

Volume III Issue IV

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AZAAD आजाज़

Sanjana Arun



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Azaad आवाज़ aims to tackle an erosion of empathy in our society. This monthly magazine (Patrika) aims to focus on the marginalized sections whose voices are often muted in the cacophony of flashy mainstream media discourse. When referring to marginalization, this platform does not aim to restrict itself to the traditional focus on social aggregates like caste and race alone but aspires to include a discussion on class, gender, sexual orientation, etc. Azaad आवाज़ sculpted as a digital media station focuses on issues that debilitate the “deliberately silenced”, drawing no boundaries and aspires to evolve and voice the needs of those silenced.

AN INITIATIVE UNDER



KASHMIR: A STORY OF PERPETUAL HEARTBREAK

The abrogation of Article 370 in August 2019 by the Indian government and the subsequent internet shutdown in Kashmir marked an important moment in Kashmir's history. The special political and constitutional status of the Jammu and Kashmir state was reduced to the status of a union territory and the region split into two.

The internet shutdown that followed was a direct attack on the freedoms of speech and communication of the Kashmiri people, leaving the residents cut off from their families and friends. During this prolonged period of digital inactivity imposed by the state, several Kashmiris left or rather disappeared from Whatsapp groups and chats, a result of Whatsapp policy for inactive accounts.

Moreover, in the two years since the abrogation, we see the rise of a surveillance state with indiscriminate policing, increased presence of military forces and the controlling of journalistic expressions becoming the norm. There is more pressure on and regulation of the local press, making it a difficult profession in the Valley.

The Indian government is keen on shaping narratives about Kashmir and opening it up for development projects. The concerns of the people, particularly around the special status of the region as well as their demands for self-determination are not heard by the government.

The history of Article 370 is tied to the tenuous position of Kashmir and its borders. By reading down this important part of the Indian constitution, the government has ignored the voices of the Kashmiri people.

The recent past of Kashmir and its people has been closely related to questions of self determination and subjugation of civic freedoms. This history is also shaped by communal tensions, formation of new states and their effects on the material realities of Kashmiris. This is a complex subject, with many political factions and groups seeking power in different periods.

During the colonial period, the British and their allies sought to control this region since it lied close to Central Asia. After the partition and the creation of India and Pakistan in 1947, a part of Kashmir acceded to the Indian union on a conditional basis. Jammu and Kashmir was the only state that had negotiated the terms of its membership with the Union of India.

Article 370 detailed these conditions, laying the autonomy of the region, a unique provision accorded by the Constitution of India that came into force on January 26, 1950.

In the years that followed, the Indian state took an aggressive approach in this process of integration, referring to Kashmir as an “integral” part of India.

Subsequently, wars between India, Pakistan and China further impacted the position of Kashmir.

During this time political groups such as the Plebiscite Front campaigned for self-determination and called on the Indian government to hold a plebiscite, a promise made by Jawaharlal Nehru during the formation of the Indian nation.

The 1980s saw a rise of insurgency, with demonstrations, strikes, boycott, of elections and targeted armed violence by certain factions of the self-determination movement.

The insurgency weakened since the mid-1990s and waves of violence were felt by civilians. While Pakistan and India attempted to hold dialogues regarding Kashmir, India refused to negotiate with the groups fighting for self-determination.

In the 2000s, protests continued and were sometimes triggered by instances of violence and rapes by the Indian army. Civilians were killed during the counter-insurgency operations of the army.

It is evident that life in Kashmir is impacted by larger political forces and by human rights violations committed by those in power. Police and military forces exert immense control over the region and everyday freedoms are restricted.

The Indian state routinely attempts to squash the protests and resistances of the Kashmiri people. And yet, Kashmiri people continue to be resilient through years of occupation. The word azadi meaning freedom has a deep connection with resistance movements of Kashmir

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The Indian state routinely attempts to squash the protests and resistances of the Kashmiri people. And yet, Kashmiri people continue to be resilient through years of occupation.

For us [Kashmiris], azadi means not just getting rid of foreign occupation of our beloved motherland but also to remove hunger, poverty, ignorance, and disease, and to overcome economic and social deprivation. One day, we shall achieve that azadi” This statement made by Maqbool Bhatt, a Kashmiri pro-independence leader active in the 1960s and 1970s, is revealing of this connection. This demand for azadi finds itself in forms of art, music, and everyday resistances of the Kashmiris.

Ahmer, a Kashmiri rapper, writes about the injustices his community experiences in his songs.

“Through Kasheer, I want everyone to know that nothing has changed in Kashmir over the years and we are still being controlled back home. This is the anthem, the people's anthem. We are depressed even when things seem to be normal around us, because you never know what's going to happen tomorrow.

Who knows, there can be a complete shut down for months. You can't even use your mobile phones anymore and no one is going to give a damn about it, because that's how it's supposed to be in Kashmir.”

The walls and shutters of shops in Kashmir show graffiti, with messages for freedom, messages against the current Indian government.

Cartoons, underground literature, and newsletters not only criticized external forces, but also their own political leaders who have not lived up to their promises. The Indian Independence day and Republic day are marked as black days and rallies were held on these days.

As a response to curfews, the population would voluntarily shut down for a day in a self-imposed curfew. These responses to occupation, through art, music, and counter-movements against the state, are important ways of expressing their demand for azadi.

In this edition of Azaad Awaaz, we attempt to document instances of resistance and resilience by the Kashmiri people. As students who live in India, our focus has been to invite Kashmiris to give their accounts and experiences of Kashmir, occupation, and resilience. The team of Azaad Awaaz has ensured in due diligence that consent of each interviewee is solicited before publishing any interviews and names, as cited in this Patrika's edition.

We won't be publishing any of the interviews (except Vichaar's podcast) of this edition on the CNES social media platforms or its YouTube channel.

In Awaaz in Focus, Dr. Asifa Amin Koul talks to us about student movements and protests in Kashmir.

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In our podcast Vichaar, we have a conversation with Mir Suhail, an artist and cartoonist, about political and personal expression through art.

Talkpoint presents perspectives from students, a letter written by Aaliyah, a Kashmiri student studying in India, and an essay about the abrogation of Article 370 by Shreya Tiwari, a law student.

In Nazariya, the issues of caste and class discrimination are discussed.

The team would like to thank Professor Ambreen Agha for reviewing this edition, and Professor Wajahat Ahmed and Bhavneet Kaur for their guidance and mentorship.

Any questions or queries on the edition's content can be directly sent to the CNES Research Team at cnes@jgu.edu.in

Kashmiri Youth, Azaadi Movements and Resistance

IN CONVERSATION WITH DR. ASIFA AMIN KOUL

Q. The term ‘azaadi’ vibrates with a uniquely strong energy in the valleys of Kashmir. It is well-documented that the term “militancy” in Kashmir has taken on dimensions significantly altered from the violent insurgency of the 1990s.

Kashmiri youth, including those involved in both violent and non-violent anti-India protests, contend today with uneven globalization, Indian mass media, online connectivity, modern education, and at the same time, continuing militarization and surveillance, social insulation and alienation.

Could you shed some light on this new form of resistance with regard to its power to articulate rebellion?

Well, as you rightly pointed out that Kashmir has been grappling with political violence since the late 1980s, after the onset of militancy with over 700,000 military and paramilitary forces deployed in Kashmir for carrying out counter insurgency operations in, Kashmir.

It's classified as the world's most militarized zone in the world. And as a result of that, deeply entrenched patterns of militarization of the Kashmiri society, along with economic deprivation, denial of democratic processes and indiscriminate violence has resulted in a constant feeling of siege, horrific social, economic, and psychological suffering for the local population, particularly young people.

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Patterns of militarization of the Kashmiri society, along with economic deprivation, denial of democratic processes, and indiscriminate violence has resulted in a constant feeling of siege, horrific social, economic, and psychological suffering for the local population, particularly young people.

Now, what we see is that in recent years, repression, notwithstanding young Kashmiris, are identified as threat to national security, who have been trying hard to retain a sense of their history, collective trauma and ethnic collectivity by employing various innovative tactics for countering the state's narratives, and giving vent to their plight as well as creating multiple free spaces to bypass state power.

So, I wouldn't go much into detail before 2008 which is known as a watershed of Kashmiri politics. Before that, the Indian state and its media would present Kashmiri youth as apolitical or disconnected.

However, this generation was not completely insulated from their external environment as they had grown up in the ongoing conflict with the memories of violence, killings, torture, barricades, heavy presence of army and police.

The summer of 2008 saw the assertion of these sentiments to non-violent means through mass agitations, which were triggered by the Amarnath land transfer controversy that deflated illusion of peace and normalcy in Kashmir. We can say that the summers of 2008 to 2010 were a watershed in the recent history of Kashmir which witnessed a tactical shift from armed resistance to a new phase of non-violent mass upsurge.

That was mainly led by youth demanding for the right of self-determination. After 2008, Kashmiri youth driven nonviolent activism started creating their own discourse and taking their own ownership of the narrative that draws on the moral language of human rights.

Now post 2008, nonviolent mass uprising, the concept of freedom, and self-determination passed on to a whole new generation that was not connected and familiar to the Kashmiri struggle at deeper levels, and like the armed struggle of the 1990s.

The new generation, they constituted the backbone of nonviolent protest movements witnessed from the 2008 uprising as youth were both agents seeking social and political change, as well as they were, targets of the state violence.

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The new generation, they constituted the backbone of nonviolent protest movements witnessed from the 2008 uprising as youth were both agents seeking social and political change, as well as they were, targets of the state violence.

Now, another feature of the youth led nonviolent moment was that it heavily depends on the informal social networks of traditional formal hierarchical organizations outside the realm of conventional political structures.

Kashmiri youth employed various nonviolent actions ranging from demonstration strikes and marches that were actually primarily inherited from previous generations of struggle, but they also employed new tactics like stone throwing that emerged as a new and widely used act and attained symbolic importance since 2008.

They also came up with novel tactics to express their collective claims by using social media, graffiti, drama, music, film theater, and literary productions.

However, videos and images of nonviolent protests and graphic videos, images depicting state force's response to the protests that were uploaded by tech savvy.

AWAAZ IN FOCUS

Kashmiri youth were used by individual human rights groups and academics who are based outside India to highlight state atrocities and encourage debate on the Kashmiri conflict at international forums.

And with the help of the social media, young people were not only able to alter the nature of information access, but also the balance of power dominated by state control jingoistic, Indian media.

Similarly, social media has proven to be the most effective weapon of new militancy in Kashmir and galvanizing public support for this, it was used not only to glorify gun culture and create a narrative around it amongst the local population, but also exposed the weakness of the state security. From 16 in 2012, direct management of local militants increased to 53 in 2013, as the idea of militancy started gaining popularity through social media.

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And it actually started with Burhan Wani, the one who joined the militants in 2010, but he developed a kind of a cult following after his photographs went viral on social media. So we can say that after 2008, Kashmiri movement increasingly became a mass civil resistance movement equally involving every locality village, town and city. So, in that way, the new generation is not apolitical or disconnected rather they are hyper engaged.

Q. What is your take on the collective consciousness that has kind of sprouted from this intergenerational memory you mention? The current generation that is resisting this state mobilization has been a result of the brutal counter-insurgency operation. So, what do you think that this has to do with the political mobilization of the Kashmiri identity, especially amongst the youth- what impact has this collective memory had on the Kashmiri resistance movement?

Identity politics has always been part of the Kashmiri resistance moment even before the Dogra movement. It's not something very contemporary and you're right, the memories of, as you said, the intergenerational memories and exposure to the statewide counter insurgency reconsolidated their sense of self and sense of identity.

And like elsewhere, as I said, Kashmiri people's response to the conflict is driven by identity politics. And if we go prior to the 1947 partition, especially during the Dogra rule, the secessionist, or separatist identity politics, was always there- both religion and region. They constituted two important markers of national identity.

AWAAZ IN FOCUS

And, however in the whole process of politicization of the Muslim identity, the regional sense of belonging was not rendered irrelevant and vice versa, and both have been mobilized by definitely the state's response to people's aspirations or people's movement, if that makes sense. So, the secessionist aspirations for separate nationhood or azaadi constituted the core value of the Kashmiri nationalist identity over a period of time.

And after 1947, the increasing disillusionment amongst ordinary Kashmiris was also fostered by combination of divergent political and economic factors, such as India's unjust interventionists and centralizing policies, gradual erosion of Article 370, it's backtracking on promises of holding plebiscite and unfulfilling economic expectations of the newly emerging middle class youth, and systemic human rights violations by the Indian forces that ultimately led to the development of national consciousness and consolidation of secessionist identity amongst the Kashmiris, which eventually culminated in the popular uprising in the valley in 1980.

And as far as the recent catalytic events from 2008 are concerned, it can also be seen, or understood in the context of growing majoritarian symbolism and the Hindu identity in India gaining prominence, which rekindled azaadi demands in the valley with the goal to protect the Muslim identity.

So yes, I mean, there are multiple factors that are responsible for assertion of a particular identity with Muslim identity or a Muslim Kashmiri identity, if that makes sense.

Q. In furtherance to this question of identity resistance, it's true that conversations on Kashmir often focus on the immediacy of the violence, the encounters, the arbitrary arrests and the human rights abuses in the valley.

Yet, comparatively little attention is paid to the lingering effects that prolonged detention, incarceration and interrogation have on the thousands of young men who are put through the state's notorious prison system. As someone who has been closely researching youth politics in Kashmir, what do you think this effect has translated into, in terms of resistance and resilience?

Yeah, right. Post the 2008 uprising, repressive state response remained the most stable component of the state control and over 300 youth were killed by the Indian forces. In 2008, 2009, 2010 and 2016, which is an illustration of all of this.

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AWAAZ IN FOCUS

The protest movement in 2010 was treated as a law and order problem to deter protests by employing other high ended tactics, such as restrictive curfews for five months, of imposing shoot at site orders to enforce round the clock curfews, conducting nocturnal raids and blocking SMS services, and local news channels broadcasting the ground situation, clamping down on social media users, mass arrests, detentions without trial, torture, involving a range of physical sexual and psychological abuses in jails and depriving victims of legal redress.

Additionally, both the state government and the Center and also the media blamed anti national elements for fermenting troubling in the valley.

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Now people are really afraid of hopefully talking about their political aspirations. Passports were and are still being denied to people whether or not they had participated in protests or stone throwing from 2010 onwards.

. For example, they described protests as Pakistan's conspiracy against India, or alternatively portrayed the stone throwing youth as drug addicts and paid agents of Pakistan, and according to an anthropologist, Saiba Verma, this state and insurgent enactment of expressing violence leads to mass psychological suffering.

This psychosocial distress is reflected in various non-governmental surveys, carried out in Kashmir. These surveys reflect the context, why personal vulnerability leads to high levels of psychological distress due to high frequency of confrontations with violence, both in the past, as well as in the present.

And the researchers state that life in Kashmir reflects a pervasive climate of violence in which the population is living as not simply an environmental effect of living in a conflict affected area, as demonstrated by the high frequency of deliberate means, events or as detention, hostage, and torture, the state also launched a psychology warfare against Kashmiri youth by using robber's surveillance apparatus for intelligence led policing with the help of CCTV footage, photographic, as well as surveillance evidences collected, during protest demonstrations and stone pelting- snooping on emails, social media accounts, and tapping phone conversations to crack down on hundreds of youth.

Now people are really afraid of hopefully talking about their political aspirations. Passports were and are still being denied to people whether or not they had participated in protests or stone throwing from 2010 onwards.

Thousands of people were arrested who were mostly school and college students for participating in protest and stone throwing these young boys who included many miners were subjected to high degree of torture and other forms of ill treatment, including electric shocks and police custody.

According to Amnesty International, hundreds of Kashmiri youth were detained under the notorious PSA, and in its 2011 report, the Amnesty International has termed it as a lawless law, which facilitates incarceration of people without charge or trial, and it targeted the youth who participated in protests and stone pelting, and also constantly harassed their family members by barging into their homes.

Additionally, the state revitalized its intelligence grid comprising of mostly local Kashmiri recruits for intensifying surveillance. They did this by tactics of harassment, they took to threatening family members or falsely promising them off their acquittal from all charges.

So this has really created trust deficit and fear among Kashmiri people and continuous exposure to state surveillance, harassment and violence and it took a heavy toll on the physical and mental health of the Kashmiri youth. High level of stress lead to marked increase in heart ailments and depression among youth, and also use of drugs among youth is on rise according to various reports. But after the 2010 uprising, state also adopted a three-pronged approach strategy of coercion, dialogue, and selected concessions to youth. Regarding coercion, I just discussed in detail.

As far as other factors and strategies are concerned, New Delhi took some conciliatory steps to diffuse the crisis in Kashmir, which included sending delegation of parliamentarians and a group of interlocutors to Kashmir to initiate a sustained dialogue for a lasting solution to the dispute.

But these initiatives were mostly with cynicism towards Kashmiri as a redundant economic prescription for the treatment of political grievances, as well as yet another dilatory tactic.

Apart from that, some soft strategies towards youth were also introduced, which included introducing various educational scholarships, like Udaan and Himmat.

But again, along with the Army's goodwill programs, such as Operation Sadbhavana- these strategies were mostly seen as co-optation strategies or means to justify militarization in Kashmir.

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AWAAZ IN FOCUS

And then we saw that in response to repressive state response, many educated youths, in the age of 18 to 24 or 25- they were drawn to armed militancy, and these were, these are new recruits for mostly homegrown self-trained and tech savvy militants who uploaded their pictures and videos on social media.

However, it was not a widespread trend as it was in the early 90s, and the number of militants in 2010 was not more than 200. What was common among the new recruits was that they were either repeatedly harassed or arrested for taking part in the 2008 to 2010 protests or demonstrations.

So we can say that the systemic denial of political space for nonviolent means also influenced their opinion on the use of violence. However the employment of violent tactics still does not lie at the core of Kashmir's resistance movement.

Q. With the Central Government increasingly focusing on deradicalization of youth as a step to contain 'terrorism', there is a need to understand the radicalization theory before dealing with it. How would you define the radicalization of youth in Kashmir? Is this delegitimizing the political struggle of the people of Kashmir?

There's no denying the fact that religion has ruined centrality in the post 1989 Kashmir with entry of foreign militants who viewed the Kashmiri conflict in terms of a Muslim solidarity with Muslim community or based in Islamic *ummah* as well as with the rise of Hindu nationalism in India now in the contemporary security discourse of the Indian state which is driven by divisive majoritarian movement.

It has become a commonplace to invoke the notion of Kashmiriyat or Kashmiriness, by pushing the narrative of the growing influence of radical Islam, by which they mean Wahhabism or Sufism or weakening of Sufi Islam and erosion of Kashmiriyat in the valley, which is radicalizing the Kashmiri youth to participate in anti-India protests, stone pelting, and picking up arms.

This was further encouraged by geopolitical shifts in the post 9/11 war on terror launched by the United States in which anti-state movements became labeled as terrorism.

It encouraged the spread of Islamophobia giving India an opportunity to bracket the Kashmiri separatists, or the Azaadi movement, whatever we call it- with war against Islamic terrorism in its official academic and media discourses and mobilizing support for counterinsurgency measures against the local population.

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So we can say that the systemic denial of political space for nonviolent means also influenced their opinion on the use of violence.

When the 2008 Amarnath land controversy erupted, the issue evoked emotional response as Kashmiris saw such developments as a threat to the religious demography of the valley. The identity frames employed at the time of mobilization of people called for protection of religious identity for mobilizing individuals.

Now, we know how the Amarnath land controversy in 2008 was a watershed in Kashmir's history, which could be understood in the context of, as I said earlier, ascendancy of majoritarian symbolism of India, informing political mobilization in Kashmir situated within the goal of protecting a distinct Kashmiri identity and rekindling azaadi sentiments in the valley.

Now concurrently, Kashmir witnessed transition to a peaceful struggle that the youth were, they were the backbone behind a nonviolent movement who played a critical role in initiating, coordinating and sustaining nonviolent struggle during mass uprising. Kashmir certainly has a youth bulge with 70% of its population under the age of 35, of which 48% of the youth are between the ages of 18 and 30.

The young generation is often stigmatized, not only in India, but elsewhere, as disruptive agents prone to radicalism and deviance and the existence of a youth bulge in a society is also commonly considered as a precursor of political violence and instability. But how did the Indian state respond to widespread youth mobilization from 2008 onwards?

First, the Indian state media attributed Kashmiri youth mobilization as the or blame Pakistan for instigating jobless youth as a sole force driving Kashmiri political discontent that led to mass upsurge.

The Indian government approached the political problem by limiting its initiatives to offering economic packages and development of policies while constantly failing to acknowledge political dissent as a response to the culture of political repression and lack of democratic space.

Secondly, the state employed unbridled response, sorry, repressive forces resulting in killings of hundreds of Kashmiri youths.

In 2008, 2009, 2010 and 2016, mass arrests of Kashmiri youth as a result, many youth were forced to join militancy after witnessing deaths of their family members or friends or facing harassment at the hands of the security forces for the crime of participating in peaceful protests.

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The Indian government approached the political problem by limiting its initiatives to offering economic packages and development of policies while constantly failing to acknowledge political dissent as a response to the culture of political repression and lack of democratic space.

However, the tendency of the Indian state and its media to link it with Islamic terrorism and portraying it as a historic conflict between Hindus and Muslims undermines the former's repressive role.

So religion certainly plays an important role in Kashmir's resistance movement and in shaping how Kashmiris view their struggle, but relegating religion as the sole driving force is over simplistic.

In order to de-legitimize the separatist movement, the Indian state and its media frequently link it with global Islamist *jihad* or groups like ISIS, Al-Qaeda and Taliban. How are these a section of youth who strongly insist that such groups have no role in Kashmiri movement?

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And other form of public support has been in the form of thousands of people attending the funerals of militants whose deaths are seen as shahad or martyrdom.

And we know based on many studies and research, and this is not just an exaggerated thing. There were incidents when, for example, Zakir Musa a Kashmiri militant and the founder of Al-Qaeda inspired militant groups in his statement declared in 2017.

He declared that Kashmiri freedom struggles should not be for an independent state, or merger with Pakistan, but for an Islamic state government. A state governed by a Sharia law, but many people, especially youth were quick to oppose it.

Similarly, there were a few incidents of ISIS flags raised during protests, but there is no evidence that would suggest that these youth were being recruited into ISIS.

On the contrary, there were many experts who contended that the youth resorted to such acts in order to mock the Indian security forces. So the state's response here- and again I'm saying that you have to keep it into consideration everyday violence and continuing political stale mate- there are 50 failed bilateral dialogues on Kashmir and this has created an atmosphere of fear and frustration in the valley.

Locals do support militants and until recently it was very common to see people disrupting ongoing military operations in the encounter sites to help militants break ordinance.

And other form of public support has been in the form of thousands of people attending the funerals of militants whose deaths are seen as *shahad* or martyrdom.

The political status quo- high-handed repression and military apparatus that has been extensively used to quell the political, non-violent movement since 2008 has led to growing frustration among youth. Many youths I spoke to personally for my research were not completely averse to armed struggle, but they felt that it should not be a major part of the Kashmiri struggle.

Additionally, although some youth were disillusioned with non-violent means as the non-violent struggle faced the same response as the armed struggle, but they strongly felt that it should be part of the strategy at the moment.

Q. Student activism in Kashmir is largely different from student activism everywhere else in the country. When you trace the history of student activism in Kashmir, it is evident that they have been an active and substantial part of Kashmir's struggle for self-determination and counter colonial settlements.

What do you think this has had to do with the emergence of a political consciousness that is essentially in conflict with the occupying state?

Like earlier, as I told you, when we briefly touched about identity politics in Kashmir, I told you that identity politics is not something new in Kashmir and it traces its origin prior to the 1947 partition. The events that started from 2018, if we take that into context, they emerged in the context of growing majoritarian symbolism as I told you earlier and gaining majoritarian identity which gained prominence during that period of time, which rekindled *azaadi* demands in the valley with a goal to protect Muslim identity.

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The word *zulm* or oppression, this is the common idiom that you will find in the narrative of Kashmiris because of their first-hand experience of state expression

Now the articulation of ethnic consciousness that informs the current *azaadi* movement in Kashmir, is defined by various things of the Kashmir's master narrative accessible to contemporary Kashmiri youth through both discourse and practice.

For example, there is a primordialist perspective, Kashmiri popular rhetoric of Kashmiri identity often invokes the notion of primordial sentiments to justify the contemporary articulation of Kashmiriness as a distinct ethnic identity by virtue of history, linguistic religious and ethnic attributes; a past differentiated that of 'other'. Then the second is, commitment to resistance as a response of *zulm*. The word *zulm* or oppression, this is the common idiom that you will find in the narrative of Kashmiris because of their first-hand experience of state expression that had a personal effect resulting in the internalization of narrative of resistance in the contemporary national identity, Kashmiri national identity of the new generation.



Kashmiri student unions are denied space for any political activity in educational systems, institutions in Kashmir unless they support of the politics of mainstream Indian parties.

Another thing I would like to touch upon is the suppression of rights including the suppression of freedom of political expression. Now it is in this context that student politics in Kashmir has historically shared an uneasy relationship with the state.

While universities still aside for student politics across India, and in fact provides an opportunity for young Indian people to enter formal politics by providing resources for protest, rallies, election campaigns and party campaigning.

Conversely, if you look at Kashmir, Kashmiri student unions are denied space for any political activity in educational systems, institutions in Kashmir unless they support of the politics of mainstream Indian parties.

This is because it is feared that student activism would eventually become a catalyst for bringing popular sentiment inside the campuses.

To give you an idea, how far they are agents of assertion of Muslim identity you need to understand the relationship of student activism with the state.

To prevent any separatist politics in Kashmiri universities during the 1990s, the state control tactics included restriction of academic freedom, deployment of military forces in university guesthouses for 15 years, spying on students and faculty members, and barring journalist from entering the campus without permission.

Then after two decades, in 2007, a students' body known as Kashmiri University Students Union (KUSU) was officially recognized and within few months of its formation Kashmiri university authorities put curbs on the students' body on the grounds that no political programs or protest will be allowed on the campus.

Despite various restrictions and tremendous pressure KUSU organized various political activities during the turbulent years of 2008, 2009 such as boycotting of classes, sit-ins, demonstrations including peaceful night protests inside the campus.

In response authorities employed more repressive tactics that involved demolition of KUSU'S office, harassment of its members and other students involved in protests inside the campus, threats of being arrested under the PSA, thrashing of students and conducting raids in the campus hostel.

Psychological harassment of their parents, floating alternative or opposing students body in each department to keep check upon the students activities, unwarranted surveillance by mobilizing intelligence agencies such as CID, criminal intelligence Kashmir, military intelligence to spy on students and faculty members.

As a result, the students' body has been working underground in recent years. In such a repressive environment where in student activism is perceived as a threat to national security, it is bound to reinforce popular sentiments among students. But it hasn't been necessarily the sole drivers of consolidating Muslim identity politics in Kashmir at a macro level due to the lack of resources and unlimited restrictions.

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ABOUT THE SPEAKER:

Dr. Asifa Amin Koul has done her PhD in International Relations at American University, Washington DC. She holds a Master's degree in Mass Communication & Journalism from Kashmir University and BSc from Women's college MA Road Srinagar.

Prior to starting her doctorate, she worked as a journalist for four years at Kashmir Times in Srinagar and interned at Indian and international news organizations. In addition to her accomplishment as a journalist, Asifa has worked as Director of Belaus, an 8-minute fiction film on communal harmony, that won a Special Jury award at the Indian Jehangirabad film festival in 2006. She is also a recipient of 2010 Caux Scholars Program Alumni Scholarship.

Life of Kashmiri Artists

IN CONVERSATION WITH MIR SUHAIL

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Mir tells us how life in a militarized zone comes with psychological trauma and how violence, both implicit and explicit become normalised



Mir Suhail

In this episode of Vichaar, Team Azaad Awaaz was in conversation with Mir Suhail, a Kashmiri artist and political cartoonist. He talks to us about his journey to becoming a cartoonist, his experiences in print media as well as his views on the medium of art as a tool to challenge majoritarian and state-led oppression.

Mir Suhail, who is currently in New York, U.S.A, talks about the anxieties as well as the freedoms of living in a foreign country. He feels a level of responsibility and burden even, to carry out his work as an illustrator and an artist since he enjoys some freedoms that his peers back in Kashmir and India do not currently experience.

He takes us through his life in Kashmir, from being born in a period of militancy, to growing up in an occupied area. Mir tells us how life in a militarized zone comes with psychological trauma and how violence, both implicit and explicit become normalised.

He started working as a cartoonist for a local newspaper at the age of 15 and later moved to Delhi to continue his work. He uses art as a way of expressing and processing the feelings of trauma and turmoil within him. Mir's art and his experiences reflect the resistance and resilience of his community.



VICHAAR

Mir feels the need to make art not just about Kashmir but also about social hierarchies and discriminatory practices in India. He explores the issues of caste, gender and religion that occur in mainland India in his artist practice. Mir remarks that art for him becomes a way of resistance and building solidarity with other marginalised groups.

The conversation moves to the elements of Mir's artistic style. He incorporates elements of satire and humor in his cartoons, and uses the cartoons as a way of helping people outside of Kashmir relate with his experiences and understand them through the visual medium. The cartoon stands out in a small space within a large body of text and headlines in a newspaper and these small dimensions help challenge the cartoonist.

As an artist, Mir also notes that it is difficult to continuously engage with themes of violence and oppression and the news cycles reporting on these issues can become overwhelming and tiring for someone who lives away from home.

Finally, Mir talks to us about mainstream news media and their harmful narratives about Kashmir. The newsrooms can be hypocritical and corrupt spaces and some journalists do not have the options of leaving these spaces. Mir posts his work on social media, which has the façade of democracy and freedom of expression, but he has experienced censorship on these platforms and has even faced abuse from some users.

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He (Mir) incorporates elements of satire and humor in his cartoons, and uses the cartoons as a way of helping people outside of Kashmir relate with his experiences and understand them through the visual medium.

Caste, Class and the Political Economy of Jammu and Kashmir

BY SIDDHARTH G.

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While the mainstream conversations revolve around religion and Kashmiri identity, people seldom talk about Kashmir from the lens of caste, class and gender.

When Articles 370 and 35A were abrogated by the Central Government, it prompted responses of anger and different conversations. Leaders from different political parties, working in Kashmir, like Omar Abdullah from the National Conference and the then Chief Minister Mehbooba Mufti from the Peoples Democratic Party, opposed this move, pointing out that abrogation of these articles from the Indian Constitution is a direct attack on the Kashmiri identity and Kashmir. Indian leaders showed different emotions, some welcoming the move and some not.

A small group of people though, albeit acknowledging the disastrous consequences of these actions, came in support of one unintended consequence that would occur due to these actions.

Dalit politicians, including Mayawati, the president of the Bahujan Samaj Party, spoke out that abrogation of these Articles will allow for more equality and opportunity to take root in the Kashmir Valley. This prompted rebukes from sections of Dalit activists who said that Dalit politicians have become ‘Islamophobic’. The reason for such a response was the following: till then, some of the important Acts that protect the marginalized communities of India, such as the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989, were not applicable in Kashmir, impeding the marginalized communities to seek justice.

Thus, the abrogation was seen as a way through which some of these acts could be implemented.

While the aforementioned reason should not be a ground to support the abrogation itself, this highlights a glaring issue about the conversations surrounding Kashmir. The mainstream conversations revolve around religion and Kashmiri identity, people seldom talk about Kashmir from the lens of caste, class, and gender.

Therefore, this article sheds light on these dimensions and tries to explain why it is important to have conversations about these topics as well, especially to understand the Kashmir Valley from the political economy perspective, a perspective rarely spoken about

KASHMIR AND CASTE DISCRIMINATION - THE CASE FOR VALMIKIS

Perhaps the most affected community within the Kashmir Valley is the Valmiki community. They were brought from Punjab under a special agreement in 1957 by the then Prime Minister of the Kashmir province, 'Bakshi' Ghulam Mohammed, to solve the sanitation crisis that plagued Jammu and Kashmir and employ them as sweepers.

These people were promised to be provided permanent residency in Jammu and Kashmir under Article 35-A that would allow them to stay in the province with the same rights and privileges enjoyed by people in Kashmir. That promise was never fulfilled.

Now, they face discrimination in terms of attaining education and getting jobs, because it is not possible to attain higher education and better jobs without the Permanent Residency Certificate (PRC). As that was not provided, the educated members of the Valmiki community cannot change their jobs for a better lifestyle.

The most cited examples of caste discrimination include that of Radhika and Eklavya. Radhika Gill, who challenged the provisions of the Article in the Supreme Court, was rejected for a position in the Border Security Force as she did not have a PRC to prove her residency in Kashmir.

Similarly, Eklavya, a post-graduate in Political Science, was only given a job of that of an office assistant on a contractual basis, because of the same reason.

Apart from that, there are instances where people from the lowest castes were targeted and attacked by the upper caste.

For example, in the infamous Kathua rape case, the First Information Report (FIR) was filed on the perpetrators only under sections 120-B (criminal conspiracy), 201 (causing disappearance of evidence of an offense or giving false information to screen offenders), 302 (punishment for murder) and 376 (punishment for rape) of the Jammu and Kashmir State Ranbir Penal Code 1989 (1930 AD.) The Indian Penal Code is not applicable in Jammu and Kashmir due to Articles 370 and 35-A.

The fact that the perpetrators were not accused under any act that convicts them of atrocity against the tribal community, despite the fact that the victim belonged to the nomadic Bakarwal community that falls under the Scheduled Tribe (ST) category, is telling of the fact that the provisions and opportunities to seek justice against caste atrocities are limited.

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The most cited examples of caste discrimination include that of Radhika and Eklavya. Radhika Gill...was rejected for a position in the Border Security Force as she did not have a PRC to prove her residency in Kashmir.

Thus, subsequent reforms need to be taken against caste atrocities, where harsher punishments and lesser loopholes are guaranteed to prevent discrimination.

This is also because Kashmir has a history of socio-economic hierarchy based on caste. Mohita Bhatia in her article “Dalits” in Jammu and Kashmir: Resistance and Collaboration in a Conflicted Situation”, writes that oppression of lower-caste Hindus and Muslims are attributed to the rule of the upper-caste Dogra rulers, who often granted extraordinary caste privileges to the Dogra Hindu community, especially to the Rajputs within the community, and often collaborated with other upper-caste communities such as the Brahmins and the Mahajans.

Thus, they enjoyed a privileged and powerful position socially and economically.

”

They (members of the SC/ST community had to struggle for another twenty years after the accession of Jammu and Kashmir in 1947 to avail these reservations. Bhagat Amar Nath, now known as the 'BR Ambedkar of Kashmir' had to fast unto death...for the state Government to yield to their demands...

Moreover, in an interview to Forward Press Hindi, RK Kalsotra from the All India Confederation of SC, ST, OBC (Jammu and Kashmir) claimed that the Dalits and the oppressed classes and castes did have reservations in government jobs, especially 8% reservation to notified castes (such as Kabirpanthi, Ramdasia, and Gardi), 10% reservation to notified tribes (such as Bakarwal, Changpa, and Gujjar).

Similarly, there was 2% reservation given to OBCs, 20% reservation to residents of backward areas, 3% to people living on the Line of Actual Control, 3% to people living in hilly areas, and 3% to people living near the border.

This was based on the 1927 Jammu and Kashmir Constitution, but they were not implemented owing to the dominance of the upper-caste Hindus, Muslims, and the Dogra rulers.

They had to struggle for another twenty years after the accession of Jammu and Kashmir in 1947 to avail these reservations. Bhagat Amar Nath, now known as the ‘BR Ambedkar of Kashmir’, had to fast unto death in 1970 for the state Government to yield to their demands and implement those reservations.

Thus, even availing provisions promised to these oppressed groups was a challenge.

But even among those challenges, a sweeping change in the economic structure of Jammu and Kashmir, initiated by the then Chief Minister Sheikh Abdullah, would go on to benefit many from the oppressed groups: land reforms.

LAND REFORMS IN KASHMIR - CASTE AND CLASS RELATIONS

Even before Kashmir acceded to India in 1947, people who were influenced by the Left-Communist ideologies initiated conversations about the economy and reforms, since they were witnesses to the oppression and exploitation of the landless tillers under the puppet landowners and *zakirdars*.

Thus, a manifesto called the “New Kashmir” was framed, which called for economic reforms, including land reforms that provide land to the tiller, compulsory work for all, and the right to rest.

Moreover, specific charters for peasants and laborers within the manifesto aimed to abolish the *begar* system and reduce the burdens of loan and credit through the former, and achieve the right to a pension, hygienic workplaces, and right to education through the latter.

Inspired by these ideals and the “New Kashmir” manifesto, Sheikh Abdullah of the National Conference, who headed the Government of Jammu and Kashmir, introduced perhaps the most revolutionary of all land reforms in different parts of the country.

These acts would go on to redistribute almost 2,00,000 acres of land without any compensation to any of the landlords, benefitting more than 1,50,000 tillers and their families, comprising almost 6,00,000 members in total.

Particularly, nearly 250,000 tillers belonging to the Untouchable category amongst the Hindus of Jammu also benefitted from these reforms, according to Michael Brecher.



These land reforms were not able to break the influence these upper-caste landowners had over the bureaucracy of the state, thus colluding with them made sure that the local bureaucracy was not accessible to the peasants and small landowners.

But even these reforms that transformed Jammu and Kashmir were not without problems. According to Siddhartha Prakash, there were accusations that these landowners used the loopholes within the acts to safeguard their lands, such as turning their agricultural lands into orchards.

Moreover, these land reforms were not able to break the influence that the upper-caste landowners had over the bureaucracy of the state, thus colluding with them made sure that the local bureaucracy was not accessible to the peasants and small landowners.

These behaviors have now resulted in the rise of a new class of landowners comprising of ‘commercially oriented landowners, land speculators, bureaucrats, houseboat owners, transporters and bootleggers wielding both money and political power’.

NAZARIYA

Moreover, after the arrest of Sheikh Abdullah and the takeover of the government by 'Bakshi' Ghulam Mohammed, the government failed to follow up on the land reforms. Instead, according to Rekha Chaudhary, his government did what he and his followers favored especially to counter the popularity of Sheikh Abdullah, who became popular for these land reforms.

He created a false sense of economic well-being in Kashmir by liberally using aid from the Centre. He heavily subsidized goods such as rice and fuel, and invested in infrastructures such as roads and hydroelectric projects, and social infrastructures such as schools and colleges.

But rampant corruption and rent-seeking behavior of the affluent classes meant that usage of these services was monopolized, which gave rise to a new section of the neo-rich, comprising bureaucrats, politicians, traders, and contractors.

“

According to Riyaz Punjabi, acquisition and vulgar display of wealth thus became the norm in Kashmir. These lopsided policies created a small axis...who would decide the standards and norms for the rest of the Kashmiri society.

These subsidies also came at the cost of rural revenue and profits, where poor farmers who cultivated crops such as rice that were subsidized were not given their dues properly.

In 1970, the Centre changed its aid policy, and only 30% of the aid came in the form of direct aid, while 70% came in the form of loans. Thus, all the revenue and profits were directed towards repaying those loans. Therefore, there was no money left to invest in infrastructure in Kashmir, which resulted in backwardness.

This, coupled with a lack of raw materials, partial land-locked nature, and lack of connectivity meant that industries never attained their full potential. The neo-rich took advantage of the subsidies and monopolized control over certain industries, such as the transportation industry, controlling fleets of vehicles.

Corruption became common in Kashmir. The Ayyangar Commission in 1969 noted that Bakshi Ghulam Mohammed and his family amassed huge amounts of wealth. It took cognizance of the fact that Bakshi's wealth increased from Rs.10,000 in 1947 to Rs. 1.25 crores in 1964. It also found 15 of the 38 corruption allegations against Bakshi to be true.

All these problems resulted in rampant class differences. According to [Riyaz Punjabi](#), acquisition and vulgar display of wealth became the norm in Kashmir. These lopsided policies created a small axis of politicians, bureaucrats, and businessmen who would decide the standards and norms for the rest of Kashmiri society.

The best of the education, health infrastructure, and government job opportunities were only accessible to this particular section of the society, and it left many people, both rural and urban, men and women, educated and illiterate – to fight for socio-economic survival every day.

KASHMIRI ECONOMY TODAY:

Some of the features of the Kashmiri economy that created these class differences continue even today. According to the 2021-2022 Budget of Jammu and Kashmir, almost 48% of the revenue comes from the Centre, 34% in the form of Central grants, and 14% in the form of Centrally sponsored schemes.

The 2021-22 Budget estimates show that Rs. 62,656 crores completely comprise resources from the Centre and only Rs. 34,485 crores are Jammu and Kashmir's revenue. 36% of the expenditure incurred by the Government is still on salaries and pensions, a huge fraction by comparison and just 1% less than the expenditure incurred on capital expenditure.

The state's total liability throughout the years as a percentage of the Gross State Domestic Product, although showing a decreasing trend, is high in general, oscillating between 46% and 50% since 2011.

Kashmir has also faced natural disasters periodically. The worst one came in the form of floods in 2014. Apart from the five million people who were directly impacted, and the three million houses that submerged in the floods, there were catastrophic economic losses.



Ever since the abrogation of Articles 370 and 35-A, and the ongoing COVID-19 crisis, there has been subsequent crackdowns on the public, and have resulted in lockdowns and internet shutdowns, impacting businesses and use of infrastructure.

According to ASSOCHAM, the floods caused an immediate loss of Rs. 5400 – 5700 crores. Immediate losses to hotels, trade, agriculture-horticulture, roads, and bridges amounted to Rs.2630 crores, and losses to railways, power, and communication infrastructure came at about Rs. 2700 – 3000 crores.

Moreover, ever since the abrogation of Articles 370 and 35-A, and the ongoing COVID-19 crisis, there have been subsequent crackdowns on the public, and have resulted in lockdowns and internet shutdowns, impacting businesses and the use of infrastructure. Businesses have been shut, which has resulted in huge trends of unemployment.

Incidences of people selling their assets to feed their families, such as taxi drivers selling their cabs, became common. Many people involved in the tourism industry lost their livelihoods and had struggled to pay back their loans ever since the shutdowns after the abrogation of Article 370. It got worse for many during the COVID-19 crisis.

NAZARIYA

Business organizations pegged the loss incurred by them since the past two years at around Rs. 50,000 crores.

CONCLUSION

People from the lower class and the lower caste in Jammu and Kashmir battle for economic and social opportunities every single day due to apparent caste and class differences. Their struggles and economic hardships have become more difficult to face due to recent actions by the Central Government, suppression of rights, and rampant shutdowns of the internet and infrastructure, coupled with the ongoing COVID-19 crisis.

The reasons for the same, such as years of economic mismanagement, corruption, and rent-seeking behavior of the rich elite of Kashmir is not something that can be done within a few years. It requires years of effort and mobilization.

As Mohita Bhatia notes, despite the heterogeneous nature of the Scheduled Caste/Scheduled Tribes of Jammu and Kashmir, they also have not been able to put in front a collective resistance towards the socio-economic and political hierarchy. This is because they do not have the political space to do so, which already is filled with conversations around India-Pakistan and Kashmiri identity.

Thus, it is important to start the conversations, and the time is now.

Student Voices: Kashmir from Two Perspectives

In this edition's Talk Point, we present two student perspectives on Kashmir. The first is a letter by Aaliyah, a Kashmiri student studying in India. The second is an essay about the abrogation of Article 370 and its effects, written by Shreya Tiwari, an Indian student.



As I open my eyes in the morning, gunshots scream in agony. My mind goes back to the day when men from your army broke down our door into pieces like that of flint, perhaps to set fire to it later.

Two of them barged into our house and grabbed the men by their jugular veins. They took them outside and crushed the early buds of our survival under their boots covered with filth.

I wanted to scream but I knew it wouldn't be of any use. The land was deserted and only dead bodies were permitted to live.

To you who sees and doesn't,
Every night fourteen men with thick black boots,
made after massacring animals to obtain leather,
stomp from my brain and then proceed to do that
on it. You have chosen not to see them but they are
there, laughing hysterically.

The pierced my chest with their gaze and the
bullets they carried. There was no blood that
spilled on the floor. I have been dried like my
mother's home-grown tomatoes that are made to sit
in the scorching heat until they turn black.



They raided our houses, internal and external. They stripped us naked and piece by piece ripped out our face. Our hands were tied between their boots. Their camouflage sprayed with red.

They took the men for questioning and when my brother gave away the place he studies in, the army men smiled with satisfaction. "That's the same place I come from in this country."

As if wanting to say that we are bound to be their case. But it is only after they make us beg for charity. He did not vocalize this.



Sitting naked on the windowsill I was noticing all this and they pointed at my bosoms and asked who I was? My brother replied, "My sister. She studies in India too." The smirk came back as the army man licked his lips to taste my blood yet again.

And when they left, they took with them, the gold the snatched after cutting my grandmothers ears and slit her throat. They took along with it, our faces. Then they hanged them around their necks. They took.



Then when we were lying above the ruins of our belonging(s), I looked at each member of my family. My mother laid unconscious on the floor and when she opened her eyes, she grabbed her son and hugged him close to her heart. My father stared at nothing and everything. My grandmother's body had been mutilated. Her skin fell loose on the floor and above her flesh.

I stood up with legs shaking and ran. I ran towards the gate and ran away from everything that was forced to exist. I ran till my legs broke into a dozen pieces that carried my being forward. One fell after the other and when I stopped, I landed into the same enclosed twenty-five acres of Indian land that occupies an infinite acre of mine.

I take a deep breath as I sit in my single box of white. The days here are blended into the nights, unlike back home. I get an abundance of food but I do not choose on eating it. I have found escapes in this escape but I have failed to escape altogether. People I would have called my own, aren't. I take satisfaction in that. Those who aren't my own, choose not to notice.

Each night I hear a thud of sweating bodies under the disco lights. They turn into gunshots that I shoot onto myself. Every knock on my boxed room feels like another flock of dirty men who want to snap my bones to make bullets out of them.



Every laugh out of joy reminds me of the triumphant and evil voices that are thrown like shrouds on the voiceless. Every gaze I receive terrifies me. Are they thinking of ripping me off my face? How long before they enact it? Every sleepless night makes me dream of a world where I do not exist as myself.

In the end I conclude:

You can run from Kashmir, but Kashmir cannot run from you

With all my love in these bare hands that I carry,
Aayilah.

Abrogation of Article 370- Walking on Thin Ice

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The abrogation has led to alienation of J&K's mainstream political parties like PDP that sought votes on the demand of self-rule..

The subjugation of a Muslim-majority state into India had led to distrust and hostility between Hindus and Muslims inhabiting the valley. Further, the state has been evolving in an environment of exclusivity and separation due to special privileges granted to its citizens regarding property, employment, and residence. These provisions might have imparted autonomy to the state but have formed an atmosphere of apprehension and suspicion in the valley due to the deployment of military forces.

On 5th August 2019, all these provisions ceased to be operative with the abrogation of Article 370 and a full-fledged inclusion of Jammu and Kashmir into India. Though, the abrogation was not unconstitutional as Article 370 was incorporated as a “temporary provision” since its inception (Sharma-2019). The abrogation has led to alienation of J&K's mainstream political parties like PDP that sought votes on the demand of self-rule. It has further curbed voices of dissent by placing influential leaders under house arrest justified through the Public Safety Act (PSA).

INTRODUCTION

Article 370 provides Jammu and Kashmir a special status within India and grants special powers to it. The article mandates the state's separate Constitution, Flag, Election Commission, and the head of the state - “Sadr-i-Riasat” instead of a governor.

The state also has its own Criminal Code known as the Ranbir Penal Code and gender discriminatory property rights (Medha-2019). It restricts the law-making power of the Parliament by necessitating the consultation of state government even on matters on the Union and Concurrent lists. Further, this article endorses the implementation of only two articles of the Indian Constitution in the state, subject to the clause that the President can at any time through a public notification declare Article 370 to be non-operative.

COMMUNICATION BLOCKADE AND INTERNET SHUTDOWN

The abrogation of Article 370 was followed by a wave of protests and stone-pelting in the valley, compelling the government to cut down all means of communication. The move was justified by the BJP government on grounds centred around security, prevention of violence, and stopping the circulation of false rumours.

Subsequently, the government acquired access to track all kinds of digital transactions to keep an eye on money laundering and terrorist funding creating an atmosphere of suspicion and mistrust among the populace. However, the government states that the revocation of Article 370 would integrate Kashmir into India and provide freedom from the existing repressive rights.

Since then, the inhabitants of the state have been in dark with no means of contact with the outside world. Trade and business took a backseat with lockdowns and no means of communication left to propel the economy. Travel restrictions brought the tourism industry to a dead end with people working in the ancillary industries having neither work nor other means of livelihood. Kashmiri citizens coped with low employment rates and almost negligible monetary aid. The common people struggled to make ends meet with no government empathy towards them.

Educational institutions have been shut down and the suspension of internet has left no doors of knowledge open to students which is in direct violation of the fundamental right to education. Students have been deprived of the opportunities which would have otherwise opened new vistas for them. Students in the valley, particularly girls, had to face social stigma and violence from military personnel as well as terrorists to have access to education. The government has promised opening of eminent institutions of higher education once Article 370 was done away with but these promises have yet to take shape. The crippled education system has pushed Kashmiri students into an abyss of unequal opportunities violating the right to equality.

The communication blockade has left Kashmiris in a complete blackout with no relations with the outside world. Kashmiris have been unable to contact their relatives for the past year and remain on tenterhooks about their well-being. Uneasiness and anxiety regarding the situation has increased and is often reflected in violent clashes with the military. These unrests have been tackled by prohibitions on public gatherings and mass arrests of people termed as “miscreants” under the draconian PSA.

The implementation of the Unlawful Activities Prevention Act in J&K after the abrogation has led to further detention of 255 non-violent protestors (Duschinski, Bhanb-2017). Kashmiris continue to toil through these communication hardships despite the Supreme Court’s decision in Faheema Shirin RK vs State of Kerala stating the right to internet as a fundamental right.

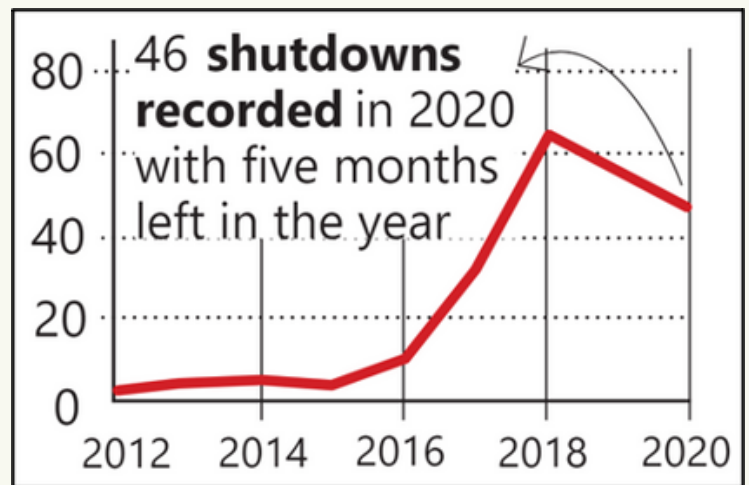


Figure 1: The rapidly increasing number of internet shutdowns imposed by government in Jammu and Kashmir since the revocation of Article 370 (Source - The Hindu's report 2020)

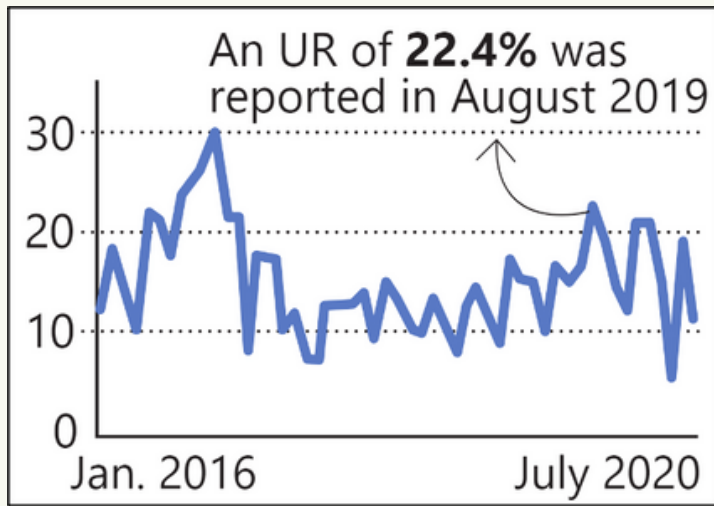


Figure 2 - Unemployment rates (UR) in Jammu and Kashmir rise consistently with prolonged shutdowns (Source - The Wire's report 2020)

WOMEN RIGHTS- AUTONOMY OR RESTRICTIONS- THE PATH AHEAD

The abrogation of Article 370 has impacted every Kashmiri citizen, especially the Kashmiri women, and suppressed lower classes. The terrorism and military subjugation of the area has already led to gross human rights violations which are also mirrored in discriminatory laws. The uniformity and equality in women's rights was one of the structural pillars for justification of the abrogation by the Central government.

The Centre explains that the revocation will empower women with the right to buy real estate and transfer property even while being married to a non-resident of Jammu and Kashmir (Lalwani, Gayner-2020). The same can now also be inherited by their children and bring them on an equal footing with men in terms of property rights, which was hitherto not possible.

The abrogation was welcomed by activists, woman sarpanch's and Kashmiri Pandit women married in other parts of the country as they had profitable stakes in the valley. However, the status of Kashmiri women living in the valley has not improved and they continue to face repressive brutality. The political attitude and administration have always tried to curb the proactive participation of women in society.

Women in the valley have been further repressed by military personnel deployed and are subject to regular physical and sexual violence. Women are now empowered with the freedom of expression but need to live in constant fear of arbitrary state action and being treated as second-class citizens.

Draconian military acts as AFSPA (Armed Forces Special Protection Act) have not only crushed the voices of women but has also made them a victim of sexual assault and violence. Under the cover of these acts, military personnel commit heinous crimes under blanket impunity. These women describe the whole horrific process as being "widowed by conflict, isolated by arrest" (Zahra, Muzamil-2020).

Other minority groups such as the Valmikis and the Gorkhas too face discrimination within Kashmiri society as well as harassment from the administrative officials. The centre has doled out a carrot in the guise of increased women and lower-class representation in public spheres promising a pot of gold at the end of the rainbow. Yet, the exclusion of women from the decision-making process is a colonial and top-down approach without any benefits. The Hindu extremist BJP government has positioned itself as a patriarch by enforcing decisions on them and assuming to know the best of their interests.

SHIFT IN DEMOGRAPHIC PARADIGM AND AUTHORITY OF THE GOVERNMENT

The opening up of the valley coupled with the anticipated influx of Hindu populace stirs up fear of being repressed and subjugated in the minds of the Muslim majority population. The general populace considers the revocation a complete takeover of Kashmir through legal framework and military control. Kashmiris find it contradictory to being called legal citizens of India yet not being asked for their consent as subjects of governance.

The inhabitants also fear that in the long run the results of any referendum or plebiscite if implemented would vary drastically due to the settlement of “outsiders”. Human rights activists predict a state of absolute lawlessness by the military due to the center’s over-reaching support (Hussain, 2009). Pro-Pakistan Kashmiri activists foresee the abrogation as a ploy of the Indian government to further tighten the noose over Kashmir and disruptive violence to be the new normal in the valley.

Human rights activists too are apprehensive of the outcomes with the coupled use of AFSPA and nationwide UAPA (Unlawful Activities Prevention Act). Youth politicians are uneasy about raising their voices for the fear of being booked and detained. The harsh treatment of political leaders like Mehbooba Mufti and Omar Abdullah under the pretext of house arrest has silenced many voices of dissent in the valley.

CONCLUSION

The state now has seen internet shutdown for over a year and isolation from the outside world with no means of communication. The heavily armed military has effectively enforced law and order but they have made Kashmiris feel alienated and second-class citizens in India.

Jammu and Kashmir still awaits to be lifted out of the communication outage and emerge without the tag of a “disturbed area”. The citizens hope to raise their voices as free citizens of India and not be labelled as “terrorists”. The majority Muslim populace is anxious to see the outcomes of being a minority in J&K. Albeit belated, Jammu and Kashmir will embark on a new journey of evolution without its special status and the question of Kashmiri identity will witness paramount changes in the near future.

“

The harsh treatment of political leaders like Mehbooba Mufti and Omar Abdullah under the pretext of house arrest has silenced many voices of dissent in the valley.



Ada Nagar
Senior Research Assistant
CNES



Hima Trisha Mohan
Research Assistant
CNES



Manisha Kamatchi
Research Assistant
CNES



Siddharth G.
Research Analyst
CNES





Prof. Deepanshu Mohan
Director,
CNES [in](#)



Prof. (Dr.) Ambreen Agha
Associate Professor,
JSIA [in](#)



Prof. Nisha Nair
Assistant Professor,
JGLS [in](#)



Prof. (Dr.) Sweta Sen
Assistant Professor,
JSIA [in](#)



Prof. (Dr.) Zaheer Abbas
Assistant Professor,
JSLH [in](#)



Prof. (Dr.) Saagar Tewari
Associate Professor,
JSLH [in](#)



Bhavneet Kaur
Lecturer,
JGLS