

India: Narendra Modi Is Using Brutal Repression to Silence the People of Kashmir

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For decades, the Indian state has suppressed the democratic rights of Kashmiris. Narendra Modi's hard-right government is taking this pattern of repression to new extremes, with the complicity of Indian intellectuals who seek to toxify the cause of Kashmir.

India-controlled Kashmir is one of the most [heavily militarized zones](#) in the world, and any public display of a persistent Kashmiri national struggle meets with swift, violent, and indiscriminate repression. This pattern of silencing extends to the field of discourse as well.

The Indian political mainstream views any reference to Kashmiri rights and aspirations, whether spoken or written, as a manifestation of “fundamentalism,” “radicalism,” or (Pakistani-inspired) “terrorism.” The hard-right, Hindu nationalist government of Narendra Modi has carried this vilification of Kashmiris to new heights.

A History of Repression

The record of the Indian state's repressive ways in Kashmir is extensive and well documented, going back decades before Narendra Modi's rise to power. In 1993, Human Rights Watch (HRW) published a [report](#) titled “Rape in Kashmir: A Crime of War.” It showed that the Indian security forces routinely targeted civilians in the course of their efforts to quell the Kashmiri independence struggle, with rape used as a tool of counterinsurgency.

The report concluded that the security forces were “attempting to punish and humiliate the entire community” through systematic sexual violence against women. Another HRW report published the same year [documented](#) the routine torture of Kashmiri detainees as well as harassment and assault of health workers who were providing care. According to the report's authors, the Indian authorities even “prevented ambulance drivers from transporting injured persons to hospitals for emergency care.”

The impunity with which the Indian armed forces have operated in the Kashmir Valley receives legal sanction from the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act. This piece of legislation gives them emergency powers to maintain public order in so-called disturbed areas — all of which, civil society organizations [argue](#), violate international human rights law.

There is ample evidence of this. Along with the acknowledged civilian death toll, there is the practice of enforced disappearances of Kashmiri men. Human rights activists [estimated](#) that between eight thousand and ten thousand people were “disappeared” between 1988 and 2007, approximately 60 percent of whom were civilians. People refer to the wives of the disappeared, who have often been missing for decades without being officially declared dead, as “[half widows](#).”

There have also been several discoveries of unmarked mass graves in Kashmir. Eyewitnesses [claim](#) that those graves were dug under instruction from the Indian security forces, and that they contain

the bodies of the missing Kashmiri men.

Blinding and Silencing

Since Modi took office, repression in Kashmir has been even more severe. Since 2010, the security forces have been using pellet guns as a supposedly “nonlethal” weapon for crowd control. In 2016 alone, they fired 1.2 million metal pellets in response to protests in the valley. The pellets left six thousand people [injured](#), with 782 suffering eye injuries. Writing in the *Guardian*, journalist Mirza Waheed [described it](#) as an exercise in “mass blinding.”

A young Kashmiri student I spoke to in Mumbai describes the conditions in the state:

Stone pelting doesn't happen that much anymore. But if anything does happen, the Indian soldiers quickly pick up anyone in sight. They will arrest you, take your paperwork, take your passport. In fact, in some cases, they will seize your property. This is normal in Kashmir.

In 2019, the Indian parliament revoked Articles 370 and 35A of the Indian constitution that granted autonomy to Jammu and Kashmir. Most significantly, Article 35A had allowed the Kashmiri Legislative Assembly to “define permanent residents.” In effect, this gave it the authority to maintain the valley's Kashmiri identity. The Indian state has engaged in a concerted effort to settle non-Kashmiris in the region and alter its [demographic makeup](#).

Using the [Jammu Kashmir Public Safety Act](#), a preventive detention law, the authorities have conducted raids and arbitrarily detained politicians, activists, and journalists. In 2022, pro-government journalists joined forces with the police to storm and [shut down](#) the premises of the independent Kashmir Press Club.

India has also become the [world capital](#) of internet shutdowns, accounting for 58 percent of all disruptions worldwide. Between January and February of last year, Jammu and Kashmir [experienced](#) forty-nine disruptions, including “16 back-to-back orders for three-day-long curfew-style shutdowns.”

Toxifying Kashmir

Physical and legal repression is supplemented by an effort to depict support for Kashmiri rights as toxic. Sociologist Mark Ayyash has written about the toxification of [Palestinian critique](#), a process through which the Palestinian national struggle is “expelled from the realm of valid, rational and respectable knowledge.” There is a similar kind of toxification at work when it comes to Kashmir.

One form of toxification is the portrayal of voices in support of Kashmir as “anti-national.” In 2020, the police [booked](#) Kashmiri photojournalist Masrat Zahra under the Unlawful Activities Prevention Act (UAPA), accusing her of engaging in “anti-national activities.” The act allows the state to suppress any activities deemed to be against the interests, integrity, and sovereignty of the state. Zahra was charged with “criminal intentions to induce the youth” through her posts on Facebook, which mostly included archives of her previously published work.

The National Investigation Agency (NIA), a specialist counterterrorism agency, also [invoked](#) the UAPA against Khurram Parvez, coordinator of the Jammu Kashmir Coalition of Civil Society (JKCCS) and chairperson of the Asian Federation Against Involuntary Disappearances (AFAD). Parvez was accused of a series of offenses such as “criminal conspiracy,” “conspiracy to wage war against the Government of India,” and “raising funds for terror activities.” A coalition of human rights organizations, including Amnesty International and Front Line Defenders, denounced the charges against Parvez as an attempt to “silence and intimidate human rights defenders.”

The same process of toxification applies to the written word, with articles both academic and journalistic equating the Kashmiri struggle with terrorism or Pakistan's "proxy war." They do not offer any substantial engagement with the call for Kashmiri rights and a national homeland.

A [review](#) by Sumit Ganguly in *Foreign Policy* of journalist Azad Essa's book, [Hostile Homelands: The New Alliance Between India and Israel](#), offers a recent example. In his account of the politics of Kashmir, Essa places the national struggle at center stage. Yet Ganguly was quick to dismiss this as "polemic" and a "one-sided account," accusing Essa of parroting a "tired Pakistani narrative" on Kashmir.

A Disappearing Act

When India recently [paraded](#) the delegates attending the G20 tourism meeting through Kashmir, it was meant to show the world that Modi's government had brought normalcy, peace, and prosperity to the valley. But in stark contrast to this performance, the young Kashmiri students I spoke to fear the ongoing violence of the state security forces. They were worried about being "picked up" at the airport, detained by the local police during a random ID check, or simply made to disappear on the way home.

They were equally aware that the ease with which they can simply disappear reflects the way that the Indian state has worked to make the entire Kashmiri national struggle disappear. In a country that has sharply swerved toward the right under the rule of Modi, it is not surprising that Kashmiris have been targeted, along with critical journalists and political campaigners. After all, they are the only ones standing in the way of India's full-fledged shift to [authoritarianism](#).

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