

Valley of discontent

More than a month after Jammu and Kashmir lost its special constitutional status and statehood, **Varghese K. George** visits the Valley and finds people, distrustful of politicians and the media, feeling the effects of a lockdown by the state and a shutdown called by protesters



"Shops across Srinagar, Pulwama and Shopian remain shut; medical stores are the exception." Strict restrictions were imposed in Srinagar on Muharram on September 8. (Below) Shopkeepers in Pulwama town. • NISSAR AHMAD

"You will give us jobs? You are shutting down plants and firing people!" Masood Ahmad, a tour operator in Pampore, is scornful. The dilution of Article 370 of the Indian Constitution that accorded special status to Jammu and Kashmir through a controversial process, the constitutionality of which is being challenged in the Supreme Court, shocked him, but what he scoffs at are the promises that accompanied it.

"India is so down and out that it is robbing from the Reserve Bank. And you say you will develop Kashmir? Are you kidding?" Ahmad, 35, has kept abreast of the latest news despite the information lockdown in Jammu and Kashmir. He says there is reduced tourist interest this season. Hotels across Kashmir have been empty since the government forced tourists to leave on August 2, three days before it ended the State's relative autonomy and divided it into two Union Territories.

Junaid, who only offers his first name, is jobless since the hotel where he works is shut. Until last year Junaid had worked in New Delhi with a tech company, but returned when it began to lay off many employees.

A few perch on the verandah of a shop with downed shutters. All shops remain closed on this road. An earshot away, soldiers in the shadow of an armoured vehicle guard a mechanic who is peering into a telephone box. "You say you will end corruption in Kashmir, but where in India has the BJP ended corruption? Madhya Pradesh? Karnataka? You say Kashmiri students are going out to study. Aren't students from Bihar and Uttar Pradesh going to other States to study?" Ahmad speaks over many others who try to get a word in. They all have a lot to say.

Lighting a fire

Over the years, the larger Indian market has lured tour operators and traders of apple, dry fruit and saffron from Pampore, called the 'saffron town' for its abundant yield of the expensive spice. Many of them are now in cities outside Jammu and Kashmir, for education, business and jobs. Feroz Ahmad, 32, runs his saffron business from Delhi. "There was no way to remain in touch with my family after the communication shutdown, so I decided to stay here until things improve," he says.

But being a part of India no longer holds the power of seduction for many; instead, Kashmiri millennials loathe the macho aggression of New Delhi. "This trauma is not going to end easily or soon," Feroz says stoically. "Now that the can of worms has been opened, there is going to be a stream of issues that will keep us in turmoil – land ownership, demographic changes, delimitation." A spark has been thrown, says Junaid. "It will light a fire – I don't know when, how and where. And there will be people waiting to pour fuel on the fire."



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FEROZ AHMAD
Businessman

Pakistan is already on the job, say security officials who request anonymity. Infiltration is on the rise from across the border; and arms seizures this week clearly point towards heightened militant activity, home-grown and foreign. A senior security official says Indian surveillance has picked up chatter in Pash-tun from across the Line of Control, in Pakistan-controlled territory, indicating the possibility of Taliban fighters.

Apple growers and traders are being threatened. This is disrupting the mainstay of Jammu and Kashmir's economy. The apple *mandi* in Shopian, which is generally buzzing at this time in a normal year, is empty and taken over by dogs. Shops across Srinagar, Pulwama and Shopian remain shut; medical stores are the exception. Eateries here and there operate with doors ajar or through a side entrance. Posters have come up in many places warning people against opening their businesses, and rumours have it that militants are stopping vehicle movement on highways. "Shutdown is our resistance. This is our only weapon," says 70-year-old Mohammad Iqbal in Pulwama town. "We can continue like this for months on end. We will support one another and manage."

But there is another view. "What is being called civil resistance is actually a behaviour sought to be imposed through coercion flowing out of the barrel of a gun," says Rohit Kansal, spokesperson of the Jammu and Kashmir government.

Waiting and watching

Protesters are clear-eyed about Article 370. "It had long become an empty shell. The Congress, with the collaboration of the National Conference (NC) and the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP), had hollowed it out and there was no autonomy worth the name for decades," says Shafiq Ahmad in Pampore. "Still, we used to chant *Chuvan Izzat, Nuan Izzat, Trihat Satat, Trihat Satat* (Your honour, my honour, 370, 370)." If Kashmiris had imagined a dead letter to be an honourable liaison with

India, its incineration is understood as humiliation and dispossession. "This is a war on us. We didn't see this," says Shafiq.

The government believes that dilution of Article 370 has extinguished the vague hope of *azadi*, or freedom, that had kindled Kashmiri politics for decades and prepared the ground for a realignment in the region's ties with the mainland. An official says Kashmiris will now come around to discuss "mundane concerns of life". Officials say the tight clampdown on assembly of people – which continues though only 10 of 200 police stations have declared restrictions in place – is to ensure that violent street protests are not organised. "Criticism about restrictions is one thing, but what is remarkable is that we are keeping things under control without firing a single bullet," says an official who does not want to be named. Until Prime Minister Narendra Modi's trip to the United States later this month is concluded, the restrictions will stay. Once they are removed, it will be anyone's guess how the grievances will be expressed, several officials say. "There may not be immediate protests but a small trigger somewhere could snowball into a big crisis. That has been the pattern of protests in Kashmir," says a police officer.

A long-time observer of the place says public opinion in Kashmir is layered. Locals have evolved a lifestyle to safeguard themselves during prolonged conflicts, but this can often be misleading, he says. "A shopkeeper might ask a military official to publicly rebuke him to keep his establishment open so that he can cite that as an alibi. A local leader could play the same trick to stand in an election," he says. However, if there is

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KAMRAN ALI
Student



unexpressed love for India among Kashmiris, it is deeply buried. Survival in Kashmir has been about avoiding binary choices – India and Pakistan, separatists and the mainstream, secession and integration. On August 5, New Delhi drew the choice for Kashmir in stark binary terms.

'Let them rot in jail'

The NC and the PDP mirrored this Kashmiri dilemma and tiptoed around questions of identity and autonomy, and framed their politics in a manner that the BJP derided as "soft separatism". The NC proposed 'autonomy' and PDP proposed 'self-rule' in response to separatism and extremism. They fashioned themselves as the protectors of the region's distinct cultural identity. "All those questions are now off the table. The response of mainstream parties will be a major factor in Kashmir politics," an official says. With former Chief Ministers Farooq Abdullah, Omar Abdullah and Mehbooba Mufti in detention, these parties currently have the convenience of avoiding the question after New Delhi's August 5 decision pushed them to the wall. Clearly implied always in their politics has been an understanding that Jammu and Kashmir's accession to India is final and irreversible. Their popularity had been sinking to new lows even before the BJP under Modi launched an all-out attack on them.

"We have no sympathy for them. Let them rot in jail," says Hilal Ahmad, a teashop owner in Pulwama. "They have duped us for decades. They took money from Delhi and enriched themselves. This serves them right." The government's publicity campaign inflames this passion against these regional leaders, clubs them with separatists, and pits them against ordinary Kashmiris. "While the children of separatists and politicians study in London, New York, Singapore and other top cities of the world, the children of the poor in Jammu and Kashmir have been denied even a decent education facility," reads one

government ad.

Though voter turnout is always low in Kashmir, the NC and PDP have always had a network of workers in the Valley. New Delhi's current policy is to build a network of local body representatives as an alternative political class to replace regional parties. Mir Altaf is the sarpanch of Pampore and is one such supporter of the government policy. He says he was part of the delegation that met Home Minister Amit Shah in Delhi on September 3, but he has not been to Pampore in months. Jammu and Kashmir has more than 4,000 sarpanches and nearly 30,000 elected members of local bodies. Last year's panchayat elections were boycotted by the mainstream parties. "We took the risk and ran for the election. Initially, we were told that 22 departments will be brought under panchayat supervision but only six or seven have come," he says at a hotel in Srinagar. Hundreds of people like him are housed in hotels in the city, due to security threats. Altaf says people do not care about autonomy or Article 370. "People want development. They want to get on with life."

However, his constituents say they don't know of any election or any sarpanch. "Who is he? Anyway, who cares. We don't vote and we don't care," says one. Hundreds of people were declared elected unopposed as participation was thin in 2018. Many areas such as Pulwama saw no polling at all in the election. With the removal of special provisions, Jammu and Kashmir is moving towards a three-tier panchayati raj like the rest of the country. Whether or not New Delhi succeeds in cultivating a loyalist political class in the Valley, the existing one has been destroyed.

Mainstream parties had maintained that the people of Kashmir had rejected the two-nation theory that led to the creation of Pakistan as an Islamic country. The Abdullaha and the Muftis advocated adherence to India which they said was pluralistic and secular. Their slim popularity may or may not have been a reflection of the popularity of this position until now, but their eclipse is certainly corresponding to an overwhelming rejection of their political position.

Sharpening polarisation

The middle ground has been land-mined, and polarisation is sharpening, not only in party politics but also in religious and cultural spaces. The Centre's decision to ban the extremist Jamaat-e-Islami Jammu and Kashmir and round up its leaders in the aftermath of the Pulwama suicide bombing in February may push religious conservatives to more fundamentalist Salafi groups, according to a local journalist who does not want to be named. "Muslim extremists are claiming victory for having said India is a Hindu country for long. The refrain is that while Hindu extremist groups get a free run and Muslims

are lynched in many parts of the country, we are targeted for our faith," he says.

"I am willing to die and I am willing to let my children die. Rather than dying everyday, let this be done and over with," says Hilal Ahmad, eatery owner in Pulwama. "Yeh aar paar ka ladai hai (This is a fight to the finish)." Hilal believes that there is an attempt to demographically alter Kashmir and crush its Muslims economically. But Hindus in Jammu and Buddhists in Ladakh are also unnerved by the possibility of demographic changes and potential changes in land ownership. Even the BJP leaders in Jammu have called for protection of the domicile rights of the State's people. The government clarified this week that nobody would be forced to sell land.

While Islamist extremists are gloating over the march of Hindutva in India, the moderate voices are lamenting the turn of events. "What has India done to those who swore by its Constitution? From the Governor to Union Ministers, the government lied ahead of August 5 that there were terrorist threats that required evacuation of people and deployment of extra troops. Is this how democracies function? Can you count how many Articles of the Constitution are being violated here?" asks Kamran Ali, a 24-year-old journalism student in Pulwama. "Can you see my knees shaking? I have lived half my life under shutdown. I know that whatever happens tomorrow is not going to be good."

The 70-year-old standing next to him sees a remarkable communal shift in the current government in New Delhi compared to previous regimes. "This approach towards us is driven by the anti-Muslim ideology of the BJP. Modi and Amit Shah are using our suffering to tell the rest of India that they are strong leaders. It is all meant for domestic politics in the rest of India, and this is no different from the way Pakistani politicians drum up support in our name and reinforce their power," he says. "This has nothing to do with the interest of the Kashmiri people."

'Everything is normal'

"But you don't write these things, okay? Write that everything is normal. Otherwise you will be labelled anti-national in India," a young man in Pampore jokes.

The overriding sentiment in Kashmir is not *azadi* but the deep revulsion and contempt towards the Indian media, particularly TV channels that blare vitriol and threats into their drawing rooms every evening. Soldiers are now intimate enemies of the Kashmiri people but TV anchors have become their constant tormentors. "Yes, soldiers enter our homes off and on, and can be nasty. We try to keep off them. But the Indian media's falsehood about Kashmir and the situation here is nothing less than violence," says Junaid. "We switch them off now." Kashmiris get to make that choice, as of now.