

Kashmir: Militarization, Protest, and Gender

Towards the end of June grim reports from Indian administered Kashmir (hereafter called Kashmir) about increasing mass agitation, demonstrations and protests which resulted in civilian casualties began pouring in. Although tension in Kashmir is nothing new given the conflict, these particular incidents involved civilian casualties on a daily basis. There was zero mobility since the government was clamping curfews which the protestors would often defy and the separatist parties began announcing shut downs, and strikes under what was to later congeal as the Quit Kashmir movement. Hoping that the tension would abate, I left for Kashmir. However it was getting intense by the minute.

I arrived in Kashmir one afternoon. Driving through the city of Lal Chowk, called the heart of Kashmir, everything was eerily quiet. Not really unusual since the valley often shuts down in general protest strikes (called *Hartals*) which have occurred frequently during the last 2 decades. However this was different. A large group of people was approaching from a small alley, fists flailing, shouting slogans. In the middle of the road heaps of rotting trash, stones, abandoned shoes and bits of clothing lay strewn about; probable remnants of a previous skirmish. Near the mouth of the alley Indian troops¹ teeming in full riot gear, poised, their shields outwards, trigger alert. An armored vehicle with a machine gun ready soldier atop stood near a distended sandbag bunker which oozed into the middle of the road, swathed in concertina wire and plastic netting. An embattled metal signboard was razed with dents and scrapes. Since the driver had discouraged me from pulling down the windows despite the dry hot weather, all I heard was the muffled cries of the crowd. Our vehicle zipped past in a blink. Looking back, the crowd spilled on the road, the riot police ramming into it and the photojournalists swooping in. A few minutes later faint shots rang through air. It was like firecrackers across the city were bursting in tandem. During my stay such I was to witness such scenes over and over.

Kashmir erupted into armed militancy in Kashmir in 1989. In the two decades of armed violence and Indian counter-insurgency launched by India has resulted in summary executions, custodial killings, torture, detention and disappearances (Human Rights Watch, 2006). There about 700,000 Indian military and paramilitary personnel stationed in the region, and around 70,000 state policemen. The soldier to civilian ratio is roughly one soldier for every 20 Kashmiris, which is highest in the world. The troops function under the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act of 1958 (AFSPA), which allows them to arrest without a warrant, with use of force against any person who has committed a certain offence or is suspected of the same. The act authorizes the officers to enter and search any premise to make arrests. Subsequently the AFSPA gives army officers legal

¹ The Indian troops in Kashmir comprise of the Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF), Border security Force (BSF), Army, and the state police, as well as irregular state sponsored paramilitary groups mostly former militants commonly known as 'renegades'. The terms paramilitary, troops, police and army is used interchangeably in the report (unless identified otherwise). For further reading on this refer to India's secret Army, A Human Rights Watch report (1996)

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immunity for their actions.² Since it has been virtually impossible to identify the militants, who had local support, civilians were subjected to terrible abuses by state security forces. The Indian army and other state forces carried out large numbers of summary executions, custodial killings, torture, “disappearances,” and arbitrary detentions” (Human Rights Watch, 2006). Around 70,000³ Kashmiris have been killed. An independent survey revealed there are over 32,000 widows and more than 97000 orphans in the valley. According to the Asian Human Rights Commission there are between 8,000 to 10,000 cases of politically-motivated disappearances including combatants and non-combatant Kashmiris (Choudhury and Moser-Puangsuwan, 2007). The majority of the disappeared persons belonged to the financially disadvantaged classes, which left their families in dire circumstances. Humanitarian organizations claim that approximately 2500 people of them were married males, whose wives now referred to as half-widows have become marginalized category. According to a study only 8 per cent of the estimated number of the widows have remarried or intend to remarry while 91 per cent have not remarried (Zia, 2007). In the absence of men who have disappeared in custody of Indian army, many women from affected households have assumed the task of caring for families and have organized to search for those who have disappeared in the custody of the Indian army. These women, mainly Muslim mothers and half-widows of the disappeared men have become tireless human rights activists unprecedented in the Kashmiri society. Most of these women are members of the Association of the Parents of the Disappeared Persons (APDP)⁴. Parveena Ahangar, a 46 year old mother, co-founded this organization in 1994 with Parvez Imroz, a human rights lawyer, after her teenage son disappeared in the Indian army’s custody.

Summer 2010: Changing Face of Kashmir Movement

It has been well known for some time now, and a fact well aired by the Indian authorities that the militancy in Kashmir is at an all time low⁵. Militants have been relegated to the fringes and since 2008 a grassroots political resistance to Indian rule had steadily burgeoned. It started with mass rallies against a land issue which quickly turned into pro-freedom demonstrations, which are on the upswing ever since. Despite the changing face of resistance the response of Indian troops has continued to be combative. A fresh cycle of protests began in early June summer after Indian troops killed a boy named Tufail Ahmed Matoi in down town Srinagar, the capital of Kashmir. It is widely believed that Tufail was an innocent bystander who had left home for attending tuitions and was not a part of the crowd protesting against the extra-judicial killings by the Indian army in Machil a border village. A tear gas shell hit Tufail’s head which resulted in his death, which was followed by vigorous demonstrations and angry protests by the public. Notably the Kashmiri youth who have been born and

² AFPSA: A Study in National Tyranny, ?, South Asia Documentation Center

³ Survey, Accessed on 3/3/10 at http://www.kashmiraffairs.org/JKCCS_dead_not_forgotten_survey_death_toll_baramulla.html

⁴ As of now APDP is broken into two factions, one headed by Imroz and the other by Ahangar.

⁵ Armed Conflict Report, 2010, Ploughshares Canada ; Only 500 militants active, 15 June 2010 The Economic Times

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bred in the violent conflict instead of taking up arms have turned to alternate methods of resistance like demonstrations and protests⁶. This past summer a faction of youth also favored a primitive method of conveying anger and frustration through stone pelting (called “Kani Jung” or “Fighting with stones” in Kashmiri, many have termed it Kashmiri Intifada). Most stone throwers are young, a passionate overwhelmed mix as Mark Magneir (2010) wrote in the LA Times that “*there's no single stone-thrower type, with some motivated by youthful machismo, others by a sense of belonging, others incensed at the death of loved ones*”. The irony and naiveté of this method is palpable in the fact that it is used against the heavily armed and armored Indian troops who are trained to combat militants and have not hesitated to unleash live fire resulting in heavy casualties. This unleashed a cyclical process of incensed funerals, protests and incidents of stone throwing. The stone pelting became both a routine and fatal, resulting in further killings by Indian forces. Incidents of unprovoked firing by policemen and troops even on reportedly peaceful demonstrations began to occur across the valley resulting in killings. As Human Rights Watchdogs condemned the use of excessive force by Indian forces to quell the protests to no avail, the Kashmiri separatist organizations urged people to refrain from stone throwing and encouraged peaceful demonstrations. This was adhered to a large extent towards the end of summer⁷ though not completely and incidents of stone pelting occurred sporadically.

Simply speaking, the present Kashmir crisis in many ways manifests as a faceoff between the Indian army and Kashmiri civilians who are overwhelmed by their heavy handedness. In the past Kashmiris would try their best to evade the wrath of Indian soldiers however this summer defiance was in the air. Media galleries are witness to pictures of young protestors, with bared chests daring the Indian troops and police. There are reports of incensed tirades being exchanged back and forth between the boys and police, sometimes boiling down to comical though never short of fatal. “Go India Go back” graffiti emblazoned the public spaces and slogans like “Quit Kashmir; we want Freedom; O! Cruel tyrants leave our Kashmir (translation)” reverberated across the valley. While streets and alleys close to army camps, bunkers and police stations were the sites of protests during the day, the mosques became the hub of night protests. Especially in the month of Ramadan (Fasting) during which many Muslims make mandatory night prayers, pro-freedom hymns and anti-India slogans blared from the public address system. Entire towns were roused to the chants of freedom and entreaties for India to leave Kashmir. Tin doors, copper bowls and buckets were banged in tandem all night especially in downtown Srinagar as the army raided the neighborhoods looking for dissident youth. People spilled into alleyways, shouting boldly signaling the boys to escape. The atmosphere has a strange admixture of ferocity and fear. By Fall about 1400 to

⁶Kumar, Shashi, Gandhigiri? J-K youth give up guns for stones, CNN-IBN Accessed on Nov 24th at <http://ibnlive.in.com/news/gandhigiri-jk-youth-give-up-guns-for-stones/71412-3-1.html>

⁷Baba Altaf, Palhalan A Village of Mourning, 8 September 2010, *The Great Kashmir*

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1500⁸ youth were incarcerated, some as young as 13 years, jailed on account of rioting and stone pelting without juvenile detention facilities or the Juvenile Justice (JJ) Act. The JJ act has been ratified by the state of Kashmir but has not been implemented. The lawyers for many of the incarcerated youth decried their wrongful booking as adults by the police under the non-bailable Public Safety Act (PSA). Under PSA the detainees do not need to be told why they are being arrested and can be re-arrested for the same charge later⁹. The authorities denied the allegations though admitting the imprisonments.

By late June the separatists' camp had congealed the disparate civic agitation under the banner of Quit Kashmir movement. Although the separatist leadership remains fraught with ideological differences they stand more or less unified in their stance against India and the demand for self-determination. A ten day calendar began to be issued mainly by separatist leader Syed Ali Shah Geelani which included events like strikes, sit-ins and mass marches to significant places to protest the human rights abuses and demanding freedom from India. The government continued an unrelenting cycle of curfews, raids and crackdowns.

On July 7 2010 a state of emergency was declared. The army conducted flag marches and a new contingent of riot police, the Rapid Action Force was called in to tackle the situation. Curfews continued during which food, medicine and other essential supplies became scarce. Media was censored. Several local cable channels were banned from broadcasting on the pretext that they were not duly licensed and registered¹⁰ and others were allowed to carry one news bulletin of only 15 minutes' duration each day and there was to be no live coverage of any incident and no discussions. Gradually local newspapers were banned and lack of advertisements created crushing bottlenecks for continuing publications. The curfew passes for journalists were suspended and some were beaten by Indian troops, which included Mark Magnier of the *Los Angeles Times*. During this time the Kashmiri activity in cyberspace flared up with people exchanging information over Facebook, Twitter and blogs. Many were apprehensive that internet would be thwarted, as had been done some years back; however it did not happen. SMS services which had been suspended for sometime remained blocked with the authorities claiming that it was to prevent anti-national and vested interests from spreading trouble.¹¹

In the ensuing days ridden with unending curfews life came to a complete halt. No movement was possible except what could be mustered during short and scarce periods of relaxation which were fraught with demonstrations and clashes. Almost at the moment relaxation in curfew was announced, demonstrations and funeral processions for those killed would begin, discouraging any safe movement. In addition to mortal perils,

⁸ Numbers varies according to sources (900 upwards)

⁹ Sarkar Sonia *Where have all the Children Gone*, 18 July 2010, *The Telegraph*

¹⁰ Jamwal Anuradha Bhasin, *Kashmir Coverage: Media in the service of misplaced 'national interest'* September 17, 2010

¹¹ SMS Services suspended in J&K, 30 June 2010 *The Deccan Herald*

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major traffic jams and people thronging the markets for buying food, medicines and other essentials choked all possibility of productive ventures. I once ended up sitting in an hour long traffic jam with the relaxation period running out, amidst billows of smoke, dust and vehicles squished close together. At the end all I could do was get down and start walking, only to find out a major demonstration underway and which was fast getting dangerous. I found myself scurrying through an alley with other pedestrians fleeing the scene.

Nearing fall over 110 people including several women had been killed and over 2000 were injured. Most of the civilians died in live fire from police and paramilitary troops, while others were hit by tear-gas shells or rubber bullets. The government of Indian after severe criticism from Human Rights watchdogs on excessive use of force in controlling crowds did try to introduce nonlethal weapons like pellet guns but which according to reports proved as much fatal¹². Human Rights Watch and Amnesty international urged Indian troops from refraining from the use of live ammunition and firearms and to comply with their own and international law which includes the UN Basic Principles on the Use of Force and Firearms by Law Enforcement Officials¹³. However the number and circumstances around the fatal shootings continued.

Women in Protest

Women demonstrating in the streets are not new in Kashmir. They have been doing so in support of the struggle for self-determination since the 90's. However during the summer it was the first time that they led the demonstrations, took part in minor rioting and throwing stones¹⁴. The media dubbed them the "angry housewives of Kashmir". There were many incidents where women bodily scuffled with the Indian troops and the state police. Women whose sons were killed in this fresh cycle of violence increasingly participated in protests. They demonstrated against the killings and for many it was like avenging the deaths¹⁵. A mother whose son was killed did not want to stay in the confines of her home and even brought her younger child to demonstrate in the streets. Women's separatist organizations have been a part of the ongoing protests. Activists of Muslim Khawateen Markaz (Muslim Women's Center party) were detained by the police as they led a procession towards the office of the United Nations Military Observers Group. Dukhtaran-e-Millat (Daughters of the Community) another group has been active in the separatist movement endorsed and participated in the protests. The women activists from the human rights organization APDP took part in the protests and demonstrations as well. They specifically

12 Iqbal Javed, *Lethal Wounds of Non-Lethal Weapons, Rising Kashmir*, Accessed on dec 21st at <http://www.risingkashmir.com/news/lethal-wounds-of-%E2%80%98non-lethal%E2%80%99-weapon-1198.aspx>; Boga Dilnaz, *Non Lethal Weapons are more Lethal*, Accessed at New Internationalist at <http://www.newint.org/blog/majority/2010/11/09/non-lethal-weapons/>

13 Amnesty International, *Document – India Urgent Need to Act as Death toll rises*, Accessed on Dec 21st at <http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/asset/ASA20/027/2010/en/eccd4bb4-1a02-4246-b251-cf925fc1e7aa/asa200272010en.html> & Human Rights Watch, *Indian Repeal Immunity Laws Fueling Violence*, Accessed on dec 21st at <http://www.hrw.org/en/news/2010/09/17/india-repeal-immunity-law-fueling-kashmir-violence>

14 Pundit Saleem, *What is making the ordinary Kashmiri woman so angry that she is out on the street, throwing stones at police and leading the mob?* 8 Auguts 2010, *The Time of India*

15 Biswas, Soutik, *The Angry Housewives setting Kashmir Ablaze*, Accessed on 9/1/10, at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-south-asia-10961577>

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visited the bereaved mothers and families and marched with the funerals. They were seen utilizing their activist experience gathered in the last two decades to orchestrate the passionate processions for optimum effect. In what has become routine for them in their unique kin-based activism they sang dirges and raised slogans against human rights abuses invoking international human rights law.

A human rights activist with APDP has become a popular protestor in her area. She leads the demonstrations along with her daughter and brothers. She thinks nothing of getting killed. "What is the difference?" she asks, "They occupy our land, disappear and kill our sons, one more death is nothing, even if I throw one stone today, I do my bit in protesting against this injustice". Another human rights activist whose husband is missing feels overwhelmed and cornered. Countless assaults by the Indian troops on the people, barging into their neighbourhood, beating old, young, men and women alike, breaking everything they see in their way, especially the glass panes with batons and stones, she feels retributive. A young girl and human rights activist after seeing a young neighbour become sick with kidney problems after he was beaten by the troops has become an ardent protestor as she feels it is the only way to release her anger. Most of her female relations and those in the neighbourhood share her ire. They all take part in demonstrations and do not hesitate to pelt stones if need be, as they feel their homes and hearths are being violated. For the activist mothers and wives of the disappeared, this has also become a time when most of the population share the response that they have adopted and visibly displayed for the last two decades (albeit their demonstrations are entirely peaceful). "Fear can get us nowhere, it has not helped Kashmir thus far", says a mother activist who has been searching for her son missing since 18 years, "We have to come out on streets otherwise no one will see what is being done to us inside our homes and alleys, we have to make noise, only then will we get justice, it will be handed to us".

Apart from the engagements that Kashmiri women have shown in seeing humanitarian demands they are also forerunners of an everyday activism and innovation which they require (and muster) to sustain their daily existence and keep the household running. The process of conflict, war and militarization has brought changes to the roles of women which have translated from personal to public as seen in women's activism for the disappeared and also in the other humanitarian demands that women have been making day to day, since the start of militancy, which have been disparate, kneejerk and spontaneous mostly an affectual response to sons, husbands or brothers or neighbors, being arrested, or killed. Kashmiri men, apprehensive about the security discrimination meted out to them at the hands of Indian troops and they have in times of need encouraged and called out to their "Maji and Benni" (mothers and sisters), often from the loudspeakers of Mosques to come out and protest an arrest or a killing or any other form of abuse. Instead of men it has always been the women, who have in a very emotional response flocked to the streets to demonstrate and conduct "*dharnas*" (sit-ins).

Abridged Version; references not included