**A valley without rights**

Amanat Ali Chaudhry

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Kashmiris living across the Line of Control as well as abroad observe October 27 as Black Day every year. People in Pakistan including all those who prize freedom use the day as an opportunity to express their solidarity and support to Kashmiris in their struggle for their right to self-determination.

This year the world is commemorating the 75th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and the 30th anniversary of the Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action (VDPA). The people of Indian Occupied Jammu and Kashmir are still deprived of their fundamental human rights and the essential right to self-determination. The UDHR provides bedrock on which the entire superstructure of the global human rights movement and the obligations of the states stands.

Since that unfortunate day in 1947, the inhabitants of Kashmir have been unjustly denied the complete spectrum of human rights and fundamental freedoms that are clearly articulated in both the UDHR and the VDPA. The Vienna Declaration explicitly underlines the principle that "All peoples have the right of self-determination, enabling them to freely determine their political status and to pursue their economic, social, and cultural development." It affirms the "right of peoples to take any lawful actions, in accordance with the United Nations Charter, to achieve their inherent right to self-determination." Additionally, it also underscores the necessity for "effective international measures to ensure and oversee the implementation of human rights standards for people living under foreign occupation."

In the last 76 years, India has employed different strategies against the Kashmiri struggle – from promising to hold the UN-supervised plebiscite to resolving the dispute bilaterally with Pakistan to using brute force to suppress the indigenous freedom struggle. While the tactics and strategies by the successive Indian governments have varied, the only constant factor has been Kashmiris’ undying commitment to their just cause as well as their willingness to render any sacrifice in the struggle for right to self-determination.

Meanwhile being in a quandary in the face of legendary Kashmiri resistance and defiance, the Indian government under PM Modi ‘settled’ on the illegal and unilateral actions of August 5, 2019 with a view to changing the internationally recognized disputed status of Occupied Jammu and Kashmir and altering the demographic structure of the occupied territory. This was the BJP leaders’ idea of imposing a ‘final solution’ on Kashmir – except that it is not.

The cruel siege and curfew enforced on August 5, 2019 was established through a substantial escalation in military presence by India. This resulted in a staggering deployment of 900,000 troops, making it one of the most densely militarized regions in recent history, equating to approximately one soldier for every eight Kashmiri individuals, including men, women and children.

The extensive Indian occupying force has subsequently executed a methodical campaign of repressive measures, which include extrajudicial killings of innocent Kashmiris in staged confrontations; deaths while in custody and ‘cordon-and-search’ operations; the use of pellet guns leading to fatalities, injuries, and blindness among peaceful protesters, particularly young individuals; the kidnapping and forced disappearances of people; the imprisonment of nearly the entire Kashmiri leadership; and 'collective punishments' involving the destruction and burning of complete villages and urban neighborhoods. It is evident that India's actions in Kashmir represent an extreme form of persecution and a clear warning sign of an impending 'genocide’.

Furthermore, a series of arbitrary legal and administrative measures have been implemented to promote land confiscation, an influx of non-Kashmiri residents, and the establishment of foreign settlements in Occupied Kashmir. Millions of domicile certificates have been distributed, and it is evident that the primary goal is to transform the Kashmiri Muslim majority into a minority in their own territory. This deliberate manipulation of demographics constitutes a grave violation of international law, including a blatant breach of the Fourth Geneva Convention.

The most distressing aspect of this situation is the ruthless application of unrestrained force, accompanied by utter impunity. Over generations, courageous Kashmiris have endured fear, intimidation, torture, and severe human rights violations. However, the depth of Indian oppression in Kashmir goes beyond this. Not only have Indian authorities consistently expanded their methods for committing further atrocities in the occupied region, but they have also imposed an impenetrable veil of silence over Occupied Kashmir through a paralyzing physical lockdown and a complete blackout of information.

For many years, Indian occupation authorities have been utilizing censorship and surveillance measures. Since August 2019, this control over information has become even more deeply ingrained. Journalists, lawyers, and human rights defenders are frequently subjected to imprisonment, physical violence, humiliation, harassment, and prosecution under oppressive laws when they attempt to carry out their duties in presenting an accurate depiction of the human rights situation in Occupied Kashmir.

Furthermore, in an attempt to silence the authentic representatives of the Kashmiri population who have spearheaded a nonviolent and lawful struggle, the occupying Indian authorities have subjected nearly the entire Kashmiri leadership to unlawful detention.

The ethical void exhibited by the Indian occupation forces astonished the global community when they forcibly took custody of the mortal remains of Syed Ali Geelani, a revered Kashmiri leader and unwavering freedom advocate. This act violated his wishes to be laid to rest in the Cemetery of Martyrs in Srinagar. It is a stark reminder that India's state-sponsored terrorism in Occupied Kashmir knows no bounds.

The most glaring truth is that India is not just an aggressor and repeat offender in terms of violating human rights but also the primary promoter of 'Islamophobia' in the region. It's widely recognized that Islamophobia is most perilous when it receives endorsement from the state. Since 2014, there has been official support for anti-Muslim hatred and violence in India, including in Occupied Jammu and Kashmir. This is largely attributed to the influence of the RSS-inspired 'Hindutva' ideology, which is inflaming tensions that are challenging to quell.

While innocent Kashmiris endure unspeakable atrocities at the hands of Indian occupation forces, it is imperative that the international community responds to the call of its collective conscience. The world must recognize that peace is an indivisible concept, and so are human rights. Any threat to human rights in one place jeopardizes human rights everywhere.

Prominent leaders in the Muslim world, along with parliamentarians from various regions, courageous civil society activists and responsible voices within the international media, have consistently expressed their support for the Kashmiri people. One can only hope that their numbers will continue to grow, and their voices will gain even more prominence.

The UN secretary-general displayed both moral and legal clarity when he articulated the UN's stance following India's actions on August 5, 2019. The United Nations Security Council (UNSC) convened several times to engage in discussions, decisively rejecting India's erroneous claims that Kashmir was solely an 'internal' matter. Equally commendable was the contribution of EU DisinfoLab, which unveiled the emptiness of India's efforts to present a misleading image of 'normalcy' in Occupied Kashmir. However, it is evident that more action is required.

While the world grapples with the question of persistent instability in different regions, the fact remains that durable peace and stability in South Asia is hard to imagine until a just solution to the Kashmir dispute is achieved. The issue of human rights abuses can’t be pushed under the carpet for long, simply because India is the preferred choice of the West in their effort to contain China and has a huge global market.

To address and potentially rectify the deteriorating Pakistan-India relations that began on August 5, 2019, the feasible course for the international community is to exert pressure on India to undo its unlawful and independent actions on that day and all subsequent measures designed to change the demographic structure of Occupied Kashmir.

The world can no longer evade its responsibility in this matter. It owes this much to the people of Kashmir.

The writer is alumnus of the University of Sussex and has a degree in International Journalism. He tweets/posts @Amanat222