complicating factors existed. To begin with, for

the imperial mindset, the mountains were ‘natural’ frontiers – useful for cartographic demarcation and defence, to be co-opted into one or another side of the country of the plains. However, for the people who inhabited these mountains, their primary affiliation was to their own environment, and the fact of their ‘belonging’ to the mountains could not easily be subsumed into any other national identity for them. Secondly, the mountains, Himalayas in particular, are unique for having a rich and syncretic civilizational intermingling of Buddhism-Hinduism-Islam, plus the multiple regional, rural and tribal groupings that focus on local affiliation above everything else. The imperial system of boundary-making and accounting sought to dilute these complexities by attending to demography alone and the postcolonial states of India, Pakistan and China have not only inherited this mindset, but also implemented the system with a vengeance. Classifying individuals in mutually exclusive identity categories and playing the divide and rule games (Hindu vs Muslim vs Sikh vs Buddhist or Shia vs Sunni or Valley Kashmiri vs Ladakh vs Jammu) continues unabated, even as an increasing number of people affected by this, appropriate the divisive identity politics themselves, and join the game.

The story of the mountain-peoples of Eurasia is, by and large, a tragedy. Running one’s index finger on the multi-coloured land surface of a modern-day political world map, one will see how many ‘problem areas’ (some states, some sub-state entities, some overlapping zones of displaced peoples) – Tibet, Kashmir, North Pakistan, Afghanistan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Iran, Iraq, Syria – were thriving zones of contact between diverse communities that traded goods and exchanged ideas along the arteries of the ‘Silk Route’. Like many of these other places, Kashmir, a Himalayan *zone of contact* between diverse peoples in history, has become a *zone of conflict*, due in large measure to modern boundary-making processes, which evolved to accommodate economic privileges and political trade-offs with rivals that were necessary for European (especially British) colonization (and the subsequent decolonization) of the region.

If we consider the specific case of the British empire in South Asia, it was a nitpicky and dissonant enterprise; it was an empire run by a democracy, that expanded by median diplomacy, strategic but grounded thinking, conceptual reconstruction, and accounting, as

much as it did by force. Unlike the earlier rulers who came from central Asia, the British operated primarily on the dual bases of economic rationality and assumed moral superiority. They often drew lines on maps opportunistically, and in time, these 'boundaries' would get transformed into 'frontiers'.

Empires of the ancient world had a fluid notion of boundaries. In parts of the Himalayas especially, there were multiple systems of power transmission – these ranged from marriages to tributes to reincarnations. The idea of people owing an overarching allegiance to an exclusive national identity (over religious, ethnic or other forms of affiliation) is a relatively modern construct.

In the case of the Himalayan mountains, the British never saw much advantage in direct control (they calculated that the administrative, policing and transportation costs were too high and the returns not worthwhile when compared to the fertile and bustling plains) and preferred, instead, to follow a stated policy of 'controlling the hills from the plains'. In order to do this, the administration at the centre needed to depend on local elites in the peripheral regions. So, the system was set up during colonial times – the bureaucrats at the centre would be the administrators and policy makers and they would cultivate local aristocratic, political and business elites in the peripheral regions. Often, they would patronize rival elites in a peripheral region and 'activate' their influence as and when required. In the middle of the twentieth century when the British formally left, the post-colonial Asian states inherited this mindset and implemented this system of governance with a renewed fervour. To this day, the Indian state manages its peripheries in this way. Both Kashmir and the 'North-East' are examples.

Why does this matter? Because it sets up structures of power and responsibility that do not overlap meaningfully. The bureaucrats and politicians at the centre do not have direct interaction with the regions; their interest is only to have a 'reliable' power base in the periphery. Equally, the local elites in the periphery exaggerate reports of their influence over 'their' people in order to gain maximum advantage from the centre. This pattern of (what I would call) Mandarin-Machiavelli interaction has characterized the relationship of India with Kashmir (or rather of New Delhi with Srinagar). Neither the centre nor the periphery has any interest in being genuinely concerned about the people in whose name they wield

power and exercise authority. What is more, in such a scenario, there is enormous potential of corruption as long as it doesn't harm the ruling interests at both ends of the chain, and any dissent will only be tolerated if it can be channelled for political gains. Otherwise, those dissenting or seeking change will be punished and brutalized. This is exactly what is happening in Kashmir today.

Thus, imperial cartography and postcolonial securitization have converted a zone of interaction into a theatre of conflict and oppression. India was once considered the jewel in the crown of the British empire. It was important for British geopolitical influence in Asia; it was a crucial source of raw materials for trade; and it was a culturally significant place to influence, civilize and develop the natives. The actual boundaries of independent India notwithstanding, for the British empire, India was as much an 'idea' as it was a physical place. This idea of India was central to the imperial British imagination and they sought to hold on to this India for as long as they could, under pressure from other colonial powers and from Indian freedom fighters of various kinds. While India was a jewel in the crown, Indians were ruled through a mix of carrot-and-stick policies. Indians suffered the ignominy, while possession of India gave the British an imperial identity. Kashmir, in the Indian imagination, holds a similar place. The idea of Kashmir – a Muslim majority province in secular India – is a jewel in the crown of Indian nationalism. Kashmiris, with their demands for dignity are considered as irritants/separatists/traitors/terrorists, while Kashmir is extolled as integral part of India.

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Much blood and ink has been spilt over militarization-insurgencies-counterinsurgencies-brutalization of 1990s and 2000s. The widespread protests in Kashmir Valley in 2010, brutal crackdown by Indian security forces, including the killing of more than a hundred unarmed protesters, hypernationalist Indian media reporting, refusal of the Indian government to make any significant concessions – all these show that the Indian state is ultimately unable to understand why most Kashmiris are not enamoured by the world's largest democracy, or why they don't buy into the 'shining' India story.

There are new and old challenges faced by Kashmiris in India and India in Kashmir. With the growing Hinduization of India in the last decade of the twentieth century and onwards, Kashmir has become a rallying point for right-wing Hindutva forces. They deploy it to argue against the so-called forces of Islamism and Muslim terrorism on the one hand, and on the other, they use the example of the mass exodus of Kashmiri Hindus in 1989-1990 as a focal point to mobilize young Kashmiri Hindus and other Indian Hindus in favour of their cause. In recent times, with the gradual dissolution of the Ayodhya Babri Masjid-Ram Temple issue possibly in favour of Hindutva, Kashmir has the potential to become another such flashpoint for Hindutva ideology. It is worth noting that the popularity of right-wing parties (such as the BJP) has increased substantially in the Jammu area. The strategy of organizing mass 'yatras' to activate public sentiment and whip up intolerance against minorities is not new to right-wing Indian politics. Just as the 'Rath Yatra' of 1990 was a seminal moment in shifting Indian politics to the right, similarly, the BJP and other such groups have renewed their efforts to make Kashmir their focus, for example in the proposed 'Ekta Yatra' of 26 January 2011.

Pakistan is in crisis. Rather than gloat about this or point out to Kashmiris that their fate in Pakistan will be worse, India should re-examine the health of its political system and economic development, especially as it is practised in Kashmir. How democratic, representative and accountable is the state in J&K? While corruption and venality are ubiquitous throughout India, what adds to the resentment of Kashmiris is a strongly held belief that the Indian rule is illegitimate. Anti-India does not necessarily mean pro-Pakistan or pro-independence. Available political strategies do not always map on to the diverse, diffuse and complicated aspirations of the people. '*Azadi*' is a demand; an ideal whose meaning is not pre-given. What is certain is that it is a negation of the pseudo-democracy that India implements in Kashmir while letting the security establishment function with impunity. It is a negation of the Indian nationalist myth of unity in diversity because the Kashmiri people are not given any substantial political agency. *Azadi* is an affirmation of self-determination, a desire of the Kashmiri people to be active agents in how the past, present and future of Kashmir is scripted.

All hope may not be lost for India. It can try, for a change, to invest in reflecting upon what Indian rule has meant for the people in Kashmir. It can shift the focus away from militarization and securitization and propaganda to understanding, conversation, and substantial change. It can make the lives of people better and easier. Kashmiris have to struggle with bureaucratic and security nightmares to acquire the amenities that people in mainland India take for granted: simple things such as a mobile phone connection or an uninterrupted access to internet. While the Middle East witnesses a remarkable democratic revolution led by young people making use of modern technologies and online social networks to unseat authoritarian regimes, officials and politicians in ‘democratic’ India express anxieties about the contagion effects of protests on Kashmiris. What does it say about the state of public morality and democratic credentials of India, if the security establishment sees itself on the side of Ben Ali, Mubarak and Gaddafi? You cannot forever buy yourself out of democratic protests through bribes masked as development packages. Indians fought against the British not only because British rule was economically exploitative, but also for their political dignity. Nationalism is primarily about political dignity. Kashmiriyat, in its present avatar is an ethnonationalist movement for self-determination and dignity.

The architecture of coercion put in place by India in the Valley to control Kashmiris creates perverse incentives for different bureaucratic, security and political interests, and prevents any serious reflection or genuine dialogue on the situation. Many told and untold (untold in the sense that they do not get covered in media) stories – relating to ‘encounter killings’, sadistic humiliation, random arrests, and corrupt security men and politicians – exist that shatter the myth of a benign Indian rule. Surveillance, harassment, humiliation, propaganda, ineffective leaders, and arbitrary killings are the face of Indian democracy that Kashmiris encounter in their everyday life.

The Indian government needs to give up the culture of suspicion that marks its attitude to the people of J&K. The focus has to be on making their life easier, promoting development suited to the aspirations of people, and most importantly, working seriously toward treating Kashmiris – Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, secularists, atheists, in short everyone – with dignity by letting them exercise

self-determination as a collectivity. As an urgent measure, the least the government can do is to dismantle the suspicion-filled security mindset and architecture that prevents Kashmiris and Indians from seeing each other as fellow human beings. A durable political order is one that is just. And justice demands that the Indian state hold itself, its political, bureaucratic, and security wings, accountable. The overwhelming presence of security forces in J&K does not only alienate the locals, it is morally corrosive for the security personnel too. The state needs to criminalize violence of all kinds, whether perpetrated by the militants or the military, and punish the criminals in a legally transparent manner. It should release honest statistics of deaths, detentions, rapes and disappearances. Rather than hushing up matters, the government should open itself to scrutiny and penalize those responsible for brutality against Kashmiri people. As the case of post-Apartheid South Africa shows, there can be no reconciliation unless we accept the truth. Instead of representing the exodus of Kashmiri Pandits in 1989-1990 and the killing of tens of thousands of Kashmiri Muslims as competitive narratives – ‘who is the bigger victim?’ – one needs to see them both as part of the same process of brutalization of space and people. A brutalization that is linked to the failures of Indian democracy to provide self-determination to the people of Kashmir. India must hear a multiplicity of voices in the forums on Kashmir, both in India and in the rest of the world. Internationally, a genuine dialogue is required between India and Pakistan over Kashmir and other concerns. Historically, Central Asia began in Kashmir. India needs to appreciate that and work together with its neighbours to reconvert the present zones of conflict back into zones of interaction across the borders.

What kind of state do Indians want? One that kills people with impunity in the name of national security or one that puts human security at its heart? What kind of democracy do Indians want? One that is merely procedural and allows for elections or one that caters to the aspirations of people, including in Kashmir, to a just order promoting self-determination? What kind of nationalism do Indians want? One that allows minorities and ethnonationalist groups claiming a separate identity to be humiliated, suppressed and brutalized in the name of national unity, or one that is affirming and flexible enough to allow those who do not want to be part of the nation to make a choice? India requires a rebranding

in substance and not just in name; one that recognizes the situation in Kashmir as an opportunity to show that it really cares, that people's dreams matter, that force is not the goal, and colonization is not the purpose.

Freeing Kashmir requires a moral renewal of India, of the idea of India, at present hijacked by dumbed down middle-class postulations, hawkish commentators, corrupt leaders, and management gurus. Kashmir can be the crucible through which India's democracy can emerge renewed.

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