

Kashmir: The Politics of Life Itself

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An interview with Professor Mohamad Junaid on the occupation and lockdown of Kashmir

Following the abrogation of Article 370 and 35a of the Constitution of India, Kashmir has been under a communications lockdown. On August 5, 2019, Amit Shah, the home minister for the Hindu nationalist, Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) revoked the Constitutional clauses that have thus far granted special status to the region and protected its autonomy. [Over 70,000](#) additional troops have been deployed since the end of July in what remains the most militarized zone in the world. Recent reports by the United Nations, Human Rights Watch, Amnesty, and journalists have reported widespread human rights abuses: arrests, beatings, denial of medical care, shootings, and civilian deaths.

Even as demonstrations continue across Kashmir valley, the Indian government continues to deny their existence, maintaining that “conditions have returned to normal”. Yet it has enforced a curfew throughout the region, denied entry to Indian politicians and journalists, and continues to hold several civil society leaders under house arrest.

In light of these events, I spoke to Professor Mohamad Junaid, whose ethnographic work spans a wide spectrum of themes, among them: memory, violence, military occupation, and resistance in Kashmir.

Mihir Sharma (MS): In which ways would you contextualize the current situation in Kashmir — the abrogation of Article 370 and 35a, the increasing militarization of the region, the crackdown on communications? What is at stake following this move by the Indian government?

Mohamad Junaid (MJ): What the Indian government did on August 5, 2019 brought the question of peoplehood of Kashmiris to the forefront: whether Kashmiris can exist as a people, with a claim of sovereignty, not only over the territory that comprises Kashmir, but also on their own lives, as people who can have a democratic voice. The Indian government’s authoritarian move serves to negate the Kashmiris as a people.

This essentially decrees that Kashmiris do not have any claim over the territory of Kashmir — that the territory belongs to India and all Indians are entitled to buy land and settle there. And if Kashmiris do not accept this position and give up their historical demand for right to self-determination, and their historic claim that Kashmir belongs to Kashmiri people, then they will have to contend with an adversarial India and its repressive measures.

This is an existential question for Kashmiris. So far, what we had seen in Kashmir was a historical formation of a dense military occupation that was violent and repressive, yet the boundary between the Indian state forces and the Kashmiri people was clear. Now, we see the beginnings of a settler-colonial project, where India wants to systematically erase, disempower, and minoritize Kashmiris. The Indians who will come and settle there, backed by the might of the Indian military, will be pitted directly against the largely defenseless population of Kashmir.

MS: In your work, you have argued against the dominant narrative of viewing the issue of Kashmir either as a “territory dispute” between India and Pakistan, or as a conflict whose genealogy begins in 1947, when both the aforementioned nation-states gained formal decolonization. How do these narratives affect our understanding of the current events? How would you suggest one ought to contextualize the current situation?

MJ: Both India and Pakistan have laid claim over all of Kashmir. The Indian claim primarily pertains to the territory, while the Pakistani claim is both territorial and over the people of Kashmir, who are mostly Muslim. But historically the claims of the people from this region, who are now close to 15 million and have existed long before India or Pakistan emerged as postcolonial states, have been suppressed. When you look at Kashmir from the standpoint of the 1947 Partition of the British Indian empire, as many experts tend to do, the claims by Indian and Pakistani states become a privileged but false framework of understanding.

Partition was based on the idea that Hindus and Muslims cannot exist within one country. This included the Hindu nationalist demand that if Muslims were to exist in India, the Hindu majoritarian interests must be foregrounded and prioritized. The Pakistani claim, led by Jinnah, was that Muslims cannot be held subservient to Hindu interests, so they must form their own state of Pakistan.

Although Nehruvian “secularists” claimed that Hindus and Muslims could live in one country, they were unwilling to offer additional protections to the Muslim minority and negotiated the formation of Pakistan to further reduce the number and sway of Muslims in India.

In all of this, the Kashmiri story has been lost. That story goes back to the pre-1947 autocratic Dogra Hindu state ruling over a mostly Kashmiri Muslim subject population. The state was largely independent from British India. Several decades before 1947, Kashmiris had already formed a political community, i.e. they were articulating their interests as a nation in the idiom of modern rights, including the right to franchise. Kashmiris wanted to be seen as equal to their Hindu neighbours, who were a small but privileged class in Kashmir. But more than that, the Kashmiri struggle was against a parasitic landed aristocracy, against autocracy, as well as for a democratic, sovereign, and independent Kashmir.

The questions of class and popular sovereignty had been predominant in Kashmir, as opposed to the Hindu-Muslim communal question as it had emerged in British India on the eve of the Partition. Up until 1947, Kashmiris had neither considered whether they were supposed to be a part of some larger entity called India, nor had they imagined that they would fall into the maelstrom of Partition.

Kashmiri freedom struggle was not anti-colonial, even though anti-colonial solidarity was often extended; it was mainly anti-monarchical. The Dogra rulers were oppressive. For about a century, they had exploited and disempowered their subjects, who did not believe that the Dogra ruler had legitimacy to speak on their behalf.

In 1947, when then ruler Hari Singh acceded the Muslim majority state to Hindu majority India, it was deemed unrepresentative of the will of the Kashmiris, and brought the poisonous communal logic of Partition into Kashmiri politics.

The Indian leaders at the time had goaded the ruler into taking that fateful step, even though he was considering keeping Kashmir an independent state. The fear that the ruler may side with India led to rebellions in Kashmir, and eventually a war between India and Pakistan. Both sides ignored Kashmir’s own history, and Kashmir was bifurcated. Since then, the historical Kashmiri political aspirations of emancipation and sovereignty have been forcibly pushed aside, while the claims of India and Pakistan have become foregrounded.

MS: It has been argued that some Kashmiri Hindu voices have been weaponized for Hindutva. Could you contextualize this instrumentalization of Hindus against Muslims?

MJ: Kashmiri Hindu Pandits comprised 4% of the population but enjoyed greater recognition and voice in Kashmir, both prior to 1947 and afterwards. The community, however, did not speak with a uniform voice. While there were right-wing voices who prefaced their Hindu identity and supported an Indian nationalist position in Kashmir, there were also socialist, left-leaning Hindus, smaller in number, who struggled alongside Kashmiri Muslim neighbours and friends against the Dogra state. Some in this latter group supported Kashmiri independence and even a merger with Pakistan. Following the exodus of Kashmiri Hindus from the region in 1990, after Kashmiri Muslims rose up against the Indian state and demanded their right to self-determination, right-wing Kashmiri Hindu voices became amplified in India.

The Kashmiri Hindus had left for multiple reasons, but primarily from the fear of what their status would be within Kashmir. In early 1990, Kashmiri militants avenging the massacre of civilians at the hands of Indian forces, began assassinating pro-India politicians and bureaucrats. While most of those targeted were Muslim, many were prominent Hindus.

Hindus typically occupied a large number of high-level positions in the bureaucracy, but a number of common people were also among those targeted. Amid widespread fear, uncertainty, and violence, the Indian government relocated Hindus to the southern region of Jammu, assuring them that they would be returned once the militancy in Kashmir was suppressed. Months bled into years, and the anxieties and wounds of exile tore through the Kashmiri Hindu community. While thousands chose to stay back in Kashmir, and some even returned, the Hindu minority of Kashmir has largely not been able to return — just like the tens of thousands of Kashmiri Muslims along the border who were similarly forced to become refugees in Pakistani-controlled Kashmir and are unable to return to their homes on the Indian-controlled side.

Many Kashmiri Hindu voices have been appropriated by Hindu nationalists in India, who use the pain of Kashmiri Hindus to whip up nationalist hatred for Kashmiri Muslims. Hindu nationalists in India claim that settling Indians in Kashmir would bring Kashmiris to heel and exact appropriate revenge for the dislocation of Kashmiri Hindus. They ignore the fact that for each Kashmiri Hindu life lost to militancy in Kashmir, more than 300 Kashmiri Muslim lives have been lost to the Indian military occupation. Not to mention the tens of thousands of Kashmiri Muslims who have been jailed and maimed.

There are indeed some Kashmiri Hindus who have voluntarily lent their support to the RSS/BJP narrative on Kashmir, but I don't think we need to club all Kashmiri Hindu voices as speaking with one voice, in the same way that not all Kashmiri Muslims speak with one singular voice. Many Kashmiris — Muslim or Hindu — privately, and even publicly, recognize that the suffering of both is a shared pain. This recognition comes from a history of neighbourliness, common cultural practices, and a sense of shared belonging to Kashmir. Kashmiri Hindus have much more in common with Kashmiri Muslims than with Indians or Indian Hindus. That is why, if Kashmiri Hindus feel hurt that Kashmiri Muslims didn't do enough to prevent their exodus, Kashmiri Muslims feel hurt that Kashmiri Hindus have lent support to the Indian state to collectively punish Kashmiri Muslims.

MS: Could you talk about the role the BJP has played in Kashmir? What are some similarities and differences to the approach of the previous Congress-led central governments before 2014?

MJ: First of all, historically there have been two major strands of political-ideological thought within India about what the Indian state should look like. They go back to the pre-1947 (anti-colonial)

national movement. One strand of thought, led by the Congress, was rather pluralist one could say, shaped by Gandhi and Nehru, and is by no means without its problems. Chief among them is the fact that this supposed pluralism could be maintained only by inheriting the imperial mantle from the British.

The idea is that India has too many units, constituencies, minorities, ethnic groups, and we must find a solution whereby all these can coexist under some overarching framework. As a result, a hegemonic centre of power in Delhi would make different kinds of political arrangements with different groups of people, entities, and potentates after 1947. In many cases, these arrangements were accepted under threat of force or in return for privy purses. But in some, the arrangements were forced through outright invasion, shady deals, and force, as happened in the case of Kashmir.

The resulting arrangements continued for a long time, even though Congress had very authoritarian, centralizing tendencies which meant that state governments across the board were historically dismissed arbitrarily, and Kashmir became a case study in this regard. Because Kashmiris had retained a strong desire for freedom, they didn't accept Indian rule. Instead of allowing Kashmiris to rule themselves or open negotiations with them, Congress governments continued to use force as a key mode of power in Kashmir. Kashmir became one of the most directly ruled states within India, with many of its governments being undemocratically and authoritatively removed, and its people suppressed.

The second strand has always existed alongside that of the Congress, and has militated against the idea of pluralism. It has its origins in 19th century Hindu reform movements, but coalesced in the form of strong political thought with the formation of the RSS in the 1920s. Its main idea was that India belongs primarily to Hindus and any other religious minority — Muslim, Christian, etc. — must be subservient to the interests of Hindus. If they could not live as second class citizens, they were welcome to leave, or basically would be gotten rid of.

Of course, many of these leaders were watching closely what was happening at the time in Nazi Germany. They were reading *Mein Kampf* and other fascist texts of the time. This group of people barely participated in the anti-colonial movement. In fact, many historians still claim that they collaborated with British authorities to undo the Congress' influence. But they played a major role in the violence of Partition across the board in Bengal and Punjab.

They also had a key role in Muslim ethnic cleansing in Jammu, the southern part of Kashmir state, which until then was a Muslim majority region. In the period between August 1947 and April 1948, RSS stormtroopers went to Jammu and killed around 200,000 Muslims and forced a similar number into exile, turning it into a Hindu-majority region.

Around this time, an RSS member, Nathuram Godse assassinated Gandhi which immediately led to a temporary ban on the RSS in India. For a long time, the RSS retained a strong influence, but was relegated to the sidelines. However, it gradually started taking over key institutions, including history writing. It presented Indian history uniformly as a history of repression of Hindus at the hands of Muslim rulers, and Muslims as naturally given to anti-Hindu sabotage. RSS re-emerged politically in the 1980s with the slow rise of politics around the Babri Masjid and the Ram Temple in Ayodhya. Its electoral-political face, the BJP, were in and out of government several times, until in 2014 when Modi, a lifelong member of the RSS, became Prime Minister of India with a majority in parliament. Now he has come to power for a second term with an even bigger majority.

In RSS thought, Muslims are a problem rather than citizens of India. They want to do two things in this regard: one, what they call "population control of Muslims", basically turn them into an even smaller minority; and second, to disempower them politically, i.e. not allow Muslims to have any say

in the electoral politics in India. The RSS has had three major experiments toward this goal:

First: the overt, direct, and spectacular violence which started in the aftermath of the destruction of the Babri Mosque in Ayodhya in 1992, then in Gujarat in 2002, and elsewhere.

The second involves questioning the legality of Muslim presence in India. This thought is behind the entire logic of branding Muslims in Assam state as Bangladeshis and not citizens of India, and underlying the call that they should be sent back. They have created the National Registry of Citizens, whereby poor, Bengali-speaking people in Assam, typically Muslims, have to prove that they are citizens. They are also creating big camps along the lines of what China is doing in Xinjiang and other places, which will be holding centres for Muslims until they are deported.

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And, the third and most critical experiment is in Kashmir. The RSS has historically seen the “Kashmir problem” as arising from the fact that it has a Muslim majority. The 95% Muslim population in Kashmir are precisely “the problem” for the RSS. So they want to reduce that problem by allowing Hindus from India to come and settle down in Kashmir, preferably as superior citizens over the disempowered Kashmiri Muslims. You can see their hypocrisy here: they say that Muslims from outside are coming and settling in Assam, which is not a good thing, but in Kashmir they are actually allowing Hindus to come and settle down in a very purposeful, coordinated manner.

In short, if Congress wanted a plural India held under an imperial centre, the RSS/BJP wants a Hindu India under the same imperial structure. In both cases, Kashmir is seen as a problem: for Congress the issue was that Kashmiris didn’t accept the Indian empire; for BJP, the problem is that Kashmiris do not accept Hindu supremacy.

MS: You have spoken earlier about the different meanings of democracy in Kashmir. Could you elaborate upon these, and tell us how Kashmiris mobilize against the hypocrisy of “Indian democracy”?

MJ: At the core of Kashmiri politics has always been this tension between the larger idea of self-determination (which has to be achieved through a plebiscite promised under the UN Security Council Resolution 47 as well as by the Indian leaders of the time like Nehru) versus the politics of elections, i.e. participation of Kashmiri political parties in electoral democracy. India backtracked on its promise of holding the plebiscite arguing that elections were enough. This tension led to those demanding a plebiscite and right to self-determination — the pro-independence Kashmiris — seeing the pro-India electoral Kashmiri political parties as hypocritical.

Pro-independence organizations argued that even when Kashmiri parties win elections, they are unable to make any impact on people’s lives, because ultimately, policies implemented in Kashmir are made by Delhi.

As Indian intervention in Kashmiri politics increased, including the summary dismissal of Kashmir governments, Kashmiri electoral parties were diminished and reduced to representing Indian interests in Kashmir, in lieu of petty privileges.

One of the first examples was Sheikh Abdullah’s removal in 1953 and imprisonment for more than a decade. Though he had endorsed the accession and even spoke to support Indian position internationally, he had begun to see his mistake and may have been reconsidering his stance. At that

time he was the prime minister of Kashmir. After he was removed, pro-India loyalists were installed in power. After this, whenever any Kashmiri political party demanded any autonomy, they were cut to size. Abdullah himself was allowed to return to Kashmir after he accepted a much reduced role as chief minister. Thus, while pro-India Kashmiri politicians never had any popular appeal in Kashmir, the Indian government worked to further weaken them.

This was also the context of the pro-independence uprising in 1990.

In 1987, there was an opposition party called Muslim United Front (MUF), whose participation in elections for the first time generated a lot of enthusiasm amongst Kashmiris, but the elections were brazenly and blatantly rigged by Indian government officials, leading to the arrest, beatings, and harassment of many people. Subsequently, a young generation of Kashmiris picked up arms against the Indian state.

Again, we know very well, for instance, that this recent decision to abrogate Articles 370 and 35a taken by the Indian government was over the heads of Kashmiris — there was no elected assembly in place and Kashmiris were not asked for their opinion. In fact, Kashmiris have been caged; they were not even informed of what the Indian government had done to them.

In my work, I asked the question: “What does it mean to have an electoral democracy under a military occupation within what is supposedly the largest democracy in the world?” Now that there will formally be no significant assembly in Kashmir, this question is moot. It is an outright military occupation.

MS: Could you clarify what you mean by military occupation? What does it mean for everyday life of Kashmiris?

MJ: I have a very specific understanding of military occupation in this context. Of course, there are legal ways in which one could think of Kashmir as an international dispute whose final status is yet to be determined, and is administered by India on one side and Pakistan on the other. What I mean by military occupation, though, is the specific way in which India has been governing Kashmir since 1990.

When Kashmiris rose up in a mass uprising in the 1990s, India pushed close to half a million soldiers into Kashmir to suppress the movement. These soldiers were armed with special powers under the overarching structure called the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) which gave them absolute immunity from civil prosecution for human rights violations. In effect, any Indian Army soldier could determine whom to kill, whom to arrest, and when to confiscate property. They could determine if anyone or anything was a threat to Indian sovereignty.

But where is this huge army going to be placed? It started occupying all public spaces across Kashmir: streets, government hospitals, colleges, schools, mountaintops, hilltops, orchards. There was no space left un-surveilled or un-patrolled. What I mean by military occupation is the particular way in which space is configured under these conditions — a specific architecture governed by exceptional rules: where can people go and when; whom people can or cannot talk to; can four people assemble at a place or not; whose life can be taken; who can be maimed without compunction. Since India claims Kashmir is an “internal matter” — although it is not — international laws of war do not apply. Under this kind of military occupation, then, the state primarily operates as a necropolitical entity.

For the occupied, the consequences are terrible. As many as 80,000 Kashmiris have been killed so far. Not a single Indian soldier has been prosecuted for these crimes. In fact, in Kashmir human

rights abuses are incentivized by the state. The more brutal a counterinsurgent approach a police officer takes, the farther it can take their career. Indian nationalists vehemently support oppressive military policies in Kashmir.

But, of course, military occupation has consequences for everyday life too. You can't plan anything; you can't plan a wedding six months in advance because you never know what is going to happen. So this occupation induces a great sense of uncertainty in everyday life. It is invisible now but visible the next moment. Military occupation is this huge infrastructure of control which has been put in place, which can come together and shut down all life in Kashmir.

MS: What are some forms of resistance in Kashmir?

MJ: There are very limited forms of resistance. Before 1990, some protests were possible but they were highly repressed. In fact, one of the reasons Kashmiris took up arms was that several big protests were brutally suppressed by Indian soldiers. There was a series of massacres in January 1990, which led to young people crossing over to the Pakistani-controlled side and returning with arms and training. But this form of armed struggle has limited meaning in Kashmir. You cannot fight meaningfully or capture territory from a million-strong army with superior weapons.

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Over the years, Kashmiris have protested through what I call the “politics of life itself.” They try to make themselves visible in this hyper-occupied, hyper-surveilled space. These are bodily protests wherein they try to enter restricted public spaces, pelt stones, and get shot at in return. They put their bodies on the line. The Indian government has found no qualms in maiming and disabling Kashmiri bodies, blinding young boys and girls, and practically putting people through a prison pipeline, where Kashmiris are sent to jail for six months to a year or more without any charges, under a colonial law called Public Safety Act.

At the centre of this resistance is the question of life itself: in the face of an entrenched, nationally-backed occupation, Kashmiris put their bodies at the forefront. They try to morally shame the Indian government. But it appears as if this form of protest has limited valence right now.

MS: What is the importance of mosques as sites of assembly under military occupation?

MJ: Mosques have been one of those few public spaces where Kashmiris can still assemble under the occupation. However, over the years, the Indian state has found ways to control those spaces as well. The imams of Kashmiri mosques have been threatened; they are typically asked to register themselves, and are closely watched for what they say to the attendees. In fact, India tried to introduce imams from the Indian plains in Kashmir. But overall, mosques have remained spaces where people can assemble and talk to each other. It is partly because imams are not so important politically in Kashmir. What is important is the question of assembly itself.

MS: Could you talk about women's mobilization?

MJ: For quite a long time, Kashmiri women have had to face a double-edged sword. On the one side, there is the patriarchy — Kashmir is not immune from the patriarchy everywhere else in the world. On the other hand, they have to defend the men who are at the receiving end of military repression. The Indian government hardly distinguishes between Kashmiri men and women when it comes to repression. Kashmiri women have faced multiple forms of violence over the years—not only physical

and sexual violence, but also the fact of managing their households in the absence of men. It has often been the sole burden of women to maintain their homes. Then again, while women have been active in resistance movements, they are not so well represented within leadership positions. Nonetheless, they have been active in numerous ways, including consistently protesting on the streets and holding one of the longest protest movements in the world for forcibly disappeared persons. Kashmir has a long history of strong women activists who have acted as moral compasses to society. That role needs to be understood better.

MS: What has the role of the media been in reporting about Kashmir?

MJ: What news organizations like the BBC, AlJazeera, and other international media have done in Kashmir recently is not special; they are doing what they are supposed to do —report what they see. What is really interesting is the case of Indian media. They are not reporting what they see. Rather, they are following the government line: whatever the Indian bureaucrats tell them they proffer somehow as journalism. For instance, they claimed that all Kashmiris are happy about the removal of Article 370, without even talking to any Kashmiris. The Indian media has accepted the position of unquestioning ally to the Hindutva regime in India. A segment of them also lives in its own bubble with no connection to facts on the ground.

On the other hand, there are Kashmiri journalists and local newspapers who have been reporting on Kashmir for years. However, the Indian government has gagged them. They don't like Kashmiris to have an independent voice of their own. Kashmiri journalists, especially photojournalists, have shown great bravery in going to the forefront to capture what they see.

When international media see reportage by Indian media and compare it to reports from Kashmiri journalists, they can tell that Kashmiri reportage is genuine and credible. But if Kashmiri journalists have demonstrated superior integrity in terms of journalistic ethics, they lack strength in numbers. They face a very loud Indian media machinery which subdues Kashmiri voices internationally.

MS: What are some lessons from scholarship on Kashmir that illuminate similar practices and politics (in terms of securitization, militarization, self-determination) in other parts of the world, or contribute to our understanding of statecraft and resistance?

MJ: We live in an interesting global moment. The international liberal order, which previously at least nodded to human rights as one of the key norms to hold governments accountable to, has been eroding and is in shambles. Several big powers, which are all ruled by hyper-nationalist majoritarian governments, feel they have *carte blanche* to do whatever they please, to whomever they please, in their territories. The Indian government, for instance, has maintained that whatever they do to Kashmir and Kashmiris is nobody else's business, and is an internal matter. This is a clear indication that India does not feel bound by any international obligations or the principles of the UN Charter.

Apart from an erosion of the human rights-based liberal order, we are witnessing a rise of populist majoritarian leaders who are much more interested in stirring majoritarian electoral bases — and continuously keeping them at the fringes of outrage, anger, and fear so that they can continue to rule. We know in many of these states that the economic outlook is bleak. The Indian economy is beginning to sputter — and this has been the case even before Modi's second term. But Modi is not worried about these things. He has been stirring anti-Kashmiri, anti-Pakistan, anti-Muslim rhetoric among the people.

So people have, in a way, shown that they do not choose leaders on the basis of performance in governance and administration or economy. This is an indication of the failure of electoral democracy. So-called democracies have become sites of persistent electoral politics — elections

seem to never end. Minorities in India hoped that once the national election was over, Modi would change gears and withdraw from hate-peddling rhetoric. But that hasn't happened. For the last six years, Modi has persistently been in campaign mode. This is an erosion of electoral democracy — democracy has been given this strange new definition of politics of the majority at the cost of minorities.

MS: You have argued that the relationship of BJP-RSS-Sangh Hindu casteist fascism is intrinsically related to Kashmir. Could you elaborate?

MJ: After 1947, the Indian army has been persistently at war with different communities and peoples not only at its external frontiers, but also within India. One of the consequences is the enforcement of measures like the Armed Forces Special Powers Act in multiple regions, whereby occupations and military abuses of human rights are being perpetrated within the boundaries of India — in Manipur, Nagaland, Chhattisgarh, etc. The Indian state has been at war against the *Adivasi* (indigenous) people in Central India too. Externally, there have been three major wars fought against the Pakistani state, and one with China. The war with Pakistan has never ended. India has intervened in Sri Lanka too and sent its troops into Myanmar. There is a distinct similarity in the way the Indian state has imagined itself and practiced its statecraft and settler colonialism in comparison to the United States. The American state, since its inception, has been at war with different nations, especially indigenous Native Americans, leading to unequal treaties, unilateral abrogation, ethnic cleansing, wars, new treaties, and so on.

The question of caste is an important one too. The RSS has a dualistic tendency. It believes in Hindu supremacy: that Hindus are superior and have the primary right to India. But in thinking about Hindus, it believes in a kind of benign casteist order, where the upper castes have the right to acquire and maintain power beyond their actual numbers, and will in turn maintain a patronage-based relationship with the lower castes, especially Dalits. The RSS would like to maintain this traditional hierarchy, but for them to maintain the coherence of ideology and not expose the contradictions within, they have created an external enemy — Kashmiris, Muslims, Pakistan.

The many Dalit voices have a united interest - namely the annihilation of caste and their self-emancipation, but there are multiple Dalit voices in the subcontinent. The progressive Dalit voices, inspired by B.R. Ambedkar and his vision, see what the Indian state has done in Kashmir, and support Kashmiris. They know that the state wants to put Kashmiris in some kind of a lower bracket. In fact, the RSS might even embrace Kashmiris, as long as they stay close to the ground, and don't strive for equality — in other words, political power. But there are some Dalit voices who have been instrumentalized in certain ways, e.g. in the 2002 pogroms in Gujarat, where they were instrumentalized to inflict violence against Muslims.

Recently, you have seen the Dalit leader of Bahujan Samaj Party, Mayawati, who has come out in support of the removal of Article 370. Many Dalits are also surprised by this move. There was a recent letter circulated by Dalit activists and intellectuals worried by these tendencies in Mayawati's behaviour.

But there is also something else going on in the relationship between Kashmir and India which is strongly correlated with the question of casteism. Kashmiri Muslims and Hindus both share a claim to be native to the region. There have been influxes of people, but very minimal. The social hierarchy consisted of Brahmins at the top, and then a graded system of lower castes, who, beginning in the 14th century, began adopting Islam, just like their ancestors had adopted Buddhism, as a means to get rid of the caste hierarchy within Hinduism centuries earlier.

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ask for rights? How dare you ask for political representation or land?””

Right-wing Hindus take this conversion as an offence — how could these people get rid of the hierarchy by adopting a different religion, they ask? So the RSS keeps reminding Kashmiris about “their past” and “who they were before they were Muslims”. By this, they are not saying that they were just like them (upper castes). They are implying that in “your previous avatar, you were lower castes. How dare you ask for rights? How dare you ask for political representation or land?” The RSS vision of Hindu supremacy desires that this benign structure of caste should continue and that this hierarchy is the only way to preserve India as a unified state.

MS: Could you talk about the political economy in Kashmir and its relevance in light of the ongoing siege?

MJ: As a Hindu state pre-1947, a minority of Hindus had appropriated a majority of the land in Kashmir, while a majority of peasants and artisans comprised of Kashmiri Muslims. Some Muslims were also collaborators with the state and were given land grants for their loyalty. This structure came to an abrupt end in post-1947 Kashmir, when Sheikh Abdullah carried out radical land reforms, taking land away without compensation from big landowners and giving it to Kashmiri peasantry. This program of land reforms and debt relief became one of the most progressive measures in South Asia, done with a radical zeal and much success despite some gaping flaws.

In the post 1952-53 era following land reforms, the political economy of Kashmir was primarily based on agriculture which was almost self-sufficient. There were no big landowners. The artisanal industry was divided between Shias and Sunnis — where both factions controlled a share of the industry and employed labourers from the other sects. Shias nonetheless constituted a small percentage of the Kashmiri population.

Then, there was the government sector, which was for a long time dominated by Kashmiri Pandits who saw government jobs as a unique calling for Hindus and avoided physical labour. They vociferously defended their exclusive rights to government jobs. In fact, a demand to remove Article 35a (the state subject law) had arisen before 1947 — the Hindus (Pandit) demanding that Kashmir belonged to Kashmiris and Punjabis should not be allowed to take their jobs. What they meant was that Kashmir belonged to Kashmiri Pandits. This changed when Kashmiri Muslims became educated, initially found low level jobs, but increasingly rose up the ranks in government jobs as well.

The third element was tourism — it is a minor sector in terms of the percentage of population it employs - but it generates a lot of revenue.

In fact, the most crucial source of income in Kashmir is the apple industry. Kashmir is a major producer of apples, but has been badly hit by Indian government curfews which have regularly been imposed as soon as the apples are ready for harvest and transport.

Remarkably, while the Indian government has said that the removal of Article 370 and 35a will bring in investments in Kashmir, there were no roadblocks to investment as such. Companies like Reliance, HDFC, Airtel — all Indian companies — are already doing business in Kashmir. The state government leased land to these and other companies for 99 years. In fact, Indian capital has had monopoly access to Kashmir, because Kashmir was not allowed to have international Foreign Direct Investments. But while India collects taxes in Kashmir, there has hardly been any public spending in the region.

An interesting puzzle is that despite the roadblocks the Indian State has implemented on social and political life, Kashmiri Human Development Indicators are better on many indices compared to the

states currently ruled by Modi's BJP. My untested hypothesis is that the land reforms of the '50s broadly created a more equal society in Kashmir, whose benefits are still being felt. There are no extremely rich and extremely poor segments of society as they exist in India. This has led to less intense, but more consistent and equitable economic growth, despite a hostile occupying power trying to undermine the society.

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P.S.

Jamhooor

<https://www.jamhooor.org/read/2019/09/13/the-politics-of-life-itself>