



'All I got is stones in my hand': youth-led *stone pelting* protests in Indian-administered Kashmir

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ABSTRACT

Since 2008, three anti-India mass uprisings occurred in Indian-administered Kashmir, resulting in a marked resurgence of the Kashmiri self-determination movement, known popularly as the Tehreek. In the resurgent Tehreek, stone-throwing – called *kanni-jang* in the local parlance, and *stone pelting* in the English language media – has emerged as a new and widely used act in the repertoire of Kashmiri resistance. The latest example of its use appeared after the Indian state's lockdown of Kashmir on 5 August 2019, when approximately 1193 stone-throwing protests were reported across Kashmir. For India, this protest tactic presents huge security challenges, yet for the Tehreek activists, stone pelting is an effective mode of protest that carries symbolic importance. In fact, the stone-throwing youth have become a signifier of the anti-India rebellion in post-2008 Kashmir. This article highlights the main factors that underlie the stone-throwing phenomenon in the Himalayan territory.

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Introduction

'Now a new generation of Kashmiri youth is on the march. They fight like the Palestinians, with stones.' (Tariq Ali, 2010)

On 5 August 2019, when India's right-wing Modi government unilaterally revoked the autonomous status of Indian-administered Kashmir, spontaneous protests erupted in several pockets of the disputed region, most prominently in the Anchar area of the Srinagar City. Citizens, fearing mass arrests, dug up roads and barricaded their area to cut off access to the police and paramilitary forces. What helped them to keep the government forces from entering their area was *kanni-jang* (stone-throwing). This defiance came at a cost, however. Over 200 protesters, including women and children, were shot by Indian security forces with metallic pellets. These pellets had been made illegal for hunting, yet kept in the state's arsenal to blind and inflict severe internal organ damage on their targets.

Since 2008, stone-throwing has been a frequent feature of anti-India political protests in Kashmir. It first emerged in parts of Srinagar city (especially in Maisuma and the old city area called Downtown) and pockets of the Baramulla district in northern Kashmir.

These sites acted as experimental theatres, and after acquiring fair success as a protest tactic, stone-throwing spread outwards. As a modular form of resistance against the state's impositions, it was later replicated in other neighbourhoods of Kashmir Valley, especially during the 2010 mass street protests. Between 2009–2019, approximately 13,000 stone-throwing incidents occurred in Kashmir, with nearly 2800 such incidents happening during the 2016 uprising triggered by the killing of iconic militant commander Burhan Wani. Although the stone-throwing protests witnessed a 'significant drop' (to 40 incidents) by July 2019, the annulment of Kashmir's autonomy on 5th August caused a dramatic upsurge in these protests, even though New Delhi had significantly increased their military presence in the region while completely cutting off the telecommunications, internet, press and media networks. Such protests in Kashmir have attracted extensive media coverage in mainland India, often to indict Kashmiris for the violence in order to justify Kashmir's military occupation in a discourse of 'national security' promoted by the state and mainstream Indian media. In contrast, stone-throwing as a form of popularised protest to be observed, researched and studied has received little academic attention. Here I point to the underlining socio-political dynamics in which stone-throwing has emerged as a mode of protest in Kashmir, especially among its youth.

Background

In 2008, Tehreek organisations, like the All Parties Hurriyat Conference (APHC or Hurriyat), mobilised massive public marches through their Chalo calls (lit. march-on). Muzaffarabad Chalo (11 August), Pampore Chalo (16 August), TRC Chalo (18 August) and Eidgah Chalo (22 August) were some of the largest of such anti-India demonstrations. The huge success of these rallies made Indian author Arundhati Roy describe them as a referendum for independence. However, the 24 August 2008 march-on call (Lal Chowk Chalo), and similar future protest programmes were violently crushed by the Indian security forces after imposing stringent curfews and killing and maiming protesters. Newspapers were disallowed, and journalists were beaten by paramilitary forces. Consequently, and gradually, future protests started to take a more violent turn. By 2009, recurrent stone-throwing incidents were reported from the urban centres of Srinagar City and a few pockets of the Baramulla district (in northern Kashmir). The rape and murder of two women in Shopian town (in southern Kashmir) sparked further unrest in early 2009. When police and paramilitary used excessive force, the demonstrators started throwing stones – which would later become a regular feature of anti-India protests. During the 2010 street protests, stone-throwing had already become a popular mode of resistance among Kashmiri youth. In many instances, cyclical dynamics operated. Funeral processions of civilians were attacked by Indian forces, resulting in stone-pelting as a response, that in turn culminated in further injuries and killings of civilians, with this cycle running in a continuous loop. In 2016, police frequently disturbed the peaceful rallies with use of force to provoke the public (*Raiot*, 6 September 2016). Violent responses from the crowd justified police violence, which became an effective way to end the demonstrations and create discouragement among the ambivalent bystanders who might have joined in. As a result, stone-throwing protests often occurred because any public gathering that expressed pro-Tehreek thought was immediately curbed by the police, either by detaining the participants or baton-charging and tear-gassing the

gathered crowds with recurrent use of pellets as the confrontations between police and protestors escalated.

Incidents of stone-throwing would typically pick up on Fridays (as after prayers many young people assemble in one place) and around dusk (when troops return to their camps in vehicles). Sometimes, there would be just a band of half a dozen boys hurling stones at soldiers, but at other times, a big crowd would converge in the market thoroughfare (or neighbourhood lanes) and engage the troops. The protest scenes were like a hide-and-seek, with (mostly white) armoured vehicles of riot police chasing the youth through the streets. Although female protestors mainly provided logistical support, during the April 2017 student revolt, female students also hurled stones at Indian soldiers across several locations in Kashmir. Between 2016 and 2017, over eleven thousand protesters were arrested, of which 8570 were detained in 2016 alone (*The Hindu*, 3 February 2018). Facing humiliation, harassment and torture in jail, some of the arrested youths later became militants with irreversible PSA (Public Safety Act) cases filed against them, providing legal sanction to the state to pick up and detain such individuals without need for justification (Jaleel, 2018).

Contested views

According to official statements by the Indian government, it is either Pakistan or the alliance of pro-Tehreek parties (the Hurriyat) who are behind the stone-throwing protests in Kashmir. In mainstream Indian media, stone-throwers are often depicted as unemployed youths, drug addicts and ‘anti-nationals’. However, the Kashmiri public, by and large, perceive stone-throwing as a reaction to the state’s repression against the Kashmiri self-determination movement and the choking of political spaces after decades of peaceful protests. For Tehreek adherents, stone-throwing has been politically instrumental for it draws valuable media attention. For many young people in Kashmir, *kannijang* is an expression of resistance, dissent, anger, frustration and a last resort for risky catharsis when severe personal loss or damage has been incurred at the hands of the state.

For India, stone-throwing protests in Kashmir present a major security and diplomatic challenge. The stone-throwing youth have become a symbol of anti-India resistance and, unlike an armed rebellion, it is difficult to dub this ‘unarmed insurrection’ as ‘terrorism’ to ward off international scrutiny, even though the Indian state and mainstream media have tried to do so. For example, on 31 October 2009, the then senior most officer of the Indian army in Kashmir, Lt. General B.S. Jaswal, termed the youth-led street protests as ‘agitational terrorism’ (Navlakha, 2010, p. 25). On 26 June 2019, the press statement of India’s Ministry of Home Affairs cited: ‘Pursuant to the Government policy of zero tolerance towards terrorism, the State Government has taken stringent action to deal with stone pelting, including identification and arrest of stone pelters and instigators of such acts under relevant laws’.

Moreover, since around 2015, Kashmiri civilians have attempted to disrupt gunfights between armed rebels and the government forces by throwing stones, thus compounding the security challenges for India. In 2018, around 60 civilians were killed near gunfight sites while trying to save trapped rebels by throwing stones at the Indian armed forces. Furthermore, as stone-throwing incidents usually happen at a neighbourhood level, many teenagers get sucked into the action. By January 2018, at least 232 juveniles had

police cases registered against them. In effect, stone-throwing has played a significant role in the resurgent Tehreek, predominantly becoming a fight between Kashmiri youth and the Indian security forces. To understand the dynamics of this post-2008 political development; however, it is essential to consider historical and socio-political factors.

A failed peace process

The ‘composite dialogue process’ between India and Pakistan (2004–2008) could not achieve a political breakthrough on the Kashmir issue. Consequently, the conflict remained unresolved and the militarisation of civilian life and human rights abuses in Kashmir were left unaddressed. Meanwhile, in the decade between 2001–2011, the population of Kashmiri youth grew exponentially (now comprising over 30% of the total population of 6.9 million). The 2008 anti-India uprising initiated this new generation of youth into an anti-India political rebellion. By 2010, they were at the forefront of mass street protests, inducing Tehreek.

The continuing conflict and violence by state and non-state actors have deeply affected the psychology of this contemporary population of young people. They are faced with what Staniland (2013) calls the ‘paradox of normalcy’. Staniland argues that the Indian state aspires to the status quo in Kashmir, but also promises democracy to the people of the region to win them over. However, as soon as Kashmiris try to use political avenues to demand their right to self-determination, the state subverts the democratic processes and its institutions to safeguard the status quo. This paradox creates recurrent political instability and unrest in Kashmir. Furthermore, the Indian polity is increasingly swept along by right-wing Hindutva ideology, which is deeply prejudiced against Muslims, and thus contributes to the perpetuation of the conflict.

Palestinian Intifada and the media

Although stone-throwing protests have happened in Kashmir in the 1960s, the current stone-throwing trend does not seem to have been inspired by previous phases. There are few, if any, references to the previous phases of stone-throwing protests in popular culture or literature that could have become a source of inspiration for the contemporary youth. However, since the Palestinian issue resonates deeply in Kashmiri society, with the Palestinian struggle frequently being mentioned during Friday prayers and at other religious and political congregations, the Palestinian Intifada appears to be one of the main inspirations for stone-throwing protests gaining popularity among Kashmiri youth. In certain neighbourhoods in Srinagar as well as south Kashmir, youth spray graffiti in support of the Palestinian struggle on public walls, especially during times of heightened violence by the Israeli state against Palestinian civilians.

Kashmiri newspapers and magazines regularly publish a wide range of visuals of Palestinian stone-throwing protests, reaching even to those young audiences who lack internet access. For example, in its August 2009 issue, Srinagar-based magazine *Conveyor* carried an article titled ‘Slingshot Dairy’. On page 53, two protest pictures were juxtaposed: the first one, taken in 2007 in Jenin (West Bank), shows a young Palestinian boy firing his slingshot at Israeli soldiers, and the second one features a Kashmiri youth aiming his slingshot at Indian soldiers in the autumn of 2008. Such examples abound in

the Kashmiri media landscape. Associating stone-throwing protests in Kashmir with Palestinian Intifada lends the former a certain aura and a degree of legitimacy. Perhaps, the logic is that if the international community supports Palestinians with stones in their hands, then it would support Kashmiris as well. However, that is not to say that only the Palestinian Intifada has made stone-throwing popular in Kashmir, rather the appropriation of, and socialisation into, protest tactics is a complex process (Della and Diani, 2006, p. 184). Social media has also played a crucial role in popularising (and even glamorising) the image of the *sangh-baaz*, the stone warrior. For example, the young Kashmiri rapper MC Kash released his popular YouTube video (at the age of 19) in 2010 with lines like:

*I protest
Against the things you've done
I protest
For a mother who lost her son
I protest
I'll throw stones and never run
I protest
Until my freedom has come*

Western journalists also observed the emerging relationship between stone-throwing protests and new media. Emily Wax of the *Washington Post* wrote on 17 July 2010, 'One young Kashmiri with a degree in computer applications edited a powerful video to the lyrics of the Everlast song "Stone in My Hand" and posted it on YouTube, prompting police to launch a chase for him. The lyrics – "I got no pistol, ain't got no sword. I got no army, ain't got no land. Ain't got nothing but the stone that's in my hand" – became the anthem of Kashmiri youth and is hummed on the streets here'.

Why youth?

McAdam (1986) postulates that familial and professional obligations and constraints keep some people from taking part in protests, even if they are adherents or sympathisers of a movement or cause. Young people therefore tend to join protests much more readily because they are usually unencumbered by adult responsibilities. McAdam (1986) calls this tendency 'biographical availability'. This idea is only a first conceptual step however towards understanding the massive participation of youth in stone-throwing protests. Socio-political and cultural factors are also crucial. Stone-throwing operates as a test of courage, or a code of honour related to youth sub-culture, whereby value is placed upon confronting the police (and mounting and denting their armoured vehicles). In such cases, participation becomes a masculine game where anger and political grievances against the state get mixed with the adrenaline rush that such forms of confrontation entail. In the case of Shahid, whom I interviewed, the killings during a protest march in the Pampore town in 2010 provoked him to throw stones at police and paramilitary. His actions were triggered by a 'moral shock', which Jasper (1997, p. 106) describes as 'an unexpected event' which 'raises such a sense of outrage in a person that she becomes inclined toward political action'. The people killed in the police firing on 1 August 2010 were not Shahid's kin. Yet, he says, '*when we saw those dead bodies it just made our blood boil in anger, then we started coming out for protests*'.

Moral shock also appears to be the primary motivating factor for many other young men who threw stones in the post-2008 period. These young men were the product of the insurrectionary force generated by the 2008 mass uprising, which reinforced pro-Tehreek political consciousness among the Kashmiri youth, whose formative years were shaped by the intimate experiences of the protracted armed conflict, human rights violations and adjacent war-induced trauma. They grew up with deep anti-India sentiments grounded in such tactics of violent suppression by the Indian state. Borrowing from Mannheim (1952, p. 309), it can be stated that deepening militarisation and concomitant violence in the last thirty years has considerably transformed their basic attitudes, consolidating ‘the various new phases of experience,’ and engendering ‘a clearly distinguishable new impulse’ in contemporary youth.

Successful intergenerational transmission of insurgent consciousness made the Kashmiri youth into a politically mobilised generation that articulated their political subjectivity in varied forms and modes, including art, narratives, and stone-throwing protests. Nevertheless, the Kashmiri youth operate in a space marked by intense militarisation, so their contentious performance – both corporeal and discursive – must navigate the spatial occupation of Kashmir that was reinforced by India after the eruption of the popular armed insurgency in the late 1980s. The Indian military’s strategy of area dominance entails placing armed units of the Indian army and paramilitary in the military camps inside and around civilian areas in Kashmir. This intricate system of control and surveillance allows the Indian military to suppress anti-India protests and kill the insurgents by swiftly mobilising its troops and armed units.

Stone-throwing is also a reaction to this military dominance of the public sphere, which is violently kept out of bounds for public protests. As such, while expressing the insurgent consciousness of the new generation of politicised youth, the prevalence of stone-throwing also reflects the lack of political opportunity in general. It must be noted that the trajectories and nature of contentious politics is shaped by the materiality of space, and to ‘the extent that contentious politics interacts with the state [...] the strategies available will be shaped by state-constructed scalar configurations and the different conditions of possibility within local places’ (Leitner et al., 2008, p. 159).

When Shahid hurled stones in August 2010, he was not the first person to do it. In the context where he threw stones, there was no inhibitive factor or fear of reprobation from society for it; rather it was an action laden with symbolic value seen as representing courage, solidarity, and resistance. Among the people, especially the crowd that he was a part of, throwing stones was not attributed to social deviance or rogue behaviour, since he was doing what others around him had already done before or were, in fact, doing at that very moment. As such, if he threw stones in other similar situations (for example, protester-police clashes), his actions were only reinforced by what Bandura (1977) calls ‘social learning’. In other words, Shahid’s moral shock realised itself in an environment where stone-throwing was a permissible mode of protest, if not an ideal one.

Facets of state repression

Since 2008, India has used a range of punitive measures to crush the resurgent anti-India movement in Kashmir, with over 220 people killed during the last three uprisings in 2008, 2010, and 2016. Between 2016–17, the police in Kashmir arrested 11, 290

protesters, of which 8750 were detained in 2016 alone (Geelani, 2018). To exceed these measures, India also introduced pellet guns in 2010 to control stone-throwing protests with devastating consequences. For example, during and after the 2016 uprising, the government forces fired pump-action guns on crowds, injuring over 3000 civilians with metallic pellets, leading to the (probable) first mass blinding in the world, with about 1500 people suffering serious eye-injuries and 139 getting blinded between 2016–2019 (among them teenage boys and girls, and in some cases children and infants like 18-month-old Hiba Nasir and 11-year-old Nasir Shafi Qazi, who died from such injuries in 2016). Since 2010, at least 24 people were killed by wounds with the metallic pellets perforating through their flesh and piercing vital internal organs.

Indian security forces also inflict collective punishment on the neighbourhoods that support protesters, or from where protests originate. For example, during the 2016 uprising, apart from smashing windows of private homes and vehicles, the government forces also damaged around 368 electricity transformers in civilian neighbourhoods (Parvez, 2017). In 2019, the police rounded up hundreds of Kashmiri young men under preventive detention who were considered potential stone-throwers or protest organisers. Ultimately, through disproportionate use of force against protesters and arbitrary detentions, the state has tried to regain control of public spaces and quell (and pre-empt) mass protests.

While government policy against stone-throwing protesters has included torture, jail, and humiliation of parents, the police have also used *persuasion* (referred to as ‘counselling’ in the official parlance). The police often summon young men to police stations where officers will employ religious and moral sermons to dissuade them from participating in future protests. A sense of scepticism and distrust is also instilled among the locals regarding Tehreek. When I asked 19-year-old Asgar why the 2016 protests were not as intense and widespread in Pampore as in 2010, he responded after some thought:

The main reason: those who were stone-pelters got corrupted, almost all of them got corrupted. Police gave them money as well as taxi cars and gave them loans, because SHO, X Munshi – my close relative was close to him – he told him about it.

Asgar’s scepticism is emblematic of a broader tendency. On various occasions in the last eight years, I have heard many people in Kashmir whispering names of alleged *mukhbirs* (police informers) who live among us. They often buttress their remarks by saying how certain acquaintances of theirs had heard a certain police official confiding in them that police were tipped off about protesters by their own neighbours and friends. Of course, the veracity of these disclosures is suspect, as such statements invariably precede by adverb *dapaan* (lit. *I have heard or rumour has it*). However, such specific narratives of *betrayal-by-one’s-own-people* have imperceptibly percolated into public discourses, eventually letting a sense of mutual distrust creep in. This scepticism and distrust, in large part contrived by the state but also reinforced by people’s uncritical acceptance of rumour, had fostered an inhibitive effect among potential protesters in Pampore during 2016.

State repression notwithstanding, Kashmiri youth have still managed to audaciously reclaim the public sphere on occasions such as the funeral processions of fallen rebels, where they converge in one procession in huge numbers and chant pro-independence and anti-India slogans. Some of these contentious events happened on 29 October 2015,

Table 1. Stone-throwing protests since 2009.

Year	Stone-throwing incidents	Arrests
2009	278	493
2010	2794	
2011	330	5417
2012	284	
2013	500+	1325
2014	449	
2015	730	
2016	2808	10571
2017	1412	2838
2018	1458	3797
2019	1999	755 (Aug-Nov)

Source: Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India.

9 July 2016, and 26 June 2018, in districts of South Kashmir. In September 2019, the young protesters in Srinagar wore motorcycle goggles to protect themselves from the pellet shots while throwing stones at the police and paramilitary. Despite the claims of the Indian government, the stone-throwing protests have not stopped. Neither the demonetisation of November 2016 nor the revocation of Kashmir's autonomy on 5 August 2019 has curbed the phenomenon (see Table 1).

Conclusion

Looking at the broader political context wherein youth become part of stone-throwing protests has helped to problematize simplistic understandings that try to infantilise (or pathologize) youth protests in Kashmir by portraying them as a problem of unemployment or social deviance. Instead, Kashmiri youth have been socialized into stone-throwing tactics in unique socio-political and historical processes, which have moulded their political subjectivity and behaviour. Brutal crackdown by the state (accompanied by widespread use of pellet guns) has had some deterring effect on potential protesters. However, as demonstrated by the people in Anchar in 2019 and the data since 2016, stone-throwing has become an entrenched component of Kashmiri resistance politics. Sharp (1989) described stone-throwing tactics during the first Palestinian Intifada as 'limited violence', but something that was too costly in terms of the '*instrumental effectiveness of that form of action*' (p. 7). However, in Kashmir, the episodes of contention often include both stone-throwing and others forms of protest, such as processions, vigils, graffiti, blackouts, and *hartal* (general strike). Stone-throwing attracts more media attention because violence sells stories and focusing on violence without assessing its motives or root causes helps in delegitimising the Tehreek. As the political space for dissent remains closed, and the state aggression against Kashmiri self-determination continues, this high-risk protest tactic might gain traction once again as a result of the current and unresolved crisis.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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