

# India: Colonizing Kashmir: Interview with Hafsa Kanjwal

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## Interview with Hafsa Kanjwal about Indian's decades long occupation of Kashmir

Bakshi Ghulam Mohammad – the second prime minister of the State of Jammu and Kashmir (1953-1963) – came to power following a coup against his predecessor, Sheikh Abdullah. Hafsa Kanjwal's recent book, [Colonizing Kashmir: State-Building Under Indian Occupation](#) analyses Bakshi's rule, and how his time in power "entrenched India's colonial occupation in Kashmir."

Kanjwal is a historian of modern Kashmir and an assistant professor of South Asian History in the Department of History at Lafayette College in Easton, Pennsylvania, where she teaches courses on the history of the modern world, South Asian history, and Islam in the Modern World. Her book argues that the early years of India's rule in Kashmir were defined by the politics of life. This foregrounded the day-to-day concerns of employment, food, education, and provision of basic services. At the same time, questions of self-determination and the political future of Kashmir were suppressed. The book states that the Indian government and Kashmir's client regimes intended to ensure that with an improved standard of living and greater prosperity, the sentiment of Kashmiri Muslim would shift in favor of India, in a form of emotional integration.

Drawing from a bureaucratic documents, propaganda materials, memoirs, literary sources, and interviews in English, Urdu and Kashmiri, the book looks at how "India's colonial occupation operated through Bakshi's state-building practices as a client regime, and especially through international diplomacy, film, tourism, education, economic development and cultural reform, and the many tensions and contradictions that they created." It also examines the rise of popular movements for self-determination during this period. In drawing connections between Kashmir and other politically liminal sites around the world, the author calls for 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."

## How is your book different from other published works on Kashmir by Kashmiri scholars or those by "Kashmir experts" in India? How does the book challenge the binaries of colonial and postcolonial nation formation?

Many "Kashmir experts" in India and in the US academy, especially those of Indian descent, naturalize Kashmir's incorporation into India, and they also naturalize the territorial sovereignty of the Indian nation-state. When it comes to understanding "what happened" in Kashmir then, especially when trying to understand the armed rebellion and mass popular uprising against the Indian state in the late 1980s, they often describe it as an "ethnic" or "secessionist movement." On their part, this reflects a colonial commitment to the integrity of the Indian nation-state form. But it also reflects an inability to see longer and deeper histories beyond the nation-state, what has been called methodological nationalism.

My work builds off of recent intervention in Critical Kashmir Studies, which situates India's relationship with Kashmir as a colonial one. It historicizes this relationship in the early decades of Indian rule in Kashmir. Instead of addressing "what went wrong" as many Indian "Kashmir experts" do, it asks the reverse: How did India acquire Kashmir without the consent of its people? What role did Kashmir's client regimes play? In particular, I focus on state-building—the ways the public structures were strengthened and the state built its capacity to function whether in the realm of law, development, finance, and security. State-building of course happens in all contexts, but it happened very differently in the Kashmir context, since it happened in the context of India's colonial occupation.

The book challenges the binary between colonial and postcolonial nation formation. The leaders of various (post) colonial nation-states, including the Indian National Congress in India, adopted and exercised their own colonial ideas of territory, borders, and sovereignty. This was reinforced in their colonialism in regions that did not fit so easily into the 'national body,' such as Kashmir. Part of this argument then also challenges this idea that these nation-states have been "decolonized."

**You write in the book that scholars of India tend to disavow or ignore the colonialism within - when it comes to Kashmir, for example - while seeing colonialism as emerging from the West to the global South. Can you explain this with some relevant examples?**

Colonialism is often perceived as something that happens 'overseas.' Regions that are geographically contiguous to one another, then, cannot have a colonial relationship; rather, the incorporation of a "region" into the "nation" is seen as a necessary process of nation-building. When talking about the problems that exist in these regions, scholars often use terms like "internal colonialism," "crisis of federalism" or "crisis of democracy." These again reify the territorial boundaries of the nation-state. It is important, I argue, to account for south-to-south colonialisms. Furthermore, in attempting to find solutions for these regions, scholars often ask how best they can be "accommodated." Scholars of settler-colonialism have argued that elimination of native populations does not always occur by killing or driving them off the land. It can also occur by assimilation, or what I call integration in the book. Thus, the desire to accommodate for me serves as a settler impulse. There needs to be a fundamental reckoning with how places like Kashmir are discussed and talked about; otherwise, scholars become complicit in the colonial projects of the nation-state.

**You write that in the early 1950s and early 1960s, the Bakshi government "used state building to empower the population of Muslim majority Kashmir and emotionally integrate it into India to normalise India's colonial occupation for international, Indian and local audience." How far was he successful in his efforts to integrate the Muslim majority Kashmir region into the Indian mainstream in his decade-long rule?**

Bakshi was not very successful in emotionally integrating Kashmir's Muslim majority population to the Indian state; in fact, his project backfired. In the years following Bakshi's rule, Kashmir witnessed mass mobilizations in favor of self-determination, or a plebiscite, especially after the Holy Relic Incident. However, Bakshi was successful in two key ways. One, he created a group of people within Kashmir who became economically invested in Indian rule, what you could call a collaborator or comprador class. He also fully entrenched the legal, political, and financial modalities of Indian control over Kashmir. For example, given Kashmir's "autonomy", the Indian Supreme Court was not supposed to have jurisdiction over Kashmir. During Bakshi's rule, it did. With the state legislature at the time finalizing the contested accession to India, Bakshi was also able to give the Indian government the justification needed for the international community to render the UN-backed plebiscite obsolete.

**In what ways does the Bakshi era help us understand the turmoil of 1990s onwards and the present political situation in Kashmir, post the abrogation of Article 370 on August 5, 2019 by the BJP-led government in New Delhi?**

What is really striking to me about the seventy-five plus years of Indian rule in Kashmir is the repetition of the different modalities of control the Indian government and its client regimes resort to (and continue to do so). During some periods, some are foregrounded more than others, but all work collectively to create an incredibly sophisticated colonial structure, and make and remake the relationship between the colonial state and the occupied society and between different communities within an occupied society. These range from what I call the politics of life in the book to manifest violence. But I would say that what this period helps us understand the most is how colonial occupations force its subject populations to reconcile their desires for political freedom with the desire to live normal, economically stable lives, to live in a spectrum between resistance and collaboration.

The Bakshi era, which happened during the rule of the Indian National Congress, also allows us to see some striking similarities between the various political formations – from liberal, secular nationalism to Hindu nationalism in India. This becomes especially important as there are calls to return to some idyllic Indian secular past to counter Hindu nationalism today. One cannot understand the rise of Hindu nationalism in India as a mere aberration by ignoring India's state-formation as a secular state.

**You argue in the book that the term “secular” was deployed as a mechanism entrench India's colonial occupation and criminalize Muslim political aspirations or alternative vision of nationhood and belonging. How?**

Indian leaders like Jawaharlal Nehru would say that India's secular ideals are vindicated through its only Muslim-majority state—Jammu and Kashmir. But what does that secularism entail if it's grounded in the context of a colonial occupation? It entailed two things. One, it was to erase and tame Muslim histories of Kashmir. Muslims were often depicted as “invaders” to a region that was authentically Hindu, and this I explore especially in my chapter on tourism and film. There was also this classic promotion of a “good” Muslim and “bad” Muslim binary, which often occurs in colonial contexts, where those who were not-that-Muslim, or loyal to the Indian national project, were celebrated.

Second, this secularism centered Hindu geographies, imaginaries, and histories. For example, in the new history textbooks, the history of Kashmir was refashioned to make its incorporation into India appear seamless because Kashmir was depicted as an integral part of a Hindu sacred geography. Writers of textbooks were urged to focus on the medieval and modern eras as these were seen as speaking to the secular demands of the contemporary moment. Life histories of famous medieval poets like Lal Ded and Nund rishi and more “inclusive” Muslim rulers like Zain ulAbideen (who plays a similar role as Akbar does in the Mughal context) were highlighted. A 12<sup>th</sup> century mythological Sanskrit text on the history of Kashmir, the *Rajatarangini*, was situated as *the* text for understanding Kashmir's history. This is not to say that these histories or narratives did not exist and were not important. But, these narratives deliberately undermined or erased Kashmir's connections and histories with other neighbors—especially in Central Asia and more towards other parts of the Muslim world.

Many in the Jammu and Kashmir princely state also saw their future with Pakistan. They either had close family, educational, or economic ties to the regions that became a part of Pakistan, and/or many of them saw Pakistan as a state that was meant to protect the Muslims of the subcontinent from Hindu majoritarianism—which Kashmiri Muslims had already faced under the Dogras,

Kashmir's princely rulers during the British colonial period. Yet, these aspirations or forms of belonging were deemed "communal" by both the Indian government and Kashmir's client regimes. This is of course ironic given that the justifications for Kashmir's links with India were based on an idea that Kashmir was intrinsically Hindu (and this happened with both secular nationalists and Hindu nationalists).

**There's increased surveillance and restrictions on freedom of press and expression in Kashmir. The governor administration has also sacked university teachers and other employees from their services in the recent years as they're deemed "anti-national" for their supposed ideological stands or independent writings in the past. What impact does it have on the independent scholarship regarding the history of Kashmir and the larger political dispute involving Kashmir?**

The impact of the Indian state's renewed attacks on the freedom of press and expression in Kashmir is chilling. Most Kashmiris, especially those living in Kashmir or in India, are having to self-censor. Proposals that even hint at words like conflict, human rights, or occupation are not being accepted in universities in Kashmir. Many research scholars studying or working abroad are not able to go back to Kashmir; if they have an Indian passport, they fear they will be placed on a no-fly list, which have become very common in recent years, and not be able to leave Kashmir. People's passports are also being revoked. This makes it very difficult for differently positioned scholars to conduct their field work in/on Kashmir, especially those who do ethnography or need to work in the archives. There are still ways to go about the research, but it will require a lot of methodological innovation and creativity.

My fear is that all of this will make way for India to send in academics linked with the Indian state or give access to Indian scholars who are aligned with the state to produce "scholarship" that will attempt to obfuscate the work that has been done by many others who have been producing scholarship that challenge Indian statist narratives and foreground Kashmiri histories, aspirations, and experiences. As we know from history, colonial powers utilize "scholarship" for their own purposes as well. It is an extremely concerning moment for the future of knowledge production on Kashmir.

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