

The Kashmir Conflict:

Identity and Power

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Introduction

Through seventy-three years of history, the Indian subcontinent has been divided and engaged in an interstate conflict that persists and escalates today. India and Pakistan, powerful and polarized states, dispute the borders of Kashmir and the citizenship of its population. Its duration makes the Kashmir conflict a case-study of the development of conflict and warfare from the twentieth century to the twenty-first century. It has evolved through decolonization, state-building, traditional military warfare, nuclear weapon proliferation, extremism, and populism. The conflict remains unresolved and a point of contention because of its complexity. It is rooted in colonial legacy, identity, nationalism, and political and military competition. There is little prospect for a comprehensive and sustainable peace resolution in the immediate future. In the past six years, the Kashmir conflict has activated and steadily intensified with comparatively greater ceasefire violations and battle-related fatalities in 2019.¹

A range of analyses have deconstructed the Kashmir conflict with different perspectives. Typical explanations focus on the role of identity and the Hindu-Muslim divide. A focus on the intersection of identity and power is missing. It is a perspective that further explains the modern conflict situation and the politicization of identity. This paper argues that the Indo-Pakistan conflict in Kashmir, in a classic security dilemma, persists because of identity and its use in the competition for power.

The paper begins with an analysis of the origin and development of the Kashmir conflict. It is followed by an examination of the strategic importance of Kashmir and its identity to the political objectives of India and Pakistan. A section is presented on the diversity of identity among the Kashmiri population and the area's lack of independent power. The focus then moves

¹ "India-Pakistan", Uppsala Conflict Data Program, <https://ucdp.uu.se/conflict/218>.

to the modern dynamics of the conflict. The paper concludes with a general analysis of identity and power in the Kashmir conflict.

Background

Set in the northernmost area of the Indian subcontinent, Kashmir is one of the most strategic locations in the world. It is surrounded by Pakistan, India, and China, all administrators in Kashmir and powerful players in the region and the world. Therefore, it is relevant to the national security interests of all three states. The borders of Kashmir are disputed by all three states. This paper will focus only on the relationship between India and Pakistan. In analyzing this complex conflict with multiple causes, this paper is limited in scope and seeks mainly to understand identity and power.

Kashmir is divided. The Line of Control (LOC) is the de-facto India-Pakistan border and one of the most militarized places in the world. Indian-administered Kashmir (IAK) divides 70% of the Kashmiri population into Jammu and Kashmir (J&K), union territories under the direct control of the Indian central government.² It is defined as “not free” because of severely suppressed political rights and civil liberties.³ Pakistani-administered Kashmir (PAK) is 1/3 of Kashmir and divided into Gilgit-Baltistan (GB) and *Azad* Jammu and Kashmir (AJK), or free Jammu and Kashmir.⁴ It is, ironically, “not free” because its elected assemblies are directly controlled by the Pakistani central government and the population lacks proper parliamentary representation and rights.⁵ The populations are entirely subject to the will of their respective governments on both sides of the LOC. These intensely polarized states promote the idea of accession and accordingly act to further integrate the territory. Neglected in the political and

² “Kashmir: Learning From the Past,” *International Crisis Group* (December 2003): pp. 1.

³ “Indian Kashmir”, Freedom House, <https://freedomhouse.org/country/indian-kashmir/freedom-world/2020>.

⁴ Judith E. Walsh, *A Brief History of India* (New York: Facts on File, 2010), 220.

⁵ “Pakistani Kashmir”, Freedom House, <https://freedomhouse.org/country/pakistani-kashmir/freedom-world/2020>.

military ambitions of India and Pakistan is the Kashmiri population. It is a majority Muslim population with Hindu and other minorities.⁶ However, caught in the middle of a conflict and disconnected from others for seventy-three years, the Kashmiri population is distinct from the Indian and Pakistani populations. *Kashmiriyat* is the Kashmiri identity of co-existent harmony and the pride and patriotism of the region. The identity of Kashmir is divided between the appeals of the Islamic state of Pakistan and the secular democracy of India.

Divide and Rule

The conflict originated in the British rule, the colonization of the Indian subcontinent, and the use of identity as a method of divide and rule. It is important to recognize that the region's history goes beyond the British East India Company or the British Raj and identity, specifically Hindu-Muslim identity, was not introduced by the British.⁷ It was, however, exploited by the British. The British employed divide and rule, the strategy of fragmenting society into groups, to prevent unity and maintain control. Identity was constructed into a social and class conflict. Defining two strategies of divide and rule, Ilia Xypolia writes, "The first is where the foreign ruler divides the local population vertically, separating it into distinct communities, usually along religious, racial or linguistic lines. The second has a horizontal dimension because it occurs when the foreign rule divides the whole population or one community along class lines, thus separating the elites from the masses."⁸ These are the divisions that would partition India and Pakistan and define their claims to Kashmir.

⁶ "Kashmir: Learning From the Past," pp. 1-2.

⁷ Ajay Verghese, "British Rule and Hindu-Muslim Riots in India: A Reassessment." Berkeley Center, Georgetown University, August 23, 2018, <https://berkeleycenter.georgetown.edu/responses/british-rule-and-hindu-muslim-riots-in-india-a-reassessment>.

⁸ Ilia Xypolia, "Divide et Impera: Vertical and Horizontal Dimensions of British Imperialism," *Journal of Socialist Theory* 44, no. 3 (July 2016): pp. 228-229, <https://doi-org.proxygw.wrlc.org/10.1080/03017605.2016.1199629>.

Vertical division, or communalism, separated Indians by religion into primarily Hindus and Muslims. Religious identity was not the norm before the British. Indians defined themselves by culture. *The Great Divide* explains, “In the nineteenth century, India was still a place where traditions, languages, and cultures cut across religious groupings, and where people did not define themselves primarily through their religious faith.”⁹ Hindus and Muslims in the same culture had more in common than all Hindus or all Muslims. The British changed how Indians identified themselves. The 1909 Morley-Minto Reform exemplifies the vertical division. It established direct elections for the Legislative Councils, legislative bodies with Indian representation, and separate electorates for Muslims.¹⁰ In a Hindu majority, the Hindu population voted for Hindus only. Muslims favored a separate electorate to elect Muslims to office. A Muslim in leadership would advocate for legislation that addresses concerns of the minority community and directly benefits it. Religious identity had developed into a political identity. This development was attributed to the social conflict of majorities versus minorities. It was not principally a conflict of religious difference. However, a separate Muslim electorate is the predecessor of a separate Muslim state, Pakistan. The Muslim population in Kashmir feared becoming a permanent minority in a Hindu majority India and identified with the political identity of Pakistan. The Hindu population in Kashmir identified more with the political identity of India. The religious diversity of Kashmir split the population into diverging political identities. It is the basis of India and Pakistan’s current claims to Kashmir.

Horizontal division, or class division, meant diverging interests of the elite compared to the masses. Religious identity developed into a class identity. Hindus became associated with the

⁹ William Dalrymple, “The Great Divide,” *New Yorker*, June 29, 2015, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2015/06/29/the-great-divide-books-dalrymple>.

¹⁰ Walsh, *A Brief History of India*, pp. 184.

elite, a distinction that would become clear in the nationalist elite Hindu leaders of the independence movement.¹¹ The grievances of unequal opportunity would push Muslims to advocate for a separate state. Partition was, to some extent, a result of class conflict. The British Raj's construction of distinct class identities along religious lines became the basis of a separate India and Pakistan and the current conflict in Kashmir.

The British implemented divide and rule in Kashmir. In the British Raj, colonial administrators directly ruled provinces and princes co-opted by the British ruled the princely states.¹² Interestingly, modern religious riots tend to occur in the former princely states.¹³ This situation is explained by the importance of vertical and horizontal division in princely states. Kashmir was a princely state. The British sold Kashmir, a Muslim majority territory, to Gulab Singh, a Hindu ruler, and co-opted the monarchy.¹⁴ An example of vertical division, animosity arose on the religious difference between the ruler and the masses.¹⁵ Inequities including "land ownership between Hindus and Muslims, the poor quality of Muslim education, and their poor employment prospects generally" symbolized the horizontal division.¹⁶ In an intermixing of vertical and horizontal division, political identity and class identity became associated with religion. It furthered the distinction between Hindus and Muslims. In the independence movement, this distinction became a Hindu ruler that favored independence and a Muslim population that favored accession to Pakistan.¹⁷ Divide and rule created a Kashmir divided on independence or joining either India or Pakistan.

¹¹ Anil Baran Ray, "Communal Attitudes to British Policy: The Case of the Partition of Bengal 1905," *Social Scientist* 6, no. 5 (Dec. 1977): pp. 44.

¹² Verghese, "British Rule and Hindu-Muslim Riots in India: A Reassessment."

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ "Kashmir: Learning From the Past," pp. 1-2.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 5.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 3.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 5.

Partition

The difference in identity divided a unified independence movement into the two-nation theory. In the process of state-building, Hindu and Muslim leaders diverged on defining the newly independent state and its future. The two-nation theory is “the idea that India’s Muslims and Hindus constituted two “nations,” each deserving their own state.”¹⁸ The Indo-Pakistan border, drawn without a comprehensive understanding of the native society, complicated the two-nation theory and resulted in violence at the very outset of these new states. Set on this border and complicated by identity, Kashmir could choose to join either state but did not completely align with India or Pakistan. Kashmir remains in this limbo.

Conflict Actors

Today, India is a secular democracy and a rising global power. In the independence movement, the nationalist elite, reflecting India’s diversity, held competing nationalisms. These leaders differed in their definition of India and “who is an Indian?”.¹⁹ No singular vision of India dominated but Jawaharlal Nehru, the first Prime Minister of India, established a secular democracy with a modern vision and the most inclusive definition of an Indian.²⁰ Kashmir is important to this vision. The political legitimacy of India as a secular democracy “would be enhanced through the retention of one Muslim majority area.”²¹ The inclusion of Kashmir emphasizes the secularism and inclusivity of India. It also secures its diverse population. A Muslim state included in India assures its diverse cultural and religious groups of the possibility of difference within a singular, unified state. A Kashmir independent of India would be followed by “secessionist demands... in other states such as Punjab and Tamil Nadu, and in the

¹⁸ Stephen Cohen, *The Idea of Pakistan* (Washington DC: The Brookings Institution, 2004), pp. 28.

¹⁹ Sunil Khilnani, *The Idea of India* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1997), pp. 5.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

²¹ “Kashmir: Learning From the Past,” pp. 6.

northeast.”²² However, competing nationalisms weakened Nehru’s secularism and democracy. In modern India, secularism has weakened because of the further expansion of religious identity into politics and nationalism. Democracy, originally identified as a miracle for a post-colonial state, is backsliding and intensifying religious difference. The state of India’s secularism and democracy is characterized by its policies and actions in Kashmir.

Pakistan is an Islamic state. It is founded on a religious identity and “... rests on the elite Indian Muslim sense of being culturally and historically distinct.”²³ It claims the Muslim population of Kashmir wishes to join Pakistan.²⁴ The political legitimacy of Pakistan is connected to Kashmir. The state was founded to attain “emancipation from the Hindu landlords of the peasantry of Bengal and Assam; the creation of new economic and political opportunities for the frustrated urban Muslim classes of Delhi, Bombay, and the United and Central provinces; and the establishment of an Islamic state.”²⁵ Muslims feared becoming a permanent minority overpowered by the Hindu majority. The justification for a Muslim state is eroded if the Muslim population does not join. It is further undermined if the Muslim population can succeed in India, a secular democracy governed by the Hindu majority. Moreover, Pakistan “never became the homeland of all South Asia’s Muslims” because one-third remained in India and the other two-thirds were split into Bangladesh and Pakistan.²⁶ Pakistan’s political legitimacy as an Islamic state relies on the will of the Kashmiri population to integrate.

In analyses of the power competition between India and Pakistan, the plight of the Kashmiri population has been overlooked. A lack of educational and economic opportunities has

²² “Kashmir: The View From New Delhi,” *International Crisis Group* (December 2003): pp. 1.

²³ Cohen, *The Idea of Pakistan*, pp. 36.

²⁴ “Kashmir: The View From Islamabad,” *International Crisis Group* (December 2003): pp. 25.

²⁵ Cohen, *The Idea of Pakistan*, pp. 33.

²⁶ Hassan Haqqani, *Pakistan: Between Mosque and Military* (Washington DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2005), pp. 4.

limited the growth of Kashmir and contributed to violence.²⁷ The political system is impeded by widespread corruption and inefficiency.²⁸ Violence is a normal occurrence and the people lack the proper political rights or civil liberties to protest this situation. The grievances of Kashmiris have developed into a bleak view of the world and an unfavorable perception of India and Pakistan. Based on their experiences of an India that grants no freedoms, the people “view India less as a secular, democratic nation than as an anti-Muslim, Hindu country.”²⁹ Disconnecting from the solidarity of religious identity, many Kashmiris “argue that Pakistan, despite its pronouncements of undying commitment to the Kashmiri cause, has not done enough to help.”³⁰ The interests of India and Pakistan outweigh the will of the Kashmiri people. It is evident in the absence of self-determination. Kashmiris do not possess the power to assert themselves and resist the policies and control of India or Pakistan. The population does not have the power of a state, the population, the economic power, an independent political system, or a military. Kashmiris are disillusioned and desperate, a consistent driving force of violence. Kashmir is also reliant on third parties, like the United Nations, that have not had significant influence in the modern conflict. Kashmiris are silenced and forgotten in the conflict taking place on their own land.

Conventional War

At Partition, there was no clear direction for Kashmir. On August 12, 1947, Hari Singh, Kashmir’s monarch, signed Standstill Agreements, the precursor to accession, with both India and Pakistan.³¹ This points to a common objective of an independent Kashmir. Evidence suggests the Kashmir monarchy, the pro-Indian National Congress Sheikh Abdullah, and the

²⁷ “Kashmir: The View From Srinagar,” *International Crisis Group* (November 2002): pp. 18.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 12.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ “Kashmir: Learning From the Past,” pp. 5.

Muslim Conference agreed on an independent Kashmir.³² A simpler solution compared to today's complex conflict, this plan was derailed, and Kashmir's leaders split. In Poonch, an area now bisected by the Line of Control, a pro-Pakistan rebellion broke out.³³ The revolt exemplified the difference between the actions of Kashmiri leaders and the will of the people. To control the rebellion, Singh signed the Instrument of Accession to get military assistance from India.³⁴ This conflict developed into the First Indo-Pakistan War. Pakistan led the offensive and fought alongside the pro-Pakistani rebels.³⁵ India enacted a successful defense.³⁶ In an inconclusive resolution, the border was established, and Kashmir was left in an ambiguous status. It was expected that the Kashmiri population would vote for self-determination after the resolution of the conflict.³⁷ A United Nations attempt to hold a vote failed.³⁸ India had captured the heart of Kashmir and had no intention to give it up. Expected to benefit from the vote of a Muslim population, Pakistan demanded a vote. Power relations determined the outcome. Importantly, the dynamics of conventional military warfare have been defined by a powerful India and a weaker Pakistan. The following Indo-Pakistan wars in 1965, 1971, and 1999 have all concluded in a resolution more favorable to India than Pakistan. Today, India's diplomatic and international power prevents any vote on self-determination. Pakistan does not hold the same global power or influence in international organizations to demand a vote. The power imbalance continues to guide India's power and Pakistan's weakness in the Kashmir conflict.

Nuclear War

³² Ibid., p. 4.

³³ Sumantra Bose, *Transforming India* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013).

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ "Kashmir: Learning From the Past," pp. 6.

³⁶ Bose, *Transforming India*.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.

In 1998, India and Pakistan declared themselves as nuclear states and changed the dynamics of war.³⁹ According to mutually assured destruction (MAD), the possibility of nuclear warfare reduced the occurrence of conventional war but significantly increased the risks associated with conflict. The militarization of Kashmir now holds a greater threat of nuclear war. India implemented a strict “no first use” policy and “there is little incentive for India to violate [it].”⁴⁰ According to its “minimal credible deterrent” doctrine, India intends to acquire nuclear weapons as a deterrent, not an arsenal.⁴¹ In other words, nuclear proliferation is for the purpose of defense and deterrence only. On the other hand, Pakistan’s policies are offensive and focus on first use.⁴² Nuclear weapons changed the power dynamics between India and Pakistan. Pakistan, originally weak in conventional warfare, was able to create a more equal playing field because of nuclear proliferation. Protected by the threat of MAD and India’s defensive policies, Pakistan was also emboldened in its policies and actions. The region is now a nuclear flashpoint, especially under threat by Pakistan. Nuclear proliferation has raised the stakes in Kashmir.

Nationalism

Hindutva is the idea of a Hindu state. It strictly defines the question of “who is Indian?”. It contrasts secularism. Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) pushes this idea of Hindutva. In pursuit of this agenda, India has moved unilaterally to integrate Kashmir. Article 370, a constitutional article granting a special status and autonomy to Kashmir, was revoked.⁴³ Integration allows the Hindu majority to overpower the Kashmiri population in

³⁹ Jason A. Kirk, “The Evolution of India’s Nuclear Policies,” *India’s Foreign Policy* (2010): pp. 288.

⁴⁰ Ashley J. Tellis, “China, India, and Pakistan - Growing Nuclear Capabilities With No End In Sight,” *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, February 25, 2015, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2015/02/25/china-india-and-pakistan-growing-nuclear-capabilities-with-no-end-in-sight-pub-59184>.

⁴¹ Kirk, “The Evolution of India’s Nuclear Policies,” pp. 288.

⁴² Tellis, “China, India, and Pakistan - Growing Nuclear Capabilities With No End In Sight.”

⁴³ Pratap Bhanu Mehta, “Winning Kashmir and Losing India,” *Foreign Affairs*, September 20, 2019, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/asia/2019-09-20/winning-kashmir-and-losing-india>.

education or the economy. This dilutes the protection of the Muslim minority. Pratap Bhanu Mehta argues this move was “a show of brute majoritarianism.”⁴⁴ Identity and the associated problems of majorities and minorities take the spotlight. A Hindutva agenda is further polarizing the Hindu-Muslim divide because of a stronger emphasis and association to a religious identity. Moreover, the government in an authoritarian move placed Kashmir on lockdown to suppress any outbreak of resistance.⁴⁵ Represented by its policies and actions in Kashmir, India’s secular democracy is weakening.

Backed by the popularity of Hindu nationalism, the Modi government is taking bold steps. The most recent military escalation brought India and Pakistan to the brink of war. In 2019, Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM), a terrorist group backed by Pakistan carried out a suicide bombing that killed 40 Indian security personnel in the city of Pulwama in J&K.⁴⁶ To retaliate, Modi took the momentous decision to launch an airstrike aimed at the JeM training camp in mainland Pakistan.⁴⁷ The decision was strategic and bold. India argued MAD had emboldened Pakistan “to continue to bleed India with a steady stream of low-cost terror strike” but limited India’s options to retaliate without an onset of nuclear war.⁴⁸ The first attack in mainland Pakistan since 1971, Modi intended to show power and make it costly for Pakistan to back any more terrorist attacks. The Hindutva agenda has promoted this bold and offensive strategy. Ali Ahmed writes, “Drawing back entails a dilution of Hindutva agenda as a prerequisite.”⁴⁹ Hindutva promotes shows of power by the Hindu state against the Muslim state. The Kashmir

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Raj Chengappa, “Balakot - The Inside Story,” *India Today*, March 25, 2019.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ali Ahmed, “The Modi Era: Impact on Strategic Culture,” *Economic and Political Weekly*, May 25, 2019.

conflict continues to escalate because of India's identity-based nationalism and the political ambitions of India and Pakistan.

Conclusion

Identity is connected to politics, the competition for power, in the Kashmir conflict. It explains the origin of the conflict. The British Raj's divide and rule strategy politicized identity. Religious identity was connected to a social and class identity. Furthermore, different religious identities became separate political entities. In general, the division of the Indian population by religious identity reduced the unified power of the people. These identities came to be defined by access to political power. Hindus were regarded as elites with greater power. Muslims did not hold the same amount of power. The differences in access to power defined a Hindu-Muslim separation and conflict.

The politicization of identity motivated the call for two separate nation-states in the independence movement. A nation is a political identity with an objective of self-governance. Hindus and Muslims were divided into different political identities and desired a separate India and Pakistan. The diversity of a Hindu and Muslim population in Kashmir complicated the desire for a nation-state. *Kashmiryat*, the common Kashmiri identity, may have promoted the idea of an independent Kashmir. This identity and will, however, was overpowered by the more powerful nations of India and Pakistan.

The political legitimacy of these states is defined by the identity of the nation. For Pakistan, it is the Muslim homeland. For India, it was the secular democracy to account for the diversity of groups. India is moving towards a more narrow definition of the nation as only the Hindu population. This shift holds significant implications for the future of Kashmir. Already underway, the Indian government acts to benefit the Hindu population at the expense of its

religious diversity and the Muslim population in Kashmir. The Hindu-Muslim polarization and nationalism contribute to popular support for Hindutva. This means an increasingly aggressive India on the international scene. Conflict in Kashmir is likely to escalate further.

The Kashmir conflict can be reduced to the concept of a security dilemma. The strategic location of Kashmir at the border is a threat to national security, prompting the extensive militarization. The competition for power explains the development of the conflict. It is exemplified in the move from conventional warfare to the proliferation of nuclear weapons. Today, power is derived from religious identity. Pakistan actively supports Islamic extremist organizations working in the Kashmir region. India's Hindutva provides popular support for its aggressive and violent policies and actions in Kashmir.

This paper argued identity and a competition for power motivate conflict in Kashmir. Focusing on the development of the conflict, the paper only provides an overview. Future research should address the complex and specific aspects of the conflict. The paper also focuses mainly on India and Pakistan as the major conflict actors. Future work should further analyze the Kashmiri population, the forgotten and silenced people.

The future of the conflict is bleak but solvable. An analysis of the intersection of identity and power competition gives insight on the driving forces and dynamics of the conflict. It is essential to an understanding of the current use of identity to escalate the conflict. To create a sustainable peace in Kashmir, it is necessary to address this polarization and politicization of identity.

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