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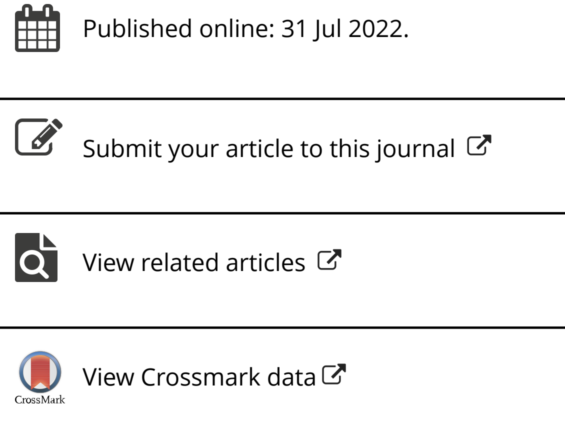

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Contesting settler colonial logics in Kashmir as pedagogical praxis

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ABSTRACT
In the aftermath of the Indian government's decision to change the status of Jammu and Kashmir on 5 August 2019, activism for the right to self-determination in Kashmir came under tremendous pressure. An intense crackdown in Kashmir, including a complete communication blackout and internet blockade, meant the only Kashmiri and dissenting voices left were located in diasporic spaces. As two Kashmiri scholar–activists involved in advocacy work on Kashmir, we examine the challenges of decolonial activism and transnational solidarity building, especially in Western academic spaces. For both of us, Kashmir has been a home and is a place where our scholarly ethos is entwined with intimate knowledge. While the diasporic/exilic location presents its own challenges of representation, the urgency imposed by the settler colonial logics that create existential questions for Kashmiris forces reconsiderations both of political alliance building as well as scholarly frameworks. In this article, we explore the emergent contours of a pedagogy of solidarity that centers Indigenous perspectives in relation to Kashmiri diasporic activism. We examine how our solidarity work takes shape in the neoliberal academy, grassroots progressive spaces, and transnational media.

KEYWORDS
Decolonization; critical literacy; pedagogic praxis; settler colonial studies; solidarity

On 5 August 2019, the Indian government, led by the Bhartiya Janata Party, a Hindu majoritarian organization, revoked Articles 370 and 35A of the Indian constitution which fundamentally changed the way India controls Kashmir and formalized India's annexation of the territory in 1947. Along with the constitutional changes, India bifurcated the state territorially into two union territories, "Jammu and Kashmir" and "Ladakh," to be ruled directly by New Delhi. The government quickly removed decades-old land and environmental protections to pave the way for mainland Indians to purchase land and settle permanently in Kashmir and for Indian corporations to buy land in the region's ecologically fragile areas for resource extraction (Jaleel, 2020a).

To the world, India framed the formalization of annexation as "integration" which would enable free-flowing Indian capital to "bring development" to the region (Gentleman et al., 2019), even though the data showed Kashmir's development indices were better than many Indian states (Drèze, 2019, pp. 233–244). For Kashmiris, who

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resist India's military occupation and violence (Duschinski et al., 2018), these dramatic changes raised the specter of outright settler colonialism and demographic flooding (Kanjwal, 2020), a long-standing demand of the Hindu rightwing in India who see demographic alteration of the Muslim-majority Kashmir to a Hindu-majority one as an effective method to undermine Kashmir's historic struggle for self-determination (Gentleman et al., 2019). Articles 370 and 35A were products of the contested history of the Indian annexation of Kashmir in 1947 (Noorani, 2011) and their abrogation amounted not only to treaty violations and contravention of several UN resolutions[1] but also an existential threat to the people of Jammu and Kashmir and an attempt to erase their identity altogether.

In the days preceding these changes, India pushed in tens of thousands of soldiers—on top of an already present 750,000 soldiers—to impose a military siege and crush any dissent in Kashmir. All forms of communication within Kashmir and between Kashmir and the outside world, including the Internet, were blocked—and remained shut down for months (Masih et al., 2019). Indian forces detained thousands of Kashmiri activists and intellectuals, including the few loyalist Kashmiri politicians who have historically collaborated with the Indian state (Fareed, 2019). India's media joined in the nationalist chorus claiming the changes would put a stop to "terrorism" (Baba & Zakaria, 2020) and participated in their government's pinkwashing campaign, falsely claiming the laws would benefit Kashmiri women and sexual minorities (Beg, 2019).

At the international level, Indian actions were initially met with disapproval but no concrete pushback. As silence was enforced in Kashmir, the only voices that were left to represent non-statist, anti-colonial perspectives were diasporic Kashmiris. Across the world, displaced and migrant Kashmiris connected with each other and with allies from other global justice struggles to protest India's military occupation in Kashmir. From petitioning the UN and international human rights organizations to demonstrating in front of Indian embassies and rallying across major cities in the US and Europe, these efforts sought to center the historical experiences and struggles of the people of Kashmir (Kadirgamar, 2019). They used social media campaigns as well as educational events, such as teach-ins and seminars. In response to these efforts, the Indian government used its immense resources and influence and activated a large section of the Hindu rightwing diaspora in the West to silence criticism of its policies in Kashmir (Kumar & Lacy, 2020).

In this article, we examine how scholarship, advocacy, and activism on Kashmir located in diasporic/exilic settings intersected as a response to the urgency of the situation the Indian state imposed in Kashmir after 2019 and primarily became a pedagogic praxis that adopted what Gaztambide-Fernández (2012) has described as, educators' "central role in constructing the conditions for a different kind of encounter … that both opposes ongoing colonization and that seeks to heal the social, cultural, and spiritual ravages of colonial history" (p. 42). As scholars of Kashmir and as educators located in North American university settings, public engagement for us meant not only opposing the Indian occupation but also building publics on Kashmir based on critical reflection, praxis of protest, and ethical engagement. As the specter of settler colonialism in Kashmir began to materialize into an empirical reality with a cascade of additional changes in law, our response took the form of

pedagogy. Pedagogy—or "problem-posing education" to use Freire's (2005) idea—is both humanist and liberatory in that it takes as axiomatic that the "people subjected to domination must fight for their emancipation" (p. 86). As Kashmiris, restlessly witnessing the silencing of our communities in Kashmir, Freire's call has signified posing the problem of self-determination not in the abstract nation-state terms,[2] but in the *de*-colonial sense, as a mode of recovering suppressed Kashmiri histories, validating a multiplicity of lived experiences, as well as confronting settler colonial practices.

Kashmir, South Asian Studies, and the Western Academy

Powerful critiques of the Indian state have continued to emerge from the margins of academic and civil society institutions in Kashmir. However, given the escalated repression, scholars and activists in Kashmir are now completely muzzled and universities are increasingly controlled by the diktats of the government. Scholars and activists are questioned, surveilled, harassed, and intimidated through police raids. Movement to and from Kashmir has been restricted through the denial of visas and passports.

A few Western academic settings have emerged as sites of critical scholarship on Kashmir outside of the direct control of the Indian government. Nonetheless, this work has been challenging, primarily because of the deep influence of Indian nationalist perspectives that center and naturalize "India" within South Asian studies, as well as targeted attacks from right-wing groups affiliated with the Indian government. To understand why solidarity work as pedagogical praxis in diasporic settings is crucial, it is important to understand the ways in which the neoliberal North American academy constricts knowledge production on Kashmir.

For decades, the universities have been complicit in the obfuscation of India's occupation of Kashmir by promoting statist narratives that undermine the aspirations and lived realities of Kashmiris (Kanjwal, 2019). Most South Asia centers, departments, and programs are headed by India-centric faculty, many of them upper caste Brahmins (Chibber, 2006), who, despite their interest in subaltern or postcolonial studies, remain woefully unable to shed their attachments to Indian nationalist narratives when it comes to Kashmir (Dar, 2015). Many are also funded by large Indian donors. This has led to a situation where there is either a complete silence on Kashmir, or the violence of occupation is invisibilized through the security framing of the "India-Pakistan" dispute.

In recent years, however, Kashmiri and non-Kashmiri scholars who have conducted field work and research in Kashmir, situate their work outside of statist or "security" frameworks. As part of an emerging group of scholars who have engaged in decolonial, feminist, anthropological, or historically situated research, we have both observed the importance of this shift and how it has expanded not only how Kashmir is understood but also how the study of South Asia can be reframed. This work has not been easy; it has meant greater scrutiny over our scholarship, especially concerns raised about our objectivity—as if questions of positionality only impact the scholar who shares an identity with the object of study, rather than the scholar who shares an identity with the entity engaged in oppression.

It has also entailed difficulty in obtaining grants or fellowships through certain institutions for research (oftentimes as a restriction imposed by the Indian government).

Our pedagogical praxis as scholars of Kashmir has also meant engaging in public scholarship through various forums (panels, community teach-ins, media). Alongside our colleagues, we have both been targeted by Hindu supremacist, pro-India, and anti-Muslim groups in the diaspora. Our events have been repeatedly disrupted, as certain attendees have sought to undermine our work by labeling us as "radicals" or "terrorist sympathizers," often taking video or audio footage of our remarks to be used without context later. Our colleges have also received emails, filled with anti-Muslim racism, from individuals calling for our jobs or positions to be revoked. Borrowing from the tactics of the pro-Israel lobby, academics who are critical of India are also accused of engaging in "Hinduphobia."[3] These are scare tactics that often use the online space to silence dissent and violate the foundations of academic freedom (Gittinger, 2018). Not surprisingly, the right-wing Hindu nationalists have also weaponized the language of indigeneity and decolonization to justify their ideology and actions; for example, they posit Muslims as "foreigners" or "invaders" to India (and to Kashmir) and situate Kashmiri Pandits, or Brahmins, as "Indigenous" to Kashmir.

Furthermore, the US academy positions diversity in relation to representation and multiculturalism and not in relation to actual solidarity, praxis, or politics. As a result, colonial and postcolonial elites are able to adopt decolonial language and utilize being marginalized as people of color in the broader US academy. This, unfortunately, works to obscure and flatten levels of gendered, caste, class, and religious hierarchies that exist even amongst scholars who are read as "brown" or "people of color." This forces us to contend with how both white *and* non-white supremacies operate in tandem, although in differential ways, and the dilemmas it poses in conceptualizing a pedagogy of solidarity.

Anti-Occupation Pedagogy, Solidarity, and Scholar–Activist Kinships

For Kashmiri and other scholars who have produced critical scholarship on the occupation in Kashmir and felt the obligation to publicly speak against the Indian oppression, the relative invisibility of Kashmir from global justice consciousness has proved challenging. For them, a pedagogic praxis that addresses the ongoing settler colonial project in Kashmir has involved the multilayered task of exposing the workings of the colonial occupation, creating conditions for an ethical encounter with Kashmiris struggling against the occupation at home, and helping allies envisage a critical space of dialogic participation with Kashmiri people so they can build a "relational solidarity," which would mean, as Gaztambide-Fernández (2012) has argued, centering "material conditions and highlight[ing] inequality as the basis of present being, rather than an accident of present conditions" (pp. 52–53).

Revealing the logics of colonial occupation in Kashmir as a collective project has involved *re-membering* the dismembered pasts, especially illuminating the historical conditions and the hegemonic discourse that accompanied India's invasion and occupation of Kashmir in 1947 (Rai, 2018; Rashid, 2020). Part of the Indian state's ideological

discourse included simultaneously claiming the legacy of postcoloniality while establishing a colonial state in Kashmir (Osuri, 2017). This discourse is further bolstered by the Indian state exceptionalism that presents itself as the "world's largest democracy" as well as a "postcolonial democracy" in which the imperatives of "nation building" take precedence over democracy (Anderson, 2012; Roy, 1999), thus denying Kashmiris the right to self-determination. Additionally, India's early "secular state" discourse was used to dismiss the Kashmiri movement as "separatist" and "Islamist." In recent years, with the Hindutva ideology that underpins Indian territorial nationalism coming to dominate Indian politics (Chatterjee et al., 2019; Vanaik, 2017), the secularist discourse has been replaced by explicit claims that frame Kashmir, despite its historically Muslim Native population, as a "sacred Hindu territory" and a symbolic site of "upper caste" knowledge and power (Rai, 2018).

Anti-occupation Kashmir scholarship, while confronting the formulaic Islamophobic representations of Kashmiri people and contextualizing the religious idiom of Kashmiri resistance (Majid, 2022), has painstakingly shown that *occupation* as a military-settler colonial logic of domination is the primary mode of Indian control in Kashmir (Bhan, 2020; Duschinski et al., 2018; Junaid, 2013; Visweswaran, 2013). However, in the post-2019 era, this scholarship has had to further train its critique toward Hindutva as it became the explicit ideological impulse behind the abrogation of Articles 370 and 35A (Junaid, 2019; Kanjwal, 2019; Zia, 2020). The Hindutva demand for demographic replacement had ranged from physical violence and expulsion to biocultural assimilation into Hinduism as a "return to the original" religion.[4] This assimilationist discourse also presents Kashmiri women both as victims of Kashmiri men and available for Indian men's sexual exploitation (Batul, 2020). Settler colonialism, in the final analysis, converges its supremacist logics in the violent control over land (Dunbar-Ortiz, 2014, pp. 1–7; Zimmerer, 2014, p. 273). In Kashmir, this process became clear not only in the way Article 35A and dozens of other land protection laws (Jaleel, 2020a), which had previously left Kashmir relatively free of permanent settlements, if not military occupation, were abrogated, but also in the adoption of a new "Domicile Law," which opened a path for Indians to acquire land in Kashmir (Jaleel, 2020b). For a critical pedagogic praxis, the ongoing nature of these drastic transformations in Kashmir demonstrates that settler colonialism is not to be understood as a single event, but as a structure or a constant "normalization of dispossession" (cf. Wolfe, 2006, p. 388). The Indian government's repression in Kashmir has accompanied precisely this normalization discourse that seeks to force Kashmiris to accept the new settler colonial logic as *fait accompli* and dispossession as an irreversible process and a "done deal" (cf. Kauanui, 2016; Rifkin, 2014).

For months in 2019, when Kashmir was cut off from the rest of the world, Kashmiri scholar–activists, despite their diasporic locations, had to persistently show that Indian actions were not "welcomed" by Kashmiris, as Indian diplomats and media sought to present the situation to the world. Indeed, India's settler colonial narrative is intensely challenged by Kashmiri politics of refusal and defiance. Kashmiris have waged a decades-long freedom struggle, which encompasses multiple registers of resistance (Zia, 2019). From an armed movement, mass demonstrations, and street protests to individual acts of activism and courage, as well as creative protests in the form of anti-occupation literature, poetry, songs, and music, Kashmiris have sought to reclaim

their historic rights, public spaces, and voices despite overwhelming Indian repression (Kak, 2013). As Kashmiri activists often argue, existence itself is resistance. Many see the preservation of Kashmir's unique culture and traditions as critical to defying the settler colonial agenda of erasure and replacement.

The pedagogic praxis centered on Kashmir has enabled a creation of spontaneous bonds of scholarly–activist kinship with decolonial, anti-racist, and feminist thinkers and activists, especially those producing critical scholarship on different settler colonial contexts. In this, the diasporic Kashmir scholars simply mirror Kashmiris at home who build affective ties with other colonized peoples struggling for justice and sovereignty. The question of Palestine deeply resonates in Kashmir at the conceptual as well as the affective level (Junaid, 2020; Osuri & Zia, 2020). Not only do Kashmiris find in their own condition a reflection of the settler colonial oppression that Palestinians face but these links also become tangible in opposition to the way India and Israel have become close allies. Over the years, the convergence of Indian nationalist discourse on Kashmir and Israeli Zionist discourses on Palestine is unmistakable, and both have become each other's ideological allies and vocal supporters. US foreign policy simply underwrites Indian and Israeli policies, as it sees them as key allies in maintaining US dominance in South Asia and the Middle East (Oza, 2007).[5] Building solidarity with other movements becomes critical for our work, given the parallel levels of censorship and repression that exist for other political struggles. It not only allows us to forge political alliances but is oftentimes a means of survival in a hostile academic environment.

Yet even as some solidarities appear natural, others are more difficult to come by, especially in relation to anti-authoritarian or progressive movements that seek better rights for India's minorities but remain uncritical of India's territorial claims on Kashmir (Trisal, 2020). As Kashmiri scholars Amin and Mushtaq (2019) have highlighted, the "slogans of 'azadi' [freedom] in Kashmir and India are different in terms of the framing and the goals" (para. 35). Indian liberals—tied to nationalist frameworks and geographies—often go out of their way to declare that their azadi is for *within* India and subsequently are unable to offer solidarity to Kashmiris in their struggle for freedom *from* India (Kanth, 2020). Meanwhile, Indian liberal or progressive focus on the violence of Hindu nationalism obscures the violence and coloniality of the seemingly more "secular-liberal" India, which is often depicted with nostalgia. Here, Amin and Mushtaq's (2019) reflections on solidarity offer us a way out:

> Solidarity is a responsibility, as much for one's own conscience as it is towards the oppressed. It has to be unconditional and accepting of the different contextual realities. When expressed as convenient condescension and blindness to people's specific identities and lived realities, it ceases to be solidarity—it is an attempt at the same othering and exclusion that the state is being questioned for. (para. 38)

In directly challenging the Indian state's hegemonic narrative on Kashmir, the anti-occupation pedagogic praxis has been public and dialogic. It has involved engagement with multiple audiences and complexities, addressing the representational aporias of diasporic/exilic location and desperately maintaining familial and other attachments with those under siege in Kashmir. It has also involved challenging the patronizing solidarity of those claiming to be allies. As a *de*-colonial stance, this

scholarship is necessarily meta-ethnographic, producing a close description of the complex workings of colonial power and violence on everyday life in Kashmir as well as an abstracted representation of those complexities to raise awareness of the colonial occupation.

Navigating Public Pedagogy: #Thekashmirsyllabus

In collaboration with others, the anti-occupation pedagogic praxis took the form of #thekashmirsyllabus which we argue was not simply "a list of readings" but a living document that became a transnational node for building a critical community of thinkers, activists, and advocates, as well as a bridge between Kashmiri activist–scholars and activist–scholars working in other settings of ongoing colonialism. #thekashmirsyllabus was inspired by the Standing Rock, Puerto Rico, and Islamophobia is Racism syllabi, in recognition of overlapping systems of oppression that bind these multiple struggles together. Snaza (2019) has analyzed these syllabi as "curricula against the state." The use of the term "against" here has a

> double, and somewhat conflicting, resonance. It means both to be in close proximity (the syllabus projects lean on statist modes of education), but also to be in opposition. Understood doubly, to be "against" the state is not to be entirely outside of it, but to be in a relation of antagonistic complicity. (Snaza, 2019, p. 140)

These syllabi are "delinked from both state-mandated or regulated curriculum" (Snaza, 2019, p. 135). They do not require an authority in order to be interpreted—they can be picked up by a wide range of individuals for a wide variety of reasons (including as a complement to advocacy or activism). In connecting the "public and the classroom," their strength lies in contributing to the "challenging work of building up networks, sites, and languages that facilitate self-determination and liberation" (Snaza, 2019, p. 138).

#thekashmirsyllabus was put together in response to the continued emphasis on statist narratives in course syllabi and public discourse, as well as a need to amplify important knowledge production being done by Kashmiris themselves on Kashmir.[6] It affirms Kashmiri (demands of) sovereignties and links long histories of political struggle to the present. It engages with themes including gender, religious difference, culture, and ecology, while also contributing theoretical knowledge on occupation and resistance. By focusing on how the liberation of Kashmir is intrinsically linked to struggles against patriarchy, militarization, empire, and ecocide, the syllabus shows the presence of "affiliated, linked, and coalescing struggles" (Snaza, 2019, p. 143). The use of sources like novels, photographs, films, short stories, and memoirs also provide a multiplicity of pedagogical materials beyond academic articles. As more and more educators assign readings from #thekashmirsyllabus in their courses, or as the syllabus gains traction in advocacy circles, the hope is that students and activists will be able to see how Kashmir emerges as a site of postcolonial "coloniality" and also connects with other struggles for collective liberation.

Yet, even as #thekashmirsyllabus provides a lens into alternative ways of looking at Kashmir, it is "against," or in close proximity to, the body of work produced in the Western academy given the presence of peer-reviewed academic articles. This entails

a particular adherence to disciplinary norms and methods even as the authors push back against colonial forms of knowledge production. That a vast majority of the works are in English also highlights how public pedagogy remains mired in restrictions imposed by the Western academy as well as formal schooling structures (Taliaferro-Baszile, 2019). How would our understanding of various topics change, for example, if more writings by Kashmiris in Urdu or Kashmiri, or by Kashmiris from varying social or class locations, were incorporated? This demands that the project of public pedagogy must be constantly evolving and ongoing and must intervene on multiple levels, attendant to dismantling colonial modes and methods of knowledge production.

Pedagogy of Positionality

What does an anti-occupation pedagogic praxis that is seeking to trace the arc of solidarity from the West to Kashmir look like for academics situated in the Western academy when knowledge production continues to remain, in many ways, tied to imperialism and colonial violence (Gaztambide-Fernández & Murad, 2011, p. 14)? For Kashmiri scholars in the West, a decolonial stance involves resisting the colonial-academic "Native informant" slot and finding a voice that does not reproduce the colonial-statist view, despite the desire to be understood.

For allied scholars, it involves, as Gonzalez (2003) has argued in her essay on the ethics of postcolonial ethnography, at least "an awareness of the colonization after having been woken from a hegemonic slumber" (p. 81), followed by accountability, fidelity to the context, truthfulness, and openness to the community's criticism (pp. 83–84). It becomes all the more critical that those who are in solidarity with the Kashmiri struggle—especially, but not exclusively, scholars of Indian descent—remain explicit about their positionality and varied levels of complicity in India's settler colonial project, as well as the personal or political stakes of their work. Scholars who come from varying levels of privilege or have dominant identities often rely on Kashmiri networks of hospitality and trust in order to create their knowledge. What, then, is their responsibility to the people and the place? What are the ethics of doing scholarship in a place like Kashmir where all aspects of individual and collective life are mediated through a brutal occupation? These questions may have no simple answers, but they must be addressed at the individual and collective levels with a constant reworking of one's own assumptions and privileges.

Most importantly, a pedagogy of solidarity requires a pedagogy of humility. Scholars based in the West must contend with the ways in which their research and the imperial gaze (and all of its implicit or explicit logics) towards colonized regions like Kashmir remain entangled despite efforts to be in solidarity. This means being cognizant of how the neoliberal North American university privileges Western scholarship as well as Westerners doing scholarship but makes it difficult for Native or Indigenous communities to engage in research. Even as critical Kashmir scholars are fighting for their space in the North American academy, they are nevertheless differently situated from scholars based in Kashmir or Kashmiri scholars based in India. Humility entails willingness to hear perspectives which may challenge one's own pedagogy, research, or frameworks and constantly reworking and relearning in dialogue with colleagues under direct repression. It entails using one's privilege, even

if just of a fleeting sense of safety that the North American university offers Kashmiri scholars, to create spaces for colleagues at home through mentorship, collaborations, and other opportunities.

Our work in the diaspora, scholarship and advocacy relies on an understanding of solidarity work through the lens of collective justice and liberation. This is built on our understanding of the concrete, intersecting ideological, and material logics of all forms of supremacism, neoliberalism, and colonialism that pervades the world order, of which the Western academy is a part. Kashmiris, as with many other vulnerable groups around the world, are not simply asking for their rights to be restored in the existing structures of power and hierarchy; rather, the case of Kashmir exemplifies how limited, and indeed disastrous, these structures are and how our responsibility is to provide an analysis that looks beyond them. It is only through a lens that foregrounds solidarity as a pedagogical praxis that we, as scholar–activists, can work towards collective liberation.

Notes

1. India had claimed Kashmir in 1947 based on the Instrument of Accession signed by Jammu and Kashmir's Hindu feudal ruler who was facing revolts from his impoverished Muslim majority subjects. The UN Security Council passed resolutions (UNSC Res. 47) that did not accept this treaty and gave the right to self-determination to the people of the state, but India did not implement them, instead signing another treaty with a few loyalist Kashmiri politicians which became the basis of Articles 370 and 35A.
2. For a critique of self-determination see Massad (2018).
3. For an example of this kind of writing, see Kumar (2020).
4. For more on the link between settler colonialism and demographic replacement, see Wolfe (2006, p. 403).
5. There is the oft-missed irony—which Kashmiris are quick to point out—that the US, Israel, and India, which proclaim themselves to be the "greatest democracy in the world," the "only democracy in the region," and the "largest democracy in the world," respectively, are either founded on or have ongoing violent settler colonial projects.
6. The Kashmir Syllabus can be accessed on the Stand with Kashmir website. https://standwithkashmir.org/the-kashmir-syllabus/

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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