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## LISA

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## EDITORIAL

### **Kashmir, India and the World**

On the first day of year 2020, India completed 150 days of siege of Kashmir – longest ever in any place with the world’s longest-ever internet blockade. The military cordon remains entrenched and unwavering to activate with the usual brutality but this time around with a wild vengeance whenever Kashmiris display any potential for resistance. So far, the only reason Kashmir has been spared a bloodbath is the strategic restraint of the population from taking out any large demonstrations that would have allowed the authorities to commit mass murder on a much larger scale than what Mehbooba Mufti did in July 2016 in the aftermath of Burhan Wani’s killing when nearly 150 youths were brutally killed and tens of thousands injured or blinded. Earlier, in 2008 and 2010-11, similar massacres were carried out to quell mass uprising.

There are reliable reports that the Indian government of Modi had prepared a ruthlessly cold blooded contingency plan of mass public massacre to control any consequential Kashmiri reaction in the aftermath of the abrogation of Article 370. That it did not happen is attributable to a sudden maturity from Kashmiris or a divine providence or both. From New Delhi’s point of view, absence of large-scale public battering does not bode well for her future predatory engagement with the people and the region. Had a few massacres happened, the total ban on communication would have masked it well and in a world of fast-changing priorities, it would have even been forgotten by the world by leaving Kashmiris exhausted to mourn and lick their wounds all alone, as they’ve done in the past. However, most observers are of the view that a public rebellion is inevitable and is lurking around in the very presence of a prying security apparatus. Thankfully, the bloodbath has been avoided, at least so far but for how long?

Kashmir is under a tight grip, its people occupied and their movements monitored. In the sky, drones conduct sweeping Israeli-inspired surveillance

over protest sites, helping armed forces identify ‘miscreants’ ‘The internet is still disconnected. Foreign journalists remain banned from visiting the region, while opposition leaders have been prevented from visiting. The only foreign delegation allowed to travel to Kashmir was a select group of mostly right-wing parliamentarians from the Europe Union. Not only are Kashmir’s pro-freedom leaders in detention, but even those pro-India political leaders on the margins of Kashmiri society, who for decades were integral to India’s grip on Kashmir, remain locked up too.

Arundhati Roy writes, “Right now, 7 million people in the valley of Kashmir, overwhelming numbers of whom do not wish to be citizens of India and have fought for decades for their right to self-determination, are locked down under a digital siege and the densest military occupation in the world. Simultaneously, in the eastern state of Assam, almost two million people who long to belong to India have found their names missing from the National Register of Citizens (NRC), and risk being declared stateless. The Indian government has announced its intention of extending the NRC to the rest of India. This could lead to the manufacture of statelessness on a scale previously unknown”

At the hearing of the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission of the United States Congress on the situation in occupied Jammu and Kashmir that was held less than a month after the hearing of the Subcommittee on Asia of the US House of Representatives; the Lantos Commission hearing reflected continued international concern over the situation in Kashmir, observing it as an internationally recognised dispute and highlighted gross human rights violations and the humanitarian crisis. It called for an independent fact-finding mission to Indian Held Kashmir and underscored the right of self-determination. At its hearing, "The witnesses also called for immediate lifting of the communications blockade and restoration of human rights in occupied Jammu and Kashmir. *Overall, it was emphasised that India should not be allowed to continue its oppressive policies as well as religious and ethnic persecution.*"

"The hearing also expressed their concern that persecution of religious minorities in India, especially manifested in the form of *anti-conversion legislation, Babri Masjid verdict, National Register of Citizens (NRC) in Assam as well as mob violence and lynching* were fostering a growing sense of fear among the minorities in India."

## **Pakistan: Handling of Kashmir Crisis**

Pakistan Prime Minister Imran Khan's desire to be a peace-maker is admirable but his instinctive optimism can at times lead to a hazardous blind. Pakistan options are limited for a meaningful and credible reaction to the Indian moves in the region. It has effectively managed to engage the world at diplomatic level. It has been fairly successful in its endeavours but as they say diplomacy also has a shelf life. He succinctly declared "Pakistan will go to any lengths to support the cause of the oppressed Kashmiri people". It is a historical fact that no freedom movement has succeed without help from outside. While the world at large has been driven by their economic and geopolitical interests in India they have conveniently abandoned Kashmir.

The large number of Kashmiris in Pakistan and the Kashmiris Diaspora overseas feel that Pakistan has also abandoned them as mere rhetoric and diplomatic engagement is not enough. They expected Pakistan to come up with a "clearly articulated narrative" to support Kashmiri freedom movement. They could have in fact come up with a narrative to support this movement within the legal framework of United Nations of supporting legitimate freedom movement and Kashmir Movement is legal, legitimate and historical.

Ashraf Jehangir Qazi a highly respected former Ambassador of Pakistan summed it up by stating, "An alternative scenario is for Pakistan to abandon the Kashmiris in IHK to their fate while maintaining a furious and largely unproductive diplomatic campaign against Indian atrocities. There are many in Pakistan who quietly or openly advocate such an approach to ensure the survival of the country. Many suspect the government is itself wedded to this approach despite its public denials."

## **The Indian Supreme Court (SC): Kashmir and Ayodha**

The Indian Supreme Court (SC) had assiduously projected itself as a custodian of India's secular democracy. While the judiciary in India has struggled to remain impartial in countering majoritarianism, however its sovereignty and integrity is fast dwindling.

The Indian Supreme Court (SC) vagueness and dithering over the current Kashmir crisis, and its controversial verdict on the Ayodhya dispute, are an indicator of how dangerous is the reach of RSS and Hindutva. Indians feel very disappointed and losing faith in the Supreme Court. It is now feared that the Ayodhya verdict will become a precedent which can be applied to other disputed religious sites, which will likely worsen the already fraught relationship between India's Hindus and Muslims.

The Indian apex court is now being criticised widely for having undermined its earlier record of progressive and tempered jurisprudence. With the superior judiciary having been tamed thus, there are unfortunately no other state institutions which now stand in the way of tempering excesses of an ultranationalist fascist government, as it continues undermining India's claim of being the largest secular democracy in the world.

## Whatever it takes

Ashraf Jehangir Qazi

THE Indian lockdown of nine million Muslims in the Kashmir Valley seems to be unending. Has India made a ‘major strategic blunder’ or has it pulled off a major fait accompli? In other words, is there a greater likelihood of India having to reverse its Aug 5 decision or is it effectively irreversible despite Pakistan’s vigorous diplomacy and the unprecedented international criticisms of India’s action?

This depends on (i) the durability of the Kashmiri resistance in India-held Kashmir under extreme Indian repression including the comprehensive and relentless targeting of the civilian population of the Valley; (ii) whether any significant political opposition to Modi’s Aug 5 decision develops in India; (iii) the response of the international community — particularly the major powers and especially the US — to the hideous human rights situation in the Valley which threatens to reach genocidal proportions as defined by the Genocide Convention of 1948; and (iv) the response of Pakistan to such a scenario which Genocide Watch says is already under way. Just read Arundhati Roy to know the monstrosity India is becoming under Modi!

The current assumptions and indications suggest:

(i) the Kashmiri resistance cannot be eliminated short of genocidal measures against the people of the Valley who regard and support the resistance as their own;

(ii) there is no prospect of any politically significant opposition in India to Modi’s decision of Aug 5;

(iii) the international community may condemn, embarrass and annoy India because of its atrocities, but it will not halt and reverse the trend towards genocide because the major powers see Kashmir in the context of a much larger Eurasian struggle in which India strategically counts for more than Pakistan; and



(iv) apart from bellicose statements and some heating up of the Line of Control, Pakistan will by and large avoid military confrontation with India even if a full-blown genocide develops. Instead, it will intensify its diplomatic campaign in the hope of arousing the conscience of the international community sufficiently for it to take effective measures to restrain India.

Aug 5 has transformed Kashmir from a longer-term diplomatic challenge to an existential challenge for Pakistan.

Inside Pakistan, the government will be primarily concerned to pacify its own public opinion and counter charges of a dishonourable and shameful betrayal of the Kashmir cause which could seriously destabilise the country. It will be reduced to saving Azad Jammu & Kashmir, Gilgit-Baltistan and Pakistan itself from further Indian designs. India will massively interfere in AJK and GB to force a final settlement along or even beyond the LoC with the understanding if not approval of the US and the Western powers. China will provide diplomatic support to Pakistan while counselling 'moderation', the need to adopt a longer-term perspective on Kashmir, and ensuring continued territorial contiguity between Pakistan and China.

Inside IHK, India will seek to wipe out the entire Muslim leadership, or strike a deal with the previous puppet Muslim leadership, or craft a new puppet Muslim leadership, possibly with people like Muzzafar Baig and Altaf Bukhari, who may be persuaded to accept the fig leaf of a hollow restoration of Article 370 as a final settlement. The All Parties Hurriyat Conference will be targeted for liquidation. No matter how outrageous the human rights situation in Kashmir gets, the major powers, including China, will not tolerate the prospect of nuclear conflict.

Pakistan has described Kashmir as its 'jugular vein' without which it is incomplete and cannot survive. It has pledged its last breath and drop of blood in defence of the Kashmiri people. It has always said any stoppage of Pakistan's waters would be a casus belli. Moreover, in the name of the freedom struggle or jihad for Kashmir the people of Pakistan have had to live in a security rather than development state. This has deprived them of the benefits of democracy, good governance, peace and development. The results of this political degeneration are today evident in the wretched daily news every day.

The honest choice before the prime minister of Pakistan is stark: either he tells the nation that the costs of stopping India from perpetrating genocide in the Valley are more than Pakistan can bear and, therefore, he has no option but to 'accept the unacceptable' for Pakistan to survive. Or he asserts that the costs of a disgraceful betrayal of the Kashmir cause, especially after the loss of the majority of Pakistan's population in 1971, will render the country a failed state without meaning, purpose, a moral foundation and a future worth having. Accordingly, while he is ready to go the extra mile for peace with India and to negotiate an acceptable, just and principled Kashmir settlement, he will never countenance genocide in Kashmir no matter what the cost may be.

For such resolve to be credible it must also be part of a comprehensive national transformation of Pakistan from an elitist, corrupt and incoherent state that, despite its verbal jihad, is unwilling and unable to take any risks for any cause, to a functioning democratic, development and human rights state that is able to develop options and take risks to ensure freedom and justice for Kashmir and to chart a course for peaceful coexistence with India. Progress towards such a national transformation will itself generate the narratives and project the images required for the views of Pakistan, regarding the plight of the Kashmiris, to register internationally.

There are no risk-free options to stop genocide, save Kashmir, and avoid war with India. Pakistan's nuclear deterrent is meant to deter war not pursue war. But if the people of the Valley are threatened with genocide, as indeed they are, Pakistan's deterrent must cover them. If this is rejected as wishful thinking there will be both genocide in the Valley and a slide towards war between India and Pakistan.

Aug 5, 2019 has transformed Kashmir from a longer-term diplomatic challenge to an existential challenge for Pakistan. Modi's 'Anschluss' does not allow for incremental strategies. The prime minister must now do whatever it takes to ensure Pakistan no longer remains an irresolute and self-imprisoned soft state that surrenders its *raison d'être*.

*The writer is a former Pakistani ambassador to the US, India and China and head of UN missions in Iraq and Sudan.*

## Well done, My Lords!

Justice Markandae Katju

*Appeasement to a bully, like the Munich pact of 1938, only whets the appetite of an aggressor.*

***SUBMIT that the recent Ayodhya verdict of the Supreme Court will go down in the annals of Indian legal history in the same category as its decision in ADM Jabalpur vs. Shivakant Shukla, 1975, the only difference being that unlike the latter, in this one there is not a single courageous dissent.***

In substance it has said that might is right, and has laid down a dangerous precedent sanctifying aggression. It is like a bully snatching a kid's sandwich in school, and the teacher giving a 'balanced judgment' by allowing the bully to keep the sandwich, and giving the kid a slice of bread instead.

One need not go into the correctness or otherwise of the Court's finding that the Babri Masjid was built by one of Babur's generals after destroying a Hindu temple on the site.

It is true that many Hindu temples were destroyed by Muslim invaders, and mosques built on their sites, sometimes even using the material of the temple e.g. the Quwwat ul Islam mosque near Qutub Minar, Delhi whose pillars have Hindu carvings, or the Gyanvapi Masjid in Varanasi whose rear wall has Hindu carvings, or the Atala Devi Masjid in Jaunpur.

But the point is this: is India to move forward, or backward?

*It would be a different matter if a Hindu temple is broken today and converted into a mosque. But where this was done allegedly 500 years ago does it carry any sense to go about restoring the structure to its Hindu original?*

This revanchism will be stupid, and can only polarise society, serving the political agenda of some people who wish to keep the communal fire burning for getting votes.

And it is stupid to think that the Ayodhya verdict will bring about communal peace. Appeasement to a bully, like the Munich pact of 1938, only whets the appetite of an aggressor.

Cries of "*Abhi to yeh jhaanki hai, Kashi Mathura baaqi hai*" were heard soon after demolition of Babri Masjid on 6th December 1992, and are bound to be repeated soon.

Sakshi Maharaj, the BJP MP has said that Jama Masjid, Delhi was built on a Hindu temple, which should be restored. Similar claim has been made about the Taj Mahal. Where will all this end?

To say that Ram was born at a particular spot is ridiculous. Even if he was a historical, not mythical, figure, how can anyone say where a person was born thousands of years ago?

India is passing through a terrible economic crisis, with GDP at a record low, manufacturing and business in steep decline, unemployment at a record height (even according to the Government's own National Sample Survey), appalling level of child malnourishment (every second Indian child is malnourished according to Global Hunger Index), 50% of our women anaemic, farmers suicides continuing unabated, healthcare and good education for the masses in a pitiable state, etc.

Evidently our leaders have no clue how to solve these huge problems, so to divert attention from them they must resort to gimmicks like Yoga Day, cow protection, Swatchata Abhiyan, abrogation of Article 370 etc, and building Ram Mandir is in the same category.

After Partition of 1947, demolition of Babri Masjid by vandals, with the connivance of some people, was the greatest tragedy of India.

The Ayodhya verdict says it was illegal, but in the same breath sanctifies it. Well done, My Lords!

*Justice Markandey Katju a former Judge, Supreme Court of India and former Chairman, Press Council of India.*

# Hindu Nationalists Head Off a Cliff in Kashmir

Pankaj Mishra

Long on a roll, right-wing nationalists finally seem to be overreaching. Evidence came from two different sources this week: India and Britain.

Brexit, advocated and promoted by mostly English nationalists, always threatened the breakup of Great Britain. With new Prime Minister Boris Johnson now vowing to leave the European Union on Oct. 31 without a deal and regardless of the destructive consequences, Brexit has been clearly exposed as a reckless bet by nationalists against their own country.

Support for independence has achieved a majority in Scotland, according to an opinion poll this week. In Northern Ireland, the excesses of Tory Brexiteers have helped make the previously unthinkable prospect of a united Ireland mainstream. More people than ever -- an estimated 41% -- back independence even in Wales, which actually voted to leave the EU.

The nationalists' more dramatic own-goal, however, occurred in India, where Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government moved to repeal Article 370 of the Indian Constitution, which sets out the special terms on which the independent princely state of Jammu and Kashmir acceded to India rather than Pakistan after the end of British rule.

Some other Indian states enjoy similar privileges of federalism. The reason why Modi's government drastically demoted Kashmir to colonial-style vassalage as a "Union Territory" is primarily, even exclusively, ideological.

India's only Muslim-majority state, Kashmir has hosted a long and relatively popular anti-India insurgency supported by Pakistan. Hindu nationalists have long campaigned to repeal Article 370 as part of a revanchist fantasy of "Akhand Bharat," or Undivided India -- a vision which includes reclaiming the part of Kashmir ruled by Pakistan.

Modi seems to have calculated that his successful electoral strategy of social-religious polarization can continue to curry favour from those who voted for him -- and distract from his failure to turbo charge the economy or create jobs. Predictably, supporters loudly cheered his government's apparent resolve to bring Kashmir to heel and to show the state's Muslims their place.

This mode of politics can keep the base energized in the short run, as elected demagogues in Western democracies such as U.S. President Donald Trump have proved. As with Brexit, however, any radical expression of nationalism cannot but have radical long-term consequences which, ultimately, undermine its own cherished ends: consolidating territorial unity and sovereign power. Right-wing nationalism, in this sense, is its own nemesis.

The Brexiteers ignored unfavourable opinion in Scotland and Ireland until it was too late and the Pandora's Box of independence had opened. The Hindu nationalists are not so oblivious to the desires of Kashmiri Muslims. But they deliberately humiliate Kashmiris because they believe in full-spectrum dominance and in imposing it by awesome displays of force.

The government prepared for its bombshell on Monday with a massive infusion of security forces into Kashmir, which is already one, the most militarized places on earth. It ordered the house arrests of opposition leaders and evacuation of Indian students and tourists, an indefinite curfew, and the shutdown of all modes of communications, including telephone landlines.

Clearly, the Hindu nationalists are hardly detained by scruples about procedure in a context where they either control or influence all of India's major institutions, including the Supreme Court. However, a ruling class that can so cavalierly dismiss the prospect of a permanently humiliated and resentful Muslim minority that numbers over 170 million citizens is in danger of being misled by its own culture of impunity.

Hindu nationalists have clearly not thought through the long-term consequences of repealing Article 370. These will, of course, be manifest in Kashmir itself, where Modi's government has presided over a spike in militant disaffection. As the aerial skirmishes between India and Pakistan this February showed, the authorities' failure to check terrorist violence in the state, and compensatory

sabre-rattling and blustering, can easily make an already volatile situation spiral out of control.

The other grave consequences of the Hindu nationalist assault on India's federal principles are less perceptible now. They will nevertheless be played out in some of India's richest states, where an assortment of sub-nationalisms has been simmering for years. The undreamed-of scenes witnessed in Hong Kong lately -- of young professionals resisting the diktats of remote-controlling authoritarian nationalists -- could one day become commonplace in Mumbai, Hyderabad, Bangalore and Chennai.

Drunk on power, the Hindu nationalists resemble the English Brexiteers as they blithely smash up fragile constitutional arrangements. History may record their actions now as another lesson in how nationalists so often overplay their hand -- and self-destruct.

*Pankaj Mishra is a Bloomberg Opinion columnist. His books include "Age of Anger: A History of the Present," "From the Ruins of Empire: The Intellectuals Who Remade Asia," and "Temptations of the West: How to Be Modern in India, Pakistan, Tibet and Beyond."*

## Sacred thread of the soul

Jawed Naqvi

SIKHS across the world are celebrating Guru Nanak's 550th anniversary today, and the fervour is enhanced by the opening of a key road between Pakistan and India that leads to his shrine in Kartarpur in Pakistan. Among the non-Sikhs who have revered Nanak are great Muslim poets. Nazeer Akbarabadi among them (1740-1830) in a paean to the Guru celebrated him for the succour he brought to those who embraced his message of human fellowship before one God. Allama Iqbal saw him as the seer who raised hopes for India's social enlightenment after the country exiled Buddhism to foreign shores.

Sikhs who have endeared themselves to Nanak's world of fraternity include excellent men and women. Foremost these days, in my mind, are the gallant men who escorted Kashmiri women from faraway Pune to their homes in besieged Srinagar. That they did so in the face of a delinquent state underscored the culture that Nanak bequeathed to his followers. Not any less in chivalry were the Sikhs who rushed to give succour and shelter to the communally shunned Rohingya refugees.

In a world overloaded with rites and traditions, Nanak's followers have spawned a rainbow of eclectic heroes that few other religions can match. Where there are ardent believers and a surfeit of Good Samaritans in the fold, there are socially committed atheists and communists too. There are affluent entrepreneurs, promptly countered by the best trade union leaders and even more militant Sikh peasants.

Let's put it this way. There would no Bhagat Singh without the message of fellowship and human bonding he imbibed from the saint-preacher from the late 15th century. Bhagat Singh who was hanged at the tender age of 23 wore the turban given by his religion but took it off without offending his community when he needed to disguise himself from his British pursuers to fight for India's independence. He used Marxism to imagine a socially and politically enlightened post-colonial India at peace with itself. One of his last pieces of writings argued his case for dying as an atheist while still being proud of his Sikh heritage.



Sikhs who have endeared themselves to Nanak's world of fraternity include excellent men and women.

Open the mind's apertures a little and you would find an utterly brilliant Sikh politician in Canada, one of several, actually. In 2017, the turbaned Jagmeet Singh, now 40, became the first non-white head of a major Canadian party. His New Democratic Party is as far left as any in a First World country. There are rumours that Singh could become deputy prime minister in Justin Trudeau's minority government whose numbers he helped slash in general elections two weeks ago.

In any case, it is delightful to hear him switch from fluent English to more fluent French while explaining his stand on issues. They may range from support to gay rights to opposing the expansion of a pipeline that carries oil through Canada's mountains to its west coast, without first getting cleared by the threatened indigenous people. Leave alone religion, could any Indian or Pakistani politician take a public stand on sexual orientation of their people or oppose a project because the people feared its adverse impact on environment?

Jagmeet was denied Indian visa for his stand on the 1984 massacre of Sikhs. But he sees himself as following Guru Nanak's path of asking questions relentlessly, to help people fight inequality and ignorance imposed by Brahminical blind faith and superstition. That this follower of Nanak is a first class leader of a First World country says something of his heritage.

Jagmeet Singh's unique style of turban helps project a stridently multicultural society he wants Canada to remain. He reminds one of liberal writer Khushwant Singh who opposed religious and caste bigotry in the footsteps of Nanak while remaining a self-confessed atheist. How many religious communities can accept the dichotomy?

Harkishen Singh Surjeet was an archetypal Sikh, sporting a turban and a steel kara while leading the largest communist party in India. The affable sardarji was among the last party leaders to promote the use of Urdu to attract the masses, a practice shunned by his successors to the detriment of their cause. If Sikh women are at the forefront of the fight for gender rights it is because Guru Nanak was himself an ardent advocate of gender equality.

There is an uplifting song by the mystical minstrel Lalon Fakir in 19th-century Bengal, which seems to have its origin in Nanak's teachings. Nanak was on the same page as the weaver-poet Kabir and cobbler-thinker Ravidas, who are thought to have been his contemporaries. "We can tell a Brahmin by his thread. How do we recognise his womenfolk?" Lalon wondered mockingly.

The question may have been lifted from a defining moment in Guru Nanak's life when he was nine years old. His father, a high-caste Hindu, had arranged for the son's thread ceremony but Nanak took the issue to his elder sister Nanaki who he loved and looked up to for guidance. He wondered why she never wore the thread. Why was it prescribed for all Hindus but excluded low-caste Shudras?

Nanaki said the question be raised with the Brahmin priest. Nanak was a brilliant student with a deep knowledge of the cultures and religions of his time. He asked the priest to explain the basis for excluding Muslims, many of whom were his friends, and Shudras and women from the thread ceremony. The priest said it was so prescribed by religious texts.

It naturally didn't wash with the young boy, and after a long and absorbing discussion with the priest he found support from the guests who were listening in. The ritual abandoned, Nanak summed up his thoughts thus: "Make compassion the cotton, contentment the thread, modesty the knot and truth the twist. This is the sacred thread of the soul; if you have it, then go ahead and put it on me."

*The writer is a correspondent in Delhi.*

# India: Intimations of an Ending – Part I

## The rise of Modi and the Hindu far right.

Arundhati Roy

*It is a long eye opener article and LISA is presenting it in three parts*

While protest reverberates on the streets of Chile, Catalonia, Britain, France, Iraq, Lebanon, and Hong Kong, and a new generation rages against what has been done to their planet, I hope you will forgive me for speaking about a place where the street has been taken over by something quite different. There was a time when dissent was India's best export. But now, even as protest swells in the West, our great anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist movements for social and environmental justice—the marches against big dams, against the privatization and plunder of our rivers and forests, against mass displacement and the alienation of indigenous peoples' homelands—have largely fallen silent. On September 17 this year, Prime Minister Narendra Modi gifted himself the filled-to-the-brim reservoir of the Sardar Sarovar Dam on the Narmada River for his 69th birthday, while thousands of villagers who had fought that dam for more than 30 years watched their homes disappear under the rising water. It was a moment of great symbolism.

This text was presented in New York City on November 12 as the Jonathan Schell Memorial Lecture on the Fate of the Earth, created by Type Media Center and the Gould Family Foundation and presented by Cooper Union.

In India today, a shadow world is creeping up on us in broad daylight. It is becoming more and more difficult to communicate the scale of the crisis even to ourselves. An accurate description runs the risk of sounding like hyperbole. And so, for the sake of credibility and good manners, we groom the creature that has sunk its teeth into us—we comb out its hair and wipe its dripping jaw to make it more personable in polite company. India isn't by any means the worst, or most dangerous, place in the world—at least not yet—but perhaps the divergence between what it could have been and what it has become makes it the most tragic.

Right now, 7 million people in the valley of Kashmir, overwhelming numbers of whom do not wish to be citizens of India and have fought for decades for their right to self-determination, are locked down under a digital siege and the densest military occupation in the world. Simultaneously, in the eastern state of Assam, almost two million people who long to belong to India have found their names missing from the National Register of Citizens (NRC), and risk being declared stateless. The Indian government has announced its intention of extending the NRC to the rest of India. Legislation is on its way. This could lead to the manufacture of statelessness on a scale previously unknown.

The rich in Western countries are making their own arrangements for the coming climate calamity. They're building bunkers and stocking reservoirs of food and clean water. In poor countries—India, despite being the fifth-largest economy in the world, is, shamefully, still a poor and hungry country—different kinds of arrangements are being made. The Indian government's August 5, 2019, annexation of Kashmir has as much to do with the Indian government's urgency to secure access to the five rivers that run through the state of Jammu and Kashmir as it does with anything else. And the NRC, which will create a system of tiered citizenship in which some citizens have more rights than others, is also a preparation for a time when resources become scarce. Citizenship, as Hannah Arendt famously said, is the right to have rights.

The dismantling of the idea of liberty, fraternity, and equality will be—in fact already is—the first casualty of the climate crisis. I'm going to try to explain in some detail how this is happening. And how, in India, the modern management system that emerged to handle this very modern crisis has its roots in an odious, dangerous filament of our history.

The violence of inclusion and the violence of exclusion are precursors of a convulsion that could alter the foundations of India—and rearrange its meaning and its place in the world. Our Constitution calls India a “socialist secular democratic republic.” We use the word “secular” in a slightly different sense from the rest of the world—for us, its code for a society in which all religions have equal standing in the eyes of the law. In practice, India has been neither secular nor socialist. It has always functioned as an upper-caste Hindu state. But the conceit of secularism, hypocritical though it may be, is the only shard of coherence that makes India *possible*. That hypocrisy was the best thing we had. Without it, India will end.

In his May 2019 victory speech, after his party won a second term, Modi boasted that no politicians from any political party had dared to use the word “secularism” in their campaigns. The tank of secularism, Modi said, was now empty. So, it’s official. India is running on empty. And we are learning, too late, to cherish hypocrisy. Because with it comes a vestige, a pretence at least, of remembered decency.

India is not really a country. It is a continent. More complex and diverse, with more languages—780 at last count, excluding dialects—more nationalities and sub-nationalities, more indigenous tribes and religions than all of Europe. Imagine this vast ocean, this fragile, fractious, social ecosystem, suddenly being commandeered by a Hindu supremacist organization that believes in a doctrine of One Nation, One Language, One Religion, and One Constitution.

I am speaking here of the RSS, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, founded in 1925—the mothership of the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party. Its founding fathers were greatly influenced by German and Italian fascism. They likened the Muslims of India to the “Jews of Germany,” and believed that Muslims have no place in Hindu India. The RSS today, in typical RSS chameleon-speak, distances itself from this view. But its underlying ideology, in which Muslims are cast as treacherous permanent “outsiders,” is a constant refrain in the public speeches of BJP politicians, and finds utterance in chilling slogans raised by rampaging mobs. For example: “*Mussalman ka ek hi sthan—Kabristan ya Pakistan*” (Only one place for the Muslim—the graveyard, or Pakistan). In October this year, Mohan Bhagwat, the supreme leader of the RSS, said, “India is a Hindu Rashtra”—a Hindu nation. “This is non-negotiable.”

That idea turns everything that is beautiful about India into acid.

For the RSS to portray what it is engineering today as an epochal revolution, in which Hindus are finally wiping away centuries of oppression at the hands of India’s earlier Muslim rulers, is a part of its fake-history project. In truth, millions of India’s Muslims are the descendants of people who converted to Islam to escape Hinduism’s cruel practice of caste.

If Nazi Germany was a country seeking to impose its imagination onto a continent (and beyond), the impetus of an RSS-ruled India is, in a sense, the opposite. Here is a continent seeking to shrink itself into a country. Not even a

country, but a province. A primitive, ethno-religious province. This is turning out to be an unimaginably violent process.

None of the white supremacist, neo-Nazi groups that are on the rise in the world today can boast the infrastructure and manpower that the RSS commands. It has 57,000 *shakhas*—branches—across the country, and an armed, dedicated militia of 600,000 “volunteers.” It runs schools in which millions of students are enrolled, and has its own medical missions, trade unions, farmers’ organizations, media outlets, and women’s groups. Recently, it announced that it was opening a training school for those who wish to join the Indian Army. Under its *bhagwa dhvaj*—its saffron pennant—a whole host of far-right organizations, known as the Sangh Parivar—the RSS’s “family”—have prospered and multiplied. These organizations, the political equivalents of shell companies, are responsible for shockingly violent attacks on minorities in which, over the years, uncounted thousands have been murdered.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi has been a member of the RSS all his life. He is a creation of the RSS. Although not Brahmin, he, more than anyone else in its history, has been responsible for turning it into the most powerful organization in India, and for writing its most glorious chapter yet. It is exasperating to have to constantly repeat the story of Modi’s ascent to power, but the officially sanctioned amnesia around it makes reiteration almost a duty.

Modi’s political career was jump-started in October 2001, just weeks after the 9/11 attacks in the United States, when the BJP removed its elected chief minister in the state of Gujarat and installed Modi in his place. He was not, at the time, even an elected member of the state’s legislative assembly. Three months into his first term, there was a heinous but mysterious act of arson in which 59 Hindu pilgrims were burned to death in a train. As “revenge,” Hindu vigilante mobs went on a well-planned rampage across the state. An estimated 2,500 people, almost all of them Muslim, were murdered in broad daylight. Women were gang-raped on city streets, and tens of thousands were driven from their homes. Immediately after the pogrom, Modi called for elections. He won, not despite the massacre but because of it—and was re-elected as chief minister for three consecutive terms. During Modi’s 2014 campaign as the prime ministerial candidate of the BJP—which also featured the massacre of Muslims, this time in the district of Muzaffarnagar in the state of Uttar Pradesh—a Reuters journalist asked him whether he regretted the 2002 pogrom in

Gujarat. He replied that he would regret even the death of a dog if it accidentally came under the wheels of his car. This was pure, well-trained, RSS-speak.

When Modi was sworn in as India's 14th prime minister, he was celebrated not just by his support base of Hindu nationalists but also by India's major industrialists and businessmen, by many Indian liberals, and by the international media as the epitome of hope and progress, a saviour in a saffron business suit, whose very person represented the confluence of the ancient and the modern—of Hindu nationalism and no-holds-barred free-market capitalism.

While Modi has delivered on Hindu nationalism, he has stumbled badly on the free-market front. Through a series of blunders, he has brought India's economy to its knees. In 2016, a little over a year into his first term, he announced on television that, from that moment on, all 500 and 1,000 rupee banknotes—over 80 percent of the currency in circulation—had ceased to be legal tender. Nothing like it had ever been done on such a scale in the history of any country. Neither the finance minister nor the chief economic adviser seemed to have been taken into confidence. This “demonetization,” Modi said, was a “surgical strike” on corruption and terror funding. This was pure quack economics, a home remedy being tried on a nation of more than a billion people. It turned out to be nothing short of devastating. But there were no riots. No protests. People stood meekly in line outside banks for hours on end to deposit their old currency notes—the only way left to redeem them. No Chile, Catalonia, Lebanon, Hong Kong. Almost overnight, jobs disappeared, the construction industry ground to a halt, small businesses simply shut down.

Some of us foolishly believed that this act of unimaginable hubris would be the end of Modi. How wrong we were. People rejoiced. They suffered—but rejoiced. It was as though pain had been spun into pleasure. As though their suffering was the labour pain that would soon birth a glorious, prosperous, Hindu India.

Most economists agree that demonetization, along with the new Goods and Services Tax Modi announced soon after—promising “one nation, one tax”—was the policy equivalent of shooting out the tires of a speeding car. Even the government admits that unemployment is at a 45-year high. The 2019 Global

Hunger Index ranks India 102nd out of 117 countries. (Nepal comes in at 73rd, Bangladesh 88th, and Pakistan 94th).

But demonetization was never about economics alone. It was a loyalty test, a love exam that the Great Leader was putting us through. Would we follow him, would we always love him, no matter what? We emerged with flying colours. The moment we as a people accepted demonetization, we infantilized ourselves and surrendered to tin pot authoritarianism.

But what was bad for the country turned out to be excellent for the BJP. Between 2016 and 2017, even as the economy tanked, it became the richest political party in the world. Its income increased by 81 percent, making it five times richer than its main rival, the Congress Party, whose income declined by 14 percent. Smaller political parties were virtually bankrupted. This war chest won the BJP crucial state elections in Uttar Pradesh, and turned the 2019 general election into a race between a Ferrari and a few old bicycles. And since elections are increasingly about money, the chances of a free and fair election in the near future seen remote. So maybe demonetization was not a blunder after all.

In Modi's second term, the RSS has stepped up its game. No longer a shadow state or a parallel state, it *is* the state. Day by day, we see examples of its control over the media, the police, and the intelligence agencies. Worryingly, it appears to exercise considerable influence over the armed forces, too. Foreign diplomats and ambassadors have been trooping to the RSS headquarters in Nagpur to pay their respects.

In truth, things have reached a stage where overt control is no longer even necessary. More than four hundred round-the-clock television news channels, millions of Whatsapp groups and TikTok videos keep the population on a drip feed of frenzied bigotry.

This November the Supreme Court of India ruled on what some have called "the most important case in the world." On December 6, 1992, in the town of Ayodhya, a Hindu vigilante mob, organized by the BJP and the Vishwa Hindu Parishad—the World Hindu Council—literally hammered a 450-year-old mosque into dust. They claimed that this mosque, the Babri Masjid, was built on the ruins of a Hindu temple that had marked the birthplace of Lord Ram.



More than 2,000 people, mostly Muslims, were killed in the communal violence that followed. In its recent judgment, the court held that Muslims could not prove their exclusive and continuous possession of the site. Instead, it turned the site over to a trust—to be constituted by the BJP government—tasked with building a Hindu temple on it. There have been mass arrests of people who have criticized the judgment. The VHP has refused to back down on its past statements that it will turn its attention to other mosques. This can be an endless campaign—after all, everything is built over something.

With the influence that immense wealth generates, the BJP has managed to co-opt, buy out, or simply crush its political rivals. The hardest blow has fallen on the parties with bases among the Dalit and other disadvantaged castes in the northern states of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. Many of their traditional voters have deserted these parties—the Bahujan Samaj Party, Rashtriya Janata Dal, and Samajwadi Party—and migrated to the BJP. To achieve this feat—and it is nothing short of a feat—the BJP worked hard to exploit and expose the hierarchies within the Dalit and disadvantaged castes, which have their own internal universe of hegemony and marginalization. The BJP's overflowing coffers and its deep, cunning understanding of caste have completely altered the conventional electoral math.

Having secured Dalit and disadvantaged-caste votes, the BJP's policies of privatizing education and the public sector are rapidly reversing the gains made by affirmative action—known in India as “reservation”—pushing those who belong to disadvantaged castes out of jobs and educational institutions. Meanwhile, the National Crime Records Bureau shows a sharp increase of atrocities against Dalits, including lynching and public floggings. This September, while Modi was being honoured by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation for building toilets, two Dalit children, whose home was just the shelter of a plastic sheet, were beaten to death for shitting in the open. To honour a prime minister for his work on sanitation while tens of thousands of Dalits continue to work as manual scavengers—carrying human excreta on their heads—is grotesque.

What we are living through now, in addition to the overt attack on religious minorities, is an aggravated class and caste war.

In order to consolidate their political gains, the RSS and BJP's main strategy is to generate long-lasting chaos on an industrial scale. They have stocked their kitchen with a set of simmering cauldrons that can, whenever necessary, be quickly brought to the boil.

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## **Bangladesh sees India validating two-nation theory and abjuring secularism**

**Tariq A Karim**

Since Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's game-changing visit to India in January 2010, bilateral relations between the two countries have been reconfigured phenomenally, in qualitative and substantive terms. The two countries amicably resolved, completely, their long-festering land boundary dispute and equally long-troubling maritime border dispute (although, surprisingly, after ratification, India appears to have revived issues that had been considered settled by both sides earlier, post signing the Protocol to the Land Boundary Agreement in September 2011, and having accepted the award of the ITLOS on the maritime boundary demarcation); trade has registered a quantum jump, with Bangladesh exports to India having crossed the psychological USD 1 billion mark; India has extended over USD 8 billion line of credit to Bangladesh, of which USD 200 million of the first tranche was converted to outright grant while most of the rest will feed into massive infrastructure development projects, restoring historical connectivity that had been closed following Partition in 1947, and power projects for Bangladesh's energy security.

The two prime ministers enjoy excellent personal rapport. If India today has one good friend standing steadfastly by its side in her often-troubled neighbourhood, it is Bangladesh. So, what could go wrong? Several things.

What could still inject jarring tones and notes into this narrative are matters of public perception and mismatched expectations, more on the Bangladesh side than India's perhaps (but that could well be a matter of hyper-sensitivity on the part of one and relative absence of it in the other!). For starters, the unresolved matter of Teesta waters sharing is galling for Bangladeshis across the political divide (a MoU was inked by the Water Resources Secretaries of India and Bangladesh in December 2010 but was never signed by the respective ministers because of obstruction by the government of West Bengal). Since September 2011, this matter has grown exponentially in public perception in Bangladesh and dominates the narrative, both loud and whispered, of naysayers in

Bangladesh sceptical of India's intentions and opposed to seeing any good coming from bilateral relations being strengthened further.

Bangladesh was also disappointed when India appeared to back away, after having accepted in 2010, from the principle of addressing questions of shared rivers on a basin-wide basis (that is, graduating from rigid bilateralism to including Nepal in talks on the Ganga and Bhutan in talks on the Brahmaputra).

The launching of the BBIN process has almost lurched to a halt with the BBIN MVA (Bangladesh-Bhutan-India-Nepal Motor Vehicles Agreement), inked in May 2015, still remaining unratified by Bhutan even though the other signatories have completed ratification, completed trial runs along identified routes and agreed to the SOPs to govern movement of passenger and cargo traffic. Result: the MVA is yet to be fully operationalised. There is another unintended consequence from this stalling of the BBIN MVA—increasingly, (and I grant perhaps irrationally) people are beginning to view BBIN MVA as a ploy engineered by India to ensure achievement of its long-cherished goal of transit and transshipment facilities through Bangladesh; now that it is happening bilaterally, mischievous people feel India is not really bothered if Bhutan stymies the process. Both Bangladesh and India would do well by working together to assuage whatever fears Bhutan may have and assure that while ratifying the quadrilateral agreement, it need not operationalise it until it feels reasonably comfortable doing so. Addressing the domestic ramifications of this within Bangladesh is of critical importance—the transit and transshipment facilities to India must be palpably demonstrated as being part of greater regional and trans-regional connectivity as envisaged first by UN ESCAP and supported by the ADB, the World Bank and numerous donor countries.

This stalling of the BBIN MVA has stymied progress on other ambitious goals set by the BBIN joint working group as far back as 2016: such as working towards integrated railways connectivity sub-regionally, an integrated sub-regional waterway, and energy and digital connectivity.

However, addressing issues related to common rivers as shared commons (basins) still appears a far cry because of perceived (and incomprehensible to Bangladeshis) reluctance on India's part. Similarly, India's long silence on

Bangladesh's desire to build a Ganga Barrage within Bangladesh has perplexed Bangladeshis. It has now, after years of internal debate within Bangladesh, been placed at the top of the agenda in Bangladesh's Delta Plan, an ambitious blueprint that the ruling party hopes will be its defining legacy (and pathway to continuation) in power in the future. At the very least, Bangladeshis, whether in or out of government, will hope there will be no foot-dragging by India.

In the meantime, a couple of other issues have catapulted to the fore in the last couple of years, and are likely to severely damage the fabric of bilateral relations if not addressed meaningfully, and quickly. Foremost among these is the problem of Rohingya refugees from Myanmar (over 1.1 million at last count, but trickle-in continues and numbers in camps have swelled by almost one lakh by new births in camps since September 2017) now guests, perforce, in Bangladesh.. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and the people of Bangladesh, not unmindful of their own previous crisis and India's generous treatment, opened their arms to give the traumatised Rohingyas refuge inside Bangladesh.

But India and China are both perceived as having stabbed Bangladesh in the back. Public perception of India and China's unhelpful stand continues to fester and grow, more so against India than China which has played its PR cards far more skilfully than India. India's seemingly knee-jerk response in favour of Myanmar (that militated against Bangladesh), reportedly in response to Myanmar's allegations of Islamist terrorists ARSA (Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army) attacking and killing Myanmar's police (which, some intelligence experts suspected, could well have been contrived and carried out by Myanmar's own agencies to justify their contemplated actions), was viewed by a broad swath of Bangladeshis as being Pavlovian in nature responding to key words "Islamist terrorists".

Over the last two years (since the Rohingya influx took place), frustration over Myanmar's flagrant obduracy and apparent continued support from China and India has deepened Bangladeshi resentment. This is particularly directed against India but there is some questioning China as well (though China's image in Bangladesh is better than India's). There is no TV channel or media outlet that does not feature a discussion on this subject on a continuing basis and the net fallout is toxic for Bangladesh-India relations.

The second issue is that of the NRC (National Registry of Citizens) conundrum in Assam—and some fairly incendiary remarks on illegal migrants (or termites, as unfortunately described by India’s Union home minister)—that has raised the decibel level in questioning Indian intentions towards Muslim Bengalis delisted as citizens by the NRC and speculation about their likely fate. From media reports (official clarification is elusive), of the 1.9 million people in Assam excluded from the NRC, about 10-12 lakhs are Hindu Bengalis, about 4-6 lakhs are reportedly Muslim Bengalis, about one lakh are Nepali-speaking people, and the remaining are of tribal origin (Bodos and others). Since the ruling BJP-led government’s official stance was that it would absorb and give citizenship to all Hindus originating from Afghanistan, Bangladesh and Pakistan, one may assume that Hindu Bengalis excluded from the Assam NRC will eventually be absorbed as citizens; but then what would happen to the non-Hindus?

The ramifications of this widening groundswell of public apprehension (that the NRC drive is mainly ethnic and more exactly against minority communities in Assam) were taken seriously enough by the government. Sheikh Hasina raised the matter personally with Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi in New York, reportedly for the first time. Despite soothing noises by Mr Modi, the sense of disquiet remains. However, reports that camps for interning the so-called illegal persons delisted from the NRC serve to fuel public perceptions and mistrust of Indian goals and intentions. One would do well to remember that the internment of the Japanese in camps by the US government during WW-II still rankles with the Japanese (and many Americans) today, seven and a half decades after the event.

Unfortunately, on top of the above, a development internal to India has deepened Bangladeshi disquiet and scepticism: the recent actions relating to revocation of Article 370 of the Indian Constitution pertaining to Jammu and Kashmir. Bangladeshis till now had paid scant attention to Kashmir. They had long felt, when part of Pakistan, that they were being used by Islamabad as a convenient cat’s paw. In 1971, Bangladeshis kicked in the teeth the infamous “two nation” thesis (of the thirties) as the basis for state formation and walked away from Pakistan to form their own nation state. But in drawing rooms and in media across Bangladesh, the abrogation of Article 370 has suddenly become a topic of heated discussion. Coming as it does in the wake of widely reported media stories of lynching of Muslims and the cow-slaughter ban issue across

several Indian states, Bangladeshi hearts are suddenly bleeding and many see India forcefully now validating the “two nation” thesis it had decried so robustly for well over 70 years.

“All politics is local” is an oft-repeated truism but in South Asia, with its bitter Partition legacy, the distinction between local and regional is blurred and very fuzzy. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina is unquestionably the most astute politician that Bangladesh has produced to date, a true inheritor of the mantle of her illustrious statesman-father, the late Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. Like her revered father, she has her finger (and instincts) honed to the pulse of her people. She cannot remain undisturbed by this latest development.

India and its leaders would do well to remember that despite Partition, some strands or remnants of the umbilical cord remain still attached to the main body. The neo-Westphalian states in South Asia that were birthed so violently in the post-colonial disorder that emerged after World War-II, while continuing to nurse uneasy to hostile relations with each other, still react to what is happening across each other’s borders for good or for bad. Such viscerally-driven relations, now apparently being fuelled by populist politics, are not good for any of these countries, or indeed for larger regional relations. Fledgling regional cooperation efforts now underway would very likely take a palpable hit from these worrisome dynamics.

Bangladesh’s Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, in a major statement delivered at the recently held India Economic Summit of the World Economic Forum in New Delhi on October 4, had clearly asserted that South Asia must shun “and move beyond the majority-minority mind-set”, and instead “celebrate South Asia’s regional, ethnic and linguistic diversity”. She emphasised: “Pluralism has been the strength of South Asia for centuries”, and was fundamental for ensuring better relations among the South Asian countries enabling them to remain “connected, always ready to make bridges with other regions for mutual benefits of the nations.” Through these words, she not only forcefully voiced her deep misgivings reflective of how many of her people feel, but effectively upped the ante in her country’s diplomatic interlocution with India.

There is no gainsaying, nor escaping, the fact that if the Indian state today is redefining itself as a Hindu Rashtra (ironically portraying itself as a mirror-image to Pakistani self-vision), it will end up losing its long-touted credentials as a champion of secularism. In the event, it may well trigger questions in Bangladeshi minds as to why the latter should continue to remain secular, as indeed secularism comprises one of the four pillars of the Bangladeshi state as asserted in its own Constitution. It is worth noting that a recent Bangladeshi media report suggests a significant increase in the Madrassas education enrolment of children, not just by poor parents but significantly by affluent parents as well. If people's opinion sways away from this hallowed principle, can the political leadership ignore that?

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## **BJP is Indianising Kashmir or leading to Kashmirisation of India.**

Pratap Bhanu Mehta

*The story of Indian democracy written in blood and betrayal. There are times in the history of a republic when it reduces itself to jackboot. Nothing more and nothing less. We are witnessing that moment in Kashmir. But this moment is also a dry run for the political desecration that may follow in the rest of India.*

The manner in which the BJP government has changed the status of Jammu and Kashmir by rendering Article 370 ineffective and bifurcating the state is revealing its true character. This is a state for which the only currency that matters is raw power. This is a state that recognises no constraints of law, liberty and morality. This is a state that will make a mockery of democracy and deliberation. This is a state whose psychological principle is fear. This is a state that will make ordinary citizens cannon fodder for its warped nationalist pretensions.

The narrative supporting a radical move on Kashmir is familiar. Article 35(a) was a discriminatory provision and had to go. Article 370 was not a mechanism for integration but a legal tool for separatism. The Indian state, despite the horrendous violence it has used in the past, has never had the guts to take a strong stand on Kashmir. The radicalisation within Kashmir warrants a crackdown. The treatment meted to Kashmiri Pandits has never been recompensed either through justice or retribution. The international climate is propitious. We can do what China is doing: Remake whole cultures, societies. We can take advantage of the fact that human rights are not even a hypocrisy left in the international system. We can show Pakistan and Taliban their place. Let us do away with our old pusillanimity. Now is the time to seize the moment. Settle this once and for all, if necessary with brute force.

There are kernels of truth to many of these arguments. The status quo was a double whammy: It did nothing to address the well-being of Kashmiris who have now endured two generations of what was effectively military occupation. And it increased the gulf between Kashmir and the rest of the nation. So some movement was inevitable. But the kernel of truth is being deployed with an armoury of evil. The solution being proposed is an annihilation of decency. The fact that these measures had to be done under stealth, with a tight security noose and informational blackout is a measure of the evil of the step taken. This is not the dawn of a new constitutional settlement, designed to elicit free allegiance. It is repression, plain and simple; reminiscent of the Reichstag or Chinese constitutional ideology that sees federalism as an obstacle to a strong state and homogenous culture.

Think of the proposal's broader ramifications. India has betrayed its own constitutional promises. India has many asymmetric federalism arrangements outside of Kashmir. This act potentially sets the precedent for invalidating all of them. How can we justify offering Nagaland asymmetric federalism but deny it to Kashmir? Its implication is that the government can unilaterally declare any existing state to be a Union Territory. This is a constitutional first. We are simply a union of Union Territories that happen to be a state at the discretion of the Centre.

Let us also not put too fine a point on this. Even if Article 370 were to be scrapped, the proposal to alter Jammu and Kashmir's status to Union Territory, even if temporarily, is designed to humiliate an already subjugated population. How dare a Muslim dominated state exist in India? Kashmir can now not even be trusted to be a state. The optics of this measure is not integration; it is humiliation, of a piece with subtle and unsubtle reminders to minorities of their place in India.

Let's take the argument that this pain is worth the price, if it actually solves the problem. But will it? There will be a sullen peace, militarily secured, that we will mistake for victory. The very army, behind whom every patriot now hides, will now potentially be put in even more harm's way: To be used more and more as the sole basis for keeping India together. And even if we concede to the tragic necessity of force, that force can work only in the context of a larger political and institutional framework that inspires free allegiance, not fear.

But even if Kashmir resigns to its fate, pummelled by military might, the prospect of radicalisation in the rest of the country cannot be ruled out. There are already incipient signs of that. The theatre of political violence will shift. In the context of the communally sensitive arc from UP to Bengal and in Kerala, India will seem more fragile.

For, fundamentally, what this change signals is that Indian democracy is failing. It is descending into majoritarianism, the brute power of the vote; it will no longer have the safety valves that allowed inclusion. The feckless abdication of the Opposition will only deepen the sense of alienation. There are no political avenues for protest left. Most of the so-called federal parties turned out to be more cowardly than anyone anticipated; the Congress can never stand for any convictions. Not a single one of us can take any constitutional protections for granted. Parliament is a notice board, not a debating forum.

*Let us see what the Supreme Court does, but if its recent track record is anything to go by, it will be more executive minded than the executive. Kashmir is not just about Kashmir: In the context of the UAPA, NRC, communalisation, Ayodhya, it is one more node in a pattern hurtling the Indian state towards a denouement where all of us feel unsafe. Not just Kashmiris, not just minorities, but anyone standing up for constitutional liberty.*

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# Fact Finding visit to Assam on the Updating of the NRC

## Fact Finding Report

### Summary

Between the 5th and 10th of November 2019, a nine person team comprising of members of Women against Sexual Violence and State repression (WSS) visited the state of Assam in order to understand the implications of updating the National Register of Citizens (NRC), particularly for the most marginalised people of Assam. The team travelled to the Barak Valley region, home to several Bengali Hindus and Bengali Muslims, to the Char and Chapori villages (the river islands and villages on the banks of the Brahmaputra), home to some of the most vulnerable groups of people – largely the landless *Miyah* Muslim peasants. The team also visited villages in the districts of Jorhat, Sivasagar and Hojai, home to those who fled erstwhile East Pakistan in 1964 and tea plantations on which migrant workers from Jharkhand and the Chhota Nagpur plateau toil. The team met with workers, peasants, activists, academics and members of civil society in all of these regions.

### **RATIONALE FOR THE VISIT**

The NRC came into being in 1951 with the first Census exercise in India and was made specifically for Assam to identify “illegal” immigrants or foreigners in the area. 1.9 million people of Assam were excluded in the final list declared on August 31, 2019. Seen together with the dominant narrative that demonizes certain social and religious identities and the proposed Citizenship Amendment Bill 2019, it reveals the dangerous ways in which such an exercise can be used to further the agenda of the Hindu right, serving to target particular communities in violent ways. It also points to a history of how the State chooses to count and categorise its people and therefore also how it chooses to exclude. Both the colonial and the post-colonial state have used this to periodically pit one community against another. While there is a wide spectrum

of scholarship and literature on the NRC that situates it historically while also seeking to analyse and critique the current exercise, much of this is directed at the problems of its implementation and assumes objective neutrality to its intent. However, under the current government which not only dedicatedly serves the interests of capital and the ruling class, but which also proudly relies on technocracy and continuously invokes a rabid religious nationalism to decide who is excluded, we are compelled to ask what an exercise to determine citizenship would mean for women, people of other marginal genders, religious minorities such as the Muslims, people of oppressed castes, and those rendered most vulnerable by the intersection of such identities. It is with this understanding that WSS planned its fact-finding visit.

## FINDINGS OF THE VISIT

Proving citizenship under the NRC relies largely on land, lineage, education and the availability of documents pertaining to these. In a patriarchal society, women in general, and women from marginal and oppressed communities in particular, have historically and traditionally been excluded from entitlements to land and access to education and have almost no documentation to prove their existence as citizens. In a caste ridden society, and also one characterised by extreme class inequality, access to the lettered world – especially of formal education – also means that most people from these communities find themselves in extremely precarious situations with respect to the necessary documentation. By, the process of updating the NRC became a conscious attempt at exclusion. The need to secure documents proved more urgent and also more expensive for the poorest and vulnerable, and thus the process of updating the NRC has consequences far beyond the challenges of temporarily grappling with bureaucracy.

- **Targeted Randomness and Conscious Exclusion:** Exclusion from the list had an apparent arbitrariness to it – for example, there were many cases where everyone in the family had made the list but one minor child had been left out; several others where a husband found himself on the list while the wife to whom he has been married to for over three decades did not; and others still where three siblings made the list while two others with the same documentation of lineage were rejected. This seeming randomness however had everything to do with the dominant narrative of the “outsider” and “illegal immigrant” that has been built over decades and granted almost

sacred sanction under the current political climate. It also largely depended on the attitude of the functionaries (at all levels) of the NRC towards language, gender, religion, caste and class. On the last date for filing objections, in a span of 12 hours there were as many as 2.5 lakh objections filed against the inclusion of names. Almost all the names against which objections were filed were names of Muslims and other marginalized communities. And almost all the objectors were unknown to those to whom they had objected against. We even met two 2-year-olds and one 9-year-old who had objections filed against them, while their parents had secured a place on the final list. This targeted randomness allowed the entire process to become one of conscious exclusion – on one hand, the burden of proving citizenship was placed entirely on people themselves and requirements were made stringent to the point of being almost unattainable. On the other, mechanisms were instituted which didn't allow any room for correcting errors in documents submitted – if there was a problem with the documents of the legacy person, or if one got wrongly linked to a legacy person having the same name in the village, it meant that revised documentation would not be accepted because one's legacy, once submitted is 'frozen'. Exclusion was further exacerbated by the fact that many NRC officials themselves had little knowledge about what constituted valid legacy and link documentation, and there were many cases where the same documents were accepted by one NRC officer but rejected by another.

- **Violation of Children's Rights:** On August 13 this year, the Supreme Court ruled that children born after December 3, 2004 were not eligible to be included in the NRC if any of the child's parents was a Doubtful voter, a declared foreigner or someone with cases pending before a Foreigners' Tribunal. This denial of citizenship to children born after 2004 is a clear violation of Article 7 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, to which India is supposedly committed. What's more, as per the Citizenship Act, anyone born in India before June 30, 1987 is in fact a citizen. In the process of updating the NRC, even such persons were required to submit legacy data to establish citizenship, which stands in violation of the provisions of this Act. Ironically, it is this very Act that is invoked to deny citizenship to children born after 2004. Further, the Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act, 2015 is applicable to all children, irrespective of whether their parents are declared foreigners or D-voters. Despite this, there is neither any legal provision that exempts children left

out of the NRC from standing trial in the tribunals nor any mechanisms to ensure that these children are provided the care and protection granted to them by this Act. Applications of children who do not have parents and/or are residing with distant relatives have not even been submitted.

- **Discrepancies in Names – a result of disregard, ignorance and unfamiliarity:** Minor discrepancies in names cost many a place on the list. Several people testified to the struggle of Hindu officials to get their names right while filling forms for voter IDs, panchayat certificates and the rest. Sometimes an additional suffix related to social identity like a *Munshi* randomly added by official decades ago became the price for exclusion. Although it is common practice for women who would sign off as *Khatun* to become *Begum* once they are married, this customary change in name caused many rejections. We even learnt of a case where someone working at one of the NRC Seva Kendras (NSKs) themselves filed an objection on the grounds that someone with a suffix of Hussain cannot be a blood brother to someone with a suffix of Ali, when this is in fact most possible. Similar mistakes were found with names of those belonging to Scheduled Castes and Tribes, thereby allowing cultural biases born of structural inequality that normalises discrimination against oppressed communities to serve as grounds to legally brand them foreigners.
  
- **Data and Security:** There has been complete opacity with regards to the security of the massive amounts of sensitive data the NRC process has generated. While the Supreme Court ordered that NRC authorities must enact a security regime akin to the one provided for the Aadhar scheme, it remains unclear what precise mechanisms make the private companies responsible for handling the reams of data accountable to the people of Assam. Questions pertaining to the ownership and use of data, and whether permission for use will be taken or not also remain unanswered. WIPRO, the company responsible for the system integration of the NRC project, has been taken to court by the office of the Labour Commissioner of Assam for violating the Contract Labour (Regulation & Abolition) Act of 1970 while operating the digital part of the NRC. Several data-operators employed by WIPRO alleged that they were being paid less than half the amount sanctioned by the government to them as salaries. How is it that a firm which blatantly indulges in illegal practice and rampant exploitation can be trusted with the private data of millions of Indian citizens?

- **Women Battle the Legacy of Patriarchy:** Since entitlements relating to land and lineage have historically been denied to them, the burden of producing documentation was that much harder for women. Legacies centred on birth-ties meant that women, even those who have been married for decades, were required to provide ‘legacy data’ from their paternal families. In Assam where women are often married off before the age of 18 and many don’t complete school (even as of 2001, female literacy in Assam was only around 50%) voter IDs and school certificates are also not common. The widespread practice of giving birth at home till very recently meant that documentation in the form of birth certificates too is rare. Marriage certificates are rarer still, creating a problem for women who have had to change their surnames after marriage to once again establish paternal legacy. It has been reported that not a single woman belonging to any other state in the country who moved to Assam after marriage, has been included in the register. Apart from documentation, the NRC made use of the patriarchy that characterises Assamese society to render the position of women all the more precarious. The inherent gender bias in the entire process is reflected in the fact that people were encouraged to state their paterilineal legacy even when their mother’s legacy met all the documentation requirements. Assumed to be incapable of defending their own citizenship, officials at hearing centres would only speak to the men accompanying women, making it near impossible for women to attend hearings without male relatives. Often, husband and wife were summoned for hearings at two completely different hearing centres on the exact same date. Women who have almost never been allowed to leave the house had to travel hundreds of kilometres alone or with their paternal families to attend hearings. Here, they were expected to use a language that is neither their own, nor one they were ever allowed to learn to read, and testify to a lineage that they have been disinherited from, only to secure a place on a family ‘tree’ that cements the patriarchal family all over again. There was a whispered fear in many homes, wondering if a place on the family tree would mean women could assert their legal right over family property. In some cases this fear meant families were hesitant to take responsibility of documentation and travel to hearing centres for daughters who had been married off. Those who do not fall within the purview of the institution of marriage and family – such as single women, widows, abandoned women and children and anyone who has asserted independence in terms of defining their gender or way of life – have an even slimmer chance of claiming citizenship. Members of the transgender community



remain almost entirely unlisted. The inherent preoccupation with homogenising the family has meant that those whose choices allow a refreshing diversity in social relations such as those who have had inter-caste or inter-faith marriages have also invariably suffered, in addition to the brutal violence they are subjected to by right-wing groups and caste-society.

- **Trauma, Indebtedness, Loss of Lives and Trust:** The process has had a deeply damaging impact on the people of Assam leading to many physical, mental and psychosomatic illnesses. The fear of being detained in camps, deported to unknown lands, separated from friends and family, and attacked for being branded as foreigners have come to define everyday life for many in Assam. Over 50 instances of suicides related to the NRC have been reported. There have also been reported deaths at hearing centres caused by extremely high levels of anxiety. There were also a few reported accidents of vehicles that were carrying scores of people to and from hearing centres that occurred in the rush to make it to final hearings. In one accident two sisters, one only 14, a student of class 8, and the other, her older sister and mother of two infants died on the spot. Several of their family members were seriously injured and critically ill. Many have still not regained mobility. In another accident, passengers were burnt by the hot tar on which their bus skid, resulting in many burn injuries of varied intensity. Those who suffered injuries had to spend huge sums of money on treatment. To add to injury, they were not even allowed a fresh date of hearing. Several people have had to sell almost all their belongings, pawn their meagre land holdings and borrow large sums of money just to get their documents in order and reach the many hearings they would be repeatedly called for. The whole exercise has created new cycles of indebtedness especially among the landless poor in the state. Due to anonymity and unaccountability of objector, people are suspicious of every other person, creating an atmosphere of paranoia. The expenses of the exercise then are not restricted to the millions spent on detention centres and hearings – the cost of it all can only be measured in the damage done to lives and severe economic losses. It must be recalled that it is in fact on the rubble of lives itself that the entire process was built – during the first pilot project in BARPETA, over 5000 people gathered to protest against the updating of the NRC on July 21, 2010, and were fired upon by the police. Four people were killed and over 50 injured. The pilot project was never completed, and yet, trampling over these corpses, the process found official sanction.

- **The Problem of Foreigner’s Tribunals (FT) and Detention Centres:** There is a complete lack of clarity as to the fate of those who have identified as foreigners or declared D-voters. They are expected to seek redress through Foreigners Tribunals which are only quasi-judicial bodies comprised of members whose qualifications have been relaxed to include lawyers who are 35-years old and above and have been registered with the Bar for a mere seven years, irrespective of their experience. Contracted for a period of a year, with little training and the unchecked power to regulate their own procedures, they are far from competent to take on the serious task of deciding the constitutional rights of citizenship. Once their order (which in many cases is *ex-parte*) renders a person stateless, as is usually the case, there are no appellate rights other than going through the expensive process of filing a writ petition in High Court. Several people against whom objections had been lodged often are completely unaware of the case made against them. We also met with people who have reference cases that have been slapped against them as far back as 2007, which they continue to try and fight without any access to defence, and while incurring costs far beyond their means, only to be deeply stigmatized. One of the women we met who are fighting such a case was even sent off to a detention centre a few days after we left because her lawyer couldn’t produce all her papers on time. At present there are very few experienced lawyers to appear for claim cases. Once in a Detention Centre, access to legal redress is nearly impossible.
- **Intimidation, Surveillance, and Targeting of Human Rights Defenders and Activists:** There has been a consistent persecution of persons who have raised a critical voice against the arbitrariness and violence of the NRC, both by right-wing groups and the State. Those helping people in these times of need have also been targeted. Registering of false cases, increased surveillance, frequent intimidation and spreading of misinformation with the intent to discredit these persons has become alarmingly commonplace. Activists also spoke of more serious but insidious harassment such as interference with their education and means of livelihood.

## CONCLUSIONS AND DEMANDS

The process of updating the NRC structurally reproduces and reinforces existing inequalities by demanding proof of citizenship in the form of documentation that have been systematically denied to certain groups of people

because of multiple processes of historical and social marginalisation and oppression. The chilling testimonies of particularly those belonging to the most marginal of communities stands testament to the fact that the updating of the NRC was inherently biased against them, and even more particularly, against the women of these communities. The refrain of being outsiders and the other is not unfamiliar to people of the Muslim community. In the current political context however, it immediately acquires very threatening undertones. With the updating of the NRC, this insecurity becomes even more acute, leaving millions to wonder whether or not they will be allowed to continue to live in a country they have called home ever since they were born or can remember. In collusion with the Citizenship (Amendment) Bill that the Centre is pushing for, (which seeks to amend the law to facilitate citizenship for non-Muslim refugees from India's neighbouring countries), and the global sanction of branding a whole community as terrorists, the discrimination against communities based on religion will gain legal sanction, and make Muslims in particular much more vulnerable to becoming stateless.

There is also a complete lack of vision in terms of what the fate of those excluded from the list is to be. Are people going to be indefinitely detained in camps? Where will those branded as foreigner be deported? What will happen to those who cannot bear the expenses of challenging exclusion through legal recourse? What about those who were unable to file their documents as a part of the process of updating the NRC? These are but a few of the myriad questions that remain unanswered by a government which remains unaccountable to its people. Despite the failure of the entire exercise – recognised by people across the political spectrum – and the havoc it has caused for the people of Assam, the Centre continues to push the idea of developing an NRC for all other states in the country. Recent remarks by the Home Minister in Parliament (which imply that it will also be redone in Assam) threateningly warn of the violence that awaits the people of the entire country, particularly those relegated to living on the margins.

Women against Sexual violence and State repression condemn the violence caused by the updating of the NRC in Assam and maintain that the State is accountable to the people of Assam to provide justice and make amends for the havoc it has wreaked.

**WSS demands:**

- That there is no exercise to create an NRC in any other state of India and no repetition of the process in Assam as stated by the Home Minister.
- That the proposed bill to amend the Citizenship Act – which clearly excludes Muslims and those without any professed faith – be withdrawn immediately.
- That people languishing in detention centres and jails on reference cases should be released immediately and all detention centres must be shut down.
- That compensation be given to families of all those who have lost people and to those who have suffered physical and mental trauma due to the process of updating the NRC.
- That action is taken against those who have filed or instigated the filing of false objections to inclusion of names on the NRC.
- Border police should be held responsible for any infiltration that happens and should be accountable to citizens and the law for filing reference cases against any individual.
- That there be strict adherence to the Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act, 2015 and special protection of children whose parents have been detained and those who themselves face the threat of detention.
- That no person be detained without a clear policy (including a time-frame) on the fate of those declared to be foreigners, and that such a policy is committed to preventing statelessness.
- Immediately stop the intimidation of Human Rights defenders and activists and quash all cases against them.
- That India becomes a signatory to both the UNCHR 1954 Convention Relating to the Status of Stateless Persons and the 1961 Convention on the Reduction of Stateless Persons.
- That justice be granted to all those who have suffered trauma, discrimination, exploitation and loss during the course of the updating of the NRC.

– That everyone who has been excluded from the NRC in Assam be in fact considered citizens and granted all citizenship rights until and unless the State itself can prove otherwise. The burden of proving citizenship should be on the State which claims to protect them, and not its people.

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## A Brandenburg Gate at Dera Baba Nanak

M. K. Bhadrakumar

*The Kartarpur complex and Gurdwara Darbar Sahib. The corridor connecting the Dera Baba Nanak shrine in India's Punjab with Gurdwara Darbar Sahib in Kartarpur in the Narowal district of Pakistan's Punjab province, will be thrown open to the pilgrims on November 9, 2019 with the two countries set to hold separate ceremonies to mark the occasion.*

A lot of bad blood has surfaced out of the cauterised wound of the India-Pakistan relationship in the wake of the Kartarpur Corridor inauguration today.

This wasn't how things were supposed to be when Atal Bihari Vajpayee and Nawaz Sharif first mooted the tantalising, visionary idea. Politicians are unable to handle what is indeed a historic development

This happens when small men grapple with momentous situations and struggle visibly to cope with it.

However, this is not the day to apportion blame but one can say with reasonable objectivity that Pakistan's handling of the run-up to this moment has been spectacular. By the yardstick of the subcontinent's abysmal efficiency quotient, Pakistan has done a marvellous job in preparing in record time the Kartarpur shrine and its premises and surroundings to create a grand setting for the Sikh pilgrims who are expected to pour in from all corners of the planet.

The fact that Pakistan showed the magnanimity to sequester the project from the debris falling on it from the Modi government's stunning decision to change the status of the J&K, or the continuing lockdown in the Valley, or the stench of violations of human rights or the adrenaline flow caused by incessant vituperative remarks by the Indian civilian and military leaders regarding the unfinished business of the liberation of Kashmiri territories under Pakistani control.

Modi government got caught in a dilemma when it became clear that Pakistan was determined to advance the Kartarpur project even overcoming the critical domestic opinion from certain quarters that this isn't the propitious time to show goodwill toward India.

If the hope was that the project would get derailed in the tortuous negotiations regarding its logistics, that was also not to be.

The ruling party BJP's political ambition to expand its footing in Punjab and among the Sikh community in particular is fundamentally the factor that exacerbates sensitivities on the Indian side.

It is an uphill struggle for the BJP to gain ascendancy in Punjab — although not as desperate, perhaps, as in Tamil Nadu. Certainly, BJP cannot afford to be seen blocking the Kartarpur project, as that would hurt Sikh sentiments and produce a backlash in Punjab.

Logically, Modi government could and should have gracefully inherited the Kartarpur project as the legacy of the Vajpayee government. But then, such positive or creative thinking has no space in the Modi government's strategy toward Pakistan or can be reconciled with the ideology of 'Hindu Rashtra'.

Equally, the national security state that India has become in the most recent years under Mod's watch abhors the very idea that Pakistan is throwing its doors and windows open to welcome Sikhs from India and all over the world.

Ironically, Pakistan has stolen from the Indian diplomatic toolbox a potent rope trick — bypassing the ruling elite in Delhi (and the Indian establishment) to reach out to Indian Sikhs directly and fostering people-to-people contacts.

Herein lies the paradox. In all my years in the Pakistani desk, we conspired to put Pakistan to shame by bypassing its establishment and fostering people-to-people relations with the friendly Pakistani people. And now when we are no longer interested in any form of contacts with Pakistan, Pakistan is driving us crazy by inviting Indians to its soil.

Make no mistake; Pakistan will put us to shame if we begin doubting the loyalty of our own fellow countrymen. Yet, we can also anticipate that today marks the launch of a new era of Pakistani diplomacy, which will keep the nerves of the Indians establishment and political leadership (in Delhi) taut.

The scope for Pakistan is virtually seamless in the period ahead to push back at the hostility of the Modi government through Gandhian methods.

I wonder if CPEC provides for projects in the tourism sector. Imagine: Chinese money and ingenuity making religious tourism a lucrative project for the Pakistani economy and Chinese businessmen, while also buttressing a self-financing Sino-Pak diplomatic enterprise to break the Berlin Wall with India. It can be the perfect antidote to ‘Quad’?

By a queer coincidence, without the Indian side apparently realising it, the date set for the inauguration of the Kartarpur Corridor (by PM Modi from the Indian side) also happens to be the 30th anniversary of the opening of the border at the Brandenburg Gate in Berlin and the ensuing fall of the Berlin Wall. The symbolism is profound.

History is packed with ‘accidents’. In the case of the Berlin Wall, this is how a German scholar recounted it last week:

“The sudden part began in the early evening of November 9, when the (East German) Politburo member Günter Schabowski misinterpreted a statement that he was supposed to read to a press conference, saying East Germans would be permitted to travel abroad “sofort, unverzüglich” — right away, immediately. Politicians in West Berlin and citizens in East Berlin decided to take him at his word. At around 11:30 pm, a senior (East German security service) Stasi officer at the Bornholmer Strasse crossing, faced with a huge crowd, told two sentries to open the main gate. The cheering masses swept through. The wall did not actually fall, of course. But thousands of people took pickaxes and hammers to it that very night. That was the beginning of the end of its physical presence.”

Of course, it is improbable that any of the BSF commanders or IB undercover officials posted at the ‘Brandenberg Gate’ at Dera Baba Nanak would take



history into his hands and mould it like paper pulp; or, Modi would make the awful mistake that Günter Schabowski made of underestimating the potency of what Germans call the 'zeitgeist' (the defining spirit or mood of a particular period of history); or, turbaned Sikhs in their thousands fired up by religiosity were to storm the sentries and pour into the Kartarpur Corridor.

But it is a tempting thought, nonetheless, for someone like me. Truly, it is on days such as today that one cannot but help reflecting on the theatre of the absurd that is the India-Pakistan relationship.

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# Whither the Bangladesh Nationalist Party

Q M Jalal Khan

***Whither the BNP (Bangladesh Nationalist Party)? Let's Still Identify with It, the Largest Political Party of Bangladesh, to Confront the Ongoing BAL (Bangladesh Awami League) Brutality on All Fronts***

“To be, or not to be, that is the question.” That is how the 30-yr old Prince Hamlet of Denmark is deeply and frightfully pondering over whether to continue to live a safe and long life (possibly a love and family life too) and thereby passively tolerate the wide-ranging wrongs in his country (“Something is rotten in the state of Denmark”) or to face them (“a sea of troubles”) and, in doing so, get killed. Off and on, he does confront the ills and evils facing the country, but he does so in a disorganized piecemeal, not targeting the root of evil—his formidably powerful uncle King Claudius. In the end, he rises to the occasion, finishes off the evil enemy as he also gets killed – heroically, tragically.

The BNP leadership, full of weak, frail, sick, and senile souls, is still thinking and cannot decide. The older they get (some are already in their 80s), the more indecisive they become about their political action program, the more in love with life they get passionately committed. The ensuing prospect of leaving this world makes them more attached and more clinging to it. Neither would they resign and retire from politics nor would they get engaged in action, if necessary, at the price of them missing in action. BNP General Secretary Mirza Fakhrul should be the first to go. He is a flop. Both in body language and tone of voice, he falls short. His useless statements fall flat, do not add up, and leave no impact.

One frustrated BNP sympathizer, who was a decorated freedom fighter once holding a high position in the government, comments about why the BNP is failing: “Where is the BNP? Is it time to read out statements? BNP has lost or is losing a golden opportunity to start a nationwide movement (Andolon). Is there a better ripe time than now? The Rohingya issue failed. Hasina failed at the UN. Hasina sold Bangladesh once again [after a series of slavish sell-outs already] to India during her recent visit to New Delhi. Abrar’s brutal murder [following his Facebook protest of Sheikh Hasina putting Bangladesh on sale to

India]. The corrupt and crooked vast Casino Empire. Unprecedented looting and plundering and smuggling. BDR massacre. Unheard of election rigging and cheating. EC's and Duduk's total failure. The whole country is ablaze in anger. BNP is virtually silent. Statements are useless. Sorry, whatever little sympathy I had for the party is fading. If I were in politics, I would have initiated a movement against today's BNP. I would have burnt its Statement House. Sorry, President Ziaur Rahman. We failed you, sir. Miserably!"

He continues: "They just needed to go to the street. The rest would have joined instantly. If the Gopalis tried to terrorize this time, I think the people would have overwhelmed them. The iron was hot, but the BNP/opposition failed to hit. Let them continue their Mujra. We have been talking about the reforms and leadership changes in the BNP for years. Nothing happened. And nothing is expected to happen, at least not in any near future. The way I see it, the 17 Crore people will have to relax and enjoy the rape as long as Hasina is in the helm, and India keeps backing her. That is the price people have to pay for Hasina to hold on to her seat illegally, since 2009. That is the tragedy!"

As one can see, taking into account many other comments by the same sympathizer on many occasions for a long time, he has a great respect for President Zia and would eloquently praise him for his achievements and accomplishments, including his declaration of independence, his fighting for it in the front line of action in 1971 (which the Sheikh family never did), his upholding of the ideals of the liberation war (national sovereignty, rule of law, social justice, transparency, accountability, etc.), his introduction of multiparty democracy, his dealing with other countries on foreign policy issues with statesmanlike vision, wisdom, and integrity, and, above all, his honesty and dignity.

The same sympathizer would also have a deep admiration and deep sorrow for the sufferings of the great and glorious and phenomenally popular Begum Khaleda Zia, who, in her old age, is counting her days in a dark lonely prison cell. Yes, I also cannot sleep thinking of her past nation-building contribution and her present Hasina-inflicted inhuman plight for no fault of hers. The same sympathizer, as I am, is full of scathing criticism of Mujib and Hasina and their Awami League unleashing a beastly culture of impunity, oppression, and corruption on the nation for years.

Yet, the same like-minded friend would hesitate to “identify” with the BNP and give the impression (or boldly profess) that he is pro-BNP. I don’t see any difference between one’s praising the party leaders all through without exception and one’s siding/identifying with that party. All parties, along with their collective leadership, have their dodging drawbacks and doldrums as all individuals do. That does not mean one cannot identify himself as a supporter of this or that party, especially when a party is in deep trouble due to Awami-imposed terror and tyranny and, therefore, is in need of our full support and sympathy. Don’t many Awamis (except the stone-hearted Hasina) have certain misgivings about their party too? Indeed they do, but they are all glued and ganged together, like a pack of wolves, in identifying with the Awami League, primarily because it has managed to stay in power by force and guile that has enabled it to let “milk and honey” flow to its supporters.

Sure, the opposition BNP should have done better, definitely much better. It has utterly failed under the weakest leadership it has since it was founded in the late seventies by President Zia. Maybe, it should have even risked the lives of an indefinite number (say, in dozens?) to free the nation from the clutches of Hasina and her Hindu Gopal-dominated heavily armed police (along with RAB too), who are voluptuously “carnivorous” and “omnivorous” in terms of their wholesale corruption and criminal oppression of the BNP, from top to bottom.

Logically, therefore, in the present fascist police and fantastically corrupt state (which Bangladesh never was until 2009 onwards), doubly locked by getting “Sikkimized” and “Hinduized” by India, the BNP cannot be expected to do any better. It is never easy to do any movement when the country is under the firm grip of the vast network of an organized police force guarding every nook and corner to keep the BNP under their boots and bullets. They’re obsessed with subjugating the BNP under their close watch and closer scrutiny with a horribly authoritarian ruler at the helm—a ruler who is at the same time playing a mew-mew lackey to India to continue her hold onto power and pleasing and placating her party men with billions of “black cat” big bucks.

Had the country remained a reasonably democratic state since 2009 with enough space for dissent and an acceptable level playing field for all, the situation would have been different. But, unfortunately, there prevails a state of cut-throat police repression under the one-person and one-party rule of Sheikh Hasina whose destructive rule continues under the direct tutelage of Narendra

Modi of Gujarat—a hater and persecutor of Muslims. While Hasina plays a docile and domesticated role to Modi for his blessings (as if she is in a kneeling and subservient relationship with her Indian *pirs* and gurus, or the relationship of a dominating husband in complete control of his submissive and subdued wife, as suggested by her unimpressive and lacklustre foreign minister), she is, however, a Mugabe, a Bashar al-Assad, a Gaddafi, a Maduro, a Saddam, or a Central Asian dictator at home.

That's why even when the fantastically popular Khaleda was out until about two years ago, nothing happened. That's why when she was barricaded by Hasina Gopalis' sand-and-cement trucks, again and again, nothing happened. That's why when the patriotically uncompromising Khaleda was ousted from her cantonment home, nothing happened. That's why when she called on the people to come out and join the Hefajote gathering at the Shapla Square, nobody did. That's why when she was continuously going to Hasina's kangaroo court to attend the false and fake and phony hearings, nothing happened. When nothing happened then, what can happen now that she is rotting and dying inside a dark cell? Nothing. When there was a brutal nationally and internationally conspired massacre of BDR army officers in early 2009, nothing happened. The fellow military sat idle without a trigger.

Different forms of massive election cheating took place in 2014 and 2018, but nothing happened. Wild corruption in every sector, nothing is happening. Unemployment of the locals is staggeringly high; still, nothing is happening. Over a million of illegal Indian workers and officers in the country, nothing is happening. Hindu minority is taking over the Muslim majority Bangladesh; nothing is happening. Endless rapes, murders, abductions, and disappearances, but nothing is happening. Freedom of expression is nil; nothing is happening. People are either frightened in Hasina's police state with dozens of fake lawsuits against everybody in the opposition and thousands are behind bars, or they are happy with whatever food is available to them, regardless of how contaminated it is, be they in slums or posh neighbourhoods.

Wasn't the Awami League silent when their leader Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was assassinated on 15 August 1975? Wasn't it silent when General Ershad rehabilitated the 15 August coup leaders by letting them find a seat in the Parliament under the banner of the short-lived Freedom Party? Following the joint Awami-BNP movement against Ershad and his ouster, there were peaceful

transitions of power for three terms. Since Sheikh Hasina got back in 2009 with the Indian engineered and the military manipulated the election, there has been a demise of the acceptable political process and a rise of dictatorship and neo-fascism with the opposition eliminated. Her Indian-sponsored iron-fist authoritarianism continues, getting harder and harder. She took back all those who celebrated her father's assassination (Inu, Motia, Menon), but nobody revolted against her. Her party men have never challenged her connections with many Rajakar families. All of them are morally and ethically bankrupt but financially fat. They got no scruple of conscience in identifying with Hasina-led Awami League, probably the worst in the history of Bangladesh.

The way I see is that it is not easy to face arms, jail, and *zulum*(state of persecution and oppression and discrimination) from within home. Small pockets of suppression may be encountered, but not the widespread repression in which the party and the police and the judiciary and the administration are the same, interchangeable with each other, and proxy of each other. In the present circumstances of anti-people and opposition–devouring tails and tentacles all over, there is no way out without some divine intervention or otherwise, just as there was no way out without similar intervention in 1975. Identification of the hesitant BNP supporters and sympathizers with the party, out of power for a long time, would then be easier and more forthcoming than now. Once either in power or at least free to engage in political action programs without the Hindu-dominated Hasina police bars and barriers, the BNP leadership would hopefully be stronger and more decisive too in launching movement to topple the tyrannical Hasina regime.

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# **Kashmir's New Status: Why the West Turns a Blind Eye to Democracy Deficit in India**

Brian Cloughley

On August 23 the *New York Times* reported that the Indian Ministry of External Affairs “won’t say why foreign journalists continue to be blocked from setting foot in Kashmir” but managed to obtain a compelling first-hand account of one of the thousands of arrests by the authorities. In this instance “Asifa Mubeen was woken up by the sound of barking dogs as policemen began pouring into her yard. Her husband, Mubeen Shah, a wealthy Kashmiri merchant, stepped out onto their bedroom balcony in the night air. The police shouted that he was under arrest. When he asked to see a warrant, his wife said, the police told him there wouldn’t be one. ‘This is different,’ they said. ‘We have orders.’ It was the start of one of the biggest mass arrests of civilian leaders in decades carried out by India, a close American partner that bills itself as one of the world’s leading democracies...”

The appalling situation in Indian-administered Kashmir has been created by Prime Minister Narendra Modi who announced on August 5 that he was annulling Article 370 of India’s Constitution, which since 1949 has given the territory (called a State by India) virtual self-government. It had its own Constitution and the most important thing was that the special status of the region allowed it to adhere to the ancient law prohibiting outsiders from buying land. The central government could not overrule the law — but with Modi’s repeal of Article 370 there is now direct rule by Delhi.

This means that the people of the territory have no say whatever in their own governance. It has also meant, thus far, the arrest and detention of some 4,000 people under the Public Safety Act which allows the authorities to jail anyone for up to two years without charge. That isn’t exactly democratic — and it is intriguing to think about how Donald Trump would regard such a law, were he aware of it.

Deficiency of democracy doesn't stop there, because the Armed Forces Special Powers Act "grants the armed forces the power to shoot to kill in law enforcement situations, to arrest without warrant, and to detain people without time limits. The law forbids prosecution of soldiers without approval from the central government, which is rarely granted, giving them effective immunity for serious human rights abuses."

The Public Safety and Special Powers Acts are in full swing in Indian-administered Kashmir, and the population is in effect under military occupation authorised by Modi's ultra-right wing government in Delhi. It is, to all intents, occupied territory whose inhabitants have no say whatever in their own governance. (There were supposed to be elections this year, but with the invalidation of Article 370 these can no longer take place. It has all been carefully thought through.)

And the leaders of the US and Britain, these usually eloquent supporters of freedom for the peoples of the world, have made no critical statements about the mass arrests or cancellation of elections or total closure of means of communication, and they ignore the fact that India's Constitution "explicitly declares that all citizens shall have the right to freedom of speech and expression [Article 19(1)(a)]."

The *New York Times* managed to ascertain that in Kashmir, the thousands of detainees "have not been able to communicate with their families or meet with lawyers. Their whereabouts remain unknown. Most were taken in the middle of the night, witnesses said." This smacks of dictatorship, for it is undeniable that detention and incarceration without trial is totalitarian rather than democratic.

It is barely credible that "Among the people who were rounded up were Mian Qayoom, president of the Jammu and Kashmir High Court Bar Association; Mohammed Yasin Khan, chairman of the Kashmir Economic Alliance; Raja Muzaffar Bhat, an anticorruption crusader; Fayaz Ahmed Mir, a tractor driver and Arabic scholar; and Mehbooba Mufti, the first woman elected as Kashmir's chief minister. Shah Faesal, another politician, was arrested at New Delhi's international airport, bags checked, boarding pass in hand, heading for a fellowship at Harvard. Several prominent state politicians have also been put under house arrest; they told Indian news outlets they had been ordered not to engage in any 'political activity'."



But there hasn't been a peep of protest from Britain's Boris Johnson, he who showed solidarity with the protestors in Hong Kong by declaring "I do support them and I will happily speak up for them and back them every inch of the way."

There hasn't been a squeak of remonstrance from Washington, either, where Trump's Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo, announced that the rule of President Maduro "is undemocratic to the core" and Trump committed his country to "stand with... all Venezuelans who seek to restore democracy and the rule of law."

If Johnson and Trump are so supportive of democracy, why do they not protest about mass arrests and detentions and cancellation of democratic elections in Indian-administered Kashmir? Why do they not take Modi to task for his excesses? It was recorded on August 23 that in Indian-administered Kashmir, "Data obtained by Reuters showed 152 people reported to Srinagar's Sher-i-Kashmir Institute of Medical Sciences and Shri Maharaj Hari Singh with injuries from pellet shots and tear gas fire between Aug 5 and Aug 21." It is regrettable that Trump and Johnson ignored the fact that on August 22 "UN human rights experts today called on the Government of India to end the crackdown on freedom of expression, access to information and peaceful protests imposed in Indian-Administered Kashmir this month." It was also stated by the UN experts, headed by Special Rapporteurs David Kaye, that "The shutdown of the internet and telecommunication networks, without justification from the Government, are inconsistent with the fundamental norms of necessity and proportionality. The blackout is a form of collective punishment of the people of Jammu and Kashmir, without even a pretext of a precipitating offence."

The absence of any criticism by Trump and Johnson of the military rule excesses in Indian-administered Kashmir will encourage Modi and his far-right nationalist administration to extend their racist grip throughout India. Since Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party came to power in 2014 there has been a most marked increase in officially-endorsed communal violence, mainly against Muslims but also involving other minority groups. These outbreaks of Hindu-supremacy barbarity are sponsored largely by a militant organisation called the Bajrang Dal which as noted in the *New Yorker* "has either been banned or has lurked at the margins of Indian society. But [since 2014] the militant group has

been legitimized and grown exponentially more powerful. In the past seven years, according to Factchecker, an organization that tracks hate crimes, there have been a hundred and sixty-eight attacks by Hindu extremists, in the name of protecting cows, against Muslims and other religious minorities.”

Indian democracy is under grave threat from racist Hindu supremacists, and the *New York Times* rightly considers it disquieting that Modi “seems intent on digging in, and he has the Indian public firmly behind him. Many Indians see Kashmir as an integral part of India, and this move has stirred up jingoist feelings. Indian news channels have referred to the detainees being flown out of Kashmir as ‘Pakistani terrorists’ or ‘separatist leaders,’ toeing the government line.”

The most appalling thing is that Modi’s India appears intent on eradicating Muslims and that the vast majority of Hindus are right behind him. In order for him to succeed, there has to be destruction of democracy — and that’s exactly what is happening.

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# **New US study warns: India-Pakistan Nuclear war can kill over 125 million people**

Abdus Sattar Ghazali

Amid rising tension over Kashmir between the two nuclear neighbors, India and Pakistan, a new US study examines how such a hypothetical future nuclear conflict would have consequences that could ripple across the globe.

A nuclear war between India and Pakistan could, over the span of less than a week, kill 50 to 125 million people that are more than the death toll during the six years of World War II, according to the research by Colorado University Boulder and Rutgers University.

The study published Wednesday said if India uses 100 strategic weapons to attack urban centres and Pakistan uses 150, fatalities could reach 50 to 125 million people, and nuclear-ignited fires could release 16 to 36 Tg of black carbon in smoke, depending on yield.

“The smoke will rise into the upper troposphere, be self-lofted into the stratosphere, and spread globally within weeks. Surface sunlight will decline by 20 to 35%, cooling the global surface by 2° to 5°C and reducing precipitation by 15 to 30%, with larger regional impacts. Recovery takes more than 10 years. Net primary productivity declines 15 to 30% on land and 5 to 15% in oceans threatening mass starvation and additional worldwide collateral fatalities,” the study added.

Rapidly expanding nuclear arsenals in Pakistan and India portend regional and global catastrophe, the study warned and added: Pakistan and India may have 400 to 500 nuclear weapons by 2025 with yields from tested 12- to 45-kt values to a few hundred kilotons.

The picture is grim. That level of warfare wouldn’t just kill millions of people locally, said CU Boulder’s Brian Toon, who led the research published in the journal *Science Advances*.

Here are excerpts of the US study conducted by ten experts:

Neither Pakistan nor India is likely to initiate a nuclear conflict without substantial provocation. India has declared a policy of no first use of nuclear weapons, except in response to an attack with biological or chemical weapons.

Pakistan has declared that it would only use nuclear weapons if it could not stop an invasion by conventional means or if it were attacked by nuclear weapons. Unfortunately, the two countries have had four conventional wars (1947, 1965, 1971, and 1999) and many skirmishes with substantial loss of life since the partition of British India in 1947. Therefore, the possibility of conventional war becoming nuclear is of concern.

### **Chinese factor**

India has one of the largest conventional militaries in the world, with about 1.4 million active duty personnel. India has not deployed tactical nuclear weapons. Indian nuclear strategy requires that a significant number of high-yield bombs be held back in case China joins a war on the side of Pakistan. Because Pakistan is a small country with only about 60 cities with more than 100,000 people, India would not need all of its 250 weapons to destroy Pakistan's cities.

We assume that India will keep 100 nuclear weapons in its arsenal to deter China from entering the war. Chinese involvement would greatly amplify the destruction discussed below. As China expands its presence in Pakistan as part of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, which is an element of China's broader "Belt and Road Initiative," the odds of a Pakistani-Indian war spreading to China would appear to be increasing.

### **Urban targets**

Of India's 150 weapons that can be used against Pakistan, we assume that about 15% will fail. In this case, failure is primarily due to the weapons not being delivered or failing to explode. Most urban targets in Pakistan are so large that precise targeting is not needed to hit them. Therefore, our scenario suggests 125 weapons actually exploding.

We further assume that there are 25 targets in Pakistan that are isolated military bases or industrial facilities located in regions with low populations and little

combustible material. We do not include these in computing fatalities or environmental damage. Therefore, we assume that India has 100 strategic nuclear weapons to use on urban counter-value targets or military counterforce targets that are located within urban areas, such as military bases, industrial facilities, oil refineries, nuclear weapons facilities, and airports.

Pakistan also has one of the largest militaries in the world, with about half as many active duty personnel as India has. We assume that, in 2025, Pakistan will have 50 tactical weapons with yields of 5 kt to be used against an invading Indian army.

We assume that 20% of these will fail or be overrun by the Indian Army. Many of these tactical weapons might be used in sparsely populated areas with little flammable material. Accordingly, we only consider the remaining 200 strategic weapons when computing fatalities or smoke created from fires.

Of these 200 strategic weapons, we assume that 15% will fail to be delivered to the target but that the remaining 170 will be detonated over their targets. We further assume that 20 of these explosions will be over isolated military, nuclear, or industrial areas. The balance, 150 weapons, will thus be used against India's urban counter-value targets and military counterforce targets located within urban areas."

### **War scenarios simulation**

A crisis simulation exercise in Sri Lanka during 2013 organized by the U.S. Naval Postgraduate School and involving retired senior military and civilian analysts from India and Pakistan found that "a limited war in South Asia will escalate rapidly into a full war with a high potential for nuclear exchange". In our scenario, with the Indian government having been severely damaged, the Indian Army brings a number of tanks to the border and crosses into Pakistan and also crosses the Line of Control in Kashmir.

On day 1 of the nuclear conflict, Pakistan uses 10 tactical atomic bombs with 5-kt yield inside its own borders with low air bursts against the Indian tanks.

The conflict continues on day 2 when Pakistan uses another 15 tactical weapons with 5-kt yield on the battlefield, whereas India detonates two air bursts against the Pakistani garrison in Bahawalpur and deploys 18 other weapons to attack

Pakistani airfields and nuclear weapons depots, partially degrading Pakistani retaliatory capabilities.

Nevertheless, on day 3, Pakistan responds with a barrage of nuclear ballistic and cruise missiles on garrisons, weapon depots, naval bases, and airfields in 30 locations in Indian cities (30 air bursts with 15- to 100-kt yield each) plus another 15 tactical bursts with 5-kt yield. India also uses 10 strategic weapons against Pakistani military bases on day 3. Because of panic, anger, miscommunication, and protocols, escalation cannot be stopped now.

On days 4 to 7, cities in India are hit with 120 strategic weapons, and those in Pakistan are struck with 70 air bursts with 15- to 100-kt yield. In total, Pakistan's urban areas are hit with 100 nuclear weapons using airbursts, and India's urban areas are hit with 150 nuclear weapons using airbursts. In addition, Pakistan has used 40 tactical nuclear weapons successfully and 20 strategic weapons successfully on targets not in urban areas, whereas India has used 25 strategic weapons successfully on targets not in urban areas.

Even one nuclear weapon explosion in a city can do a great deal of damage. For example, in the most densely populated urban area in Pakistan, a 15-kt airburst at the optimum height to maximize blast damage could kill about 700,000 people and injure another 300,000. With a 100-kt airburst over the same region, roughly 2 million fatalities and an additional 1.5 million nonfatal casualties could occur. Similar numbers would result for nuclear explosions over large Indian cities.

### **World War II casualties**

During WWII, it is estimated that about 50 million people were killed, not considering those who died from disease and starvation over 6 years. Because of the dense populations of cities in Pakistan and India, even a war with 15-kt weapons could lead to fatalities approximately equal to those worldwide in WWII and a war with 100-kt weapons could directly kill about 2.5 times as many as died worldwide in WWII, and in this nuclear war, the fatalities could occur in a single week.

The world's annual death rate from all causes is about 56 million people per year. Therefore, a war between India and Pakistan in our scenario with 15-kt weapons could kill the same number of people in a week as would die naturally

worldwide in a year, effectively increasing the immediate global death rate by a factor of 50. A regional catastrophe would occur if India and Pakistan were to engage in a full-scale nuclear war with their expanding arsenals.

India would suffer two to three times more fatalities and casualties than Pakistan because, in our scenario, Pakistan uses more weapons than India and because India has a much larger population and more densely populated cities. However, as a percentage of the urban population, Pakistan's losses would be about twice those of India. In general the fatalities and casualties increase rapidly even up to the 250th explosion due to the high population in India, whereas the rate of increase for Pakistan is much lower even for the 50th explosion.

### **Conclusion**

India and Pakistan may be repeating the unfortunate example set by the United States and Russia during the "cold war" era: that is, building destructive nuclear forces far out of proportion to their role in deterrence.... Compounding the devastation brought upon their own countries, decisions by Indian and Pakistani military leaders and politicians to use nuclear weapons could severely affect every other nation on Earth.

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## Will Taj Mahal meet the same fate as Babri Masjid?

Shamsul Islam

*One of the greatest wonders of the World and the only one in India, Taj Mahal, has become the newest target of the Hindutva killer/demolition squad. It was ordered to be built by Mughal king Shahab-ud-din Muhammad Khurram known as Shahjahan (1592-1666) in the memory of his wife, Mumtaz Mahal. It is interesting to note that it was named as Taj Mahal (Crown of the Palace) despite being a mausoleum which took 20 years to be built.*

A Hindutva icon from western UP, Sangeet Som after inaugurating a statue of 8th-century Hindu king Anangpal Singh Tomar at Sisauli village near Meerut (October 16, 2017) was once again on in top gear while denigrating Muslims and Islam. However, it was not from his earlier repository of hate like the cow, love jihad, Ghar Wapsi etc. etc. On this occasion, he chose a new theme. It was Taj Mahal being denigrated as part of Hindutva polarizing agenda.

According to leading English daily in this speech Som told the gathering: “Many people were pained to see that the Taj Mahal had been removed from the list of historical places, what history, history of which place, which history. The person who made Taj Mahal [Shahjahan] imprisoned his father, he targeted the Hindus of Uttar Pradesh and India. If these people still find a place in history, then it is very unfortunate and I guarantee that history will be changed.”

Som continuing his sermon said “In the past few years, there have been attempts to distort history in India and Uttar Pradesh. Today, the governments of India and UP are working to bring that history on the correct path, from the history of Ram to Krishna, Maharana Pratap to Shivaji Rao, they are trying to incorporate them in the books. And the blots which are in our books, be it of Akbar, Aurangzeb, Babur, the government is working to remove them from history.”

This sermon on history was hilarious so far as facts were concerned. One could see the clear imprint of RSS ‘boudhik’ training which produces such



intellectuals. Shahjahan becomes Aurangzeb! Shah Jahan, who got Taj Mahal built in the memory of his wife Mumtaz Mahal, was told to be the one who jailed his father. On the contrary, it was Shahjahan who was imprisoned by his son Aurangzeb until former's death. But so far as the aim of communal polarization was concerned there was no confusion and mistake.

Som, a beloved of the RSS, is a seasoned religious bigot. He was implicated in his provocative statements in the Muzaffarnagar riots of 2013 that claimed at least 60 lives and displaced 50,000 people. The Justice Vishnu Sahai Commission report on Muzaffarnagar riots named him among the people responsible for inciting the riots. In the last UP assembly elections, he was also charged with instigating communal hatred after his supporters screened a documentary that allegedly polarized voters. This RSS/BJP leader was also accused of stoking communal tensions in Dadri's Bisada village after the 2015 mob lynching of Mohammed Ikhlq.

For such prominent services to the cause of Hindutva politics, he was felicitated with awards like Hindu Hriday Samrat and Mahathakur Sangharsh Veer by 'Hindu' organizations. His prominence in the Hindutva hierarchy can be gauged by the fact that instead of being behind bars, he has been provided Z-category security by the RSS/BJP government.

Som in his speech was condemning those historians and activists who had criticized the absence of iconic Taj Mahal, a UNESCO World Heritage Site from the list of historical monuments in the UP Government tourism booklet released a month ago. Taj Mahal was dropped from the list despite the fact that as per a reply of the then Union Tourism and Culture Minister Mahesh Sharma in the Lok Sabha (July 19, 2016), it had earned a revenue of Rs 75 Crore in three years of which only Rs 11 Crores had been spent on its maintenance and other important environmental development of the Taj Mahal during the same period.

It is true that a section of the BJP leaders did half-heartedly express difference with Som's opinion taking care of the fact that their response did not hurt the perpetrator of hate. The UP tourism minister Rita Bahuguna Joshi made it clear that the Taj was part of our heritage. But when asked directly about Som's denigration instead of condemning the hate campaign against the Taj Mahal she

simply said, “Well, every individual is free to make an opinion but as far as the government is concerned Taj is very much on our priority list.”

There is no doubt that Som’s diatribe was neither an exception nor an aberration. He was religiously expressing the RSS/BJP point of view on the monument. Last June chief minister Yogi Adityanath had no hesitation in declaring that He said that “the Ramayana and the Gita represent Indian culture and not the Taj Mahal.” He went on to emphasise that the ivory-white marble mausoleum didn’t represent “Indian culture”.

How the RSS/BJP intends to use the issue of Taj Mahal for its polarizing agenda can be known by the statement of a seasoned RSS/BJP leader, Vinay Katiyar, BJP Rajya Sabha MP which he made two days after Som’s venom-spitting against Taj Mahal. According to him, Taj Mahal was built by Mughal emperor Shahjahan after demolishing a Hindu temple dedicated to Shiva called Tejomahal.

It was no different with the BJP national spokesperson and a senior RSS cadre, G V L Rao, who though expressed difference with Som. But by treating Taj Mahal as a heritage of a killer and the barbaric Islamic rule as Som had done, had no hesitation in declaring that “As a party, we do not have a view on any individual monuments. But, broadly speaking, the period of Islamic rule — around 800 years — was a period of extreme exploitation, insane barbarism and unprecedented intolerance to the other faith. If anyone tries to gloss over these facts, it will be actually distorting history. It is well documented by historians of world stature that Muslim invasion and its rule represented the most oppressive and regressive world over”.

Some of the political commentators are of the view that the issue of Taj Mahal’s ‘barbaric Islamic’ heritage is being hyped keeping in view the coming assembly elections, especially in Gujarat. The RSS/BJP feel that Hindus of Gujarat not solidly backing it there, this issue will help in consolidating Hindu vote-bank there. It may be partly true but the danger of Hindutva mischief with Taj Mahal cannot be underestimated.

We should not forget that that before the murder of Father of the Nation, Gandhi ji (January 30, 1948), a strident campaign of hatred was launched against him by the Hindutva gang. This hate propaganda resulted in his

assassination was underscored by none other than Sardar Patel led home ministry which went on to record that “It was not necessary to spread poison in order to enthuse the Hindus and organize for their protection. As a final result of the poison, the country had to suffer the sacrifice of the invaluable life of Gandhi ji”.

It was no different when Babri mosque’s demolition was planned and executed during 1990-92. It is well-documented how all Muslims became haram-zade or Babar ki aulad (children of Babar) posing a serious danger to Ram-zade (children of Ram). The hatred campaign against Muslims/Islam was carried on for almost two years and became the most pervasive sentiment among Hindus with a trail of a bloodbath of Muslims in different parts of the country. Riding on it the Hindutva juggernaut led by RSS was able to demolish Ayodhya mosque on December 6, 1992, despite the commitment to the Parliament, PM and Supreme Court that mosque would not be harmed.

The RSS demolition squad must tell us that why despite “the period of Islamic rule — around 800 years — was a period of extreme exploitation, insane barbarism and unprecedented intolerance to the other faith”, the population of Muslims never exceeded 25% of the population and Hindu population never decreased below 75%. Savarkar says that after Humayun no Mughal king of India was from a Muslim mother. ‘800 years of Muslim rule’ kept Muslims pauperized whereas wealth, properties remained with the Hindus. Was it due to the fact that high Caste elite of Hindus joined hands with these ‘Muslims’ rulers? There could be no other reason for the continuation of this insane barbaric, extreme exploitation and unprecedented intolerance Islamic rule for 800 years.

There is real danger to the safety and existence of Taj Mahal. The rulers having allegiance to RSS cannot be trusted despite all kinds of assurances. India has not forgotten how Hindutva bandwagon especially RSS cheated and reneged on the Babri mosque. There can be 3 kinds of immediate dangers to Taj Mahal.

1. Mobs are allowed to damage/destroy Taj Mahal for being a symbol of Islamic repressive rule as was done on December 6, 1992, or in 2006-7 in Kandhmal against Churches and seminaries of anti-national Christians. It may be noted that many ‘Hindu’ historians/intellectuals have been claiming that Taj Mahal was a temple.

2. Taj Mahal is damaged/destroyed by forming a fake Islamist group or conspiring with some Islamo-fascist group claiming that mausoleum-like Taj Mahal is not allowed in Islam. It may be noted here that RSS relies on conspiracies for achieving its objects. Dr Rajendra Prasad who rose to be the first President of the Indian Republic warned even first home minister of India, Sardar Patel on this. In a letter to Sardar Patel (March 14, 1948) he wrote: "I am told that RSS people have a plan for creating trouble. They have got a number of men dressed as Muslims and looking like Muslims who are to create trouble for the Hindus by attacking them and thus inciting the Hindus. Similarly, there will be some Hindus among them who will attack Muslims and thus incite Muslims. The result of this kind of trouble amongst the Hindus and Muslims will be to create a conflagration."
3. Even if Taj Mahal is not demolished its beauty and gorgeousness for which the Taj Mahal is known can be damaged permanently by the conspiratorial use of sub-standard and harmful chemicals for cleaning. This can be done through experts/consultants committed to the cleansing of India of 'Islamic' heritage.

In order to check and counter any such attempt the highest court of justice in India, the Supreme Court, must take immediate charge of the World Heritage Site as governments both at the Central level as well as UP level are committed to what creatures like Som, GL Rao and Vinay Katiyar have been propagating. The UNO, especially UNESCO must monitor the situation to save Taj Mahal.

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# The Kartarpur factor

Ashraf Jehangir Qazi

*Opinions should only be based on facts. Love is wise. Hatred is foolish —  
Bertrand Russell*

WHAT is the significance of Kartarpur? Can it be scaled up to impact India-Pakistan relations? Can it be extended to a Kashmir settlement? Many Indians see it as a ploy by Pakistan to cultivate Sikh goodwill to counter India's policies towards Pakistan. Nevertheless, Narendra Modi expressed his appreciation for Imran Khan's initiative.

In Pakistan the initiative is very welcome but it is not expected to break any ice with India especially after the Aug developments in India-held Kashmir (IHK). However, some do hope one good gesture might lead to another including the possibility of Modi taking a more farsighted and statesmanlike approach to Kashmir and India-Pakistan relations.

Coinciding with the opening of the Kartarpur Corridor the Indian supreme court [decided](#) the Babri Masjid or Ram Janmabhoomi case in favour of the Hindu community. This elicited condemnation from the Pakistan's foreign office and a response from the Indian foreign office. The goodwill and possibilities generated by the Kartarpur Corridor opening may have been diluted by the decision of the Indian apex court.

Kashmir has been in lockdown for more than a quarter of a year. The situation is likely to get worse. The Line of Control cannot remain quiet in such circumstances. India is not likely to reverse its decision on Kashmir in the absence of real international pressure, nor is it likely to eliminate the Kashmiri resistance short of an exponential escalation in its already massive human rights violations in the Valley. The international community is well aware of a potential human rights catastrophe in IHK. But, like with climate change, it is currently not politically motivated enough to avoid the worst outcomes.

What is to be done? Pakistan needs to keep its nerve. It has to clean up its act on all fronts.

In a worst-outcome situation, neither Imran Khan nor the Pakistan Army will be able to restrain the people of Azad Kashmir and Pakistan from responding. That will raise the risks of an Indian assault on Pakistan with all its possibly existential consequences for both countries. The very first and least of these consequences would be the closing of the Kartarpur Corridor.

To avoid worst possible outcomes, the UN Security Council will need to get off its butt. While most of the major powers may be inclined to concentrate their pressure on Pakistan, this is not likely to succeed because of the even greater domestic pressure in Pakistan to stop a perceived genocide in IHK. In such a situation, only the veto-wielding powers in the UN Security Country would be in a position to persuade India to relent in order to avert a war, including the real risk of nuclear exchanges.

An alternative scenario is for Pakistan to abandon the Kashmiris in IHK to their fate while maintaining a furious and largely futile diplomatic campaign against Indian atrocities. There are many in Pakistan who quietly or openly advocate such an approach to ensure the survival of the country. Many suspect the government is itself wedded to this approach despite its public denials.

This approach hopefully assumes the Kartarpur initiative might have the potential to set in train a series of developments that could eventually convince India to review its Kashmir policy, restore the status quo before Aug 5, and resume dialogue with a Pakistan that manages to get off the FATF grey list.

But why would Modi respond to such an approach? He certainly resents criticisms of his policies but is under no pressure to revise them. Moreover, his Hindutva base would instantly reject him if he revised the Aug 5 decision. He sees Pakistan not India up the creek. He sees Pakistan not India doing U-turns. He sees himself as having finally settled Kashmir. He sees himself as the embodiment of a triumphant ideology that has given India great power status while putting an end to Pakistan's dreams of Kashmir.

Modi may even see himself as joining an Asian trio of superpowers (China, Russia and India) that leaves Pakistan out in the cold. He might see this as providing India even greater leverage with the US. He believes Indira Gandhi had an historic opportunity to finally settle Kashmir during the Shimla negotiations in 1972 but was outsmarted by Bhutto. He intends to do no such

thing with Imran Khan. In this scenario, Kartarpur will have been a one-off happening.

What is to be done? Pakistan needs to keep its nerve. It has to clean up its act on all fronts. It has to structurally transform itself politically, economically and socially in order to achieve stability and increasing prosperity and, just as importantly, project a positive image to the world which will allow its point of view to register. None of this is happening. When it does the people will acknowledge it loud and clear without the government having to shower praise on itself.

What ‘out-of-the-box’ initiatives are available to the prime minister? He could consider a statement reiterating his commitment to take risks for peace even at this hour of minimal hope. He could stun the world by indicating a willingness to travel to Delhi to make a joint statement with Modi in which both leaders acknowledge the urgent need to address the following:

- (i) Common threats especially climate catastrophe;
- (ii) The need to work towards eliminating conflict which could escalate dangerously for the two countries, the region and the world;
- (iii) The core concerns of each other i.e. eliminating terrorism in all its forms including state terrorism, and moving towards a principled settlement of the Kashmir dispute acceptable to the people of Kashmir, India and Pakistan;
- (iv) Curbing, minimising and eliminating mutually hateful narratives, negative media coverage, etc;
- (v) A comprehensive plan of bilateral exchanges, trade and investment, conferences and seminars on a range of relevant issues; and
- (vi) Developing a national consensus in support of these initiatives.

The ball would be in India’s court.

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## **Death of Secular and Democratic India**

Swapna Gopinath

Ayodhya Verdict unravels a new sensibility and a distinctly different social reality, in several diverse ways. One aspect to be mentioned here is the extraordinary rush of appeals for peace in the country. With large battalions of police force deployed throughout the nation, the government and mass media and the social media sent out appeals again and again. The verdict was pronounced and of course, peace prevailed. But the sense of dread has grown phenomenally. The silences are scary especially when the prime minister himself responds to the verdict, when he had remained silent on numerous occasions of national importance.

India has always been walking on thin ice: a fragile democracy kept in place by several institutions intended to help each other uphold the values of democracy. The challenges were manifold: the plurality of religious identities being a prominent one. The economic backwardness faced by every colonial nation added to the woe. Another major hurdle was the widespread illiteracy; of course, democracy requires a basic civil sense and understanding of human rights about which the illiterate Indian had little knowledge. Yet the country stayed strong, though the period of Emergency did unsettle it slightly, the voices of resistance were strong and powerful. Indian Express dared to carry a blank editorial page as a protest against the gagging of press. Leaders were jailed but the protests gained in momentum and Indira Gandhi had to bite dust in the next elections. As the country moved towards adopting a neoliberal economy, shifts in paradigms, social and cultural, were bound to happen. As the waves of globalization swept through the nation, and the markets got crowded with commodities, social sensibilities too began to evolve. The new India was slowly gaining traction and the old India died a natural death.

The new India is a scary one: neoliberal norms have eased the new Indian into a world where the individual is of supreme importance, her identity is defined by the market: collectives and communities no longer matter. The fiercely



competitive society demands from the individual huge sacrifices, and in return gets pulled into the affective world of commodities and desires. This individual finds herself increasingly isolated, yet competing with others, on an imaginary journey towards success. The thought processes of this individual are quite complex, and the losing significance of communities, and the nation as a welfare-state add to the woe of the post-global Indian. She sees the inequality, she lives through the frustration of unfulfilled desires and provides the perfect ground for forces of Hindutva to grow undeterred.

For the millions of middleclass, urban Indians, Hindutva is the magic potion that can change their world. From the feeling of helplessness to a state of being powerful and arrogant, the Hindu happily devours the stories of othering and marginalization where the Muslim and the Dalit emerge as targets. Hate works well in the mind of the person who feels she is a loser in the world of the superrich whose visibility is extremely high, with the media capturing their moments of glory and luxury. For the rural poor, Hindutva again proves to be a powerful tool, empowering them through the violent power over the others. Mob lynching and moral policing is hailed by the rightwing forces, the criminals involved in these extreme acts of violence are honoured, thus validating such acts of violence.

The recent verdict sealed the deal in favour of Hindutva, a militant political Hindu identity that is distinctly different from Hinduism as a religion. The verdict was not a surprise for many, since the country has been witnessing partisan rulings and verdicts at all levels of administrative and judicial interventions.

Why is this death knell for democracy in India?

1. The silence of the majority in issues of grave importance, especially when the victims are Muslims or Dalits or other minorities. The secular principles upheld in the constitution are no longer a viable option by a large section of Indian society as is witnessed through the terrifying silence.
2. The acceptance of the verdict by the Muslims has been very stoic. In a democracy that carefully considered the minorities through constitutional provisions thought out and executed so brilliantly, this stance of the Muslim community is a sign of the fear and insecurity that threatens them as a community.

3. The many voices, arrogant and powerful that are plain threats against the minorities. When political leaders speak with such wantonness the atmosphere of fear and suspicion gets stronger day by day.
4. Kashmir and now this verdict, along with the national registry, the target is quite clear. Such targeting of minorities cuts the very lifeline of democratic principles so carefully enshrined in the constitution. While the first term of office of BJP did not witness such major revamp of the nation's identity, the second term threatens to turn the nation into a totalitarian regime with minorities silenced and voices of dissent attacked or ignored.
5. Aiding the forces of Hindutva is the media that thrives on money and corporate support. Media, unlike in the times of crisis during Emergency, prefers to support the forces of divisiveness and hatred. Since the autonomy of the mass media is severely curtailed through the processes of production that require huge investments, we see them as lapdogs to the powers of authority and arrogance.

India is in a crisis; and Indians, a huge majority of them, refuse to comprehend this reality. The mass mediated images of an invincible leader who can lead the nation to great heights have percolated into the society and offers the illusion of hope to millions who feel abandoned and helpless against the onslaught of the neoliberal market; as consumers and as producers. This sense of impotency acts as the fertile ground to a toxic masculine Hindutva agenda that is set to destroy the secular and democratic structure of India.

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# The global limelight is now on Kashmir

Shekhar Gupta.

*'The Kashmir issue has become internationalised after nearly half a century.*

*'India, not Pakistan, has done so pro-actively,' says Shekhar Gupta.*

Does the world care about Kashmir?

They know that it is part of the subcontinent, over which India and Pakistan keep trading blows, mostly at a level inconsequential to the rest, and only occasionally racketing it up to the nuclear-threat level so everybody has to go scampering searching for an atlas.

Each significant nation, by now, has its own equivalent of what might be a spiral-bound primer of Kashmir FAQs.

Donald Trump might not be the best example. Not when he is supposed to have famously asked what is 'Button' and 'Nipple' (for Bhutan and Nepal) in the course of a briefing on the subcontinent. Still, his comment at his July press conference with Imran Khan, where he described Kashmir as this most beautiful place where bombs were going off all over the place, was significant. He has a mind uncluttered with detail, and institutional memory and his GK aren't exactly the UPSC level. In that comment, therefore, he made it evident that the first time Kashmir figured 'bigly' on his mind was when Pulwama happened in February. That, if you check back the records, was the only bomb of some size to have gone off in Kashmir for almost his entire tenure yet.

What does this tell us? That from India's best strategic and political interest, no news on Kashmir is good news.

In the 30 years since this round of insurgency began in Kashmir, the only time the issue caught the world's conscience was in 1991-1994, when P V Narasimha Rao launched that unforgiving counter-insurgency, and got every international human rights organisation and the first Clinton administration furious.

He put down that trouble and then made some amends, essentially to assuage global opinion by opening up Kashmir to international media, and setting up his own National Human Rights Commission in 1993. In the 30 years since this round of insurgency began in Kashmir, the only time the issue caught the world's conscience was in 1991-1994, when P V Narasimha Rao launched that unforgiving counter-insurgency, and got every international human rights organisation and the first Clinton administration furious.

He put down that trouble and then made some amends, essentially to assuage global opinion by opening up Kashmir to international media, and setting up his own National Human Rights Commission in 1993. Since then, his effort was to let Kashmir slide to the back-burner. Otherwise, he played down Kashmir as a strategy.

In a published interview with me, to a question on what he foresaw in Kashmir, he simply said, "Bhai, they will do something, we will do something, what emerges will be the net of it." He said it, weaving his finger in the air as if writing an arithmetic sum, including the two parallel lines at the bottom and indicating the 'net' between them. That's only as far as he would go.

Over the decades after the Simla Accord, Indian prime ministers, including Atal Bihari Vajpayee, pursued a strategy of playing down Kashmir. All questions about Pakistan, including during the near-war situations (Kargil, Op Parakram), were limited to terrorism. Kashmir was never allowed to become the issue.

For a long time, this had worked neatly. Even when the Pakistani 'Miltablishment' got its mojo back after 9/11 as the Americans returned to pamper them, there was no talk of Kashmir.

If at all, the US and allies counselled calm on Pakistan even if it got restless. They didn't want the distraction. On the other hand, India mostly used the new situation deftly: Keep your spoilt child in control, or don't blame us if we ruin your plans which entirely depend on Pakistan.

Three consequences emerged. First, the world started to believe that the two countries had found their strategic balance, and troubles will remain at the tactical level. Second, that Pakistan, with its doddering economy, and India, with a booming one, had both acquired a new vested interest in the status quo.

And third, that the two countries were progressing towards accepting the Line of Control as the real border.

A formal settlement, to borrow the words Deng Xiaoping famously spoke to Rajiv Gandhi, could be left to a wiser generation. In fact, among the most significant lines I had heard in the course of my coverage of the Kashmir crisis of the early 1990s had come from then US assistant secretary of state for South Asia Robin Raphel, who was seen here as hostile. Soon after her remark questioning the Instrument of Accession had caused a storm, she had said somewhat philosophically, 'Kashmir is only India's to lose.'

India under the Modi government has made a departure from his predecessors' serendipitous Kashmir strategy and broken the status quo. It follows, that the onus now is on Pakistan to threaten war. Which it did for some time, but gave up. It saw its military limitations, and nobody in the world was amused.

Please check out that video clip of Imran Khan's press conference in New York, where he asks in exasperation: So what else can we do besides what we are doing? We can't attack India.

So far so good. Then, complications begin.

Accept it or not, the Kashmir issue has become internationalised after nearly half a century.

India, not Pakistan, has done so pro-actively.

If you take a partisan view, it is encouraging for India that no country barring China and Turkey has contested its position that the August 5 changes were its internal affair or demanded a return to the pre-August 5 status. But the picture is far from perfect.

Enough countries, including the US, are concerned about what happens in Kashmir next.

Nobody believes Imran Khan when he says there is a genocide going on. Neither does anyone take much comfort in drone pictures of Srinagar showing

'normalcy'. The valley is seen as being under a draconian lock-down and thousands detained without charges or trial, and global patience with this will soon run out.

The UN week came and went. There will be celebrations of “diplomatic victories” and how Pakistan was isolated. On balance, Narendra Modi returned from New York with more positives than negatives. India's old 'Kashmir is our internal affair' line has by and large gone unchallenged.

Trump, even in the White House readout of his meeting with Modi, asked him only to restore normalcy and fulfil his promises to the Kashmiri people, not put the clock back to August 5. But rather than isolate it further, the new turn in Kashmir has given Pakistan a chance to return to global attention, playing victim and underdog.

If Kashmir being acknowledged as India's internal affair is a diplomatic achievement at the end of this particularly acrimonious version of the annual India-Pakistan tu-tu/main-main in New York, the key to its future and India's supreme national interest also lies here. It is now two months since the communication lockdown. It has already gone on for too many weeks too long. The delay in opening up is increasing the Kashmiri anger. The longer it takes, the graver will be the danger of a blow-out, violence, and bloodshed. Such situations can often go out of control.

*The world is not reacting to Kashmir, but it is now sensitised. To that extent, the issue has been internationalised.*

In 2016, at least 140 persons were killed in the week following Burhan Wani's killing. Now just one death, of teenager Asrar Wani, is a matter of contention.

The global limelight is now on Kashmir. It will be perilous to take the post-August 5 lockdown to be the new normal or the new status quo.

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## **India: Intimations of an Ending – Part II**

### **The rise of Modi and the Hindu far right.**

Arundhati Roy

On August 5, 2019, the Indian Parliament unilaterally breached the fundamental conditions of the Instrument of Accession by which the former princely state of Jammu and Kashmir agreed to become part of India in 1947. It stripped Jammu and Kashmir of statehood and its special status—which included its right to have its own constitution and its own flag. The dissolution of the legal entity of the state also meant the dissolution of Section 35A of the Indian Constitution, which secured the erstwhile state’s residents the rights and privileges that made them stewards of their own territory. In preparation for the move, the government flew in more than 50,000 troops to supplement the hundreds of thousands already stationed there. By the night of August 4, tourists and pilgrims had been evacuated from the Kashmir Valley. Schools and markets were shut down. More than 4,000 people were arrested: politicians, businessmen, lawyers, rights activists, local leaders, students, and three former chief ministers. Kashmir’s entire political class, including those who have been loyal to India, was incarcerated. By midnight, the Internet was cut and phones went dead.

The abrogation of Kashmir’s special status, the promise of an all-India National Register of Citizens, the building of the Ram temple in Ayodhya—are all on the front burners of the RSS and BJP kitchen. To reignite flagging passions, all they need to do is to pick a villain from their gallery and unleash the dogs of war. There are several categories of villains—Pakistani jihadis, Kashmiri terrorists, Bangladeshi “infiltrators,” or any one of a population of nearly 200 million Indian Muslims who can always be accused of being Pakistan-lovers or anti-national traitors. Each of these “cards” is held hostage to the other, and often made to stand in for the other. They have little to do with each other, and are often hostile to each other because their needs, desires, ideologies, and

situations are not just inimical, but end up posing an existential threat to each other. Simply because they are all Muslim, they each have to suffer the consequences of the others' actions.

In two national elections now, the BJP has shown that it can win a majority in parliament without the “Muslim vote.” As a result, Indian Muslims have been effectively disenfranchised, and are becoming that most vulnerable of people—a community without political representation, without a voice. Various forms of undeclared social boycott are pushing them down the economic ladder, and, for reasons of physical security, into ghettos. Indian Muslims have also lost their place in the mainstream media—the only Muslim voices we hear on television shows are the absurd few who are constantly and deliberately invited to play the part of the primitive Islamist, to make things worse than they already are. Other than that, the only acceptable public speech for the Muslim community is to constantly reiterate and demonstrate its loyalty to the Indian flag. So, while Kashmiris, brutalized as they are because of their history and, more importantly, their geography, still have a lifeboat—the dream of *azadi*, of freedom—Indian Muslims have to stay on deck to help fix the broken ship.

(There is another category of “anti-national” villain—human rights activists, lawyers, students, academics, “urban Maoists”—who have been defamed, jailed, embroiled in legal cases, snooped on by Israeli spyware, and, in several instances, assassinated. But that’s a whole other deck of cards.)

The lynching of Tabrez Ansari illustrates just how broken the ship is, and how deep the rot. Lynching, as you in the United States well know, is a public performance of ritualized murder, in which a man or woman is killed to remind their community that it lives at the mercy of the mob. And that the police, the law, the government—as well as the good people in their homes, who wouldn’t hurt a fly, who go to work and take care of their families—are all friends of the mob. Tabrez was lynched this June. He was an orphan, raised by his uncles in the state of Jharkhand. As a teenager, he went away to the city of Pune, where he found a job as a welder. When he turned 22, he returned home to get married. The day after his wedding to 18-year-old Shahista, Tabrez was caught by a mob, tied to a lamppost, beaten for hours and forced to chant the new Hindu war cry, “*Jai Shri Ram!*”—Victory to Lord Ram! The police eventually took Tabrez into custody but refused to allow his distraught family and young bride to take him to the hospital. Instead, they accused him of being a thief, and



produced him before a magistrate, who sent him back to custody. He died there four days later.

In its latest report, released earlier this month, the National Crime Records Bureau has carefully left out data on mob lynching. According to the Indian news site *The Quint*, there have been 113 deaths by mob violence since 2015. Lynchers, and others accused in hate crimes including mass murder have been rewarded with public office and honoured by ministers in Modi's cabinet. Modi himself, usually garrulous on Twitter, generous with condolences and birthday greetings, goes very quiet each time a person is lynched. Perhaps it's unreasonable to expect a prime minister to comment every time a dog comes under the wheels of someone's car. Particularly since it happens so often.

Here in the United States, on September 22, 2019—five days after Modi's birthday party at the Narmada dam site—60,000 Indian Americans gathered in the NRG Stadium in Houston. The “Howdy, Modi!” extravaganza there has already become the stuff of urban legend. President Donald Trump was gracious enough to allow a visiting prime minister to introduce him as a special guest in his own country, to his own citizens. Several members of the US Congress spoke, their smiles too wide, their bodies arranged in attitudes of ingratiation. Over a crescendo of drum rolls and wild cheering, the adoring crowd chanted, “Modi! Modi! Modi!” At the end of the show, Trump and Modi linked hands and did a victory lap. The stadium exploded. In India, the noise was amplified a thousand times over by carpet coverage on television channels. “Howdy” became a Hindi word. Meanwhile, news organizations ignored the thousands of people protesting outside the stadium.

Not all the roaring of the 60,000 in the Houston stadium could mask the deafening silence from Kashmir. That day, September 22, marked the 48th day of curfew and communication blockade in the valley.

Once again, Modi has managed to unleash his unique brand of cruelty on a scale unheard of in modern times. And, once again, it has endeared him further to his loyal public. When the Jammu and Kashmir Reorganization Bill was passed in India's parliament on August 6 there were celebrations across the political spectrum. Sweets were distributed in offices, and there was dancing in

the streets. A conquest—a colonial annexation, another triumph for the Hindu Nation—was being celebrated. Once again, the conquerors’ eyes fell on the two primeval trophies of conquest—women and land. Statements by senior BJP politicians, and patriotic pop videos that notched up millions of views legitimized this indecency. Google Trends showed a surge in searches for the phrases “marry a Kashmiri girl” and “buy land in Kashmir.”

It was not all limited to loutish searches on Google. Within days of the siege, the Forest Advisory Committee cleared 125 projects that involve the diversion of forest land for other uses.

In the early days of the lockdown, little news came out of the valley. The Indian media told us what the government wanted us to hear. Kashmiri newspapers were completely censored. They carried pages and pages of news about cancelled weddings, the effects of climate change, the conservation of lakes and wildlife sanctuaries, tips on how to live with diabetes and front-page government advertisements about the benefits that Kashmir’s new, downgraded legal status would bring to the Kashmiri people. Those “benefits” are likely to include the building of big dams that control and commandeer the water from the rivers that flow through Kashmir. They will certainly include the erosion that results from deforestation, the destruction of the fragile Himalayan ecosystem, and the plunder of Kashmir’s bountiful natural wealth by Indian corporations.

Real reporting about ordinary peoples’ lives came mostly from the journalists and photographers working for the international media—Agence France-Presse, the Associated Press, *Al Jazeera*, *The Guardian*, the BBC, *The New York Times*, and *The Washington Post*. The reporters, mostly Kashmiris, working in an information vacuum, with none of the tools usually available to modern-day reporters, travelled through their homeland at great risk to themselves, to bring us the news. And the news was of night-time raids, of young men being rounded up and beaten for hours, their screams broadcast on public-address systems for their neighbors and families to hear, of soldiers entering villagers’ homes and mixing fertilizer and kerosene into their winter food stocks. The news was of teenagers with their bodies peppered with shotgun pellets being treated at home, because they would be arrested if they went to a hospital. The news was of hundreds of children being whisked away in the dead of night, of

parents debilitated by desperation and anxiety. The news was of fear and anger, depression, confusion, steely resolve, and incandescent resistance.

But the home minister, Amit Shah, said that the siege only existed in peoples' imaginations; the governor of Jammu and Kashmir, Satya Pal Malik, said phone lines were not important for Kashmiris and were only used by terrorists; and the army chief, Bipin Rawat, said, "Normal life in Jammu and Kashmir has not been affected. People are doing their necessary work.... Those who feel that life has been affected are the ones whose survival depends on terrorism." It isn't hard to work out who exactly the government of India sees as terrorists.

Imagine if all of New York City were put under an information lockdown and a curfew managed by hundreds of thousands of soldiers. Imagine the streets of your city remapped by razor wire and torture centres. Imagine if mini–Abu Ghraibs appeared in your neighbourhoods. Imagine thousands of you being arrested and your families not knowing where you have been taken. Imagine not being able to communicate with anybody—not your neighbour, not your loved ones outside the city, no one in the outside world—for weeks together. Imagine banks and schools being closed, children locked into their homes. Imagine your parent, sibling, partner, or child dying and you not knowing about it for weeks. Imagine the medical emergencies, the mental health emergencies, the legal emergencies, the shortages of food, money, gasoline. Imagine being a day labourer or a contract worker, earning nothing for weeks on end. And then imagine being told that all of this was for your own good.

The horror that Kashmiris have endured over the last few months comes on top of the trauma of a 30-year-old armed conflict that has already taken 70,000 lives and covered their valley with graves. They have held out while everything was thrown at them—war, money, torture, mass disappearance, an army of more than a half million soldiers, and a smear campaign in which an entire population has been portrayed as murderous fundamentalists.

The siege has lasted for more than three months now. Kashmiri leaders are still in jail. The only condition under which they are offered release is the signing of an undertaking that they will not make public statements for a whole year. Most have refused.

Now, the curfew has been eased, schools have been reopened and some phone lines have been restored. “Normalcy” has been declared. In Kashmir, normalcy is always a declaration—a fiat issued by the government or the army. It has little to do with people’s daily lives.

So far, Kashmiris have refused to accept this new normalcy. Classrooms are empty, streets are deserted and the valley’s bumper apple crop is rotting in the orchards. What could be harder for a parent or a farmer to endure? The imminent annihilation of their very identity, perhaps.

The new phase of the Kashmir conflict has already begun. Militants have warned that, from now on, all Indians will be considered legitimate targets. More than ten people, mostly poor, non-Kashmiri migrant workers, have been shot already. (Yes, it’s the poor, almost always the poor, who get caught in the line of fire.) It is going to get ugly. Very ugly.

Soon all this recent history will be forgotten, and once again there will be debates in television studios that create an equivalence between atrocities by Indian security forces and Kashmiri militants. Speak of Kashmir, and the Indian government and its media will immediately tell you about Pakistan, deliberately conflating the misdeeds of a hostile foreign state with the democratic aspirations of ordinary people living under a military occupation. The Indian government has made it clear that the only option for Kashmiris is complete capitulation, that no form of resistance is acceptable—violent, nonviolent, spoken, written, or sung. Yet Kashmiris know that to exist, they must resist.

Why should they want to be a part of India? For what earthly reason? If freedom is what they want, freedom is what they should have.

It’s what Indians should want, too. Not on behalf of Kashmiris, but for their own sake. The atrocity being committed in their name involves a form of corrosion that India will not survive. Kashmir may not defeat India, but it will consume India. In many ways, it already has.

This may not have mattered all that much to the 60,000 cheering in the Houston stadium, living out the ultimate Indian dream of having made it to America. For them, Kashmir may just be a tired old conundrum, for which they foolishly believe the BJP has found a lasting solution. Surely, however, as migrants

themselves, their understanding of what is happening in Assam could be more nuanced. Or maybe it's too much to ask of those who, in a world riven by refugee and migrant crises, are the most fortunate of migrants. Many of those in the Houston stadium, like people with an extra holiday home, probably hold US citizenship as well as Overseas Citizens of India certificates.

The "Howdy, Modi!" event marked the 22nd day since almost 2 million people in Assam found their names missing from the National Register of Citizens.

***Part III is being published in next LISA issue***

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