

# 66 | Kashmir: Through the eyes of a Grand-daughter

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## Introduction

When the Mughal Emperor Jahangir (1569-1627) visited Kashmir for the first time, he proclaimed: *If heaven exists anywhere, then it's here, it's here, it's here*. Centuries on, the beauty of the valley has confirmed his impression. Kashmir truly is 'Paradise on earth'. But for the last seven odd decades, that Paradise has been invaded by serpents and witnessed deaths and destruction of genocidal proportions. Kashmir has been turned into a site of decades-long political and military strife and now usurped in the name of 'integration'. Losses of lives, mass incarceration and tortures seem to have been driven by this plot to occupy and annex the valley.

The Indian occupation of Kashmir has left a permanent scar in my mind and soul. My whole life has been somehow shaped and constrained by it. The insurgency movement in Kashmir was at its peak when I was born in a distant land. My parents returned to their homeland a few months after I was born, with strong hopes that the strife would cool down eventually and the future would hold peace and security for their beloved valley of lakes and for their children. Alas, that was not meant to be, as a selfish and brutal force was constantly trying to occupy our beautiful land with spiteful vengeance. An occupying force has been there in our land to occupy and exploit us in all possible ways.

Driven by the Hindutva ideology of hatred and intolerance, the current government in Delhi has intensified its military and media machines take us back to the medieval age of crude barbarity. For the fascist and bigoted political establishment of Narendra Modi, militarisation and subjugation is not enough. He has gone for all out shut down and isolated Kashmir from the rest of the world and its people from each other.

## A personal rendezvous with fear

As I grew up, I kept hearing all kinds of terrible stories of torture and murders of Kashmiris by the Indian army. Many Kashmiris have chosen the path of self harm and scores of ordinary but exhausted civilians have jumped into rivers to commit suicide. Ending their lives seemed to them to be an easier option than to bear with all sorts of oppression and humiliation. I heard so many stories of injuries and suicides from my parents, my grandparents and other family members.

I remember my uncle telling me about the dreaded crackdowns by the Indian army in the 1990s, which used to bring the life in whole neighbourhoods in Kashmir to a complete standstill. It was depressing for him to tell us, and traumatic for us to hear, about the ordeals that he and all Kashmiris (mostly men) endured during those dark days. Their throats used to go dry while waiting for their turn to be interrogated and humiliated by the Indian army. The army used captured freedom fighters for torture techniques and coercive interrogation practices. They put masks on them with their eye slits open. Every Kashmiri man had to stand in a queue and the army forced the masked freedom fighters to ascertain who were or were not part of the freedom movement. The masked men would often give a nod only to avoid degrading maltreatment and lethal injuries during the night. As for the Kashmiri men, a nod or otherwise from a complete stranger, the hostage, would determine their fate. Eventually, some Kashmiris came back to their worried families but many did not. The Indian army has been applying this method again and again to contain any resistance in the Kashmir valley. Since 5 August 2019, they have not wanted the world to know about oppression. To suppress the

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Kashmiris they have shut down all communications. As a result, the world does not know the full extent of what gruesome atrocities are going on.

It was the late 1990s, I remember the fear in my chest when Indian army personnel barged in our home with guns in their hands, breaking in bedroom doors, employing their scare tactics to frighten us. I remember the look of worry on my mother's face who was pushing me and my brother behind her, trying to protect our younger eyes from witnessing that moment of terror.

Kashmiris have been through so many brutal atrocities and been under the dreadful presence of nearly a million Indian troops for decades. Demanding freedom and respect as human beings seems to be the crime of the Kashmiris. The Indian government proved on 5 August 2019 that it has little regard for the Kashmiris as human beings. It is actually the Kashmiri land they want. Millions of Kashmiris are perhaps preparing themselves for a prolonged phase of fear and uncertainty, with the valley witnessing one of the most stringent curfews and shutdowns it has ever seen.<sup>1</sup>

### **The present pandemonium**

For decades, Indian-administered Kashmir has been a large open-air prison. This time the Indian government has blocked all communications including telephone and Internet. Thousands of miles away from home, I feel stranded not knowing how my parents and other family members are, and how Kashmir is doing dotted and surrounded by occupation forces.

The last time I properly talked to my parents was on Sunday night 3 August 2019. They did tell me about menacing rumours circulating across Kashmir valley, as the Indian government issued an advisory calling for the evacuation of all Indians from Kashmir. My parents' utterance of goodbye seemed to have the apprehension that something more ominous was in store for the Kashmiris. Since then, I've only managed to contact them a few times through a broken landline connection that needs dozens of trials to get through. Compared to those of my friends who have not been able to get in touch with their families in Kashmir, I feel fortunate.

One of my friends had to try 67 times before her

call went through this week; the rest of times, it's just the same recorded message repeating in a female voice "This number does not exist", or a dead dial tone. It feels like my family is lightyears away from me. My family members appear to be millions and millions of miles away in space and in time. The twenty-first century sophisticated telecommunication technologies are not of any use for the Kashmiris, as all such services are cut off by the Indian government. It's like the whole of Kashmir is in the Dark Ages with no internet, no means of communication, desperate for a ray of light, desperate to survive this wave of Hindu Zionism bent on erasing their identity.

I'm still in the process of grasping the fact that the Indian government evacuated over 20,000 Indians out of Kashmir within a span of 48 hours a week before it shut down the valley. I feel betrayed by those in power in New Delhi, as they restrict my people in cages like animals. I shudder to think that the Indian government has continued to breach the legal order and used brutal forces against the Kashmiris for decades and now put an entire population under siege. Sadly, they trumpet this state coercion, rights violation and the gruesome ordeal of intimidation as a victory. How is silencing a population of 8 million by deploying about a million troops a victory?

By restricting the movement of the people and caging them inside their houses time and again, the occupation forces have created a new normal for the Kashmiri people. Manufacturing this state of helplessness is a deliberate strategy to create an exhausted, passive population that will be forced to give in to fear and losing hope. It seeks to take away the rights of Kashmiris and bludgeon them into bearing with injustices.

On the evening of 8 August 2019, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi addressed the Indian nation and regarded the complete seizure of Kashmir's autonomy through the abrogation of Article 370 of Indian constitution as a move to foster "development" in the scenic valley.<sup>2</sup> One wonders what kind of development comes with putting an entire population under siege and caging them inside their houses with no access to food, medicine, or any mode of communication to the outside world. The Indian government has taken this atrocious move to seize the rights of Kashmiris. During this spate of oppression, tens of thousands of

Kashmiris have been detained and tortured, and many have "vanished without trace" since 5 August 2019.<sup>3</sup>

### **Coming to terms with brutal realities**

Last week, my cousin arrived at my university along with a few dozen more Kashmiris, the highest number of Kashmiri students in any new intake at my university. Parents of young Kashmiris are worried and many are sending their kids overseas to study because no one is certain about what the future holds for Kashmir. I am worried more about those parents who cannot afford to send their children overseas for education. I can't help but feel guilty as I belong to the privileged few while innumerable young men and women like me face an uncertain future in Kashmir. The abrogation of Article 370 could mean political and economic instability for years to come, which means the education and employment sector will likely suffer as well. Whatever the duration of the current siege, the psychological effects of imprisoning people in their own houses are grave and long-lasting. Ever since things took a turn for the worse in Kashmir, I've been thinking about my other cousins who have to face the Indian army in the street day and night. They deserve a peaceful place to live just like other people in the world. No one would want to live under draconian and depressing conditions.

According to a friend who recently returned from Kashmir after experiencing the current siege from the very beginning, the military forces have reopened the infamous interrogation and torture centre Papa II. When the insurgency in Kashmir was at its peak, in 1989, the Border Security Force of India took over a government guest house for visiting bureaucrats built during the period of British Colonial rule in India. They named the building Papa II and used the place for committing unspeakable brutalities and abuses. In 1996, Human Rights Watch issued a report detailing the torture and abuse committed at the centre.<sup>4</sup>

That building still has a solemn existence in the valley, and people fall silent as they pass by the hauntingly inhuman building to commemorate thousands of their bretheren who were victims of the horrendous cruelty of that place. One of the reasons Papa II gained its notorious reputation was because of the screams that could be heard for miles into the night back in the 90s. I heard from my parents that many families moved out

of the vicinity of Papa II and left their houses to escape the unbearable shrieks and cries coming out from the torture centre.

I have heard personal stories from the families of torture victims and survivors who were abused in this very interrogation centre. The father of one of my closest friends was tortured in Papa II for three days. He was tortured through electrocution and other barbaric methods of interrogation. Decades on, he now takes sleeping pills every night to fall asleep while his wife, my friend's mother, suffers from PTSD.

One of the cruel interrogation techniques that were practiced in these torture centres was placing the captive suspects under heavy rollers, and crushing their bodies underneath. This method caused several hundred deaths while others died through application of electric shocks. Most commonly, the electric shocks were applied through electrodes attached to the detainee's genitals which consequently caused sexual dysfunction and fatal injuries.

A particularly brutal and extremely painful method of torture known as 'waterboarding'. [Familiar to IMR readers from its use by the US in Iraq, Guantanamo and elsewhere]. The army personnel immersed the prisoners' heads in water during interrogation, often causing asphyxia and oxygen deprivation to various organs including the brain, resulting in long-lasting psychological effects and even death.

Kashmir is encountering frequent harassment of journalists and a severe crackdown on reporters who work for local media houses. On 8 September 2019, a reporter who works for the Indian daily newspaper *The Tribune* was stopped at a checkpoint in Srinagar. She was prevented from reporting despite carrying a curfew pass. She insisted the army personnel to let her through, around half-a-dozen of them hit her car with batons as she sat inside crying.<sup>5</sup>

An editor of a local newspaper testified that they are being forced to publish absolute rubbish to fill the pages of their newspapers, under threat of having their advertisement license being revoked by the Indian government. This gives an illusion to the outside world that everything is just fine in Kashmir. Another TV journalist confessed that "every day is a balancing act between the truth and my safety. I do not know if we're compromising both."

On 25 August 2019, a doctor in Kashmir was detained for giving an interview to the BBC regarding the dangers of the current communication blackout and how the consequent shortage of services and medical supplies in hospitals and drug stores can eventually lead to more deaths in Kashmir. In some places, the Indian security forces even held off ambulances for hours and did not let them cross security check-points to go to big hospitals in Srinagar. Boys as young as twelve years of age are literally being "picked up" by security forces and locked up in jails for participating in peaceful protests, and some for no reasons whatsoever.<sup>6</sup> A lot of these young boys are jailed under the Public Security Act (PSA) which grants full authority to the Indian army to imprison anyone without a trial or justification.<sup>7</sup> What is worse, the detainees are taken to unknown locations and their family members are in the dark about their whereabouts. Some detainees booked under the Public Safety Act have been flown out of the valley in military aircraft to be imprisoned in jails located in other parts of India as prisons in Kashmir have run out space, and meanwhile, their family back home is desperate for any knowledge of their safety and security.<sup>8</sup>

We have been hearing stories of security forces barging into homes for random searches, army men beating down young men in the middle of the street and taking them away to detention centres and torturing them through electric shocks.<sup>9</sup> A married woman was asked by some army men to accompany them for a search around her house; she was physically abused in her own home when she refused to be alone with them out of fear of being raped.

### Conclusion

The Indian government cannot keep a population of 8 million boxed inside their houses forever, and once they lift the restrictions, a massive outbreak of protests is inevitable. In the past Indian military forces have shown little to no hesitation to fire into crowds of protesters; who's to say they will hold back this time around? And who can predict the casualties and losses this time with an occupying force of around 900,000 that already has enormous track records of human rights violations? Analysts and journalists predict a bleak future for the troubled region, reiterating that the stage is being set for something more gruesome in Kashmir.<sup>10</sup>

Kashmiris have been facing brutal dehumanization and humiliation for decades. Is this the price for asking for peace and basic human rights? What Kashmiris want at this point is the preservation of their land and identity, a right to decide their future and full support for their cause from genuine democrats, progressive peoples and organisations in all countries.

## Notes

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