

From Militancy to Stone Pelting: The Vicissitudes of the Kashmiri Freedom Movement

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SARMAD ISHFAQ, OCT 27 2020

Since 1947, the Kashmir issue remains the most obstinate between nuclear rivals Pakistan and India. Pakistan controls around 30% of the disputed land while India controls around 55% of it (Pakistan ceded the remaining 15% of the territory to China). Both countries have fought three wars over Kashmir and the area is infamous for being the world's most militarized zone. In fact, another Pakistan-India war seems to be looming over both nations' head yet again. The reason being the same as before – Kashmir. The intractable issue of Kashmir remains the oldest unresolved international conflict in the world. Following the 1947 war over Kashmir between Pakistan and India, UN resolution 47 was passed on 21 April 1948 that asserted that the issue must be resolved through a free and fair plebiscite. The Indian government under Nehru promised that a plebiscite would be conducted per the will of the Kashmiri people but this never transpired. In fact, since 1947 India has ruled Kashmir with either a sham democracy or an iron fist. The situation reached boiling point when in 1989 a full-fledged insurgency was launched against the Indian state. Although India's bad governance and affectitious democracy were the root causes of this insurgency, Pakistan's support to the militants severely exacerbated the situation on the ground. Eventually, due to India's severe indiscriminate military measures against the Kashmiris as well as Pakistan's miscalculations in the valley, India was successful in curbing the first cycle of the insurgency.

In the late 90s and early 2000s, only sporadic attacks from militants took place and the movement diminished. However, the grievances of the local Kashmiris endured due to the unrelenting hardline Indian posture – which meant the freedom movement's fervor never ended but temporarily subsided. Things escalated again after Indian security forces killed Burhan Wani, a popular Hizbul Mujahideen commander, in 2016 – and since then the situation has increasingly deteriorated. A major factor in this deterioration was (and remains) India's ruling party, the BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party), with its far-right Hindu ideology agenda. The BJP severely aggravated the situation in Indian-administered Kashmir (Jammu and Kashmir – J&K) by abrogating Article 370 and 35A (which allowed a degree of autonomy to J&K) and also dissolved J&K as a state in 2019. To curb the protests of the Kashmiris in response to said actions, a curfew, which has continued for over 400 days, was enforced by the Indian government. Massive amounts of troops were added to bolster the already superfluous presence of security forces in the valley. Compared to the first cycle, this time militancy is very low in the valley. The youth are relying on different means of protesting especially relying on stone pelting but Indian aggression is higher than ever.

The article aims to juxtapose the 1989-armed insurgency with the unrest that began in 2008 (and is ongoing). Being a historical recount of the 1989 insurgency and concurrently focusing on the current Kashmiri situation, the paper will allow the reader to discern the similarities and distinctions between both cycles of the Kashmiri freedom movement.

The 1989–2004 insurgency

Since 1948, Delhi maneuvered around the “plebiscite” question and instead relied on co-opting Kashmiri politicians to dissuade the Kashmiri freedom movement. Due to rigged elections, Delhi-controlled prime ministers, and nepotism throughout the decades since 1947, Kashmir was simply a mock-democracy. Indian machinations to subdue Kashmiri desires for an independent homeland, however, backfired and Kashmiri frustrations with Delhi steadily increased until it reached the proverbial point of no return. The 1987 sham legislative elections were the straw that

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broke the camel's back. The Congress-backed Farooq Abdullah, son of Sheikh Abdullah, became the chief minister and formed a coalition government – however, his government lacked legitimacy among Kashmiris and the Kashmiri freedom movement turned militant. The insurgency is believed to have been a product of the massive electoral rigging sponsored by Delhi, in addition to Pakistan fanning the flames by aiding the insurgents. In 1991, the Kashmir Valley resonated with the sounds of gunfire and explosions as young men wielding AK47s roamed the streets of Srinagar and other major towns.

Initially, the Yasin Malik-led JKLF (Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Front) rose to prominence in the context of the insurrection. The JKLF demanded a separate and secular Kashmir, independent from both India and Pakistan. Bandhs (shut downs) and Hartals (strikes) became commonplace – and so did JKLF-sponsored bomb blasts, attacks on government buildings, and assassinations. The response from Delhi was equally brutal. Indian security forces, from the police to the army, on many occasions, used indiscriminate means to combat the insurgency – killing insurgents but many civilians as well. The use of draconian laws (that are still present in Kashmir today) such as the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) was extended to J&K in 1990 which bestowed upon soldiers “a free pass to kill.” In areas determined as “disturbed”, the act permits shoot to kill, arrest, and search without a warrant. If this was not abhorrent enough, the act also immorally shelters security forces personnel as it grants them impunity from civil prosecution. Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International and other groups have repeatedly called for its repeal until today.

Notable Indian forces human rights violations during this time include the Gawkadal massacre which saw Indian paramilitary forces killing 50 Kashmiri protesters (but survivors state the number could be close to 300); the Sopore massacre where 57 Kashmiris were killed by India's Border Security Force; and the Bijbehara massacre where 51 civilians were killed by Indian forces.

Human rights violations also occurred on the other side of the camp. The JKLF and other militant groups targeted the native Kashmiri Pandits (Kashmiri Hindus) and the violence forced a mass exodus of the Pandits. Islamist groups identified Pandit homes so the latter could be killed or converted. Due to the continued persecution of the Pandits and their killing at the hands of the JKLF and others, around 100,000 out of the total 140,000 Pandits left the valley in the 1990s (according to conservative estimates).

Eventually, however, the JKLF slowly eroded due to Indian counterinsurgency operations and took a backburner position in the movement. This vacuum was filled by the pro-Pakistan Hizbul Mujahideen (HM). Pakistan wanted to support an insurgent group that was loyal to them and bellowed “Kashmir banega Pakistan” (Kashmir will become Pakistan) rather than the JKLF's “Kashmir banega khudmukhtar” (Kashmir will become independent). In 1991, Pakistan focused its aid to HM while engineering defections and schisms in the JKLF. The HM cadre, mostly comprised of Kashmiris, would cross the LoC (Line of Control) to get weapons and training from Pakistan-administered Kashmir. After the Soviet defeat by the Afghan mujahedeen in 1989, many non-Kashmiri “jihadis” also became part of the Kashmir insurgency and in essence hijacked the movement. This means that during this period, many madrassa-educated mujahedeen from Afghanistan had infiltrated J&K to fight against India. Therefore, the movement started acquiring a different shape due to, in part, the Pakistan factor and also due to the Islamist influence of the mujahedeen who defeated the Soviets.

The aforementioned factors eventually proved detrimental to the Kashmiri movement, as many Kashmiris saw this iteration of the movement as exported or foreign and discerned the meteoric inflow of guns and violence as unfavorable. These factors coupled with effective Indian counterinsurgency efforts, albeit regularly indiscriminate and violent, saw the movement dwindle. In the mid-1990s, many insurgents either dropped their weapons or chose to collaborate with Indian security agencies. The JKLF, once the leader of the movement, promised to continue their struggle peacefully. The HM, although still active today, lost its zeal in the mid-1990s due to a war of attrition with the Indian security forces.

In 1993 the All Parties Hurriyat Conference was formed, which consisted of 26 parties seeking Kashmiri separation from India. Later on, the Hurriyat split into two factions – one that actively seeks a merger with Pakistan, while the other is pro-independence. Both, however, want to rid Kashmir of Indian occupation and remain an integral player in

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the Kashmiri socio-political landscape.

After the movement lost its intensity, there were a few “fidayeen” attacks (around 50) that took place from mid-1999 to the end of 2002 conducted by insurgents on both security and civilian targets. These attacks were conducted by groups like Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT), which allegedly had Pakistan’s support. These attacks were mostly conducted by non-Kashmiris, however. Although the violence paled in comparison to a few years ago, the psychological impact of the fidayeen attacks should not be scoffed at.

The aftermath of the September 11 attacks changed not only the Kashmiri freedom movement but also the world. Pakistan was heavily pressurized by the US to withdraw support to proxy groups – and the country was practically forced to side with America. In 2004, Pakistan under President Musharraf began to end its support to the insurgency. Although Pakistan was rewarded handsomely for its war on terror support to America, soon after the country became embroiled in its own insurgency as many anti-American militant groups turned anti-Pakistan. This further diminished the militancy aspect of the Kashmiri freedom movement, as Pakistan began fighting a war against militants within its own borders. This does not mean that the Kashmiri people and India were miraculously bequeathed with amicable relations, only that violence had halted. The Kashmiri people had become inured to the many hardships at Indian hands to overlook the movement. Apart from isolated incidents, things quieted down on the Kashmir front.

The Current Protests (2008–present)

Kashmiri animosity against Indian authority never died but laid dormant for some time. The current iteration of the movement, while having similarities to its predecessor, is vastly dissimilar. In 2008, the valley witnessed its largest anti-India demonstration since 1994. Hundreds of thousands of men, women, and children made their voices heard in the streets of Srinagar. Indian security forces were, as they always have been when it comes to Kashmir, heavy-handed in responding to the protests and killed many innocents. In this phase of the freedom movement, the Kashmiri people’s weapon of choice was the stone rather than the gun. The Kashmiris made stone-pelting their own as much as the Palestinians have against Israel in their quest for freedom.

Pakistan’s involvement was limited during this time. Pakistani rhetoric was the same as in the past, i.e. “Kashmir is the jugular vein of Pakistan”, but not much was being done on the diplomatic front or even surreptitiously. The Economist aptly states how the Kashmiri freedom movement had evolved – where in the past innocent Kashmiris died because of the war between Indian security forces and Pakistan-assisted insurgents, now stone-pelting Kashmiri civilians were being killed by Indian paramilitary forces and police. This statement indicates how Indian oppression and the marginalization of the Kashmiris never ceased since independence and that the unrest now was essentially local Kashmiris versus Indian forces. The militancy aspect during this phase remains extremely limited, but despite this, India increased its military presence in the valley instead of listening to the clamor of the Kashmiris – a recipe for disaster. Arundhati Roy, the Indian Booker Prize-winning author, stated that the huge number of soldiers that have been stationed in the Kashmir Valley were there solely to keep the rebellious civilian population at bay and not to fight a few poorly-equipped militants. Even though militancy remains low in the valley, Kashmiri civilians have shown their support to the limited number of armed Kashmiris fighting Indian authorities. In fact, since 2014, India was rattled by the fact that Kashmiri civilians were coming in between insurgents and security forces during gunfights to aid the escape of the outgunned and outnumbered insurgents. The implication being that a vast number of Kashmiri civilians see the small number of insurgents as heroes who are fighting against an oppressive force. In fact, some commentators state that if it were not for the support of the local Kashmiris – around 6 million in the valley – the Indian security forces could easily “round up and wipe out the 200-odd armed insurgents” in half a day. The number of Kashmiri civilians killed by Indian security forces in recent times reiterates that the bulk of the Kashmiri protesters are merely innocent civilians. In fact, in 2015, 2016, and 2017, over 300 Kashmiri civilians were killed by Indian security forces across various operations.

In 2016, a watershed moment transpired which changed the Kashmiri landscape. It still resonates loudly within most Kashmiris even today and is the foundation for the current angst against India. Indian security forces killed a beloved youth insurgent commander named Burhan Wani, and his death resulted in mass protests exploding in the valley. The Indian crackdown on the civilians was brutal. Hundreds of people were killed and many more blinded. The

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security forces relied on the use of pellet shotguns to disperse civilian protests. According to an Indian newspaper, at the end of August 2016, nearly 6,000 civilians had been injured – of them, 927 had suffered eye-related injuries. Counterproductive to Indian interests, this crackdown also made some hopeless Kashmiris turn to militancy. Although the militant numbers were and even today are in the mere hundreds, they started proliferating due to continued Indian barbarities. Unlike the 1989 insurgency, which was hijacked by Islamist non-Kashmiris, this time even educated Kashmiri youth are turning to militancy. According to an Indian army official, 191 young Kashmiris joined armed groups in 2018 – the number of recruits in 2013 (before the BJP came to power) were only 16.

The killings and mass blindings of Kashmiris, sustained curfews, augmented Indian security presence, as well as other human rights violations by security forces, have risen since the BJP's re-arrival in 2014. In fact, 2018 was Kashmir's deadliest year since 2008 with 160 civilians being killed. Furthermore, commentators, Indian and otherwise, allege that since Modi became prime minister in 2014 and his re-election in 2019, India has begun to wither as a secular democracy and is headed towards becoming a Hindu Rashtra (nation) – the end goal of the BJP. Notwithstanding the marginalization of the Kashmiris, India's diverse minorities have been ostracized all over the country since BJP came into power – although Kashmir's plight exceeds all. In mid-December 2018, Indian security forces killed seven innocent Kashmiri protesters marking it as one of the bloodiest days for Kashmiris in recent memory. Modi also placed a curfew and media blackout in the valley so that atrocities could not be broadcasted to the world. India played the age-old card that Pakistan was behind instability in J&K although proof being to the contrary. According to Arundhati Roy, "Kashmir has never been an integral part of India" and that India became a "colonizing power" post-1947 – this is quite telling about the relationship between both actors since independence. While India had a reasonable excuse and a culpable party in Pakistan in the earlier insurgency cycle, the Indian state does not seem to believe that its own actions have and continue to contribute towards the deepening schism between Kashmir and itself. As aptly stated by Indian historian and professor, Mridu Rai: "the oft-asserted contention that Pakistan has created the turmoil in Kashmir ab nihilo is unconvincing." The South Asia bureau chief for the New York Times, Jeffrey Gettleman, writes that where once, many years back, Pakistan supported militancy in J&K, "Now, the resistance is overwhelmingly homegrown." He clarifies what he means by homegrown by asserting that the Kashmiri conflict today is shaped less by geopolitics than by "internal Indian politics, which have increasingly taken an anti-Muslim direction." India, however, refuses to accept this as the case even though scholars, from India and abroad, state otherwise.

When Imran Khan took the reins of prime-ministership, Pakistan's diplomatic engagement vis-à-vis Kashmir was re-ignited. Pakistan's diplomatic efforts paid dividends as international human rights organizations as well the United Nations berated Indian hostilities against the Kashmiris. In 2019, a UN report cited, among other things, the Indian authorities' use of excessive force against civilians since 2016 and asked that an international inquiry be conducted – but India obviously rejected this report. Imran Khan even raised the issue in a speech in the United Nations General Assembly in 2019. Owing to Imran Khan's invasive diplomatic efforts, key Muslim leaders like Turkey's Erdogan and Malaysia's Matir spoke against Indian violence against Kashmiri Muslims as well. However, one must be cognizant that although Pakistan might have kept the Kashmir issue alive in the world arena, "the real oxygen for resistance is India's iron-fisted policies and defiance."

After the Burhan Wani incident and what followed, India made yet another miscalculation. In order to fulfill its Hindutva (far-right Hindu ideology) objects and keep its campaign promises, the BJP revoked J&K's Article 370 and 35A from the Indian constitution. The former allowed J&K to make its own laws for most subjects while the latter forbade outsiders from, inter alia, permanently settling, buying land, and holding local government jobs in the region. India removed J&K's state status and divided the region into two union territories – Ladakh and J&K. India's unilateral treatment of J&K, a disputed territory, angered Pakistan and also China – but nowhere near as much as it incensed the Kashmiris. Prominent Kashmiri politician and the former Chief Minister of J&K, Mehbooba Mufti, stated that the revocation of Article 370 was a vote-seeking tactic (aimed at appeasing the BJP's Hindu nationalist base). She said that "They [the BJP] have demonised Kashmiris, Muslims and even Dalits for that matter in the media and when they fail at anything, they remember Kashmir and Article 370." The BJP presaged that the abrogation would lead to ensuing chaos in the valley and so imposed a curfew that has run unabated for over 400 days and counting. Media and internet restrictions are still present but more ominously, the BJP government buttressed its 500,000-strong troop presence in the region by adding tens of thousands of additional troops. Due to the curfew and

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the spread of COVID-19, things look bleak in the valley. In the first half of 2020, 229 killings have taken place including the “extrajudicial executions of at least 32 civilians” according to the Jammu and Kashmir Coalition of Civil Society (JKCCS).

Unfortunately, the Indian media has not played an impartial role vis-à-vis Kashmir. It has either ignored the Kashmir issue in the least or misinformed the Indian public by painting it as a terrorist movement at the most. Perhaps this comes as no surprise as the Indian media has a very low press freedom ranking of 140 (out of 180 countries), whereas Pakistan’s is even worse at 145. The demise of the Indian media was precipitated by the BJP since winning the 2014 elections. The biased reporting of the Indian media on the Kashmiri issue has been informed by many reputable sources. For example, The Washington Post states that the Indian media, more often than not, depicts “Kashmiris as terrorists or human shields, not as a community seeking self-determination.”

Similarities and Differences between both Cycles

Similarities

What remains unchanged are the Indian hostilities befalling Kashmiris – from extrajudicial killings, torture, and rape to the use of the AFSPA act and beyond. The degree of hostilities, it can be argued, seem to be more pronounced in the second 2008-present cycle. The primary reason why the paper forwards this assertion is the rise of BJP. In its plan to create a Hindu Rashtra at the expense of Indian minorities, the BJP has not only incessantly tried to subjugate Kashmiri Muslims but has also marginalized Muslims and other minorities all over India. Under BJP rule, acts such as the mass blindings of Kashmiri civilians via security forces’ hands have become commonplace. This affixed with Indian-administered Kashmir being one of the most internet shutdown-prone regions in the world – according to a Stanford University study – makes the situation on ground far from idyllic. Indian troops’ presence has also been significantly amplified under the BJP’s right-wing rule even though militancy is only in the mere hundreds in current times.

This first point thus signifies the other similarity between both cycles of the movement, i.e. the anti-India vehemence that Kashmiris hold appears to be perennial. Kashmiris abhorred Indian authority then, and never stopped loathing it since. While the degree of militancy might have significantly reduced compared to the insurgency in the 90s, the feelings of animosity prevail. As far as Pakistan’s support to the Kashmiri freedom movement goes, it has continued. However, the type of support has changed from the first iteration to the second.

Differences

Pakistan has clamped down on its proxy activities in J&K and therefore, the world discerns the current Kashmiri unrest as a product purely of Indian activities. Pakistan’s diplomatic support however has become proactive especially since the arrival of Imran Khan and Modi’s pronounced transgressions in J&K.

The insurgency that began in 1989 eventually shed a bad light upon the Kashmiri movement. The world did not seem to sympathize with the Kashmiris but saw the region as a warring ground between old rivals, Pakistan and India. This undermined the struggle of the Kashmiris as it made them appear as violent and indiscriminate people. Now, however, the world sees them as oppressed due to the nuances of violence and militancy being skeletal. The militancy in Kashmir today is “smaller and less deadly than at the insurgency’s peak in the late 1990s and early 2000s.” Today the world sees hundreds of thousands of men, women, children in the streets shouting against Indian authority and at most hurling stones against soldiers equipped with shotguns and teargas. The world therefore sees an imbalance – the stone versus the gun, the oppressed versus the oppressor – and thus the story has transformed into a modern-day David versus Goliath. While the world might have been apathetic to the movement before, this time around their sympathies lie with the Kashmiris. Since Pakistan has ceased its proxy war tactics in the valley, while India has stayed the course vis-à-vis antagonizing the Kashmiris, international support has poured in for Kashmir while India has been met with scorn. There have been anti-BJP protests in countries as different as America, Britain, Pakistan, India, Germany etcetera.

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Since militancy is low in the current iteration of the movement, albeit increasing due to BJP oppression, there is no inter-group fighting. In the first cycle, the JKLF and HM began fighting amongst themselves and damaged the movement irreparably. There is no such issue this time around.

Perhaps the most important difference is that unlike the first cycle which was hijacked by non-Kashmiri mujahedeen and damaged the movement, this cycle is spearheaded almost entirely by Kashmiri people. Kashmiris from all spheres of life have partaken in anti-India protests – from young to old, men to women, educated to uneducated, rich to poor; everyone has participated. The limited number of militants too mostly comprise of local Kashmiris and this is why civilians have shielded them from Indian authorities (as mentioned earlier). The frustration with India has created an unsalvageable situation, which has precipitated even educated young Kashmiris towards militancy. According to a Washington Post article, “educated Kashmiri youths are joining an anti-India insurgency.”

Conclusion

It is the opinion of the author that the Kashmir issue has no diplomatic solution anymore. The point of no return is in the distant past now. The relations between Pakistan and India are exasperated. From India's romance with Hindutva to Kashmir's resurgence in Pakistani consciousness, from international pressures on BJP-run India to China's invasive troop movements inside Indian-administered Ladakh, from the Kashmiri aversion to the Indian state to the rising Islamophobia in “mainland” India, tensions are high. Due to sustained Indian oppression and the ongoing curfew, it is safe to say that more and more Kashmiris will look towards militancy as the last resort and therefore the situation will deteriorate in the valley until it explodes. All signs are pointing towards another war, which will undoubtedly impose a new status quo in the region.

About the author:

Sarmad Ishfaq is the CEO of the think tank, Paradigm Shift. His work has been published in *The Diplomat*, *Middle East Monitor*, *Harvard*, *Open Democracy*, *GVS*, and *Eurasia Review*. He has also been published in peer-reviewed journals such as *Social Identities*. Previously he worked as a research fellow for the Lahore Center for Peace Research. He has a master's degree in International Relations from the University of Wollongong in Dubai where he was recognized as the 'Top Graduate'.