KASHMIR
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The Case for Freedom

Tariq Ali
Hilal Bhatt
Angana P. Chatterji
Habbah Khatun
Pankaj Mishra
Arundhati Roy
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Chronology: 1947–2010

15 August 1947: British India is partitioned into the independent nation-states of India and Pakistan. The rulers of ‘princely states’, bearing in mind the wishes of their people, are to choose whether to accede to India or Pakistan. The Maharaja Hari Singh, Hindu ruler of Muslim-majority Kashmir, delays his decision.

October 1947: Armed tribesmen from Pakistan’s North-West Frontier Province enter Kashmir to join an internal revolt in the Poonch region. The tribesmen go on the rampage, looting and raping locals.

26 October 1947: Requesting help from India in quelling the revolt and invasion, the Maharaja signs the Instrument of Accession, acceding Kashmir to India. The accession is seen as provisional pending a plebiscite to determine the will of the Kashmiri people.

27 October 1947: Indian forces are airlifted into Srinagar to repel the Pakistani militias. The fighting escalates into the first Indo-Pakistan war, with Pakistan disputing the accession and eventually sending in regular forces.

1 January 1948: India formally refers the Kashmir situation to the United Nations.

5 February 1948: A UN resolution calls for an immediate cease-fire and a plebiscite.

1 January 1949: The UN-brokered cease-fire ends the first Indo-Pakistan war, with India and Pakistan agreeing to a plebiscite and the withdrawal of troops behind the cease-fire line, leaving two-thirds of Kashmir under Indian control.

26 January 1950: The constitution of India comes into effect. Article 370 accords autonomous status to Jammu and Kashmir, with Indian jurisdiction restricted to defence, foreign affairs and communications.


30 March 1951: A UN Security Council resolution rejects elections as a substitute for a plebiscite to determine the future status of Kashmir and appoints a representative to
effect demilitarization, which is unsuccessful.

**September 1951:** Amid allegations of vote rigging, National Conference wins all seventy-five seats unopposed in Constituent Assembly elections.

**31 October 1951:** In his first speech to the assembly, Sheikh Abdullah argues for accession to India.

**July 1952:** Sheikh Abdullah signs the Delhi Agreement, providing for autonomy for Jammu and Kashmir within India.

**July 1953:** The development of the Prasad protest movement (led by Syama Prasad Mookerjee) in 1952, calling for the complete accession and integration of Kashmir into India, pushes Abdullah to make proposals for independence.

**8 August 1953:** Abdullah is dismissed as prime minister and arrested and imprisoned by India. Bhashi Ghulam Mohammad takes his place. Protests are put down with force.

**17–20 August 1953:** Indian and Pakistani prime ministers meet in New Delhi and agree to the appointment of a plebiscite administrator by the end of April 1954. However, as the alliance between Pakistan and the US deepens, Indian considerations over Kashmir become coloured by the Cold War and the plebiscite is off the table.

**February 1954:** The Constituent Assembly ratifies the accession to India.


**24 January 1957:** The UN Security Council reaffirms its 1951 resolution, stating that no action taken by the Constituent Assembly can be a substitute for a plebiscite in determining the final disposition of the state.

**26 January 1957:** The Constituent Assembly enacts the Constitution of Jammu and Kashmir, which states that ‘the State of Jammu and Kashmir is and shall be an integral part of the Union of India’.

**9 August 1955:** The Plebiscite Front is established to press for Sheikh Abdullah’s release and a plebiscite under UN auspices to decide the future of Kashmir.

**20 October–20 November 1962:** A border dispute in the Ladakh region sparks war between India and China, resulting in territorial gains for China from both India and Pakistan.

**March 1965:** The Indian Parliament passes a bill declaring Kashmir a province of India, claiming for India the power to appoint a governor, dismiss Kashmir’s government and assume its legislative functions.
**August–23 September 1965:** The second Indo-Pakistan war over Kashmir breaks out after Pakistan sends armed infiltrators across the 1949 cease-fire line.

**10 January 1966:** India and Pakistan sign the Tashkent Declaration, agreeing to pull back to pre-1965 positions.

**3–16 December 1971:** The Indo-Pakistan war results in Indian victory and the succession of East Pakistan as the independent state of Bangladesh.

**February 1972:** The Plebiscite Front is banned from participating in the State Assembly election.

**2 July 1972:** India and Pakistan sign the Simla Agreement, which redesignates the UN cease-fire line in Kashmir as the ‘Line of Control’, to be respected by both parties, who are to resolve the Kashmir dispute through bilateral talks.

**13 November 1974:** In return for Sheikh Abdullah’s release and reinstatement as chief minister of Jammu and Kashmir, his deputy, Mirzal Afza Beg, signs an accord reiterating the State of Jammu and Kashmir as a constituent unit of India, without the condition for pre-1953 autonomy.

**23 May 1977:** Abdullah threatens succession unless India respects the provisions of Article 370 regarding Kashmir’s autonomy.

**8 September 1982:** Sheikh Abdullah dies. His son, Farooq Abdullah, assumes his position.


**7 March 1986:** The Shah is dismissed from his post and Jagmohan assumes exclusive power, which he uses to restrict the government employment of Muslims.

**23 March 1987:** The vastly popular Muslim United Front (MUF) contests the 1987 State Assembly elections. The Congress–Conference Alliance wins amid widespread allegations of poll rigging. Fierce repression thwarts any mass uprising against Farooq Abdullah’s unpopular reinstated government.

**1989:** Armed resistance to Indian rule breaks out, spearheaded by formerly imprisoned MUF members. Strikes take up one-third of the year’s working days and the State Assembly election is boycotted – turnout is under 5 per cent.

**1990s:** The insurgency continues; Pakistan-sponsored militant Islamic groups proliferate and Indian militarization intensifies.

**20 January 1990:** The day after Jagmohan is reappointed governor of Kashmir, the
Indian paramilitary Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) fires on a group of unarmed demonstrators, including women and children, in Gawkadal. The Gawkadal massacre prompts the mass demonstrations of hundreds of thousands, which are met with further violence.

1 March 1990: More than half a million people march to the offices of the UN Military Observer Group in Srinagar to demand the implementation of UN resolutions stressing the importance of the plebiscite and self-determination. The Indian army fires on demonstrators, killing twenty-six civilians at Zakoora Crossing and twenty-one at the Tengpora bypass.


6 January 1993: The Sopore Massacre – Indian Border Security Police kill at least fifty-five unarmed civilians in Sopore in revenge for a militant ambush on one of their security patrols.

March 1993: Political, social and religious groups form the All Party Hurriyat Conference (‘Hurriyat’ meaning freedom in Urdu), calling for self-determination.

21 February 1999: Indian prime minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee and Pakistani prime minister Nawaz Sharif sign the Lahore Declaration, which focused on, among other issues, peaceful resolution of the Kashmir problem.

May–July 1999: The Kargil War, fought by India and Pakistan in the Kargil district of Kashmir.

2000s: The decade sees the armed struggle yield to a new phase of mass, non-violent protest. India and Pakistan restore diplomatic ties – engaging in talks over Kashmir and implementing confidence building measures – although this is interrupted sporadically by incidents of violence. The Indo-Pakistan diplomacy does not result in demilitarization in Kashmir or any agreement on its future.

May 2008: The decision by the Government of India and the state Government of Jammu and Kashmir to transfer land to the Hindu Shri Amarnath Shrine Board sparks the most widespread and sustained mass uprising against Indian rule since 1990. Armed police fire on the protesters, and the only functional road between Kashmir and India is blockaded.

21 February 2009: The Bomai killings, in which two worshippers were shot when the Indian army fired indiscriminately, inflames large protests in Bomai and surrounding districts, which then face indefinite curfew.

29–30 May 2009: Two women, Neeolfar Jan, twenty-two, and Asiya Jan, seventeen, are gang-raped and murdered in the Shopian district of India-administered Kashmir.
**June 2009:** Large protests erupt across the Kashmir Valley, accusing the CPRF of the rapes and murders. The protests are met with force and an undeclared curfew is imposed on the Shopian district.

**30 April 2010:** The Indian army claims to have killed three armed infiltrators crossing the Line of Control in the Machil Sector. It is later found that the encounter was staged and that the dead three were Kashmiri civilians, shot so that their killers could claim a cash reward.

**11 June 2010:** Tufail Ahmad Mattoo, seventeen, is struck in the head and killed by a teargas canister fired at close range, while walking home from school. His death sets off another summer of protest, during which a military curfew is imposed and more than a hundred Kashmiris are killed.
Once known for its extraordinary beauty, the valley of Kashmir now hosts the biggest, bloodiest and also most obscure military occupation in the world. With more than eighty thousand people dead in an anti-India insurgency backed by Pakistan, the killing fields of Kashmir dwarf those of Palestine and Tibet. In addition to the everyday regime of arbitrary arrests, curfews, raids, and checkpoints enforced by nearly 700,000 Indian soldiers, the valley’s four million Muslims are exposed to extrajudicial execution, rape, and torture, with such barbaric variations as live electric wires inserted into penises.

Why, then, does the immense human suffering of Kashmir occupy such an imperceptible place in our moral imagination? After all, the Kashmiris demanding release from the degradations of military rule couldn’t be louder or clearer. India has contained the insurgency of 1989, which it provoked with rigged elections and massacres of protestors. The hundreds of thousands of demonstrators who periodically fill the streets of Kashmir’s cities today are overwhelmingly young, many in their teens, and armed with nothing more lethal than stones. Yet the Indian state seems determined to strangle the voices of the new generation as it did those of the old one. In the summer of 2010, soldiers shot dead more than a hundred protesters, most of them teenagers.

The New York Times described these protests as a comprehensive ‘intifada-like popular revolt’. They have a broader mass base than the Green Movement does in Iran, or indeed than the uprisings in the Arab world have enjoyed. But no colour-coded revolution is heralded in Kashmir by Western commentators. BBC and CNN don’t endlessly loop clips of little children being shot in the head by Indian soldiers. Bloggers and tweeters in the West fail to keep virtual vigils by the side of the dead and the wounded. The United Nations does not hold emergency sessions to discuss its response to the killing of scores of unarmed protestors.

Kashmiri Muslims are understandably bitter. As Parvaiz Bukhari, a journalist, says, the stones flung randomly by protestors have become the expression of a ‘neglected people’ convinced that the world deliberately ignores their plight. The veteran Kashmiri journalist Masood Hussain confesses to the near-total futility of his painstaking auditing of atrocity over two decades. For Kashmir has turned out to be a
The cautiousness – or timidity – of Western politicians is easy to understand. Apart from appearing a lifeline to flailing Western economies, India is a counterweight to China, at least in the fantasies of Western strategists. A month before his election, Barack Obama declared that resolving the ‘Kashmir crisis’ was among his ‘critical tasks’. Since then, Obama hasn’t uttered a word about this ur-crisis that has seeded all major conflicts in South Asia. David Cameron was advised to maintain a similar strategic public silence during his visit to India last year.

Those Western pundits who are always ready to assault illiberal regimes worldwide on behalf of democracy ought not to be so tongue-tied. Here is a well-educated Muslim population, heterodox and pluralist by tradition and temperament, and desperate for genuine democracy. However, intellectuals preoccupied by transcendental, nearly mystical, battles between civilization and barbarism tend to assume that ‘democratic’ India, a natural ally of the ‘liberal’ West, must be doing the right thing in Kashmir, that is, fighting ‘Islamofascism’. Thus Christopher Hitchens could call upon the Bush administration to establish a military alliance with ‘the other great multiethnic democracy under attack from Muslim fascism’, even as an elected Hindu nationalist government stood accused of organizing a pogrom that killed more than two thousand Muslims in the Indian state of Gujarat.

Electoral democracy in multiethnic, multireligious India is one of the modern era’s most utopian political experiments, increasingly vulnerable to malfunction and failure and, consequently, to militant disaffection and state terror. But then the West’s new masters of humanitarian war, busy painting grand ideological struggles on broad, rolling canvases, are prone to miss the human position of suffering and injustice.

Indian writers and intellectuals, who witnessed the hijacking of India’s secular democracy by Hindu supremacists, seem better acquainted with the messy realities concealed by stirring abstractions. But on Kashmir they often appear as evasive as their Chinese peers are on Tibet.

People in mass democracies are usually slow to recognize the nature of the undeclared wars conducted by their representatives. But by the late 1960s there was hardly a public figure in the United States – from J.K. Galbraith to Philip Roth – who did not feel compelled to build up a chorus of denunciation against the country’s deeply dishonourable involvement in Indochina. In comparison, the deaths, in less than two decades, of nearly eighty thousand people in neighbouring Kashmir have barely registered in the Indian liberal conscience.

Indians may have justifiably recoiled from the fundamentalist and brutish aspect of the revolt in the valley. But the massive non-violent protests in Kashmir since 2008 have hardly released a flood of pent-up sympathy from them.

A few Indian commentators have deplored, consistently and eloquently, India’s record of rigged elections and atrocity in the valley, even if they speak mainly in terms of defusing rather than heeding Kashmiri aspirations. But many more have tended to become nervous at the mention of disaffection in the Kashmir Valley. ‘I am not taking up that thorny question here’, Amartya Sen writes in a footnote devoted to Kashmir in The Argumentative Indian. In the more resonant context of a book titled Identity and Violence, Sen yet again relegates the subject to a footnote.

A commonplace secular-nationalist argument in India is that Kashmiri Muslims, if
given the slightest concessions by India, would go radically Islamist or embrace Pakistan, emboldening separatists in the northeast. But it has never been clear that radical Islam has a sustainable appeal in Kashmir. The Kashmiri feeling for Pakistan, too, is highly capricious, almost entirely fuelled by hatred of the Indian military occupation.

Certainly, as Arundhati Roy’s near-imprisonment for ‘sedition’ proves, anyone initiating a frank discussion of Kashmir in India risks not only the malevolence of Hindu nationalists but also a storm of vituperation from the Indian understudies of Bill O’Reilly and Sean Hannity. The choleric TV anchors, partisan journalists, and opinion-mongers of India’s corporate media routinely amplify the falsehoods and deceptions of Indian intelligence agencies in Kashmir. Blaming Pakistan or Islamic fundamentalists, as The Economist pointed out after massive peaceful demonstrations in Kashmir in 2010, has ‘got much harder’ for the Indian government, which has ‘long denied the great extent to which Kashmiris want rid of India.’ Nevertheless, it tries, and as the political philosopher Pratap Bhanu Mehta, one of the few fair-minded commentators on this subject, points out, the Indian media now acts in concert with the government ‘to deny any legitimacy to protests in Kashmir.’

This effective censorship reassures those Indians anxious not to let mutinous Kashmiris sully the currently garish notions of India as an ‘economic powerhouse’ and ‘vibrant democracy’ – the calling cards with which Indian elites apply for membership in the exclusive clubs of the West. In Kashmir, however, the net effect is deeper anger and alienation. As Parvaiz Bukhari puts it, Kashmiris hold India’s journalists, as much as its politicians, responsible for ‘muzzling and misinterpreting’ them.

‘The promise of a liberal India’, Mehta writes, ‘is slowly dying.’ For Kashmiris, this promise has proved as hollow as that of the fundamentalist Islam exported by Pakistan. Liberated from political deceptions, the young men on the streets of Kashmir today seem simply to want to express their hatred of the state’s impersonal brutality and to commemorate lives freshly ruined by it. As the Kashmiri writer Basharat Peer wrote in his moving ‘Letter to an Unknown Indian’, Indian journalists might edit out the ‘faces of the murdered boys’ and ‘their grieving fathers’, they may not show ‘the video of a woman in Anantnag, washing the blood of the boys who were killed outside her house’, but ‘Kashmir sees the unedited Kashmir.’

And it remembers. ‘Like many other Kashmiris,’ Peer writes, ‘I have been in silence, committing to memory the deed, the date.’ Apart from the youth on the streets, there are also those with their noses in books, or pressed against window bars. Soon this generation will make its way into the world with its private traumas. Life under political oppression has begun to yield, in the slow bitter way it does, a rich intellectual and artistic harvest: Peer’s memoir Curfewed Night was followed in 2011 by The Collaborator, a searing novel by Mirza Waheed. There are more works to come; Kashmiris will increasingly speak for themselves. One can only hope that their voices will finally penetrate our indifference and even occasionally prick our conscience.
Only graveyard breezes blow in the valley of Kashmir. Murder tours the region in different guises, garbed sometimes in the uniform of the Indian army or in the form of bearded men, armed and infiltrated by Pakistan, speaking the language of jihad—Allah and Fate rolled into one. The background presence of nuclear missiles offers a ghoulish comfort to both sides. Kashmir, trapped in this neither–nor predicament, suffocates. Depressed and exhausted by the decades of violence, many Kashmiris have become passive: the beauties of spring and summer pass unnoticed by listless eyes. Yet, fearful even of medium-term possibilities, Kashmiris prefer to live in the present. Oppressed by neither–nor, they are silent in public, speaking the truth in whispers. They fear that old Kabul might move to Srinagar and, in the name of a petrified religion, ban all poetry and music, outlaw the public appearance of unveiled women, close down the university and impose a clerical dictatorship. It is difficult to imagine a Talibanized Kashmir, but it was once equally difficult to imagine a Talibanized Afghanistan. A complicated and unpredictable combination of circumstances does sometimes enable the enemies of light to triumph. Unless . . .

I was thinking about this on a balmy October evening in New York during the dying days of the Clinton presidency, wondering if there was an alternative to neither–nor and what, if anything, the Empire had in store for its South Asian satrapies. Provincial at the best of times, the country was immersed in its own election campaign.

Strolling down Eighth Avenue in search of sustenance, I was halted between 40th and 41st streets by a tacky, twinkling, neonlit sign: K-A-S-H-M-I-R. An adjacent, non-twinkling arrow signalled a fast-food dive in the basement below. I decided to risk the food. Attached to the austere eating zone was an extension in the shape of a raised wooden platform. A slab on the wall proclaimed this to be Jinnah Hall, inaugurated in 1996 by Nawaz Sharif, the prime minister of Pakistan. I asked the young Kashmiri woman sitting behind the cash desk underneath the slab whether this could possibly be the same Nawaz Sharif who was sitting at the time in a Pakistani prison on charges of corruption and attempted murder. She smiled, but did not reply. Instead she turned her eyes to the ‘Hall’, where a meeting was in progress. The place was nearly full. About twenty or so South Asian men and a single white woman. The top table was occupied...
by an assortment of beards dressed in traditional baggy trousers and long shirts. I felt for one of them. Afflicted with the dreaded dhobi’s itch, he was engaged in his own private jihad, scratching away at his testicles throughout the evening.

At the lectern, next to the top table, a clean-shaven white American was already in full flow. His gestures and rancid rhetoric suggested a politician, who could have belonged to either party. He turned out to be a Democratic congressman, ‘a friend of the people of Kashmir’. Recently returned from a visit to the country, he had been ‘deeply moved’ by the suffering he had witnessed and was now convinced that ‘the moral leadership of the world must take up this issue’. The beards nodded vigorously, recalling no doubt the help the ‘moral leadership’ had given in Kabul and Kosovo. The congressman paused; he didn’t want to mislead these people. What was on offer was not a ‘humanitarian war’ but an informal Camp David. ‘It needn’t even be the United States,’ he continued. ‘It could be a great man. It could be Nelson Mandela . . . or Bill Clinton.’

The beards were unimpressed. One of the few beardless men in the audience rose to his feet and addressed the congressman: ‘Please answer honestly to our worries,’ he said. ‘In Afghanistan we helped you defeat the Red Army. You needed us then and we were very much loyal to you. Now you have abandoned us for India. Mr Clinton supports India, not human rights in Kashmir. Is this a good way to treat very old friends?’

The congressman made sympathetic noises, even promising to tick Clinton off for not being ‘more vigorous on human rights in Kashmir’. He needn’t have bothered. A beard rose to ask why the US government had betrayed them. The repetition irritated the congressman. He took the offensive, complaining about this being an all-male meeting. Why were these men’s wives and daughters not present? The bearded faces remained impassive. Feeling the need for some fresh air, I decided to leave. As I went up the stairs the congressman changed tack once again, speaking now of the wondrous beauty of the valley he had recently visited.

Damn the beauty, I thought, stop the killings. Were the congressman or attendant beards aware of Kashmir’s turbulent past, Islamic and pre-Islamic? Did they know that the Mughal kings had never regarded religion as a cornerstone of empire-building? Were they aware of the strong women who had resisted rulers in the past, or why Kashmir had been sold for a pittance by the East India Company to a corrupt local ruler? And why it had all ended so badly? Could the beards seriously imagine that the Empire would intervene and transform Srinagar into Sarajevo, occupied by Western troops while India and China watched calmly from the sidelines? Or did they believe that one day a totally bearded Pakistan would use nuclear missiles to liberate them?

‘The buildings of Kashmir are all of wood,’ the Mughal emperor Jehangir wrote in his memoirs in March 1622. ‘They make them two, three and four-storeyed, and covering the roofs with earth, they plant bulbs of the black tulip, which blooms year after year with the arrival of spring and is exceedingly beautiful. This custom is peculiar to the people of Kashmir. This year, in the little garden of the palace and on the roof of the largest mosque, the tulips blossomed luxuriantly . . . The flowers that are seen in the territories of Kashmir are beyond all calculation.’ Surveying the lakes and waterfalls, the roses, irises and jasmine, he described the valley as ‘a page that the painter of
destiny had drawn with the pencil of creation’.

The first Muslim invasion of Kashmir took place in the eighth century and was defeated by the Himalayas. The soldiers of the Prophet found it impossible to move beyond the mountains’ southern slopes. Their victory came unexpectedly five centuries later, as a result of a palace coup carried out by Rinchana, the Buddhist chief from neighbouring Ladakh, who had sought refuge in Kashmir and embraced Islam under the guidance of a Sufi with the pleasing name of Bulbul (‘Nightingale’) Shah. Rinchana’s conversion would have been neither here nor there had it not been for the Turkish mercenaries who made up the ruler’s elite guard and who were only too pleased to switch their allegiance to a co-religionist. But they swore to obey only the new ruler, not his descendants, so when Rinchana died, the leader of the mercenaries, Shah Mir, took control and founded the first Muslim dynasty to rule Kashmir. It lasted for seven hundred years.

The population, however, was not easily swayed, and despite a policy of forced conversion, it wasn’t until the end of the reign of Zain-al-Abidin in the late fifteenth century that a majority of Kashmiris embraced Islam. In fact, Zain-al-Abidin, an inspired ruler, ended the forced conversion of Hindus and decreed that those who had been converted in this fashion be allowed to return to their own faith. He even provided Hindus with subsidies to enable them to rebuild the temples his father had destroyed. The different ethnic and religious groups still weren’t allowed to intermarry, but they learned to live side by side amicably enough. Zain-al-Abidin organized visits to Iran and Central Asia so that his subjects could learn bookbinding and woodcarving and how to make carpets and shawls, thereby laying the foundations for the shawl making for which Kashmir is famous. By the end of his reign a large majority of the population had converted voluntarily to Islam; the ratio of Muslims to non-Muslims—85 per cent to 15 per cent—has remained fairly constant ever since.

The dynasty went into a decline after Zain-al-Abidin’s death. Disputes over the succession, unfit rulers, and endless intrigues among the nobility paved the way for new invasions. In the end, the Mughal conquest in the late sixteenth century probably came as a relief to most people. The landlords were replaced by Mughal civil servants who administered the country rather more efficiently, reorganizing its trade, its shawl making and its agriculture. On the other hand, deprived of local patronage, Kashmir’s poets, painters and scribes left the valley in search of employment at the Mughal courts in Delhi and Lahore, taking the country’s cultural life with them.

What made the disappearance of Kashmiri culture particularly harsh was the fact that the conquest itself had coincided with a sudden flowering of the Kashmiri court. Zoonie, the wife of Sultan Yusuf Shah, was a peasant from the village of Tsandahar who had been taken up by a Sufi mystic enchanted with her voice. Under his guidance she learned Persian and began to write her own songs. One day, passing with his entourage and hearing her voice in the fields, Yusuf Shah, too, was captivated. He took her to court and prevailed on her to marry him. And that is how Zoonie entered the palace as queen and took the name of Habba Khatun (‘Loved Woman’). She wrote:

I thought I was indulging in play, and lost myself.
O for the day that is dying!
At home I was secluded, unknown,
When I left home, my fame spread far and wide,
The pious laid all their merit at my feet.
O for the day that is dying!
My beauty was like a warehouse filled with rare merchandise,
Which drew men from all the four quarters;
Now my richness is gone, I have no worth:
O for the day that is dying!
My father’s people were of high standing,
I became known as Habba Khatun:
O for the day that is dying.

Habba Khatun gave the Kashmiri language a literary form and encouraged a synthesis of Persian and Indian musical styles. She gave women the freedom to decorate themselves as they wished and revived the old Circassian tradition of tattooing the face and hands with special dyes and powders. The clerics were furious. They saw in her the work of Iblis, or Satan, in league with the blaspheming, licentious Sufis. While Yusuf Shah remained on the throne, however, Habba Khatun was untouchable. She mocked the pretensions of the clergy, defended the mystic strain within Islam and compared herself to a flower that flourishes in fertile soil and cannot be uprooted.

Habba Khatun was queen when, in 1583, the Mughal emperor Akbar dispatched his favourite general to annex the kingdom of Kashmir. There was no fighting: Yusuf Shah rode out to the Mughal camp and capitulated without a struggle, demanding only the right to retain the throne and strike coins in his image. Instead, he was arrested and sent into exile. The Kashmiri nobles, angered by Yusuf Shah’s betrayal, placed his son Yakub Shah on the throne, but Yakub was a weak and intemperate young man who set the Sunni and Shia clerics at one another’s throats, and before long Akbar sent a large expeditionary force, which took Kashmir in the summer of 1588. In the autumn the emperor came to see the valley’s famous colours for himself.

Habba Khatun’s situation changed dramatically after Akbar had her husband exiled. Unlike Sughanda and Dida, two powerful tenth-century queens who had ascended the throne as regents, Habba Khatun was driven out of the palace. At first she found refuge with the Sufis, but after a time she began to move from village to village, giving voice in her songs to the melancholy of a suppressed people. There is no record of when or where she died – a grave thought to be hers was discovered in the middle of the last century – but women mourning the disappearance of young men killed by the Indian army or ‘volunteered’ to fight in the jihad still sing her verses:

Who told him where I lived?
Why has he left me in such anguish?
I, hapless one, am filled with longing for him.
He glanced at me through my window,
He who is as lovely as my ear-rings;
He has made my heart restless:
I, hapless one, am filled with longing for him.
He glanced at me through the crevice in my roof,
Sang like a bird that I might look at him,
Then, soft-footed, vanished from my sight:
I, hapless one, am filled with longing for him.
He glanced at me while I was drawing water,
I withered like a red rose,
My soul and body were ablaze with love:
I, hapless one, am filled with longing for him.
He glanced at me in the waning moonlight of early dawn,
Stalked me like one obsessed.
Why did he stoop so low?
I, hapless one, am filled with longing for him!

Habba Khatun exemplified a gentle version of Islam, diluted with pre-Islamic practices and heavily influenced by Sufi mysticism. This tradition is still strong in the countryside and helps to explain Kashmiri indifference to the more militant forms of religion.

The Mughal emperors were drawn to their new domain. Akbar’s son Jehangir lost his fear of death there, since only Paradise could transcend the beauties of Kashmir. While his wife and brother-in-law kept their eye on the administration of the empire, he reflected on his luck at having escaped the plains of the Punjab and spent his time smoking opium, sampling the juice of the Kashmir grape, and planning gardens around natural springs so that the reflection of the rising and setting sun could be seen in the water that cascaded down specially constructed channels. ‘If on earth there be a paradise of bliss, it is this, it is this, it is this,’ he wrote, citing a well-known Persian couplet.

By the eighteenth century, the Mughal empire had begun its own slow decline, and the Kashmiri nobles invited Ahmed Shah Durrani, the brutal ruler of Afghanistan, to liberate their country. Durrani obliged in 1752, doubling taxes and persecuting the embattled Shia minority with a fanatical vigour that shocked the nobles. Fifty years of Afghan rule were punctuated by regular clashes between Sunni and Shia Muslims.

Worse lay ahead, however. In 1819, the soldiers of Ranjit Singh, the charismatic leader of the Sikhs, already triumphant in northern India, took Srinagar. There was no resistance worth the name. Kashmiri historians regard the twenty-seven years of Sikh rule that followed as the worst calamity ever to befall their country. The principal mosque in Srinagar was closed, others were made the property of the state, cow-slaughter was prohibited, and once again the tax burden became insufferable – unlike the Mughals, Ranjit Singh taxed the poor. Mass impoverishment led to mass emigration. Kashmiris fled to the cities of the Punjab: Amritsar, Lahore and Rawalpindi became the new centres of Kashmiri life and culture. (One of the many positive effects of this influx was that Kashmiri cooks greatly improved the local food.)

Sikh rule didn’t last long: new conquerors were on the way. What was possibly the most remarkable enterprise in the history of mercantile capitalism had launched itself on the Indian subcontinent. Granted semi-sovereign powers – that is, the right to maintain armies – by the British and Dutch states, the East India Company expanded rapidly from its Calcutta base and, after the battle of Plassey in 1757, took the whole of Bengal. Within a few years the Mughal emperor at the fort in Delhi had become a
pensioner of the Company, whose forces continued to move west, determined now to
take the Punjab from the Sikhs. The first Anglo-Sikh war, in 1846, resulted in a victory
for the Company, which acquired Kashmir as part of the Treaty of Amritsar, but, aware
of the chaos there, hurriedly sold it for seventy-five lakh rupees (ten lakhs = one
million) to the Dogra ruler of neighbouring Jammu, who pushed through yet more
taxes. When, after the 1857 uprising, the East India Company was replaced by direct
rule from London, real power in Kashmir and other princely states devolved on a
British Resident, usually a fresh face from Haileybury College serving an
apprenticeship in the backwaters of the empire.

Kashmir suffered badly under its Dogra rulers. The corvée was reintroduced after
the collapse of the Mughal state, and the peasants were reduced to the condition of
serfs. A story, unconfirmable, told by Kashmiri intellectuals in the 1920s to highlight
the plight of the peasants revolved round the maharaja’s purchase of a Cadillac. When
His Highness drove the car to Pehalgam, admiring peasants surrounded it and strewed
fresh grass in front of it. The maharaja acknowledged their presence by letting them
touch the car. A few peasants began to cry. ‘Why are you crying?’ asked their ruler.
‘We are upset’, one of them replied, ‘because your new animal refuses to eat grass.’

When it finally reached the valley, the twentieth century brought new values:
freedom from foreign rule, passive resistance, the right to form trade unions, even
socialism. Young Kashmiris educated in Lahore and Delhi returned home determined
to wrench their country from the stranglehold of the Dogra maharaja and his colonial
patrons. When the Muslim poet and philosopher Iqbal, himself of Kashmiri origin,
visited Srinagar in 1921, he left behind a subversive couplet which spread around the
country:

In the bitter chill of winter shivers this naked body
Whose skill wraps the rich in royal shawls.

Kashmiri workers went on strike for the first time in the spring of 1924. Five thousand
workers in the state-owned silk factory demanded a pay rise and the dismissal of a
clerk who’d been running a protection racket. The management agreed to a small
increase, but arrested the leaders of the protest. The workers then came out on strike.
With the backing of the British Resident, the opium-sodden Maharaja Pratap Singh
sent in troops. Workers on the picket line were badly beaten, suspected ringleaders
were sacked on the spot and the principal organizer of the action was imprisoned, then
tortured to death.

Some months later, a group of ultra-conservative Muslim notables in Srinagar sent
a memorandum to the British viceroy, Lord Reading, protesting the brutality and
repression:

Military was sent for and most inhuman treatment was meted out to the poor,
helpless, unarmed, peace-loving labourers who were assaulted with spears,
lances and other implements of warfare . . . The Mussulmans of Kashmir are in
a miserable plight today. Their education is woefully neglected. Though
forming 96 per cent of the population, the percentage of literacy amongst them
is only 0.8 per cent . . . So far we have patiently borne the state’s indifference
towards our grievances and our claims and its high-handedness towards our rights, but patience has its limit and resignation its end.

The viceroy forwarded the petition to the maharaja, who was enraged. He wanted the ‘sedition-mongers’ shot, but the Resident wouldn’t have it. As a sop he ordered the immediate deportation of the organizer of the petition, Saaduddin Shawl. Nothing changed even when, a few years later, the maharaja died and was replaced by his nephew, Hari Singh. Albion Bannerji, the new British-approved chief minister of Kashmir, found the situation intolerable. Frustrated by his inability to achieve even trivial reforms, he resigned. ‘The large Muslim population’, he said, ‘is absolutely illiterate, labouring under poverty and very low economic conditions of living in the villages and practically governed like dumb driven cattle.’

In April 1931, the police entered the mosque in Jammu and stopped the Friday khutba which follows the prayers. The police chief claimed that references in the Quran to Moses and Pharaoh quoted by the preacher were tantamount to sedition. It was an exceptionally stupid thing to do and, inevitably, it triggered a new wave of protests. In June, the largest political rally ever seen in Srinagar elected eleven representatives by popular acclamation to lead the struggle against native and colonial repression. Among them was Sheikh Abdullah, the son of a shawl trader, who would dominate the life of Kashmir for the next half-century.

One of the less well-known speakers at the rally, Abdul Qadir, a butler who worked for a European household, was arrested for having described the Dogra rulers as ‘a dynasty of blood-suckers’ who had ‘drained the energies and resources of all our people’. On the first day of Qadir’s trial, thousands of demonstrators gathered outside the prison and demanded the right to attend the proceedings. The police opened fire, killing twenty-one of them. Sheikh Abdullah and other political leaders were arrested the following day. This was the founding moment of Kashmiri nationalism.

At the same time, a parturition was taking place on the French Riviera. Tara Devi, the fourth wife of the dissolute and infertile Maharaja Hari Singh – he had shunted aside the first three for failing to produce any children – gave birth to a boy, Karan Singh. In the Srinagar bazaar every second person claimed to have fathered the heir-apparent. Five days of lavish entertainment and feasting marked the infant heir’s arrival in Srinagar. A few weeks later, public agitation broke out, punctuated by lampoons concerning the maharaja’s lack of sexual prowess, among other things. The authorities sanctioned the use of public flogging, but it was too late. Kashmir could no longer be quarantined from a subcontinent eager for independence.

The viceroy instructed the maharaja to release the imprisoned nationalist leaders, who were carried through the streets of Srinagar on the shoulders of triumphant crowds. The infant Karan Singh had been produced in vain; he would never inherit his father’s dominion. Many years later he wrote of his father:

He was a bad loser. Any small setback in shooting or fishing, polo or racing, would throw him in a dark mood which lasted for days. And this would inevitably lead to what became known as a muqaddama, a long inquiry into the alleged inefficiency or misbehaviour of some hapless young member of staff or a servant . . . Here was authority without generosity; power without