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Introduction | War and Suffering in Kashmir

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As this special issue was being conceived, Kashmir scholarship was only beginning to examine Kashmiri suffering amidst the war for sovereignty over Kashmir. For decades, Eurocentric and Indocentric scholarship has dominated the field of knowledge production in Kashmir. In the field of international relations, Kashmir dispute is approached in terms of regional conflicts, superpower rivalries, and security concerns, while Indology has approached Kashmiri literary, historic, and cultural traditions in terms of Hindu religious and political ideology. Kashmiris, as agents of experience and subjectivity, have been alternately erased and formulated as mysterious, ahistorical, and alien entities to be approached with caution and suspicion.

This violent politics of representation has operated as part and parcel of the apparatus of power and domination that has sustained India's machinations of war and occupation across more than a century – and has persisted through various political administrations across the 20th century, intensified with the rise of Hindutva ideology and Hindu supremacy across the past decade, and culminated in India's complete annexation of Indian-occupied Kashmir through the revocation of the region's semi-autonomous status in August 2019. This special issue challenges the Eurocentric and Indocentric domination of Kashmir scholarship by presenting Kashmiri experience as a product of complex dynamics of power and domination, exploitation and subjugation, and war and militarization across time.

There is a need to establish a contextualized understanding of suffering, not merely to weave a historic

ethno-nationalistic narrative but rather to recognize and place the human agency and its engagement in the socio-political transformations that have shaped the present identities and contests therein. To that effect, when reviewing Kashmiri historic and literary traditions, a visible road map of permanence of suffering and subjectivity that further emboldens suffering as a political condition of life appears. The native thought explores a broader matrix of social, economic, and political conditions of injustice and oppression. Such traditions are preserved in many languages used to express native thought. From Pandit Kalhan, the Sanskrit chronicler who wrote the *Rajtarangini* (*Chronicles of Rule*) in the 13th century, to Ghani Kashmiri, a Kashmiri Persian poet of the Mughal period in the 17th century, to Abdul Ahad Azad (1903-1948), the Kashmiri language poet of the early 20th century, the exploration of social political suffering is a broader motif of the native thought.¹ In his revolutionary socialist poetry, Azad laments the political systems that have subjected Kashmiris to suffering across time, invoking the metaphor of the lion to represent Kashmiris who have been deprived of their autonomous rule:

“To the sheep and the goat, the butcher, and the wolf
Are alike — one slays, the other drains blood.
The law has sanctioned human slaughter.
Mean jackals are feasting on lions' blood.”²

Azad's verse maps Kashmiri suffering, not in terms of territorial fragmentation, but rather in terms of foreign

oppression, law's violence, and social and political subjugation. He expresses a spirit of rebellion against the Hindu Dogra Kings of the present as well as oppressive rulers of the past – manifesting rebellion as “colloquial life” outside of corridors of power. As poetry of revolution, such expressions of Kashmiri suffering have been largely overlooked in Kashmir scholarship.

Such dominant political representations have mapped Kashmir's history as well as cartography in terms of Hindu religious ideology, thereby eliding Kashmir's non-Hindu past. Notably, history and historic archaeology pay scant attention to the period of Kushanian rule before the 13th century, thereby sidelining connections among pre-Islamic Iran, Afghanistan, and Kashmir that would provide a foundation for placing Kashmir within the Central Asian imagination.

In this issue, a new generation of critical Kashmir scholars reclaims this representational terrain through contributions that analyze Kashmiri suffering through the social, economic, and political conditions of power, violence, and war. Bilal Pandow explores the economic damage incurred, not only through repeated cycles of shutdowns and curfews, but also through periods of “return to normalcy,” arguing that such “economic captivity” produces severe consequences for oppressed classes. Huzaifa Pandit translates Kashmiri resistance poetry, evoking its potential for recollection as well as meaning-making in opposition to state domination. Bhavneet Kaur traces the smells and sounds of tear gas shelling in downtown Srinagar, shedding light on a “conflict sensorium” of bodily vulnerability amidst the casual everydayness of indiscriminate violence. Ankur Datta examines the “simmering anger” of Kashmiri Pandit victimhood as a form of continuous pain constituted through reference to notions of recognition, legitimacy, and fairness. Charlotte Thomas analyzes how Kashmiri Muslims living in Delhi experience a “non-belonging” determined by the imagination of their national

home and the otherness of Indian rule. Omer Aijazi unpacks the narrative of his interlocutor, a village imam in Neelum valley, to interrogate the political project of striving towards a utopic yet indeterminate future. In her self-reflexive photo essay, Binish Ahmed represents power in the warzone through visual attention to the genocidal colonial social order as well as the “nuanced modalities of self-determination” in public spaces and gazes. Uzma Falak offers a visual textual representation of the unspeakability of violence that spans “timescapes and landscapes” through a disruption that calls for not only meaning-making but also for witnessing, mourning, and memorializing. This issue, thus, foregrounds a rejoinder, an unlearning procedure to allow for human agents to reemerge as story tellers, narrative weavers of their own subjectivity, and allow for a reticulation that chooses to strengthen the top-down approach to sovereignty, development, and nation-building.

Endnote

1. The recounting of such strategic injustice has evoked strategic resistance as in the literary forms, with the advent of Islam in 13th century, Kashmiri language literary prowess has manifested itself adequately as a challenge to the predominant caste and power monopolizing systems. With Lale-ded and Sheikh Noorudin's birthing of Kashmiri language and its later modern revival by poets like Abdul Ahad Azad, literary genius in preserving subjectivity is an adage to the existence of verse as resistance. A temperament preserved by Kashmiris in many other languages chosen to express native thought such as Ghani Kashmiri's Persian verse, and similarly in Urdu and English verse too.
2. Abdul Ahad Azad (1903-1948). *Kashmir Pen*. Available at: <https://www.kashmirpen.com/abdul-ahad-azad-1903-1948/> (accessed on 19 September 2020).