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Kashmir: Religious Diversity Becomes Religious Militancy

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Abstract

This case study explores the shift away from interreligious harmony and toward sectarian strife in Kashmiri society, particularly over the last three decades, and how religious antagonisms have played into both local politics and warfare between India and Pakistan. The case study exposes the nature of the situation in Kashmir through five questions: What are the historical origins of the conflict over Kashmir? How are religious factors involved in the conflict? How important were international religious and political forces? What role do socioeconomic factors play? How does religion intersect with these other factors in driving outcomes? Along with its core text, the case study features a timeline of key events, a guide to relevant religious groups and nongovernmental organizations, and a list of recommended further readings.

About this Case Study

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Introduction

The 1947 partition of British India into a Hindu-majority India and a Muslim-majority Pakistan inaugurated a conflict over the border region of Kashmir that continues to this day. Nationalism is at the core of the dispute, but religion plays an important role as well. For India's leaders, any change in the status of the Muslim-majority territory it currently controls is out of the question. Pakistani leaders insist that they have no territorial ambitions, and maintain that their goal has always been to protect the

rights of the Muslim population living under Indian rule. Religion has become increasingly important as a central marker of identity and a flashpoint for conflict in Kashmir. By the late 1970s, Islamic nationalism was on the rise in Pakistan and Hindu nationalism began to grow in India in the 1980s. These changes in both countries' domestic politics and the emergence of a militant Kashmiri independence movement have sharpened the religious dimension of conflict over the past three decades.



A Kashmiri family

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The conflict in Kashmir has been shaped by a complicated interplay between factors internal to Kashmir and the oftencontentious relationship between India and Pakistan. The pivotal point in Kashmir's modern history was the decision by the Maharaja of Jammu and Kashmir, a Hindu, to join his Muslim-majority province to India, rather than Muslimmajority Pakistan, at the time of partition. From then on, Pakistan has contended that Muslims in Kashmir are being held captive by Hindu India, and the issue continues to resonate powerfully with the Pakistani public. In contrast, India insists that the Maharaja's 1947 decision was in accordance with the internationally agreed-upon method of partition. War ensued between Pakistan and India, ending only with a UN-backed ceasefire that left Kashmir divided along the still-observed Line of Control. This UN agreement also called for a plebiscite to determine Kashmir's future status, but due to continued Pakistani military presence along the disputed border and Indian resistance to the plebiscite, it has never taken place. The two nations fought a second war over Kashmir in 1965, but since then a stable status quo has developed with each country holding on to those areas where it has a military advantage: India maintains control of the Kashmir Valley, Jammu, and Ladakh provinces, and Pakistan holds the Azad Kashmir region and Gilgit-Baltistan. India and Pakistan fought another war in 1971, which resulted in the breakup of Pakistan and the establishment of independent Bangladesh, but largely spared Kashmir.

It was not until 1999 that a third war over Kashmir ensued. The 1999 Kargil conflict broke out when Pakistan infiltrated a body of troops into the Indian side of the Line of Control. Bitter fighting raged in this Himalayan region from May through July, with Indian soldiers and international diplomatic pressure pushing the Pakistani army out of Indiancontrolled territory.

This outbreak of violence in Kashmir was distinctive due to the greater salience of religious actors in both countries' politics. In the 1970s and 1980s, both Pakistan and India saw religious revivalism and religious nationalism gain greater social and political currency. In Pakistan, leaders such as General Muhammad Zia-ul-Haq pushed back against the perceived secularization and Westernization of society, implementing a national Islamization program. This stressed the notion that Pakistan is a Muslim nation in contrast to Hindu India or the atheistic Soviets and Chinese. In turn, by the mid-1980s India's traditionally secular government, led for decades by the Congress Party, found itself challenged by increasingly popular Hindu nationalists represented by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). Religious nationalists in both countries favored efforts to gain a decisive advantage in Kashmir, resulting in the Kargil conflict.

There have been dozens of instances of militant attacks in Kashmir over the past twenty years. Notably, in 1989, Muslim Kashmiri militants launched an insurgency against Indian forces across the Line of Control. In the early 1990s, attacks on both Indian forces and civilians (including some Muslim communities) prompted a mass exodus of Hindu Pandits from Kashmir. Indian forces (both army and paramilitary) responded to the insurgency with a variety of methods, resulting in allegations of extrajudicial detentions, torture, and executions. Many local Kashmiris found themselves caught between the insurgents and the Indian military, both of which acted with what Human Rights Watch has called "patterns of impunity" in their dealings with civilians. While direct fighting between Pakistani and Indian forces has been rare, Pakistan provides safe harbor and arms to militants who train and recruit on the Pakistani side of the Line of Control. While casualty counts vary widely, it is generally agreed that at least 30,000 civilians have been killed (some Kashmiri groups say that number is as high as 100,000). Since 2004, India and Pakistan have negotiated peripheral measures aimed at calming Kashmir, but no fundamental compromise is yet in sight that would allow a resolution to the conflict.

DOMESTIC FACTORS

Although Kashmir has long been characterized by religious diversity, it is only the last generation that has seen this diversity become a source of sectarian violence. Kashmir is historically home to Muslims, Hindus, and Buddhists. Local leaders coined a term, kashmiriyat ("Kashmir amity"), to describe the relative harmony across religious and cultural lines. Religious groups often blended practices across faith lines, and a shared Kashmiri identity trumped sectarian divisions. The end of British rule and the subsequent establishment of the states of Pakistan (with its primarily Muslim population) and India (with its Hindu majority and a Muslim population nearly as large as Pakistan's) unsettled the status quo, making appeals to narrow sectarian interests from outside the region commonplace.

Pakistan's antagonistic stance toward India over Kashmir, the rise of Hindu nationalism in the 1980s, and regular

Recently, governments in both India and Pakistan have used religious appeals to bolster their domestic support and justify hard-line policies in Kashmir. In the 1990s, India's Hindu-nationalist BJP began to implement strenuous anti-militant operations that impacted civilian populations, especially in the Muslim-majority Kashmir Valley. Indian security forces routinely relied on special

spurts of sectarian violence since 1989 have significantly

undermined the unifying identity of kashmiriyat. In par-

ticular, the heavy-handed presence of the Indian military

in Kashmir drove many Muslims to sympathize with separatist militants. Likewise, Islamic militant violence drove

many Hindus closer to a growing religious nationalism,

known as hindutva. Buddhists increasingly sought to in-

sulate themselves from the rest of Kashmir to protect their

unique identity and interests.

laws issued by the Indian government (such as the Jammu and Kashmir Disturbed Areas Act) to legitimize extrajudicial beatings and executions of civilians. In Pakistan, the quasi-military government of President Pervez Musharraf continued to allow Muslim militants to train and stage attacks from the Pakistani side of the Line of Control. Militant groups like Jaish-e-Mohammed and Lashkar-e-Taiba wed insurgent violence with Islamist extremism. Since Musharraf's ouster in 2008, it has become increasingly clear that many of these groups, including the Pakistani Taliban and elements of Al-Qaeda, conduct their operations from ungoverned areas of Pakistan.



A sign in Kashmir ©Kashmirglobal.com

INTERNATIONAL FACTORS

The international community has nervously watched events in Kashmir and its connections to regional political trends. Religious pluralism and religious tolerance have ebbed over the past two decades, making Kashmir a major element in a wider set of sectarian divides. For instance, events within India like the destruction of the Babri Mosque at Ayodhya in 1992 by Hindu extremists (and the deadly riots that followed) heightened tensions within Kashmir and outraged the international community. Kashmir is a crucial international pilgrimage site for Hindus, including tourists from Europe and North America. Issues surrounding the security of pilgrims and religious sites, such as the Vaishno Devi and Amarnath shrines, act as fodder for those who would link control of Kashmir with Hindu nationalism.

Several Islamist groups have also played a role in the Kashmir conflict. Jihadists have entered the region with varying degrees of support from the Pakistani government. Just as the Pakistani government supported religious militants in

Afghanistan to further its own interests, it has pursued a similar strategy in Kashmir. Jihadist groups like Jaish-e-Mohammed were a useful tool for the Pakistani government: they effectively challenged Indian control of Kashmir, provoked harsh repressive measures from the Indian military, and allowed the regular Pakistani military to gain distance from frontline hostilities. Since the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, American officials have pressed Pakistan to reel in the Islamic militants, with limited success. The radical brand of Islamism espoused by these groups is a departure from native Kashmiri Muslim practices, known for their syncretistic blending of

Hindu and Buddhist rituals. However, increasing alienation from Hindu India increased the effectiveness of separatist Islamic appeals among native Kashmiri Muslims.

Although the Kashmir conflict is distinct both geographically and politically, it is connected to numerous other regional flashpoints. Pakistan fears Indian influence on its border in Kashmir as well as along its border with a potentially resurgent Afghanistan. India is concerned not just about the traditional Pakistani military but also Islamist terrorism, as exemplified by the November 2008 Mumbai attacks by Pakistani Lashkar-e-Taiba, which killed 172 people. Neighbors in the region, particularly Afghanistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Russia, and China, all fear Islamist terrorism directed by militants headquartered in Pakistan. Moreover, the entire international community is concerned by a worst-case scenario in which a spiral of violence in Kashmir results in a nuclear war between India and Pakistan, since both possess weapons of mass destruction.



Indian soldier stationed in Kashmir

RELIGION AND SOCIOECONOMIC FACTORS

Ethnicity and religion are critical identity markers in Kashmir. Geographically, the area commonly referred to as Kashmir actually encompasses five provinces, which are divided by the Line of Control between India and Pakistan. Demographic variables in each of these provinces have played into the broader conflict, especially in the three provinces on the Indian side of the Line of Control: the Kashmir Valley, Jammu, and Ladakh. In the Kashmir Valley, which includes the regional capital of Srinagar, Muslims predominate, making up 95 percent of the approximately 6 million residents. In contrast, in the Jammu region, Hindus are in the majority, with 67 percent of the population of about 5 million. Muslims are the second largest group, with 30 percent of the population. Muslims are divided in terms of ethnicity, particularly between those living in Jammu and Kashmir. This has resulted in internal fragmentation that complicates negotiation efforts. The third Indian-controlled region, Ladakh, is experiencing population shifts but until recently had a slight Tibetan Buddhist majority (50 percent) and a significant population of Shi'a Muslims (46 percent). This region is much less densely populated than Jammu and the Kashmir Valley, with only 250,000 residents.

Population estimates vary for the two Pakistani provinces: approximately 900,000 people lived in Gilgit-Baltistan at the last census in 1998, whereas Azad Kashmir has approximately 3.2 million residents according to the Pakistani government. The Pakistani side of the Line of Control, in contrast to the Indian-controlled territory, is almost exclusively Muslim (99 percent of residents). However, this apparent homogeneity masks important religious differences among Muslims, especially within Gilgit-Baltistan. Here, the Shi'a majority regularly clashes with a Sunni minority that is closely aligned with the Pakistani military

and central government in Islamabad.

Kashmir's economy is still struggling to recover from the devastating earthquake of late 2005, which struck primarily Pakistani-controlled Kashmir. This has had an important impact in the realm of education. Educational infrastructure was already lacking there, and the 2005 earthquake reduced much of it to rubble. Indian and other international observers have expressed concern that radical Islamists have stepped into this social service vacuum in Pakistani-administered Kashmir, and that extremist madrasas are training the next generation of Islamic militants. Such schools have been the cause of civil conflict in Gilgit-Baltistan, with local Shi'as rejecting the narrowly constructed Sunni curricula that are imposed on their children. Such objections touched off deadly riots on multiple occasions during the past decade.

Kashmir's ethnic and religious diversity, once the hallmark of its local pluralism, has become the stage for a wider set of adversarial contests between India and Pakistan. Many locals, regardless of their faith tradition, have been caught in the middle—victims of national militaries, insurgents, or both. Over time, however, wider trends toward religious nationalism and heavy-handed actions by the Indian government have driven many members of religious communities to align themselves with one side or the other, eroding trust and contact across religious lines.

In conclusion, the Kashmir dispute is infused by notions of religious identity, but at its heart is not a war for or against a faith. Rather, it is a geopolitical contest between national governments that is rooted in national interests, notions of security, and the regional dynamics of ethnic and religious nationalism and militancy.

KEY EVENTS

1947 Partition and Indo-Pakistani War

India and Pakistan are partitioned upon the end of British rule; millions flee to one side or the other based on ethnicity and religion. Kashmir becomes a disputed territory. The subsequent Indo-Pakistani War (also known as the First Kashmir War) results in India taking control of the Kashmir Valley, Jammu, and Ladakh, while Pakistan gained control of Azad Kashmir and Gilgit-Baltistan, establishing the Line of Control between Indian-controlled Kashmir and Pakistani-controlled Kashmir that exists to the present day.

1965 Kashmir War

Often called the Second Kashmir War, Indian forces defeat Pakistan on the battlefield, but little changes on the ground.

1971 Indo-Pakistani War

Although not a war over Kashmir, this conflict deepens Indian-Pakistani enmity. With Indian support, East Pakistan secedes and becomes the independent state of Bangladesh.

1989 Insurgency Erupts

In the wake of disputed Kashmiri elections and more general failures of Indian governance, Pakistani militants cross the Line of Control and commence an armed insurgency against the Indian government. The Indian government responds with harsh counterinsurgency operations that further alienate much of the Muslim population of the Kashmir Valley. Militant groups, like the Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Front, clash with Indian regular army forces, causing substantial civilian casualties. As this Muslim-Hindu violence escalates, so do tensions between Muslims and Buddhists in Ladakh. Rioting prompts the Ladakh Buddhist Association to call for a three-year boycott of all Muslim businesses.

1989 Pandit Exodus

The Pandits made up the majority of the Hindus of the Kashmir Valley. This Brahmin caste was a privileged minority among a Muslim majority before the 1947 partition, and retained its prominence until conflict erupted in 1989. Since then, many have been killed and the majority has fled to escape sectarian violence. Some figures estimate that as many as 200,000 to 300,000 Pandits are living in exile away from Kashmir, many in Internally Displaced Person camps scattered throughout India. The eventual return of the Pandits to the Kashmir Valley is one of many unresolved issues facing those that seek to negotiate a settlement in Kashmir. Pandit persecution plays into the hands of Hindu nationalists who stress the need to protect coreligionists from oppression at the hands of Muslims. "Panun Kashmir" refers to both the name of the homeland that some Pandits demand within Kashmir for their people's safe return and to an organization representing that goal. This homeland would include much of the Kashmir Valley, including the central city of Srinagar.

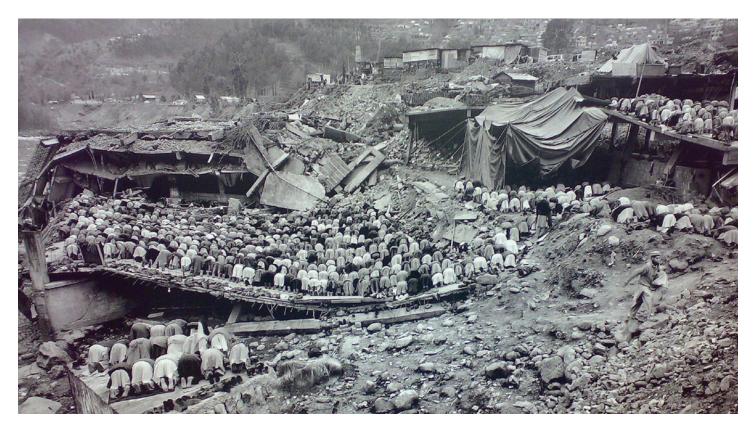
1999 Indo-Pakistani War

Most commonly called the Kargil conflict or Kargil War but sometimes called the Third Kashmir War, this was the first major conflict between India and Pakistan in which both sides were declared nuclear powers. The conflict began in May with Pakistani military units infiltrating the high-altitude Kargil region; ultimately they were repulsed by Indian troops and international pressure.

2000–2002 Attacks on Hindu Pilgrims

Kashmir is home to two of the holiest sites of Hinduism, the Amarnath Cave shrine and the Vaishno Devi shrine, each of which is the destination for important annual pilgrimages. The former is near territory controlled by Muslim militants, and thus presents a flashpoint for attacks. The path to the

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People attend Friday prayers on what remains of a mosque following the 2005 earthquake

Amarnath Cave shrine was attacked in 2000, 2001, and multiple times in 2002. Despite these attacks, pilgrims continue to visit each site every year. The willingness to attack pilgrims highlights the weakening of the unifying ideal of *kashmiriyat* since the outbreak of the insurgency in 1989.

2000-present Confidence Building Measures

For a number of years, both India and Pakistan have engaged in hesitant attempts to build a peace process. In 2000, Indian Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee declared a unilateral ceasefire in observance of Ramadan. This controversial step was not officially reciprocated by Muslim militants, but did bring at least a temporary lull in violence. The process of normalizing relations continued in 2004 with the defeat of the Hindu nationalist BIP and the election of Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, a Sikh. Singh and Pakistan's President Musharraf met a number of times to discuss Indo-Pakistani relations, including the Kashmir dispute. Their focus was largely on small-scale confidence-building measures in the absence of a comprehensive agreement on the conflict. Bus service opened across the Line of Control in 2005, and transport now connects two of Sikhism's holiest sites on opposite sides of the Indo-Pakistani border: Amritsar in India and

Nankana Sahib in Pakistan. While these confidence-building measures initially met with some success, the terrorist attacks on Mumbai in November 2008 have significantly strained relations between Delhi and Islamabad on all issues, including Kashmir.

2005 Earthquake

In October 2005, a massive earthquake hit Kashmir. The quake was centered on the Pakistani side of the Line of Control, and killed over 75,000 in Pakistani-controlled Kashmir and 1,500 in Indian-controlled Kashmir. The quake struck during the month of Ramadan, which may have hindered the response in the worst hit zones. In the aftermath of the quake, relief organizations rushed to meet the needs of the devastated populations. Unfortunately, many of those best equipped to bring humanitarian aid were shadow organizations tied to Islamist militants. Legitimate humanitarian groups like the Edhi Foundation, Islamic Relief, and World Vision had to compete with militants tied to Jaish-e-Mohammed and Lashkar-e-Taiba. The Musharraf government allowed these militant groups to operate openly, and build public support in the process.

RELIGIOUS GROUPS

Kashmiri Sufism (Muslim)

The Muslim community in Kashmir has traditionally been heavily influenced by Sufi systems of belief. This resulted in openness to Hindu and Buddhist beliefs and practices, and relative harmony with the large Hindu minority. The particular brand of Sufism prominent in Kashmir is known as Rishi Sufism, an indigenous set of beliefs known for its emphasis on asceticism and the unity of humanity. Kashmir's most important Muslim religious site is the Hazratbal Shrine in Srinagar. It houses a hair of the Prophet Muhammad, which is displayed for special religious festivals. Jama Masjid, the largest mosque in Srinagar, has a capacity of 30,000.

Islamist Militant Groups

The Kashmir conflict is fueled by Islamist militant groups developed with support from the Pakistani government. Among the most prominent of these are Jaish-e-Mohammed and Lashsar-e-Taiba, both of which are headquartered on the Pakistani side of the Line of Control. Hizbul Mujahedeen is believed to be the single largest militant group, and is headquartered within Indian Kashmir. These groups operate primarily in Indian Kashmir, although Jaish-e-Mohammed and Lashkar-e-Taiba moved beyond Kashmir to bomb the Indian Parliament in 2001. Jamaate-Islami, Pakistan's largest Islamic political party, has connections with many of these organizations and protested moves by President Musharraf to limit their armed activities in Indian-controlled Kashmir. Some militant factions change names frequently, especially to protect affiliated schools and charitable organizations from expulsion by the Indian and Pakistani governments. Such organizations have been used to build up support for the militants among the indigenous Kashmiri Muslim community.

Buddhism

Buddhists traditionally made up the majority in the province of Ladakh, one of the three provinces of Indian-controlled Kashmir. The Ladakh Buddhist Association is a leading voice for the Buddhist community. After Buddhist-Muslim riots in 1989, the LBA called for a boycott of Muslim businesses that lasted three years. The Buddhists of Ladakh have successfully negotiated some autonomy from the Indian state through the Ladakh Autonomous Hill Development Council in the Leh district, where they comprise the large majority of the population.



Buddhist monk

NONGOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS

International Center on Religion and Diplomacy

http://icrd.org/kashmir

The International Center on Religion and Diplomacy (ICRD) is an American NGO dedicated to bridging religion and diplomacy in global conflict zones. Since 2000, ICRD has been active in Kashmir in training next-generation political and religious leaders for reconciliation work. Working on both sides of the Line of Control and across religious traditions, ICRD has trained hundreds of grassroots leaders in reconciliation and confronting the wounds of history. This work has had a particular impact on the issue of Pandit return to the Kashmir Valley, one of the thorniest issues in Kashmir diplomacy. The ICRD is currently working to expand these localized workshops into large-scale public events in the city of Baramulla, a place once known for its militancy.

Pugwash Process

http://pugwash.org/reports/rc/sa/march2006/march2006-report.htm

The Pugwash Conference is an international organization dedicated to Track II peace-building (a form of diplomacy carried out by non-officials like scholars and activists) in various parts of the world. Pugwash has been active in Kashmir diplomacy with meetings in India, Sri Lanka, Nepal, and Pakistan. Among Pugwash's priorities is ensuring that the interests of Kashmiri political and civil society leaders are heard in negotiations along with

those of the Pakistani and Indian governments. Kashmiri representation at these conferences comes from across religious divides, and ensures that confidence-building measures enacted by India and Pakistan are taken in consultation with the Kashmiris they are designed to benefit.

UNMOGIP: United Nations Military Observer Group in India and Pakistan

http://un.org/Depts/dpko/missions/unmogip

Established in 1949, UNMOGIP was deployed in January of that year to supervise the ceasefire agreed between India and Pakistan in the State of Jammu and Kashmir. Since the hostilities of 1971, UNMOGIP monitors the ceasefire called for by the United Nations Security Council. The website links to the UN resolutions regarding Kashmir and other facts and figures about the history of the conflict.

Doctors Without Borders

http://msfindia.in/

In Kashmir, Doctors Without Borders continues to provide community-based psychosocial support and basic health care to those affected by years of violence, including over 12,000 consultations. A search for "Kashmir" on the organization's website returns publications on their specific activities in the region.

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DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- 1. What are the historical origins of the conflict over Kashmir?
- **2.** How are religious factors involved in the conflict?
- **3.** How important were international religious and political forces?
- **4.** What role do socioeconomic factors played?
- 5. How does religion intersect with these other factors in driving outcomes?