**Political Apartheid in Kashmir**

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The history of Kashmir is riddled with blatant betrayal, bloody barbarianism, and heartless brutality. Unfortunately, since 1947, the month of August has been a symbol of an ill omen for the people of Kashmir, ringing alarm bells for fears, tears, tribulations, and tyranny. It was back in August 1947 that India and Pakistan got their independence and failed to reach an agreement on the sovereign status of Jammu and Kashmir, most of which continues to remain with India. Kashmiris were never consulted nor made a party in this gory drama of perpetual pain. They were rendered irrelevant and made invisible. The most recent and severe setback came three years ago on August 5, 2019. The Indian government revoked Kashmir’s special status by abrogating Article 370 and 35A by doing away with whatever limited autonomy they enjoyed, though much on paper. Article 370 allowed Indian-administered Kashmir to retain control over all areas except defense, communication, and foreign policy. Likewise, Article 35A ensured that only Kashmir’s “permanent residents” could own property. The revocation was yet another step towards completely annexing Kashmir, a move that used to garner popular support in India at the expense of Kashmiris. The will of the governed, which is essential in a democratic dispensation, is not at all a priority issue for the Hindu nationalist government of India when it comes to the people of Jammu and Kashmir, which also includes the Kashmir valley.

Kashmir had already been under a crippling lockdown long before COVID-19. For weeks in 2019, all phone lines and internet services were cut off by the Indian government. Basic mobile-phone connectivity took months to be restored and a ban on high-speed 4G internet continues to this day. The autocratic Indian government has fully capitalized on coronavirus lockdowns by passing the domicile rule, which has caused alarm because of its potential to change the demography of the Muslim-majority state of Jammu and Kashmir. The measure grants a right to residency and government jobs to anyone from India who has lived in the state for 15 years or more, studied there for seven years and taken certain exams, or served in its state government for 10 years or more. During just more than a month in 2020, around 400,000 people had reportedly acquired domicile certificates. This malicious move is all set to alter the results of any referendum seeking peoples’ opinion for the resolution of the larger, international dispute over control of the territory. Adding salt to the injury, later the same year came the first attempt to change the demography of Jammu and Kashmir: the Muslim-majority district of Poonch in Jammu faced a siege, which resulted in a massacre of Muslims across Jammu. It is not exactly known how many actually died, but conservative estimates put the casualty count between 20,000 to even more than 200,000 with half a million compelled to migrate to Pakistan.

In the final analysis, it can safely be inferred that the world community stands thoroughly exposed because of its commercial interests and strategic security ties with India.

In August 1953, Sheikh Abdullah who became Prime Minister of Jammu and Kashmir in 1948-was arrested and jailed. Dozens of people were killed in protests following his incarceration. Likewise, in August 2008, Kashmiris protested the blockade of a key highway in the state by Hindu nationalists. As tens of thousands of protesters marched towards the city of Muzaffarabad-the capital of the Pakistan-administered Kashmir on the other side of the Line of Control-Indian security forces fired upon them. Since 1990, more than 70,000 people have been killed, at least 8,000 have disappeared, hundreds have been tortured and thousands detained by Indian authorities. The official Indian figures put the death toll much lower. Almost all elections have been shamelessly rigged and draconian laws have been imposed by twisting the local government’s arm. Those who chose to oppose the Indian government’s writ were either jailed or heartlessly killed. There has been absolute lawlessness with the shady structures of accountability that have been rendered dysfunctional. Not one person from the Indian armed forces has ever been prosecuted in civilian courts for their involvement in human rights violations. The political promises of a free and fair plebiscite allowing Kashmiris to decide the territory’s fate, made by then Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru in 1947, have been cast to the four winds and replaced by a new stance that “Kashmir is an integral part of India.” The Indian stand on Kashmir has grown more rigid and the violence against the people of Jammu and Kashmir has become more brutal with every passing day.

As Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) came into power in 2014, his aggressive regime became even cruder. The deceptive demeanor of the secular Congress government was replaced by the brazenness of the Hindu-majoritarian BJP. However, his re-election in 2019 worsened the situation for all minorities including Muslims. Emboldened by his grip over power corridors, Modi-led regime turned totally fascist in days. On 5th August, 2019 the Kashmiris lost the symbolic autonomy they had under the constitution. As expected, the international community has looked the other way and expressed only mild concerns about the deplorable situation of human rights violations in Jammu and Kashmir. The trade and strategic relationships with India have gagged the developed world. Material gains have taken precedence over the moral dilemma. The international agreements must be words intended to make the leaders who sign them find them on high moral ground. The unilateral and undemocratic changes governing Jammu and Kashmir, incessant human rights violations, denial of basic facilities, and land-grabbing due to militarization are all in violation of international law, UN resolutions, India’s own constitutional framework, and India’s commitment to Kashmiris. India feels encouraged to continue with its barbaric policy because of the lack of any meaningful intervention by the international leadership. It is a sad story of criminal complacency. Cut a word; it will bleed.

When India and Pakistan gained their independence, New Delhi wasted no time and initiated a campaign to change the demography of IIOJK. Therefore, in IIOJK, the constant fear of demographic change has existed for decades and this apprehension is further intensified by Hindu right-wing groups openly calling for a change in the demography of Kashmir and integrationist politics. India has initiated a planned strategy to replicate the West Bank pattern of colonization like the Israeli model in Kashmir, towards the displacement of local citizens, particularly Kashmiri Muslims through new settlers by exerting hegemonic influence. When attending a conference with the Kashmiri Hindus, a serving Indian diplomat in America claimed that “Kashmiri culture is Indian culture; it is Hindu culture” and he lauded Israel’s inhuman strategy of dealing with the West Bank settlements. Kashmiris have been living in terror of an ambiguous status given by the Indian Government for well over 70 years and always feared the expected change in the demography and status of IIOJK. Building further on its sinister designs, Modi-led regime plans to add about 2 million non-local voters to facilitate the imposition a puppet CM in IIOJK. These anxieties have now become harsh realities and get further compounded with every passing day. These fears were perceived to be ridiculous and unwarranted at one point in time by the international community. Given the recent security situation in IIOJK, the international community has turned its deaf ears to the bemoaning innocent civilians being subjected to atrocities of all shades and grades by the Indian armed forces.

In the final analysis, it can safely be inferred that the world community stands thoroughly exposed because of its commercial interests and strategic security ties with India. In its flagrant violation of International Laws and UN resolutions, India’s unilateral, unconstitutional, and undemocratic changes in the demography of IIOJK are not only a serious breach of human rights but also a constant threat to regional peace and stability. The sooner the developed world rises to its shared responsibility of ensuring a just solution to the persistent political apartheid in Kashmir, the better.

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