

# Which Kashmir? Pakistan wala ya India? Konsa Kashmir? Pakistan's or India's?

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*By: Omer Aijazi (University of Toronto)*

*This piece is part of APLA's newest Speaking Justice to Power Series, which focuses on Kashmir and marks the one-year anniversary of the abrogation of Articles 370 and 35A of the constitution (August 5, 2019). The Series page is [available here](https://politicalandlegalanthro.org/speaking-justice-to-power-kashmir/) (<https://politicalandlegalanthro.org/speaking-justice-to-power-kashmir/>).*

Last year, after the AAA meeting in Vancouver, I sat with a Kashmir scholar to try to find commonalities and interconnections in our work. While we both work in Kashmir, ironically, we did not work in the *same* Kashmir. Our respective projects lay separated by the Line of Control (LoC), and the material and discursive interruptions the de-facto border instills. It was difficult for us to locate each other geographically, even though we strongly suspected that most likely, we worked on opposite sides of the same *pahars* (mountainscapes), possibly facing each other across the LoC. Even the names through which each one of us had come to know, locate, and experience Kashmir failed to connect one to the other (for example, it took me a while to understand that the “Kishanganga river” morphs into the “Neelum river” as soon as it gushes past the LoC, or vice versa, depending on which side counts as primary). There were no maps to rely on, other than our rudimentary knowledge of the *pahars* and waterways, which irreverently blend one Kashmir into the other. Any language we possessed to facilitate serious interconnections was as flimsy as the series of guarded and bureaucratically exhausting to cross bridges (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WdLuP77ASVc>) that at whim connect communities across the LoC, but only sometimes.

The disconnections instituted by the LoC are bolstered by technologies of re-naming and re-zoning of Occupied lands, an intentional and strategic colonial strategy to limit the potentiality of any efforts directed at Kashmir's sovereignty. So much so, that each successive generation of Kashmiris raised in Occupied lands has even lesser recognition or memory of their inherited and ancestral lands, their configuration, or historicity, lending to colonial desires of assimilation and usurpation. The abrogation of Article 370 and the ensuing Jammu and Kashmir Reorganization Act has set in motion yet another wave of large-scale re-zoning and re-naming of Occupied lands and its institutions,<sup>[1]</sup> a practice which the Indian state has been pursuing long before. To some extent, Pakistan, too, has made claims on Kashmir via its assimilation and re-zoning projects. The creation of the separate administrative unit of “Northern Areas” in the 1970s from the disputed region of Kashmir and its further autonomy as Gilgit-Baltistan in 2009 is an example.<sup>[2]</sup> While masquerading as tools of rule and governance, strategies of re-zoning, re-districting, and re-naming normalize the Occupation.

The LoC has no real “essence,” and in many locations is just a flowing river.[3] However, communities in its vicinity embody the reverberations of its separations, which are both material and affective. This is beautifully captured via the cameras of a news channel, which shows people on either side of the LoC waving and acknowledging each other, reaffirming each other's moral presence (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CPo6dh870ds>). Their simple aerial gestures and air blown hugs lessen the vast distance created by the LoC, offering us glimpses of other analytical and philological possibilities for the region.[4]

In Neelum valley, Pakistan-controlled Kashmir, where I work, I was invited to an annual student debating competition. This was a yearly event jointly organized by a network of schools across Neelum. The theme for that year was “*Mazi, Haal, Mustaqbil*,” (past, present, and future) and was meant to stimulate discussion on Kashmir's sovereignty. As one of the organizer's quipped: “We want students to come together around Kashmir, despite India's impure claws, Pakistan's overbearing bureaucracy, and China's regional stature (*Bharat kai napak panjay, Pakistan ki intizamiya, aur China jaisa pehlwan*).”

The chief guest for the event was a senior official of the Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Front (JKLF), a Kashmiri political party, that envisions the future of Kashmir as being independent from both India and Pakistan. The venue was at full capacity; students, their parents, and siblings formed the audience. A marked police van was parked outside, though the police weren't allowed to enter. This was in addition to the military troops stationed at a checkpoint some 15 minutes away. Checkpoints, both visible and hidden, dot the entire valley.

In-between enthusiastic student speeches on topics as diverse as human rights violations in Indian-occupied Kashmir to Kashmir's natural beauty and abundant natural resources, a quiz competition was held. Moderated by the chief-guest, this took the form of several rounds of questions that the audience members were challenged to answer in exchange for a prize. The entire event was insightful, a window into the political imagination of Neelum's youth. I found the quiz competition particularly intriguing.

The chief-guest turned quiz host began the first round of questions by prefacing Pakistan as a “neighborly” and “brotherly” nation. He insisted that Kashmiris don't need to look towards Western universities and knowledge-makers to make sense of their history: “We have our own rich historical, philosophical, and religious repositories.”

Most of the questions he asked were concerned with the *riyasat* (state) of Kashmir in its entirety as if the LoC was only a temporary inconvenience. He asked: “What is the total area of Kashmir? What is its current population? How many rivers are in the territory?” Most audience members answered incorrectly, by only guessing the area, population, rivers in the portion of Kashmir under Pakistan's control. The host reminded them that Kashmir remains split across Pakistan, India, and China and must always be thought of in its entirety. He then asked about the number of provinces that constituted Kashmir before 1947, and how they were broken into newer districts and *tehsils* (organizational divisions) after: “Kashmir has how many districts? How many are under India, and how many under Pakistan? Who can name some of these? How many *tehsils* does AJK[5] currently have? How many districts?” The audience found these questions challenging.



**Students dressed in what is considered to be “traditional Kashmiri attire” from the Kashmir valley, perform a skit during a school event (photograph by Saeed Khan).**

There was also an emphasis on a Muslim Kashmiri identity to differentiate from the oppressive Dogra rule: “Who was the first Muslim ruler to govern Kashmir? Under which Muslim ruler did the frontiers of Kashmir expand? Who was the last Muslim ruler of united Kashmir?” A young boy answered the third question as Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto;[6] the audience erupted with laughter.

Those who gave correct answers or simply participated were given prizes. These comprised of books written in Urdu on the speeches, interviews, letters, and court statements of Maqbool Bhat (<http://www.wandemag.com/the-life-and-times-of-maqbool-bhat-part-one/>), a prominent Kashmiri political activist who, in 1984, was hanged in India on charges of treason.[7]

Neelum’s elders are preparing their youth for a world where *Azadi* (freedom) has been found and dearly held, an “affirmatist” future that will *surely* be realized. In this imaginary, the LoC does not reflect a final partition but political promise.[8] In a space of constant surveillance, they utilize every little opportunity to engage in some kind of public and intergenerational dialogue to ensure the circulation of Kashmir’s sovereignty. The only genuinely uncensored site amenable to these discussions is the home, which I think is better left outside my analytical gaze.

One of the organizers later explained that the quiz served the pedagogical function of refreshing people’s memories of Kashmir in its entirety and historicity, not merely as fragments of India, Pakistan, and China. He added: “According to the national school syllabus, there are only three compulsory subjects: *Islamiyat*, Urdu, and Pakistan Studies. Our children don’t study about Kashmir; there are no

textbooks, no courses, nothing. We want to start a mandatory class on *Kashmiriyat*, so our children can learn their history, and place more books on Kashmir in our libraries.” According to the organizers, despite the venue being at full capacity, this was considered to be a low turnout, as many parents are afraid of sending their children to such “sensitive events,” fearing that they may get on the radar of Pakistan’s surveillance apparatus (“*agencies pechay lag na jai*”).

After Article 370 was removed, demonstrations also erupted on this side of the LoC. Protestors demanded the complete demilitarization of Kashmir in its entirety, raising questions about Kashmir’s current configuration within Pakistan.[9] They were met by police force, which is usually how any form of political expression is addressed in the region.

Residents, both young and old, relate to the labor and struggle for *Azadi*. They maintain connections with the “other side” via various affirmative practices; some public, some private. This may take the form of public history lessons on Kashmir outside the state-sanctioned syllabus, a glimpse of which is shared in this essay. Or the stories of Kashmir’s past, present, and future told in the safety of one’s home. These remind us that ultimately there is only one Kashmir, nor India’s nor Pakistan’s.

This also stands as an important reminder for those of us who think and write on Kashmir, to insist on the interconnections of the many Kashmirs and the forms of solidarity that can be enabled from all sides. [10] And, to be wary of the epistemic violence of language even if only used to mark geography.

[1] See, Ahmad 2019; Parvaiz 2020; Snedden 2019.

[2] See, Ali 2019a; Haider 2009.

[3] See, Ali 2019b.

[4] Aijazi 2018.

[5] AJK refers to Azad Jammu and Kashmir, the nomenclature given to one of the two divisions of Pakistan-controlled Kashmir. Neelum is located in AJK.

[6] Zulfikar Ali Bhutto served as the 9<sup>th</sup> Prime Minister of Pakistan. He is remembered fondly by many Kashmiris on account of his attempts to take up Kashmir at the United Nations. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4TGEkQ-3Csc>). However, whether his vision on Kashmir truly supported Kashmir’s sovereignty is debatable.

[7] Several of Maqbool Bhat’s books remain banned or are difficult to obtain in Pakistan, including in the portion of Kashmir under Pakistan’s control.

[8] Zia 2019.

[9] Hashim 2019; Shams 2019; Naqash 2019.

[10] Aijazi 2019.



*Omer Aijazi is a Postdoctoral Research Fellow (Anthropology and Religion) at the University of Toronto. He writes on questions of violence and social repair along the Line of Control in the disputed territory of Kashmir and its continuity with Northern Pakistan. This essay was written on the traditional land of the Huron-Wendat, the Seneca, and most recently the Mississaugas of the Credit River.*

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