The Kashmir conflict, already an inextricable part of international politics, is getting more complicated now with attempts to cast conflict resolution in a Hindu nationalist framework, including suggestions of subdividing the State along religious lines. In this essay, Human rights lawyer and author of Many Faces of Kashmiri Nationalism: From Cold War to Present Day (2015) Nandita Haksar, highlights the multiple narratives that have shaped the popular understanding of the conflict. A new dimension has been added after the killing of Burhan Wani with the upsurge in the valley acquiring anti-Hindu undertones. This is a disturbing deviation from the past when the anger of the Kashmiris was against the Indian state and not the people.

Branding Burhan Muzaffar Wani a pro-Pakistani, anti-Indian terrorist does not explain away why thousands and thousands of Kashmiris—men, women and children—have been out on the streets facing pellets in protest against his killing by Indian security forces on July 8, 2016. Nor does it tell us anything of why the 22-year-old slain commander of the Hizbul Mujahideen, Burhan Wani was a hero for the Kashmiris, revered as a martyr, and why so many Kashmiri youth picked up guns and decided to face death, rather than call themselves citizens of India.
Watching heated debates on national television does not help us understand the Kashmir issue either. For instance, the coverage of the Parliamentary delegation’s visit to Kashmir on September 4, 2016, two months after the killing of Burhan Wani, was used as an occasion to criticise Hurriyat leaders for not opening the doors of their homes to receive the Members of Parliament (MPs). Some journalists wondered whether Syed Ali Shah Geelani violated the traditional Kashmiri ethos of hospitality when he refused to speak to the Indian parliamentary delegation.

No one, however, asked the MPs why they had not gone to the Valley earlier when the first reports came that people were being injured and killed by pellet guns. If we refuse to understand the cause of the Kashmiri people’s rage, their anguish, their hurt and their feeling of humiliation, how can we have a meaningful discussion on how to solve the conflict? Is it not obvious that the only way forward to resolving any political problem is to first understand the causes that have given rise to it?

How do we begin our journey to understand the anguish of the Kashmiri people? Of course, the best way is to listen to their stories. Kashmiris feel anger at the injustice they have faced over decades, if not centuries. Mahum Shabir, a Kashmiri painter and sculptor, quoted a patient in a Kashmiri hospital:

“The doctor asks if I have witnessed violence. I want to tell him that I have witnessed enough peace to question the distinction in the meaning of these words.”

The vast majority of the people in India have got a rather simplified view of the complex problem. It is the view that underlies much of the debate on national television. Perhaps the best example of this simplified view from “an Indian” point of view is reflected in an open letter written by the popular writer, Chetan Bhagat, to the people of Kashmir.

Chetan Bhagat’s view of Kashmir

I quote Chetan Bhagat not because he is an expert on Kashmir or is known to have any sympathy for the Kashmiri people. However, he is India’s most popular writer and read by lakhs of young Indians. That is why his views matter.

I quote from Chetan Bhagat’s letter:

“Allow me to tell you how your future will be best, on a practical basis, if the Kashmir Valley integrates and assimilates with India. This is not an emotional, political or historical argument. It is simply more rational for people in the Kashmir Valley who seek a better future to do it with India.

Sure, the experts will jump on me now. Experts who have made the Kashmir problem their fiefdom. However, if the problem were indeed solved, how will these people stay relevant? ...

The issue is complicated for sure. For those who don’t know the Kashmir issue, here it is in a nutshell. India became independent. Princely states were assimilated. Jammu & Kashmir didn’t accede. Pakistan attacked Kashmir, took half of it (and still controls it). Kashmir’s ruler called India for help. In return for help J&K became part of India, but with riders.

J&K would have its own constitution, have more political independence than other states, while the Centre would handle defence, foreign affairs and communications. In theory, it was a good solution, a sort of one country, two systems approach. In reality, it never worked.

Instead of two parents as planned, J&K became nobody’s child and an orphan. Pakistan took advantage and used the common factor of Islam to start a militant movement. The Indian army tried to control it. However, it is difficult to control terrorism that co-exists with a civilian population (case in point: even the world’s superpowers appear unable to control Islamic State). Hence the Indian army, and India, only got a bad name in the Valley. Thus the ‘we hate India’ slogans and perennially unsolved Kashmir problem.”

Chetan Bhagat blames it all on the non-working of Article 370 of the Indian Constitution which gives special status to Kashmir. He is not bothered about why the autonomy promised in Article 370 has not worked. He blames Pakistan and Islam, but leaves out the role of Hindu nationalism in alienating the Kashmiri Muslims. He also does
not mention the grievance of Kashmiris against the Indian security forces; especially the large scale human rights violations which includes brutal torture, rape and murder.

In contrast to Chetan Bhagat's approach, several persons have in the recent weeks put forward reading lists on Kashmir for the general reader in India who wants to understand the historical and political cause of Kashmiri anger against India and Indians. But these reading lists reflect the political ideologies of their makers as much as they do of the complexity of the political history of Kashmir.

Let us examine the literature in a wider political perspective:

**Human Rights**

The literature on human rights violations in Kashmir Valley has grown and can fill many volumes. It is virtually impossible for people who have never been under army rule to understand what it is like to live under martial law; to know that the security and safety of your home can be violated at any time of day or night; that your house can be searched and your father, brother or husband be dragged away—never to be seen again.

Human rights activists and organisations have been criticised for not paying attention to the violations committed by the non-state actors or the militant groups. While this is true to an extent but the so called non-state actor is often funded and supported by the state. For instance, in Kashmir, some of the worst atrocities have been committed by the militia groups made of surrendered militants that were floated by the Indian intelligence agencies.

The Kashmiri Pundits have criticised human rights activists for either not documenting the attacks on their community by militants or adequately acknowledging their suffering. They blame the militants for ethnic cleansing. It is true that the human rights groups have not paid sufficient attention to the plight of the Pundits; but it also true that the Muslims were just as much targets of the militants as were the Pundits.

I was on one of the first fact finding teams that went to Kashmir at the beginning of the uprising of 1989. I visited the Kashmir Valley in June 1990 as a part of a four-woman fact finding team, which also included Saqina Hasan, Premila Lewis, and Suhasini Mulay. We travelled to the villages and documented the incidents of human rights violations.

At that time, the Armed Forces (Jammu and Kashmir) Special Powers’ Act had not been passed. In fact, our investigation revealed that the armed forces were given powers under secret notifications to arrest, search and seizure. The report clearly demonstrated how the human rights violations being committed by the Indian armed forces were alienating the people. We also documented how people, especially women, were resisting the Islamisation programme of the militants.

The reading of human rights literature does explain, in part, the reason for the alienation of the Kashmiri people. However, the most important contribution that has been made by the human rights movement is that it has demonstrated that military repression is not the answer to political problems.

Human rights literature, by its very nature, focuses on only one aspect of the Kashmir conflict: the role of the Indian state in suppressing the aspirations of the Kashmiri people. But the Kashmir conflict is not only a conflict between Kashmir and India; it has international dimensions. Human rights itself is an instrument of foreign policy of the Western states. In this context, the controversy over the resignation of Gita Sahgal from Amnesty International over its organisational links with Jihadi organisations is relevant.
From Cold War to the War on Terror

Kashmir has always been caught in the web of international politics beginning with the Cold War to the current War against Terror. There has never been a time when international politics has not been inextricably linked to the lives of the peoples of Kashmir.

The territory of the erstwhile Princely state of Jammu and Kashmir is divided and occupied by three sovereign states: India, Pakistan and China. At present, China holds about 20 per cent of the original Princely state of Jammu and Kashmir; Pakistan 35 per cent and India the remaining 45 per cent. The United Nations refers to this region as Jammu and Kashmir, a disputed territory.

Much of the work written on the Kashmir conflict is silent on the role of the West in the Kashmir conflict. In fact, the U.S. and the U.K. are often portrayed as the neutral parties trying to mediate between India and Pakistan. This is far from the truth.

The Western support for Pakistan was a part of the Cold War politics. British geostrategic thinking had placed Pakistan, even before its realisation as a state, at the centre of its vision for South Asia. In his memoirs, Francis Tucker, the last General Officer Commanding of the British Indian Eastern Command, says that the imperial military was “for the introduction of a new Muslim power supported by the science of Britain” … imperial strategists deemed it “very necessary to place Islam between Russian Communism and Hindustan”.

The U.S. and the U.K. wanted control over the Northern Areas (Gilgit and Baltistan) which were bordering Central Asian republics in the Soviet Union and People’s Republic of China. Britain and the U.S. wanted to use Jammu and Kashmir as a military base and a centre for espionage. By 1958, the U.S. Air Force 6937 Communications Group had two facilities to monitor communications in the Soviet Union and China.

This was the time the West was building an alliance with political Islam, which would last until they successfully managed the disintegration of the Soviet Union. The Canadian envoy to India during this time wrote in his book: “the culture of Islam is much closer to that of the West than is the culture of Hinduism. Hinduism is indeed farther removed from the culture of the West than any other of the great contemporary cultures of mankind…India, on the other hand, has almost no common intellectual or religious roots in the West.”

The Communists knew that the only way the West could control these areas was by exploiting their religious sentiments.

In 1979, Sayyid Abu al-Ala Mawdudi, an Indo-Pakistani revivalist thinker and founder of Jamaat-i-Islami, and an ideologue of militant political Islam, died but that year saw an unprecedented rise in the influence of his ideology. His death coincided with the Iranian Revolution which became an inspiration to the Muslim youth all over the world and, charged by its success, they were ready to help the Taliban in their fight against the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan.

The U.S. saw the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan as a threat to the capitalist world order. In early 1980s, a high-level U.S. delegation with Secretary of State, Warren Christopher, arrived in Islamabad and offered $400 million in military aid to fight the Soviet Union which they declared was a “threat to the peace and security of Pakistan, the region of the world.”

In July 1979, U.S. President Jimmy Carter gave his secret sanction to foster the spread of Islam in Central Asia and spread the “fundamentalist” version of Islam. Charlie Wilson, a Texan Congressman, is said to have converted an ordinary CIA assignment into the largest covert operation in American history.
These events had a direct bearing on militancy in Kashmir. It is not a coincidence that the uprising in Kashmir Valley coincided with the victory of the Taliban in Afghanistan.

And this politics of the Cold War continues.

Now, the question that hangs over the Kashmir Valley is whether India’s re-engagement with Central Asia will lead to China’s economic domination or will it lead to ideological dominance of militant Islam? In the rhetoric about the threat of Chinese economic domination, what is lost is the threat of the CIA-backed Islamic movements in the Muslim republics of the former Soviet Union integrated with the Turkestan and Uighur movements in China’s Xinjiang-Uighur autonomous region. In February 2001, four Uighur militants from China’s Xinjiang’s province were caught in Kashmir.

Thousands of Britons of Pakistani origin have joined the jihad in Kashmir since the 1990s; it has been estimated that 900 of them were visiting the Valley every year for military training. This was a part of the West-supported Pakistani strategy to control the silk route to China via Gilgit and would allow Pakistan to act as a strategic power.

The West has played this double role of both supporting sections of militant Islamic groups and also to project Islamic militancy as a threat against which they are waging a war against terror.

The role of the West in using a section of radical Islam as an instrument of its foreign policy has not been sufficiently understood in the context of the continuance of insurgency in Kashmir.

Political Islam as the dominant narrative

The rise of political Islam and its increasing impact on the youth in Kashmir is definitely a factor. The youth of Burhan Wani’s generation has no access to any other ideology than political Islam; for them, communist and socialist ideologies have been discredited.

The role of the communists and socialists in the history of Kashmiri has been wiped out of the memories of the people. The important contributions they made have got undermined by serious political mistakes they committed. I have tried to resurrect some of that history in my recent book *The Many Faces of Kashmiri Nationalism: From the Cold War to the Present Day* (2015).

Perhaps there is a need to re-examine the meaning of secularism and re-think about the role of religion in politics. Secular Indians celebrate Pandit P. N. Bazaz as the person who befriended Sheikh Abdullah and persuaded him to change the name of his party from All Jammu and Kashmir Muslim Conference to All Jammu and Kashmir National Conference in 1939. But Kashmiri Muslim scholars have argued that the change in name, in fact, betrayed the Kashmiri Muslims and deprived them of a political organisation which could address their specific grievances.

During the four years I was involved in the campaign to defend the rights of two Kashmiris, S. A. R. Geelani and Afzal Guru, accused in the conspiracy to attack the Indian Parliament, many questions arose in my mind about the relationship between religion, nationalism, secularism and democracy.

In 2007, I published my book, *Framing Geelani, Hanging Afzal: Patriotism in the Time of Terror*. I wrote the book in the form of a series of letters to people dealing with various aspects of the case. I was overjoyed with the response the book got from Kashmiri prisoners in the jail, including Afzal Guru. He wrote a long letter to me after reading the book; the book got rave reviews in the Muslim publications. However, the Muslim press ignored the
letter I wrote to Bismillah, Geelani’s younger brother which was entitled “In celebration of an impossible friendship”. In that letter, I wrote how it was impossible for a fundamentalist and a feminist to be friends.

It was also selected the best book of the year by Pakistan’s *Dawn* newspaper. In London, a Pakistani-origin British citizen reviewed the book in three parts. He told me that the ISI stopped him from publishing the third part of his review. I bring this up only to point out how difficult it is to write on Kashmir without being accused of having some agenda or the other.

**Role of Hindu nationalism and Kashmiriyat**

A large part of secular writers talk about Kashmiriyat as a way forward. The political idea of Kashmiriyat signifies Kashmir as a land of communal amity where Hindus and Muslim have lived in harmony from times immemorial. It must be remembered that this is not a Kashmiri term and emerged in the post-1947 years. Some scholars have argued that it emerged in the 1980s. Scholars like Toru Tak (2013) \(^1\), Chandralekha Zutschi (2003) \(^2\), and Mridu Rai (2004) \(^3\) have exposed the fact that the concept has served the interests of the rulers rather than the people. Although Kashmiriyat as a concept is discredited in the eyes of the Kashmiri Muslims, it does not mean that they have taken to being anti-Hindu. On the contrary, a day before Burhan Wani was killed, his six-minute video had gone viral on Facebook, WhatsApp and other social networking sites. In that video, he had said that the Kashmiri militants had no plan or will never attack pilgrims who arrive in Kashmir for the Amarnath yatra. However, he had warned that if there were separate colonies for Kashmiri pandits, they would attack them.

The video was made in response to the rumours that the Amarnath yatri would be attacked by militants. Wani had said: “A BSF officer had recently said militants plan to attack the Amarnath Yatra. His statement is absolutely untrue and false. Let me assure you (pilgrims) that we have no plans to attack Amarnath Yatra. They (Hindu pilgrims) are coming here to fulfil their religious duties and we have nothing to do with it.”

From the time the Amarnath Cave was discovered by a Muslim shepherd, no pilgrim has ever been attacked by the militants or anyone else. The Kashmiri Muslim has always welcomed the pilgrims and looked after their needs. Often, when it rained, the Muslims had invited them into their homes and warmed them with blankets and hot cups of tea.

But in 2008, the Amarnath Yatra was politicised and since then the Hindu nationalists have mobilised lakhs of people for the Yatra and endangered the fragile eco-system. Despite this provocation, the Kashmiri Muslims have continued to welcome the Hindu pilgrims.

After Burhan Wani’s killing, the valley witnessed an upsurge of anti-Hindu sentiments. So far the anger of the Kashmiris was against the Indian state, not the people.

On July 10, an enraged mob of Kashmiri Muslims stoned the accommodation complex of Kashmiri Pandits at Haal in Pulwama. The same day, a *langar* [community kitchen] set up for devotees headed to the Amarnath shrine was attacked in Ganeshpora village, *en route* to Pahalgam. At Srigufwara in Anantnag district, Muslim youth pelted stones on a bus carrying Amarnath pilgrims.

However, Syed Ali Shah Geelani condemned the stone pelting in Srigufwara in an article in *Greater Kashmir* \(^4\). It was the presence of Hindu nationalism that had given rise to misgivings about Sheikh Abdullah’s decision to stay within the Indian Union. Sheikh Abdullah had made it amply clear that he did not favour joining Pakistan. In his historic address to the Constituent Assembly of Jammu and Kashmir on October 31, 1951, he said:
The most powerful argument which can be advanced in her favour is that Pakistan is a Muslim State, and a big majority of our people being Muslims the State must accede to Pakistan. This claim of being a Muslim State is only a camouflage. It is a screen to dupe the common man, so that he may not see clearly that Pakistan is a feudal state in which a clique is trying by these methods to maintain itself in power. Right-thinking men would point out that Pakistan is not an organic unity of all the Muslims in the sub-continent. It has, on the contrary, caused the dispersion of Indian Muslims for whom it was claimed to have been created.

What had made Sheikh Abdullah feel uneasy with India? The one thing that troubled him deeply was the growing communal divide and the growth of Hindu nationalism in Jammu. Even in his speech in the Constituent Assembly on October 31, 1951, he had articulated his fears about the future:

"Certain tendencies have been asserting themselves in India that may in the future convert it into a religious state wherein the interests of the Muslims will be jeopardised. This would happen if a communal organisation had a dominant hand in the Government, and Congress ideals of equality of all communities were made to give way to religious intolerance."

These words of Sheikh Abdullah become even more important today when the Valley is in turmoil and the Government consists of two parties with totally different understanding of the Kashmir question. The fact that the BJP did not get votes in the Valley is indicative of the long history of the distrust of the Kashmiris of Hindu nationalists.

This gains further significance now when the Bharatiya Janata Party projects Jammu as a Hindu region. Some Hindu nationalists have even demanded that Jammu become a separate State. Even today, parts of Jammu are Muslim majority districts, namely Rajouri, Poonch and Doda. Although the Hindus have an overall majority in Jammu, one-third of them belong to the Scheduled Castes.

Ladakh is projected as a Buddhist state but the Kargil district is Muslim-majority; besides, the Buddhists resent being treated as an appendage to the Hindus.

While the Kashmiris are fighting for their right to live with dignity, the powers around them are using them as pawns in the Great Game which is again being played by India, Pakistan, Russia, America and the West, and China. The plight of the Kashmiris has been captured by a Kashmiri poet’s lament written in the 1940s:

From all sides I am assaulted,
The English, the Indians, the Afghans, the Pakistanis,
To whom should I complain, to whom should I tell my fate?
Capitalists, tyrants, oppressors, and friends, all want me
To become their accomplice,
With whom should I agree, with whom should I disagree?
To whom should I complain, to whom should I tell my fate?

The situation has got a lot more complicated not only for the Kashmiris, but also for those who wish to express their solidarity with them in their struggles for justice.

References:

2. ^ The full letter was originally published in Times of India and reproduced here with a reply from a Kashmiri woman. Last accessed September 20, 2016.
3. See: Kavita Krishnan, A Road to empathy and solidarity: a reading list on Kashmir in Scroll.in; Hilal Mir, Kashmiri journalist, has another list published in the Hindustan Times, May 28, 2016; and there are other longer or shorter lists.


6. This territory Aksai Chin and Trans-Karakoram was given by Pakistan to China in 1963.


15. Z. A. Muhammad, Revisiting Bazaz’s Writings. Last accessed September 20, 2016.


(Nandita Haksar, is a human rights lawyer, a campaigner, a teacher and a writer. She filed the first case in the Supreme Court challenging the constitutional validity of the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act, 1958, and took the issue to the United Nations in 1991. She led the campaign for the fair trial of two Kashmiris accused in the Parliament attack case and is the author of several books, including Framing Geelani, Hanging Afzal: Patriotism in the Time of Terror (2009); Rogue Agent: How India’s Military Intelligence Betrayed the Burmese Resistance (2010); The Judgement That Never Came: Army Rule in North East India (with Sebastian Hongray, (2011); ABC of Naga Culture and Civilization (2011); Across the Chicken Neck: Travels in North East India (2013); The Many Faces of Kashmiri Nationalism from the Cold War to the present day ( 2015.).)

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