

Opinion

In Kashmir, the silence is the loudest sound

The Indian government has confined about seven million Kashmiris to their homes and imposed a complete communications blackout.

Arundhati Roy

NEW DELHI As India celebrates her 73rd year of independence from British rule, ragged children thread their way through traffic in Delhi, selling outsized flags and souvenirs that say, “Mera Bharat Mahan.” My India is Great. Quite honestly, it’s hard to feel that way right now, because it looks very much as though our government has gone rogue.

Earlier this month, it turned Kashmir into a giant prison camp. Seven million Kashmiris were barricaded in their homes, internet connections were cut and their phones went dead. Even “mainstream” pro-India politicians were detained. Newspapers report that the Jammu & Kashmir police force has been disarmed. That in this age of information, a government can so easily cut off a whole population from the rest of the world for days at a time, says something serious about the times we are heading toward.

Even before 45,000 extra troops were flown in to handle this potential emergency, Kashmir was already one of the most or perhaps the most densely militarized zone in the world. More than half a million soldiers have been deployed to counter what the army itself admits is now just a handful of “terrorists.” More than a half-million soldiers have been deployed to counter what the army itself admits is now just a handful of “terrorists.”

An estimated 70,000 people, civilians, militants and security forces have been killed in the conflict. Thousands have been “disappeared,” and tens of thousands have passed through torture chambers that dot the valley like a network of small-scale Abu Ghraibs. Over the last few years, hundreds of teenagers have been blinded by the use of pellet-firing shotguns, the security establishment’s new weapon of choice for crowd control.

In Narendra Modi’s first term as India’s prime minister, his hard-line approach exacerbated the violence in Kashmir. Now two months into his second term, his government has tossed a lit match into a powder keg.

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forces assisted by troops borrowed from other princely states, massacred Muslims. Historians and news reports of the time estimated that somewhere between 70,000 and 200,000 were murdered in the streets of the city, and in its neighboring districts.

Inflamed by the news of the Jammu massacre, Pakistani “irregulars” swooped down from the mountains of the North Western Frontier Province, burning and pillaging their way across the Kashmir Valley. Hari Singh fled from Kashmir to Jammu from where he appealed to Jawaharlal Nehru, the Indian prime minister, for help. The document that provided legal cover for the Indian Army to enter Kashmir was the Instrument of Accession.

thus far mostly nonviolent demand for self-determination grew into a full-throated freedom struggle. Hundreds of thousands of people poured onto the streets only to be cut down in massacre after massacre.

The Kashmir valley soon thronged with militants, Kashmiri men from both sides of the border, as well as foreign fighters, trained and armed by Pakistan and embraced, for the most part, by the Kashmiri people.

The first casualty of the uprising was the age-old bond between Kashmir’s Muslims and its tiny minority of Hindus, known locally as Pandits. When the violence began, according to the Kashmiri Pandit Sangharsh Samiti, or the K.P.S.S., an organization run by Kash-

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On Aug. 5, India's home minister proposed in Parliament that Article 370 of the Indian Constitution (the article that outlines the legal obligations that arise from the Instrument of Accession) be overturned. The opposition parties rolled over. By the

next evening the Jammu and Kashmir Reorganization Act, 2019 had been passed by the upper as well as the lower house. The new Act partitions the State into two and strips the erstwhile State of Jammu and Kashmir of its special status—its right to have its own Constitution and its own flag.

Indian citizens can now buy land and settle in their new domain. Already India's richest industrialist, Mukesh Ambani of Reliance Industries Ltd has promised several "announcements." What this might mean to the fragile Himalayan ecology of Ladakh and Kashmir, the land of vast glaciers, high altitude lakes and five major rivers, barely bears thinking about.

The dissolution of the legal entity of the state also means the dissolution of Article 35A, which granted residents rights and privileges that made them stewards of their own territory. So, "being open for business," it must be clarified, can also include Israeli-style settlements and Tibet-style population transfers.

For Kashmiris, in particular, this has been an old, primal fear. Their recurring nightmare (an inversion of the one being peddled by Donald Trump) of being swept away by a tidal wave of triumphant Indians wanting a little home in their sylvan valley could easily come true.

As news of the new act spread, Indian nationalists of all stripes cheered. The mainstream media, for the most part, made a low, sweeping bow. There was dancing in the streets and horrifying misogyny on the internet. Manohar Lal Khattar, chief minister of the state of Haryana, bordering Delhi, while speaking about the improvement he had brought about in the skewed gender ratio in his state, joked: "Our Dhakarji used to say we will bring in girls from Bihar. Now they say Kashmir is open, we can bring girls from there."

Amid these vulgar celebrations the loudest sound, however, is the deathly silence from Kashmir's patrolled, barricaded streets and its approximately seven million caged, humiliated people, stitched down by razor wire, spied on by drones, living under a complete communications blackout.

Kashmir, they often say, is the unfinished business of the Partition of the Indian subcontinent on religious grounds into India and Pakistan, under



Blockades on the streets of Srinagar, the largest city in Jammu and Kashmir, on Aug. 11.

which territories with a Hindu majority would go to India and territories with Muslim majorities would form Pakistan. But, what is unfolding today on both sides of the border of the erstwhile state of Jammu and Kashmir is actually the unfinished business of assimilation.

While Partition and the horrifying violence that it caused is a deep, unhealed wound in the memory of the subcontinent, the violence of those times, as well as in the years since, in India and Pakistan, has as much to do with assimilation as it does with partition. In India the project of assimilation, which goes under the banner of nation-building, has meant that there has not been a single year since 1947 when the Indian Army has not been deployed within India's borders against its "own people." The list is long — Kashmir, Mizoram, Nagaland, Manipur, Hyderabad, Assam.

The business of assimilation has been

complicated and painful and has cost tens of thousands of lives. What is unfolding today on both sides of the border of the erstwhile state of Jammu and Kashmir is the unfinished business of assimilation.

What happened in the Indian Parliament this month was tantamount to cremating the Instrument of Accession. It was a document with a complicated provenance that had been signed by a discredited king, the Dogra Hindu King, Maharaja Hari Singh. His unstable, tattered kingdom of Jammu and Kashmir lay on the fault lines of the new border between India and Pakistan.

The rebellions that had broken out against him in 1945 had been aggravated and subsumed by the spreading fires of Partition. In the western mountain district of Poonch, Muslims, who were the majority, turned on the Maharaja's forces and on Hindu civilians. In Jammu, to the south, the Maharaja's

forces assisted by troops borrowed from other princely states, massacred Muslims. Historians and news reports of the time estimated that somewhere between 70,000 and 200,000 were murdered in the streets of the city, and in its neighboring districts.

Inflamed by the news of the Jammu massacre, Pakistani "irregulars" swooped down from the mountains of the North Western Frontier Province, burning and pillaging their way across the Kashmir Valley. Hari Singh fled from Kashmir to Jammu from where he appealed to Jawaharlal Nehru, the Indian prime minister, for help. The document that provided legal cover for the Indian Army to enter Kashmir was the Instrument of Accession.

The Indian Army, with some help from local people, pushed back the Pakistani "irregulars," but only as far as the ring of mountains on the edge of the valley. The former Dogra kingdom now lay divided between India and Pakistan. The Instrument of Accession was meant to be ratified by a referendum to ascertain the will of the people of Jammu and Kashmir. That promised referendum never took place. So was born the subcontinent's most intractable and dangerous political problem.

In the 72 years since then, successive Indian governments have undermined terms of the Instrument of Accession until all that was left of it was the skeletal structure. Now even that has been shot to hell.

It would be foolhardy to try to summarize the twists and turns of how things have come to this. Let's just say that it's as complicated and as dangerous as the games the United States played with its puppet regimes in South Vietnam all through the '50s and '60s.

After a long history of electoral manipulation, the watershed moment came in 1987 when New Delhi flagrantly rigged the state elections. By 1989, the

thus far mostly nonviolent demand for self-determination grew into a full-throated freedom struggle. Hundreds of thousands of people poured onto the streets only to be cut down in massacre after massacre.

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The first casualty of the uprising was the age-old bond between Kashmir's Muslims and its tiny minority of Hindus, known locally as Pandits. When the violence began, according to the Kashmiri Pandit Sangharsh Samiti, or the K.P.S.S., an organization run by Kashmiri Pandits, about 400 Pandits were targeted and murdered by militants. By the end of 1990, according to a government estimate, 25,000 Pandit families had left the valley.

They lost their homes, their homeland and everything they had. Over the years thousands more left — almost the entire population. As the conflict continued, in addition to tens of thousands of Muslims, the K.P.S.S. says 650 Pandits have been killed.

Since then, great numbers of Pandits have lived in miserable refugee camps in Jammu city. Thirty years have gone by, yet successive governments in New Delhi have not tried to help them return home. They have preferred instead to keep them in limbo, and stir their anger and understandable bitterness into a mephitic brew with which to fuel India's dangerous and extremely effective nationalistic narrative about Kashmir. In this version, a single aspect of an epic tragedy is cannily and noisily used to draw a curtain across the rest of the horror.

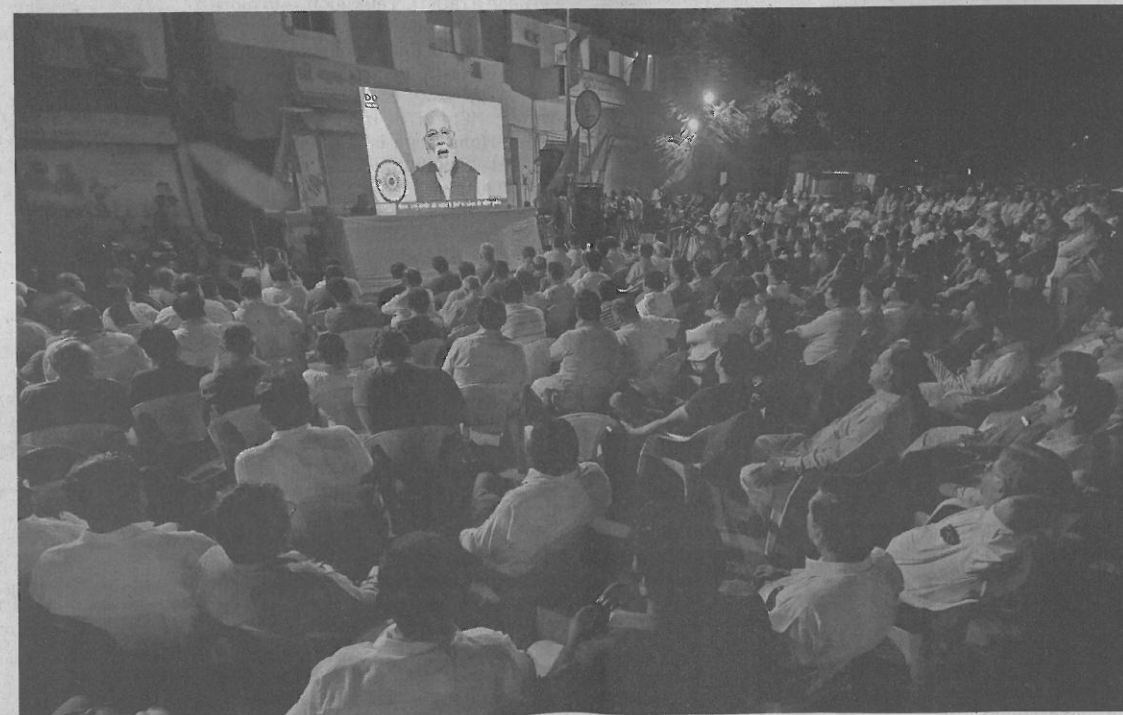
The passing of the Jammu and Kashmir Reorganization Act of 2019 has deepened the tragedy. Apart from the act itself, the way it was passed is truly disgraceful. It began in the last week of July, when tens of thousands of extra troops were rushed into Kashmir on the grounds that there was a Pakistani "terror" threat to the annual Amarnath Hindu pilgrimage to a cave in the mountains of Kashmir.

On Aug. 1, some Indian television networks announced that a land mine with Pakistani Army markings on it had been found on the pilgrimage route. On Aug. 2, the government published a notice asking all pilgrims (and even tourists who were miles from the pilgrimage route) to leave the valley immediately. That set off a panicky exodus. By Saturday, Aug. 3, tourists and pilgrims had left and the security forces had taken up position across the valley.

On Aug. 8, four days into the lockdown, Narendra Modi appeared on television to address an ostensibly celebrating India and an incarcerated Kashmir. He sounded like a changed man. Gone was his customary aggression and his jarring, accusatory tone. Instead he spoke with the tenderness of a young mother. It's his most chilling avatar to date.

His voice quivered and his eyes shone with unspilled tears as he listed the slew of benefits that would rain down on the

Indian security personnel on the streets of Srinagar, Kashmir, this month.



Prime Minister Narendra Modi's televised address to the nation is watched by a crowd in Ahmedabad, India.

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ROY, FROM PAGE 10

people of the former State of Jammu and Kashmir, now that it was rid of its old, corrupt leaders, and was going to be ruled directly from New Delhi. He evoked the marvels of Indian modernity as though he were educating a bunch of feudal peasants who had emerged from a time capsule. He spoke of how Bollywood films would once again be shot in their verdant valley.

He didn't explain why Kashmiris needed to be locked down and put under a communications blockade while he delivered his stirring speech. He didn't explain why the decision that supposedly benefited them so hugely was taken without consulting them. He didn't say how the great gifts of Indian democracy could be enjoyed by a people who live under a military occupation. He remembered to greet them in advance for Eid, a few days away. But he didn't promise that the lockdown would be lifted for the festival. It wasn't.

The next morning, the Indian newspapers and several liberal commentators, including some of Narendra Modi's most trenchant critics gushed over his moving speech. Like true colonials, many in India who are so alert to infringements of their own rights and liberties, have a completely different standard for Kashmiris.

The communication shutdown, we now hear, could be extended for some time to come. When it ends, as it must, the violence that will spiral out of Kashmir will inevitably spill into India. It will be used to further inflame the hostility against Indian Muslims who are already being demonized, ghettoized, pushed down the economic ladder, and, with terrifying regularity, lynched. The state will use it as an opportunity to close in on others, too — the activists, lawyers, artists, students, intellectuals, journalists — who have protested courageously and openly.

The danger will come from many directions. The most powerful organization in India, the far-right Hindu nationalist Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, or the R.S.S., with more than 600,000 members including Narendra Modi and many of his ministers, has a trained "volunteer" militia, inspired by Mussolini's Black Shirts. With each passing day, the R.S.S. tightens its grip on every institution of the Indian state. In truth, it has reached a point when it more or less is the state.

In the benevolent shadow of such a state, numerous smaller Hindu vigilante organizations, the storm troopers of the Hindu Nation, have mushroomed across the country, and are conscientiously going about their deadly business.

Intellectuals and academics are a major preoccupation. In May, the morning after the Bharatiya Janata Party won the general elections, Ram Madhav,



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Sameer Ahamed, whose eyes and arms were injured from pellets, in Srinagar on Aug. 10.

a general secretary of the party and a former spokesman for the R.S.S., wrote that the "remnants" of the "pseudosecular/liberal cartels that held a disproportionate sway and stranglehold over the intellectual and policy establishment of the country... need to be discarded from the country's academic, cultural and intellectual landscape."

On Aug. 1, in preparation for that "discarding," the already draconian Unlawful Activities Prevention Act was amended to expand the definition of "terrorist" to include individuals, not

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just organizations. The amendment allows the government to designate any individual as a terrorist without following the due process of a First Information Report, charge sheet, trial and conviction. Just who — just what kind of individuals it means — was clear when in

Parliament, Amit Shah, our chilling home minister, said: "Sir, guns do not give rise to terrorism, the root of terrorism is the propaganda that is done to spread it... And if all such individuals are designated terrorists, I don't think any member of Parliament should have any objection."

Several of us felt his cold eyes staring straight at us. It didn't help to know that he has done time as the main accused in a series of murders in his home state, Gujarat. His trial judge, Justice Brijgopal Harkishen Loya, died mysteriously during the trial and was replaced by another who acquitted him

speedily. Emboldened by all this, far-right television anchors on hundreds of India's news networks, now openly denounce dissidents, make wild allegations about them and call for their arrest, or worse. "Lynched by TV," is likely to be the new political phenomenon in India.

As the world looks on, the architecture of Indian fascism is quickly being put into place.

I was booked to fly to Kashmir to see some friends on July 28. The whispers about trouble, and troops being flown in, had already begun. I was of two minds about going. A friend of mine and I were chatting about it at my home. He is a senior doctor at a government hospital who has dedicated his life to public service, and happens to be Muslim. We started talking about the new phenomenon of mobs surrounding people, Muslims in particular, and forcing them to chant "Jai Shri Ram!" ("Victory to Lord Ram!")

If Kashmir is occupied by security forces, India is occupied by the mob.

He said he had been thinking about that, too, because he often drove on the highways out of Delhi to visit his family who live some hours away.

"I could easily be stopped," he said.

"You must say it then," I said. "You must survive."

"I won't," he said, "because they'll kill me either way. That's what they did to Tabrez Ansari."

These are the conversations we are having in India while we wait for Kashmir to speak. And speak it surely will.

ARUNDHATI ROY is the author of the novel "The Ministry of Utmost Happiness." Her most recent book is a collection of essays, "My Seditious Heart."