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## Agitation dynamics in Kashmir

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### ABSTRACT

*The dynamics in Kashmir valley have undergone a vast change in past few years. Recent developments have shown that the underlying separatist sentiment aided overtly and covertly by Pakistan has again started to manifest itself, predominantly through protests and agitations. The scale and intensity of protest in 2016 have brought to fore the mass discontent amongst large sections of the local population.*

**Keywords**— Agitation, Kashmir, Terrorism

### 1. INTRODUCTION

In July 2016, large-scale protests broke out in the Kashmir Valley bringing this disturbed region into the national and international limelight. The wave of public protests which began after the killing of HM terrorist commander Burhan Wani was not the first instance of mass agitation in the State but was by far the most widespread, and, most violent. The agitation lasted for over three months in which 96 people lost their lives while over 15000 persons including security personnel were injured. There are contradictory figures about the total Number of casualties. [1]

There was widespread damage to the public property and writ of the state came under serious challenge at many places particularly in South Kashmir. Although that destructive wave of mass agitation has died down, protests by civilians and their confrontation with Security Forces are reported almost on a daily basis from various parts of Kashmir Valley.

This paradigm shift to Agitation Dynamics was first felt in the Kashmir Valley in 2008 when there was widespread agitation over the transfer of land to Amarnath Shrine Board. The protests again broke out in 2009 with the trigger being the alleged rape and murder of two girls in Shopiyan District. Subsequently, in 2010, protests broke out again on account of Machil fake encounter wherein three local youth were killed on LC in Machil sector (Kupwara) by the Indian Army. [2]

The dynamics in Kashmir valley have undergone a vast change in past few years. Recent developments have shown that the underlying separatist sentiment aided overtly and covertly by Pakistan has again started to manifest itself, predominantly through protests and agitations. The scale and intensity of protest in 2016 have brought to fore the mass discontent amongst large sections of the local population.

In fact, Conflicts and intense political movements have been a constant feature of Kashmir's security landscape for over eighty years. Since the 1990s, a violent insurgent movement aided by Pakistan has kept the Security Forces engaged in J & K.

The Kashmir issue is a political legacy of India-Pakistan partition and remains one of the most complex security challenges for India. The Kashmir problem is a mix of several paradoxes and has seen several ups and downs in its story. After Independence, the people of Kashmir stood up against Pakistani intruders in 1947, but many years later, in the post-1989 period, they provided overt support and shelter to Pakistani militants. The 90s also saw an exodus of the Kashmiri Pandits, considered to be the original inhabitants of the Kashmir Valley. The onset of this century saw a phase of complete withdrawal of support by locals to foreign terrorists, only to see a revival of militancy in last few years.

The geostrategic location of J & K also makes it the main source of water and hydropower generation for India and Pakistan. Therefore, the control of this geographically important region creates a zero-sum game due to the desire of retaining control over rivers and glaciers in the area. Even within Kashmir, the issue of Hydropower projects and their ownership has become a rallying point for separatists and politicians. [3]

There are undoubtedly differing and completely contrasting narratives which exist regarding the Kashmir issue: one perceived by the Indian state; and the other by some sections of the population in J & K with active support from Pakistan. This contrast persists due to a mix of several factors, historical, geopolitical and socio-economic, which have been affecting the State. The State

of J & K itself is a curious mix of different culture and ethnicities spread across three distinct regions of Jammu, Ladakh, and Kashmir. The intra region dynamics, different perceptions, and sensitivities add further complexities to the issue.

There are two dimensions to the Kashmir conundrum as seen from an Indian perspective: the **external dimension**, due to Pakistani involvement and its claims over J&K, and, **the internal dimension**, due to the sociopolitical demands of the people of J&K from the Indian state. The resolution of the problem has been made difficult by the interplay of several interconnected issues. Indian territorial sensitivity, Pakistan's brazen proxy war using Non State actors and the Kashmiri ethno nationalist sentiment vie for the same socio-political space, making it a complex narrative and preventing any clear "suits all" solution.

## **2. THE ISSUE**

The recent spiral of street violence in Kashmir Valley, especially after the killing of HM terrorist commander Burhan Wani in 2016, reflects a paradigm shift from terrorist violence to public agitation and mass resistance. Although Kashmir has witnessed such prolonged spells of protests earlier also as in 2008-2010, the potential implications of mass-based movement are huge and must be correctly understood. Since the approach of successive governments towards Kashmir has been security-centric, there is a need to move beyond the usual narrative in order to analyze the historical and political context of the present-day crisis in J & K.

Lack of democratic space for dissent, real or perceived exploitation, lack of socio-economic opportunities and global Islamic political developments are some of the reasons that are considered to have reignited the passion amongst the minds of locals towards seeking a permanent solution to their woes. There is no doubt that Pakistan has been actively encouraging and supporting the present wave of protests but it is important that a correct diagnostic framework is established to prevent any future agitation. Although the recent wave of civil protests has been contained to some extent, this trend of mass agitation presents fresh challenges to the government and to security establishment in particular.

A generation of youth that has grown through the conflict has shed its psychological fear of Security Forces and is at the forefront of the street protests. These protesters seem to have come a long way from the "fear of death" to the "death of fear" in a confrontation with security forces.

Are they opposing state institutions and laying down their lives merely due to monetary considerations? Are they doing it as a religious duty? Are they so naive that a failing country like Pakistan can equip and exploit them? Are they looking to fulfill their genuine socio-political aspirations?

These are complex issues but unless we move beyond the usual rhetoric and try to understand the driving factors behind the wave of protests and agitations, the state of Jammu and Kashmir will continue to simmer.

## **3. HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE**

### **The Onset of Insurgency - Initial Pd (1989-99)**

Although the Kashmir dispute has a complex historical context and a lot of analysts believe that "Kashmiri Freedom Movement" began with their struggle against Dogra rule, the armed insurgency in the state was undoubtedly initiated after the misconduct of the 1987 assembly elections. A large number of disaffected youth crossed over into Pakistan where they were trained under ISI arrangements and thereafter infiltrated back into India in 1988-89 to carry out terrorist and subversive activities. [4] The Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Front (JKLF) and allied groups with the agenda, of 'Azaadi' were in the forefront of this so-called 'freedom struggle'. This period was characterized by mob violence among the urban population, poster and leaflet campaigns, kidnappings, strikes, and hartals. Thereafter the spiral of violence increased culminating with the systematic ethnic cleansing of the Kashmiri Pandit (KP) population from the Valley.

After the initial phases, Pakistan's shifting of support to the pro accession Hizbul Mujahideen (HM) and allied groups was natural and the pro-independence groups such as JKLF were systematically sidelined and suppressed including by means of internecine clashes with the HM. The "Ikhwanis" or the surrendered militants raised by security establishment also assisted a great deal in the neutralization of terrorists although they became notorious for numerous ill deeds. [5]

The period also saw the gradual introduction of the fundamentalist or 'Wahabi' Islam into the Kashmir Valley characterized by the attack and desecration of Sufi Shrines (Hazratbal and Char-e-Sharif) and with the killings of Kashmiri religious leaders (Mirwaiz Maulvi Farooq and Qazi Nissar). [6]

The establishment of the All Party Hurriyat Conference (APHC), in April 93 orchestrated by Pakistan was meant to give a political face to the insurgent movement. This umbrella organization consisting of approximately two dozen odd political and militant groupings initially seemed to accommodate all shades of political opinion from the JKLF (independence) to the JEI/HM (accession to Pakistan). These separatist leaders gradually became self-appointed guardians of the "freedom movement".

The period May-October 96 saw the successful conduct of the Parliamentary and Assembly Elections. Parliamentary Elections were a landmark event in that they were held in spite of boycott announced by the APHC and other militant groups. In spite of outpourings of protest from Pakistan and negative reporting by some sections of the international media, the elections were generally considered free and fair. The installation of a democratically elected National Conference (NC) Government led by Dr. Farooq Abdullah was a major blow to the insurgency. The very fact that elections had been successfully conducted meant that the people had got considerably alienated from the militants and favored an early return to normalcy. However as subsequent events would reveal, it did not result at the end of the insurgency.

The nuclearization of the subcontinent following the nuclear tests in May 98 brought the Kashmir issue to the center stage of world attention. During this period, Pakistan also raised the frequency and intensity of firing across the Line of Control in an attempt to force international intervention to solve the Kashmir issue on favorable terms.

Pakistan also used the window of opportunity of Indian Army's engagement in the Kargil conflict in 1999 to infiltrate a large number of terrorists (mostly foreign terrorists) into J & K. By this time, Pakistan had realized that the indigenous portion of the insurgency was not working in its favor and the local militants had to be sidelined. Foreign Terrorists (FTs) brought into the State soon took over the mantle of "freedom movement". Terrorist Tanzeems like Let and JeM became predominant and managed to establish a support base of their own. As a result, the reigns of the proxy war were handed over to these hired mercenaries. Although the effectiveness of the local content of the militancy had been reduced to a large extent by 1996/97, it was more or less complete post Kargil. Even Hizbul Mujahideen (HM), the largest and strongest of the local groups, was firmly in control of its Pakistani based masters and no longer called the shots as far as the conduct of the militancy was concerned. [7]

In a bid to provide a boost to the flagging proxy war, Pakistan opened up new fronts into the Jammu region and embroiled the areas of Punch/ Rajouri/ Doda/ Kishtwar into militancy using mainly the Foreign Terrorists Pakistan also opened up the IB (International Boundary) sector of the Jammu region to infiltration. The trend of "Fidayeen" attacks on security forces posts, and raids along the LC on border posts using a mix of regulars and militants escalated the violence levels in the Valley. [8]

#### **4. TRENDS IN INSURGENCY POST 9/11 AND OP PARAKARAM**

After the December 2001 attacks on the Indian Parliament, both the Countries after being on the brink of war started to seek normalization of relations. The 9/11 attacks also brought a paradigm shift in the 'worldview on terrorism'. In Nov 2003, a ceasefire was signed regarding the Line of Control (LoC) which had a tremendous effect on the infiltration levels. It also facilitated the creation of a formidable fence on the LC (AIOS) leading to further drop in infiltration levels. In January 2004, then-President Parvez Musharraf and then-Indian Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee met in Islamabad, where the former stated that he would not permit any territory under Pakistan's control to be used to support terrorism. Based on this promise, the two countries agreed to start a composite dialogue in February 2004, tackling issues of bilateral concern.

In a significant policy shift, Pakistan scaled down its longtime covert support to terrorist groups and took some active steps to prevent the militants from crossing the Line of Control (LoC) including monitoring the porters/ guides and controlling funds. **On a more analytical level, the steady decline in violence witnessed since then can be attributed to Pakistan's compulsions arising out of its domestic challenges, the international pressure on Pakistan and the successes of the counter-insurgency grid in J&K.** [9]

There was a gradual improvement in the overall security situation in J&K, which is evident from the fact that all parameters of violence started to show a steady decline. During this period, internal dimensions of Kashmir problem such as political stability, civil liberties, governance, alienation from national mainstream etc became more relevant than the external dimension of Pak support. Large numbers of terrorist cadre were neutralized resulting in an impressionable dent on the morale of terrorists. Intense pressure by Security Forces, waning local support and depleting cadre strength also contributed to the stabilization of situation.

At the same time, the global stage also saw a wave of "Spring Movements" in the Middle East and Africa. The popular uprising in these predominantly Muslim regimes encouraged similar environment elsewhere. Mass agitation, therefore, emerged as a calibrated strategy by Pakistan backed separatist movement to compensate for the declining terrorist influence in the state.

#### **5. THE SHIFT FROM TERRORISM TO AGITATIONAL FORM**

The changed paradigm manifested in large-scale protests for the first time, in the year 2008 due to the Amarnath land controversy. In May 2008, the Govt. transferred 99 acres (0.40 km<sup>2</sup>) of forest land to the Shri Amarnathji Shrine Board (SASB) responsible for conducting the Amarnath Yatra so as to facilitate the creation of temporary shelters and facilities for pilgrims. This caused a huge outcry as the issue was exploited by the separatists to mobilize public opinion against the land transfer. The Hindu dominated Jammu region orchestrated a counter-protests by enforcing an economic blockade thus bringing to fore the stark regional divide in the state. The protest was also politically motivated as some observers felt that PDP was instrumental in fomenting trouble in the Valley while BJP did the same in Jammu region. In the end, agitation ended after the Government revoked the land transfer and pacified the protesters. 46 persons were killed and 1,265, including SF personnel, were injured in this widespread street violence. [10]

The agitation also saw "Chalo" (March) calls such as "Muzaffarabad Chalo, Idgah chalo in which separatists urged the locals to gather together and march towards a particular designated place. These "Chalo" calls have now become a recurring feature in the State subsequent years.

In the summer of 2009, protests again broke out in Kashmir Valley due to the "**Shopian rape and murder case**". The case involved the alleged abduction, rape, and murder of two young women in May 2009 at Bonham, Shopian District in South Kashmir. The two women went missing while on the way home from their orchard on 29 May 2009. The next day morning, their bodies were found. The police rejected the allegations of rape saying that the women appeared to have drowned in a village stream. Locals blamed the security forces for the crime, and their sentiments were cleverly exploited by Separatist leaders leading to months of sporadic street protests across the Valley. [11]

The same cycle of street violence and protests repeated in 2010 with much more damaging consequences. This time, the agitation started in June 2010 after the 4 RAJPUT Battalion of the Indian Army claimed to have killed three Pakistani terrorists in a counter-infiltration operation. Subsequent investigations by Police revealed it to be a case of a fake encounter in which three young men were lured on the pretext of employment from their village in Baramulla district and killed in a staged encounter at Sona Pindi Gali in Machil sector. The protests soon spread across the state and were orchestrated by separatists. The widespread agitation resulted in 112 deaths, including many youths and a lot of damage to property. [12]

The protests subsided in September 2010 after the government announced a package of measures included the creation of three member interlocutor panel for dialogue with all stakeholders aimed at defusing the tensions.

There was a period of calm and stability for the next few years but the hanging of Afzal Guru, who was awarded death sentence in the Parliament attack case, in February 2013 created further tensions. While large-scale protests were prevented due to the imposition of restrictions, approximately 40 people were still injured in the clashes between security forces and violent protestors. Although there were no large-scale protests, there is no doubt that, the Afzal Guru hanging led to further alienation of locals. [13]

Fractured Mandate in the State Assembly elections in 2014 saw the formation of a government by PDP and BJP, two parties with diametrically opposite ideologies who had fought the elections berating each other. This opportunistic post-poll alliance provided an impetus to separatists in discrediting mainstream politics and raising the bogey of “saffronisation” of Kashmir. [14]

Subsequent misinformation campaign on government decisions such as bringing out a new industrial policy, rehabilitation of Kashmir pundits by establishing colonies etc created an uncertain environment about government’s perceived attempt to undermine the special status of the state of J & K.

The violent protests, which broke out in July 2016 after the killing of Hizb-ul Mujahideen (HM) terrorist commander, Burhan Wani, completely paralyzed the situation in the Kashmir Valley. Although the elimination of Wani was the immediate trigger, there had been an environment of mistrust building up in the Valley primarily due to the ruling political dispensation of PDP – BJP.

Burhan Wani was part of the breed of educated young terrorists, who can be credited with revolutionizing the use of social media to generate popular support. The images of young local terrorists, dressed in combats uniform and showing off weapons managed to ‘glamourize’ the militancy.

The photographs, messages, and videos that were widely circulated in Kashmir, using social media platforms such as Facebook and Whatsapp, made the local terrorists a household name. In August 2015, Burhan uploaded a video on social media, that called for establishing *Khilafat (caliphate)* in Kashmir and urged the youth to join him.[15]



**Fig. 1: Photograph of HM terrorist Commander Burhan Wani along with his group which went viral in J & K.**

On 07 July 16, as the news of the death of three terrorists including Burhan Wani in an encounter with security forces in Kokernag (South Kashmir ) spread, locals, came out in large number and started protesting. The protests soon grew in intensity and life came to a complete standstill across Kashmir. The situation was particularly grim in south Kashmir comprising of four districts of Pulwama, Shopiyan, Kulgam, and Anantnag. During the six month long protests, almost 100 people were injured while nearly ten thousand were injured. 14 of the 22 districts of J & K accounted for all the fatalities. 32 of 82 tehsils accounted for 48 % of all fatalities. [16]

Many serious questions were raised about the sustainability and efficacy of Indian Rule in the state of J & K. The Indian Army inducted additional troops and launched Operation ‘Calm Down’. [17] After months of prolonged shutdowns and violence, the agitation petered out due to fatigue and despair amongst the protesters. Security forces have since then intensified their operations against terrorists by launching Operation “All out in which over 200 terrorists have been killed in the year 2017. [18]

However, the security forces continue to face stiff opposition from crowds during operations, particularly in South Kashmir. In fact, protests and shutdowns, on one issue or another, have now become a common feature in Kashmir.

The larger challenge before the Indian State is to address the separatist rhetoric which is responsible for periodic cycles of violence in the Valley. The mass protests are thriving on the narrative against accession of J & K to India that has been effectively manufactured and spread by Pakistan supported separatists in the minds of locals. The youth of Kashmir seems to have been particularly affected by the appeal of anti-establishment protest and agitations.

Unfortunately, many incidents such as high handed actions of Security Forces, cases of serious governance deficit and political apathy etc. continue to occur at regular intervals which provide the requisite triggers for the anti-national elements to intensify

their agitational strategy. In the third week of December 2017, three civilians were killed in three different incidents with one of them being a taxi driver who was killed as a result of mistaken identity. [19]

There is no denying the fact that events post-July 2016 are just another chapter in Kashmir's turbulent history. Unless the discontent amongst the local masses is addressed holistically with a combination of hard and soft measures, there will be another series of protests and agitations in the Kashmir Valley.

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