

The Human Rights Framing of the Freedom Movement in Indian Held Kashmir on Social Media

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ABSTRACT

The contemporary phase of the freedom movement in Indian Held Kashmir (IHK) is not confined to the armed rebellion by the Kashmiri youth, but is coupled with a non-violent approach using the social media against the atrocities and human rights violations such as systematic torture, rape, extrajudicial killing, and prisoner abuse, committed by the Indian Armed Forces. Victims' stories have been well-documented and 're-packaged' for the world community through social media. This paper applies social movement framing analysis to this contemporary freedom movement in IHK to better understand the ways in which it is being re-defined by activists through exposure and affiliation to other transnational protest movements and re-framed in a manner which stresses the universal applications of contemporary human rights mobilizations. This is done somewhat strategically and is in contrast to what Kashmir issue has previously been interpreted broadly as an ethno-nationalist or religiously-motivated issue.

Key Words: Kashmir Issue, Freedom Movement, Social Movements, Social Media, Frames Analysis, Media Framing

Introduction

The freedom movement in Kashmir can be dated back to 1930s when the region was under the control of the British Empire. After the partition of the Subcontinent in 1947, Kashmir, a region with the Muslim majority, was annexed to India against the aspirations of the people. The freedom movement went through various phases throughout the history and the latest phase was started in 2016 after the killing of a young freedom fighter, Burhan Muzaffar Wani, by the Indian Security Forces. This contemporary phase of the freedom movement is also coupled with the use of modern communication technologies like the social media which ensures that the narrative of liberation from illegal occupation of Kashmir by Indian Armed Forces would spread all around the world. Burhan Wani who was part of *Hizbul Mujahideen*, an armed rebellion group, became a youth icon and used social media to raise his voice against the illegal occupation of the Kashmir. He shared selfies and video messages on the popular social media platform Facebook to show the world atrocities being committed by the local

police and the Indian Armed Forces in Kashmir. The social media posts he shared got viral and thousands of the viewers from around the globe were able to see the situation in Kashmir. Burhan Wani was killed by the Indian forces and soon after his death, a new wave of protests by the young boys and girls, spread all across Kashmir and the situation got severe when the images of his dead body became viral on social media (BBC News, 2016).

It forced the local Indian authorities to impose a curfew and suspend the communication channels like internet and telephone service. The killing of Burhan Wani had a substantial impact on the contemporary freedom movement in Kashmir and the use of innovative tools like the social media has also strengthened the freedom movement in Kashmir which is the most militarized zone in the world with estimated troop levels of around 700,000.

Framing identities

In order to place this study within the context of social movement framings, it is first important to understand what role ethnic, national, and religious identity markers may have on actors' motivations to participate in the transnational Kashmiri freedom movement. It is a feature of identity politics for political entrepreneurs to garner support for a cause and mobilize constituents by appealing to a particular identity, be that an ethnic, religious, national, linguistic, professional, gender, sexual orientation or any other set of identities. The emergence and sustenance of social movements have been analysed with respect to their mobilizing structures, political opportunities, and framing processes. McDonald reviews the growing importance of identity in the study of social movements by the mid-1980s by expressing how 'Identity increasingly became understood as a resource that could be mobilized...or a factor that reduced the costs of mobilization...' (McDonald, 2006:26). Here there is somewhat of a connection between ideology as an abstract concept and identity as a tangible resource. Furthermore, identity is the way in which movements could 'transform their members into political actors' (Taylor et al. 1995: 104).

Growing research on identity politics led to an increasing discussion of the role of collective identities being used as a political resource (McDonald, 2006: 26). Politicizing identities implies that identities are socially constructed, and therefore able to be changed. Ideological processes may present a clear picture of the complexities surrounding the transmission of political ideas; how constituents relate to a campaign, how particular identities become salient and may lead to supporting a particular political cause or candidate, etc. However, there seems an almost inescapable line of thought in literature that relies quite heavily on stereotypical imaginings of an 'other.' In conflict resolution terms, 'characterization frame' is a frame used to undermine the legitimacy of others, 'cast doubts on their motivations, or exploit their sensitivity,' (Kaufman et al., 2015: 3). An example here would be the labelling of a group as 'terrorists.' It is a highly negative and contentious term describing a group who most probably does

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not see itself in that perspective. Without an open space for dialogue, classification frames in news and academic discourse, and perpetuated on social media platforms can further escalate conflicts by widening the discursive space between opponents. Frames can play a very strategic role in the escalation, de-escalation and overall intractability of a conflict. Again, this can be a conscious effort by political entrepreneurs, or it may be a consequence of years of media framing, state and non-state rhetoric and propaganda, or even played out in popular culture references.

Although many studies have been conducted in order to examine the news on Kashmir, but there is a void in terms of the focus from the perspective of the Kashmiri freedom activists, their interpretation of the events, and how do they frame their grievances, in addition to the analysis of the other actors involved, their goals, and their identities. It is evident that the contemporary Kashmir freedom movement is transnational.

Analysing separatist movements as social movements is not novel, but is particularly evident in the contemporary context of transnational student and youth-driven movements. The youth which assemble abroad reflect the youths on the streets in their respective locations, shouting slogans, waving placards, and throwing stones. But how does one reconcile identity related claims inherent in a movement for one's own homeland with the desire to collectively mobilize diverse populations? How do they perceive the movement for themselves as Kashmiri activists and how do they alternatively 'sell' the movement to a wider audience on the social media an effort to turn their domestic transgressions into a meaningful transnational call to action?

Kashmir freedom movement and traditional media

The Kashmir Freedom Movement is an indigenous struggle of the Kashmiris to get rid of the illegitimate Indian occupation. The movement is being suppressed by the Indian Armed Forces and thus the killings and the violations of the human rights is not being reported on the mainstream Indian media. However, the Kashmiris have kept the movement alive by using alternative medium of communication like speeches at the places of gatherings, distributing the pamphlets, wall chalking and publishing and circulating local newspapers. In the recent years, the use of social media has also been used as a medium for communication by the Kashmiri freedom fighters.

In 1987, when elections were held in IHK, the *All Parties Hurriyat Conference (APHC)* leaders accused the Indian administration of massive rigging but the mainstream media of India used the negative framing and became mouth-piece of the Indian establishment and a tool of propaganda with one-sided framing. Similarly, the coverage of the news by the leading newspapers of India has projected the narrative of the Indian State (Joseph, 2000). The content analysis of the electronic and print media in Indian Held Kashmir is also "vigorously

government-led” and intensively “negative” (Sreedharan, 2009). The Indian conventional media is biased, sensational and antagonistic and does not cover the freedom struggle and sufferings of the Kashmiris (Naik, 2016). The analysis of the news of the Indian media shows that 78% of content is related to Indian military (Tarfe, 2015). The impact of the inability of the traditional media to cover the Kashmir freedom movement led to the emergence of the social media as an alternate medium.

Kashmiri freedom movement: a transnational mobilization

In response to the revocation of lands to the Amarnath Yatra Shrine Board in 2008, Kashmiris staged massive protests, marches, and strikes. Further debilitating the Kashmir Valley was the imposition of curfews and blockades and blocking essential commodities from being freighted into the Valley. The protests were met with brutal force by the Indian Security Forces. In addition to calls for *Azadi*, or freedom, the protesters shouted slogans in praise of Pakistan and overtook the main square in Srinagar in order to hoist the Pakistani flag (Roy, 2011).

Symbols must extend beyond the scope of a singular community in order to reach out to an international or transnational audience. Oleson refers to Gamson and Lasch’s concept of metapackaging which, in general, consists of a package of ‘idea elements with potential applicability to a wide range of issues’ (Oleson, 2009: 5). This certainly seems to be a succinct way to conceptualize the human rights frame as advocated by so many transnational groups. For a movement to transcend the domestic realm to become transnationally relevant, it is necessary to re-package group goals in a manner more relatable to a wider audience (della Porta and Tarrow, 2005). Oleson’s work describes how activists may develop a ‘solidaristic metapackage,’ based on the presence of particular frames rooted in human rights-related activism (Oleson, 2009: 9). These interpretative packages have a more universalistic character which translates to a wider groups being able to empathize, or create bonds with the target group. Recent work in other contemporary movements have noted the transformation of separatist or freedom movements into transnational social movements. One such case also looks to framing analysis using Twitter to understand support for the Palestine Solidarity Movement in Ireland and the UK (Abu-Ayyash, 2014). The Palestinian movement for self-determination has become much better known and publicised in recent years and demonstrates the heterogeneity and appeal the movement has for non-Palestinians, non-Arabs, and non-Muslims. A thorough analysis of key activist Twitter accounts reveals that the most frequent way to discuss the Palestinian movement is to discuss it in a human rights frame. It can be demonstrated through analysis of the types of articles shared and the comments made on the article. The human rights frame in this scenario would be the potential ability to mobilize people to action – or at least to publicly demonstrate support for the Palestinian cause. This analysis may not be accurate but it is a great starting point in understanding motivations for slacktivism.

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As is often the case, however, and is argued in social movement literature, simply being opposed to human rights abuses is not enough to promote action. In social movement terminology, the prognosis is that the Palestinian people are suffering, and the diagnosis is a free and independent Palestine. The motivation for action, is having empathy for the people suffering human rights abuses and the want to fix it. Although this represents a very small engagement with much broader literature, (Polletta et al., 2001). Countless other social movement scholars appreciate that the call to collective action is a constant push and pull between collective and individual identities – which are malleable and salient. This makes it very difficult to make any generalizable assumptions or typologies of SMOs, however, the breadth of work on the subject does offer hope in uncovering particular trends, such as understanding better the frames used by social movement organizers (McAdam, et al., 1996). The reasoning for activists mobilizing always contains some subjective component (Noakes et al., 2005).

Although in-group activists share some common ethnic or regionally ethnic identity (Kashmiri or other South Asian), out-group activists tend to share a subjective bond based on their own experience of perceived subjugation or oppression. For others still, it is their dedication to working with or perhaps a general or academic interest in disadvantaged minorities or victims of torture or human rights abuse.

The use of pallet guns by the Indian Armed Forces has intensified the suffering of the Kashmiri people and while it got viral on the social media platforms the human rights frame suggests that the reason for these violations in Kashmir is due to an illegal ‘occupation’ by ‘India.’ Viewed in this perspective, it is easy to make a tenuous link between movements in opposition to perceived ‘colonialism’ or ‘imperialism.’ It could be noted, however, that the ‘Kashmir’ is a separate entity from the ‘Indian.’ In this sense, the Kashmir is the occupied and the Indian is the occupying force could suggest an ethnic movement; however, the Kashmir identity has developed as a result of shared experiences of suffering; in relation to torture, human rights violations, and rape being used as a weapon of war (Cockell, 2000). A movement being in opposition to torture, human rights violations, and rape being used as a weapon of war is indeed not a hugely controversial concept. It serves as a universal rallying point that others, especially other activists can get behind.

There is expressed disillusionment with political processes in, and regarding to Kashmir. There is historical precedence for the disillusionment. Election rigging and the dismissal of elected officials in the state have been well-documented affairs (Akbar, 1985; Schofield, 2010; Bose, 2005). Fighting the system from a grassroots perspective has gained traction in the activist communities within and out-with Kashmir. The role identities play in gaining sympathy from an international audience and the role they have in recruiting more members also plays a role. Perhaps most meaningful is how traditional identity markers such as

nationalism and religion have given way to social values identities such as human rights and women's rights, leading to more rhetorically universalist calls for democratic and legal reforms.

Kashmir freedom movement and the social media

The pictures and images of the atrocities committed in Kashmir by Indian forces when posted to social media depicted a scenario opposite to the one portrayed by the Indian media by distorted pictures and details manipulated. Social media has helped its Kashmiri users get their message across quickly because it is free from gatekeeping and editing barriers. Imaging and framing through social media is inexpensive, instantaneous and readily available to Kashmiris who are the aspirant to the independence. Social media also allowed the content to reach the global audience from the remote areas where conventional media had little coverage or where access to conventional media was intentionally blocked or where content had to pass through regulatory authorities' gatekeeping. The pictures uploaded by the 22-year-old Burhan Wani on social media posing with a Kalashnikov launched a peculiar trend in the resistance to India. It established Burhan Wani's mass following on social media and most of those who followed him were young educated Kashmiris (Rasool et al., 2016). This gave Kashmiris freedom movement a boost. The killing of freedom fighters by the Indian forces in the disputed region is a regular activity in Kashmir, approved by Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA). Indian troops in Kashmir use the strategies of sub-conventional operations with the intention of neutralizing all the opposing elements in the conflict zone that can turn the will and attitudes of the people. However, the killing of Burhan Wani generated a wave of resistance as the pictures of his dead body disrupted Indian media's traditional framing and the images of Burhan Wani's bullet-ridden perforated body had been posted to Facebook by nearby villagers on the site of the targeted shooting, generating a "magic bullet" effect among Kashmir's social media users.

The Indian media, supported by the military establishment, concentrated all of its energy on selling the usual cover-up fabricated stories to the Kashmiris, Indian civil society and the international community that the young freedom fighter killed was a "wanted militant" and his killing was thus justified. This time, however, the Kashmiris were not prepared to embrace any concocted story broadcasted by mainstream Indian media and the pro-freedom narrative prevailed widely. Burhan Wani's message and philosophy spread over social media to the Kashmiri people, who hailed him as a hero. The daily maneuvering and content control by Indian corporate media in Indian occupied Kashmir not only backfired after the killing of Wani, but also served as a catalyst to reinforce the feeling of the masses opposing Indian rule. This has also undermined the attempts of the Indian media and the political leadership to de-escalate the situation.

India blocked social media, mobile phone networks and local media as a reaction, and enforced curfew to monitor the damage caused by Burhan Wani's

unwarranted killing. Though the Indian army has killed tens of thousands of people since 1989, the protests triggered a long period of resistance after the killing of Burhan Wani, which beats all records of previous shutter-down strikes and loss of human and property. The masses of Kashmir opposed Wani's characterization of Indian media as a terrorist and made it clear that killing freedom fighters can no longer be justified by merely branding them as 'terrorists.'

Kashmir's freedom movement on social media internationalized the Kashmir issue in support of Kashmiris to India's absolute scorn. In both the presence and absence of traditional media, social media has now emerged as a vibrant weapon in the Kashmir dispute. As a reaction to this, the BJP government used the policy of suppression again. Modi's government also undermined the Article 370 of the Indian Constitution which gave previously Jammu and Kashmir special status, thus legitimizing the lethal use of force in post-Wani protests.

Plebiscite and right to self-determination

One of the most common themes across all samples is the framing of right to self-determination as a human right, which is commonly referenced in international forums such as the United Nations and repeated by activists for self-determination of Kashmir. The most common terminology used in this context is the term 'plebiscite,' which has been commonly used in activist literature on Kashmir, in academic literature and encapsulated by the Plebiscite Front, one of the first well-organized non-violent attempts to lobby for the implementation of the UN mandate for a plebiscite. All Kashmiris are familiar with the UN mandate for a plebiscite and regularly approach this as evidence of right to self-determination and hotly contend that India has been denying Kashmir's rights through not implementing the plebiscite. The link between the right to self-determination and the militarization of Kashmir (often referred to as an occupation) is equally habitual. A desire for justice and the scepticism around the likelihood of perpetrators being punished is also commonly expressed.

Kashmiris actually seem quite well-disposed to the idea of international intervention on Kashmir. UN has mandated a plebiscite (or referendum) to be held to determine the fate of the Kashmiri people. Not giving the people the option to choose has been a big grievance. It is also an argument visited when discussing the Kashmir conflict to those outside of Kashmir. It is assumed that not a lot of people outside of South Asia are familiar with the historical contexts of the UN.

Conclusion

This paper has explored some of the dominant themes in human rights framing of the contemporary transnational freedom movement in Indian Held Kashmir also known as the *Azadi* (independence) movement through the traditional and social media contents analysis. Literature on the ethno-national depictions of a Kashmir

freedom movement tend to look at a much narrower, homogenized conception of ethnicity and other identity markers. However, the full extent and impact that other movements have, or that other world trends may have on the situation needs to be considered as well. Social movements do not occur in isolation and social movement processes can better articulate the contemporary, progressive nature of the Kashmiri freedom movement.

Raising awareness about Kashmir to an international audience has been a conscious effort and the social media has been used as a new tool of communication as reflected on the corresponding social network sites of the groups. The collaboration efforts with other campaigns and groups as well as the language used is reflective of the growing transnationalism of the Kashmiri freedom cause. The social media undermined the agenda setting of the Indian media taking the resistance to an all-time high given the lock-down of the mainstream media of the Indian controlled Kashmir for three months. The effect of social media has proved stronger than the traditional Kalashnikov weapon allegedly recovered by the Indian Army from Burhani Wani who raided his hide out at midnight and killed him on the spot. In the IHK conflict zone, social media transcended the physical and psychological barriers raised by powerful state-controlled media and Indian military. On the psychological warfare front in IHK, the Indian military establishment struggled to maintain its understanding and push Indian agenda. Indian security forces' disproportionate use of force backfired and sparked a mass uprising at IHK led by Kashmiri youth. Indian propaganda failed to depict Burhan Wani in a misleading way and justify his assassination, which has remained an Indian war machine standard practice since 1990.

Social media is an alternate way of raising one's voice more efficiently than lethal weapons, but it requires traditional media alliances that can use social media knowledge as their primary content. Social media has relevance in conflict areas but it is powerful locally before and until it is incorporated as an indigenous resource into traditional media. Resistance mode and method can be transformed accordingly in an age of globalization in which boundaries cannot impede information flow.

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