

An Occupation of Truth

Indian-Administered Kashmir

by Tara Dorabji

A few days before I left for India, American journalist David Barsamian was deported from New Delhi for his coverage of Kashmir. Barsamian reports for AlterNet, one of the few national free speech outlets in the United States. News reports quoted officials saying that his deportation resulted from his prior reporting on Kashmir. In 2009–10, he traveled to India on a tourist visa and later produced some reports from the trip.¹ If reporting the truth in Kashmir can get one deported, I was in danger.

On my first day in Srinagar, the local head of surveillance let me know he was fully aware of my arrival. It was a discreet enough interaction, but it served its purpose: I was being watched. Was I a threat? I wielded a pen and paper to record the stories of Kashmiris.

The silence surrounding India's occupation blankets the Kashmir Valley, like the morning smog obscures the Himalayan Mountains. Despite the Indian government's own estimate of only 500 to 700 armed militants in the area, Kashmir remains the most densely militarized land on earth. There are approximately 700,000 Indian military and paramilitary in Kashmir, policing a population of ten million.²

But there is a new face to the hundred-year-old struggle for Kashmiri sovereignty and independence. A strong current of popular, nonviolent uprising for freedom has been growing. It is evident in citizens like Sahil Tariq, age twelve, who lit up when I asked what his hope for Kashmir was. "I have a hope that there is . . . freedom in Kashmir." Sahil's father disappeared in 2002. For nine years he and his mother have searched for his father. Every day after school Sahil

comes home to help his mother work—embroidering cloth to earn a few rupees.³

The recent, nonviolent uprising distinguishes itself from the armed rebellion of the early 1990s, yet the demand is the same: liberation from occupation—the independence of Kashmir.

Arguably, the Kashmiri independence movement goes back to 1846 when Kashmir came under the oppressive rule of the Dogra. Under the British partitioning of India in 1947, the matter of Kashmir was unresolved; it was not clear if Kashmir would go to India or Pakistan. In 1947, the first Indo-Pakistani War took place, with India taking Kashmir. In 1948, India brought the case of Kashmir to the United Nations, and Kashmir was officially recognized as a disputed territory. From the time that India claimed Kashmir until the early 1950s, Kashmiris experienced a high degree of self-rule, self-determination, and indigenous leadership.⁴ Kashmir led the world in revolutionary land reform, implementing a broad redistribution of resources that created a population relatively equal in wealth. Under land-to-the-tiller legislation, 188,775 acres of land were transferred to 153,399 peasants. No individual could legally keep over twenty acres of land. And to keep land, the landowner had to get out there and work the land.⁵ Today, after decades of occupation, many Kashmiris live in poverty: approximately 65 percent of the population does not have access to safe drinking water, and half the population lives without access to toilets.⁶ Did the Indian ruling elite fear that an independent Kashmir would serve as a model for India? If left to self-rule, could Kashmir have led the way for a broad redistribution of resources in the subcontinent?

There are many interpretations of how and why the trust and relationship between Delhi and Srinagar eroded. The result was a deliberate stripping of Kashmiri independence. When the Indian constitution came into effect in 1950, Kashmiri sovereignty was protected by Article 370. Kashmir was autonomous, and Indian jurisdiction was limited to defense, foreign affairs, and communications. In 1952, Sheikh Abdullah, the leader of Kashmir, signed the Delhi Agreement, giving Kashmir autonomy. This was overturned in 1954, when Order 1954 was added to the Indian constitution, giving India jurisdiction over Kashmir.⁷ While most of the rights under Article 370 have di-

minished, land protection in the valley is still observed. To this day, only Kashmiris can own land in the region. It is this provision that has prevented a complete repopulation of the area. But with the erosion of Kashmir's autonomy has come military repression and, arguably, attempted genocide.

Buried Evidence, the groundbreaking 2009 report released by International People's Tribunal on Human Rights and Justice in Indian-Administered Kashmir (IPTK), documented thousands of mass graves in Kashmir. The report captured the haunting words of Atta Mohammed, a Kashmiri gravedigger from Bimyar: "My nights are tormented and I cannot sleep; the bodies and graves appear and reappear in my dreams . . . the sound of the earth as I covered the graves . . . bodies and faces that were mutilated . . . mothers who would never find their sons. My memory is an obligation." From 2002 to 2006, Atta Mohammed buried 203 unidentified bodies.⁸

The torture and death in the valley of Kashmir can be buried no longer. Between 1989 and 2011, there were 8,000 documented disappearances and 70,000 deaths of Kashmiris resulting from the Indian occupation.⁹ The conflict has left as many as 100,000 children orphaned.¹⁰ According to a survey by Médecins Sans Frontières, 99 percent of Kashmiris surveyed reported experiencing crackdowns. Eighty-six percent experienced roundups or raids in villages. Forty-four percent reported psychological and physical mistreatment.¹¹ Yet, there is a global silence. Kashmir has many similarities with other global independence struggles that garner significant international support. In comparison, the Israeli occupation of Palestine caused 10,271 deaths from 1987 to January 2012. In Ireland, there were 3,710 deaths from 1969 to 2010. In Tibet, 1.2 million people died from 1949 to 1979.¹²

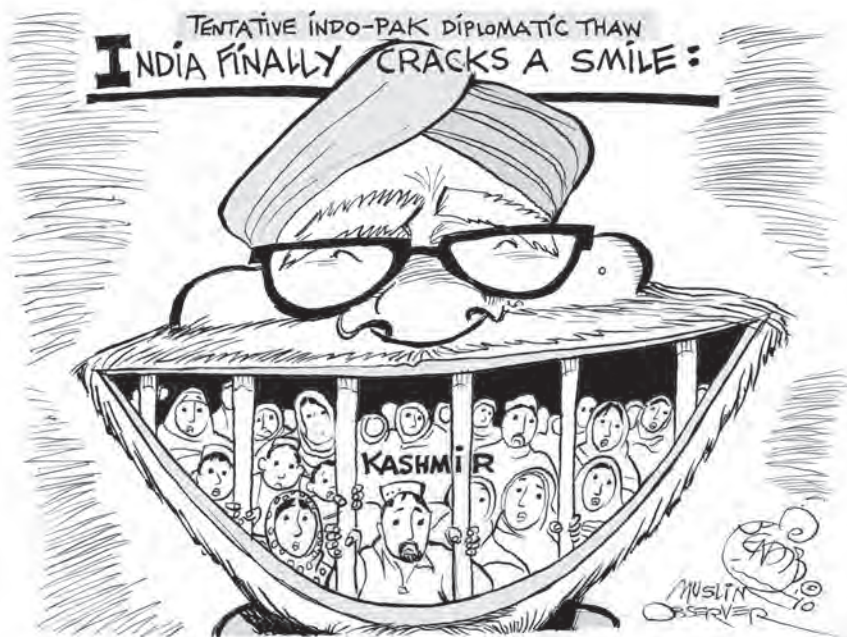
It is the dead who are breaking the silence that surrounds Kashmir. In July 2011, the State Human Rights Commission (SHRC) of Jammu and Kashmir released a report documenting 2,730 unidentified bodies in thirty-eight graveyards; 574 of the exhumed bodies were then identified.¹³ The state report verified the findings of IPTK's report *Buried Evidence*. Khurram Parvez, liaison for IPTK and program coordinator for the Jammu and Kashmir Coalition of Civil Society, explained in an interview how the findings were initially swept under

the rug: “The government said that these unmarked graves are all of foreign militants and people need not worry about it.” There have been limited DNA tests. Parvez cited that DNA tests of fifty-three bodies identified that forty-nine were Kashmiri civilians, one was a Kashmiri combatant, and three were unidentified.¹⁴

When I spoke with Tahira Begum, whose husband disappeared in 2002, she said that she’s known about the mass graves for over five years. Begum explained, “I went to the mass graves and saw the bones, the bones that add up to the absence of 10,000 men. I hug these bones. I hug them for their life.”¹⁵ For nine years, she has been searching for her husband. Begum said that each day she dies ten times, not knowing if her husband is dead or alive. Without her husband it is a struggle to make ends meet. Two of her sons live with her and help her to embroider after school. Her third son was placed in an orphanage.

The families of the disappeared continue their monthly protests and demand that the government take action to identify the bodies, as more and more bodies are uncovered. Begum joins with other families to protest every month, carrying the faces of the disappeared, pushing the state to run DNA tests on the thousands of unidentified bodies. “We are protesting every month in the square. I am not afraid. I must protest not just for my husband, or for my sons, but for all the families and the men who are disappeared.”¹⁶ In Kashmir, there is a special term for women whose husbands disappear: “half widows.” By conservative estimates, there are 1,500 half widows in Kashmir. Half widows are not eligible for pensions or other government relief. They often suffer severe hardships as Begum does.¹⁷

One might wonder why the bodies of so many Kashmiris disappear. According to IPTK’s Parvez, “It is the right of the family to have the body. The government does not want to give these bodies to the families because there is something to hide. They are hiding the marks of torture.”¹⁸ Torture is rampant. There are over 60,000 cases of documented torture in the valley of Kashmir. The torture includes the most heinous acts of water boarding, injecting petrol into anuses, rapes, psychological torture, and mutilation.¹⁹ Internal correspondence released by WikiLeaks showed that the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) sent evidence of torture in 2005 to



diplomats in the United States. Between 2002 and 2004, The ICRC met with 1,491 detainees and torture was reported in 852 cases. The torture ranged from electric shock, suspension, sexual abuse, and water torture. Torture victims were rarely militants.²⁰

“The most underreported phenomenon in Jammu and Kashmir is torture. If you go to any village hundreds of people in every village have been tortured, not just men, but women, children and old people as well,” explained Parvez.²¹ Sexual assaults are perhaps the most taboo to report. A Médecins Sans Frontières report found that about two-thirds of people surveyed had heard of a rape case, and one in seven Kashmiris reported actually witnessing rape.²² In 1991, in the village of Poshpora, Kupwara, more than forty women were allegedly raped by the Indian army.²³

Parvez was involved in documenting the torture of over 1,500 people who became impotent because their genitals were electrocuted. In our interview, he revealed that hundreds of boys have been raped by soldiers. In one case the abuse by the army was caught on video, yet

still there were no convictions. Describing yet another case of torture, he said, “I have documented very horrible cases, but this is the most horrible.” The army kept a sixty-year-old man in solitary confinement for one month. During that time, he wasn’t given anything to eat but his own flesh. Soldiers cut the flesh from his body and served it to him. This was all he was given to eat for a month. Recounting the story, Parvez said, “This was something that shook me. We have hundreds of Guantánamo Bays here. Why is nobody talking about it?”²⁴

LAWS, UPRISING, AND VIOLENCE

Violence permeates the everyday reality of life in Kashmir. The militarized insurgency of the 1990s has given way to popular, nonviolent uprisings. This unarmed people’s movement is met by brutal force. In 2010, between June 11 and September 22, Indian paramilitary and military killed 109 Kashmiri—youth, women, and men alike. During these summer rebellions, massive popular protests flooded from the villages to the cities. The valley was on lockdown with seventy-three days of imposed curfews and seventy-five days of strikes.²⁵

There are special laws that allow for the killings and torture of Kashmiri civilians to continue. The Public Safety Act (PSA) of 1978 allows for incarceration of civilians for up to two years on grounds of unconfirmed suspicion. In March 2011, Amnesty International reported that between 8,000 and 20,000 people have been held under the PSA over the past twenty years.²⁶

The Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act allows security forces to preemptively shoot people to prevent future terrorist attempts.²⁷ In addition, it allows soldiers to detain residents without cause, search buildings without warrants, and destroy houses.²⁸

It is perhaps this environment—where the army has the right to detain, shoot, and kill people at will—that spawned the large civil uprisings. For three consecutive summers in the valley, from 2008 to 2010, there were massive protests and general strikes that shut the city down for months. The strikes were met with enforced curfews. Grenades of tear gas exploded. New weapons were introduced like the “pressure pump” gun, which fires bullets that enter the body and can destroy organs, but leave hardly any external marks.²⁹ It was not

only protesters who were killed. On June 12, 2010, Muhammad Rafiq Bangroo was severely beaten by police forces while watching a protest by his house. He died days later from the wounds. Yasmeeen Jan was shot and killed when a bullet landed in her chest. She was standing near a window in her house. At times police fired into the funeral processions of the just dead, killing more. On August 2, 2010, nine-year-old Sameer Ahmad Rah was beaten to death by police forces. He was playing near a protest.³⁰ The names of the innocent dead go on and on.

During the summer of 2010, the city was shuttered. The local papers were not delivered. Some mornings, people could slip out at 5:00 a.m. to a local shop and get some food before the 6:00 a.m. curfew was enforced.³¹ For days on end, people were trapped in their homes.

Like many of the modern-day people's movements, social media allowed people to communicate across empty streets. The local news stopped reporting the death toll, so citizens found information on the Internet. Kashmiris logged into Facebook to see ashes and death, and to read the news of who was shot dead and what was burned. Local reporters tallied the dead bodies on excel documents and e-mailed them around. Everyone waited. It took until the body count reached forty in the summer of 2010 before the BBC covered it.³²

ARTISTS BANNED IN KASHMIR

Dark humor becomes a cathartic release for many living under occupation. It follows as no surprise that the cartoonist and artist Malik Sajad was targeted for his work. In 2008, he was invited to display his installation *Terrorism of Peace* at the India Habitat Center. During this time, there was a bombing in Delhi. Malik Sajad was taken by the police and interrogated. As the police began to bring evidence against him, they eventually referenced his installation to justify their actions because his art was "anti-India."³³

In Kashmir, poetry and music are rooted in resistance. In traditional Kashmiri folk music, *ladi shah*, singers go from village to village singing songs of resistance. Today, music continues to be a tool to organize, with a new generation embracing hip-hop. Artist MC Kash recorded "I Protest," which went viral during the 2010 mas-

sive summer uprising. The song's lyrics speak to the new generation of protesters with words such as: "No more injustice / We won't go down / When we bleed / Alive in the struggle / Even the graves will speak!"³⁴ In an interview with the Associated Press, MC Kash said that watching a film on the occupation of Palestine inspired his work—he realized that the same thing was happening in Kashmir and that he had a responsibility to speak about it. When MC Kash became a hit, the police raided the recording studio where he recorded the song, and the staff was questioned. The studio closed its doors on MC Kash. He cannot record there anymore. When asked if he feared retaliation, MC Kash said, "[R]evolutionaries don't fear persecution or execution. If they throw me in the prison . . . I'll write on the walls." Yet the fear of retaliation is so great that another young hip-hop artist, Renegade, removed his songs from the Internet for fear that his family would be targeted.³⁵ Even so, the beats of resistance have found a new home on the Internet.

THE "K WORD"

Whatever you do, just don't mention the "K word." When British Prime Minister David Cameron visited India in July 2010, he was asked not to use the "K word." A few months later, US President Barack Obama went to Delhi and was warned to steer clear of Kashmir.³⁶ Just don't mention it. Mum is the word.

Some don't heed the warnings. When they speak truth about Kashmir, retaliation is the name of the game. Writing on Kashmir can get you banned from the world's largest democracy. Indian-born scholar and anthropologist Dr. Angana Chatterji resides in San Francisco, California, and is the cofounder of the IPTK. She is also the lead author of *Buried Evidence*. When she visits Kashmir, she is under constant surveillance: an armored jeep tails her everywhere she goes, and she has been detained. Even her mother, who lives in Delhi, has been interrogated by authorities.

In November 2010, Chatterji and her husband, academic Richard Shapiro, were en route to India. Shapiro was refused entry to India. Chatterji continued to Kashmir while her husband was forced to go back to the United States. There was no formal reason for Shapiro

to be banned from India, though it seemed to be a punishment for Chatterji's work with the Tribunal on Human Rights.³⁷

POLITICS OF MAPPING

The borders of Kashmir have been under dispute since 1947. For over fifty years, students in India have grown up seeing a false map of Kashmir, one that does not match the rest of the world. On the world map, Kashmir is carved up into Indian-occupied Kashmir and Pakistan-occupied Kashmir. There is also Aksai Chin and Shaksam Valley, under Chinese control.³⁸ In fact, when you look at Indian maps you find a disclaimer, such as this one on Maps of India's website: "All efforts have been made to make this image accurate. However Compare Infobase Limited and its directors do not own any responsibility for the correctness or authenticity of the same."³⁹ Since map distortion is an old and new art, you find this disclaimer across all the company's maps. Many of us in the United States are familiar with the distorted maps that show Greenland to be larger than all of South America. This map, of course, also has America in the center. This was the map I grew up with.

In India, printing a different (arguably more accurate) map of Kashmir can get you banned. In 2010, India censored the *Economist* after it released an issue with a map showing the disputed boundaries of Kashmir. Domestic maps of India show false borders, claiming land currently administered by both Pakistan and China as India. Subsequently, thirty-one issues of the weekly British magazine were banned. Indian authorities stamped "illegal" across the magazine. What was illegal about this map? Perhaps the accuracy of the Pakistan- and China-controlled portions of Jammu and Kashmir portrayed on the map. The map shows India controlling most of Kashmir with approximately 87,823 square miles. The Pakistan-controlled portion is depicted showing about 53,342 square miles, with the Chinese-controlled area covering 23,336 square miles.⁴⁰

PATH TO FREEDOM

Looking at the high alpine lakes and valley surrounded by mountains, one cannot help but think of Switzerland. With a population of 7.6

million people, Switzerland's population is nearly half the size of Kashmir's. Despite its small size, Switzerland spends about 1 percent of its gross domestic product (GDP) on military. If Switzerland can be independent, why not Kashmir?

Could the future independence of Kashmir be a headwaters in creating a new type of democracy? In *A Letter to Fellow Kashmiris*, Mohamad Junaid delved into the possibility of freedom: "What it means is that the future free and independent Kashmir, to continue to remain free and independent, and to continuously live the moment of freedom, should not replicate any socio-economic blueprints (especially the ones handed out by institutions of the hegemonic global economic order), nor should it accept the kind of modular democracy a tragicomic version of which Indian government makes us Kashmiris suffer every few years."⁴¹

If the nonviolent, popular movement of Kashmir is allowed self-determination, perhaps a new brand of democracy will be born: a democracy that is not founded on control through military domination—one that does not wave the flag of democracy to cover up genocide.

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