

India & Kashmir: Breaking the silence

Monday 29 April 2013, by [BARSAMIAN David](#), [MISHRA Pankaj](#) (Date first published: 27 April 2013).

In Kashmir, the scale of human rights violations—from collective punishment and assassinations, to custodial deaths and disappearances—is staggering. Yet little of what goes on in that Himalayan region reaches the outside. Those who resist Indian rule, the Indian government tells the world, are fundamentalist jihadis backed by Pakistan. But the reality is quite different. Kashmir is an unsettled issue, dating back to the disastrous 1947 British partition plan to divide the subcontinent in two: a Hindu-majority India and a Muslim-majority Pakistan. Today, Kashmir is one of the most volatile places on the planet.

Pankaj Mishra writes for the *New Yorker*, the *New York Review of Books*, the *New York Times Book Review*, and the *Guardian*. He is the author of *Butter Chicken in Ludhiana*, *An End to Suffering*, *Temptations of the West*, and *From the Ruins of Empire*.

ISR regular contributor David Barsamian, host and founder of Alternative radio (www.alternativeradio.org), whose latest book of interviews with Noam Chomsky, *Power Systems*, has just been published by Metropolitan Books, spoke with Mishra in Boulder, Colorado.

David Barsamian: In your introduction to a collection of essays *Kashmir: The Case for Freedom*, you wrote: “Once known for its extraordinary beauty, the Valley of Kashmir now hosts the biggest, bloodiest and also the most obscure military occupation in the world. With more than 80,000 people dead in an anti-India insurgency backed by Pakistan, the killing fields of Kashmir dwarf those of Palestine and Tibet.

In addition to the everyday regime of arbitrary arrests, curfews, raids, and checkpoints enforced by nearly 700,000 Indian soldiers, the Valley’s 4 million Muslims are exposed to extrajudicial execution, rape and torture, with such barbaric variations as live electric wires inserted into penises.”

And then you proceed to ask the logical next question: “Why, then, does the immense human suffering of Kashmir occupy such an imperceptible place in our moral imagination?”

Pankaj Mishra: There are several reasons for this, particularly in the last decade or so, there has been this idea of India emerging as a great economic power and also as a strategic ally of the United States. There has been a lot of bad news coming out of India that’s not been reported internationally, certainly not in the Western press. I think the government also places very heavy restrictions on reporting out of Kashmir, even on foreign correspondents.

Many of them start their tenure by going to Kashmir and being shocked and appalled, because nothing has prepared them for what they see there, so they go and do these anguished reports about this horrific situation. Very soon the government cracks down on them, and they are told to stay

within their limits. And for the next of their three or four years in India , they observe those limits, because the price is you might have to leave your job or it might become harder for your newspaper to maintain a bureau or an office there. So there isn't really enough reporting happening of the kind that happens, for instance, in Tibet. Even though the Chinese government does not allow journalists to go there, still reports filter out all the time. And when there is a massive event there, like the riots in Lhasa back in 20 08 09, it's on the front pages and in the headlines for days on end.

DB: You observe that whole libraries of books are devoted to Tibet and to Palestine, but not to Kashmir.

PM: The situation is inherently complicated. And I think the Kashmiris themselves until quite recently have been absent from this discussion of Kashmir internationally. It's only recently that Kashmiri writers have started to tell their stories and to write books. That is definitely making a difference. I 'm thinking of Basharat Peer 's memoir, and Mirza Waheed's novel. Those books are making a lot of people sit up and take notice. Sanjay Kak has edited a fine collection of essays called (Haymarket Books) But otherwise we've had very little academic writing on the subject. One of the unfortunate omissions has been that Indian intellectuals have rarely taken up this subject. Because, once again, you can alienate and exacerbate and anger a large and powerful constituency in India if you talk about Kashmir in any kind of frank and objective way.

DB: This is not just an internal conflict between the people of Kashmir and the Indian state. One-third of Kashmir is occupied by Pakistan, two-thirds is occupied by India, and a small sliver is occupied by China.

PM: I think at least the Indian-Pakistan bits of this conflict can be resolved. There are parameters. And there actually have been serious talks on these issues, and the broad outlines of a solution have been clear. It's also been clear for a long time that, instead of being an eternal problem in India-Pakistan relations, Kashmir could actually be a solution to the larger problem of India-Pakistan relations. That once you have a border which is easily crossed by people on both sides of it and trade happens, very soon we move away from these narrow and harsh ideas of national sovereignty, which is good for South Asia as a whole.

We so badly need to entertain those ideas at this point. We've invested so much in defending our respective territories. We 've invested so much emotional and physical and national energies in this whole project of consolidating the nation state, fighting several wars and sinking billions and billions of dollars over the decades into building up nuclear bombs, into building up these great militaries . I think we can step back from this completely mad process if we start to think of Kashmir as a way forward to a sort of South Asian federation of sorts, where people can travel, where you have extensive trade links across the subcontinent, of the kind that have existed for centuries and centuries.

Kashmir was a great gateway to Central Asia, and large parts of what is now Pakistan were gateways to the Silk Road and larger markets across Central Asia. And one should still think of these places in those terms and not just sort of lock oneself into this very impoverished imagination of the nation state.

DB: It's striking, when you travel from Lahore to Delhi, to see the similarities. The major visible difference is in the signboards. In India, Devanagari, the Hindi script, is dominant; in Pakistan it's Urdu. But the spoken language, the food, the music, the clothing—the similarities, except for religion, seem to be greater than the differences.

PM: This is one instance where you could say the ruling elites of these two countries are almost

entirely responsible for this problem: in creating this problem in the first instance, in the years leading up to the Partition of India, and then carefully sustaining this problem, very carefully feeding this over the decades. I think the elites have really remained very invested in Kashmir, in making their respective national claims on Kashmir because nationalism for them has been this great self-legitimizing ideology. This is true both for the unelected regimes that we've seen in Pakistan and for the elected governments that we've seen in India.

DB: A prominent lawyer, Prashant Bhushan, was physically assaulted for speaking out on Kashmir. Arundhati Roy, the writer, was threatened with sedition charges. There's a price to pay for speaking out on the issue.

PM: Very much so. I think especially in the last few years there has been a sort of intensifying atmosphere of intolerance, not just on Kashmir but on various issues in India, and any number of non-state actors now. The state really doesn't have to do much, because it can always rely upon various extremists to bully people into silence. I think anyone speaking out on this subject is exposing himself or herself to that kind of intimidation and violence.

DB: While I think the evidence is overwhelming that in 1947 the majority of Kashmiri Muslims would have wanted to accede to Muslim-majority Pakistan, I'm not sure that's the case today. In the brief inquiries I did when I was there, I didn't find anyone having a good word to say about Pakistan. They know what's going on across the border. It's not a state that's very attractive to them.

PM: The infatuation with Pakistan, even during the most intense years of the anti-Indian insurgency, was limited. And that romance is pretty much dead. From my sense of it, they want to be equidistant from both India and Pakistan. I think that's why the whole sort of propaganda in India, certainly among Hindu nationalist circles, that certainly these people all want to be Pakistanis and if you give them any degree of autonomy, they will go and join Pakistan, is utterly false.

DB: One aspect of this, I believe, too, is the intensity of Kashmiri identity. When I first went there in 1966, I went overland from Delhi, people asked me, "Did you come from India?" I was taken aback.

PM: That been their historical experience. They were never really part of this political and administrative entity that we know as India, which, mind you, is also a creation of the British. In many ways Kashmir was culturally connected to the rest of India, through Buddhism, through Sufi Islam, but it also within the Valley nurtured, and developed certain traditions, which were quite different from Islamic and Hindu Buddhist traditions elsewhere in the country.

So it had a very clear sense of its identity and being geographically located where it is in this Valley, relatively isolated, which allows people everywhere, wherever they are in mountain valleys, to develop. There are many books on this subject, about Southeast Asian hill communities, how they are very different from the rice-cultivating communities near the coasts. So there are real differences to be observed there. And I think they also had a very clear sense of their political identity, which in the years leading up to the Partition was formed by an active opposition to the very decadent, dissolute Hindu rulers of the Valley. So their political journey, their cultural identity has departed in significant ways from the rest of India. And, very obviously, post-partition South Asia, post-partition India, the government did very little to make them feel part of this larger entity called India. In fact, their sense of alienation deepened all through those early decades when Jawaharlal Nehru was in power in Delhi.

DB: There were also the broken promises of plebiscites.

PM: Indeed All through these decades they felt more and more isolated and more and more alienated from the rest of India . Yet again, that cultural identity, I think, also prevents them from embracing the fundamentalist project, which is the one that many Pakistanis, many Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) operatives, many people in the Pakistani army try to foist upon the Valley, which is sort of militant versions of political Islam— fundamentalist ideas that, again, did not really find a foothold in the Kashmir Valle y b e cause their own traditions were so much stronger. So that's one reason, again, why that propaganda about them being closet fundamentalists or Pakistanis is so false.

DB In late 2009, a report came out called Buried Evidence, about mass graves all over Kashmir. Many thousands of Kashmiris have gone missing. What's interesting is that this report itself was buried and disappeared. There was hardly any commentary on it.

PM: There have been some of us writing about this subject, and also pointing out that the uncovering of 3,000 corpses in mass g raves anywhere else in the world would prompt a media firestorm. You would have headlines and commentary for days and days on end. But here we are. All the evidence is there. It's been well documented, it's been verified, certified by very respectable authorities in the realm of human rights. And no response. The government does not feel obliged to say anything about it.

There have been reports by various human rights organizations. But they have been met with silence. So this is a measure of just how all of us conspire in maintaining this conspiracy of silence over Kashmir: the international media , the various international g overnments, the Indian media, the Indian newspapers, television channels.

DB: These are not two ordinary countries. These are nuclear-armed states with the ability to deliver those weapons of mass destruction. There have already been multiple wars in the Kashmir area. The danger here is acute.

PM: We should all worry about this. And one reason why Kashmir remains an urgent issue, even though we don't really pay much attention to it, is because, as you point out, it is a dispute between two nuclear-armed countries. Here we've already got two countries which have fought major wars over this issue and are full of any number of belligerent people. Both of them have extremely jingoistic media. So this is something to be extremely worried about. We know from bitter historical experience how major wars can erupt out of tiny sparks. War has this completely irrational, illogical momentum, and it becomes very, very difficult to stop.

DB: One of the unusual characteristics of the Kashmir situation is something known as half-widows. There have been various reports issued about women who have lost their male provider, be it father, brother, uncle, or husband, but they don't have the death certificate. They've gone missing. The Indian state says, "Well, they've gone over to Pakistan or whatever, they've fled." Thus the women are unable to collect any kind of compensation. And of course they live in an emotional limbo. It is a painful and unresolved circumstance.

PM: I remember when I first went there and I was in my early days as a reporter, I remember tactlessly asking a Kashmiri journalist who had told me precisely about this problem. I said, Where can I find these people? and he said, Knock on any door. He was more or less right. So this is a very widespread problem one of the many. You have people who are suffering from various trauma-related injuries who haven't recovered psychologically from the various and scars reflected not just on the physical body but on their psyches. There are a number of documented cases of depression and suicide. You're really looking at a society that's undergone a very serious and l o n g trauma. So you have all kinds of pathologies and all kinds of problems there. This is just one of them.

DB: That describes some of the effects of occupation on the Kashmiris. Have you thought about or looked at what the impact of the occupation has done to India itself in terms of civil rights and human rights?

PM: This is a problem that we have seen for decades, for centuries. Various writers, philosophers, thinkers have pointed this out. Colonialism, military occupation not only brutalizes the obvious victims, the people who are occupied, but also brutalizes the occupier, the colonialist. So you see a rapid deterioration in the political and intellectual climate of India. You see growing intolerance and the way in which the security forces, for instance, behave, the kind of impunity they enjoy, whether in central India or even increasingly in urban centers.

One of the things that has emerged from this recent horrific case of an assault on a young woman in New Delhi is how people actually fear approaching the police because they fear they might actually be further victimized by the police in all kinds of horrific ways. And there's no redress against that. There's no recourse to justice against the might of the police.

So I think the kind of damage this military occupation in Kashmir and the Northeast, this frequent recourse to brute force in these areas is really incalculable. We see the effects today. We see it all around us, in the way the political climate has been poisoned; in the way we talk about certain issues. Also, the army used to be regarded as a largely apolitical force. We never really used to hear from military chiefs in the way we do now. Every time something happens in Kashmir or on the border, suddenly the army chief is doing multiple interviews. I think the enhanced role of the army in political affairs is an extremely disturbing development. The fact that the local army chiefs in Kashmir can publicly overrule the elected chief minister of the state tells you something about how things have deteriorated there politically. So I think in various parts of India you can see the effects of this kind of long and brutal military occupation.

DB: India has, to the surprise of many, one of the largest Muslim populations in the world, approaching, I think, 200 million people. They're cricket stars, Bollywood celebrities, the foreign minister is a Muslim, several presidents have been Muslim. But the parallel track to that is the destruction of the Babri Mosque, massacres in Mumbai, a major massacre in Gujarat in 2002. What is the status of Indian Muslims?

PM: It's a very demoralized and depressed minority at this point. Economically, in every index you look at of human development it's lagging behind.

DB: Because the state is not attending to its needs?

PM: The state is completely unresponsive to the Muslim minority. But, mind you, the state is unresponsive to even members of the so-called majority, so that is not an exceptional case at all. But I think what has happened since the advent of Hindu nationalism, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), as major forces in Indian politics is that Muslims have been marginalized and they have lost even the kind of political voice they used to have at one point. They're purely an electoral vote bank for many politicians, who still claim to speak for them. The fact is that all kinds of affirmative action projects to improve their capabilities and improve literacy levels, or improve employment levels in the government, for instance, are torpedoed by various political parties. They don't really get anywhere.

DB: How has the Indian state and media interpreted what has been described as Tahrir Square before Tahrir Square, where hundreds of thousands of Kashmiris turned out to peacefully demonstrate in 2008, 2009, and 2010, completely flying in the face of the narrative that these are jihadis, militant fundamentalists supported by Pakistan? How have

they navigated that? And isn't it interesting that nobody here, at least in the US, even knows that these demonstrations took place.

PM: Its been interesting. Because for a long time , when I first started writing about Kashmir, I used to hear this argument among Indian liberals, that if only Kashmiris were to renounce violence and terrorism, if they were to take to the streets in large numbers and demonstrate, India would be faced with an unanswerable moral dilemma. And that is precisely happened, as you say, in those years, when hundreds of thousands of Kashmiris demonstrated.

It was a difficult thing , I think, for most people to understand, because many people in the Indian media had already kind of subscribed to the propaganda that Kashmir has now been settled, infiltration from across the border is down to historically low levels, the militants have been routed, and basically the whole thing has been resolved. And suddenly this younger generation of Kashmiris were on the street. So it was a very difficult thing to figure out, to explain, to analyze. For a while the demonstrations were on the front pages. And soon enough the propaganda machine started cranking out reports of how these people are really in contact with their ISI handlers across the border, and various transcripts of phone conversations were published by outlets of the Indian media demonstrating that this is obviously true, that once again Pakistan is behind these demonstrations . So that's where it ended, basically, that even these big and spontaneous expressions of public anger and disaffection in Kashmir could yet again be repackaged as a Pakistan-backed campaign against India.

DB: What role does water play in terms of strategic power and an incentive for the Indian state not to relinquish control over Kashmir?

PM: I think it's playing an increasingly important role. Water is going to be a source of conflicts not just in South Asia but across Asia. You already see a lot of tensions with China over the damming of the Brahmaputra when it flows through Tibet, and the same kind of tensions cropping up between India and Pakistan. That was one success story of the whole relationship, the Water Treaty. But that's beginning to unravel. We see in Pakistan a number of extremists who want to keep alive the idea of India as the great enemy. When I was there last year, among the extremists there was constantly this discourse about how India is basically responsible for the floods in Pakistan, for the drought, for basically everything bad that is happening in Pakistan. But water kept cropping up as the most important theme. Having failed to get their way in Kashmir, having failed to really inflict a serious defeat on the Indian military, what they have now cottoned on to in order to make themselves relevant to the Pakistani masses is this idea that India is cheating us out of our legitimate share of water. This is going to become, I think, a more serious issue between the two countries.

DB: Large areas of South Asia are described as water-stressed. I was in Uttarakhand a couple of years ago, where a major dam was built. People in towns, like Tehri, and in villages there don't have water to drink or for bathing. The water they were once using is now going to New Delhi.

PM: The water table has been plunging across North India for quite some time. This is one of the stories that isn't reported. What we don't hear is just how unsustainable this particular model of economic growth that we've signed up to is. For example, the fact that so many of India's limited resources are being diverted to basically providing for these growing urban populations. We're seeing a slow catastrophe developing in large parts of rural India: water tables plunging , soil becoming uncultivable, even in the great granary of India, the Punjab, where we're seeing the long-term effects of the Green Revolution now playing themselves out. These are some of the most important, the most serious stories that are emerging out of India today. And very little attention is

being paid to them because that's not what makes money circulate, that's not what gets foreign investors excited, that's not what makes for stimulating conversations at cocktail parties in Delhi, where so much of this knowledge circulates and then makes its way into the international pages of the New York Times and the Washington Post

DB: Is there much focus on or attention being paid to climate change in India?

PM: Not as much as it should be. Definitely not. Because this is going to affect a vast majority of India's population who live in rural areas and depend on agriculture. Monsoon patterns have been shifting alarmingly. We know that major rivers, like the Ganges, are going dry at very important points in their journey towards the ocean.

DB: The Yamuna in Delhi is a veritable cesspool. It stinks.

PM: And it's all visible. That's the other thing. It's not like you have to do a lot of research or lose yourself in some library or archive for days on end to uncover this. It's in front of you. It hits you the moment you leave an air-conditioned mall. It's just all out there. But there is very little concern about this. Sometimes I feel there's more discourse about environmental issues in China than in India today. I think we really sort of close our ears from that whole conversation at this point and have completely devoted ourselves to building ourselves up as this great superpower all set on this uninterrupted trajectory all the way up to international superpowerdom.

DB: V. S. Naipaul once described India as a country of "a million mutinies." Indeed, from the Northeast, to Chhattisgarh, to Kashmir, there are various uprisings, rebellions, revolts, resistances. What accounts for this impressive pushback to corporate and state power from underprivileged, poor people?

PM: At some point people feel that they have to respond, they have to resist. One of the great things about India today, which gives me hope, is the network of activists and various organizations around the country: political, environmental people active in the field of adult literacy or fighting on behalf of the tribals being dispossessed of their land, trade unionists. Any number of people out there working very hard to create lives of dignity. One of the ways in which a lot of people realize you can live a dignified life is through actively engaging in resistance. Not forming political parties or standing for elections. That's absolutely the wrong way of entering politics. But this is one way many people across India have chosen, that we will not let ourselves be trampled into the earth by the combined powers of multinational corporations and the state, that we will resist. This idea has gone around. When Naipaul spoke of the million mutinies, he was thinking more in terms of individuals rising and claiming their share of the wealth. He did not really mean these various sorts of movements that have sprung up in India over the last two decades or so, which are more important than this individualistic aspiration for consumer modernity that he was describing. I think this is more crucial and probably more significant for India's future.

DB: What you see happening in Kashmir? Can the occupation go on indefinitely?

PM: I don't think it can. It's ultimately unsustainable in the sense that it can undermine many democratic institutions it has already done that and remain counterproductive. You can keep up the bare bones of the occupation, obviously. India has a very large army, so it can afford to keep that many people in the Valley and continue the occupation as long as it can, technically at least. But I think the price it is paying for that occupation in terms of the damage being to civil rights and human rights, to the security infrastructure, to the future of democracy in India generally, that has just been too high a price to pay. I think if we continue to pay that high price, we're just going to see a lot more violence, not just in Kashmir but also within India today, and a lot more repression at the

same time, a lot more authoritarianism. In that sense I think the occupation is unsustainable, not because India can't afford to have that many soldiers in the Valley.

DB: So the call for azaadi, for freedom, is still some distance away.

PM: Yes. And I think we have to specify what is meant by and in what context can it be realized. There is not just one context. I think for an outsider, especially for an Indian citizen like myself to say, look, is virtually impossible in the present circumstances, is a harsh thing to say, and I would hesitate in saying that. But the fact is that we have to think of innovative and creative ways in which we can think of , in which we can manifest the real meaning of and not just think of yet another nation state which becomes this buffer one between two hostile nation states, becomes hospitable to all kinds of imperialist interventions in the region.

We have to remember also that Kashmir itself is a multinational, a multi-ethnic, multi-religious society, if we are thinking of the state of Jammu and Kashmir. So the whole idea of national self-determination there also has a different cast. So there are all these complexities that open up once you start examining the idea of As an aspiration for an end to brutal military rule, it makes perfect and clear sense. But I think when we start thinking about it slightly more deeply, about political alternatives, then we have to be slightly more creative than thinking along these lines, which have led India and Pakistan into the trap which we find ourselves in, which is these unwieldy nation states.

P.S.

* International Viewpoint. <http://www.internationalviewpoint.org/>