

Kashmir, Colonialism, and COVID-19:  
The Weaponizing of a Pandemic to Perpetuate Oppression  
(working draft)

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## Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought the global economy to its knees. In a desperate attempt to reignite the machine, prominent capitalist nations such as the United States have resorted to withholding, manipulating, and even falsifying testing data (Smith et al., 2020, paras. 4 & 5). Such insidious lengths in the service of economy are rooted in the competitive nature of capitalism - which prioritizes labor-value & its extraction over the laborer. While the current pandemic has cost the global economy billions, with an unprecedented number of people filing for unemployment, I will be focusing on Indian-occupied Kashmir, which saw over 2.4 billion USD in losses as of mid-December, 2019 (Bukhari, 2019, para. 1). This loss came less than four months after India revoked Kashmir's special constitutional status through the abrogation of constitutional articles 370 & 35A and even before the pandemic had impacted the global economy. India, as a capitalist nation, depends on ceaseless resource extraction to sustain itself, and thus, demands ceaseless expansion. Abrogation was, India hopes, the beginning of the end of its decades-long project to colonize and homogenize the only remaining Muslim-majority region ruled by a far-right Hindu nationalist, or Hindutva, government.

While imperialism and colonialism have existed for some time, Marxist analyses of the practice draw an important distinction between pre-capitalist colonialism and the modern colonialism that developed alongside capitalism in Western European nations; dominated by Britain, "the principle imperialist power of the day," this modern colonialism constructed relationships of economic dependency upon the colonial power and was thereby more aggressive and insidious in nature (Bottomore, 1991, pp. 94-96). Due to the extractive and expansive nature of capitalism, it is important to note that wherever capitalism is established,

colonialism is sure to follow. In the desperate decolonization process by the British in the wake of the economic devastation wrought by World War II, the British Raj was dissolved and what was once the jewel in Britain's imperial crown became the independent nations of India and Pakistan; Partition cleaved two of British India's most powerful and populous states - Punjab and Bengal - in twain and left upwards of 12 million people to suffer the material, economic, and cultural consequences of displacement (India Partition, 2017, secs. 7 & 11). The princely states, including that of Kashmir, were free to accede to either India or Pakistan (sec. 12). Most princely states promptly acceded to either of the newly formed nations with the exception of a few, including the Muslim-majority Kashmir, whose Hindu ruler, Maharaja Hari Singh, delayed his decision on 15 August, 1947, the day of Partition (Ali et al., 2011, p. vii). The project of colonialism as it was "necessary for the growth of European capitalism and industry" was thus taken up in the Kashmir valley by the newly independent Republic of India (Loomba, 2004, p. 1102).

### **Indo-Pakistani Conflict and The Kashmir Question**

It is not enough to consider this issue without placing the region in its historical context, as "foolhardy" an undertaking that might be (Roy, 2019, para. 19). Within a few weeks of Maharaja Hari Singh's delay, in October of 1947, an anti-India insurgency was complicated by Pakistan sending armed tribesmen to the contested region (Shapiro 79). The resultant violence against locals led to the Maharaja signing the Instrument of Accession - on provision of an eventual plebiscite to ensure Kashmiri self-determination - in exchange for India's help in dispersing the revolt & invasion; in turn, leading to the first Indo-Pakistani war (Ali et al., 2011, p. vii). The war ended in January of 1949 with a cease-fire brokered by the United Nations along

with a call for a plebiscite. Despite such calls, an impartial plebiscite was never held and Kashmir's Muslim-majority was no closer to self-determined rule. Instead, Pakistan controlled approximately 2/3 and India approximately 1/3 of Kashmir along the cease-fire line (Lyon, 2008, p. 80).

Multiple wars over the contested region have been waged between the South Asian powers since the Indo-Pakistani War of 1947, including those of 1965, 1971, and 1999. The war of 1965 began with Pakistan crossing the ceasefire line and India retaliating across the international border at Lahore (India Partition, 2017, sec. 14). The war ended with the signing of a 1966 peace agreement in which both nations agreed to return to the pre-August cease-fire line (Tashkent Declaration, 1966, sec. 2). While the war of 1971 was not expressly over Kashmir, the conflict exacerbated tensions and eventually led to the formation of Bangladesh from what was formerly East Pakistan. With regards to Kashmir, the governments of both India and Pakistan entered into the Simla Agreement, formally solidifying the UN's 1949 cease-fire line as the Line of Control dividing Kashmir between the conflicting nations (1972, sec. 4). In the 1949 cease-fire agreement, India took control of the Kashmir valley, the economic heartland of the region, and negotiated maintaining a military presence "to ensure regard for law and order" (Lyon, 2008, p. 80). India has since abused this military presence in the name of colonial and Hindu nationalist expansion.

As recently as 2019, the nations once more risked war. A resident of Indian-occupied Kashmir executed an explosives attack on an Indian army convoy in February; the attack was promptly claimed by a Pakistan-based militant group (M Khan, 2019, sec. 2). In response, the Indian Air Force was mobilized and sent across the Indo-Pakistani border. Pakistan's Air Force

“brought down an Indian plane and captured the pilot” (I Khan, 2019, para. 6). Imran Khan, Prime Minister of Pakistan, explained that Pakistan did not want to aggravate the conflict and the pilot was promptly returned “with no preconditions” (para. 6). Looking to secure another sweeping victory in the elections just three months off, Narendra Modi and his Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) leaned on the conflict’s flare-up and stoked anti-Pakistan & anti-Muslim sentiment. Playing the Hindu nationalist card “more openly in 2019 than in 2014,” Modi won his second consecutive record-breaking majority (Kumar, 2019, sec. 1). This victory once again secured Modi, along with his Hindu nationalist agenda, as Prime Minister of India.

“Decolonization is always a violent event... what is singularly important is that it starts from the very first day with the basic claims of the colonized” (Fanon, 2004, p. 1). Despite calls for Kashmiri self-determination from the first United Nations-brokered cease-fire in the late 1940s and a contemporaneous demand for a plebiscite, India has long been accused of rigging elections that might otherwise affect the future of Kashmir. This includes banning the Plebiscite Front “from participating in the State Assembly election” in 1972 (Ali et al., 2011, p. x). A humorless irony coming from what is often celebrated as the “world’s largest democracy” (Waheed, 2016, para. 21). The election of March 1987 saw “rigging and strongarm tactics... all over the valley,” “massive booth capturing [by] gangs,” “entire ballot books pre-stamped for [National Conference],” and even explicit refusal to let voters vote (Badhwar, 1987, paras. 18-21). The People’s Conference and their leader, Abdul Ghani Lone, showed much electoral promise in preliminary surveys, as did the Muslim United Front. However, in the wake of the election results coming out in apparent favor of the JKNC, Lone said, “This simply deepens

people's feelings against the Government of India. If people are not allowed to cast their votes where will their venom go except into expressions of anti-national feelings?" (para. 17). Within two years, he was proven correct. A mostly non-violent resistance movement had seen calls for the rhetorical violence of decolonizing the Kashmir valley either ignored or rigged-to-fail in India's overbearing hands and thus, in 1989, the movement evolved into a "full-throated freedom struggle. Hundreds of thousands of people poured onto the streets only to be cut down in massacre after massacre" (Roy, 2019, para. 20).

India has worked to contain the violent insurgency of 1989, although periodic resistance demonstrations with attendances in the hundreds of thousands - now "armed with nothing more lethal than stones" - are still met with violence by the Indian state; as recently as "the summer of 2010, soldiers shot dead more than a hundred protestors, most of them teenagers" (Mishra, 2011, p. 1). As of 2000, the Indian government, then and now dominated by Hindu nationalists, had sent "close to half a million soldiers to Kashmir to suppress [insurgencies]" (Mishra, 2000, sec. 1). In 2016, The Guardian questioned if Indian soldiers firing an estimated 1.3 million jagged metal pellets, damaging the eyes of nearly 1,000 civilians, was the world's first "mass blinding" (Waheed, 2016, paras. 12 & 16). Despite periodic cease-fires between India, Pakistan, and guerrilla militant groups in the valley, India's colonial project marches on, indiscriminately attacking rebellious protestors, armed or otherwise. Fanon notes, in *The Wretched of the Earth*, that "with a kind of perverted logic, [colonialism] turns its attention to the past of the colonized people and distorts it, disfigures it, and destroys it" (2004, p. 149); that is, where capitalist-colonialism is established, the cultural fabric of the space is forcibly altered. India's attempt at such a hollowing of their colonized has been an ongoing project in

the Kashmir valley.

### **Abrogation, COVID-19, and the Kashmir Valley**

On 5 August, 2019, the Hindu nationalist government led by Narendra Modi and the BJP abrogated articles 370 and 35A - which guaranteed Jammu & Kashmir's special semi-autonomous status since the ratification of India's supposedly secular constitution - in order to "permanently incorporate the contested territory... which includes the Hindu-majority area of Jammu and the Muslim-majority Kashmir valley" (Goel, 2019, paras. 3-4). Anticipating resistance by affected Kashmiris, the Indian government imposed a barbaric military lockdown: turning "all of Kashmir into a giant prison camp. Seven million Kashmiris were barricaded in their homes, internet connections were cut and their phones went dead" (Roy, 2019, para. 2).

This is not India's first time blanketing the region with a military curfew or even a communications blockade. The central government insists that such a blockade is to stymie anti-India militant organizing. It is common for the capitalist superpower to periodically remind its restive subjects of the power imbalance in place and to keep the prying eyes of those concerned worldwide out of the region. They did so during the summer of unrest in 2016 following the killing of Burhan Wani (Waheed, 2016, para. 8). Many doubt it will be the last: Mir Hanan expressed his cynicism, commenting that most Kashmiris are "numbed to them," adding, "They've made their point. Even if they give us the internet back, they can take it away any time again whenever they want, and as long as they want" (Dixit, 2020, secs. 3 & 6). Nearly six months after the blockade was imposed, in late January, 2020, India restored 2G connectivity to "institutions providing 'essential services'" in the region - marking the longest such blackout in a supposed democracy (Ellis-Petersen, 2020, paras. 1-2). While worth a brief sigh of relief, it is

necessary to note the practical limitations of 2G connectivity in the age of digital information - especially as COVID-19 stirred, preparing to threaten the world's most vulnerable populations.

An integral element of colonialism is to disrupt a colonized people's connection to their history, their legacy, and any footing to develop and maintain the same going forward. To this end, a Hindu nationalist central government has long held education hostage in the Kashmir valley. The military lockdown led to the closure of nearly all private schools and most government schools; even the schools that were open reported attendance at around 3% in late October (Yasir, 2019, paras. 5-6). Without access to education, students are at risk of falling behind, dropping out, and losing sight of their dreams. Even when schools were open - prior to the global pandemic - parents refused to send their children out of fear. Fear of the Indian forces detaining their sons or raping their daughters (Ozturk, 2019, ques. 11). Mehbooba Iqbal explains, "So many new military bunkers have been built; there is [an] overwhelming presence of forces. We don't want to send our children to schools in this tense atmosphere" (Kashmir siege, 2019, sec. 3).

While disrupting education for the multi-generational residents of Kashmir, India is also bulldozing laws protecting the insulated and historically self-sufficient Kashmiri economy. Laws in place since the Instrument of Accession (Wani, 2020, para. 3). The Ministry of Home Affairs used the J&K Civil Services Act to grant "domicile" and therefore employable and voting status to non-permanent residents who have lived in Jammu & Kashmir for 15 years or studied for 7 years & appeared for class 10 or 12 examinations in the region (Government issues, 2020, para. 3). The freshly minted Jammu and Kashmir Reorganisation Order also grants government officials and their children similar domicile status (Wani, 2020, para. 2). Paving the path for



residential occupation of the region is complemented by India's opening of forest land for exploitation by corporate-industrial interests, echoing moves by Jair Bolsonaro's administration in Brazil over the Amazon rain forest (In Kashmir, 2020, sec. 2). These offerings - 15,000 acres as of late 2019 - to the Hindu nationalists and corporate bodies of India in the form of "land banks" and "domicile" status violently threatens not only the region's fragile ecology but also its long-subject population (Parvaiz, 2019, para. 6). The demographic flooding implied by the act will also allow non-Kashmiris to influence the outcomes of any potential referendum or plebiscite - long called for by the people of Kashmir and international bodies - even one organized by a supposedly objective third-party.

Such anxieties are not new for the people of the valley. In 2008, India transferred 100 acres of forest land to the Amarnath Shrine Board in order to establish shelters & facilities to accommodate Hindu pilgrims; what was once, pre-1989, a pilgrimage of approximately 20,000 grew into more than half a million within 20 years (Roy, 2011, pp. 57-58). Despite the land transfer's eventual revocation (Chronology, 2008, sec. 5), the move was seen as the initiation of an elaborate plan to actively change the political and social demography of the region. The implications of the J&K Reorganisation Order are best summarized by Naseer Ahmad, a Kashmiri columnist, "Removal of Article 370 was theory, here comes the practical part now. The objective always was to turn the Muslim majority in the region into minority. And India has set about accomplishing it, not even waiting for the coronavirus pandemic to pass" (Wani, 2020, para. 5). Mr Ahmad hints at the additional pressure on the already vulnerable population of the Kashmir valley as precisely what Hindu nationalists look to capitalize on.

India recorded its first case of COVID-19 on 30 January, 2020 but didn't declare a lockdown until 24 March (Roy, 2020, secs. 1-2). It was, much like the decolonization of British India, haphazard and rushed. With less than 12 hours to prepare for a police enforced lockdown, India's 1.38 billion people were running out of food, running out of money, and trapped away from families; in the capital city of New Delhi, state police used the lockdown and threat of the coronavirus to disperse the longest-running protest against the recent Citizenship Amendment Act, legislation that threatens the citizenship status of Muslims (India declares, 2020, secs. 1 & 3). Rather than heeding calls by the United Nations for a freeze on all global conflicts in order to focus efforts on containing and combating the pandemic (COVID-19: UN, 2020), far-right governments, including Narendra Modi's Hindutva administration, are taking this as an opportunity to further marginalize already marginalized populations.

For the people of the Kashmir valley, the lockdown of 24 March was nothing new. Epitomizing the adage, "out of the frying pan and into the fire," the COVID-19 lockdown saw the region returning to heightened scrutiny and state-sponsored repression. The task of establishing the World Health Organization's (WHO) guidelines for the COVID-19 pandemic have been relegated to the occupying Indian forces (In Kashmir, 2020, sec. 4). This force, historically acting in a settler-colonial capacity, has defaulted to maintaining the lockdown the only way they know how: violence. Overlapping with the seven-month long lockdown following abrogation, this places Kashmir under an ongoing military lockdown for what will be a year this August. Such a stranglehold on the region is an attempt by the world's largest democracy to normalize their approach of rule-by-force (Mushtaq, 2020, sec. 3). The Indian government has claimed before that their military occupation is to maintain law & order and now, with the

COVID-19 lockdown in place, has added claims of ensuring public health & safety to their multifaceted rhetorical acrobatics.

Where social distancing is possible, the military makes sure to intervene. Under the guise of hunting anti-India insurgents, the occupying forces indiscriminately raze civilian homes and thus force families into tighter and tighter spaces. “The fact remains that precautions that could have been followed in our homes can’t be followed in the houses of others” says Tasleema Jan, who lost her home in the violence and was forced to move in with her brother and his family (Burhan, 2020, para. 14). Now there is a risk of exposing everyone who is packed into Tasleema’s brother’s home to the virus. Such cases are all too common in the most militarized zone on earth. The Hindu nationalist government of India claims the current lockdown is to help prevent the spread of COVID-19; however, their actions show that they are hellbent on decimating the Muslim population.

The dual threats of the pandemic and the roving military forces weigh on the population’s collective psyche, which the government has capitalized on. They have weaponized the risk of contracting the virus, ensured that the healthcare system - with a doctor:patient ratio of 1:3866 compared to the WHO’s recommended 1:1000 (Aijazi, 2020, sec. 5) - is ill-equipped to handle the potential scale of an outbreak, and are now leveraging this fear to have civilians report on their neighbors’ travel history. ““This is *mukhbiri*,’ the loathed practice of locals informing Indian forces about the presence of militants, often for a cash reward, ‘just that it is being asked and done the legitimate way now’” was a common but short-lived joke in the region (Mushtaq, 2020, sec. 1). The district magistrate of Srinagar, Shahid Choudhury, has been using heat maps and phone trackers to locate so-called “COVID suspects”

since 10 March - 14 days before the central government issued lockdown orders; his administration has also established digital platforms encouraging civilians to file reports against their neighbors for violating the strict quarantine orders (Dhawan, 2020, para. 3). In doing so, the government maintains informants among the general population, sows division among civilians to further prevent anti-India organizing, and justifies their invasive & advanced surveillance infrastructure.

The continued throttling of internet speeds, even now, as the pandemic rages on, serves multiple functions in the Hindu nationalist project. As one doctor stated on condition of anonymity, "Every day, there is something new about the virus that we must know in order to keep pace with our research but we are not able to access it properly because of the 2G speed" (A Khan, 2020, sec. 2). Preventing doctors from accessing integral and constantly updated research - one doctor reported it taking over an hour for a 24 megabyte download to fail (We'll die, 2020, sec. 5) - means they cannot provide appropriate care to COVID-19 patients nor take the necessary precautions to prevent contracting the disease themselves. While doctors and the general population both understand the urgency of the pandemic, they have no way of fighting it if it takes a hold of the region. As one veteran doctor said, again, on condition of anonymity, "If it happens here, we will be devastated. We will die like cattle" (sec. 3).

The limited connectivity in the region is not the only way the state is undermining doctors. They are also threatening those who speak out about the mishandling of the pandemic. On 1 April - the same day as the Ministry of Home Affairs' issuance of the Jammu & Kashmir Reorganisation Order - the Directorate of Health Services in Kashmir announced that "Hence forth strict action will be initiated against such elements who resort to such uncalled for

reporting to media. Any person disobeying any regulation or order made under the Epidemics Diseases Act, 1897 shall be deemed to have committed an offence punishable under Section 188 of the Indian Penal Code [IPC] (45 of 1860)” (Changiowla, 2020, sec. 1). Under this order, doctors, key figures in controlling the virus the world over, are barred from speaking with journalists, lest they suffer jail time. Gowhar Geelani cites one example of a doctor who was very vocal in his demands for PPE & ventilators and was very promptly silenced (Kashmir Internet, 2020, ques. 2). “We are at the forefront of this battle against the coronavirus. If you tie our hands and tongues, the ship is bound to sink,” said a doctor in Srinagar on condition, of course, of anonymity (Changiowla, 2020, sec. 1). Doctors are not allowed to speak out and are not allowed to access life saving information. The only informed party in Kashmir is therefore the government and its agents. Using this monopoly on information, the administration has “made itself hyper-visible, attracting praise” by offering any information, including a once-a-day one-way communiqué that “gives all the statistical data” (Kashmir Internet, 2020, ques. 3; Mushtaq, 2020, sec. 5). The Hindutva government has, through strict and unjust lockdown measures, secured itself as the only trustworthy source of information on the pandemic, and they are consciously withholding what doesn’t serve their violent ends.

Doctors are not the only people under threat of detention for speaking out against the government as the pandemic roils on. In mid-April, the state charged Masrat Zahra, a Srinagar-based photojournalist, for “uploading anti-national posts with criminal intention” and “uploading photographs which can provoke the public to disturb the law and order” (A Khan, 2020, sec. 3). Ms Zahra said that her arrest was a stern message to the “whole journalist fraternity in Kashmir... if they could book a female journalist, imagine what they could do to

male journalists” (sec. 3). This results in even less people, whether doctors or civilians, willing to speak to the press. Such swift actions, against doctors and journalists alike, are part and parcel of a colonizing government’s work to quash the logic of dissent. All while hiding behind the excuse of stifling terrorism. The power the government exercises over journalists extends to newspaper editors, as well. Journalists who submit to the government’s wishes and pen pro-India articles aren’t necessarily to blame. Pankaj Mishra explained, “All of them know from experience what their bosses in Delhi will or will not publish” (2000, sec. 2). And so, while the lockdown threatened over half a billion unhomed, misplaced, and neglected people, the pro-India, anti-Muslim media rallied against the Islamic missionary organization, Tablighi Jamaat, for holding a meeting in early March - prior to Modi’s 19 March call for social distancing - and unknowingly becoming India’s first super-spreader of the virus; the media applied a Hindu nationalist spin and accused Muslims of inventing the virus and deliberately unleashing it as a form of jihad (Roy, 2020, secs. 1 & 3). The various threads of colonial disruption and displacement have been at work in Indian-occupied Kashmir for over three-quarters of a century. The Hindu nationalist central government continues to use their various channels of influence to commit rhetorical and bodily violence upon the Muslim-majority population of the Kashmir valley and, in turn, hopes to convert the majority to minority and confirm complete cultural and ideological control over the region.

## **Conclusion**

Internally and externally, India’s Hindu nationalist government and its state agents are stoking anti-Muslim flames, smoldering in the historical conflict between the two religions. This is not the only place such atrocities are going on. The world over, far-right and nationalist

governments are using the current pandemic to expedite their various projects of colonial occupation and hegemonic rule. Arundhati Roy offers that this pandemic is a portal to the next world, she invites us to leave our baggage in this one and come together to imagine this other world (2020, sec. 4). To do so, we must expose, acknowledge, and condemn the machinations of capitalism that have brought us here, including Hindu nationalism's ongoing efforts to cleanse the Kashmir valley of its Muslim-majority population. We must be ready to fight for a better world and, in doing so, we must condemn India's attempts to secure the jewel in their own imperial crown.

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