



The Kashmir Question: Victim of British Colonialism and Site of Post-Colonial Communal Violence

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ABSTRACT

Kashmir has been a site of communal and international violence for the past decades ever since the decolonization of the Indian sub-continent in the late 1940s. Due to British colonial rule and subsequent religious tensions, the region has faced a complex situation, which has resulted in a political crisis. As a result of competition between three great nuclear powers —China, India, and Pakistan— Kashmiri voices for peace and sovereignty have been silenced and crushed with violent force by the Indian state. By exploring first the history of Kashmir from the British colonial era, and then the region’s alignments to surrounding powers, this essay explores the ways in which great power politics silences Kashmiri voices.

Introduction

Kashmir, a region tucked away in the Himalayas, is mired in a territorial dispute between three nuclear powers: India, Pakistan, and China. It is home to different religious and linguistic groups with competing claims to the region. The region has always been strategically important; for example, Britain invaded Punjab after concerns that the Sikh Empire was no longer reliable in the face of the Great Game in the region between Russia and Britain (Rai, 2004). It is also the case that the voices of Kashmiri locals are often drowned out by Indian and Pakistani loyalists whenever violence breaks out in the region. During the decolonization of the Indian subcontinent, in the face of growing communal violence, the ruler of Kashmir acceded his state to then-secular India in hopes of settling peace in the region. Yet, Kashmir remains a site of violence and international bickering at the government level while Kashmiri lives are in jeopardy.

The root causes of the Kashmir conflict can be attributed to the communal violence between Muslims and Hindus, a lingering aftermath of British colonial policies in India. The results of the colonial policies still affect Kashmir, as it is divided into states led by religious nationalist governments vying to win their rivalry over the region. This paper will examine the history of Kashmir from the decolonization of British India to the start of the conflict through the various Indo-Pakistani Wars, Chinese involvement, and the rise of Hindu nationalism in India. By doing so, the essay will argue that the Kashmiris do not hold the keys to their national destiny due to the politics of stronger nuclear

powers, which forcibly situate Kashmir in the middle of conflicting interests and futures set out for the region.

Kashmir Before 1948

Coming out of the Second World War, the Indian subcontinent saw communities separated by religious affiliation: Muslims and Hindus. This identification as one of the two religious groups resulted from the British colonial policy of categorizing its colonial subjects for effective governance (Lange and Dawson 2009). Differentiation between Muslims and Hindus allowed the British to favour one over the other unjustly, increasing animosity between the two groups artificially categorized by the British (Lange and Dawson 2009).

Kashmir was not immune to this division between Muslims and Hindus, as the ruler of Kashmir, Maharaja Hari Singh, was Hindu, while the majority of his subjects were Muslims. This created dissonance during the Partition/Accession period (Rai 2004). Animosity grew among communities and between the subjects and the ruler, exploding as communal violence during the decolonization process of the subcontinent, including in Jammu and Kashmir with the 1947 Jammu massacres. The Maharaja of Jammu and Kashmir was initially set on remaining independent during the chaotic partition and accession period. This position gained support from various groups except for the Muslim Conference. This led to the 1947 Poonch Rebellion against the Maharaja and resulted in the mass migration of Hindus and Sikhs to Jammu with stories that incited fear among the locals against the Muslims (Ganguly

1995). The fear led to the massacres targeted against Muslims in Jammu (Snedden 2001).

Due to the eruption of communal violence across his principedom, Maharaja Hari Singh signed an agreement to accede his principedom to then-secular India. In exchange, he sought the defence of his principedom against the Pakistani-backed militias and, later on, against the Pakistani army (Qadri 2021). Additionally, the accession guaranteed autonomy for Kashmir within India under the Instrument of Accession, signed by Lord Mountbatten, representing the Dominion of India, and the Maharaja, representing Jammu and Kashmir. This guarantee of Kashmiri autonomy would later be ingrained into the Indian Constitution in 1949 with the passing of Article 370 (Qadri 2021). The notion of Hindu-majority India being a secular state, the Maharaja being Hindu himself, and rebellions incited by Pakistani-backed militias across the principedom made India a more viable option for accession than Pakistan (Varshney 2010).

The First Indo-Pakistani War started over Kashmir when Indian soldiers entered Kashmir to defend the newly acceded principedom and when the Pakistani-backed militias, and later the Pakistani army, also entered Kashmir (Wolpert 2010). The United Nations had to intervene and lay out a peaceful resolution that laid out terms, such as the withdrawal of Pakistani troops and minimal Indian troops stationed in Kashmir for a plebiscite on the future of Kashmir to be held (Qadri 2021). Hopes for a standing peace quickly dissipated as neither the Pakistani nor the Indian army withdrew their armies in suspicion of each others' motives. The plebiscite

never happened, and the Kashmir region was divided between India and Pakistan (Varshney 2010). The origins of the Kashmir conflict are evident; the British pursued a colonial policy of categorizing and differentiating its subjects into groups, setting them against each other to govern the colonies more easily and quash any united movements for independence. This policy of communal animosity resulted in communal violence committed in the Indian subcontinent as principedoms and states were forced to choose between joining the Muslim-majority Pakistan or the Hindu-majority but secular India. When faced with the choice between two newly independent and powerful states, the Maharaja of Kashmir had to concede his initial wish to remain independent, leading to its conditional accession to India as Pakistan-backed rebellions broke out in his principedom, which planted the seed of a decades-long conflict continuing to this day.

20th Century Indian-Pakistani-Chinese Influence over Kashmir

After Kashmir acceded to India and received constitutional guarantees of autonomy, Sheikh Abdullah was appointed the Prime Minister of Jammu and Kashmir in 1948. Sheikh Abdullah spoke strongly against the Kashmiri accession to Pakistan, describing the nation as “an unscrupulous and savage enemy” due to its strongly religion-oriented government compared to secular India (Guha 2019, 92). Abdullah's strong opposition to Pakistan portrays the general Kashmiri attitude on the issue of the Kashmir question during this time. Indian Muslims also opposed Pakistan, blaming

their reckless risking of Indian Muslim lives through their provocative handling of the partition issues and encroaching upon Kashmir. This further incited anti-Muslim violence in India (Varshney 2010).

After the First Indo-Pakistan War, Pakistani attitude, the motivation for Kashmiri independence, and Abdullah's stance on the issue changed. Abdullah was increasingly wary of the potential rise of Hindu nationalism in India (Varshney 2010). Hindu-nationalist politicians were increasingly hostile against Indian Muslims and were suspicious of their loyalty towards India as animosity with Pakistan grew with various conflicts. It was this ambiguous position taken by Abdullah that allowed the rise of Hindu nationalism in India as the populace of India grew increasingly suspicious of Kashmir's loyalty and true intentions of joining India. However, it was unfair for India to demand unquestioned loyalty from Kashmir, a Muslim-majority country, rightfully concerned with the potential scenario where Hindu nationalists could gain popular support, meaning that Kashmir would no longer benefit from its constitutional guarantee of greater autonomy. Nevertheless, the rise of Hindu nationalism materialized in India throughout four wars with Pakistan. The concerns that Abdullah, among other Kashmiris, had of the fate of secularism in India seemed increasingly valid (Basu 1996).

The Second Indo-Pakistan War erupted in 1965 when Pakistan decided to infiltrate Jammu and Kashmir amidst increasing discontent among Kashmiris with the integration of Kashmir into India and the overreaching actions of the Indian government despite the guarantee of

autonomy (Wolpert 2010). Although the war ended with no territorial gains made by either side, the subsequent dissatisfaction felt by both sides on the Kashmir Question led to more wars and skirmishes in the region between the two countries (Wolpert 2010). With the continuation of violence in Kashmir, as well as increased dissatisfaction from Kashmiri locals on the integration process, the movement for an independent Kashmir emerged. Both violent and non-violent mobilization were met with brutal suppression by the Indian military and police forces, breeding more support for Kashmiri independence and local hostility towards India.

While India and Pakistan were going to war multiple times over Kashmir, the People's Republic of China annexed Tibet in 1959, leading to rising tensions with India over the drawing of the border between India and China in the Himalayas. The tension between the two countries worsened after India provided refuge to the Dalai Lama, the Tibetan religious and political leader fleeing the Chinese government (Malik 2019). The two countries pushed the border conflict into a full-blown war in 1962 when the Chinese troops crossed the disputed McMahon Line (Malik 2019). The Chinese intended to build a road connecting their regions, Xinjiang and the newly-annexed Tibet, which went through the disputed Aksai Chin territory in Kashmir (Sen 2014). The war ended with the Chinese consolidation of Aksai Chin, increased animosity between India and China, and increased cooperation between Pakistan and China due to Pakistan's strategic interest in gaining a regional ally to check India's power. While

the great powers started to prey upon the politically and socially fractured Kashmir, Kashmiri locals were caught in the crossfire of Chinese, Pakistani, and Indian military operations and strategic interests, which contributed to the civil unrest and an unstable region making the lives of many Kashmiris difficult and unable to choose their national destiny.

Kashmir Today - Escalating Conflict and the Lost Kashmiri Voice

Today, Kashmir is a site of border skirmishes, civil unrest, and constant fear for one's life by the local population. Cries for Kashmiri independence and police brutality against peaceful protesters have resulted in more protests against the Indian government. In 2019, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-led Indian government, with Narendra Modi at the helm, revoked Article 370 of the Constitution to remove Kashmir's special status and autonomy (Lunn 2019). Critics of the revocation of Article 370 called it a move that would strip the autonomy of the only-Muslim majority region in India in order to completely integrate it into the Indian Union. The integration would further destabilize the region amid growing support for Kashmiri independence (Al Jazeera 2019). In the lead-up to the revocation of Article 370, it has been reported that thousands of Indian troops were sent to Kashmir, a curfew was imposed, and communications in and out of the region were shut down (Lunn 2019). Ever since protests for independence rose in India and Pakistan, Kashmiris on each side of the border have grown tired of the regular state-led violence, leading to protests and demonstrations,

which were consistently met with brutality. In 2022, ten protesters were reportedly killed in Kashmir when a protest broke out after a Kashmiri pro-independence leader, Yasin Malik, was sentenced to life (Al Jazeera 2022). On the other side of the border, the pro-independence movement gained momentum, with thousands of Kashmiris pouring out into the streets regularly in response to interstate violence that affected the community in Azad Kashmir (Shams 2019). The original hope of Maharaja Hari Singh and Sheikh Abdullah of an autonomous Kashmir under a secular, democratic India was no longer a realistic scenario, as a Hindu nationalist Indian government stripped Kashmir of its autonomy in a coercive and almost militaristic manner.

Other than the stripping of its autonomy within the Union of India, Kashmir has also seen multiple border skirmishes occur, such as the 2022 skirmishes between China and India. The altercation was over the increasing infrastructure construction on both sides of the Galwan River valley near the Line of Actual Control. This line separates Chinese-controlled territory from the Indian-controlled territory in Kashmir. The violence broke out after years of infrastructure construction and military buildup on both sides, each accusing the other of violating its territorial sovereignty (Wu and Myers 2020). The Chinese were "testing the limits" of the Line of Actual Control by expanding their claim over the valley (Wu and Myers 2020). Despite the cessation of the skirmishes along the border, thousands of Chinese and Indian soldiers remained stationed near the Line of Actual Control near Galwan Valley, which re-

sulted in continued tension in the region (Singh 2022).

Rising tensions in Kashmir due to the stripping of its autonomy in India and the border clashes between China and India are compounded by the increasing Chinese-Pakistani cooperation through the Belt and Road Initiative. The Pakistani government has been hoping to leverage the strengthened Sino-Pakistani relationship to pressure India on the Kashmir Question as they expedite various infrastructure projects related to the Belt and Road Initiative in Pakistan (Aamir 2019). The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), the main part of China's Belt and Road Initiative, also goes through Pakistani-controlled parts of Kashmir, which led to objections from India (Blah 2018). The Chinese government maintains that the CPEC's involvement with Pakistani Kashmir does not signify their taking a stance on the Kashmir Question between India and Pakistan (Blah 2018). Still, Pakistan hopes that the development of the CPEC will lead to further Chinese involvement in the issue and its siding with Pakistan. In response to the development of CPEC, India is constructing a railway line connecting Jammu and Kashmir to other strategically essential border regions of India, leading to competition for infrastructure development in the region between China-Pakistan and India.

Conclusively, the current situation in Kashmir reflects an increasingly Hindu nationalist Indian state stripping Kashmir of its autonomy through suppressive measures. This is all happening while India and China's border skirmishes are incited along the Line of Ac-

tual Control in Aksai Chin and increasing cooperation between Pakistan and China, which encroaches upon India's strategic interest in Kashmir. All of this occurs while the police and military brutally crush those who strive for an independent Kashmir, and both Indian and Pakistani loyalists drown out the voices of everyday Kashmiris in the elections and media coverage on the issue. The question of whether the various economic and developmental initiatives will benefit the Kashmiri population in the long run or if they will stand to serve the interests of the Great Powers, leading to greater conflicts in the future, will unfold in the coming decades.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the decades of violence and tragedies occurring in Kashmir today and the various geopolitical games between nuclear powers in the region derive from the British colonial policy and their chaotic departure from the subcontinent in the 1940s. The British policy of differentiating, categorizing, and favouring one religious group over another has deepened animosity between Muslims and Hindus. It led to all-out communal violence across the subcontinent, including Kashmir, where the Maharaja was Hindu and the populace Muslim. Despite hopes for its independence, Kashmir quickly found itself pressured into choosing a side between newly-formed India and Pakistan. The Maharaja's indecisiveness impeded the two powers' desire for Kashmir's integration.

Consequently, Kashmir was met with militant insurgencies and invasions from Pakistan, leading to its accession to India under the con-

dition of certain sets of autonomy within the union. The increasing dissatisfaction with the integration process, the fear of rising Hindu nationalism, and increasing brutality by Indian forces have bred the rise of the Kashmiri independence movement in the region. Frequent protests today are met with violent suppressions, breeding a cycle of violence. The current Hindu nationalist government stripped Kashmir of its constitutionally guaranteed autonomy for greater integration of the Muslim-majority Kashmir into Hindu-majority India, which only sparked more unrest in the region. The frustration with daily violence also led to the rise of the Kashmiri independence movement in Pakistan. All this is happening while China solidifies its strategic interests and encroaches upon the region, leading to the Sino-Indian War in the Sixties and recent border skirmishes with India. China is also strengthening its ties with Pakistan through the CPEC, which further integrates Azad Kashmir into the Chinese-Pakistani cooperative partnership.

The origins of the Kashmir conflict, the historical progression of the conflict, and the current status of the conflict depict the region as tragically stuck in the crossfire between three great powers. Kashmir is unable to decide its own national identity and is forcibly separated along artificial and ambiguous lines due in large part to centuries-old British colonial policy.

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