

NOSHEEN ALI, MONA BHAN, SAHANA GHOSH,
HAFSA KANJWAL, ZUNAIRA KOMAL, DEEPTI MISRI,
SHRUTI MUKHERJEE, NISHANT UPADHYAY,
SAIBA VARMA, AND ATHER ZIA

Geographies of Occupation in South Asia

OCCUPATIONS ARE FOUNDATIONAL to the making and reproduction of many “modern” nation-states. They are not exceptional forms of state power, but rather, constitutive of state-making in several South Asian nation-states such as in India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh, where the hegemonic meanings and definitions of national security and national community have come to be refracted through occupation and war.¹ Recent events across South Asia suggest that geographies

This statement is the result of our conversation at the feminist pre-conference of the Annual Conference on South Asia at the University of Wisconsin, Madison in October 2017. Since the year 2012, the Critical Kashmir Studies Collective, comprised of Mona Bhan, Haley Duschinski, Deepti Misri, Hafsa Kanjwal, and Ather Zia, has attempted to mobilize academic conversation around the Indian occupation of Kashmir through a series of published articles, books, talks, and conferences. In this vein, and building on several prior pre-conferences, the Collective organized the 2017 feminist pre-conference around the theme of “Gender, Sexuality, and Occupation,” bringing us together to think collectively about state occupations and their gendered legacies across South Asia and its diasporas.

1. Haley Duschinski, Mona Bhan, Ather Zia, and Cynthia Mahmood, eds. *Resisting Occupation in Kashmir* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018); Nosheen Ali, “Grounding Militarism: Structures of Feeling and Force in Gilgit-Baltistan,” in *Everyday Occupations: Experiencing Militarism in South Asia and the Middle East*, ed. Kamala Visweswaran (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), 85; Deepti Misri, *Beyond*

and logics of occupation can travel inward toward the center, disrupting the binaries between war and peace, center and periphery, as well as between national territories and their margins. This has become chillingly obvious in the recent annexation of Kashmir by India, a move that intensifies the subjection of Kashmiris but also subjects Indians to the arbitrary power of the state. On August 5, 2019, the Indian government abrogated Article 370 of the Constitution of India, a provision that had maintained a semi-autonomous status for the state of Jammu and Kashmir since 1954, shortly after India's independence from Britain in 1947. The repeal, conducted by presidential decree, was not only unconstitutional, but also preceded and followed measures that have implications for all Indians.² Only a few days after this abrogation, in the flood-hit Kolhapur district of Maharashtra, the Indian government imposed Section 144 of the Code of Criminal Procedure, which prohibits public assembly of more than four persons. Often imposed in Kashmir to contain anti-government protests, Section 144 was seen as playing a similar role in Kolhapur—minimizing accusations of government inadequacy leveled by flood-affected populations. This is not an entirely new move—for instance, in the “peaceful” Bengal borderlands, Section 144 is imposed every night along the border roads and fence, by an order that the District Magistrate routinely renews every month. Still, the imposition of Section 144 in the hinterland may augur an increasing normalization of the emergency structures of occupation. Similarly, the quick amendment of the Unlawful Activities Prevention Act empowered the government to designate individuals, rather than just organizations, as terrorists. This had the dual effect of criminalizing dissent within India even as it further strengthens the government's chokehold on Kashmir. Therefore, attention to zones of occupation compels us to think not only about occupations “in” or “of” Pakistan and India in regions such

Partition: Gender, Violence, and Representation in Postcolonial India (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2014).

2. Akshay Deshmane, “Kashmir: Scrapping Article 370 ‘Unconstitutional,’ ‘Deceitful’ Says Legal Expert A.G. Noorani,” *Huffington Post*, May 8, 2019, https://www.huffingtonpost.in/entry/kashmir-article-370-scrapping-constitutional-expert-reacts-noorani_in_5d47e58de4boaca341206135.

as Kashmir or Balochistan, but also to theorize how modes of rule at the center and periphery are connected.³

Occupation is not just what happens when state power gets out of hand, but rather, it is frequently a central principle of both nationalism and state-making. This becomes especially apparent when we turn to borders that are officially described as “friendly” and “peaceful,” such as India’s eastern border with Bangladesh, which challenges us to think about how occupations are sustained through a contradistinction between places of “no conflict” and “exceptional” spaces. As members of the mobile Border Security Force live and work in these different locations along territorial edges, they stitch together a national security geography through such differentiations. Soldiers in the BSF narrativize the eastern border as “not Kashmir” (*ye Kashmir nahin hain*) and not a conflict involving “us” and “them.” These naming practices form the premise for a collective “we” that can be invoked in the Bengal borderlands in order to serve and suffer for the “national interest,” as defined by the security state.

As solidarity for Kashmiri self-determination has grown globally, so has the repression of critical conversations about occupation, particularly within India, a regional hegemon that has for decades been confronted by movements for self-determination in Kashmir and several other states in the northeast region of India. Here, we wish to collectively consider how a focus on occupation might speak to, draw upon, and potentially revise existing theorizations about the relationship between South Asian feminism, nationalism, and transnationalism. What might it mean, for instance, that the solidarity Indian feminists offer to Kashmiri women is often narrowly framed as a “human rights issue” while ignoring or remaining deliberately silent on the disputed status of

3. Here we want to differentiate between the nationalisms espoused by post-colonial nation-states and those of communities fighting for self-determination against them. We have no wish to conflate nationalist processes that are central to the maintenance of settler states with Indigenous nationalisms that are fighting for sovereignty and decolonization. Phillip Carroll Morgan, Kimberly G. Wieser, and Craig S. Womack, eds. *Reasoning Together: The Native Critics Collective* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2008); Noelani Goodyear-Ka’opua, Ikaika Hussey, and Erin Kahunawaika’ala Wright, eds. *A Nation Rising: Hawaiian Movements for Life, Land, and Sovereignty* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014).

Kashmir? We wish to call attention to the ways in which these inadequate gestures of feminist solidarity might tacitly contribute to Indian nationalist narratives when they take as given that Kashmir belongs to the Indian nation-state.

Additionally, we wish to advance a conversation about how the framework of occupation could possibly decenter “South Asia” as well as “India,” whose local political and territorial dominance is frequently duplicated in South Asian studies. To take only one institutional example, the sheer proportion of space occupied by panels on India at the Annual Conference on South Asia effectively renders scholarship on and from other South Asian countries as marginal. Centering the question of occupation may potentially destabilize both “India” and even “South Asia,” as occupied populations often emphasize alternate geographies of belonging that draw on long histories of connection and often extend out of South Asia. How might we think through the spatial and temporal dimensions of historical and contemporary occupations across “South Asia” and its diasporas, be they in Kashmir, Chattisgarh, Goa, Assam, Sikkim, Manipur, Meghalaya, Balochistan, Tibet, Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Tamil Eelam, Khalistan, or beyond?

As feminist scholarship on colonialism, war, and occupation has repeatedly noted, colonial occupations do not rely only on violent tactics of control. They manufacture consent by reorganizing social structures, altering everyday relations, and enacting projects designed to psychologically transform restive and unruly subjects. Often reinforced through humanitarian registers of sympathy, compassion, or restraint, militaries in many contexts across the world have sought to rework their own image as occupiers, as well as people’s sense of self and identity, in order to discipline and contain dissident populations. In the context of Kashmir, militarized humanitarianism is understood as a softening or feminization of war, which often reinforces notions of a weak, colonized population in need of saving, while the state itself emerges as a benevolent patriarch.⁴ In our work, many of us have foregrounded the ways in which military occupations use strategies of both coercion

4. Mona Bhan, *Counterinsurgency, Democracy, and the Politics of Identity in India: From Warfare to Welfare?* (New York: Routledge, 2014); Saiba Varma, “Love in the Time of Occupation: Reveries, Longing, and Intoxication in Kashmir,” *American Ethnologist* 43, no. 1 (2016): 50-62.

and consent to forge a political order in which surveillance is no longer limited to physical environments but extends into the realm of feelings. Such strategies ensure that militarized states can repackage brutal war tactics through seemingly benevolent means, producing particular subjectivities that are emotionally tethered to the nation. The conscription of public sympathy by the security state via humanitarian gestures thus rationalizes away the injuries, anger, and humiliations experienced by borderland communities who are targeted by surveillance and violent policing. Working in the context of occupations, questions recur about whether we can hold the everyday instances of violence on which military occupation inevitably rely—violent killings, land dispossession, sexual violence, and torture—apart from the benefits that sometimes accrue to segments of the occupied populations through military recruitment, educational opportunities, military contracts, and other forms of employment.

In light of the above, we must ask: can an occupying state, brought into power through coercion but also through the manufacture of selective consent, ever be “feminist?” We would aver not and urge other feminist scholars to cultivate an awareness of how selectively pursuing “women’s empowerment” may, wittingly or unwittingly, normalize colonial projects and thus render them invisible. We might consider, for example, state-sponsored “women’s empowerment” schemes in Kashmir in the 1960s under the rubric of *Naya*, or new Kashmir.⁵ While such gestures certainly seek to empower a marginalized group in society, they also seek to create consent and establish legitimacy for the occupier’s rule. How might we untangle the very real feelings of empowerment experienced by select women beneficiaries of such a political order? Indeed, expressions of concern for women in colonized and occupied societies across history and geopolitical contexts have routinely been deployed by occupying powers in order to present themselves as benevolent, or even feminist. This tactic becomes even easier when the occupied societies in question are predominantly Muslim, as we have seen in the case of Gaza as well as Kashmir. Struggles for gender and sexual liberation within occupied states can easily reproduce colonial logics and obfuscate the

5. Hafsa Kanjwal, “State-led Feminism in ‘Naya Kashmir’: The New Woman,” *Economic and Political Weekly* 53, no. 47, December 1, 2018.

critical intersections of cisheteropatriarchy and colonialism that maintain these projects. Many scholars writing against these occupation projects have pointed out how feminism(s) emerging from these locations can be complicit in processes of occupation. When feminists implicitly or explicitly prioritize the sovereignty of occupying states above solidarities with oppressed communities that include people of all genders, how can we understand “feminism” as such?⁶

We conclude, necessarily, with the question of how feminism might actively resist its co-optation into mechanisms of colonial occupation and war. Regimes of apartheid and occupation in Turtle Island, South Africa, Palestine, Kashmir, territories in North East India and elsewhere, have long been interconnected with transnational projects in which feminists have often been complicit. We believe it is essential to discern these connections, while also forging transnational feminist solidarities to hold accountable the mechanisms of state power by which occupations everywhere maintain their hold. A conversation that began at the “margins” of South Asia has now found its way to the center, including in places and for subjects who have long considered themselves the norm rather than the exception. Clearly then, recognizing occupation as constitutive of life not just in Manipur, Kashmir, or Assam, but also in Delhi and Mumbai, constitutes an ongoing ethical and political project that will require much more collective work by South Asian feminists and others. We invite feminists everywhere to join us in this effort.

Contributions compiled by Deepti Misri, Mona Bhan, and Ather Zia

6. Ather Zia, *Resisting Disappearance: Military Occupation and Women's Activism in Kashmir* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2019).