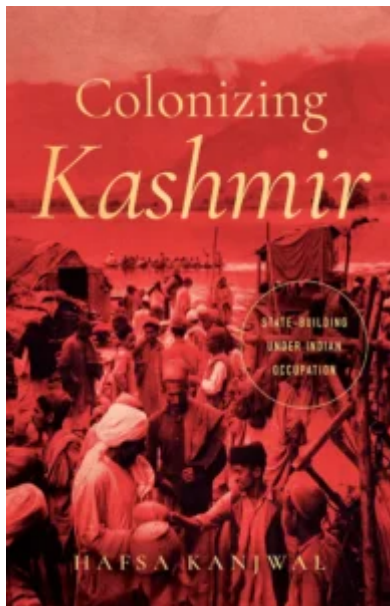


Review: Colonizing Kashmir

written by Javier Sethness | April 29, 2026



Colonizing Kashmir: State-Building Under Indian Occupation

By: Hafsa Kanjwal

Stanford University Press, 2023

This is an excellent book by historian Hafsa Kanjwal about the colonization of Kashmir that the Indian State has carried out since gaining independence from the British Empire and undergoing the tragedy of Partition. As the British overlords withdrew in August 1947, the subcontinent was split into India and Pakistan according to senseless imperial design—a tumultuous event that exploded in sectarian mass-violence, with an estimated million people killed. The Partition crisis immediately gripped the princely northern state of Jammu and Kashmir (J&K), too, which had been dominated for a century by the Hindu Dogra dynasty operating under indirect British rule.

Professor Kanjwal explains that, prior to the Dogra Maharaja Hari Singh’s infamous decision to accede to India rather than Pakistan in October 1947—despite the fact that J&K was majority-Muslim—his army joined forces with militants from the Hindu-nationalist Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and troops from another princely state to kill an estimated 250,000 Muslims in Jammu, displacing several hundred thousand more to Pakistan in the process. These oppressive policies of the maharaja sparked the first India-Pakistan War (1947–48), which established the “line of control” that currently divides Kashmir between the hostile neighbors.

Aptly defying the simplistic scholarly narrative that “see[s] colonialism as emerging only from the West to the Global South,” Professor Kanjwal in *Colonizing Kashmir* chronicles the “*third world imperialism*” that has been practiced by the Indian ruling class in this mountainous occupied territory over the past eighty years (13–14 [emphasis in original], 22). The unwilling host to up to 750,000 Indian troops who have been engaged in “massacres, human rights violations, and war crimes” for decades, Kashmir has widely been considered the world’s most-militarized region since an indigenous armed uprising began in the late 1980’s (273). To date, the Indian State continues to systematically deny millions of Kashmiris—the majority of whom are Muslim—their right to self-

determination. As such, it is in violation of United Nations Security Council Resolution 47 (1948), which mandates a plebiscite to decide the territory's fate: namely, whether it is to become independent, merge with Pakistan, or remain with India.

Besides the devastating effects this unresolved international crisis has on healthcare access and women's rights in Kashmir, it has led to multiple wars between India and Pakistan since decolonization. One of these conflicts—the Kargil War (1999)—broke out after both countries had acquired nuclear weapons, thus coming dangerously close to the nuclear threshold. The threat of regional escalation to nuclear war is ever-present now, as the brief armed conflict that broke out between the neighboring countries in May 2025 after a militant attack on Hindu pilgrims in occupied Kashmir—a war that President Trump has wrongly credited himself with ending—reminds us.

In this sense, *Colonizing Kashmir* is a courageous challenge to “the sovereignty claims of the (post)colonial nation-state,” and to the triumphalist idea that decolonization has necessarily been a liberatory process (22). It is a call “for the creation of a historiography of states that do not exist, have not been allowed to exist, and peoples who have been denied self-determination and the right to exercise their sovereignty” (20). Beyond Kashmir and Kashmiris, these include “Hawaii, Puerto Rico, Palestine, Hong Kong, Tibet, East Turkestan, Chechnya, and Western Sahara,” indigenous peoples of the U.S., Canada, and Australia, plus “the Kurds, Papuans, and Oromo and Tigray people” (20). Likely as retaliation to its author's principled truth-telling and apt criticisms, the Indian State outright banned the book in August 2025, mandating all its possessors to forfeit their copies!

In this review, we will examine Professor Kanjwal's brilliant elucidation of state-building in Kashmir, before concluding by considering some of the parallels between Kashmir and Palestine.

Colonizing Kashmir

During the initial rule of Sheikh Mohammad Abdullah (1947–53), the first prime minister of occupied J&K, Articles 35A and 370 were added to the Indian Constitution. These articles authorized local authorities to restrict land ownership to Kashmiris, and granted them uniquely autonomous powers, respectively. However, by ordering the ouster of Sheikh Abdullah over concerns about his loyalty and replacing him with a client regime led by Bakshi Ghulam Mohammed, Jawaharlal Nehru, India's first prime minister and leader of the Congress Party, showed his true interest in intensifying India's colonization of Kashmir. It is on Bakshi's controversial rule (1953–63), which advanced capitalist modernization, normalization of relations with India, and “emotional integration” to distract Kashmiris from their right to self-determination, that Professor Kanjwal focuses her book (9, 32, 130–1).

Despite Nehru's proclamation of a secular-democratic political orientation (while hailing from a Kashmiri Pandit [Brahmin, or upper-caste Hindu] background), his centralist subjugation of Muslim-majority Kashmir arguably anticipated the current Hindu-fascist Prime Minister Narendra Modi's brazen 2019 abrogation of Kashmir's constitutional autonomy. (Modi is a long-term member of the RSS, and as Chief Minister of Gujarat, he oversaw pogroms orchestrated by Hindu mobs in 2002 that killed hundreds, if not thousands, of Indian Muslims.) As Professor Kanjwal notes in an article written after the sudden cancellation of Articles 35A and 370, not only does Modi's unilateral action effectively serve to annex Kashmir, but it also “enables people from India to buy land and property in Kashmir,” thus raising fears that direct rule by New Delhi will “change the demographics of the Muslim-majority region.”

As *Colonizing Kashmir* elucidates, Naya (“New”) Kashmir refers to a progressive manifesto written in 1944 by leaders of Kashmir's National Conference about the region's post-independence future. Affiliated with the Congress Party, the National Conference was a political formation to which both

Sheikh Abdullah and Bakshi belonged. By contrast with the despotism of contemporary Dogra rule (and of Hindu nationalism), Naya Kashmir envisioned a voice for J&K's Muslim majority, pluralistic respect for its religious minorities (Hindus, Sikhs, Christians, and Buddhists), equality before the law, decentralized parliamentary governance, the abolition of feudalism, and cooperativism.

In this vein, Sheikh Abdullah actually avoided forging closer ties with Pakistan after Partition, partly out of fear that its feudal elites would block the implementation of Naya Kashmir, and he opted for continued accession to India instead. (While not necessarily committed to Naya Kashmir, the Communist Party of India and the Soviet Union appear to have shared similar views about the feudal character of Pakistan, which soon became a close U.S. Cold-War ally.) In 1950, Sheikh Abdullah's government successfully passed reforms that redistributed lands without compensation to their former owners, in a move that empowered Kashmiri Muslim peasants while antagonizing Hindu landlords.

In their leadership style, both Sheikh Abdullah and Bakshi were authoritarian: they banned opposition parties and wielded a great deal of control over press and radio coverage in and about Kashmir. Foreign journalists exaggerated Kashmiri Muslims' support of Bakshi, in line with the local and central governments' self-presentation as advancing secular and pluralistic politics. Tourism revolving around Kashmir's natural beauty and supposed exoticism, the promotion of Hindu pilgrimages, the production of superficial films, large-scale infrastructure projects, economic modernization, and corruption were all utilized by Bakshi to further bind occupied Kashmir to India. Moreover, Bakshi personally directed Kashmir's police and associated paramilitaries while clamping down on dissent.

Furthermore, Sheikh Abdullah and Bakshi's regimes mobilized an artistic vanguard to promote Kashmiri cultural nationalism and deepen ties with the Indian State. This ended up being a dialectical process that backfired to some extent, given the call's resonance among Indian and Kashmiri leftists alike, together with its indirect encouragement of satirical and subversive commentary. For instance, Kashmiri literature entered a "decade of despair" following Sheikh Abdullah's ouster, and several Kashmiri writers focused on "themes of corruption, greed, obsession with money, loss of moral values, and lack of loyalty" during Bakshi's reign (210, 222).

While the vision of Naya Kashmir and the implementation of land reforms may have been progressive, they ultimately served to integrate Kashmir into India and derail fundamental questions about popular self-determination. In fact, Sheikh Abdullah conspired with Prime Minister Indira Gandhi in 1975 to drop his demand for a plebiscite, in return for his being re-installed as Kashmir's political boss.¹ This fraught history set the stage for the present.

Parallels with Palestine

Tragically, the ongoing genocide carried out in Gaza by Israel and the U.S. since October 2023 may preview the fate of Kashmiri and Indian Muslims at the hands of the Hindu-fascist State. Especially following the revocation of J&K's special status in 2019, the risk of genocide in Kashmir has been escalating, as Professor Kanjwal and Farhan Mujahid Chak have warned. Indeed, in the context of Hindu-supremacists wantonly lynching Muslims in Indian cities, many of Kashmir's Pandits have welcomed the abrogation of Articles 35A and 370, while many Muslims have opposed it—in an alarming dynamic that ominously recalls Partition. As Azad Essa explains, the cancellation of Article 370 has been a long-term goal of the now-hegemonic Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), led by Modi.²

In 2019, the Indian diplomat Sandeep Chakravorty blatantly called for the implementation of the "Israeli model" in Kashmir, by which he presumably meant dispossessing and ethnically cleansing

Kashmiri Muslims to make way for settlement by India's Hindu majority. Moreover, in 2021, Hindu nationalists publicly endorsed the genocide of Rohingya Muslims carried out in 2016 by the Burmese military and affiliated paramilitaries as inspirational.³

On its own, then, Hindu nationalism is toxic enough: its main theorist Vinayak Damodar Savarkar (1883–1966) openly supported Nazism, and sought to rid post-independence India entirely of its Muslim minority.⁴ Yet, when India, which has long been Israel's largest arms importer, is emboldened by the utter disregard evinced by its ally for international humanitarian law in its prosecution of genocide against Muslim-majority Palestinians (as well as its success to date in ensuring impunity for the same), the stage is set for a synergistic effect that could prepare the ground for genocide against Kashmiris—just as the unjust settlement of the Russo-Ukrainian War being pushed by the Trump and Putin regimes arguably encourages Xi Jinping to invade Taiwan.

¹Azad Essa, *Hostile Homelands: The New Alliance between India and Israel* (London: Pluto, 2023), 150–1.

²*Ibid* 98.

³*Ibid* 141.

⁴*Ibid* 74–83.