

# Why Hindu Nationalists are Intensifying the Occupation of Kashmir

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The irony of India celebrating its 72<sup>nd</sup> year of national independence as it orchestrates a coup and military lock-down on the occupied territory of Kashmir was apparently lost on Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

Modi used the occasion of an annual independence day celebration in Delhi to champion the abrogation of Kashmir's constitutional rights as a decisive step in rooting out terrorism and corruption, promising a new dawn for "development" in the Himalayan region.

An extensive fact-finding report by a team of Indian activists and academics described the alarming military blockade put into place at the beginning of the month. The free movement of people is being curtailed, and some are being prevented from reaching hospitals and obtaining critical medical care. Food and basic commodities are in short supply.

Perhaps most unnerving is the veritable communications black-out which has kept the Kashmiri population in the dark, as well as Kashmiris abroad who desperately attempt to connect with their families back home.

Despite the blockade thousands of people have poured out onto the streets of Srinagar in protest of the Indian government; they are demonstrating to their world their "steadfastness: how to hold on, through lies, murder, brutal repression, breathtaking theft, unbearable despair" (to borrow the words of Alice Walker in her 2011 essay on Palestine).

This time the Kashmiris "held on" through a hailstorm of teargas, chili grenades and pellet-gun fire, with over 150 of them sustaining injuries. In the Soura neighborhood of Srinagar, protestors have even erected a ramshackle barricade to keep out the Indian security forces.

"They can only enter Soura over our bodies. We won't give even an inch of land to India," Mufeed, a resident said in an interview with AFP. He also went on to compare the Kashmiri freedom struggle

to that of the Palestinians.

Notwithstanding the government's announcement last week that "normalcy" has been restored to the valley, civil society groups are still scrambling to track down the 4,000 Kashmiri's who in the preceding weeks were arrested under the Public Safety Act, which allows for the preventative detention of people against whom there may be no recorded criminal offence.

It is reported that most of the detainees—many of whom were picked up in warrantless midnight raids—have been "flown out" of Kashmir and are being housed in various prisons in Uttar Pradesh.

The BJP's recent move in Kashmir can be seen as one key moment in the longer arc of Hindu authoritarianism (Hindutva). For decades the BJP's parent organization, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), has been campaigning for the repeal of Article 370, which allowed Kashmir to have its own constitution and legislature; and subclause 35A, which barred non-Kashmiris from settling in the valley. Populating the Muslim-majority valley with Hindu settlers is a central plank of the RSS's vision for a unified, Hindu-only nation.

### **A Long History of Betrayals**

At the close of colonial rule the former Princely States (ruled only indirectly by the British Raj) were given the option to secede to India or Pakistan. With 77 percent of its population Muslim, Kashmir was expected to join Pakistan.

But a crisis of legitimacy ensued when Kashmiri Muslims—eager to overturn the oppressive order of the Hindu princely ruler, Maharaja Hari Singh, and increasingly subject to communal brutality sparked by the Partition of the Punjab—initiated an uprising across at least three districts of Kashmir. Shortly thereafter, a Pakistan-backed Pushtoon incursion entered Kashmir from the North-West Frontier. As the militants approached the gates of Srinagar, the Maharaja hurriedly acceded to India in exchange for military assistance in crushing the multiple rebellions.

Often downplayed by India's ruling class in this episode is the fact the Maharaja's declaration of accession was "provisional"; once the invaders were overcome the Kashmiri people were to be granted the right to determine their own fate (i.e. whether it would remain within the Indian Union, join Pakistan or remain independent) through a plebiscite.

Nehru and all of the succeeding Congress governments have betrayed this promise. (To be sure, Pakistan, by trying to usurp and infuse an Islamist fundamentalist hue into the Kashmir revolt has also had a major part in frustrating self-determination efforts).

Over the years India's Congress Party cynically painted an image of "winning hearts and minds". As Kavita Krishnan put it, the Congress attempted to "convince the international community that elections and Article 370 prove that Kashmiris are with the Indian Government," while installing successive puppet governments through fraudulent elections.

### **Deepening Militarization**

The 1989 uprising demanding "azaadi" (freedom) from Indian occupation marked a turning point for Indian state repression in Kashmir.

Draconian laws were passed such as the extension of the Armed Forces Special Powers (AFSPA) which grants soldiers executive powers to search and arrest without a warrant and use lethal force against any person who is "acting against the law."

With an estimated 500,000-strong occupying army—more troops than were deployed during the entire second Iraq War by the US and its coalition partners—Kashmir was permanently transformed into the most militarized place on earth.

Since 1990 more than 70,000 people have died in the conflict. Tens of thousands have been tortured, thousands more have been “disappeared,” and hundreds have been blinded or otherwise injured by pellet gun fire.

A shocking 2009 report by International People’s Tribunal on Human Rights and Justice in Kashmir documented the presence of 2,700 mass graves across 55 villages in Kashmir. Out of the 2943 cadavers discovered, 89.7% of them were unidentified.

A separate term, “half-widows”, was invented to describe the women who were left behind after their husbands were “disappeared” mostly by the security forces. They are only “half” widows because they have no way of knowing whether their husbands are dead or alive.

Since the 1989 uprising the anti-Indian resistance has ebbed and flowed. A flash point was the 2016 murder of the beloved Kashmiri leader, Burhan Wani, by the Indian security forces. The massive protests which ensued were met with brutal repression including the death of 30 civilians. Since then violence has been escalating, the last twelve months being the deadliest in a decade.

### **Pulwama: The Lynchpin of Modi’s Reelection**

While Modi’s pro-development rhetoric may have worked to get him elected in 2014, the country’s economic record at the end of this term did not bode well for the BJP’s re-election bid.

Belying Modi’s promise of 10 million new jobs, unemployment stood at four-decade high of 6.1 percent from 2017-18. The 2016 demonetization initiative, rather than curbing the flow of black money, led to a crushing currency shortage and devastated the already precarious incomes and employment of small farmers, traders, vendors, and casual workers.

Combined with the midterm election results, which saw the BJP lose its stronghold over three key states, the saffron party’s prospects seemed imperiled.

Enter Pulwama. On February 14<sup>th</sup> Adil Ahad Dhar, a 20-year-old Kashmiri and member of the Pakistan-based Jaish-e-Muhammad, rammed a car with explosives into convoy of 2,500 Indian paramilitary soldiers in Kashmir’s district of Pulwama. 40 Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) personnel plus Dhar perished in the explosion.

Modi could not have hoped for anything more auspicious.

Less than two weeks later, India ordered “preemptive surgical strikes” on what was alleged to be a terrorist camp in Balakot, Pakistan. Pakistan then shot down two of the Indian Air Force (IAF) jets and captured one of the Indian pilots.

Interestingly on the day of the IAF attack the Indian media broadcast that about 300 militants had been killed. India’s Foreign Secretary, Vijay Gokhale, told reporters that the strike killed “a very large number of Jaish-e-Mohammad terrorists, trainers, senior commanders, and groups of jihadis who were being trained for Fidayeen action [suicide missions] were eliminated.”

However, a Reuters investigation revealed that not a single person had died in the attack and the only damage done was to a few pine trees. The surgical strike appeared to have missed its target. But this finding was virtually ignored by the Indian press who went on parroting the government’s

story.

Nor did the media seem preoccupied with asking why or how the alleged intelligence tip off from Jammu and Kashmir about the attack was not acted upon by the Indian government. It took no notice of the immense restraint with which Pakistan acted and its relatively humane treatment and quick return of the captured pilot.

All that mattered in that moment and later during the lead up to the national elections was that Modi had taken a “bold,” “Prime Minister-like” action against the enemy. His move had restored “faith and confidence in the Indian Army and the armed forces.”

Modi’s landslide electoral victory in May of this year had in part Pulwama (and the media’s jingoistic coverage of it) to thank.

## **The Far Right**

To be sure, the unabashed “Make Kashmir Great Again” rhetoric spewing not only from the most rabid Sanghis (shorthand for an RSS member) but also from Bollywood, the Indian press and a host of political parties (including the “lower caste” BSP) is a chilling indication of just how far and wide Hindutva has spread.

A quick look at the numbers suffices to grasp the magnitude of their forces. The RSS—which draws its inspiration directly from Nazi Germany—currently has an official membership of 5-6 million spread across 56,859 units (*shakhas*). It is the largest voluntary organization in the world. Its registered trade union Bhartiya Mazdoor Sangh (BMS) is the largest trade union in India with over 6 million members. And the BJP, with 148 million members, is the largest political party in the world.

The Hindutva movement has also established its superiority in the electoral field. In 18 of India’s 29 states the BJP either directly or through an alliance currently governs.

Further, in 2017 the BJP installed a Hindu fundamentalist priest, Yogi Adityaanath, as the Chief Minister of the most populous state in India.

Adityanath is widely known for his uninhibited anti-Muslim hate speech—which in at least one instance was found to have ignited a communal riot.

Unsurprisingly it is in his state, Uttar Pradesh, where the *sanghis* have most aggressively run amok in recent years.

In 2018 alone—the year after Adityanath came to power—five deaths and 21 mob attacks were recorded. 70 of these cases were in the name of “cow-protection” and 75% of those who were targeted belonged to the Muslim community.

The national picture is not any less disquieting. According to a new hate crime tracker called Citizen’s Religious Hate Crime Watch 90% of religious hate crimes in the past decade have occurred after the BJP assumed power at the national level in 2014. Muslims who comprise 14% of India’s population were the victims in 62% of these cases.

As Harsh Mander reports, “The permissive environment for hate attacks created by frequent hate speeches by senior leaders of the party, and Modi’s refusal to criticise these attacks...means that communal and vigilante formations feel emboldened and encouraged to attack people of minority identities with impunity.”

In the same period Hindutva forces also advanced a unified cultural agenda by modifying educational text books to, for example, erase mention of Hindu caste oppression and installing its sympathizers in university administrative positions.

As Modi did in Gujarat during the 2002 anti-Muslim programs when he was the Chief Minister of that state, the PM masterfully kept an arm's length from the most brazen acts of religious violence—leaving the dirty work to his closest aids.

Instead during his first term Modi appealed to middle class voters through the promise of increased FDI and market liberalization. To woo India's poor he championed new government schemes on housing, electricity and sanitation.

Now, by no coincidence, the same idiom of development is being employed by the BJP to cover up the Indian state's atrocities in the Muslim-majority state of Kashmir.

### **Islamophobic Feminism**

In the same independence day speech promising development in Kashmir, Modi also vowed that the Indian nation would freely impart "rights" to Kashmiri women. With the repeal of Kashmir's semi-autonomous status, Muslim women there would enjoy the same rights of their Indian counterparts.

But this fairy tale has not been so easily fed to the oppressed in India nor in Kashmir. In fact the euphemistically named "Muslim Women Bill" which criminalizes the custom of a Muslim husband divorcing his wife by repeating the word "*talaq*" (divorce) three times faced strong pushback from Indian civil society.

While some women's organizations have long campaigned within their own communities against the triple *talaq*, many have questioned whether the new Bill would actually facilitate justice for the aggrieved.

The proposed punishment of imprisonment of the husband for three years, for example, could leave the aggrieved complainant without financial security and/or "at the mercy of her matrimonial family, [which is] liable to turn vengeful towards the wife for putting [her husband] behind bars," reads a statement issued by the Beeback Collective.

The protest statement also pointed to the hypocrisy of the Hindu majoritarian government claiming to save Muslim women while fanning the flames of communalism. The Bill is simply one of many ways in which the BJP government is attempting to "criminalize Muslim men in the guise of protecting Muslim women."

Modi's claim to liberate Kashmiri women through a more extensive Indian domination over Kashmir rings hollow in light of this context.

### **The Left Must Break with Nationalism**

Rather than unequivocally condemning the occupation and putting forth the case for self-determination, the Indian parliamentary left has historically assumed a series of contradictory positions on Kashmir.

As detailed in the late Praful Bidwai's *The Phoenix Moment: Challenges Confronting the Left* the Communist Party of India (CPI) initially welcomed Kashmir's accession to India.

In retrospect, it reversed its position, claiming the party's position had been based on the "false

presumption that India is 'progressive', and Pakistan is 'reactionary'" (12). Nehru's policy on Kashmir, the party argued, was primarily aimed to "grab and exploit Kashmir's rich territory". And the circumstances surrounding accession were "treacherous."

But by 1953 the CPI took another sharp turn, deeming the Maharaja's accession "legitimate." It went on to pledge its commitment to abide by parliamentary democracy and the newly minted Indian Constitution" and affirm "its support to India's territorial claims over Jammu and Kashmir" (13).

This position of the CPI has more or less held and is also reflected in positions of the other largest parliamentary left party, the Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPI-M). Most recently, in the aftermath of the Indian government's surgical strikes, the CPI-M-led legislature in the state of Kerala passed a resolution congratulating "the Army for taking steps to protect the country and people."

Any new Left project must part ways with "war on terror" rhetoric and unequivocally fight for the withdrawal of the Indian army from Kashmir (and from the other militarized areas of the subcontinent such as the North East and Bastar). The left must adopt an uncompromising position in favor of self-determination.

The CPI/M's follies aside, there are many on the left including various Marxist-Leninist and Trotskyist organizations which have forged genuine solidarity with the people of Kashmir and affirmed its fundamental right to self-determination.

The international left must build links with and support these various forces, while mounting pressure within our own countries to end the occupation. Additionally, a longer-term project for the left requires the development of a truly internationalist consciousness on Kashmir.

A recent statement issued by the Palestinian Boycott Divestment and Sanctions movement is a good starting point. It points to the fact that India regularly draws ideology, technology and weapons from Israel to better control Kashmir. "Our oppressors are united, and our struggles will be stronger if we too unite."

This cogent statement helps illustrate the fact that international solidarity is not just a moral imperative, but it is also a practical one if we are to effectively challenge the well-coordinated and transnational imperialist onslaught.