

Conflict Escalation in Kashmir: A Study in State-Society Breakdown

By Gerald Meyerle*

“Victory attained by violence is tantamount to defeat, for it is momentary.”
—Mahatma Gandhi

How did the Kashmir Valley remain peaceful for decades and then suddenly explode into violence in 1989 and 1990? More than 13 years of fighting in which as many as 50,000 people have died has benefited neither the Indian government, the Kashmiri people, nor those young men who took up the gun in 1989. Militancy sparked state repression and state repression furious reprisals that generated a spiral of violence that has ruined Kashmir’s economy and society, destroyed the government’s authority, and demoralized the army and security forces. A culture of violence has bred deep cynicism and despair from which Kashmiri society may never fully recover. Like state-society violence elsewhere, the Kashmir conflict is messy and savage, lacks clear objectives, and often does not distinguish between combatants and non-combatants, enemies and friends.

This paper’s modest goal is to trace the conflict back to the 1980s and before in an effort to point out those factors that contributed most to the outbreak of violence in 1989 and 1990. I break the conflict down into three stages: stable peace, political crisis, and violent conflict. I also identify three types of factors that helped push the conflict forward: structural dynamics that contribute to weak state-society relations, proximate causes that drove the political crises of the 1980s, and trigger factors that sent these crises spiraling into violence.

I argue that the onset of militancy and repression in Kashmir should be understood as the result of a gradual process of escalation whereby underlying tensions escalated to crisis when embattled central leaders coercively undermined the state’s political and administrative institutions, causing a rapid deterioration in state-society relations that hit crisis levels as cycles of protest and state repression further alienated the public and eroded the government’s authority.

* Gerald Meyerle is a Ph.D. Candidate in the Department of Politics, University of Virginia. In the process of writing this article, he has made several trips to India, Pakistan, and Kashmir. His email address is gmm5f@virginia.edu.

Several trigger factors such as a rigged election, some scattered militant attacks, and then massive state repression sent the crisis spiraling into violence.

Stage 1: A Tense but Stable Peace

From India's Independence in 1947 to the early 1980s, the Kashmir valley remained relatively stable and peaceful, despite little press freedom, frequently rigged elections, and no organized political opposition. The ruling National Conference government depended on funds from the central government in New Delhi, which it distributed as patronage. Despite rampant corruption, misgovernance, and low economic development, the National Conference ruled unopposed without serious political unrest. While beleaguered Indian leaders faced numerous riots and violent rebellions elsewhere in the country during the 1970s and early 80s, Kashmir presented few problems. In the early 1950s, the National Conference under Sheikh Abdullah followed through with extensive land reforms that made him enormously popular. Aid from the center helped build schools and hospitals that slowly changed the Valley from a semi-feudal, mostly illiterate backwater to a semi-developed, semi-modern state with a growing middle class.

However, this relative calm belied a weak and unstable relationship between the central government in New Delhi and the people of the Kashmir valley. The center's authority in Kashmir has always been tenuous, and Kashmiri support for full integration uncertain. Background factors responsible for this dynamic fall into four categories. First are those factors that weaken Indian sovereignty, including Kashmir's status as disputed territory, lingering demands for a plebiscite to decide the state's final status, and a special autonomy that limited the center's powers to defense, communications, and foreign affairs. The second is geographic and demographic separateness. The third is a historical lack of democracy and press freedom, and the fourth changing political mobilization during the 1970s and 80s that posed new challenges to India's political leadership. These aspects contributed to a unique set of center-state tensions that help explain why Kashmir, unlike other crisis-hit Indian states in the 1980s and 1990s, fell into a cycle of militancy and repression from which it has yet to recover.

Disputed status, plebiscite, autonomy

Kashmir is disputed territory under international law. Pakistan claims sovereignty over the entire territory on the grounds that it is a Muslim majority state. India, a multi-religious secular state, denies the legitimacy of this claim, and argues that letting Kashmir go could threaten the unity of the country and endanger the country's approximately 140 million Muslims.¹ Pakistani leaders, on the other hand, argue that, according to the rules governing the partition of British India in 1947, the predominantly Muslim region of Kashmir should have gone to Islamic Pakistan.²

Kashmiris, in the meantime, have always viewed their accession to India in 1947 as conditional and temporary, pending a popular plebiscite to decide the region's final status. This plebiscite was never held. Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru offered to hold a UN-administered plebiscite to decide Kashmir's final status as part of India's ceasefire agreement with Pakistan in 1948, but this agreement broke down several years later. The plebiscite offer remained open, however, and has been a recurring theme in Kashmiri politics. Sheikh Abdullah, the state's popular leader, began demanding independence in the early 1950s until his arrest in 1953 for meeting with foreign leaders to gain support for secession. While the possibility of a plebiscite ever being held became ever more distant as the years went by, it remains as powerful as ever at the level of popular sentiment.

Nehru also granted Kashmir a special autonomous status within the Indian Union that restricted the center's authority to defense, foreign affairs, and communications. Non-Kashmiris are also prohibited from buying property in the state. Many of these provisions were removed with the 1952 Delhi Agreement that rescinded much of the state's legal autonomy. Further measures in the 1970s removed nearly all special provisions of administrative autonomy. Nehru and his successor Indira Gandhi (daughter of Nehru and no relation to Mahatma Gandhi) had removed much of Kashmir's substantive autonomy by the 1980s through a series of low-profile measures that left intact the basic principles of the relationship, but brought local governance

¹ There are approximately 120 million Muslims living in India compared to about 140 million in Pakistan.

² For a good summary of these arguments, see Robert Wirsing, *India, Pakistan, and the Kashmir Dispute: On Regional Conflict and its Resolution*, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994), 10-12.

firmly under central authority.³ The legal precedent of autonomy remained, however, leaving the door open to renegotiation of the center-state relationship.

Geographic and demographic separateness

Kashmir has a high degree of cultural separateness from the rest of the subcontinent, due in no small part to its long history of isolation. It is the only Muslim majority state in India, and also has a distinct ethno-cultural identity known as *Kashmiriyyaat*. Perceived threats to Kashmiri identity have aroused passions time and again, and helped galvanize public opinion behind the secessionist movement during its early stages. Kashmir is separated from India by two mountain ranges with peaks as high as 15,000 feet that are nearly impassable during the winter months. No other state presents such formidable geographic barriers, with the possible exception of India's northeastern states where insurgencies have raged since the 1950s.

Kashmir shares a porous, contested border with Pakistan, a hostile neighboring state that claims the entire territory and advocates a military solution to the dispute. Cross-border infiltration has posed a constant challenge to Indian policy-makers who insist that much of the present violence is a direct result of the Pakistan military's 13-year-old policy of arming, training, and financing militants from across the Line of Control. This plays an important role in the calculus of Indian leaders and the military capabilities of separatist insurgents. It also keeps the threat of war high. India and Pakistan have fought three wars over Kashmir – all of which began with some kind of infiltration from Pakistani territory. As a result, Indian leaders have a tendency to view threats to internal order in Kashmir as a matter of external security, leading to greater state reliance on coercion and less political bargaining.

Lack of democracy and press freedom

Kashmir is less free and democratic than the rest of India. The ruling National Conference party in Kashmir has a long history of using state power to muzzle the press and exclude opposition parties from the electoral process. Indian leaders in New Delhi helped ensure

³ See Bose et al, "India's Kashmir War" in Ashgar Ali Engineer, *Secular Crown on Fire: The Kashmir Dispute*, (Delhi: Ajanta Publications, 1991). Kashmir's administrative autonomy was further dismantled in later years, culminating in the notorious declarations of governor's rule in the 1980s and 90s that removed even the appearance of special autonomy.

this state of affairs for fear that a powerful political opposition may push for independence or accession to Pakistan. Opposition activists were forced underground where they became increasingly radicalized through the 1970s, turning to strident ethno religious mobilization in the 1980s as a means of fragmenting the ruling all-India secular ideologies of the National Conference and Congress parties in Srinagar and New Delhi.

Balraj Puri, a prominent pro-autonomy activist, claims he advised Prime Minister Nehru to extend political freedoms in the state following demonstrations against the arrest of the enormously popular Kashmiri leader Sheikh Abdullah in 1953. Nehru apparently replied that “we have gambled at the international stage on Kashmir, we cannot afford to lose it. At the moment, we are there at the point of the bayonet. Till things improve, democracy and morality can wait.”⁴ Puri adds that most analysts at the time justified Kashmir’s one-party system on economic and security grounds.⁵ This was wrong, he argues, because when the center allowed opposition parties to function in the late 1970s and early 80s, secessionist sentiment faded considerably. Puri asserts that the center’s opposition to the construction of legitimate political institutions was the single most important factor in the emergence of secessionist violence in the late 1980s.⁶

Changing political mobilization

Long-term shifts in political mobilization from the 1960s on inclined a younger generation of Kashmiris toward more strident opposition. Rising political awareness in the face of stagnant political and economic development contributed to frustration in the emerging Kashmiri middle class. Huge expansions in higher education, new media technologies, and the decline of all-India secular institutions drove the emergence of particularistic Kashmiri nationalism during the 1970s and 80s that shifted political support away from an already declining National Conference party.

The Indian government dramatically expanded literacy and higher education during the 1970s and 80s, leading to the rise of a new generation of more educated, politically aware youth

⁴ Puri, *Kashmir Toward Insurgency*, 46.

⁵ Puri, *Kashmir Toward Insurgency*, 46.

⁶ Puri, *Kashmir Toward Insurgency*, 44-45.

less likely than their forebears to tolerate the status quo.⁷ Young people faced stagnant political and economic opportunities, and repressive barriers to protest. The number of unemployed in Kashmir rose from 10,000 in 1971 to 150,000 in 1986.⁸ The number of Muslims in government jobs remained well below their share of the population despite great expansions in higher education.⁹ According to political commentator Prem Shankar Jha, “this is a class that was trained to wield power, but denied the opportunity to do so.”¹⁰

The state’s educated youth filled the ranks of emerging Kashmiri nationalist movements that rallied behind two competing nationalist ideologies – ethnic and Islamist – that challenged all-India National Conference secularism. Ethnic Kashmiri nationalists stressed a separate ethnic identity known as *Kashmiriyaat* that encompassed Kashmiris of all religions and ethnic groups, and agitated for an independent, united Kashmir. A smaller, yet more vocal, minority, represented by the *Jama’at-i-Islami* of Jammu and Kashmir, emphasized the region’s predominantly Muslim makeup, and argued that Kashmir as a Muslim majority state should merge with Pakistan.¹¹ Kashmiri nationalism offered a fresh dynamism that Kashmir’s newly educated middle class took to with conviction.¹²

Maya Chadda argues this conflict between an all-inclusive Indian nationalism and regional nationalisms mirrors the struggle for power between state and local political actors on one side and central leaders on the other. India’s leaders viewed maintenance of an all-India nationalism as integral to ensuring the voluntary compliance of local leaders and maintaining the unity of the country without resort to force. When regional nationalism began to win out in

⁷ Sumit Ganguly, *The Crisis in Kashmir: Portents of War, Hopes of Peace*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 29-30. Kashmir had the second highest literacy rate of all Indian states in the 1970s, even though it was among the least developed.

⁸ Rajesh Kadian, *The Kashmir Tangle: Issues and Options*, (Boulder: Westview Press, 1993), 16.

⁹ Tapan Bose et al, “India’s Kashmir War,” in *Secular Crown on Fire*, 262-66.

¹⁰ Prem Shankar Jha, “Frustrated Middle Class: Roots of Kashmir’s Alienation”, in *Secular Crown on Fire: The Kashmir Dispute*, (Delhi: Ajanta Publications, 1991), 35.

¹¹ On the ideological differences between the two nationalisms, see Maya Chadda, *Ethnicity, Security and Separatism in India*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 60-61.

¹² On the middle class and Islamist politics, see Yoginder Sikand, “The Emergence and Development of the Jama’at-i-Islami of Jammu and Kashmir,” *Modern Asian Studies* 36:3 (Fall 2002), 705-08; and Mustapha Kamal Pasha, “Beyond the Two-Nation Divide: Kashmir and Resurgent Islam,” in *Perspectives on Kashmir: The Roots of Conflict in South Asia*, (Boulder: Westview Press, 1992), 371-75. Pasha argues that the assertiveness of middle class youth inspired by Islamist ideas helped tip the balance away from secularism.

Kashmir, India's leaders sought to correct this shifting balance in political forces by forcefully centralizing power. This only created more problems.¹³

Stage 2: Political crisis and its escalation

A series of political crises shattered the relative quiet of Kashmir valley from the mid-1980s on. Tensions that had simmered beneath the surface for decades suddenly burst into the open. The mood in the valley had improved with the state's first free and fair elections in 1977 and 1983 in which the National Conference won resounding victories. The situation deteriorated rapidly, however, when Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi engineered the dismissal of Farooq Abdullah's National Conference government in 1983, and replaced him with the incompetent and repressive G.M. Shah. During his 20 months in power, Shah imposed curfew on one locality or another at least 157 times before the government was dismissed and governor's rule declared.¹⁴ Incidents of police repression increased dramatically during his tenure, as did riots and scattered militant attacks.¹⁵

Politics became more factional and central leaders depended increasingly on coercion to maintain control through what had become in the eyes of many Kashmiris an illegitimate proxy government. Rather than bring democracy back to the Valley, Indira's son and successor Rajiv Gandhi forced an alliance with the National Conference in 1986 that transformed Kashmiri democracy into a *de-facto* one-party system in which Congress politicians pulled the strings. The National Conference and Congress parties lost legitimacy over night as young activists turned away from the democratic process towards protests, riots, and militancy. Rajiv Gandhi extended repressive anti-terrorist legislation to the state and stepped up paramilitary patrols. According to Sumit Ganguly, "the very measures that had been undertaken to curb violent secessionist activity fed the existing reservoir of discontent and resentment."¹⁶

These policies, though intended to strengthen New Delhi's control, weakened the government's authority at the local level and contributed to escalating crises of intervention and

¹³ Chadda, *Ethnicity, Security and Separatism in India*, 49-51, 140-45.

¹⁴ *India Today*, March 31, 1986, 82.

¹⁵ Ganguly, *The Crisis in Kashmir*, 88.

¹⁶ Ganguly, *The Crisis in Kashmir*, 90, 93.

resistance. A humiliated and discredited National Conference declined, and fragmented opposition groups emerged to fill the vacuum. As police firings became more prevalent with rising protests and political violence, radical secessionist leaders sidelined those advocating moderate solutions. Extremist militants emerged during this period to threaten the minority Hindu population and advocate armed resistance. The rule of law stood, however, and violence remained the exception.

Several related proximate factors contributed to these political crises. The first is that India's leaders became increasingly insecure from the mid 1970s on with the decline of the Congress and rise of regional nationalisms. India's leaders sought to make up for declining central authority by coercively centralizing power, especially in peripheral areas. Second, coercive centralization led to the dismissal of elected governments, and rapid administrative centralization that undermined local-level party and state institutions, and spurred escalating political crises. Third, mounting protests and anti-India agitation further weakened the government's authority. Finally, police firings and state repression alienated the people from their government and brought a near total collapse of local administration.

Embattled central leaders

Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's aggressive centralization of state and Congress party institutions during the late 1970s and 1980s considerably weakened state capacity at the local level. Indira Gandhi undermined party workers at the lower levels of the party hierarchy and concentrated power in its top echelons where she put a premium on personal loyalty. She also launched concerted attacks on the rural elites her father had depended on for control over local politics.¹⁷ Indira did the same to state institutions, frequently transferring middle-level officials, dismissing chief ministers, and imposing governor's rule. She also used paramilitaries and intelligence agencies to monitor and control the opposition.¹⁸ Indira did not, however, build new institutions and local-level links to replace those she undercut in her efforts to centralize power. A spiral of centrifugal forces resulted that spurred more centralization and state coercion in a vicious cycle of institutional decline and rising popular unrest.

¹⁷ Paul Brass, *The Politics of India Since Independence*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 33-34; Kohli, *Democracy and Discontent: India's Growing Crisis of Governability*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 190.

¹⁸ Brass, *The Politics of India Since Independence*, 321-22.

Analysts of the Indian state disagree on what drove this push for centralization. Maya Chadda argues the exigencies of state building demanded power be centralized to counter rising ethno-religious mobilization and declining central control.¹⁹ Paul Brass blames Indira Gandhi personally for her poor handling of the “tensions created by the centralizing drives of the Indian state in a society where the predominant long-term social, economic, and political tendencies are toward pluralism, regionalism, and decentralization.”²⁰ Atul Kohli blames Indira Gandhi’s personalized rule at the expense of grass-roots party organization.²¹ Many journalists argue Indira Gandhi decided to dismiss the Farooq Abdullah government in 1983 and centralize control over Kashmiri politics because she was worried Farooq Abdullah might align with the opposition at the all-India level. Whether Indira Gandhi was power hungry, paranoid, or concerned about the integrity of the Indian state, she clearly meant to attack challenges to her authority at the center. Her policies of coercive centralization continued under Prime Ministers Rajiv Gandhi and V.P. Singh – though perhaps to a diminished degree.

The government’s capacity to mediate conflict and peacefully co-opt assertive ethno-nationalist leaders declined while political violence escalated and politics became increasingly fragmented.²² Indira Gandhi responded to rising centrifugal challenges in states such as Punjab and Kashmir with coercion rather than co-optation or power sharing.²³ She painted demands for autonomy as potentially secessionist and indigenous leaders as treasonous, which served to justify her policies of undermining regional leaders. These policies only radicalized movements for autonomy, which led to increasingly brutal government crackdowns.²⁴ When Gandhi undermined the government’s mediating structures she exacerbated existing conflict, leading to increasingly coercive policies that contributed to escalating crises of governance.²⁵ In short,

¹⁹ Chadda, *Ethnicity, Security and Separatism in India*, 77-80, 102-03.

²⁰ Brass, *The Politics of India Since Independence*, 226-27.

²¹ Kohli, *Democracy and Discontent*, 190-91.

²² Kohli, *Democracy and Discontent*, 92-95.

²³ Chadda, *Ethnicity, Security and Separatism in India*, 77-78.

²⁴ Ganguly, *The Crisis in Kashmir*, 84-85.

²⁵ Kohli, *Democracy and Discontent*, 59-60.

violence increased while the state's capacity to deal with this violence deteriorated in a mutually reinforcing cycle of institutional decline and conflict escalation.²⁶

These crises only deepened after Rajiv Gandhi took power following his mother's assassination in 1984. Rather than accommodate Kashmiri demands, Rajiv Gandhi, at the helm of a rapidly declining Congress party, further undermined Kashmir's political institutions, and looked the other way while the National Conference government cracked down on protestors. Rajiv Gandhi lost the 1989 elections to a weak, motley coalition of regional and fringe parties known as the National Front under Prime Minister V.P. Singh. Shortly before collapsing in 1990, the Singh government, under pressure from hardliners within his coalition, declared governor's rule in Kashmir, and began a brutal counter-insurgency crackdown that marks the official beginning of the present conflict.

Coercive centralization and dismissal of elected government

Farooq Abdullah's dismissal on July 2, 1984 was a major watershed in Kashmiri politics. The National Conference had won 47 of 76 seats in what is widely regarded as one of only two free and fair elections in the state's history. Indira Gandhi engineered the defection of key parliamentarians and forced Abdullah's dismissal through a pliant governor she had herself appointed. This move put the lie to Kashmiri democracy and humiliated the few remaining moderate leaders capable of integrating the state with the rest of India.

The state government's legitimacy eroded overnight as protestors across the Kashmir valley denounced both the Congress and National Conference parties. The crisis deepened when in 1986 Farooq merged his party with the Congress in order to monopolize Kashmiri politics at the behest of the center. Though Abdullah could not be depended on to tow the center's line in a time of rising ethno-religious nationalism, he had succeeded in maintaining a moderate secular consensus and keeping radical politics at bay. When Indira pulled the rug out from under him, she destroyed the foundations of legitimacy upon which the Kashmir state government had rested for more than three decades, and by extension that of the center.

²⁶ P. Sahadevan argues that the weakness of mediating structures is a major proximate cause of ethnic conflict in South Asia. Sahadevan, "Ethnic Conflict and Militarism in South Asia," Kroc Institute Occasional Paper #16:OP:4, (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame, Joan B. Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies, 1999), 18.

Democratic politics had moderated secessionist forces and integrated the state with the rest of India. The center's dismissal of elected governments reinforced Kashmiris' sense of isolation and alienation, and stimulated a resurgence of separatist sentiment.²⁷ By 1984, Kashmiri autonomy had become a cruel joke. Indira's coercive abrogation of even the basic constitutional principles of the center-state relationship brought long-brewing tensions into the open. Indira and later Rajiv Gandhi sent the message that Kashmiri autonomy was essentially meaningless – that the state would, in fact, enjoy not more but less independence than other Indian states for which the constitutional provisions of federal democracy applied.

The result was widespread disaffection and renewed calls for independence that fueled the secessionist parties and militant organizations that came to dominate Kashmiri politics by the late 1980s. Indira's conspicuous attack on Kashmiri autonomy also brought renewed calls by Pakistan to enforce UN resolutions concerning the state's final status. Rajiv Gandhi's landslide election as prime minister in December 1984 held the promise of a more pragmatic policy. But rather than breathe life back into Kashmir's political institutions by calling for free and fair elections, Rajiv encouraged police repression by extending the notorious Terrorist and Disruptive Activities Ordinance to the state. In September 1985 some 600 villages were designated restricted areas in which constitutional freedoms were suspended and media access restricted.²⁸

The center restored democratic competition in 1986 in preparation for fresh elections to be held the following year. Rajiv, however, failed to take advantage of this important opportunity to rebuild confidence in the state's political institutions. Under pressure from Congress party leaders facing debilitating electoral challenges, he forced an alliance with the National Conference that transformed Kashmir's democracy into a *de facto*, one-party system. This alliance, known as the 1986 Rajiv-Farooq Accord, gave the Congress a virtual political monopoly. What little real opposition existed was disorganized, fragmented, and largely outside the pale of mainstream politics. It consisted of inexperienced, radicalized youth who would later fill the ranks of militant organizations.²⁹ Kashmiris looked on Farooq Abdullah and his

²⁷ Puri, *Kashmir Toward Insurgency*, 44-45.

²⁸ Ian Talbot, *India and Pakistan*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 275-76.

²⁹ Maya Chadda argues Rajiv Gandhi's attempt to reestablish relational control in 1986 by pushing for an alliance with the National Conference destroyed the interlocking balances between the center and Kashmiris. "After that,

colleagues in the National Conference with renewed disdain as little more than stooges of the center. The legitimacy of the Kashmiri state government hit an unprecedented nadir. Yet no organized opposition existed capable of representing the interests of Kashmiris through existing frameworks.

The breakdown of democratic institutions closed off peaceful avenues of protest, radicalized the opposition, and contributed to violent agitations.³⁰ Political elites in New Delhi and Srinagar disenfranchised educated and newly mobilized youth, many of whom took up the gun after 1987.³¹ Many of these youth were unemployed and nearly all had been excluded from the political system. Amanullah Khan, the Pakistan-based founder of Kashmir's primary pro-independence militant organization, the Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Front (JKLF), has been quoted as saying that when he tried to organize insurgency in the Valley in 1983, he found few takers. But by 1986, anti-India sentiment was running high, and young opposition activists from the Muslim United Front coalition began crossing the LOC to acquire arms and paramilitary training, largely in response to policies by the state and central government.³²

Escalating protests, strikes, and scattered militant attacks

The center's policies of coercive centralization led to protests, strikes, and, by the late 1980s, scattered militant attacks. Unrest escalated and popular support shifted in favor of secessionist parties and paramilitary outfits. Rather than pursue peaceful solutions, India's increasingly desperate leaders centralized administrative control, replaced local police with paramilitaries, arrested opposition activists, and humiliated moderate leaders. Kashmir's centrally appointed governor, Jagmohan Malhotra, showed open contempt for local police and government officials, who he viewed as corrupt and in league with anti-India elements. As a

only brute force, that last resort of the supranational state, remained." Chadda, *Ethnicity, Security and Separatism in India*, 140-44.

³⁰ See Sten Widmalm, *Kashmir in Comparative Perspective*, (New York: Routledge, 2002), 24-25. On how democracy's breakdown leads to often violent extra-institutional protest, see Juan Linz, *The Breakdown of Democratic Regimes: Crisis, Breakdown, and Reequilibration*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), 30.

³¹ A 1994 Indian Army study of 31 captured militants found the separatists were driven by a 'deep sense of alienation.' These findings contradicted the commonly held views of Indian military and foreign and domestic media at the time. Sten Widmalm, *Kashmir in Comparative Perspective*, 80-81.

³² Widmalm, *Kashmir in Comparative Perspective*, 81.

result, local intelligence dried up, and the state's capacity to combat emerging militant organizations and deal peacefully with popular agitations plummeted.³³

Communal disturbances that had been almost unheard of before 1986 became frequent occurrences, and served to further polarize the population.³⁴ Rising protests, strikes, and riots led to a near breakdown of political authority. Popular agitation abated temporarily in early 1986 with the dismissal of the repressive Shah regime, but tensions flared again eight months later when Farooq Abdullah joined the Congress and ruined what little legitimacy his party had left. From 1986 on protests frequently descended into major riots involving large confrontations between angry crowds and security forces – a state of affairs that often precedes the outbreak of armed confrontation between paramilitary groups and security forces.³⁵

Popular unrest rose to uncontrollable levels after 1987. By 1988, many protests had taken on the quality of orchestrated violence.³⁶ The population had become so hostile that in January 1988 the Kashmir state government did not illuminate its administrative buildings in celebration of Indian Republic Day as it had done in previous years. Protestors walked the streets carrying black flags. They honored Pakistan's Independence Day, and several months later the death of General Zia-ul-Haq, Pakistan's military dictator known for his policies of Islamization and support for the Afghan Mujahideen. On Indian Independence Day in August 1989, militants called for a blackout in Srinagar. Government officials cooperated by shutting off the city's lights. A prominent National Conference leader who dared to defy the blackout order was killed in broad daylight six days later. By late 1989, the state's administration hardly functioned and people barely obeyed state commands. Militants began collecting taxes in some localities, and providing certain services such as law and order.³⁷

In July 1988, the first militant attacks occurred when two bombs exploded in the Central Telegraph Office and Srinagar TV station. In September, militants tried to assassinate the

³³ Ajit Bhattacharjea, *Kashmir: The Wounded Valley*, (New Delhi: UBS Publishers' Distributors, 1994), 261-62.

³⁴ P.S. Verma, *Jammu and Kashmir at the Political Crossroads*, (New Delhi: Vikas Publishing House, 1994), 217-18.

³⁵ Stanley Tambiah argues that radical states of civil war are usually preceded by episodic civil riots involving violent police-public confrontations. Tambiah, *Leveling Crowds: Ethnonationalist Conflicts and Collective Violence in South Asia*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 28.

³⁶ Ganguly, *The Crisis in Kashmir*, 102.

³⁷ On Kashmiris' shift away from the state in 1988-90, see Rajesh Kadian, *The Kashmir Tangle*, 19-22.

Director General of Police, and detonated several bombs in other locations around the Kashmir valley. In October, the Union Home Ministry reported that over 100 armed militants had infiltrated into the state from Pakistan-administered Kashmir during the preceding few months. Militant activities escalated precipitously in 1989 with a sharp rise in political murders that put renewed pressure on the weak National Front coalition at the center to dismiss the Farooq Abdullah government and declare governor's rule. Thereafter, militant attacks increased, culminating in the kidnapping of the daughter of India's Home Minister in December 1989 – a move that brought the full force of state coercion to bear, and marks for many the beginning of the present crisis.

By the late 1980s no moderate Kashmiri leader existed who had any legitimacy, and the government's authority had almost completely eroded. The escalating popular agitations and militant violence of the late 1980s strengthened hardliners in New Delhi who advocated a harsher response, and further curtailment of the state's autonomy.³⁸ This reinforced the existing cycle of centralization and state decline that, rather than strengthen state control, led to spiraling popular agitations and deepening crises of governance.

Curfews, police firings and state repression

From 1983 on, central leaders relied increasingly on coercion to stem escalating protests and political violence. Large demonstrations met with police firings that brought yet more protests in a vicious cycle that eventually spiraled out of control in 1988-89. As the center undermined local police and government officials, and relied more heavily on centrally controlled paramilitaries, civilian deaths mounted. Beginning in 1989, militants began shooting at police and security forces during mass demonstrations in order to provoke retaliatory police firings that resulted in yet more civilian deaths and thus strengthened the militant cause.³⁹ As the government's capacity to command cooperation from its citizens declined and local-level institutions ceased to function, state coercion rose until the outbreak of widespread militancy in 1990 made violence the only option.

³⁸ Ajit Bhattacharjea, *Kashmir: The Wounded Valley*, (New Delhi: UBS Publishers' Distributors, 1994), 261.

³⁹ Bhattacharjea, *Kashmir: The Wounded Valley*, 261.

Many analysts cite indiscriminate police firings as one of the primary causes of widespread discontent and support for militancy. Rather than encourage some types of agitation and discourage others, the government used force against all forms of protest. A distinction could have been made between peaceful protests and terrorist violence. The blanket use of force against militants and civilians alike alienated the public, helped legitimize indiscriminate violence, and facilitated the identification of militancy with popular discontent.⁴⁰ The government's indiscriminate use of force locked in a cycle of escalating protest and police repression that played a crucial role in the outbreak of violent conflict.

Stage 3: Violent Conflict

The political crises that had begun with Indira Gandhi's dismissal of an elected government in 1984 had reached a boiling point by the late 1980s. Moderate political leaders were discredited, government institutions deteriorated at every level, and secessionist parties and militant groups began to dominate civil society. As a cycle of protests and police firings set in, Kashmiris turned increasingly to militants for protection, and the state's capacity to provide law and order plummeted. The valley, as journalists are fond of saying, was ripe for rebellion.

By the early months of 1990, the Indian security forces were fighting an open war with militants who enjoyed widespread support. Most government services had completely shut down, and much of the valley was under curfew. Those who dared to organize protests or funeral processions risked being fired upon by security forces. Distrust between Kashmiris and their government could not have been worse. Counter-insurgent forces faced an openly hostile population that had, for the most part, sided with militants who blended in with the population. For every militant the security forces killed or captured, several more civilians were either killed, injured, or deprived of their constitutional rights. A militancy-repression cycle set in that destroyed all hope for an easy solution.

⁴⁰ Tapan Bose et al, "India's Kashmir War," in *Secular Crown on Fire*, 248; Balraj Puri, *Kashmir Toward Insurgency*, 56-57. Some analysts have argued that militants shot at security personnel during demonstrations in order to spark police firings that would result in civilian deaths, popular disaffection, and greater support for anti-state militancy. See Bhattacharjea, *Kashmir: The Wounded Valley*, 261.

Scholars and journalists point to several important events that triggered the outbreak of violence in late 1989 and 1990. These include reports of Pakistan's involvement in arming and training insurgents, a rigged election in 1987 that dealt the final blow to the democratic process, the kidnapping by militants of the daughter of India's home minister in December 1989, and the government's launching of a massive counter-insurgency campaign in January, 1990. What makes these events important is their timing at the high point of political crisis. The Kashmir Valley had been doused in gasoline, so to speak. The slightest spark could have set it alight.

External involvement

Pakistan's actual or possible involvement had two triggering effects. First, it tipped the balance in favor of those activists who advocated armed resistance by holding out the promise of reliable future support. Second, it transformed what had been an internal matter into one of external security, and thus played an important role in the center's decision to use massive force in January 1990 – a policy justified on national security grounds.⁴¹ Whether or not Pakistan was directly involved before the outbreak of widespread militancy in 1990, the known possibility of such support is sufficient to have had a catalytic effect, both on the calculations of security-minded central leaders and on radical activists contemplating insurgency.

Highly professional militant attacks in 1988 indicated an increased availability of arms and explosive devices, and training in how to use them. Indian intelligence reported in 1988 that captured militants confessed to having received training across the Line of Control (LOC) separating Indian and Pakistani Kashmir. Hundreds more are reported to have crossed back into the Indian Kashmir during 1988 and 89 with new skills and weaponry.⁴² Amanullah Khan, leader of the pro-independence Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Front (JKLF), has been quoted as saying that planning for the Kashmir insurgency began in Pakistan-administered Kashmir in 1986. Khan asserts that the JKLF recruited young militants and handed them over to Pakistani

⁴¹ See Robert Wirsing on the high probability of Pakistani support by the mid 1980s. Wirsing argues that it would have taken little imagination or resources to aid JKLF insurgents who had set up operations in Pakistan-administered Kashmir by the early 1980s. Wirsing, *India, Pakistan and the Kashmir Dispute: On Regional Conflict and its Resolution*, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994), 115. On how the possibility of external involvement allows states to justify repression and gain international support, see Ashley Tellis et al, *Anticipating Ethnic Conflict*, (Santa Monica: Rand, 1997), 13.

⁴² Bhattacharjea, *Kashmir: The Wounded Valley*, 257; Manoj Joshi argues political support began as early as 1983, and the military began sending money in 1985. Joshi, *The Lost Rebellion: Kashmir in the 90s*, (New Delhi: Penguin, 1999), 16-19.

intelligence for arms and training, though a concerted insurgent campaign did not begin until July 1988.⁴³

Rigged 1987 elections

The rigged state assembly election of 1987 are often cited as the major precipitating cause of the Kashmir crisis because of the environment of rising violence and disaffection in which they took place. Kashmiris by this time viewed the electoral process with deep cynicism. Democracy itself hung in the balance, and the government was on the verge of collapse. This election was the government's last chance to re-establish democratic governance and open up institutional avenues of protest. However, embattled leaders in Srinagar and New Delhi conspired to undermine the process and ruin what little legitimacy the state's electoral institutions had left.

The valley's pro-autonomy parties came together in a loose coalition under the Muslim United Front. Though they did not stand a chance of winning a majority against the combined political machineries of the Congress and National Conference, they counted on the prevalence of anti-India sentiment to hand them a substantial share of political power. Rather than allow free and fair elections, however, the government harassed and arrested opposition activists and allowed the stuffing of ballot boxes. Nearly all the young men involved in militant attacks in 1989 and early 1990 were guarding the ballot boxes for the Muslim United Front in 1987.⁴⁴

Widespread allegations of election rigging dealt a killing blow to the democratic process. Democracy and peaceful agitation were discredited and public opinion shifted markedly in favor of secessionist parties and militant organizations. Many MUF activists crossed the LOC to receive paramilitary training and returned in 1988 and 89 to carry out targeted attacks against moderate politicians, officials, and security forces.⁴⁵ According to an *India Today* journalist

⁴³ Joshi, *The Lost Rebellion: Kashmir in the 90s*, 21. See also, Widmalm, *Kashmir in Comparative Perspective*, 260-61.

⁴⁴ "Militant Siege," *India Today*, Jan. 31, 1990, 28.

⁴⁵ Kohli, "Self Determination Movements in India," in Wolfgang Danspeckgruber, *The Self-Determination of Peoples*, 209.

writing in 1990, separatism had always been popular in Kashmir; what changed was the total disappearance of any credible political leadership after the rigged 1987 elections.⁴⁶

It is the timing of these elections that is important in helping to trigger violent conflict. The same event might have yielded different outcomes in a more stable political environment. Ballot box stuffing and intimidation of the opposition had been common electoral practices in the valley since the 1950s. Kashmiris this time around, however, turned against the government, and state institutions at every level practically ceased to function.⁴⁷

Kidnapping of the home minister's daughter in December 1989

On December 8, 1989 JKLF militants kidnapped Dr. Rubaiya Sayeed, daughter of India's Kashmiri Muslim home minister, Mufti Mohammad Sayeed. They demanded in exchange the release of five militants held in the Srinagar jail. The kidnapping caused deep indignation in the valley and many Muslim groups in Kashmir, Pakistan, and Britain demanded her unconditional release. The reputation of the JKLF immediately plummeted as people did not approve of their tactics.

This changed when the beleaguered coalition government under V.P. Singh gave in to the JKLF's demands. Mufti Sayeed along with two cabinet ministers and several intelligence officers rushed to the valley in order to force a reluctant state government to release the five militants and secure Rubaiya Sayeed's release.⁴⁸ Once again, central leaders circumvented local authorities and undermined their own authority. Kashmiris flooded the streets in celebration. The JKLF had succeeded where all others failed in putting the government on the defensive.

Those scholars who mark the Rubaiya Sayeed kidnapping as the turning point in the conflict note how it convinced an ambivalent public to support militancy for the first time, boosted the militants' morale by offering them the possibility of success, and showed the inability of the state and central governments to deal with terrorist tactics.⁴⁹ According to Balraj

⁴⁶ "Militant Siege," *India Today*, Jan. 31, 1990, 27.

⁴⁷ "The Roots of Unrest," *India Today*, May 31, 1989.

⁴⁸ For this analysis, see Balraj Puri, *Kashmir Toward Insurgency*, 58-59.

⁴⁹ See Joshi, *The Lost Rebellion*, 33-34; Ajit Bhattacharjea, *Kashmir: The Wounded Valley*, 260-61.

Puri, a political activist who lived through the crisis, the incident “legitimized kidnapping as a political weapon, which had earlier been disapproved of by the Muslim world and had tended to isolate the terrorists from the people of Kashmir.”⁵⁰

More than anything else, the Rubaiya affair destroyed the government’s moral authority at a time when strength and firmness were called for.⁵¹ The initial public reaction to Rubaiya Sayeed’s kidnapping contrasts starkly with what happened after the government backed down. Kashmir in 1989 had reached a moment of truth, so to speak, in which the valley could have followed the road of peaceful protest or of militancy. The Rubaiya affair tipped the scales in favor of the latter.

This event had a dual effect. First, like the Kashmir government’s poor handling of popular agitations, the Rubaiya affair laid bare the weakness of the state’s institutions and the incompetence of its leadership at a time of extreme nervousness and instability at the center. Second, it strengthened the militant movement both in terms of morale and popular support. This brought a new wave of anxiety to India’s embattled leadership, strengthened the hardliners within its ranks, and resulted in a final push to remove all remaining vestiges of the state’s local-level authority in a sweeping counter-insurgency campaign run almost entirely by the center. I turn now to this sad development, which marks the point of no return, and thus the final cause of the present tragedy.

Massive counter-insurgency operation in January, 1990

Within weeks of Rubaiya Sayeed’s kidnapping, India’s Prime Minister V.P. Singh, under pressure from hardliners in his coalition, ordered governor’s rule declared on January 20th, 1990. That night, paramilitaries killed 50 and arrested 400 more. Police firings claimed 20 more lives, and the government imposed curfews across the valley.⁵² This marked the beginning of a brutal counter-insurgency campaign intended to beat the militants into submission. Kashmir’s state

⁵⁰ Puri, “The Challenge in Kashmir,” in Ashgar Ali Engineer, *Secular Crown on Fire*, 15.

⁵¹ Wirsing, *India, Pakistan and the Kashmir Dispute*, 167.

⁵² Bhattacharjea, *Kashmir: The Wounded Valley*, 261.

governor Jagmohan Malhotra flew para-militaries in from distant places, called in the army, completely sidelined the local police, and dispensed with constitutional rights.⁵³

These paramilitaries treated the population as potentially hostile, and Kashmiris in turn viewed them as an outside occupying force. As a result, local intelligence dried up and counter-insurgent operations became brutal, indiscriminate, and largely ineffective. Popular sentiment shifted rapidly in favor of militant organizations that blended in with the population.⁵⁴ As the violence continued, the ranks of militant organizations swelled, support from Pakistan increased, and nearly all governmental authority short of outright coercion disappeared at the local level. According to prominent political commentator Balraj Puri:

With this incident, militancy entered a new phase. It was no longer a fight between the militants and the security forces. It gradually assumed the form of a total insurgency of the entire population. The new phase was also marked by demoralization within the political system, followed by the collapse of the administration. The escape of 12 detainees, described as dangerous, from Srinagar jail, is just one illustration of this collapse.⁵⁵

1990 was the first year that a head of state failed to hoist the national flag on Republic Day. Crowds of unprecedented size, including women, children, and government servants flooded the streets to brave paramilitary bullets. The center responded with curfews and shoot-at-sight orders.⁵⁶

With total popular alienation, open guerilla warfare, daily police firings, and total collapse of the local administration, a cycle of militancy and repression set in from which the state has still not recovered. What power the government retained was purely coercive and concentrated at the top echelons of the system at the expense of all local-level authority. The only thing standing between the status quo and state collapse were a cadre of powerful bureaucrats and upwards of 50,000 paramilitary and police personnel. A more tragic impasse for all concerned could not be imagined. Kashmir's state and society would never be the same again.

⁵³ "Militant Siege," *India Today*, Jan. 31, 1990, 22.

⁵⁴ For this analysis, see Bhattacharjea, *Kashmir: The Wounded Valley*, 261.

⁵⁵ Balraj Puri, *Kashmir Toward Insurgency*, 60.

⁵⁶ Puri, *Kashmir Toward Insurgency*, 61-62.

Conclusion

What should one take away from such a disastrous chain of events? First, over-reliance on coercion destroyed the center's authority and only bred more violence. The state apparatus itself falters when popular compliance breaks down. The capacity to govern comes, above all, from consent of the governed. Indian policy-makers also failed to foresee that part of the strategy of anti-state militants is to provoke such a violent state response as to totally alienate average people from their institutions of governance. By replacing familiar local policemen with unfamiliar and more brutal paramilitaries, and by replacing familiar political leaders with inaccessible bureaucrats, Indian leaders played into the hands of the resistance, which attempted to paint India as a foreign occupying power. Violence and counter violence, resistance and centralization played off one another in a kind of downward spiral.

India since its independence from Britain in 1947 has suffered from a structural contradiction between a centralized state and decentered polity. This contradiction was particularly acute in Kashmir, a disputed territory on India's periphery in which New Delhi's leaders sought firm central control over a polity accustomed to autonomy. Indians seek to resolve this contradiction through a federal democracy in which conflicts may be negotiated peacefully. But an older and still quite brutal state apparatus comes to the fore on occasion, as it did most strikingly in Kashmir. The result was not greater unity, but division and near total state-society breakdown. It is worth noting, however, that as ugly as this story appears, it suggests that without democratic decentralization, the Indian state ceases to function. Federal democracy may be India's only alternative to total fragmentation.

Kashmir's return to peace will involve building new political and administrative institutions capable of mediating conflict, bringing Kashmiris into local and national politics, and establishing reliable and effective mechanisms of negotiation between Kashmiri society and the state, both at the provincial and national level. A return to local-level governance is both necessary and inevitable as the imperatives of Indian state-building tend towards finding a safe balance between central and provincial power.

Given a reduction in tensions with Pakistan, the Indian army and security forces should eventually be withdrawn, replaced by provincial-level institutions more accountable to local people than an unwieldy state apparatus run by bureaucrats in New Delhi. By giving political power back to Kashmiris through regular, fair elections, and perhaps returning to them the autonomy they lost from the 1950s on, the Indian state may regain some of its lost credibility. The natural tendency of Indian society is to local authority, decentralized governance, and personal relationships. Failure to realize this principle lies at the heart of the problem.