

Research in practice (ADAD5004)

Proposal- State-policing, Resilience & Minorities

*Course-*Documentary photography and visual activism

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Since the British partitioned the subcontinent, conflict has persisted in both regions. In India, ongoing tensions exist between the government and its diverse minority populations. Hindus constitute 79.8% of the 1.2 billion inhabitants, while Muslims make up a significant minority. Christians, Sikhs, Buddhists, and Jains account for the remaining smaller percentages of the population (Biswas, 2021).

India, often hailed as “the world's biggest democracy” (Polgreen, 2023), has a troubling history of state oppression against minorities. In 1984, following the assassination of the prime minister Indira Gandhi, around 3000 Sikhs were killed in state-sanctioned, anti-minority violence (Singh, 2014). This horrifying event signifies a historical precedent of state sanctioned violence against minorities.

In addition to state oppression, India perpetuates systematic discrimination against



Figure 1-(pew Research Center)

minorities through laws and state policing, notably evident in the contested

region of Kashmir. The Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) is a prime example, granting broad immunity to security forces for operations. Kashmir, facing intense militarisation, witnesses over 50,000 Indian troops deployed to quell dissent and protests for self-determination (Imroz et al., 2012). This illustrates how state policing is employed to suppress minorities and dissent in specific regions of India.

Amongst other atrocities, the Indian government suppresses protests, evident recently in the 2020–2021 farmer protests led by the Sikh community against



Figure 2- (TimeIndia,2022)

contentious agricultural laws. Despite mostly peaceful demonstrations, the government discredited Sikh farmers using heavy police presence, blocking roads to Delhi, detaining leaders on weak grounds, and arresting many protestors. Justified by a Red Fort incident in January (KHANNA, 2023), this response highlights a concerning pattern of oppressing minority voices. This essay will explore instances of state policing, minority resilience, and

discrimination, unveiling injustices in India, self-proclaimed as the world's largest democracy.

State policing

State policing does not appear to be a clearly defined term with an established definition from scholarly sources or dictionaries. However, from research conducted, in commentary and discussions about state power, minority rights, the repression of dissent, etc, the term "*state policing*" is frequently used. Common definitions mention how the state uses police, surveillance, the military, laws, etc. to monitor, control, and suppress – particularly when it comes to minorities and dissenters-this is what it shall mean for this essay. terms like state surveillance or political policing were also choices, but this one was the one that represents accurately what is going on in India.

Given that state policing is the use of security forces to suppress dissent and minorities, India's treatment of various groups serves as an example of this suppression. For instance, state policing in Punjab has been focused on the Sikh community. During the Punjab insurgency in the 1980s and the early 1990s, Indian security forces killed and abducted thousands of Sikhs. (Ganguly, 2007)

“While this was a calculated assault on the visible minority group, it was also an attack on all the decent people of India and what their country stood for. If the hard-working Sikhs were not safe, what minority could ever be?” (Kaur, 2006)

The draconian laws and military crackdowns on Azadi protesters show that the Kashmiri self-determination movement faces severe repression by the state. As one author recounted, *"The army was everywhere, as if troops had been brought in to fight a war, except they were ranged against unarmed civilians"* (Quraishi, 2004). Central to these state policing tactics is the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA), granting unchecked powers to security forces leading to human rights violations in Kashmir. AFSPA provides broad immunity from prosecution, enabling abuses like extrajudicial killings, torture, and forced disappearances of suspected militants with impunity (Quraishi, 2004). Despite persistent calls for repeal from human rights activists, AFSPA persists, offering legal protection for excessive state force to suppress dissent and separatism. The suffering inflicted on Kashmiris reveals the oppressive role of AFSPA in state efforts to deny demands for self-determination through force.

In response to the Sikh insurgency in Punjab, India took measures to counter the unrest by expanding the powers of security forces under laws like TADA (Terrorist and Disruptive Activities (Prevention) Act) and PSA (Public Safety Act). These legal amendments facilitated crackdowns and resulted in the disappearances of thousands, (Fareed,2021), along with human rights abuses aimed at suppressing pro-autonomy sentiments.

The response to the Punjab insurgency involved India granting enhanced powers to security forces under laws like TADA and PSA, enabling crackdowns and widespread disappearances. Singh (2018) estimates that over 20,000 individuals disappeared, often with their bodies discarded in canals or secretly cremated. The prevalence of unchecked abuses was compounded by the legal immunity granted to the forces. The absence of accountability and justice for the victims has fuelled ongoing grievances. Human rights groups emphasise that relying on state terror rather than lawful policing and justice not only violated human rights but also failed to establish the stability sought.

Kashmir has seen predominantly civil disobedience - protests for self-determination. To suppress this, India has relied on AFSPA immunity, mass detentions, demographic changes through Hindu resettlements (a form of

ethnic cleansing per scholars) and blaming Pakistan. (Singh, 2023) A common tactic in both regions has been forced disappearances of suspected militants and protestors as a form of state terror.

While the context differs between Punjab and Kashmir, the core minority grievances remain. However the Indian state has met aspirations in both regions with authoritarian military force, justified by maintaining order. (Singh, 2014) Specific tactics vary, but oppression of minorities through state policing persists. Global scrutiny on abuses has been greater in Kashmir but ineffective overall.

Through extensive force and discriminatory laws, the Indian state systematically suppresses minority groups and dissent, notably in Punjab and Kashmir. Despite relentless state oppression, these communities exhibit resilience through ongoing activism and dissent. Sikhs seek justice for those disappeared in the Punjab insurgency, and Kashmiris protest for self-determination against India's heavy military rule. Despite state efforts to silence them, many groups persist in nonviolent mobilisation for rights and justice. Resilience, demonstrated by marginalised minorities, involves enduring and recovering from adversity. The forthcoming exploration will delve into their courageous activism against authoritarian oppression.

Resilience

Despite relentless state suppression through oppressive laws and brutal force, minority groups in India have shown incredible courage and strength



Figure 3- sikhs commemorating 1984 (Singh,214)

by persisting in nonviolent activism and dissent. This resilience has taken many forms.

A good display of this resilience are the Sikhs who have organised remembrance events and campaigns, demanding justice on the anniversary of Operation Blue Star, a tragic incident where the Indian military attacked the Golden Temple. This operation, carried out in 1984, resulted in significant human rights abuses, including extrajudicial killings and detentions during the unrest in Punjab.

In 2022, thousands gathered in Amritsar to commemorate Operation Blue Star, urging government accountability even after 38 years (Singh, 2022).

Continuous campaigns, such as these annual remembrances, sustain the quest for justice over decades, with rallies boasting thousands underscoring the magnitude of grievances.

“The cumulative acts of barbarity endured by the Sikh people are a testament to our resilience and perseverance.” (Padam, 2020) In response to these atrocities, Sikhs have not only commemorated the victims but also set up advocacy groups to bring attention to the widespread human rights abuses, particularly the disappearance of thousands (Punjabdisappeared, 2023). This ongoing activism underscores their unwavering commitment to seeking accountability and justice in the face of historical and systemic injustices.

Another minority- Kashmiris have also shown immense resilience against India's excessive state policing. Despite thousands detained and sweeping immunities for security forces under AFSPA, Kashmiris continue to speak out for self-determination. Regular protests erupt calling for Azadi or freedom, often led by women. Activist groups like the Association of Parents of Disappeared Persons persist in documenting and publicising Indian atrocities and demanding investigations into the 8,000+ disappeared (APDP, 2018). Young Kashmiris also use art, music and poetry as creative dissent confronting military rule, such as through rapper Ahmer Javed's songs highlighting extralegal killings (Kappal, 2019). While India seeks to portray unrest as solely terrorism, Kashmiri resilience through broad-based civil resistance reveals demands for justice and democratic rights.



Figure 4- (kappal,2019)

Kashmiri strategies employ a combination of mass protests and everyday resistance. While certain protests, like those following the 2020 killing of Burhan Wani, draw tens of thousands, smaller consistent gatherings advocating for Azadi are also commonplace. Public mourning and shop closures serve as forms of low-risk dissent. Art, graffiti, and music become additional avenues for protesting against India's rule. Assessing efficacy, this multifaceted approach not only sustains activism but also mitigates the crackdowns faced by mass actions alone. Adaptable dissent endures despite India's restrictions and garners global attention, showcasing the tenacity of these communities (Hill, Dar and Singh, 2019)

Beyond Sikhs and Kashmiris, various minority groups throughout India showcase comparable resilience as they advocate for fundamental rights. Dalits persist in their campaign against caste-based violence and discrimination, exemplified by movements such as the Dalit Panthers social reform movement (Gautam, 2022). Christians and churches have actively mobilised protests against assaults by Hindu nationalist groups, advocating for safeguards to protect religious freedom (Kaur, 2023). This collective activism underscores that marginalisation manifests in diverse forms in India, yet state repression

has proven ineffective in suppressing the voices of these resilient minority communities.

Demonstrations of resilience frequently involve significant personal risks but are imperative for garnering global attention to human rights issues. Civil society groups have compiled reports on extrajudicial killings, sexual violence, torture in custody, and other abuses, offering substantial evidence. Over recent review cycles, more than 100 alternative reports have been submitted to UN human rights bodies (Refugees, 2017)

The pursuit of justice still depends on acts of resilience In the face of violence, even though they frequently come with high personal risks. Large-scale protests in Manipur demanding an investigation were sparked by the 2004 rape and murder of Thangjam Manorama in a prison. Even though no security personnel have been held accountable, Manorama's family continues to protest and call for justice



Figure 5- Manorama's mother (sen,2020)

decades later. The tenacious pursuit of justice continues, demonstrating the strength of persistent dissent. (Sen, 2020)

The ongoing activism of Sikhs, Kashmiris, Dalits, and other groups shows how India's minority populations remain resilient in the face of great danger and state oppression. Their steadfast campaigns demonstrate a strong dedication to justice and rights. Now the focus is on the overall state of marginalised minorities in India. Despite the country's enormous diversity, some minority groups endure persistent discrimination and exclusion in the social, political, and economic spheres. Minorities bravely fight against systemic injustices, hoping for a just and equal society, but resilience endures.

Minorities

India boasts immense ethnic, religious, caste, and tribal diversity; however, certain minority groups contend with ingrained systemic discrimination and vulnerability within the social structures and state policies. Dalits, Muslims, Christians, Sikhs, and tribal populations like Adivasis have confronted enduring persecution and exclusion across social, political, and economic domains. Institutionalised oppression persists through citizenship, marriage, religious

freedom laws, and more, explicitly marginalising non-Hindu communities.

Recent years have seen documented surges in hate crimes and mob violence against minorities, exacerbated by divisive rhetoric from India's ruling Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), framing minorities as 'others' or 'anti-national.' The oppression and resilience displayed by groups like Sikhs and Kashmiris thus underscore broader inequities and the ongoing struggles for justice faced by many of India's minorities. (Human Rights Watch, 2021)

Marginalisation permeates minority lives, as quantified through key indicators.

Muslims have a 50% higher infant mortality rate and 20% lower literacy rate compared to Hindus (Minority Rights Group, 2019). Dalits and Adivasis face even starker gaps, with child malnutrition triple that of upper-caste groups.

Reports also indicate over 300 incidents of communal violence against minorities since 2015, increasingly enabled under BJP rule (Mallapur, 2018).

Legal restrictions further oppress identity, like 'anti-conversion' laws primarily used to harass Christians and Muslims. Minority cultural practices also face barriers, from dress regulations that disproportionately affect Muslim women to 'beef ban' laws weaponised against Muslims and Dalits. Together these multifaceted constraints by both societal and state actors systematically exclude marginalised groups.

Numerous laws and policies in India further entrench discrimination against minorities, with a notable impact on Muslims, Dalits, indigenous groups, and others, extensively documented in human rights reports (Roth, 2020). For example, personal and religious laws governing marriage, divorce, adoption, and inheritance systematically disadvantage Muslims, Christians, and tribals by withholding protections afforded to Hindus. Contentious citizenship laws, such as the BJP-backed Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), facilitate pathways for non-Muslims while excluding Muslims. Laws banning the consumption of beef primarily affect Muslims and Dalits. Additionally, minorities face obstacles in purchasing or developing property due to contested indigenous land rights. The ruling Hindu nationalist BJP has advocated for numerous discriminatory laws that explicitly or disproportionately marginalise non-Hindu communities. (Human Rights Watch, 2021)

Marginalisation of minorities extends across education, employment, housing, and health outcomes. Government data shows literacy rates for Muslims and Dalits lag national averages by 10-20%, while just 2.5% of senior civil service posts are held by Muslims despite comprising 15% of the population (Najiullah, 2006). Minorities face discrimination in urban housing and access to public

services in States like Gujarat. Health indicators including infant mortality and malnutrition display vast inequities along religious lines (Department of state, 2023) . According to Pew Research Centre , prejudice also impacts daily life and mobility - surveys reveal many minorities conceal or alter religious attire, names, or practices to find housing or employment and avoid harassment (Pew Research Centre 2021). Everyday acts of bias, discrimination and verbal/physical abuse fuelled by engrained stigma collectively impair minorities' access, dignity and security.

Minorities in India continue to face significant underrepresentation across various institutions, including government, police, and the judiciary, which curtails their democratic participation. Despite constituting nearly 15% of the population, Muslims hold only 4.9% of bureaucrat positions and 3% of police and security jobs, as reported by the Council on Foreign Relations (Maizland, 2020). Additionally, when combining Christians and Muslims, their representation in lower court judgeships falls below 4%. This glaring underrepresentation hampers the ability of minorities to exert influence on policies that directly affect them, perpetuating systemic imbalances.

Addressing this issue necessitates comprehensive reforms to establish a more

inclusive judiciary, police force, civil service, and other entities that accurately reflect the diverse composition of India (Maizland, 2020).

While the imperative for comprehensive reforms to establish representative and equitable institutions is evident, the journey towards such transformation remains a formidable challenge that minorities cannot navigate alone. Yet, within this uphill battle, activism and dissent persist, ensuring that urgent issues stay in the spotlight despite concerted state efforts to stifle marginalised voices. Prominent visual activists have showcased the potential of creative media, particularly documentary photography, as a tool to empower oppressed communities, enabling them to narrate their stories and catalyse social justice movements.

Exploring the intersection of state policing, minority rights, and resilience in my thesis, I seek to delve into a fundamental question: How does the state policing of minorities in Punjab, Kashmir, and beyond underscore systemic injustice, while simultaneously unveiling the remarkable resilience within these communities? Through impactful visual storytelling, my goal is to amplify the voices of minorities engaged in peaceful struggles for their rights through avenues such as protests, lawsuits, and art. Visual journalism becomes a potent

means to render their issues impossible to ignore. In this exploration, I aim to stand in solidarity with the minorities who valiantly fight for their dignity in the complex socio-political landscape of India.

Proposed question for Independent Project- How does the state policing of minorities in Punjab, Kashmir, and beyond underscore systemic injustice, while simultaneously unveiling the remarkable resilience within these communities?

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Fig 2- (Singh, 2014)

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Glossary-

AFSPA: Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act

Controversial law granting Indian security forces in some regions immunity from prosecution and expanded powers such as warrantless searches and arrests. Used extensively in Kashmir.

TADA: Terrorist and Disruptive Activities (Prevention) Act

Sweeping anti-terrorism law enacted in India in 1985 and used to detain and suppress Sikh separatists. Allowed detention without trial. Expired in 1995 after criticism of rights abuses.

PSA: Public Safety Act

Law in Jammu and Kashmir that allows preventive detention of persons for up to two years without trial, for loosely defined security reasons. Used to detain protestors and dissenters.

Azadi:

Word meaning "freedom" or "independence" in Urdu and Hindi. Commonly chanted at protests by Kashmiris demanding self-determination or independence from India.

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