

## Report

### **Kashmiri Youth: Redefining the Movement for Self-determination**

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**Indian-administered Kashmir has seen an increase in violence over the years since 1989. Fighting has killed tens of thousands, mostly civilians, in Muslim-majority Kashmir. Being denied their right of self-determination, Kashmiris have been in a state of chronic revolt for decades [AP]**

## Abstract

This report discusses the local dynamics of the Kashmir conflict, and focuses on the youth-led resistance against the Indian state in Kashmir that has emerged since the late 2000s. It narrates the ways in which Kashmiri youth have mobilized outside the realm of formal politics, using new technology and other means to bring awareness to the Kashmir issue. Despite these developments, their political agency remains restricted through increased state repression and surveillance.

## Introduction

After a three-year break, India and Pakistan have agreed to re-start a comprehensive bilateral dialogue, which will culminate in a high-level visit of Indian Prime Minister Modi to Pakistan in September 2016.<sup>(1)</sup> While the conflict over Jammu and Kashmir will surely be addressed, it appears once more that other issues will take priority over the voices and demands of the people, especially those of the Muslim-majority Kashmir Valley. This priority is misplaced. The dialogue between India and Pakistan must take into account changing realities on the ground within the Kashmir Valley. No progress can be made unless a Kashmir-centric approach is taken into consideration.

## The conflict: from partition to present

The Kashmir conflict can be traced to 1947, when the Indian subcontinent was partitioned along religious lines into Hindu-majority India and Muslim-majority Pakistan. A murky transfer of sovereignty by the then Hindu Maharaja of Kashmir led a majority of the territory to be incorporated into the Indian Union.<sup>(2)</sup> Local demands for a plebiscite to determine the future of Kashmir were sidelined throughout the second half of the twentieth century.<sup>(3)</sup> From the late 1980s to the early 2000s, Kashmir was embroiled in

a violent uprising between Kashmiri and foreign fighters against the Indian state. The insurgency was supported by Pakistan. The Indian state managed to quash the movement through direct force, the introduction of counter-insurgency militant groups such as the Ikhwan, and a policy of divide and rule that contributed to infighting within the militant and pro-freedom ranks.(4)

For most of the 2000s it appeared that the Kashmiri movement for self-determination had been rendered obsolete, as Indian and international analysts projected a “return to normalcy” and the local populace grew disillusioned with militant groups.(5) However, in 2008 a new wave of largely non-violent protests began to emerge in Kashmir, led by the generation that grew up during the period of heightened militancy. The triggers for this new wave of protest included the Indian state’s attempted land grabs, extrajudicial killings, and the torture and killing of Kashmiri youth.(6) This new generation of youth activists has played a critical role in redefining the Kashmiri movement for self-determination as well as the precarious political and social conditions in which they function.

### **Shifting modes of activism**

Much like the youth of the Arab Spring, Kashmiri youth today are empowered with new communication technologies that increase the movement’s social and cultural reach. These technologies expand activists’ network within Kashmir as well as linking the movement for self-determination with a global discourse of resistance, ranging from Palestine to Ferguson.(7)

Many from the middle class are traveling abroad for their education—either to universities in India or the UK and the US—where they encounter new modes of thinking and activism. A large number of these Kashmiri students are studying the humanities and social sciences, and in the process becoming more aware of their history and the place of Kashmir among other decolonizing struggles. This emerging awareness has led to a blossoming of young Kashmiri artists, activists, writers, journalists, filmmakers, and academics that are producing political art, literature, and scholarship. The importance of this shift is best exemplified by the student protests on Indian university campuses in February 2016 after the Modi government cracked down on student dissent. Kashmiri youth, alongside a number of Indian youth from a variety of religious and social minority groups, challenged the discourse of the Indian state as it pertains to Kashmir and the politically charged hanging of Afzal Guru, a Kashmiri Muslim accused of conspiring in the 2001 attacks on the Indian parliament.(8)

Kashmiri youth-driven activism and cultural production has crafted a new discourse that—while relying on multiple, concurrent frames of reference and inspiration—is deeply connected to the desire for justice in Kashmir.

One such example is Kashmiri cartoonist Malik Sajad's 2015 autobiographical graphic novel, *Munnu: A Boy from Kashmir*. Sajad, who started drawing political cartoons for Kashmiri newspapers at a young age, narrates his personal story of growing up in Srinagar's Batmaloo area during a period of heightened militancy and witnessing the harsh repression tactics of the Indian state and its security forces. Sajad deftly brings together the modern graphic art form with traditional Kashmiri embroidery and design, drawing upon contemporary cultural icons as well as Kashmir's rich historical traditions and folklore. Using the language of memoir, human rights, Islamic mysticism, and political critique, Sajad does not pay homage to any particular political party or ideology, but shows the everyday struggles and heartbreaks of life under military occupation.<sup>(9)</sup> It is both the universality of his themes as well as the specificity of the Kashmir context that draws in the reader. Sajad is one of many Kashmiri youth experimenting with different cultural forms—both online and off—to bring attention to the Kashmir issue.

The activism of the new generation of Kashmiri youth points to another significant shift in Kashmir: a sphere of politics that exists outside of Kashmir's traditional pro-freedom parties.<sup>(10)</sup>

Since the late 1980s, the pro-freedom leadership, comprised of groups such as the Hurriyat and the Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Front (JKLF), dominated Kashmiri resistance against the Indian state. Mired in their own political intrigues, infighting, and allegations of corruption, the influence of these groups and their leaders waned in recent years. While supporting these groups' ultimate aims, many in Kashmir have begun to question their modes of resistance, critiquing the overuse of hartaal, or general strike, as well as their inability to do more than "simply keep the struggle alive."<sup>(11)</sup> Some youth also feel that there is very little space for them to be involved in these parties, unlike the pro-Indian local parties that make space for youth to take on bigger roles.

Kashmiri activist Muzzammil Thakur, who is the president of the Kashmir Institute of International Affairs and runs a number of development projects in the Valley, laments the prevailing predicament of the pro-freedom groups.

There doesn't seem to be a committee of qualified people that can move the movement forward, and provide us with a strategy. How many of our leaders have a background in negotiations or political theory? Where are the new strategies? Either we have hartaaals called by the pro-freedom leadership, or curfews called by the government. Many youth are beginning to question the leadership—what have you succeeded in getting us? Political sentiment alone will not drive us forward—we must have a real strategy forward.<sup>(12)</sup>

Yet, not all agree that this is the primary reason for the pro-freedom groups' waning influence. Wajahat Ahmad, who teaches sociology at OP Jindal University, thinks that most middle class activists are not interested in the harsh reality of membership.

Youth do not join Hurriyat or JKLF not because these parties are not welcoming but because of the harsh reality that associating with pro-independence groups means arrest, beatings, death of a career and in a classist and status conscious society like ours, an identity crisis. Middle class youth who are journalists, cartoonists, writers, academics, and human rights activists do not consciously engage with the pro-independence parties, as they know the cost of a formal association with these groups. Pro-freedom parties are more than happy to accept young people but who would sit in a Hurriyat office all day and give up jobs or university degrees in return for a few thousand rupee monthly stipend and the risk of an arrest or beating or risk police harassment to one's family.(13)

Despite differences of opinion on the efficacy of the pro-freedom parties today, many Kashmiri youth nevertheless acknowledge the important role the parties have played since the 1980s and the difficulties they face due to the limitations placed upon them by the Indian state.

The emerging grassroots, youth-led movement, marked by its lack of leadership or formal organization, has forged new spaces for discussion on Kashmir, outside of the realm of the various political parties. This has led to a broader vision of azadi (the struggle for independence), and fierce debates on the nature of the Kashmir conflict.(14) Kashmiri youth are at the forefront of defining what constitutes azadi, and challenging long-held perspectives on the role of religion, economy, culture, and education. While they connect to feelings of being marginalized as Muslims as a result of the so-called Global War on Terror, these new perspectives do not simply rely on religious identification, but also incorporate critiques of imperialism, religious nationalism, and global capitalism. For example, many youth are critical of Pakistan's role in Kashmir and are beginning to think beyond the ideals constructed by nationalist imaginaries—even those within Kashmir.

### **An invasive state**

Despite these important developments, Kashmir's youth remain in the immediate line of fire, facing violent suppression from the Indian government, affiliated right-wing groups, and the security apparatus in Kashmir. This has led many, especially in the middle class, to refrain from participating too vocally, worried about repercussions for themselves and their families. In addition, there is also a concerted effort by the state apparatus to encourage youth to join administrative services or other careers where their ability to be political agents is restricted.(15)

Just as new technologies have played a transformative role in youth activism, new technologies are also being used by various state agencies as an advanced method of invasive surveillance. The state hires hackers to retrieve information about youth organizing online and to create fake social media accounts to troll online forums and instigate dissent in order to see who might be a potential threat to the state.(16) "There is a lot of money being pumped in this area," says Dilnaz Boga, a journalist who covers youth issues in Kashmir. "The state is able to control youth voices by figuring out information about them and then using it against them—including information about their personal and family lives."(17) Boga affirms that Facebook is used for multiple purposes. "The state is able to keep an eye on the likes and comments, and hire people to egg on young people. With this strategy, the government is essentially able to find out who is willing to die or not."(18)

In moments of heightened crisis, such as dates of commemoration or after killings of youth activists, the state clamps down on communication networks, sometimes for days or weeks at a time, including social media. As a result, the youth are unable to mobilize and build momentum around particular issues. This illiberal and undemocratic muzzling of expression is meant to curtail dissent.

The struggle, of course, isn't taking place only online. Kashmiri youth have relied on stone throwing against the Indian and local security forces as a form of protest. Many of these protestors are fired upon with live bullets or tear gas, leading to countless deaths and injuries.(19) The state also regularly arrests youth who are involved in stone throwing or agitation against the Indian state, many of whom are under the age of 18. These youth are booked under the notorious Public Security Act (PSA), which effectively brands them for the rest of their lives even if they are released. In 2011, Amnesty International called the PSA a "lawless law" and declared that it was a way for the government to circumvent the rule of law.(20) The subsequent negative media attention given to this law resulted in an increase of illegal detentions outside of the PSA, as police try to deal with dissent under the radar.(21)

Drug use has also increased in Kashmir, especially in areas such as Tral, Pulwama, Islamabad, and Sopore where resistance to Indian rule is most prominent.(22) The coincidence is not lost on Kashmiris; many believe that drugs are being pumped into Kashmir through black markets, much like they were in Punjab, to distract the youth from activism. Many become addicted while they are in jail.(23)

Suppression in Kashmir goes beyond targeting youth that are agitating against the Indian state. The entire Kashmiri student body politic is deemed suspect; students in Kashmir have no space to organize or mobilize politically. Student groups, unless they

espouse the politics of mainstream Indian parties such as the Congress or BJP, are not allowed to meet in universities. As a result, the Kashmir University Students Union has been working underground in recent years. Freedom of expression is restricted. Indeed, Facebook works in tandem with the Indian state to remove or suspend any posts that it views as being controversial. Mir Suhail, another Kashmiri political cartoonist, had his cartoon marking the death anniversary of Afzal Guru removed and his account suspended for three days.(24)

The state is able to use the threat of global Islamist fear by drawing links between the youth and groups such as ISIS in an attempt to undermine their dissent. While ISIS flags have been seen in protests, experts contend this is a move to taunt Indian security forces and there is no evidence to suggest that these youth are being recruited into ISIS or even endorse their ideology.(25)

The increasing suppression and violence of the Indian state, especially since the killings of over 120 young Kashmiris in the summer of 2010, has led to an increase in Kashmiri youth joining militant groups. Unlike their predecessors in the late 1980s and 1990s, many of these youth are highly educated. Burhan Wani, a Kashmiri from Kashmir's Tral region who joined the militancy when he was only fifteen, has inspired this new generation of militants.(26) Police estimate that he has recruited over eighty youth in recent years.(27) Many of these youth joined the militancy after facing harassment at the hands of the security forces or witnessing the death of a family member or friend.

## Conclusion

Kashmiri youth are well aware that their struggle for self-determination is of little international concern. With rising authoritarianism and right-wing fervor in India, and continued geopolitical interventions in Pakistan, Kashmir is simply not a policy priority. The perceived intractability of the issue continues, but this might create new opportunities for Kashmiris to take ownership of their cause. Kashmir's initial revolt has come full circle and a new generation is testing new ways of dissent, taking ownership of their narrative, and expanding their solidarity and networks through social media and other mediums. While state surveillance and repression is likely to continue, so is youth resistance.

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- (2) India and Pakistan went to war over Kashmir immediately after Partition, resulting in Pakistan acquiring nearly one-third of the princely state of Jammu and Kashmir, which it calls "Azad Kashmir." This report is restricted to Indian-administered Kashmir.
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- (11) The pro-freedom leadership usually calls for hartals after the occurrence of human rights violations by the Indian state. Most businesses, banks, schools, and government offices remain closed and public transportation is limited. Critics of the hartal as a protest strategy decry that it harms the Kashmiri economy and keeps children from attending school; the leadership maintains that it is the only form of resistance that Kashmiris can use given the state prohibition of protests and larger public gatherings.
- (12) Interview with Muzzammil Thakur, conducted 7 February 2016
- (13) Interview with Wajahat Ahmad, Faculty, O.P. Jindal Global University, India, conducted 27 February 2016
- (14) Azadi is the Persian word for freedom, and is also used in Kashmiri and Urdu. It represents the demand in Kashmir for self-determination and an end to the Indian military occupation.
- (15) Interview with Wajahat Ahmad
- (16) Interview with Dilnaz Boga, journalist and filmmaker, conducted on 15 February 2016



- (17) *ibid.*
- (18) *ibid.*
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