**Kashmir: Strengthening and Gilding the Cage of Occupation**

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“They make a desolation and call it peace.” -Kashmiri poet Agha Shahi Scholars of political resistance have argued that domination by a settler-colonial hegemon requires not only silencing the colonized but also continuous buttressing and entrenchment through displaying and enacting power through legal, structural, and militaristic means, and ceremonial symbolization.

“The powerful,” writes James C. Scott in his Domination and Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts (1990), “…have a vital interest in keeping up the appearances appropriate to their form of domination. Subordinates, for their part, ordinarily have good reasons to help sustain those appearances or, at least, not openly to contradict them.” It is an accurate description of the current relationship between India’s total domination in the Indian Administered Kashmir (IAK) and Kashmiris’ subtle resistance.

Matrix of control in Kashmir

India has dominated the political discourse through military control, extra-judicial killings, and disappearances, civilian surveillance, police raids on adversaries’ homes, and incarceration of human rights advocates and non-conforming journalists on trumped-up charges. They rely on the lawless colonial law, Armed Forces, Special Powers Act (AFSPA), militarized traffic control and curfews, and curtailing civil liberties. And, all the while, forwarding its settler-colonial project through demographic changes aimed at changing the Muslim-majority character of Kashmir. This demographic engineering is designed to impact the UN-mandated vote of self-determination-long overdue.

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This matrix of control also includes collective punishment of the population using a wide range of tools of the repressive regime such as assaults, subtle and harsh indignities, and defilements, including torture, mass frisking, cumbersome vehicle searches, disappearances, tying of hands to electric poles and trees, blindfolding, using pellet guns for blinding protesters, or chasing them towards fast flowing rivers, resulting in their death by drowning. To camouflage the reality of Kashmir and Kashmiris, the Indian government uses opportunities to promote a false image of “normalcy” couched as development. The only time India invites foreigners to Kashmir is for supervised tours of representatives of foreign dignitaries while caging the locals. Public displays of grandeur, such as holding international conferences in the disputed territory, pock-marking the scenic landscape with Indian flags, holding musical concerts and other social festivals showcasing and eulogizing India’s progress under the façade of “development” have become a staple of their propaganda tactic.

Claws of biopower and necropolitical systems of control

To manufacture consent, where the occupier’s writ goes unchallenged, even accepted under duress, the state has used administrative, legislative, judicial, Machiavellian political, and military power to manage the everyday affairs of the people’s lives, including arrogating itself to immiserate and end lives at will. The Kashmiri bodies have been rendered expendable using the claws of bio-power and necropolitical systems of control and servitude. These necro-punitive techniques not only cause but also tolerate a certain threshold of death as necessary. Having caged the population to the largest open-air prison on earth- Kashmir-, the state has imprisoned thousands in the far-flung, dingy jails in India. These incarceration sentences are also served vicariously to the relatives and others deemed to be associated with political activists.

While maintaining a semblance of normality in their living conditions, militarized as they are, Kashmiris harbour lingering memories of the injustices perpetrated by the state. While overt public resistance is in suspended animation, the hidden resistance is well and alive. It percolates the psyche of every living generation of Kashmiris in the region and elsewhere. Kashmiri’s political disguise, where they insinuate their resistance through diverse survival strategies, cannot be mistaken for consent. The luxury of moving “freely” and maintaining a semblance of life’s routine amid a daunting network of police and military surveillance network is contingent upon the population giving into this daunting matrix of control. This absent presence of resistance-a presence that is strategically incognito, unspoken, and covert – while strikingly proscribed and repressed by the state – is best described through the cliche “Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent.”

Governmentalization of life

A common hallmark of settler-colonial occupation is the governmentalization of people’s lives. Anyone seeking government jobs, or a passport must undergo police verification of non-involvement in purported anti-state activities. The structural violence of unemployment and police scrutiny has sought to demobilize collective resistance and erode nationalist solidarity among the desperate masses. The state, being the primary source of economic activity, employment, welfare, or security against routine crime, and the captive population’s dependence on the state for these civic and material needs, is used as an inducement to remain peaceful and silent.

Constitutive silence

This haplessness has inevitably led to silence on the streets of Kashmir while the memories of multiple massacres linger in people’s collective memory. This is the sulking of a subaltern- powerless and disenfranchised people whose hands have been tied. Kashmiris are not silent by choice; they have been silenced through structural, legal, and aggressive methods and technologies of state repression.

Some compelling ethnographic surveys in Kashmir have demonstrated that counter-hegemonic and counter-mapping narratives are operationalized at the deepest levels of Kashmiri society. This is particularly true among the youth: millennials and Generation Z. Conversations about the injustices and the crippling technologies of repression are a staple of office and dinner-time conversations, daytime chats in the tea shops and buses, social gatherings and weddings, hushed-up voices in schools and universities, and various social media platforms. The truth of Kashmiri’s subjugation, alienation, and resistance lies under the carpet, expressed only in a whisper. They represent the resistance narratives through art forms, fiction, poetry, and resistance literature.

Diasporic Kashmiris are overtly and covertly working with allies in the social and political justice spaces to highlight the plight of their kith and kin in Kashmir. Kashmiri-origin scholars and their partners from diverse fields actively contribute to knowledge -creation about Kashmir’s political struggles and India’s settler-colonial enterprise in the territory.

Failure to erase Kashmiri nationalism

Repression has not secured Kashmir for India. Decades of attempts at erasure or manufacturing consents have failed to integrate Kashmir with the Indian Union. Kashmiris have always viewed the Indian occupation of their territories as an existential threat and likened it to the Israeli occupation of Palestine. The seven decades of brutal occupation and the most recent escalation of repression have resulted in the terminal and deeply ingrained alienation. India’s callous disregard for the sentiments of the people is on full display, but the state lacks confidence. It does not trust Kashmiris with freedoms afforded to Indian citizens, for example, in Mumbai or New Delhi. A recent World Press Report from Kashmir has noted that “there is an overwhelming belief among Kashmiris that a solution to this conflict is no longer possible within the ambits of India’s constitution.” Pakistan’s irredentist interest in Kashmir is merely part of a more significant problem confronting India. By its admission, India’s right-wing ruling class has used the bogey of Pakistan’s involvement for electoral advantage. As is clear from the recent revelations by Kashmir’s former governor, Pakistan serves as a political punching bag for weaponizing the Indian public.

Routinizing the occupation

The Indian state has embarked on many settler-colonial measures to alter Kashmir’s demographic profile. While the insidious plan of demographic change was first introduced in 1947 in the Jammu region, resulting in the ethnic cleansing and displacement of estimated half a million Muslims, the current target of demographic change is once again the Muslim enclaves in the Hindu-majority Jammu region, such as Doda, Rajouri, and Poonch. With introducing the colonial-settler laws of granting Domicile to non-Kashmiris, and changing the land laws of Kashmir, the project of demographic change is well underway.

Thousands of Hindu refugees from the neighbouring countries have been settled in these areas to dilute their Muslim majority character. Yet, most of the settlers are of Indian origin and predominantly of Hindu heritage. By opening the floodgates of settlers from India to own land in Kashmir, the state aims to undo the indigenous land ownership at a slow and steady pace.

The sole beneficiary — during the upcoming 2024 elections — of these gerrymandering machinations will be Prime Minister Modi’s right-wing ruling party. The state has devised legal and legislative tools to appropriate native land and created a litany of brutal legal and administratively punitive measures for those who resist. The Economist recently quoted the region’s pro-India politician, the former chief minister Mehbooba Mufti as saying: “Everything is about snatching land, jobs and resources from locals here and giving them away to wealthy corporate allies of the present dispensation [Modi’s nationalist party BJP].”

Thick on propaganda

The state has sought to impart a sense of false consciousness among Kashmiris and global audiences by systematically reframing the root causes of the conflict. They use the classic settler colonial labels of development, peace, and progress, where Kashmiris are mystified to go blind to their oppressions; For global audiences, they invoke the spectre of terrorism. Since the latter has brought diminished returns, they have weaponized trade to buy international silence on the issue. A recent report in The Economist dismisses the claims of normalcy in Kashmir as untrue. The state has used the development myth even as unemployment in the Kashmir region stands at 24%, three times higher than the national figures.

The international silence

India has used, to its advantage, the archaic and dogmatic Westphalian conception of ‘sovereignty’ -immutability of international borders-which callously disregards the aspirations of the people held captive, against their will, within those borders and failed to acknowledge the exceptional nature of internationally recognized disputes such as Kashmir. The Western governments’ duplicitous politicking, motivated by geostrategic and trade interests, is illustrated when China’s territorial claims in Tibet are touted as an ‘occupation,’ and the annexation by India and Israel of the territories they occupy is not.

The U.S has demonstrated that it will look the other way while Modi unrolls the juggernaut of rabid Hindu nationalism bent upon brutalizing and erasing Kashmir and depraving the minorities in India of their human rights; the U.S. is only too willing to sacrifice the principles of human rights at the altar of the Great Game seeking to contain China. It is no wonder that the affected people in Kashmir and Palestine do not trust the Western governments as honest brokers and perceive them as complicit in perpetuating their prolonged agony. Compounding this is the lack of any bone in international humanitarian law.

End piece

All territorial occupations, including Kashmir’s, must end. Under the shadow of the gun, this forced occupation is against the will of the Kashmiri people. Kashmiris can be held to ransom or kept silent only for so long. The Diplomat has termed this silence ‘dangerous’ and warned, “Sooner or later, it will burst out in a disaster.” The writing has been on the wall for a long: As a settler-colonial power, India may have been able to force submission, but it has garnered no loyalty in Kashmir. It never will.

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