Spectacular Violence: Pellet Guns and the Sovereign Right to Maim in Kashmir

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Vision is always a question of the power. This article seeks to investigate the radically different distribution of vision and the violence implicit in everyday visualizing practices in Kashmir by analysing the pellet gun injuries. The use of pellet guns is indicative of the incipient hegemony of the maiming regime with an unequal power relationship between the Indian soldier, the owner of the gaze and the gazed on Kashmiri bodies. Thus, visual impairment produces Kashmiri bodies as sheer biology, captured in non-human economies of control. Building on the analytical vocabulary of 'right to maim', it illustrates that the 'blindings' due to pellet gun injuries are indicative of visual sovereignty that distinguishes Kashmiris as lacking visual rights. The first section looks at the linkages between violence, vision and disability dealing with questions regarding politics of sight and disability and how rethinking forms of sovereign power through visual sovereignty can be a useful tool for understanding contemporary forms of militarism. The second section develops the history of unequal relationship between India and Kashmir by focusing on the 2016 summer uprisings post the killing of Burhan Wani and illuminates the visual dimension of occupation. The last section develops on the complementary logic to the presence of Indian forces and the manifestation of settler colonialism which thrives on creating and maintaining the population of Kashmir as 'permanently impaired' yet simultaneously 'living' for exercising state control.

Darkness is my world: Disability and Sovereign Power

Disability has been understood as a biologically produced condition rather than a socially induced reality. This presciently maps the liberal defence of disability as an exceptional accident. Disability studies scholars have long insisted that the field needs to turn to the global south to disrupt the conventionally normative understanding of the subjects that have historically dominate the field (Chouinard 2014; Connell 2011; Meekosha and Soldatic 2011). The distinction between abled and disabled bodies has varied historically as what is valued in bodies today is based on hyper capitalist modes of surplus accumulation and advent of the neoliberal subject. The usefulness or uselessness of bodies is tied to the specificity of their location and how these bodies exceed or defy national identities and subject hood.State sanctioned debility adds a novel, discrete element to the life-death pendulum. These injuries are reported as part of the mundane existence in a conflict zone, rationalised through the idea of collateral damage. Mbembe discusses injury as an integral element of enslavement, the slave is kept alive but in state of injury (2003, 63). Disability is a status that triangulates the hierarchies of living and dying that are generally deployed in theorizing biopolitics. The populations available for injury overlap with the targeted populations to be injured. As Puar rightfully mentions there is a complementarity between the right to kill along with the 'right to maim'- creating perpetually debilitated yet alive Kashmiri populations who can be controlled. This ostensible use of pellet guns by a democratic country led to many civilians 'permanently disabled' in a place with lack of proper medical infrastructure and rationed livelihood supplies.

The overlapping between the sovereign and the biopolitical power can be further understood through the 'right to maim'. Puar while focusing on Palestine, highlights that the oscillation between right to kill and right to maim isn't contingent or arbitrary but has deep seared biopolitical ramifications that can be explained through the idea of 'will not let die' (Puar 2017). She uses debility as a triangulation between ability/disability binary. Puar also maintains the distinction between debilitation from disability as it focusses on the gradual wearing down of populations instead of a

singular event of becoming disabled (Puar 2017, 6-7). She identifies debility not as an identity marker but as a form of massification, as a practice that renders populations available for injury (ibid: 16-17). Debilitation sustains itself through foreclosing any social, political and larger cultural translation into disability.

The idea of targeting to debilitate finds legitimization within the state narrative as the bodies posing 'risk' to the national integrity and security. The biopolitics of debilitation is embedded in the larger calculus of distribution of risk to mainstream imaginaries of sovereignty of the state. The state also controls the regimes of visibility, shrouding the disabilities and effacing the quotidian wide scale violence subjected to these bodies. The right to maim epitomizes the terrible intensive practice of the 'biopolitical state' justified by refuting humanity of these victims and camouflaging violence for justifying preservation of integrity of the nation.

Pellet guns and Visibilized Invisibility: The 2016 Protests and the Visual (Hi)Story

The summer of 2016 saw violence erupt in various parts of Kashmir valley as a reaction to the killing of a 21 year old 'new age' militant Burhan Wani by the Indian army.The death of Burhan Wani shifted the visual landscape of resistance in significant ways. Unlike the secrecy that shrouded earlier counter cultures, Wani was a folk hero and engaged in 'performative militancy' by using social media platforms (Junaid 2016; Shah 2015b). There were huge numbers of attendees as part of the funeral procession expressing grief over his death which also represented growing resentment against the Indian state. This was followed by demonstrations and protests that were met with heavy handedness by the Indian forces, with thousands of protesters injured by the use of pellet guns which brought the entire valley to a standstill as cycles of curfews as strikes became a regular feature of the everyday existence (The Wire 2016). This violence can be contextualised and traced through a long history of mobilisation for independence (Azadi) in Kashmir. The Indian state responded to the interruption of protests in July 2016 by launching 'Operation Calm down' in September 2016, which deployed pellet guns as a response to crowd control and management. Army and police instituted a state of siege by using 12-gauge shotguns against funeral processions, street protests and public gatherings. The cartridges of these pellet guns contain 450-600 lead pellets with piercing edges which are made of lead and metal. Once fired, these cartridges explode, spurting pellets indiscriminately. Often the range of firing can prove to be fatalistic, fired from close proximity these can end up shattering organs. Eyes being one of the most sensitive body parts, are highly susceptible to damage, as these pellets penetrate the eyeball, causing severe injuries which lead to blindness.

According to Physicians for Human rights 11000 people were injured in the clashes at the end of the summer and 98 died sustaining ocular injuries (OHCHR 2018).There were also instances of victims choosing not to seek treatment because of fear of being targeted and imprisoned by police (The Wire 2017). Sri Maharaja Hari Singh hospital, the nodal point for treatment of these injuries ran out of emergency medicines and equipment within days of the eruption of the protests and pellet gun attacks. Even though there were instructions to use deflectors as attachments to stop pellet guns attacking individual's eyes, the reports of eye injuries kept emerging. The standard operating procedures instruct the forces to use pellet guns below the waist, however the vast number of visual impairments were indicative of indiscriminate firing (Nair 2016). The adoption of non-lethal weapons was seen as exemplifying a more gentler and humane response to the protests yet various reports indicate that their use has in fact aggravated suffering.In August 2016, the security forces told the Jammu and Kashmir High court that they had used 450 metal pellet each but the government refused to provide information of the metal used in these cartridges citing national security concerns. It was also revealed that the paramilitary forces were only given three-day training on the use of non-lethal weapons including shot guns (The Wire 2017). The Supreme Court of India directed the authorities that these weapons must not be used indiscriminately or excessively in Kashmir for crowd control (The Wire 2017). Despite widespread condemnation from human rights organisations (including a petition to ban pellet guns in the Jammu and Kashmir High Court) the Indian forces have relied on pellet guns as necessary mechanism for crowd control (Ahsan 2016).

Spectacular Violence of the Everyday: The Disposable Kashmiri body

Pellet guns are often postured as 'less' damaging than bullets. However, extensive research has demonstrated that the use of these guns can be fatal (Perrigo 2018).The complex and fragile parts of the body- eyes don't heal

themselves like the skin does. Often times, doctors decide against removing the pellet guns as it might be fatal, so they remain lodged in the victims' bodies- as permanent markers of the sustained injuries. Disability isn't just limited to the impairment of a particular sensory or locomotory organ but has left indelible impact on the mental health and well-being of the survivors. According to a report by the Department of psychiatry, Government Medical College, Srinagar, 85% of the pellet gun victims developed psychiatric disorders including post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (HRW 2017). The loss of eyesight at a young age leads to shattering of dreams and aspirations for the future.The pellet marked bodies and bandaged eyes were the new icons of resistance, articulating the relationship between power and sight. These images produce a visual economy of suffering countering the claims that deny human rights violations in Kashmir. There are vexed questions regarding politics of sight: who sees? who is seen? What is the danger in being seen? Who, dares to look back? Kashmiri pellet gun injuries, visceral and harrowing became the marker for visual vocabulary of state oppression.

Traditionally, these have been used for hunting animals, often analogies being drawn to the Indian state treating Kashmiris as animals (Sultan 2016). The visual impairment of the pellet gun victims is a value extraction from populations that are otherwise also considered disposable. The use of pellet guns to disperse crowds creates a false impression that wounding people is 'morally better' than killing them. Visual impairment lies between death and accidental assault on life- it produces dual effects: one leading to permanent disability via infliction of harm and second through targeting life support infrastructure that might enable healing from this state-inflicted harm. It is important to highlight the links between the two forms – to contextualize the pellet gun victims in a systematically resource deprived infrastructural environment. The use of pellet guns can be seen as a process of value extraction from its populations, biopower vectors around keeping the death toll low in comparison to the injuries while profusely destroying the populations. The spectacle of killing is undesirable given the scrutiny of international media and India's claims for a democratic super-power, however slow attrition through maiming would not count as a war death.

Maiming serves the twofold function of producing permanent disability through inflicting injury and attrition of support systems that assist the populations to heal. The attacks on hospitals by armed forces in Kashmir corroborate the dual strategy pursued by the state of targeting human bodies and infrastructure while simultaneously presenting to the world that they are 'letting Kashmiris live'. Eyes which function as integral to vision along with the critical infrastructure are both the target and the weapon. The assault on infrastructure is crucial component of bio-political regulation leading to a regulated humanitarian collapse. It is an expression of 'asphixatory' application of power which isn't just limited to physical territorial containment but also virtual enclosure. The target isn't just life but resistance itself. Maiming functions in accelerating the assault on bodily and infrastructural fronts while simultaneously leading to slow death.

While there have been interventions by the government infused with the certitude to reclaim disability as a valuable difference by encouraging discourses on rights and empowerment (schemes like Divyang inaugurated by Prime minister Narender Modi in the Indian context), it fails to address the debilitation caused by its own forces in Kashmir. Thus by one definition, disability might become an exceptional category with special privileges by virtue of state recognition but also be manifested through the exceptional use of force by state forces. The bio-political distribution of disability is further de-politicised through such frameworks that are inclusive of disability in 'national' locations. A stark rebuttal to looking at disability as 'randomness of fate' the plight of pellet gun victims speaks volumes that disability is neither random nor arbitrary. The everyday experiences of disabled Kashmiris lies outside the reach of human rights instruments.

Another aspect of targeting the youth for maiming is to render any future resistance futile. The traumatic effects of injuries can prospectively debilitate any challenging capabilities of the imminent generations. It is the biopolitical fantasy of the state to pre-emptively locate, strip and empty any resistance. The 'let live' liberal approach of Indian forces justified the use of pellet guns as a more humanitarian response to the protests in 2016. The use of pellet guns in producing visual impairment is a tactical move on the part of Indian forces while keeping the statistics of killed Kashmiris low. There is a striking paradox between recognising blindness as a disability that requires state protections and empowering visually challenged citizens through its schemes through liberal politics of recognition and the state seeking to disable its own citizens visually. State sanctioned maiming draws attention to the profound failure of human rights framing of disability. Ironically, India is a signatory of the United Nations Convention on the

Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD).

The term 'non-lethal' is indicative of the epistemological reality of not viewing Kashmiri life as life and as Butler terms this- as violence of de-realisation (Butler 2006, 33). The de-realisation of the other results in viewing the other as 'infinitely spectral' which means it poses a continual threat to the nation-state and must be countered with violence over and over again. The state must be exposed of its own hypocritical stances while being the main source of producing disabled bodies and simultaneously appropriating the human rights discourse. The 'spectrality' associated with the Kashmiri life legitimises the use of pellet guns as an alternative to bullets with the Indian state projecting itself as a benevolent sovereign 'letting Kashmiris live'. The boundaries of 'acceptable limits' to violence are demarcated through 'small inoculations of evil' that pave the way for immunizing the public for larger configurations of repression (Nagengast 2002). The suspension of basic rights of Kashmiris are part of the public discourse that suspects them to be threats to national integrity and justifies state control through repressive techniques and grants full impunity to state agents to exercise brutal means of control marked by human rights violations while dealing with Kashmiris. The stigmatization of disability within the larger societal narratives, justifies the right to blind by the Indian forces, it can be contrasted with efforts being made to reclaim disability as an empowered identity.

Conclusion

This paper offers a provocation around the visual politics of occupation in Kashmir and questions of vision and visibility, particularly the ability to see and be seen through the lens of disabled bodies of pellet gun victims. Modern statecraft and conflict zones are inherently centred around the body, but the Indian state is unparalleled in its extensive use of pellet guns that injures with efficacy and impunity and exerts power over the Kashmiri bodies through the 'right to maim'. Losing sight due to pellet gun injuries is not simply the consequence of occupation but representative of the assertion of state power over the body of the 'other'. In the context of Kashmir, the racialisation of the 'other' occurs on the basis of religious-cultural identity whereby the visuality of the Kashmiri body is under scrutiny. Once the Kashmiri body is established as the 'other', it is perceived as a 'traitor' and deviant to the nationalist imaginary, making the right to blind being wielded by the forces with impunity. The spectacle of the disposable body is central for the consolidation of the nation-state project in India, which uses the 'Muslim other' as a threat to assert irrefutable sovereignty over Kashmir. Visual impairments produced through pellet guns are thus an extension of India's increasing polarisation and militarisation in the region under the masquerade of democracy. The right to maim is instantiated as the 'right to blind' in the case of Kashmir which illustrates the unequal disposability of Kashmiri bodies for the Indian state.

Death attracts a lot more attention, injuring someone can be a cost-effective way of deterrence. The maiming of Kashmiris results in damaged, debilitated and afflicted bodies to the extent that they are 'living dead' which fits within the biopolitical logic of the state of will not let die. These 'living dead' not just lose their bodily abilities but also are incapacitated through the infrastructural inequalities. The right to maim also brings forth the hollowness of the claims by liberal democracies as guarantors of rights to their citizens when they themselves partake in disabling their citizens as a form of exercising control. Visual impairment serves at producing a docile and subservient population whose ability to resist the advances of the Indian state are compromised at the physical level. The use of pellet guns as a non-lethal form of punishment furthers the Indian state's narrative of treating Kashmiris as right bearing citizens of a democratic country. It is this notion of 'non-lethality' which is used to camouflage gross violations of human rights in Kashmir. All of these indicate that vision has become more than just physical sight, it is integral to witnessing and challenging the conditions of occupation. The visual injuries of pellet gun victims perform the expository function while also representing the mundane and quotidian reality of the treatment of Kashmiris. Even though their existence can be a source of resistance, the inhuman bio-political framework which is based on the right to blind brings out the jarring cost of resisting. The victims of pellet guns also call on us to re-examine out position of ethical spectatorship of disabled bodies and need for reflective gaze in understanding visual relations as by-product of power hierarchies. The reflections on the visual through the right to blind hopes to stir imaginations for a de-militarised future where sight and site of politics do not emerge from the barrel of the gun.

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