

CONCLUSION: AFTERWORD—A CLARION CALL

Tahir Abbas

In the shadows of the Himalayas stands the forgotten struggle of Jammu and Kashmir (Kashmir for short), whose plight remains precarious as India tightens its grip, placing the future of the territory in even more uncertainty and insecurity. The region of Kashmir is one of the most contested in the world. However, the vast majority of commentators, analysts, and social thinkers in the West routinely omit a careful analysis while those in the region face immense pressures on their freedom to report and write on the issue. For too many, the matter is a bilateral question between India and Pakistan when the reality is an urgent and necessary need for the self-determination of the people of Kashmir. In presenting some closing arguments to this vital collection of scholarly input on the topic of social and political life in Jammu and Kashmir, I outline some distinct sociological concerns. I also take this opportunity to issue a clarion call to activists, scholars, and thinkers to place the needs and wants of Kashmir first and foremost, even if either neighbor—India or Pakistan—remains somewhat limited in its perspectives, whether this is by design or an accident of history.

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At the end of the Second World War, Britain was unable to hold on to its existing territories and left various parts of the world in a somewhat hurry. The conflicts in the north of Ireland, Palestine, and Kashmir are all a legacy of the hasty departure of the British from once-colonized areas. While there is some peace in Northern Ireland, hard-fought after many years of struggle and strife on all sides, the situations in Palestine and Kashmir remain utterly shameful. One can no longer point the finger at the failed British policies of yesteryear; instead the lack of international support concerning these fragile hotspots comes into sharp relief. With a great deal of bias in media and among geopolitical actors and states concerning these sites, the future of these territories is uncertain.

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When Islam came to Kashmir in the thirteenth century, there was no India or Pakistan. A center of Buddhist and Hindu religion, art, culture, and knowledge, when Islam arrived, so did greater syncretism. However, there was also conflict. The Muslims, the Sikhs, and the British battled over the province from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries. Hindu rule from the mid-1800s until partition in 1947 led to prevarication on the part of the ruler Hari Singh over the question of whether Jammu and Kashmir would succeed to India or to Pakistan. He ultimately sided with the former. Thereafter, Jammu and Kashmir became semi-autonomous, although both India and Pakistan continued to stake a claim to the territory as a whole. While the United Nations granted a plebiscite in 1948, that opportunity has yet to be realized. It leaves the Kashmiris caught between two bitterly opposed neighbors. When tensions mount in the territory, India and Pakistan argue that it is a bilateral matter and the world switches off, leaving the Kashmiris with no voice.

Today, a wave of authoritarian populist religious nationalism is sweeping India. The recent 2019 election placed these paradigms at the heart of the campaign. Now Narendra Modi, a youth member of the Hindu nationalist Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), implicated in the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi in 1948, is compelled to sustain a particular worldview that calls into play the status of Hindu India on a global stage. Over recent years, the institutions of India have been carefully and systematically marginalizing Indian Muslims, some of whom face random mob attacks based on spurious claims of smuggling beef or forcibly converting Hindu women, all of which appeal to the idea of

Islam as an invasive and uninvited force. At the same time, Pakistan, now under the leadership of Imran Khan, is still getting to grips with issues of development, cronyism, and corruption that have plagued the country for generations. With a population that is likely to double to 350 million within 30 years, there are numerous challenges in Pakistan relating to education, land and property rights, and representation. While Pakistan provides regional autonomy to Azad Kashmiris, on August 5, 2019, India revoked Article 370 of the Indian Constitution, which effectively eliminated a range of rights once held as sacrosanct. It is now possible for people outside of Indian-occupied Kashmir to purchase property, permitting the accumulation of capital by external interests, which is likely to undermine the already delicate balance in Jammu and Kashmir. While many of the Hindu Pandits fled the region in the 1990s due to rising Kashmiri insurgency supported by Pakistan on occasion, authority and control persist in the hands of India's Hindu majority.

Presently, some 8 million Kashmiris—who have been variously facing lockdown since August 2019—remain surrounded by over 900,000 Indian troops. All forms of communication, travel, transport, and trade have been halted. Telephone lines were opened only in early March 2020, allowing Kashmiris to talk to their loved ones inside and outside of the territory for the first time in many months. There are talks of as many as 15,000 young men “lifted” in the middle of the night and detained, often hundreds of miles from their homes, and without the knowledge of their families. Youth who resist on the streets face being pelleted, and then they are searched, and those found with marks on their bodies are not treated but whisked away to faraway jails. Medical supplies have been dramatically reduced, and the economy has suffered drastically as the main markets remain shut and transport is unavailable. Traders, workers, and travelers have all lost opportunities. The Indian government now wants to shut down seven departments in Jammu and Kashmir (the Information Commission, the Consumer Disputes Redress Commission, the Electricity Regulatory Commission, the Commission for Protection of Women and Child Rights, the Human Rights Commission, the Commission for Persons with Disabilities, and the State Accountability Commission). There seems to be a concerted effort to break the will of the people who have continued to face the tragedies of occupation for over seventy years.

One issue that Kashmiris are opposing is the Israeli-like settlement programs, which have severely dislodged the Palestinians from their

homes and their lands. Kashmiris face the brunt of a mighty occupying force, which displays all of the characteristics of an oppressive regime, driven by ideology, religion, and the sheer egoism. External powers disempower groups and ultimately physically remove populations from their historical origins, replacing their memories with new histories in the image of the oppressor. These recent Kashmir clashes have raised to the surface tensions that have been simmering for decades but catalyzed by assassinations, reprisals, curfews, and various human rights abuses that have resulted in a ban on media and the internet, the shutting down of mosques, and the vigorous enforcement of a closedown of the region in all but name. While Pakistan and India blame each other, it is the population of Kashmir that faces the brunt of the conflict and the tragedies that unfold daily.

* * *

Within not only the region itself but also elsewhere across the world, the voices of Kashmiris are almost without representation. It appears that the only real way to resolve this matter is to recognize the right to self-determination of the people of Jammu and Kashmir. They must determine their future independent of the interests of both neighbors. However, this is a long way from occurring unless the fair-minded of the world appreciate the tragedies of the reality of Kashmir for what it is, on its terms. If these nations dramatically diminished spending on defense and security, more could be put into education, trust, and peacebuilding between neighbors, all of which would be underpinned by the economic and cultural interdependence that was the hallmark of a greater India before the beginning of the colonial habits of divide and rule—the legacy of which continues to this day.

For the West, India is a counterweight to China, an old ally of Pakistan. Hence, Western interests are not to resolve the Kashmir issue as it threatens economic opportunities and regional cooperation with India. Therefore, it is more vital than ever that the people in Kashmir have the authority to determine their future, not least because both neighbors have been unable to solve the conundrum. Pride, hubris, and degrees of nationalism have prevented both neighboring states from overcoming their immense sense of loss—but at what cost? The tragedy of Kashmir has resulted in hundreds and thousands of people having been killed or gone missing, tortured and abused, and with the constant presence of

the Indian army on one side, the vast majority of Kashmiri Muslims who dominate the local geography continue to face a daily struggle for one that remains forgotten by some many.

The tensions in the region are also affecting the diaspora from Jammu and Kashmir. The recent visit by “Howdy Modi” to the United States illustrates the extent of Indian influence there. Nearer home, the UK has the largest ex-pat community of Azad Kashmiris in the world. There are approximately three-quarters of a million across the country with only approximately 500 families from Indian-occupied Kashmir in Britain. Political demonstrations concerning the recent events in Jammu and Kashmir in the major cities of the UK often become a stage for some to focus on the idea that it is a conflict between India and Pakistan, further silencing the voice of the Kashmiris.

The vast majority of the British diaspora are Paharis who herald from the Mirpur district of Azad Kashmir. They were originally displaced in the 1960s, due to the building of Mangla Dam, which submerged 300 villages and swallowed many homes, with a significant number coming to the UK as part of the chain migration processes of the time. However, many of these Azad Kashmiris are not recognized as such, since they are identified as Pakistani. Yet, many reject this marker and argue that, in reality, Pakistan has done little or nothing for the Azad Kashmiris, resulting, therefore, in many being caught between different identities. Only in the last two decades or so has the social science literature come to the stark realization that when speaking about Pakistanis, the reality is that people are effectively referring to Azad Kashmiris. Their migration, diaspora, and transnational linkages to the sending regions have now made them of special intellectual interest. While elitism prevents scholarship in the West from being able to penetrate the importance of understanding local and global experiences concerning Kashmiris, the issue has compounded historical attempts to explore the reality of Azad Kashmiris in the region.

Little is known of the internal struggle facing this body of people during a traumatic time of political change. It is difficult to obtain independent and analytical perspectives on the range of different issues at play that pulled people and groups in different directions during the choice to accede to Pakistan or India during the time of partition. How has the regional polity of the Azad Jammu and Kashmir been shaped over the

decades, and what kinds of implications have there been for local communities as part of the political process which can be understood in a wider historical and sociological context?

* * *

There can only be a democratic solution for Kashmir, with the Kashmiris deciding their political future through free choice, without having to negotiate the interests of their eager neighbors. However, this seems to be a long way from becoming a reality, with little or no international support to make it happen. Meanwhile, often regarded as one of the most beautiful parts of the natural world, Kashmiris face the reality of being disdained by the world. Both India and Pakistan need to allow Kashmiris to determine their future and the international community must step in to ensure exactly that. This important and highly pertinent collection will help readers navigate the subtleties in a complex part of the world, but it also takes scholarship forward from the constant focus on the colonial history of the region or only the Valley itself. The collection also represents an important opportunity to hear voices from the ground—which to date have been sorely lacking. It is also apparent that the bilateral talks between India and Pakistan continue to achieve little or no progress on resolving the conflict of Jammu and Kashmir; nor are they able to meaningfully represent the people who reside in these territories. As such, this book is one of the first of its kind. Written for a global audience, this book marks the first step that should encourage many others to follow.

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