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India/Kashmir

India: The meaning of Kashmir

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Description:

Modi's decision to revoke Article 35-A and Article 370 of the Indian constitution has fulfilled one of the cornerstones of Hindutva ideology - the forceful assimilation of Kashmir. The audacity of ambition combined with unprecedented secrecy amplified the menacing character of this event. Couching the operation as part of the fight against terror, arresting the entire political leadership of Kashmir, and cutting off communications throughout the valley indicates the colossal nature of the legal and political rupture taking place in the region.

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The abrupt pace of events has combined feelings of hurt and helplessness with numbness. Naomi Klein once argued that shocking opponents into submission will be the new model for imposing unpopular economic decisions. The Indian government is displaying the political equivalent of the Shock Doctrine, disorienting the public with a blitzkrieg in which citizens are reduced to mere spectators, helplessly watching as the conquest of Kashmir unfolds.

But what does it mean to conquer a territory that is already the most militarized space in the world? Or perhaps we can ask broader historical questions. What has been the meaning of Kashmir for disparate political actors in our region's recent history? Or to put it differently, what fears, injustices and hopes does Kashmir today stand for?

In the immediate context, the current move provides an impetus to the jingoistic agenda of Modi's government- not only allowing him to cement an internal base that wants a "final solution" for the Kashmir problem, but also opening up Kashmir's land and resources for India's business elite. The belligerence is meant to link Kashmir to the pursuit of a "Hindu Rashtra" and unbridled corporate profit, the two fantasies that sustain fascism in contemporary India.

The move has worked to solidify the BJP's support as Indians across the spectrum celebrated "integration of Kashmir into India", making it abundantly clear that it was presented and viewed as a conquest. What is more unfortunate is that the latest aggression has exposed the hollowness of Indian liberalism. Many liberal pundits are oscillating between feigning 'cautious' celebration for the event and pointing out possible legal gaps in it. Fear and shock have gripped the Indian polity as opposing Modi's whims is being equated with treason. With the shameful silence of liberals in the wake of the onward march of fascism, the very existence of reasoned debate in India is rapidly vanishing.

Kashmir today means the spectacular unraveling of Indian democracy in front of an arrogant authoritarian order. Kashmir of course has deeper, older meanings for the Indian and Pakistani national projects. Its disputed legal and administrative status is the legacy of the incompleteness of the partition of the Subcontinent. In that sense, Kashmir is both a remainder of the disorderly British exit from the region, and a reminder of the violence and terror at the origins of the two-nation states.

As a wound that refuses to go away, it brings forth the psychic investments that citizens carry with the birth of the two nations. And these emotions have been manipulated by the ruling classes to produce internal consent. In India Kashmir was associated with the sense of loss connected to Partition, propelling state paranoia and centralization against demands for regional autonomy. On the other hand, in Pakistan, Kashmir has been viewed as an unfinished task that was conflated with the existential threat posed by India to the country's territorial integrity. Yet, this has often been used to delegitimize internal dissent by designating critics as 'foreign agents'. Once reserved for politicians from the peripheries, such allegations can now be used against entire oppositions, signaling the intimate relationship between external enemies, state paranoia and internal repression.

It is clear that Kashmir has been an essential part of the narratives that sustain national identity in India and Pakistan, any deviation from which is identified as treacherous. For nationalism in South Asia, then, Kashmir refers to the manipulation of historical wounds to curb internal dissent.

The current crisis also poses questions about the effectiveness of the 'international community' that has hosted a number of international resolutions, conferences and summits on the Kashmir problem. Yet, the world has watched helplessly over the decades as the region was embroiled in conflict and militarization. The same international community that identified the non-existent 'weapons of mass destruction' in Iraq was unable to see the world's first mass blinding carried out by Indian armed forces in Kashmir, where hundreds were shot in the eyes with pellets by security forces. And today, as the valley is gripped in fear and uncertainty, the international community can only "caution" India and Pakistan, without any guarantees of safety to the beleaguered people of the region.

The devastation in Kashmir is therefore a tragedy that cannot be mourned, since it does not fit neatly into the frameworks of international politics where interests trump adherence to principles. Kashmir then also means exposing the hypocrisy of the global conscience as it submits to the logic of state interests.

Most importantly, Kashmir has a meaning as a site of resistance that is more universal in its appeal. For places like Palestine and Kashmir, the experience of modern sovereignty has not been one of law, citizenship or freedom of expression. In fact, it has not even been one of dictatorship in the ordinary sense, where citizens fight for rights denied by an authoritarian structure. Instead, Kashmiris have experienced modernity as a form of erasure; an erasure of their sovereignty, their identity, their citizenship and even their suffering. The latest assault by Modi is the intensification of this larger trajectory in which Kashmir's territorial integrity as well as history is being erased to allow for the smooth functioning of a toxic national narrative.

Yet, Kashmir remains the site of a profound refusal to fade away, a festering wound that is nourished by the sacrifices of hundreds of thousands of Kashmiri youth who continue to fight for freedom. Nothing perhaps signifies the resilience of the people more than the half-widows of Kashmir whose 'missing' husbands reside in the unapproachable zone between life and death. Their breathtaking resolve to resist the erasure of their husbands' memories by organizing regular protests is a testament to the courage that has sustained the will to freedom in Kashmir.

Kashmiris are today teaching the world to dream again and to fight again. Therefore, Kashmir today also stands for the courage to sustain a rebellion in the midst of unspeakable tyranny.

This refusal to adjust to the logic of domination is perhaps the greatest universal lesson from the struggle of the Kashmiri people. Rather than offering hyperbolic and jingoistic statements, we must ask what it would mean to think like a Kashmiri in our own contexts, including being attentive to the ethnic, class and gender-based suffering that surrounds us.

More importantly, we should resist the temptation to make Kashmiris 'Indian' or 'Pakistani' in our own national narratives. Instead we must acknowledge that for far too long have Kashmiris proven themselves worthy of carrying the burden of our history. Perhaps, instead we should prove ourselves worthy of becoming Kashmiris, with all the courage, humility and sacrifice such a gesture entails.

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