

The Abuse of Kashmiri Children

by
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On 5 August, 2019, India abrogated articles 370 and 35A of the constitution, which guaranteed Jammu & Kashmir's special status under the constitution. Since then, schools are either closed or deserted; arrests and detentions [even more](#) commonplace; and families are separated by a communications and media blackout. "All of Kashmir is a jail now. Some of them are inside, and some, like us, are outside," [said](#) Abid Salam, whose uncle, Abdus Salam Rather, was detained by Indian forces on 5 August. Now, with the machinations of the world bound in the grip of the [coronavirus](#) pandemic, political tensions in Kashmir are growing increasingly complicated.

Education was caught in the fire of this decades old conflict, with all private and most public schools closed. [Even](#) colleges and universities sat empty. Now, due to shelter-in-place and lockdown orders going out worldwide, all schools in the world's most militarized [region](#) are closed. There is no structured education available in Kashmir. Without it, students are at risk of dropping out, falling behind, and losing [sight](#) of their dreams. As in the case of [Mehak Javid Bhat](#), who is preparing for her medical school exam. Because of the occupation, she could not get the study help necessary to get into such a school. In the few instances that schools were open - prior to the global pandemic - parents refused to send their children out of fear. [Fear](#) of the Indian forces detaining their sons or raping their daughters. "So many new military bunkers have been built; there is overwhelming presence of forces. We don't want to send our children to schools in this tense atmosphere," [offers](#) Mehbooba Iqbal. Even before the coronavirus outbreak, the Indian state had taken education hostage.

Such fear is well founded, there is a long history of the Indian state arresting, torturing, and even [disappearing](#) protestors and organizers, including [children](#). Some heads of state are even [joking](#) about taking Kashmir's girls. Detainees can include anyone seen to be a threat to the colonial project of Indian expansion. For example, there are anti-India militants, non-violent protestors, and stone throwers; usually [younger](#) and all classifiable as terrorists under the newest [amendment](#) to the Unlawful

Activities Prevention Act, which passed 2 August, 2019, just three days before abrogation. A Kashmiri youth, detained and tortured for stone throwing, [said](#) in 2011, “India asks us, ‘Why do you throw stones?’ No one asks, ‘Who burned your house down?’” The occupying Indian forces do not understand non-violence, so the liberation movement - mostly non-violent until [1989](#) - is forced to resort to the universal language of violence.

The Indian state knows this, and has weaponized it against the people of Kashmir. As the state applies increasing pressure to the contested area and its people, they narrate the arrests and detentions of children as “immediate preventive” measures to “protect life and property of the people and avoid any problem that could breach peace and public tranquility,” [according](#) to the Director General of Jammu & Kashmir police. The National Federation of Indian Women, however, claims that [13,000](#) children have been detained, some as young as [9](#). These unjustly detained children have been beaten, tortured, and, in some cases, [killed](#). This conflicts with the Indian government’s official [numbers](#) as of 5 October, which claim only 5,500 people - not explicitly children - have been detained since abrogation and only 350 under the Public Safety Act (PSA). Here again, the Indian state has shown its need to control the flow of information, to control the education of the people.

The [PSA](#), was designed to maintain government rule by allowing detentions without a trial or formal charges. The Act has been condemned by human rights groups including Amnesty International, who called it a “[Lawless Law](#)” in their 2011 report. The same report clarifies that 10,000 - 20,000 people had been detained under the PSA since its enactment in 1978. Compare this number spanning a 30-year period to the number of children detained from 5 August to mid-September, when the National Federation of Indian Women [visited](#).

The [day](#) before abrogation, the Indian state imposed a communications blackout across Indian-occupied Kashmir. The impact this has had on children in the space as well as children of the diaspora is profound. [Diasporic](#) Kashmiris have been unable to contact their families and have no confirmation that their family is safe, or even alive.

Children in the state are separated from their families by this digital curtain. In the case of Abdus Salam Rather, his daughter and grandchildren did not know he had been arrested for nearly a [week](#). Children, prevented from attending school, are now performing [labor](#) in the fields; one such child could not receive antivenin for a treatable snake bite because of the communications blockade and died.

Nearly six months after the blockade was imposed, in [late](#) January, 2020, India restored 2G connectivity to the region. This marked the longest historical communications blackout in a supposed democracy. However, 2G connectivity is slow and unreliable compared to the 4G and even 5G service available elsewhere. Internet access is also still [limited](#) to 301 whitelisted websites, with the Indian state charging individuals for accessing social media websites or using VPNs. By cutting Kashmir's domestic and international digital connections, the Indian state has created a violent state of absence, from which families can only hope they might recover.

Across the world, non-essential institutions, including colleges and universities, are shutting down in response to the coronavirus and COVID-19, leaving their communities in disarray. Among them are Kashmiri medical students studying in other countries, particularly Hubei University of Medicine in [China](#). The remainder of the university's semester is slated to be completed online. But with such a narrow whitelist and throttled 2G speeds, students are unable to access their course content, crippling their ability to advance their education and even provide medical support to their community.

Due to the limited internet access, Kashmiris are [unable](#) to access dire treatment and preventive information about coronavirus and COVID-19, endangering families and other more densely populated spaces. The Doctors Association of Kashmir has issued a letter to Prime Minister Narendra Modi calling for the restoration of 4G service to the region. Without such service, doctors write that they miss "the latest guidelines and breakthroughs issued by the Government of India, the World Health Organisation (WHO) regarding testing and treatment for people suspected of being exposed to the virus or who are infected with the virus." Despite this urgent call for an end to the

communications blockade, India has [consistently extended](#) the ban on 4G internet service. This [time](#) until 15 April.

The breakout of the coronavirus and India's stranglehold on information allows the imposing government to stifle gatherings. The lockdown measures imposed upon Kashmir are not new, but [intensifications](#) of containment and separation measures already in place. Disrupting large-scale protest and religious gatherings through the historical threat of violence and the contemporary threat of contagion offers the Indian state space to absolve itself of mistreating the region and its people, its children.

This violence against children - terrorizing and closing schools, arresting and torturing or raping children, the communications blockade, and, newly, the control of information regarding a global pandemic, as propagated by the Indian state, sends a very clear and direct message: one of severing familial ties to heritage; one of quashing resistance through forced separation; one of violent and permanent erasure. Mir Hanan [said](#) of the blockade, "They've made their point. Even if they give us the internet back, they can take it away any time again whenever they want, and as long as they want."