



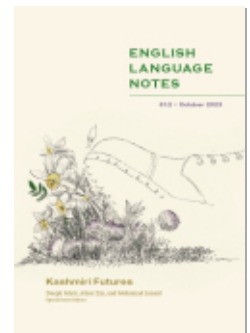
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Researching Kashmir

Power, Position, and Ethics

MONA BHAN, MOHAMAD JUNAID, AND HAFSA KANJWAL

Abstract This roundtable discusses the future of research in critical Kashmir studies through a close consideration of questions of power, ethics, and positionality that have come to the fore in recent years.

Keywords Kashmir, research ethics, positionality

This conversation on Kashmir started as an online panel at Oxford University in January 2022. The panel was part of Oxford's Modern South Asian Studies seminar series titled "Researching South Asia" at the Asian Studies Centre. The transcript reflects the ongoing and wider conversation prompted by the event. The panelists were Mona Bhan, Mohamad Junaid, and Hafsa Kanjwal. The discussion has been edited for clarity.

Asian Studies Centre: *Today we are discussing Kashmir and the very unique challenges of working on or in Kashmir. This is, of course, of a long-standing concern. But in recent years, especially after the abrogation of Article 370 in August 2019, the intense difficulties and sensitivities of working on Kashmir have become much more apparent. That said, it's not entirely clear that we still have the kinds of conversations that might be needed among academics on how one is to study a place like Kashmir and what the complexities and ethical conundrums of such research projects may be.*

Perhaps we can begin this conversation by asking you about the trajectory of your own research and writing, as well as your own positionalities vis-à-vis your work on Kashmir.

Hafsa Kanjwal: So I come to this work situated as a Kashmiri Muslim, who was born in Kashmir but spent most of my life outside Kashmir and identified with the political struggle from a young age. I became interested in history as a discipline because so much of how this issue gets discussed was a battle over historical narratives, and I wanted to understand that better. In terms of my own positionality, my experience doing research on Kashmir has been twofold. First, I've encountered quite a bit of Islamophobia or anti-Muslim sentiment throughout my academic career, especially in South Asian studies. Second, as a scholar situated in the US

or Western academy—I acknowledge that I still benefit from certain privileges and levels of access and visibility that are simply unavailable to Kashmiri scholars elsewhere. I think the first point is especially important and is not something that people feel comfortable openly speaking about. And we can speak of the ways in which Islamophobia or anti-Muslim sentiments emerge in the academy overall, but in South Asian studies it is particularly pervasive. And this is because the makeup of the field is largely elite or upper-caste Indian scholars who make you feel that you—as a Kashmiri, as a Muslim, as a female—simply do not belong, while they reproduce their own networks of kinship. I’ve experienced a certain kind of discomfort around Muslimness. In addition, a particular type of secular liberalism [which in the Indian context is often a mask for soft Hindutva] normalizes India’s colonial subjugation of Kashmir. So I often have heard that my work is “too political,” and because I am a Kashmiri Muslim, I lack “objectivity.” What of course is interesting about this is that Indian scholars who work on Kashmir or engage with our work are naturally seen as “objective”—even if they share an identity with the oppressor, are unable to come out of their nationalist frameworks, or have intimate ties to the colonial state, that is not seen as a bias, but the positionality of Kashmiri Muslim scholars is. So because of these cultures of elitism and exclusion within South Asian studies, I found that many of my mentors, role models, or people whom I have been in intellectual community with tended to be outside South Asian studies—working on Palestine, Middle East studies, Islamic studies, Africana studies, or Indigenous studies. Those fields allowed me to freely ask the kinds of questions that I wanted to ask about Kashmir, unshackled from the dominance of “India” as a master signifier. Despite these issues, however, I acknowledge that being in the US academy gives me certain privileges—access to resources, publications, conferences; the ability to teach, research, and write a bit more freely. So I do often think about these hierarchies of knowledge production and how my work on Kashmir—while important to me in terms of my political, ethical, and moral commitments—also may eventually grant me tenure, or be published in a book form. And I understand that is a privilege, but it also comes with a responsibility not to simply extract knowledge but also to give back.

Mohamad Junaid: Let me start by saying that our political subjectivity, or what you called positionality, unfolds in charged contexts and emerges from personal trajectories. I was born and grew up in Islamabad, South Kashmir. I call it Islamabad now, but at that time you could get into trouble with Indian soldiers if they heard you say it. They wanted us to call it Anantnag, because the latter name, in their minds, suggested some ancient connection with a Hindu India, even though the name Anantnag had relatively recent origins in the late nineteenth-century Dogra rule, and hardly anyone in this old town used it. I grew up in a Kashmiri Muslim milieu, but I really didn’t reflect on that identity back then. Only later did I recognize that I was shaped by the nineties—the years when India launched its counterinsurgency war against Tehreek, the Kashmiri independence movement. Early in 1990 Indian soldiers descended upon everything, took over public spaces, even schools and hospitals, and there was fear all around. Several of my friends, and many people

in my neighborhood, were injured or disappeared, and some were even killed during this time. Eventually, in the late 1990s, this situation in Kashmir drove me to Indian universities, where I began, first of all, to feel dislocated. There was a deep dissonance between my experiences of the violence of the counterinsurgency war back in Kashmir and that of the crowded yet humdrum life in India. Because of the aggressive Indian nationalism that pervaded the public sphere, I became acutely sensitive to my Kashmiriness and my Kashmiri Muslimness. To be a Kashmiri Muslim in a place like Delhi led not only to discrimination, suspicion, and surveillance but also to a constant pressure to stay silent on Kashmir. One thing I noticed early on was that there wasn't much written about the Kashmiri experience of the 1990s. Where were "Kashmiri intellectuals"? The truth, of course, was that the intellectuals had been, in the language of the colonial counterinsurgency, "put out of circulation." So while Kashmiris had gone through a yearslong political uprising for freedom, there were no serious accounts of it. In Indian journalistic and military accounts, Kashmiris were absent or uniformly vilified as "anti-nationals." The core axioms of Indian nationalism were also hegemonic in Indian academic spaces. When I was working on my master's thesis, I realized I couldn't ask many questions on my topic, which had to do with Indian nationalism and its consequences for those in the margins, specifically Kashmiris. At the time, my chosen field of study was international politics, which was, of course, highly structured and abstract but also bereft of any engagement with the distinct histories and politics of the peoples that were now all clubbed together as "Indian." To me, the Indian university had not broken away from the aims of colonial education; it was, in fact, reproducing it to maintain the dominance of the postcolonial elite. I needed both a new disciplinary home for my inquiries, as well as a new academic home. In 2008 I returned to teach in Kashmir, where the counterinsurgency war had quietly settled into the recesses of everyday life. That year Indian forces shot dead dozens of Kashmiri youth to suppress renewed protests. Eventually, by some effort and luck, I ended up in New York to pursue a PhD in anthropology. In anthropology one could recognize two distinct traditions: first, an "imperial tradition," which involved anthropologists going into colonized or war zones embedded in the colonial forces, conducting research, and using their knowledge instrumentally to support imperial power; second, a critical tradition, which questioned not only power but the discipline's own complicity with it. It felt empowering to me, and I felt instantly attached to this critical tradition. I could ask questions about Kashmir that I had left unasked. That is what drove me to my research. I worked with "youth activists" in Kashmir. These were activists and intellectuals who had been part of Tehreek from the late 1980s to the 2010s. Several of these were actually quite old and had spent entire lifetimes contesting Indian rule in Kashmir. Indian authorities in Kashmir used the term *youth* as a way to represent Tehreek activists as immature, menacing, and sociopathic. But what I found—and always knew, in a way—was that these activists were intellectually sharp and deeply political and relentlessly fought to reclaim space, both physical and discursive, for Tehreek politics. So, while Kashmir and my own experience as a Kashmiri had brought me to anthropology and to the United States, my research took me back there to make sense of all those experiences that previously I had found unarticulated.

Mona Bhan: The question of positionality is a complicated question for me as well. I was born into a Kashmiri Pandit family, and a majority of Kashmiri Pandits consider Kashmiri Muslim claims to self-determination unfounded. My intellectual, ethical, and political commitments to Kashmir, however, were profoundly shaped by my grandfather's role in the Kashmiri movement for self-determination from the 1940s on. I therefore grew up hearing very divergent views and claims on Kashmir. On the one hand, I had a role model in my grandfather, who stood up for rights and justice and felt very strongly that self-determination for Kashmiris was for all Kashmiris, not just for Muslims. He argued how self-determination was not a concession but a fundamental right that people should stand up for regardless of their religious or ethnic affiliations. On the other hand, I had extended family members who were dismissive of my grandfather's politics. I remember arguing with them frequently and struggling with these contradictory political positions early in my childhood. For me, the picture of Kashmir as a peaceful paradise before the 1980s never really existed. This picture was inherently problematic, given how India had been treating Kashmir and deceiving Kashmiris all along. When I turned to anthropology in the 1990s, which is a much longer story, I wanted to work in Kashmir. Because it was hard to do ethnographic fieldwork in Kashmir at the time, I ended up choosing Ladakh as my field site. While my decision to work in Ladakh was about the feasibility of fieldwork at the time, I also recognized how Ladakh and Kashmir seemed politically and socially divided, with implications for how we understood the larger history of the former princely state. Unfortunately, the existing scholarship also replicated the way the state represented the region of Jammu and Kashmir as a divided and fragmented space, with the Kashmir Valley the villain in the region. While anthropology provides a wonderful array of conceptual and methodological tools to challenge hegemonic scripts, it is critical to use historical sensibilities to unpack the regional politics of the former princely state. If we reproduce the state's divide-and-rule policy, which is what much of the scholarship did, then Ladakh and Kashmir become inherently different problems. The cultural, affective, material, and social ties that bind these places together are dismissed to foreground how the princely state was an "inorganic" entity. Well, which state or political formation is an organic entity? Furthermore, the political contexts that also tie their fates together are ignored in such formulations. Ladakhis, for example, have suffered extensively because of living so close to the Line of Control [LoC]. The wars and the lines drawn by nation-states separated families and friends in Kargil. Folks who bore the brunt of wars in the region spoke of how difficult it was to live under the constant shadow of wars and violence. In any case, what brought me to anthropology was the spirit to contest the eternity of these borders and artificially drawn linguistic, ethnic, religious, and regional lines that freeze our thinking and action. I wanted to contest those, because I had seen these lines creating rifts within families, and within my own family. Also in terms of my positionality, while in Kashmir, I did not fully comprehend how being from a Brahmin family afforded us a variety of social privileges; the division of labor across class and religious lines in Kashmir's stratified society troubled me deeply. Interdining was rare, and intermarriages across

the Hindu-Muslim divide were uncommon. To an extent, religious differences concealed the effects of caste in Kashmir. In Udhampur, where I moved with my family when I was fifteen, I became acutely aware of caste-based hierarchies among caste-privileged “Hindus” and caste-oppressed communities. But because there was considerable pushback against our family’s politics in Kashmir, I also grew up feeling vulnerable and somewhat isolated. Living on these edges of socially constructed identities taught me early on to question political and cultural categories that were foisted on me. I realized that I had to find ways to question pre-given social and political norms in order to live a meaningful and fulfilling life. Anthropology allowed me to figure out my identity through these many contradictions.

ASC: *Could you tell us a bit about what it is like to do research on Kashmir?*

MJ: If you are a Kashmiri Muslim researcher in Kashmir, so many spaces are fore-closed to you. Far from doing research there, you are not even allowed to enter those spaces. I am speaking here literally of spaces, like entire regions and areas, including, for instance, border zones. In fact, the Indian state sees the category of “Kashmiri Muslim intellectual” itself as a threat. As a researcher, therefore, there are only a few things you can do before the state comes down on you. Then there are, of course, institutional controls. For instance, at Kashmir University, the oldest and the most prominent university in Kashmir, I have seen the struggles of Kashmiri researchers. These are bright scholars who would thrive elsewhere if they had freedom to explore the kind of questions they want to explore. But the university’s chief patron is the Indian governor, who makes it clear that the university authorities must keep tabs on what kind of research can be done in Kashmir University. I have come across scholars in Kashmir who are forced to change their research at the last minute or repackage their research away from any mention of Indian state repression in Kashmir. There’s really no space to ask critical questions or do research in social sciences or humanities. There is no funding. Even experienced scholars, instead of pursuing their own work, are forced to accept roles as “native participants” in the research projects led by Indian scholars who come from outside. Some even get rolled into Indian Ministry of Home–financed projects that clearly have counterinsurgency goals. The Indian governor’s vice-regal-style, undemocratic role in Kashmir is devastating overall, but it is no less odious for education and research. I had a brief and tense, but telling personal encounter when I was teaching in Kashmir in 2008, and the governor was visiting the university. He came in a helicopter and raised a dust storm that enveloped the entire campus. We were asked to “meet and greet” and not to ask any questions. I went hesitantly and sat around the table. I don’t know why, but toward the end I raised my hand to ask a question. He looked visibly angry. My colleagues around the table were afraid for me. I went ahead and asked him, “What is the role of the university in the moment of crisis?” There were a lot of protests going on in Kashmir in 2008, and Indian forces, as I mentioned before, had shot dozens of young Kashmiris dead, injured thousands, and arrested many more. Without a hint of irony, he said that the university must do more research on animal husbandry and handicrafts and, you know, things that sounded so far from the reality all around us. It made no sense. What I’m trying to say is that research for Kashmiris in Kashmir is

extremely difficult and often absurd. When you do research in places like Kashmir, this attention to positionality is not a footnote to the knowledge you produce, nor is it the customary, poetically wrought “self in the field” section in the book intros. It is central to the praxis of research itself. The Kashmiri Muslim identity of a researcher is the very opposite of privilege. It’s by itself a threatened, precarious identity. In the “field,” it becomes even more so.

MB: I want to expand this category of research and talk about the ways the Indian government represses all forms of expression, be it political, social, cultural, in Kashmir that undo the myth of Kashmir’s integration with India. A lot is at stake for Kashmiri researchers, journalists, activists, and advocates who dare to think, ask questions, or write. Some of you might know that Khurram Parvez, an internationally renowned human rights defender and a fierce Kashmiri rights advocate, and cofounder of the Jammu and Kashmir Coalition of Civil Society, is in prison. Khurram’s case is widely known, but it is by no means an isolated one. It represents what is happening on the ground right now. Indian national security advisor Ajit Doval’s statement that civil society is now the new frontier of war has serious implications for Indian civil society but even graver consequences for Kashmiris, who have dealt with the criminalization of their activism since the 1940s. The surveillance machinery used to scuttle voices and criminalize any form of dissent has a very long history in that region, and it’s only become worse since 2019. In January 2022 the Press Club of Kashmir was shut down. That, to many, was the last bastion of freedom and autonomy in the region. A journalist friend of mine claims that India is invested in the dual project of dismantling and erasure in Kashmir. And those two are happening simultaneously at a speed that we can’t even envision sitting here. So I just want to make sure that we recognize this larger context within which research is happening, or not happening, or not allowed to happen. For many of us here, the stakes are different; the fundamental question that we’re faced with at this moment is whether we can even return to a place we all call home. Can we go back and see our family members, whom we haven’t seen in years? These are existential questions for us that transcend narrowly framed concerns related to research.

The possibility of continuing to do research in Kashmir is also not simply about one’s identity anymore; it’s also about how publicly visible your work is. I could work in border regions in the 1990s and in the 2010s because my digital footprint was not easily accessible. I could speak to the military in Ladakh, and I could do it only because I was a woman, and I was a Kashmiri Pandit. If I were Kashmiri Muslim and male, this work might not have been possible. At the same time, being in a relationship with a Kashmiri Muslim created many issues during fieldwork. I was kicked out from the village in 2001 because the military considered me an ISI [i.e., a Pakistani Inter-Services Intelligence] operative. The military in Kashmir has been part of the project of disciplining bodies for the longest time, and they discipline different bodies differently. So as a Kashmiri Pandit woman, the disciplining that happened was through overt and covert messages about whom I could or could not marry. Working along the LoC was hard because village counterinsurgency networks had transformed residents into the eyes and ears of the state and

had fragmented communities by sowing seeds of mistrust. I had to be fiercely honest with people about who I was; they demanded it from me, and I owed it to them. As anthropologists, we have to be mindful of our presence in certain spaces at certain times. We might not actively be asking questions, but our presence and proximity to certain people and spaces can hurt or harm people, advertently or inadvertently. We must let our interlocutors guide us in this process. I feel that this process requires us to cultivate deep humility and honesty and a recognition of our limits as anthropologists. We have to acknowledge that there are certain spaces that might not need to be “accessed.” We have to acknowledge that our identities and affiliations might be damaging to the well-being of the communities we work with. And you know, this is really difficult for anthropologists to accept, since we fetishize the notion of “access” so much in our field.

HK: So I wanted to say a bit about my own research experience but also share some insights from Kashmiri colleagues currently based in India or in Kashmir. I did my archival research back in 2013–14. My research is on state building, so I needed to access bureaucratic documents of the Kashmir state, as well as the Indian government’s communications with the Kashmir state. I was lucky to get access to the Srinagar state archives at that time, but it was very difficult to obtain any materials on Kashmir from the National Archives of India. Most of the requested materials came back nontransferable. So just on a broad level you are dealing with institutional restrictions on scholarship on Kashmir, and your access to materials can at times be completely haphazard or based on your contacts. In addition, there are so many institutions or groups in Kashmir who may have archival material, but they are nervous about opening their archives to researchers in case the state hears of this documentation and attempts to destroy it. Many people also told me that during the 1990s they destroyed their own personal archives, including those who themselves or whose family members had been involved in the resistance. Then there is the day-to-day struggle of doing research under a constant state of uncertainty due to strikes or curfews. In terms of the experiences of Kashmiri scholars in Kashmir, university life in Kashmir isn’t like elsewhere. There are no student unions, talks or symposiums are subject to official approvals, and there are institutional limitations to the type of research scholars can undertake, even the kind of terminology they can use [*occupation* or *conflict*, for example]. Since 2019 Kashmiri scholars have felt increasingly vulnerable. The level of surveillance is immense, including on social media, and scholarship and documentation are criminalized and subject to antiterror laws like the UAPA [Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act of 1967, amended most recently in 2019], which has already been used on various members of Kashmiri civil society. Many academics have been visited by state intelligence and asked for information about their work, who they know, and so on. Colleagues have told me that they constantly delete their field notes or information from their phones and laptops. They do not keep a record of their work because of regular checkpoints, frisking, and raids. They fear approaching potential interlocutors lest they extend the surveillance grid on them. Also, those potential interlocutors might be undercover police or intelligence. Even travel within Kashmir is tricky for fieldwork; as one colleague and political scientist told me:

For years now, police and other state forces have looked at intertown and intervillage travel or stay with suspicion in Kashmir. For example, if a person is traveling to a certain village, he becomes the first suspect during the numerous daily “security checkups” on the roads. . . . The night stay is difficult in Kashmir. The “guest” is the first suspect in the cordon and search operation.¹

Furthermore, the state has not allowed some Kashmiris to leave Kashmir for further work or study: they have been placed on a no-fly list, and many Kashmiris who are currently outside are afraid to go home in case they are not allowed to travel out again. These are the kinds of dilemmas students, researchers, and scholars are constantly considering. Everything is set up to completely clamp down on scholarship and silence people. All of this raises the question of how scholarship even happens in conditions of settler colonization.

ASC: What kind of ethical guidelines do you think people should consider, particularly through a disciplinary lens?

MB: Different fields approach the question of ethics differently, and that’s in part why so much harm has been caused already by many scholars and academics who choose to go to Kashmir for research. In my initial few months of fieldwork in Kargil, I found it upsetting when villagers called me a spy or questioned my intent. I had to come to terms with the fact that this was not a personal attack. It was a structural position that I occupied as someone who belonged to Kashmir and was conducting research in these heavily securitized spaces. An important part of decolonizing our research praxis is to recognize that there’s nothing personal about “being questioned” by your interlocutors. It is obviously their right to do so, and it is our duty to acknowledge and spell out our structural location to communities we choose to work with. I had to acknowledge that people who lived along the LoC had experienced inexplicable amounts of suffering. Their ruthless scrutiny about my intent and identity was totally warranted. In hindsight, I appreciate the kinds of questions I was asked every day by young kids who wanted to know if I had a hidden microphone in my bag. At the time, I would get really peeved by these little kids pestering me to reveal the contents of my bag. But I now appreciate why it took so long for people to trust me. It is critical to recognize our structural locations when we do fieldwork, particularly when we are trying so hard to move away from predatory and extractive models of doing fieldwork. At the AAAs [the American Anthropological Association annual meeting in November 2021], Akhil Gupta gave an important talk about decolonizing anthropology.² I appreciate the points he made about how we need a racial reckoning in the field. Similarly, Dalit scholars have pushed for caste reckoning in South Asian studies as well. I feel, however, that it is high time for Kashmir reckoning to happen in South Asian studies, and in anthropology more specifically. This might mean that some norming practices must be unsettled. So, for example, the framing of Kashmir as a frontier has implications for how we do research in the region. Anthropology can encourage the frontier-

ization of Kashmir, where the intrepid anthropologist, usually the one unfamiliar with the political context or oblivious to it, can perform their work in “dangerous” conditions. Kashmir has a sedimented history of oppression, structural violence that is well documented as well as secret state violence that is largely undocumented because there is no way to know how the secret state operates in the region. We need to reckon with this history, particularly as engaged scholars of Kashmir. South Asian scholars must challenge the embeddedness of India-centrism in South Asian studies but it can only happen if we challenge the settler-colonial models of scholarship that South Asian studies is founded on. We need to move away from the idea of India as a secular democracy and acknowledge India’s status as a settler colonial power, an aspirational empire that has expansionary ambitions, and part of that ambition is to control Kashmir. If we miss this foundational fact about India’s relationship with Kashmir, I don’t think that any work we do in that region will be ethical, critical, or radical in any sense.

MJ: I agree that recognition has to come from within anthropology and South Asian studies. For me, that reckoning also involves asking what kind of a place Kashmir is, or what sort of place India is turning Kashmir into. Settler colonialism and counterinsurgency produce their own field effects, and the history of the transformation of a place like Kashmir needs to be taken into account. In such a place, the question of positionality in research has a heightened importance. It means recognizing where one comes from, what baggage one brings with oneself, and knowing that one’s presence itself might reinscribe violence, even in an unintentional manner. All this needs to happen before one even decides whether one should do research. The second point I wish to make may sound like a tough ask, even an unreasonable one, especially from non-Kashmiri researchers, but I think ethnographers in particular should really consider it, precisely because Kashmir is not like a traditional field site. This has to do with our language in the field. I realize increasingly that anthropological research on Kashmir now involves eschewing even the traditional practices like learning the language. During the destructive Kashmir floods of September 2014, while accompanying a local relief team in the countryside, I came across journalists, even some Kashmiri journalists, working for Indian news channels who would come up to the villagers and ask them questions in Hindi. It was quite interesting and heartbreaking to notice the way the people would respond to them and address them as “yes, sir” or “yes, ma’am.” But when the Kashmiri journalists switched to Kashmiri, that “sir” and “ma’am” would go away. What it told me was that in Kashmir, Hindi and a certain kind of Urdu are languages of command. Kashmiris know well how the Indian military speaks. And sometimes the researchers or journalists who may come from outside, or Kashmiris who momentarily adopt that authoritative mode of inquiry, speak like military officers and ask questions that come across like interrogations. In Kashmir, the word *interrogation* means custodial torture, which has been part of the counterinsurgency war. This is one effect that not learning the language might create. Indeed, there is an entire experience of what it means to live under the occupation in Kashmir, not to mention history, as Kashmiris narrate it, which is deeply ingrained and very complex and complicated, much like histories of other people, much of which

remains opaque when you do not speak the language of the people. It appears that speaking the language of the occupier, which is sometimes the same as speaking down with authority, also involves borrowing the descriptive metaphors of the occupation itself and thus reinforces that reality. I'm not saying that you cannot do research there if you don't speak the language of the people, but for ethnographers, learning the commonly spoken languages means additional accountability, and not being able to speak the language requires a recognition of that and of knowing that your findings are partial and possibly compromised. Speaking down the languages of command, on the other hand, despite the speaker's intentions, sometimes produces a "savior effect." Researchers project an idea of persistent suffering onto Kashmiris, without having to engage their actual lifeworlds. If we don't speak the languages people feel comfortable speaking, how do we read the expressive silences, rich twists of phrase, or bodily language, or aspects of life that may not fit the notion of a suffering subject? A scholarly fascination with a rarified Kashmiri lifeworld marked by "suffering" sometimes leads researchers to recursively translate their experience in Kashmir as a moment of their own transformation, sometimes to the point of claiming to have "become Kashmiri," probably to compensate for not finding enough "material." Ironically, Kashmiri researchers sometimes borrow similar axioms and metaphors, so it just becomes this repetitive process where the complexity of the society and people's experiences get flattened. The occupation and its violence are crushing and real; indeed, settler colonialism has sought to fragment Kashmir. But there is also a lot of resilience among people. Despite violence, differences, and social conflicts, Kashmiris have held together as a people, because there are a long history, traditions, and layered experiences and lifeworlds that Kashmiris share and inhabit and that make them a people. We can miss this if we remain wedded to scholarly projects and concepts whose singular audience remains academe.

HK: I think I would start off by saying that the structure of the neoliberal academy is such that it is easy for these ethical breaches to emerge and for scholars from the global North to exploit the power differentials that exist especially when they work on the global South; a complete rethinking of knowledge production needs to happen alongside ensuring that our existing practices are held to ethical standards. And this is especially true for occupied or colonized places. In history, and this may sound bizarre but it happens, it is important not to steal or take away archival material with you. This seems pretty obvious, but it has happened in the past in Kashmir. At the same time, I do think that there are broader questions of research ethics that all researchers—including Kashmiris and non-Kashmiris—must consider. First, why are you conducting the type of research you are trying to conduct? What kinds of questions is your research interested in, and why? As researchers, we have to remain vigilant that our research sites or questions do not reinscribe Indian or colonial categories or understandings of Kashmir's past, present, and future. I do sense a resistance to the work that critical Kashmir studies is putting out in some quarters, because it centers India's relationship with Kashmir as a colonial one. Some may argue that we are solely focused on Kashmir's occupation and that questions of internal hierarchies, minority rights, and other communities are not being fore-

grounded. Of course research should be conducted on these topics. But is the researcher's intention to "complicate" and "fracture" the Kashmir Tehreek and downplay the role of India's colonization of the region? Is the attempt to focus on Kashmiri-on-Kashmiri violence without understanding the structural conditions that are in play? Even when studying these internal hierarchies, it is important to remain intersectional, to not lose sight of the broader political context in which these other critical questions exist. In addition, there is a tendency for researchers, especially from the global North, to simply mine their research subjects or area for information or data; it is very extractive. I think it's important for ethical research to give back through mentorship, workshops, helping others, listening, and speaking out in solidarity. There are also models of collaborative scholarship that can be followed, especially when working with researchers in Kashmir. Are they paid adequately, are we understanding their limitations and not imposing our own standards on them, and are we allowing them to define the contours of the research? And then I think, just broadly, that people need to ask what kinds of connections they are using to access the research site. What are their connections to the Indian and Kashmir states? What are their connections to the bureaucracy? Are they being transparent about those methods?

ASC: Maybe we can return to this point that Mona has referred to as the "Kashmir reckoning." Doesn't it open up a question now asked in anthropology—not just in anthropology but in the social sciences more generally—about who has the right to study whom? Like whether this is upper-caste people studying Dalits, whether this is white people studying Maoris in New Zealand or is, for instance, privileged Indians going and working in Kashmir, because the stakes of that project, as you were just saying, are so completely different. There is currently a very big debate within the discipline, but within South Asian studies as well, on positionality, ethics, stakes of research, et cetera. What would the three of you say about Indians who work on Kashmir? How do we think about what this "Kashmir reckoning" might be?

MB: I think that's a really important question. You know, I do want to preface my answer by saying that Kashmiris, and this is a stereotype but it's largely true, love inviting people to their homes. They are a fiercely inclusive community. Kashmiri human rights advocates, journalists, and political activists graciously invite Indians to visit Kashmir and want them to see for themselves what the Indian state has been doing to Kashmiris at the behest of national security. In any case, it is not as if Kashmiris have the authority to act as gatekeepers. Sadly, it is often the other way around. Over the years many Kashmiris living in exile have not been able to return home, let alone act as gatekeepers for outsiders. Like in any colonial occupied space, it is the state and the military that exert these powers. As a gesture of true solidarity, Indian scholars can challenge the structures of power that they're embedded in and be cognizant of how such structures of power might have directly or indirectly benefited them. I think that decolonial scholars must at the very least commit themselves to this kind of radical honesty. There are many examples of wonderful Indian allies who have worked alongside Kashmiris to amplify their voices in ways that are respectful of Kashmiri aspirations and their political voice. Many people in Kash-

mir are complicit with the government, perform key roles as police or politicians, or are forced to rely on government personnel for their everyday necessities. For instance, if I need to see someone off at the airport, I need to figure out a way to contact an “influential” figure who can arrange my entry. If I need a mobile cell phone connection or a SIM card, I need to figure out how to contact somebody in the bureaucracy so that I can get things done. The state thus exerts its power over the most quotidian aspects of Kashmiri lives to sustain its bureaucratic stranglehold over them. Many Kashmiris I know participated in elections because some politician promised the return of their disappeared kin. Voting during India-orchestrated elections was therefore hardly ever a gesture of support or legitimacy for the Indian government. On the contrary, it was their best strategy to survive the repressive hold of the state or the military. The Indian state has also long played the divide-and-rule policy by instituting client regimes in Kashmir that created what many in Kashmir call the collaborator class. While this is a critical context to bear in mind, this does not give outside researchers, particularly those who remain embedded in and who benefit from the state’s institutional power, permission to equate their “embeddedness” with those of local populations. I think this is disingenuous at best. It is the responsibility of everyone doing ethical, feminist, and decolonial research work to spell out their institutional privilege, be they Kashmiri scholars or outsiders. But one cannot as a self-reflexive researcher pretend that these complicities [of researchers and their interlocutors] with the state are the same or are born out of the same context. It is important to acknowledge that Kashmiri activists, human rights workers, and scholars have worked hard to establish solidarities rather than box people up into pregiven categories. This is the feminist praxis that we as Kashmiris stand for, fully recognizing the urgency to do so in order to think through the promise of liberation collectively.

MJ: There lingers a classical power/knowledge nexus in colonized settings—sadly, anthropology has still not fully cast out its old ghosts. The argument that anthropologists sometimes use, and that has come up in some recent instances, is that certain places, especially colonized spaces, are “murky spaces,” and so the researcher’s identity can’t help but be murky as well. It is true that societies are complicated and complex; places under counterinsurgency wars, especially, are made deformed and murky. And yes, the colonized do not always bravely resist and courageously defy. They deflect, hide, compromise, and collaborate even. For them, and for them alone, the cost of being truthful is often unbearably high. But if the place and its people have been turned murky, should a researcher’s practice be murky as well? Projecting a fashionable opinion about a people through one’s own research practice is glib but not a valid justification. Sometimes your ability, or privilege, to invent such justifications really says something about how you see yourself as someone whom the colonized must unquestioningly trust, and how you see the place simply as a field site that must lend itself to your research agenda no matter what. Not to mention that such characterizations just recycle colonial tropes. India’s state “journalists” have, for instance, written objectionable and fanciful accounts about how Kashmir is murky and how its people are devious. You can read this in the works of people like Praveen Swami or David Devadas. But you don’t expect this from serious scholars.

In the context of South Asian studies and Kashmir, there is another issue that is quite interesting and often disturbing. My sense is that so far even critical researchers—those who, for instance, oppose military repression in Kashmir—continue to retain the notion of an “Indian liberal” identity as by default a cosmopolitan one and above everyday Indian nationalism. That a simple declaration of being “secular Indian” is enough. Yet they can’t get rid of the conceptual grip of Indian nationalism, which demarcates for them the territorial boundaries of “India.” Nor may they realize that for Kashmiris, “Indian liberal” or “Indian secular” identity is no less imperial than the everyday Hindu nationalist one. Even those who use the term *internal colonialism* for Indian rule in Kashmir, instead of *settler colonialism*, will appear to Kashmiris to reinscribe the Indian state’s narrative of Kashmir as an “internal problem.” I remember Gyanendra Pandey’s 2006 essay on Dalit conversion, where he used the term *internal colonialism* to suggest that Dalits and Muslims in India were internally colonized because they had nowhere to go.³ That they feel colonized, yet they can’t go anywhere because they’re geographically dispersed and their identity is intrinsically tied to Hindu majoritarian identity. This argument was then repeated after the 2019 abrogation of Article 370 by Partha Chatterjee, who suggested that Kashmir is internally colonized.⁴ Well, Kashmir is colonized but not internally. Kashmiris are not geographically “dispersed” in the way Dalits and Muslims are presumed to be in Pandey’s formulation. They have a deep sense of their own history outside their relationship with India—outside the colonial relationship that India has imposed on Kashmir—which Kashmiris not only believe will end but against which they have also built, despite the odds, a historical political project, Tehreek, to end it. When you look at these ostensibly critical interventions, therefore, you realize that the interventions have failed to disabuse themselves of Indian nationalism. You begin to realize that even being an “Indian” is quite problematic. That you call yourself Indian is problematic especially when you come to Kashmir. You may have the best intentions in the world, yet you remain embedded in the nationalist universe one way or the other. So there is no automatic trust that can be accorded. It has to be earned through truthfulness and accountability.

Another point I would like to make concerns the way some in Indian elite media and academic circles sought to discredit Kashmiri scholars who raised these kinds of questions. There has lately been quite a bit of focus on “diasporic Kashmiris” having a “problem” while for the “native Kashmiris” there is no issue. This eerily dovetails with the Indian state’s narrative in Kashmir after 2019, when India imposed a monthslong communication blockade in Kashmir and tried to claim that the opposition to India’s actions was limited to diasporic Kashmiri intellectuals and academics, while those living in Kashmir were perfectly happy with it. Even the Indian administration in Kashmir accused diasporic Kashmiri activists of trying to provoke Kashmiris into rebellion while telling people in Kashmir that there would be heavy costs if there were any protests. Not only did the Indian government wish to suppress all forms of protest and all voices in Kashmir, but they also created these new categories, “diaspora” versus “the people.” This way the colonial administration could externalize dissident voices, disconnect international Kashmiri kinship and friendship networks, and incite suspicion and mistrust, while ostensibly patronizing

those directly under its brutal rule and speaking on their behalf: “Our Kashmiris—whom we exploit and dispossess and whom we don’t allow to speak—they are fine with it.” When a similar rhetoric is used to justify research practices, it speaks volumes. Many dissident diasporic voices live in exilic or semi-exilic conditions. The colonial tactic is to discredit them, along with threatening their families in Kashmir, refusing to renew their papers, or deporting them. This tactic is meant to take away the voices of Kashmiri intellectuals, as the state has done in Kashmir, where Kashmiri intellectuals are continuously pulled out of circulation or suppressed. Unfortunately, in a roundabout manner, anthropology enables an element of this. In the disciplinary imaginary of the anthropologist and the native, the native is always imagined as this person trapped in their located culture, imprisoned in place. As soon as the native goes abroad and starts to do their own research, they become a problematic category and confuse the disciplinary categories.

HK: I think that for Indian scholars to do research on Kashmir, they have to really unpack their assumptions when they come into a region that their country maintains an active colonization in. One thing to consider is the type of research Indian scholars engage in. What are the ethics of their coming into Kashmiri communities, entering their most intimate spaces, to study the “impact” of conflict or militarization on Kashmiris? Especially when this research results in obfuscation of the primary vectors of violence or subjugation and focuses so much on Kashmiri-on-Kashmiri violence, or claims that things are complicated and all Kashmiris are somehow compromised. What does it mean for an Indian scholar to make claims that their level of compromise is equivalent or comparable to that of a colonized community? Rather than make Kashmiris their research subjects, why can they not research their own oppressor community and understand the state, ideology, and society that enable settler colonization and India’s genocidal project in Kashmir?

ASC: *I wonder if you might discuss the trajectory of South Asian studies and how it has traditionally engaged or not engaged with questions of Kashmir.*

MJ: Let me address the part about the “traditional” approach to Kashmir in South Asian studies, which as a field centers India and problematically sees the rest of South Asia, and generally Muslims of South Asia, as peripheral and as a problem from the perspective of Indian state and nationalism. The roots of contemporary South Asian studies work on Kashmir go back to the pre-1947 era, during the Dogra rule. It was mutually shaped by Brahmin state officials and the British colonial officials at the Kashmir Durbar. With this work began the process of erasure of Kashmir’s history, especially its Muslim pasts, and the identity of its people. This knowledge production was meant to invent sources of legitimacy for the upper-caste Hindu Dogra clan, a vassal of the British, to rule over a Muslim Kashmiri subject population. This knowledge was further enabled by the oppressive Dogra regime undercutting sources of Kashmiri Muslim literacy. It is no surprise that the demand for education became a key emancipatory slogan in the anti-Dogra movement in the 1930s. The Indian scholarship on Kashmir was laser focused on “discovering” the Sanskrit Hindu past “buried under the medieval Muslim rule.”

This focus continued after 1947, for instance, under supposedly secular institutions like the Archaeological Survey of India and other such institutions. In Kashmir, its people and Indigenous history writers, both Muslims and Hindus, broadly understood that Kashmir had a pluralistic past, with traditions, languages, social forms, and experiences that couldn't be neatly cataloged in the dichotomous world of Hindu-Muslim Indian historiography. After 1947 the Indian state sought to present Kashmir as an integral part of India, not simply in terms of territory but in terms of "civilization" as well. This nationalist framework suppressed the pasts and experiences in which Kashmir was connected, via cultural flows, trade, and in- and out-migrations of people, with many surrounding regions, including NWFP [the North-West Frontier Province], Central Asia, Iran, the Inner Himalayas, Kashgar, et cetera—basically those crucial aspects that showed Kashmir as an independent region in itself, with no essential connection to what later became India. The "Indian scholarship" on Kashmir, which is backed by Indian state institutions, has remained the dominant discourse, and the critical Kashmir scholarship has sought to decenter and problematize it. In this latter scholarship, India is not the implicit or explicit master signifier, territorial or "civilizational," and, if at all, must be seen, as Kashmiris see it, as an occupier state. Critical Kashmir scholarship insists that even the so-called liberal Indian scholarship, which otherwise criticizes nationalist historiography elsewhere, remains awfully blind to nationalist sentiments that shape their own approach to Kashmir. At best, that approach leads them to argue how to benignly control Kashmir, how Kashmiri political aspirations are not worth seriously considering, and what granting some sort of mild "autonomy" should do. This may not appear overtly violent, but it is epistemic violence that erases Kashmir as it recenters India as a natural and unquestionable form within which all problems need to be solved. Take, for instance, the field of subaltern studies. In some key texts of subaltern studies, precisely the ones that seek to ask profound questions about the practices of nationalist Indian historiography, Kashmiri history and historical traditions are quietly appropriated as "Indian" history. Kashmiri historical texts from the past are represented as "Indian" texts. This appropriation is presented as "inclusion." But it is epistemic violence, and part of the centuries-old settler-colonial erasure. And that is the most critical Indian scholarship I am talking about, not the crude nationalist accounts that are still dominant.

HK: The main point I would add here is that there is an imposition of a liberal, secular epistemology when it comes to Kashmir but also broadly when it comes to Islam and Muslims. So Muslim aspirations can be legible or palatable only in particular ways, and not in others. I've had a number of senior Indian scholars tell me that they would support the Kashmir freedom movement were it not for the "Islamic" nature of the resistance. So where does one even begin with that level of bigotry—there are a lot of secular assumptions that need to be unpacked and others that need to be challenged. What is perceived as the original sin—the creation of the state of Pakistan—looms large in Indian framings over Kashmir. Pakistan is the dead horse they like to beat—I'm reminded of when the CAA legislation [2019 Citizenship (Amendment) Act] was passed and all some senior Indian scholars could think to say was that India had become a "Hindu Pakistan." This is the level of analysis and

erasure of their own history that we are dealing with, even among scholars who claim to have anti-Hindutva politics.

MB: I couldn't agree more with Hafsa's last point about Pakistan. I mean, even the way we talk about Indian politics—the phrase *Talibanization of India* is so problematic because of its inherently Islamophobic subtext. There's no recognition of how Pakistan is repeatedly used to score ideological and political points and make Indians feel good about their secular polity. Having said that, I also think that South Asian studies in US universities is trapped in an antiquated area studies model of the world. Such models are tied to funding streams, so these are hard to dislodge. The area studies model emerged to support US policy objectives, and US universities reproduce this model rather than consider creative and meaningful alternatives. South Asia, India in particular, is a huge market for US universities, and that's where I feel South Asian centers face some limitations. There is a reluctance to challenge the implicit ways in which Kashmir keeps getting folded into the ambit of India and Indian democracy. The discourse therefore recycles certain tired myths about Kashmir, which include claims such as: the situation in Kashmir represents the failure of Indian democracy, without a mention of India as a settler-colonial state; or the Kashmir crisis is not because of India's expansionary aspirations but because of India's inability to conduct itself more humanely in the region; and so on and so forth. I think it's this institutionalized folding of Kashmir into the Indian studies model, into the South Asian studies model, that has led to an erasure of Kashmiri voices. The South Asian studies model has considerably limited our understanding of Kashmiri history, culture, and territoriality. Instead of seeing Kashmir as a seam of cultural, political, economic, and aesthetic relationships between South and Central Asia and as a vibrant hub of trade and commerce, Kashmir was reduced to a hinterland as India's dangerous border. And for reclaiming such histories of connectedness, and reclaiming past geographies, Kashmiris are deemed seditious and subjected to bodily and psychic violence.

ASC: *I wonder whether we could talk about the contemporary neoliberal academy, as well as the attacks on academic freedom by Hindutva forces, which we're seeing everywhere. Whether it is in the United Kingdom or in the United States. Of course, we're seeing it in India. And I wonder what this does to the study of Kashmir.*

HK: So many of us have been targeted by Hindutva organizations in the United States. Administrators and colleagues at my college have received emails letting them know that they have hired a “terrorist supporter” who wants to bring “shariat” law to Pennsylvania. Talks and panels are regularly interrupted and disrupted, especially since 2019. Dossiers and online campaigns are created. One of the most common tactics that this lobby uses is to declare Kashmiri academics or anyone who speaks out on Kashmir a “Pakistani agent,” to essentially deny any Kashmiri agency. Meanwhile, in Kashmir there is an increasing attempt by the police to create a category of “white-collar terrorists,” so the police can label academics, journalists, human rights activists white-collar terrorists, and they are already accusing people abroad of inciting violence. So of course, the implications for research on Kashmir

are huge. I mean, there is the fear of being removed from your job, facing harassment, not getting tenure, and so on. But more than that, there's the main fear that our families or loved ones will be harmed, and also that we won't be able to go back. Given state surveillance and how so many social media sites work in tandem with the Indian government, it is also increasingly hard to be in touch with people back home. This creates distance and can eventually destroy social bonds and the ways in which we all try to work together and understand what is going on. The space to have open, frank discussions among ourselves has shrunk. So I think that what this means for the future of research is pretty frightening.

MB: Kashmir scholars have worked hard to name the violence of India in Kashmir a military and political occupation, but in the United States the solidification of the Hindu Right means that spaces where we can talk about Kashmir openly without blowback are shrinking. A part of the Hindu Right's intensification in the United States after 2019 has included their campaign to vilify Kashmir scholars. University deans and alums often receive letters discrediting critical scholarship on Kashmir. In India, the state creates exit lists and entry lists to regulate who can and cannot enter or leave Kashmir. Many Kashmir scholars fear that they will not be allowed to enter Kashmir or to leave it, since that has happened in countless instances already. This has had a paralyzing effect on scholars and researchers. We often see that the Hindu Right groups active in the United States circulate our talks and events as anti-India or jihadi propaganda and will tag the Indian Home Ministry to alert them about our "activities." Such transcontinental surveillance has implications for our friends, families, and colleagues in Kashmir. Unfortunately, our universities are not yet prepared to deal with the Hindu Right in the United States, and this came to the fore during the Dismantling Global Hindutva Conference in 2021. At my university [Syracuse], several Hindu faculty wanted the university to withdraw its support from the conference because they claimed that it was a Hinduphobic conference, and the university's support and endorsement made them feel unsafe on campus. Unfortunately, our limited understanding of diversity in a predominantly white context has meant that Brown people are treated as a monolithic group, and there is little attention paid to how hierarchies of privilege differently shape experiences of being Brown in the United States. By default, universities rely on formulaic and sweeping understandings of diversity, and there is little to no understanding of how Brown caste or religious hegemony is a real impediment to freedom of thought and expression in academe. Universities must come to terms with the shifting landscape of the Hindu Right and how it is impacting scholars working on issues of Hindu fascism, or is impacting Kashmiris and other dispossessed minorities in India. Brown imperialism is real, and we need to reckon with this too in our universities. The folks who harp on feeling vulnerable because of Hinduphobia have the backing of a very powerful state apparatus, and there must be a clear recognition at the administrative level of how such state-backed narratives can scuttle voices for justice, freedom, and liberation in academe.

MJ: I'll just simply say, in addition to what has already been said, that an immense amount of money flows from big Indian corporations into academic centers in

American universities, British universities, et cetera. So, there are actual material interests involved now. I suspect that, going forward, Kashmiris would have an even harder time making a case that there is “Brown imperialism.” Kashmiris and other such colonized people would have a harder time explaining that diversity is not this flat binary, that there are a lot of hierarchies built into diversity. At the beginning, I said I tried to find an academic home for myself where I could pursue questions. But I will end by saying that I only realized that there is really no home. There is no space where one could pursue research unfettered, because the Indian state and its nationalism pursue you across the globe in the form of private-nationalist capital, the North American university complex, or endowed chairs and academic centers named after Indians who played a key role in the occupation in Kashmir. Through them the long arms of Indian Hindu nationalism extend to the American shores. The Indian state even has control over social media; some platforms are led by Indian CEOs who take Indian nationalist positions on Kashmir, or simply accept the Indian government’s diktats about throttling Kashmiri voices. Kashmiris living outside India get Twitter legal notices that they are breaking *Indian law* by remarking about Kashmir on their platforms. Indian IT cell trolls send letters to our universities and departments about how in employing us they have employed “terrorists,” and the deans and the department heads sometimes don’t even know how to process all of this. The reach of Indian nationalists is immense. They disturb our events. Hafsa, Mona, and I were at Princeton in [September] 2019 for a panel event, and a large number of Hindu right-wing activists gathered there and disrupted our event. They had already sent letters to Princeton’s leadership to cancel our panel. Later that month, several of these people took selfies with [Narendra] Modi when he came for that Howdy Modi event in Texas [a summit hosted by the Texas India Forum for Prime Minister Modi and President Trump in Houston on September 22, 2019]. The fact that these people had access to India’s prime minister means that the stakes were already quite high. Every day, when we write, speak, or meet, it is not an easy decision to make, because we put not only ourselves but also people we love at home at risk. It’s extremely difficult to talk about Kashmir openly. Our families, when we get a chance to talk to them, often hide that the Indian authorities have contacted them, because they don’t want to worry us. Sometimes you speak with your family, and you hear that familiar click in the background, and you know someone else is listening in on the conversation. So, far from being able to do research, it’s just the basic ability to speak with your families and friends that has become challenging. This is mostly the reality of Kashmiri researchers and those who have allied themselves with Kashmiri researchers. In all honesty, I am envious of those few researchers, typically upper-caste, privileged Indians, who still freely go to Kashmir in summers and continue their research there. It is as if nothing has changed for them.

ASC: This has been such an important and eye-opening conversation in terms of the intricacies, difficulties, ethics, and morality involved in working on Kashmir. The political difficulties are staggering. And there’s a very deep sort of linkages that you’re drawing out, which are really hard to immediately grasp. Thank you so much for being so honest and open.

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Notes

- 1 Lymon Majid, pers. comm., January 5, 2022.
- 2 Gupta, "Decolonizing U.S. Anthropology."
- 3 Pandey, "Time of the Dalit Conversion."
- 4 Chatterjee, "Kashmir Is the Test Bed."

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