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[Maleeha Lodhi](https://www.dawn.com/authors/8829/maleeha-lodhi) Published January 23, 2023

The writer is a former ambassador to the US, UK & UN.

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A compelling new book chronicles the latest, ongoing chapter in occupied Kashmir’s decades-long tragedy. A Dismantled State: the untold story of Kashmir after Article 370 by Anurudha Bhasin is a scathing indictment of Indian actions in Jammu and Kashmir following its annexation and bifurcation by [abrogation of Article 370](https://www.dawn.com/news/1498227) of the Indian constitution on Aug 5, 2019. As a prominent journalist, executive editor of *Kashmir Times* and resident of Kashmir, Anurudha has long witnessed the turmoil, violence, injustices and vicissitudes of political life there. But post-August 2019, which saw J&K’s dismemberment and disempowerment, was a fundamental break from the past. She describes her book’s aim as discovering how this period that drastically altered the sociopolitical and economic landscape “impacted the people of J&K in their day-to-day lives”. The book is an effort to “combat disinformation in Kashmir’s dangerous information desert”.

I asked the author in an email exchange what motivated her to write this ground-breaking book, the first and only one to detail the trials and tribulations of Kashmir and its people post-August 2019. Anurudha said almost a year after Kashmir lost its special status, she began trying to make sense of what was happening on the ground. The geographical and political map of the state had been altered and what followed a year later were drastic and radical legal changes with a momentous impact on the lives of people there. But as very little was known and there was little media coverage, she began digging for facts in a “complete desert of information”. Among the impediments she faced was people’s reluctance to be interviewed due to the climate of fear.

In the book, Anurudha provides a vivid window into the atmosphere of J&K when the Aug 5 action was taken. The deployment of additional troops and “sound of regular chopper sorties” preceding the move had already created panic, fear and foreboding among people. She shows how the Pulwama incident and the officially sponsored narrative of antipathy towards Kashmiri Muslims prepared the ground for August 2019. In fact, through many political, military and administrative manoeuvres “the ground was being readied for bulldozing Kashmir’s special status, a year before it happened”.

The untold story of post-2019 trials and tribulations of the Kashmiri people.

When the “constitutional fraud” was imposed, people’s world was “suddenly turned upside down while they were virtually trapped in their homes, with unannounced curfew and communication systems in complete disarray”. There was barbed wire and multitudes of barricades everywhere on sealed, trafficless roads.

Thousands of arrests and detentions followed in the crackdown — of political leaders, lawyers, traders, businessmen, academics, activists and even children in midnight raids. The draconian Public Safety Act was weaponised and subsequently used more widely, as was torture. Several cases are documented in this regard. The author writes that “the apparatus of terror and control — operated in the form of night raids, arbitrary arrests, detentions, torture and alleged sexual assault — continued for days”. Virtually imprisoned by the lockdown, 13.65 million people were placed under siege. Internet was shut down and a communication blockade imposed. Most people, she says, had no idea then of the fate decided for them by Delhi. “Existence and identity, as we knew it, had been altered.”

Although the book examines the post-August 2019 period, the author also reflects on decades of Delhi’s failed policies in J&K — policies of manipulation and jailing of leaders combined with military coercion. This portion offers a clear analysis of how in the last seven decades successive governments dealt with the Kashmir conflict through force and manipulation, with the “Modi-led BJP government, consistently contributing to deepening the conflict by pursuing an all-out military policy”. “Militancy,” she asserts, “was a symptom of a deeper malaise — an unaddressed political dispute, subversion of democracy and democratic rights of the people and neglect of human rights violations.”

Commenting on recent trends in militancy, she argues that unlike in the 1990s, when boys crossed the border into Azad Kashmir to receive weapons and training, the new wave of militancy is mostly homegrown. Post-2019 militancy feeds on anger and “thrives on local support” and has been increasing with rising local recruitment.

The book catalogues the plethora of laws that were changed or promulgated mostly during, and taking advantage of, the Covid-19 pandemic. In October 2020, the government brought in 26 land-related laws which marginalised locals and aimed to deprive them of land. Under other changes, land could be seized from locals and given to outsiders. Overall, out of 334 state laws, 164 laws were repealed, and 167 laws adapted. Also detailed is the electoral delimitation plan unveiled in 2022 that sought to change the demographic character of the region and make way for J&K’s first Hindu chief minister. Addition of new voters to the electoral rolls, which gave non-residents voting rights, also aimed at enabling a BJP majority whenever election to the J&K assembly is held. All this has left Kashmir demoted, disempowered and disenfranchised.

Significantly, Anurudha sees India’s tightening military control, silencing of dissent, bulldozing of its economy and demography and assault on civil liberties as unsustainable and therefore believes its Kashmir strategy is bound to fail. Although the BJP government has disingenuously sought to portray the imposed silence in Kashmir as acceptance, the reality is of seething and massive discontent and deepening alienation from which “India stands to be the bigger loser”.

I asked Anurudha how she sees the situation play out from here. She said while all of J&K’s people including Hindus and Sikhs feel robbed, “the Muslim majority reels under an existential threat”. But a deafening silence has been produced by the jailing of politicians and civil society activists as well as throttling of the media. This, she says, portends danger because it makes it impossible to fully understand or assess the ground situation. It also makes it difficult to predict how Kashmiris will eventually respond, because respond they will. In fact, a key message of her book is that “a volcanic outburst is simply a matter of time”. I couldn’t agree more with the conclusion.

*The writer is a former ambassador to the US, UK & UN.*

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