

# ROOT OF CONFLICT

Root of Conflict Podcast

## Episode: Autonomy and Kashmir

*featuring*

Rohool Banka, Local Activist, Kashmir  
Salwa Shameem, Filmmaker, Strategy Consultant

*interviewed by*

Pranjal Chandra, Student, Harris Public Policy  
Yi Ning Wong, Student, Harris Public Policy

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Full Transcript

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Root of Conflict Interviewers: You're listening to Root of Conflict, a podcast about violent conflict around the world and the people, societies and policy issues it affects. You'll hear from experts and practitioners can conduct research, implement programs and use data analysis to address some of the most pressing challenges facing our world. Root of Conflict is produced by UC3P, in collaboration with the Pearson Institute for the Study and Resolution of Global Conflict, a research Institute housed within the Harris School of Public Policy at the University of Chicago.

News Anchor 1: ...the new law, which allows migrants from Afghanistan, Bangladesh, and Pakistan to seek Indian citizenship, though, long as they are not Muslim.

News Anchor 2: Protestors defied a ban on large gatherings.

Protestors: [inaudible] The Citizenship Amendment Act, completely unconstitutional, anti-people, arbitrary, and against the basic feature of the Indian constitution.

Aishwarya Raje: In December of 2019, the government of India passed the Citizenship Amendment Act or the CAA, which would grant Indian citizenship to migrants of certain religions who fled for religious persecution from Pakistan, Afghanistan and Bangladesh. Muslims, most notably, were excluded from this amendment. This was the first time religion had been used as a criteria for Indian citizenship, and it led to widespread protests across India, particularly on behalf of those who feared they would become stateless in their own country. On this episode of Root of Conflict, we discussed the ramifications of the CAA and its subsequent protests, as well as how prime minister Narendra Modi's decision to revoke Kashmir's statehood puts the future of India's democracy in limbo. Yi Ning Wong is joined by guest interviewer, Pranjal Chandra who speak to Salwa Shamim, a policy analyst focused on international development about the CAA. Later in the episode, you'll hear from Rohool Banka, a Kashmir University student in New Delhi who joined the protests and shares his on the ground perspective.

Yi Ning Wong: Thank you for coming here today and joining us before we start our conversation about what's going on in Kashmir. Could you just give us a little bit of context about what's going on in India?

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Salwa Shameem: Well, I guess we should start with the most recent events that have emerged in the last month or so, which is that at the end of February, in response to the Citizenship Amendment Act, there have been protests across India, by both Hindus and Muslims and other minority groups. Originally, the CAA is meant to, for undocumented migrants or individuals from neighboring countries around India, give them a pathway to citizenship. But this law explicitly states that Muslims are not a part of that law, meaning that they don't have a pathway to that citizenship. So, for the first time since Indian independence, you've got a law that is explicitly using a religious test to prevent a pathway to citizenship. And so, the reason this is problematic is because you've got the national register of citizens, which is a record of all the citizens in India, or at least trying to create a record of citizenship in India. And what it's asking individuals to do across all of India is to provide proof, by papers or documentation, that you are in fact a citizen.

And the reason that that is problematic is because you're talking about people across the socioeconomic strata, trying to scramble for papers to prove that they've lived here for generations and generations. And if you're thinking about like the poorest or the most vulnerable segments of Indian society, that means poor individuals who have to come up with these papers that they don't have, and then somehow prove that they've been here for however many generations. With the CAA and then the NRC, the National Register of Citizens, you've created this situation in which if you can't prove that you're not a U.S. citizen, or you don't have the papers to prove that, then you can go through the CAA and have a pathway to citizenship. But if you're Muslim, then you are kind of being affected in two ways. You neither have the papers nor do you have a pathway to actually get that citizenship.

Again, I want to keep reiterating that this is not a Muslim issue. Indians across India have been alarmed by this because of how blatant the language was. And so, you've had these protests happen in Delhi, and largely peaceful demonstrations and dissent, and then what you get is, Kapil Mishra, who has this rhetoric of "If the protesters don't clear out, then they're going to be cleared out," that sort of language. And so, what you get then is mob violence of right-wing Hindu nationalists, who went out into the streets and took those protesters out. And not just those protesters, but that community. So, it was effectively a pogrom, right? When we talk about what actually was going on, we're talking about lynchings, beatings, burning down businesses and homes and rape and sexual violence.

And 53 people have died so far as a result of it. Many of them, most of them Muslim, a lot of them lynched and died as a result of that mob violence. And I think what makes it a pogrom and not a riot is because there's this language around like, "Oh, it's a riot. It's just communal violence between Hindus and Muslims," again, this language of, "Oh, it's a religious issue." And again, that's one that's simply not true because you actually had Hindus on the front lines, helping Muslims while they were going through this. Right? But then at the same time, that behavior, that mob violence, that was created, not in a vacuum, but around conditions of anti-Muslim rhetoric that have been going on for a while, such as the statements by Kapil Mishra. The reason this matters is because it's not specific to Delhi, it's not specific to this particular time.

It's part of a larger rhetoric that is unfolding or has been unfolding in India. And, unfortunately Prime Minister Narendra Modi, he has a history of this, meaning in 2002 during the Gujarat pogrom and the riots, as they say, you had up to a thousand Muslims die as a result of very similar violence. And the best view of him in that case is that he stood by and did nothing while it was happening, knowing that the police were sort of allowing it to go down. This is sort of like a resurgence of that violence, and my fear, and I think the fear of a lot of people is that we're going to see more of this, just across many, many parts of India.

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Pranjal Chandra: Yeah, I think you spoke about how RSS and BJP are interconnected, and RSS's ideology in terms of what BJP. Can you describe a little more about how you see the connection between RSS and BJP, and obviously before independence, from 1980 when BJP was formed, and then right now, how you have seen BJP and RSS?

Salwa Shameem: Yeah. Well, it's interesting because the RSS was around before the independence of India and they were quite active even before then. And so, while you had visions of Pakistan and visions of a secular India, you had this other sort of fringe group advocating for like a purely Hindu state. And they were actually banned multiple times. Even within India, they were considered this really, really fringe group. To credit the RSS, they were very intelligent with their strategy, which was, they went to people from all parts of India and said, "This is the vision of India that we want." Here is how you create that that vision of a Hindu state, right. And Narendra Modi was actually a member of the RSS as a young boy. Like he really climbed the ranks of the RSS.

He was rewarded for that. And then he slowly, politically distanced himself to the effect that he could actually go and run for office, and then rise to power in that way. But it's kind of like mother and child, if you really think about it, it's like a parent organization and the child goes off and has grown up with those values, those principles, and then goes off and does their own thing. It would be foolish to think that just because he no longer officially identifies as a part of the RSS, that he's not connected or influenced, or even directly involved in how that ideology plays out. And again, this is not dissimilar from what we're seeing in America in some ways, which is, sometimes it works well politically to align with even the fringe element, because the fringe element is politically expedient and savvy. And so, I think whether or not all these BJP politicians believe in what the RSS is saying, that vision doesn't matter actually, because for them it's politically convenient either way.

Yi Ning Wong: Is what they're doing motivated by wanting to keep that power and taking advantage of having a Hindu majority, or is it purely ideological?

Salwa Shameem: I think it's something related to both, because aligning yourself with the BJP or the RSS, whatever it is, there's so much groundswell support for it that sometimes it doesn't pay to not be a part of that movement. Right? Especially if it's at risk to your own wellbeing. And you have, like I said, Hindus across India who don't agree with this, but they are also in danger because they're siding with a different vision of India. So, I think the most interesting part about this is like, "What will India be?" And if this is supposedly the world's largest democracy by virtue of the fact that there are just so many – the population is so large – I mean, what kind of democracy is this? Is it a liberal democracy? It is an illiberal democracy, or is it just a charade? Like, that's like the real question we've got to be asking. And I think the other thing that's interesting about the RSS is the support that you see on the ground. It's very much grassroots. And I think that is why it's been so successful, is because it's not necessarily someone promising lofty ideals on a political stage, it's that these people are in the trenches with the community saying, "We're going to train you, we'll provide you resources. Here's your mission, here's your purpose now." And if you're talking to people who are economically, politically, socially impoverished, that's a great vision to offer someone.

Pranjal Chandra: How do you see BJP dependence on RSS with respect to that? Particularly because India is such a huge country, and when you have that grassroots mobilization and organization, you can obviously leverage it towards different models. And thus, do you see BGB can ever branch out of RSS completely or do you see them completely dependent on them?

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Salwa Shameem: You're basically asking how much will do you truly have when something is such a groundswell movement, and so politically sort of entrenched. And this goes back to your earlier question of "Is it actually an ideological belief or is it a politically convenient, expedient thing to do because of this groundswell?" I'm not sure what the answer to that is, but I think if about the BJP, and for that matter, even the Congress party, right? It's really easy to bypass true policy change and the real work that needs to be done in India, that requires a lot of hard work and accountability, right? Like true accountability to the Indian people. Supporting an organization like this allows you to kind of bypass that accountability and that responsibility, whether you're in the BJP or Congress. Right? And we're going to talk about the Congress Party. Like, yes, they've distanced themselves from the RSS and of course the BJP, their opposition. But if you look at even the Congress Party's policies in the last X number of years, they haven't always been particularly friendly towards minorities either. Right? So, it goes back to this question of like, what is your vision for India and how accountable do you actually want to be to the Indian public for true change in society.

Yi Ning Wong: Looking at the current regime, through the lens of the ongoing conflict in Kashmir, we know that there's been an internet shutdown, Article 370 has been passed. Can you walk us through a little bit about what's happening?

Salwa Shameem: Yeah, I think it'll be good to rewind to August, 2019, where there was a new law passed unilaterally by Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his party, his majoritarian party, the BJP, to abrogate or revoke the semi-autonomous status of Jammu and Kashmir, Article 370. And what that article basically means is, or at least what it symbolized, was this notion of Kashmir being a part of India in the sense that the Indian government had control over its foreign affairs, its communication affairs, and its defense. But Article 370 did grant a bit of semi-autonomous status for Kashmiris to manage their own internal affairs. And the revocation of that article is basically saying, "You no longer have any control. You are now a part of the Indian Union, wholesale." And if we just rewind a little bit further, the reason that matters is because for 70 years, and this actually predates even partition, the desire for Kashmiri independence doesn't happen in 1947.

It actually precedes that. And so, when the partition happens, Kashmiris are offered or promised a referendum to decide the future. Do they want to join Muslim majority Pakistan? Do they want to be a part of India, or do they want to be an independent state? It's all kind of left in the air so that they can figure it out. That referendum never ends up happening. And then what transpires from that not happening is 70 years of militarization of Kashmir. And this is the most militarized region in the world, or one of the most. It's more militarized than the North and South Korea border. It's more militarized than South Sudan and Sudan, than Israel and Palestine, Afghanistan and Pakistan and the U.S. Mexico border. So, if you think of what's happening at all of those borders, this is more militarized than those.

And so, you have around 600,000 to 700,000 Indian soldiers effectively occupying Kashmir. And we're not talking about a benign military presence. We're talking about a military presence that engages in a series of human rights abuses across a spectrum, ranging from curfews and strict control of movement, to night raids and missing children, kidnapping of young boys and children at night, all the way to obviously violence, sexual violence, rape. And then you've got squashing protests and using pellet guns to blind protestors, all of which is a means to control a population and their political and social and economic will. And so, what happened in August 2019 is, on one hand Article 370 was already quite symbolic. If you talk to most Kashmiris, they'll say it meant nothing anyways, in the sense that they effectively were already treated like they had no political, social or economic will, but the unilateral revocation of that article is a very bold move symbolically because we know Kashmir is a hotbed, it's very sensitive.

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You've got two nuclear armed countries, both Pakistan and India, both in conflict over this piece of land. So, it's a bold move to unilaterally make that choice. But even more concerning than Article 370 being revoked is Section 35(a) which is a part of Article 370, which basically protected Kashmiris and their property ownership. Right? So with changing 35(a) what you get is a real economic hit of what happens to our property and our land when Indians from mainland India flood Kashmir and buy our property, or we can't sell, or we can't do business. So, that is like the real time implication of this. While the rest of the world has already found out that the article has been revoked, Kashmiris inside Kashmir don't find out that Article 370 has been revoked and there's a total communication blackout. Internet is shut down, mobile landlines, all disconnected, and that's effectively keeping a population in total silence. So that again, what is the function of that? Why would a democracy do that to 7 million people overnight? And it's again to prevent mobilization, organization, protests, any sort of free will to exercise a dissent against this policy.

Yi Ning Wong: What does revoking the article signal to BJP supporters?

Salwa Shameem: Yeah, I mean that the revocation of that article was a promise that the BJP party made as part of their election. They simply delivered on that promise. And I think what that tells BJP supporters and the BJP is "We'll get what we want," and what it tells everyone else is, "If you challenge us, look at what we did here." And it goes back to the point I just made. If you can do it in Kashmir, which has been this contested issue for 70+ years, then it's no big deal to pass the CAA or policies related to the NRC or building detention centers in Assam to house those undocumented Indians who've been living there for generations. That's what it signals, is success and a groundswell of support for this.

Pranjal Chandra: So, that's what I'm hearing is that Article 370 sends a signal to all the supporters in terms of what BJP is capable of in its delivering on his promises. When Article 370 was revoked, the other narrative was that, "Okay, finally, we have a solution for Kashmir," because a lot of Indians felt like Kashmir was a part of India, and now, finally, Kashmir is a part of India officially. Is it a solution? Is it not a solution?

Salwa Shameem: The reality is, there's no solution if Kashmiris are not part of that. And that's simply what we see is that no Kashmiris were consulted when that unilateral decision to revoke Article 370 happened. And all Kashmiris have been demanding for the last 70-something years is to be a part of that process. And so, if you want a meaningful solution, well, certainly disengaging, well, not only disengaging, but brutally stamping out any political opinion coming from Kashmiris is not going to lead to any viable solution. It's not sustainable and it's not viable. And it certainly has no credibility.

Yi Ning Wong: So we've kind of seen similar patterns across the world in Xingjiang, China, and Rwanda, of like heavy military occupation. Do you think that these places are comparable with what's happening in Kashmir? And if so, what role does foreign policy have to play?

Salwa Shameem: I was going to mention this earlier, but I think if you're really like - it's kind of like the airplane level of what's going on, the 10,000-foot view. If you think about what's playing out in Kashmir and then what's played out in Delhi and will most likely play out in other parts of India, the reason this is so problematic, not just for Indian Muslims or for minorities or the Dalits or whoever, is that, unfortunately, if you look at the region, we've got terrible success cases. And I say terrible success cases because we look at the Uighurs and China, and we look at the Rohingya in Myanmar. I mean, India saw this play out in two countries and it's worked phenomenally, and you're only further confident that you could push this forward. And so, I guess in terms of a foreign policy point of view, 1) if India is the "world's largest democracy," what is our definition of a democracy in which this is possible? And then 2) knowing the scale, of just the impact in India, knowing what's happened with the Rohingya and what's happening with the Uighurs, it just makes it that much more



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real and it sounds eerily familiar to a lot of other right-wing extremists, moments of history in which people are round up. And then God knows what after that. And so that is the impact. If you're someone who is here in America or anywhere else, like why is this relevant to you? Apart from the fact that this is just another example of violence and right-wing extremism, it's that it's going to be done on a scale that you haven't seen before. And I guess in terms of like being more solution-oriented, like what can U.S. foreign policy do, or what can we as policymakers do, is 1) being more aware of this. Right? Because I think most people have a very particular view of India, which is a very sanitized view, and maybe that's changing and in the last few months or so.

India is kind of portrayed as – you think of like Bollywood and food and culture – and those are all still aspects of Indian identity, but the reality for so many people in that country is otherwise. And so, from a foreign policy standpoint, or even from a policymaking standpoint, having awareness of 1) what's going on 2) understanding Western complicity. What is Western or American complicity in this all? Because you just had President Trump visit, right? And in the backdrop of him talking about how India is a great place and a great country, you've got the streets literally burning. And interestingly enough, last September during the UN General Assembly, around that time, the Gates Foundation awarded Modi a Goalkeeper award, and that initially was being rewarded as there was a blackout in Kashmir, as there was violence in Kashmir.

You've got like one of the world's biggest philanthropic organizations, shaking hands and patting someone who has blood on his hands for building toilets. And even that initiative, just as a slight digression, even that initiative that he was rewarded for, it's grossly overestimated, the positive impact of that particular initiative, in which Dalits were actually forced to clean open sewage areas. Again, reinforcing that you're lower than us. And that is actually partially the reason why that initiative was even remotely successful, is because it was on the backs of Dalits. I mean this is what's happening. And then this man is being rewarded on an international stage for his activities. And that is what I mean by Western complicity. There is even a philanthropic complex. Why are we shaking hands with this individual? Well, part of that is because there's a huge market in India still, and everyone wants a piece of India economically, even in the West, like Silicon Valley has huge interests in India. And so this is what I mean: if we're going to think about being solution-oriented, what is in our control? And from a policymaking standpoint, that is this sort of influence, this economic influence. Like, can we put some pressure on Indian leadership for these actions?

Aishwarya Raj: Now you'll hear Yi Ning's conversation with Rohool Banka about his experiences as a student protester.

Rohool Banka: There's a difference – when they entered the library – there's a difference, because the majority of the policemen in Delhi are in the midst of Muslims, and they have hatred towards Muslim community. So, this hatred, this organization has developed the officer's mind in such a way that they have also actually started beating people with their preferences. Like who is a Muslim, they will beat him wherever you find. Like if they find somebody who is having a long day, they're creating a sort of identity as a Muslim, they will judge him. Preferential treatment towards the certain community is actually gone to the roots, creating a sort of biasness towards these communities. So, we had seen these things already in the English mid-valley where we have sort of military forces everywhere, you are being checked everywhere. It's actually happening there as well, where Muslims, particularly Kashmiris, are also feeling not safe and not able to decide “Should I go back to Delhi for studying or not?” It's creating a sort of question among a lot of youth, a lot of population of Muslims, who are actually reluctant to go back to the institutions where they were studying.

Yi Ning Wong: Right. So local police officers act as a proxy to enforce Modi's ethnonationalistic regime and creating a sense of fear upon Muslim minorities?

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Rohool Banka: Definitely, definitely. It's actually going in that way. I mean, it's a creating a sort of, they're creating a sort of otherization towards these communities. I told you last time, if you see most of the Muslims who go to different parts of the country, it's very difficult for them to find even accommodation. Like if I go to Delhi and if I want to stay somewhere in a room, or if I want to book a hotel, I will be checked in a way as if I'm somebody [...]. So, this sort of hate mongering and this sort of communal – it is sort of a series of structural violence towards the community. If you see the Bollywood of India, what you will see most of the villains in the movie will be Muslim.

If there is a terrorist, he's Muslim. So, I would say like this sort of image has been manufactured in this industry. I mean, it's actually creating a sort of Islamophobia among the general public. So, even if you go to some local person in Delhi and ask him for the accommodation, and if he finds your name, which is a Muslim name, he will be reluctant to give you that accommodation. If somebody wants to go to Delhi and wants to study in a good university, or he has to go there and find a good accommodation where he wants to stay, he will not have easy access for that. So, for him, his good choice is to stay at home. So, because education demands security, you need to think creatively for that, and you need to have a security, which is not there for Muslims. I guess I have faced this problem. I realized it at different levels. Right now, I should have been there in the university, continuing my PhD. But unfortunately, because of this violence, because of this sort of events, what is happening is that people like me are staying at home.

Aishwarya Raje: Thank you for listening to this episode of Root of Conflict. Special thanks to our interviewers, Yi Ning Wong and Pranjal Chandra and to our guests, Salwa Shameem and Rohool Banka. As always, thank you to UC3P and the Pearson Institute for their continued support of this series. For more information on the Pearson Institute's research and events, visit [thepearsoninstitute.org](http://thepearsoninstitute.org) or follow them on Twitter.