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## India's Shame

### Genocide in Kashmir

by ANDRE VLTCHKEK

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Welcome to Kashmir! It is deep winter. The mountains are covered with snow and the naked trees above the lakes at sunset, look melancholic and magnificent, precisely like a completed Chinese brush painting.

Welcome to a nation overrun by the 700,000-strong security forces of the occupying power – India. Welcome to the continuous presence of barbed wire, of military columns, and ‘security checks’. Welcome to a brutality unimaginable almost anywhere else on earth!

Welcome to a land of joint military exercises conducted by the United States, Israel and India.

Kashmir! Still beautiful but scarred. Still proud but bleeding and thoroughly exhausted... Still standing, still resisting, still free and independent, at least in its heart!

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Four kids are standing near the Grand Mosque in Srinagar. They are edgy; they appear to be ready to jump, to run, and to fight, also ready to run and retreat if necessary. It all depends on the circumstances.

“They are raping our sisters and mothers!” screams one youth. I am shown teargas canisters, similar to those used in so many other parts of the world to disperse protesters. They are usually fired into the air. Here they are fired by the security forces directly at people’s heads – with the intention to kill.

In this Kashmiri Intifada, the police, army and paramilitary use slings, guns, teargas canisters, everything that is available, to suppress rebellion.

It also uses video cameras; it films stone-throwing protesters and then it detains them, “disappears” them, and sometimes uses savage torture methods in order to subdue them.

Young men in this neighborhood are routinely detained, and most of them have at least once, been brutalized.

I am photographing empty gas canisters in their hands, always pointing my lenses away from their faces. But kids actually want to pose: they are not afraid, anymore.

Ironically, it is 26th January, the Indian Republic Day.

“We are going later today! To fight them! Come with us!”

They use Arabic words. They point their fingers towards the sky. They are smiling, pretending that they are brave and ready to die, to martyr themselves. But I know that they are scared. I have been in this for many years... I can sense how frightened they are.

They are good kids. They are desperate, cornered, but good.

I promise. I say I will come. Later: as always, I keep my word.

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A few days later, in New Delhi, in his comfortable, old-fashioned apartment, the great Indian Kashmiri independent documentary film director, Sanjay Kak, talks to me about the Indian colonialism, in both Kashmir and the Northeast.

We both agree that all over the world, there is very little knowledge about the horrors of the occupation of Kashmir, and almost no knowledge at all about the occupation of the Northeast. In unison, the mass media in India and in the West, censors the information about the true nature of oppression, killing, torture and rapes.

It is because India has betrayed BRICS and moved closer and closer to the Empire, towards the West, signing military pacts with it, while spreading market-oriented gospel. Now it can count on having ‘special status’, like Indonesia. No matter what it does, it will easily get away with it!

Mr. Kak also says that these days it is “difficult to compete in the market-place of global sorrow.”

When I mention the involvement of both the United States and Israel in joint exercises with India, in Kashmir, as well as in the training of Indian police and army officers deployed in Kashmir, Sanjay Kak replies:

“When it comes to brutality, Indian forces could actually teach both Israelis and the United States quite a few things.”

A friend of Sanjay Kak, an Indian writer and activist, Arundhati Roy, explained in March 2013, on “Democracy Now”:

“Today Kashmir is the most densely militarized zone in the world. India has something like 700,000 security forces there. And in the '90s, early '90s, the fight became—turned into an armed struggle, and since then, More than 70,000 people have died, maybe 100,000 tortured, more than 8000 disappeared. I mean, we all talk a lot about Chile, Pinochet, but these numbers are far greater.”

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In Kashmir itself, I work closely with “Jammu & Kashmir Coalition of Civil Society” – with both its President, Parvez Imroz, and with Parvaiz Matta, a human rights researcher. Both men became my good friends.

JKCCS actually believes that since the 90's, More than 70,000 people have lost their lives in Kashmir, mostly civilians. The organization is openly calling what occurs in Kashmir – genocide.

Mr. Parvez Imroz wrote for this essay:

“The army since 1989 has resorted to war crimes as they have been given the legal impunity and seldom have any armed personnel for crimes against humanity have been punished. The militarization in Jammu and Kashmir has affected all aspects of life and unfortunately the Indian media and civil society, with some exceptions, have been also extending the moral and political impunity to the army who they believe are fighting trans-border terrorism. The systematic disappearance, mass graves, torture has been completely ignored by the Indian and international media.”

“In order to suppress the freedom struggle in Jammu and Kashmir, the Indian government has resorted to systematic and institutional repression. More than 700,000 armed forces have been pressed into service to neutralize the armed struggle and to control the people of Jammu and Kashmir who are seeking the right of self-determination which government of India had promised before the United Nations in the 1948 and 1949 resolutions. The repression of the Indian state has been part of their policy. In this lie culpable even the judiciary who as a wing of the State has served the interests of the executive and not the people of Jammu and Kashmir.

“The international institutions and particularly the western civil society and governments after 9/11 and because of Islamophobia and other interests are completely ignoring the situation in Jammu and Kashmir.”

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In Kashmir, no matter where I go, no matter where I drive, there are constant, powerful reminders of the occupation: from the almost grotesque presence of the military, police and paramilitary forces, to mass graves. Army barracks are lined up along all the major roads. Military and police trucks drive on them in all directions, on all the major and secondary roads. There are countless roadblocks and checkpoints.

But it is not just the direct and brutal force that is bleeding and destroying Kashmir. Parvaiz Matta explains that this enormous Indian security force has managed to infiltrate and divide local society. Spies and snitches have been inserted. Brave resistance fighters were discredited as informers. Resistance movements have been broken, divided, and so have entire communities, even families.

There is great sense of insecurity. Interrogators telephone formerly detained, alleged resistance figures, and tell them: “We will soon get your sister.”

The brutality of the torture here is unimaginable by any standards. I have investigated and reported on countless warzones, all over the world and countless times, I was entrusted with hair-raising stories of savagery. However, what I learned in Kashmir exceeds the most terrible practices.

In modern history, the cruelty of Indian forces in Kashmir can only be compared to the Indonesian atrocities of 1965 and to its genocide in East Timor, as well as in Papua, or to the brutality of the Rwandese and Ugandan forces in the Democratic Republic of Congo. Or to the Empire’s direct extermination campaign in Indochina.

Not surprisingly, both India and Indonesia are the West’s client states, promoted as examples of ‘democracy’ and ‘tolerance’.

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“India is deprived, hegemonic and violent”, I am told at the house of Parvez Imroz, outside of Srinagar city.

In the highly traditional Kashmiri custom, several people sit on the floor, legs stretched, old-fashioned heaters placed under the blankets. We are drinking tea.

When it comes to this meeting, I can only identify two men in this essay from the JKCCS, by their real names. The rest are those who are working on behalf of their abused land, but their positions in the international organizations and press agencies would be compromised, were they to go publicly on the record.

They all helped me a lot, guiding me, explaining the situation, supplying me with contacts and information. They were willing to speak on condition of anonymity, and it is clear where their hearts and allegiances were:

“Indians are very moralistic, when it comes to Palestine... Although, even that is changing, after this administration of Prime Minister Modi is moving India closer and closer towards the West. US and Israel here are deeply involved in ‘anti-terrorist training’. Countless military and police officers are receiving their education in the US, European Union, and Israel. Police officers are being flown abroad. The army is performing regular exercises with the US and Israeli forces, mainly in the area of Ladakh, near Pakistan.”

“Ladakh is actually extremely popular among Israelis. 20,000 to 30,000 come here, every year, as tourists, or in some double capacity.”

“The ideas and methods of Israeli settlements are widely used in Kashmir. But they are ‘improved’ here. The Indian state is fine-tuning Israeli policies of apartheid.”

Everybody here agrees that the brutality factor is much higher in Kashmir than in Palestine:

“The brutality of Israeli forces is not hidden: it is all in the open. Every action against the Palestinian people is well documented. Israeli actions are constantly criticized from abroad, even at home. Huge blocks of countries, even the EU, are demanding independence for Palestine. Kashmir is different: our Intifada is hidden from the rest of the world. At least 8,000 of our people have already died. Hundreds of thousands have been tortured. But there is almost total silence coming from abroad.”

The similarities between Palestinian and Kashmiri resistance and their aim for independence and statehood, are striking. One of the most famous films made by my friend Sanjay Kak from New Delhi, is called “Jashn-e-Azadi – How We Celebrate Freedom”, and it is exactly about the topic. Sanjay also edited a book: *Until My Freedom Has Come – The New Intifada in Kashmir* (2011).

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Kupwara. Mass graves dot the hill.

When we arrive, the town itself is totally shut down. It is the 21st anniversary of the massacre of local people by Indian forces. Around 27 people were slaughtered here, more than two decades ago, as they demanded the end of the Indian occupation.

“Here, many people were ‘disappeared’; they were killed in so-called staged battles. It happened on several occasions”, explains Parvaiz Matta. “Countless bodies arrived mutilated at the local hospitals: some with no legs, a clear result of torture.”

There are rusting stretchers resting against a tree. I am told that they were used to shuttle bodies from the hospital to this mass grave. And the bodies kept arriving, being carried by security forces from the forest.

The mass graves are all over the hill, some right next to a public school, which sits at the summit.

“The security forces described the bodies as being those of ‘unidentified foreign terrorists’, I am told. But ‘foreign’ is already a form of identification, isn’t it?”

There are 7000 unmarked and mass graves in Kashmir, I am told...

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The 700,000-strong security forces are fighting between 200 and 300 active Mujahedin, resistance fighters.

The ‘fighting’ mainly consists of murdering innocent bystanders and villagers in the remote areas. These corpses are then passed off as the corpses of the Mujahedeen, ‘killed in combat’. That consequently ‘justifies’ huge military operations and budgets.

The ‘fighting’ also includes torturing anyone who is suspected or ‘accused’ of belonging to, or supporting the Mujahedeen; therefore anyone whom the security forces decide to identify as such.

The ‘signature’ torture in Kupwara, consists of cutting off legs or fingers. Torture tools and methods here, in this area, which is very near the Pakistani border, are very elaborate.

The chests of victims are burned with red-hot coins, and electric current administered through the penis. The testicles of victims are burned. Bottles of alcohol are inserted into the rectum of men who are then hung upside down from the ceiling. Wooden rollers are used to destroy legs. Nails are hammered into the feet of prisoners. Those who have half-moon tattoos, have them removed by red-hot pliers.

When a woman gets arrested, it is almost certain that her torture will include gang rape.

Sodomizing male prisoners is also common, all over Kashmir.

All of this, of course, could not pass as anything ‘spontaneous’. There is clearly a pattern. The security forces are trained to do what they are doing. A new, extremely brutal group has been created by the state. It is called SOG, and it mainly consists of the children of police and military personnel killed in battles with the Mujahedeen. It is easy to imagine the type of methods it uses.

“Most cases of torture and rape are not documented”, explained Parvaiz. “But my organization alone has already managed to amass documentation on around 5,000 instances of torture. For instance, a father had his head chopped off in front of his horrified family...”

I make him stop, at least for a few minutes. I need to at least have a short time to digest what I see around me, as well as what I am told.

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We drive further, towards the Pakistani border. It is all really lush here – lush and stunningly beautiful. Tall mountains covered by snowcaps, pristine lakes and meadows. I ask our driver to stop; I need some fresh air. I need to see this magnificence, in order to regain strength, before we proceed towards a place that I dread visiting, but which I have to visit nevertheless.

We are heading towards two villages: Kunan and Poshpora.

Here, on 23rd February 1991, the armed forces of India surrounded Kunan, and arrested all men older than the age of 13. They arrived with the tools of torture, in their vehicles, and the torture that they administered, was horrible.

We park the car and I am lead into one of the houses.

It is a traditional, neat and extremely clean house. We take off our shoes. Two men are already waiting in the main room, resting their backs against the wall and soft pillows. A third man arrives shortly after.

We are not here to discuss torture. It is mass rape I am supposed to hear about.

But first, the men recall their own suffering. One of them begins:

“It was February and it was late at night; cold outside, winter. It all began at 11 PM and did not stop until 4 AM, early in the morning. All the men were taken out, into the bitter cold. They stripped us naked, and forced us to stand in an ice-cold stream. There was snow, 3 feet tall all around. They tortured 100 of us; of the men... 40 to 50 were severely tortured. They used electric current, and also, they put red chilly into the water and forced our heads down into it.”

There are no women in the room; no women at all that could be spotted around the house.

Another old man began speaking, while I averted my eyes. It was all extremely uncomfortable, and I knew what a great effort and determination it took for these men to speak about that horrible night, almost a quarter of century ago.

“Women and girls were left in the houses. They were alone and defenseless. The soldiers, around 200 of them, entered the houses, mostly 5-10 per house. They were carrying bottles of alcohol with them – they were drunk. It was all planned like this!”

Now the men spoke over each other:

“Women were raped. All of them... And not only women, but also small girls, from 6 to 13 years of age... Their clothes were torn off, they were insulted, humiliated, then raped.”

Soldiers were screaming at women: ‘You are bloody helping the militants, aren’t you?’

And this was done by Indian troops, and in India, so often; even rape does not end with the act itself. The brutality of the act is regularly indescribable; it includes the insertion of sharp objects, of rusty bars, of anything.

“Many of our women bled profusely. Some were unconscious for 4 or 5 days,” these 3 husbands whose wives survived that terrible night told me.

“One of the women delivered a baby, just 4 days earlier. The baby was hugging her mom when the soldiers entered. They first killed the baby, then gang-raped the mother.”

“They tortured and raped a minor, a girl. They broke her leg. She died later...”

“Some women have undergone treatment for many years, as their rectums were severely damaged”.

5 women died as a result of what took place that night.

There were two cops, from the village, who tried to assist the injured women. Later, they were willing to come forward and to testify. One of them was shot dead – murdered.

I am told that 40 women came forward and gave testimonies. These were married women. Minor, unmarried girls, had kept their identity secret. But even so, almost no young woman from Kunan could get married, afterwards. The stigma was too great and no villager from the area wanted to marry a rape victim.

Parvaiz explained that the rapes are still taking place in the deep provinces, in the frontier areas, where the people are at the mercy of the military. “Still, rape is used as a weapon of war”, he said.

For the Kunan onslaught, not one soldier has been punished, so far.

Before we left, the husbands of the rape victims, explained:

“This happened at the beginning... Then many other, terrible events took place. We tried to play by the rules, using the Indian legal system. But after almost a quarter of a century, there has been no justice. Here, the law only protects those guilty ones. This militarization of Kashmir ruined our lives! Now, we just want to be freed by destiny! This was all a terrible trauma for us. Even children from other villages are mocking our women and girls: “Oh, you come from that village where all the women were raped!”

It was a humbling experience, facing those tough Kashmiri men, who decided to open themselves up to me.

After they spoke, we walked from Kunan to Poshpora Village. Metaphorically, the ice was broken. I was allowed to photograph villagers, both men and women. I was accepted.



As we began driving towards Srinagar, there was a long silence inside the car. Then I broke it:

“Parvaiz?”

“Hmmm?”

“The fact that they mock the girls and women...” I began...

I knew he was thinking the same.

“Would you marry a rape victim?” He asked.

“If I were to be in love with her, yes, of course I would.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes,” I said.

“This is where our culture has failed”, he said. And this is when I knew, that he would do the same.

I told him about the mass rape in the city of Ermera, in East Timor. The Indonesian forces did it – exactly the same scenario as in the Kashmiri village of Kunan.

I was then working illegally in East Timor. I was detained and tortured. Nobody ever got punished for the rape or for the killings. Many people directly responsible for the genocide in East Timor are now governing Indonesia.

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As we passed Kupwara, the mood in the car significantly improved.

“I did not want to tell you, but chances were that before reaching Kupwara, we could have been stopped, interrogated and then...”

I got the point.

But now ‘it was fine’.

The further we drove away from Kupwara, the safer it was getting; by now we would have many arguments for justifying our trip. I photographed a few military and paramilitary camps, through the windshield.

Then I asked our driver to stop. I needed to take a piss. He pushed the brakes right next to some beautiful Kashmiri apple orchard.

I stepped out from the car and walked towards the first tree; the fresh air and beautiful countryside, and stuff like that... Then I spotted him: a soldier, semi-camouflaged, holding his machinegun, ready. I pissed towards him, defiantly. Then I saluted him, mockingly. He did not even smile, just stood there, like an idiot, under the apple tree.

I was wondering whether there are more Indian security personnel in Kashmir, or apple trees?

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I visited Mr. Hassan Bhat in Sopore City, known for its resistance fighters.

Mr. Bhat used to be one of them, but he was captured and tortured savagely, on several occasions, and he gave up on active duty.

The security forces killed both his sons. Just like that, both died by the time they reached the age of 15.

One son had gone to a local store, in 2006, to buy milk, and a security agent shot him through the chest, from his speeding police car. Another boy died in 2010, when some kids got engaged in stone-throwing, and he was caught in the middle of it, when he got scared, and jumped into the river. Police began shooting tear gas canisters at anyone who was in the water. They hit him with one of those, and he died.

“I know the perpetrators, I know the officer who was in charge”, said Mr. Bhat. He tried to file a complaint, but the police refused to register the case.

“The officer-in-charge was going to join the UN Peacekeepers”, said Parvaiz. “India often sends people who fought in Kashmir, to the UN. It is a huge money-making scheme for the country... But my organization identified him, and supplied the UN with detailed evidence on his crimes. After that, his application got rejected.”

I actually saw the Indian UN “Peacekeepers” in action, in Goma, in the Democratic Republic of Congo, where even the former UNHCR head, Ms. Masako Yonekawa, complained to me about the many illegal activities perpetrated by the Indian ‘peacekeeping contingent’.

Then, Mr. Bhat and I stood by the shore of the River Jhelum.

“It flows all the way to Pakistan,” he sighed.

Mr. Bhat, despite all those horrors that he has survived, is a kind, gentle man.

I asked him whether he thinks that Kashmir will be able to, at some point, gain its independence.

“80% of Kashmiri people want freedom”, he said. “80% is a lot of people, don’t you think?”

I am being shown where, in 1993, an entire area had been destroyed, by the BSF (Border Security Forces). Back then, 53 people died.

Later we go, in the middle of the night, to a house where a battle took place between the Indian forces and the Mujahedeen, just a few days earlier.

Sopore is still fighting.

But there is fear. It is cold; it is an omnipresent fear.

I am told by many, that now, people are afraid of even protesting against the scarcity of basic supplies. One could easily disappear.

I am told that here, the Indian forces are trying to hook young people on alcohol and drugs, in order to keep them away from the resistance.

But others say: in this city, in Sopore, people are determined. They resist. They are active here. This city produces big people! People that never surrender! Indian forces call it “Little Pakistan”.

Can the huge oppressive force really be defeated, and if yes, then how?

This is when, even in Sopore; even in the middle of the night, in front of a house that recently witnessed a real battle, everyone gets realistic:

“Only international pressure can help!”

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At some point, one gets exhausted, almost numb, after listening to detailed and well-documented accounts of extra-judicial killings, disappearances, torture and rapes.

At one point I was presented with evidence about a man who was detained, questioned and when he appeared defiant, both of his feet were chopped off. He survived. When still in detention, sometime later, the security forces cut off substantial parts of his flesh, from different parts of his body; cooked it, and forced him to eat it, for several days. He survived... The case is documented and HR organizations are demanding justice. No one has been punished.

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There is genocide: terrible, outrageous and unreported by the cowardly media and the intellectuals, in both India and the West.

People, who dare to speak and write about the plight of Kashmir, are intimidated, deported, and even physically attacked.

Arundhati Roy is periodically threatened with sedition charges, lawsuits and life imprisonment.

Others, like the legendary radio host David Barsamian, got deported from India, no explanation given.

In October 2011, a senior Supreme Court advocate Mr. Prashant Bhushan (who drafted the Lokpal Bill), was brutally beaten in his chambers at the Supreme Court after he made comments on Kashmir. Mr. Bhushan's spoke on human rights violations and militarization in Kashmir.

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There are tourists in Kashmir, not only Indian, but foreigners as well. They go skiing and snowboarding in Gulmarg, or hiking to Ladakh. There are Europeans and Israelis, some North Americans.

Many locals call it "horror tourism in Rapistan".

I encountered several couples, high in the mountains, in Gulmarg: red cheeks from too much fresh air at the high altitude. I talked to a British couple enjoying skiing, a German couple on vacation... They had no clue about what was happening in Kashmir. When I pressed them a bit: "But you must have noticed all those bunkers, military convoys and checkpoints", their simple reply was: "Yes... Well, India has to do something about the terrorism problem, right?"

It is a well-documented fact that the Empire is counting on several countries, all over the world, for acting on its behalf, spreading terror in the 'neighborhood', often brutalizing even its own people. These countries are, for instance, Rwanda, Uganda and Kenya in Africa, Honduras and Columbia in Latin America, Israel, Saudi Arabia and Qatar in the Middle East, Indonesia, Thailand and now India in Southern Asia.

Most of the brutal lackey states are christened as 'democracies', as tolerant, as the examples worth following.

These countries are promoted as 'Lands of Smiles', or as 'cultures of non-violence'. It is all farcical, but somehow, not many people seem to be laughing.

It is because they don't know. It is because brutality and cynicism still pays.

And this approach should stop! Brutal crimes against humanity have to be exposed. Countries that are murdering thousands of innocent people have to be shamed publicly and dealt with, internationally. It goes without saying that a state that is serving the Empire, torturing and raping those who are longing for independence, while in the same time spitting on its own poor, should never have place in an organization like BRICS!

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I went back to the area of the Grand Mosque in Srinagar, on 26th January, as I promised. I followed the kids. A few streets away, after 2 PM, fighting erupted.

It was all raw and tough, and it clearly resembled Palestine.

The only great difference was that other than me there were no witnesses, to describe the courage of local youth, as well as the oppression of the Kashmiri people by the Indian state.

Two days later I took the longest cable car in Asia, at Gulmarg. I wanted to see 'what was up there'. There is, of course, a military base!

On the way down, the electricity collapsed and our gondola froze, suspended in midair. The door would not close, and there were holes, all over. It was India, after all. I could have frozen to death, if the stuff did not begin moving a few minutes later.

India is facing some of the most serious challenges on Earth: from illiteracy to deep poverty. 700,000 security forces cost billions of dollars, annually, pragmatically speaking. Even if the Indian elites, government and military do not care about the Kashmiri people and their plight, they should care at least about their own poor!

Holding Kashmir against its will brings no benefits to India and its people. It is definitely undemocratic and brutal... and absolutely unnecessary!

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Welcome to Kashmir! Its beauty is fabled. Its lakes, mountain ranges, deep valleys and rivers are proud and striking. Its people warm, welcoming, but strong.

Kashmir is bleeding. Its valleys are divided by barbed wire. Its women are raped. Its men tortured and humiliated. The cries of Kashmiri people are muted. The world knows almost nothing about their plight, about their suffering.

700,000-man security force fighting around 300 men! And they cannot win. Why? The answer is simple: It is because no brutal force on earth could ever defeat those who are fighting for the survival of their land, for something so dear, so beloved!





