



Jammu and Kashmir: On the Cusp of Change, But Challenges Remain

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Abstract

The recent killings of minorities, migrant workers, and local police officers in the Kashmir Valley have led to an impression that the security situation in Jammu and Kashmir is once again becoming uncontrollable. On ground, however, the situation is said to be firmly under the control of the Indian State. This does not mean that terrorism has been eliminated; small terrorist groups continue to operate and attack soft targets, heightening the sense of fear among the local population, migrant workers, and elected officials. At the same time, the political process has not taken off in Kashmir, where a political vacuum of sorts persists that the local body elections held in 2020

have not been able to overcome. The cleansing of separatist elements inside the administration continues, even as no serious effort is being made to reform the education system and deradicalise the youth. Development activities are impressive on paper, but largely invisible on ground. Despite this, the national discourse remains focused on security, and not on the other issues where State attention is missing and much needed.

The data used in this report were all sourced from government functionaries during interactions with ORF scholars on a visit that was facilitated by the Indian Army. These data were provided on condition of anonymity.

Attribution: Sushant Sareen, *Jammu and Kashmir: On the Cusp of Change, But Challenges Remain*, June 2022, Observer Research Foundation.

Introduction

Recent events in the Kashmir Valley have drawn widespread attention. At the political level, the submission of the final report of the Delimitation Commission¹ on 5 May 2022 has generated a lot of heat,² much of it along expected lines. On the security front, the targeted killing of a Kashmiri Pandit government employee,³ the murder of a special police officer,⁴ and the attack on a liquor outlet⁵ that resulted in the death of another member of the minority community has raised the usual questions about the terrorist networks that continue to operate in the Valley. These incidents indicate that the situation in the union territory of Jammu and Kashmir remains fraught. Yet, the Valley appears on the cusp of change.

To be sure, such a development is not new.⁶ But the hubris of policymakers and the security czars' tendency to become complacent played a big role in allowing the situation in the Kashmir Valley to backslide. Today, there is once again an opportunity to completely alter the political and security dynamics in the union territory. But whether or not New Delhi and Srinagar will capitalise on this will depend on how the politics is handled, which in turn will depend on the narrative that dominates the mind-space of the people of Jammu and Kashmir.

This report presents a broad overview of the situation in Kashmir based on inputs gathered during interactions with security officials and other stakeholders (such as elected representatives of local bodies, civil society members, students, activists, women, and other citizens) during a visit by this author to the Kashmir Valley.^a

a The visit was facilitated by the Indian Army but financed by the author.

Where Stands the Kashmir Valley

The current security situation in the Valley is arguably better than it has been in years. One metric to judge the security situation is the reported record number of tourists who visited Kashmir in March/April 2022, despite it not being the peak tourist season. There are also several other metrics that corroborate the optimistic assessment. For instance, security officials claim that the residual terrorist infrastructure is at its lowest in the last 10 years. As far as the geography of terrorism is concerned, North Kashmir, which once was the hotbed of terrorism, has seen little violence in recent years, with the epicentre of terrorism shifting to South Kashmir. There has also been an uptick in terrorist actions in Srinagar, but in both quantitative and qualitative terms, the level of violence has reduced drastically. The presence

of the security forces in and around Srinagar is evident, but is visibly sparse outside the capital city. One reason for this is the number of high value targets, both physical and perceptual, in Srinagar as compared to the outlying districts.

While the worst scenarios anticipated in the aftermath of the revocation of Jammu and Kashmir's special status in 2019 have not come to pass, terrorism in the Valley has not been completely wiped out nor have the terror networks been dismantled. Nevertheless, the space for terrorists is said to have been severely curtailed.

Infiltration

Infiltration across the Line of Control (LoC) has come down sharply since 2019 (see Table 1). In 2022, until April, there have been only two infiltration attempts, both of which were foiled. According to the Indian Army, over 100 terrorist launch pads continue to operate in Pakistan-occupied Jammu and Kashmir, but this has not translated into increased activity across the LoC because of the robust security grid in Kashmir, including the fencing of the LoC. At the same time, it is debatable to what extent the ceasefire along the LoC has helped in curtailing infiltration since much of the terror infrastructure across the border remains intact.

**Table 1:
Infiltration attempts
across the Line of Control**

Year	Attempted Infiltration	Terrorists Eliminated
2008	198	27
2009	427	99
2010	288	82
2011	188	52
2012	222	121
2013	229	97
2014	183	65
2015	93	33
2016	349	12
2017	323	120
2018	339	143
2019	171	130
2020	62	36
2021	58	31
2022	04	00

Source: Indian security forces (data shared on condition of anonymity)

As per the army's assessment, most of the infiltration occurs from south of the Pir Panjal range and some from the international border in the Jammu region. There are also some instances of terrorists using the Nepal route to enter India, but this is generally only used by leaders and not foot soldiers because it is expensive and cannot be used to bring in weapons, and because it takes a long time to reach the destination (during which a lot can go wrong).

Recruitment

In 2022, until April, an estimated 51 individuals are thought to have been recruited into terrorist cells, a sharp decline from previous years (see Table 2). The bulk of the recruitment is said to be from South Kashmir, with the Shopian and Pulwama districts becoming a hotbed for such activity (see Table 3).

**Table 2:
Number of individuals
recruited as terrorists**

Year	Recruitment
2001	716
2002	585
2003	504
2004	197
2005	157
2006	110
2007	151
2008	113
2009	68
2010	29
2011	24
2012	19
2013	31
2014	63
2015	83
2016	86
2017	128
2018	214
2019	117
2020	178
2021	143
2022	51

Source: Indian security forces (data shared on condition of anonymity)

**Table 3:
Recruitment by District and Terrorist Organisations
in 2021/22**

District	Lashkar-e-Taiba	Hizb ul-Mujahidin	Jaish-e-Mohammed	Ansar Ghazwat-ul-Hind	Al-Badr	Islamic State Jammu and Kashmir	Total
Baramulla	05/06	-	-	-	02	-	07/06
Kupwara	01	-	-	-	-	-	01
Bandipura	02	-	-	-	-	-	02
Srinagar and Ganderbal	07/04	01	03	-	-	-	11/04
Anantnag	04/01	06	02	-	-	01	12/01
Kulgam	19/06	07/02	-	-	-	-	26/08
Budgam	01/03	-	01	-	-	-	02/03
Pulwama	22/08	13	08/05	-/02	06	-	49/15
Shopian	22/12	04/01	-/01	-	06	-	32/14
Total	83/40	31/03	14/06	-/02	14	01	143/51

Note: The data for 2021 and 2022 is divided by /. For example: 08/05 means 08 in 2021 and 05 in 2022.

Source: Indian security forces (data shared on condition of anonymity)

According to the Indian security forces, of around 160 active terrorists in Kashmir, there is an almost equal split between Pakistani and local terrorists. Interestingly, the spatial distribution of terrorists is very different between North and South Kashmir (see Table 4). In the north, Pakistani terrorists make up 75 percent of the active terrorists. This number flips in South Kashmir where 75 percent

of terrorists are local. In terms of profile, there is no significant change from the past. The bulk of the new recruits are from poorer backgrounds and have had limited education (high school or lower). However, around 25 percent of the new recruits finished at least high school.

**Table 4:
Terrorist Strength, by Region**

Location	Lashkar-e-Taiba (85)		Hizb ul-Mujahidin (32)		Jaish-e-Mohammed (38)		Ansar Ghazwat-ul-Hind (00)		Al-Badr (02)		Sub-Total			Pakistan-occupied Jammu and Kashmir	Total
	LT	PT	LT	PT	LT	PT	LT	PT	LT	PT	LT	PT	UI	LT	
North Kashmir (77)	15	39	02	03	-	18	-	-	01	-	17	60		12	168
South Kashmir (80)	23	08	25	02	06	14	-	-	01	-	56	24	168	09	
Total (157)	38	47	27	05	06	32	-	-	02	-	73	84		21	157
Grand Total												157	168	-	325

Note: LT is local terrorists; PT is Pakistani terrorists; UI is unidentified terrorists Source: Indian security forces (data shared on condition of anonymity)

Targeted Killings

While there have been several incidents of targeted killings of Hindu and Sikh citizens and off-duty policemen and army personnel, the security forces have managed to capture or kill the assassins in almost all these cases. Since the 2019 Constitutional reforms, many terrorist organisations have mushroomed under secular-

sounding names, such as the Resistance Front, Anti-Fascist Force, and Kashmir Tigers, while others have more Islamist names—Al Qisaas, Al Jihad, Muslim Janbaz Force, and Markazul wal Arshad. Notably, all of these are fronts for existing terrorist organisations like the Lashkar-e-Taiba, Jaish-e-Mohammad, and Hizbul Mujahideen.

Still, Indian security forces have had some success in identifying and eliminating terrorists associated with these groups. For instance, 31 terrorists, including five commanders from the Resistance Front have been killed so far. Although the organisation still exists and operates, it is restricted to low-level attacks against soft targets.

Hybrid Terrorists

Among the many challenges confronting Indian security forces in Kashmir is that of the changing face and structure of terrorism. Most of the newly formed front groups are amorphous to a certain degree, even informally structured.

**Table 5:
Civilian Killings by Terrorists**

Year	Details	Local			Non-Local			Grand Total	JKP Personnel	
		Muslim	Non-Muslim	Total	Muslim	Non-Muslim	Total		On Duty	Off Duty
2020	No. of Incidents	35	04	39	-	-	00	39	02	05
	Fatalities	29	03	32	-	-	00	32	02	02
	Injured	06	-	06	-	-	00	06	-	-
2021	No. of Incidents	23	04	27	01	05	06	33	02	-
	Fatalities	23	03	26	01	07	08	34	02	-
	Injured	05	-	05	-	01	01	06	-	-
2022	No. of Incidents	13	03	16	02	09	11	27	-	04
	Fatalities	08	02	10	-	04	04	14	-	02
	Injured	05	01	06	03	12	15	21	-	01

Source: Indian security forces (data shared on condition of anonymity)

They operate in small cells and do not have the big organisational structures that their parent organisations maintain. Unlike in the past when recruits took to social media and announced their rebellion wearing guerrilla outfits and with a gun in hand, the new recruits are more discreet and operate in anonymity. They are generally discovered either because someone informs on them or with the help of technical information. Most of the new recruits are not well-trained; their training is limited to firing a handgun and escaping. Typically, they ambush ‘soft’ targets (unarmed civilians or off-duty security personnel), and they are not capable of launching complex attacks.

The Jammu and Kashmir Police (JKP) describes this new phenomenon as ‘hybrid terrorism’. The people involved ostensibly lead normal lives—they may be students, hold jobs, and live with their families—and often do not have a police record. They get activated for an operation and after carrying it out go back to their lives. Since they are not on the radar of the security agencies, identifying

them becomes difficult. According to a senior security official, the new hybrid terrorist modules are supported by white-collared underground workers—such as teachers, civil servants, lawyers, professionals, journalists, and businessmen—who provide the ideological support and finances, and wage the information warfare on their behalf.

Table 6:
Number of underground workers arrested

Year	Arrests
2019	372
2020	277
2021	184
2022	48

Source: Indian security forces (data shared on condition of anonymity)

Since the 2019 constitutional reforms, there has been a sustained crackdown on overground workers, which has helped in firming up the State's grip over the situation. According to the JKP, over 1,100 people have been arrested for engaging in "unlawful activity" and around 500 have been detained under the Public Safety Act (PSA). Additionally, through the combined efforts of the JKP, army and the Central Armed Police Forces, some 53 terrorists were 'neutralised' and 48 overground workers arrested in 2022 (until April), compared to 171 and 184, respectively, in 2021. The security forces claim that certain policies have had an impact on reducing fresh recruitment: the bodies of slain terrorists are not handed over to their families; their burials are not allowed to be turned into a public spectacle; and their burial is allowed only in areas far away from their native places. The policy of attachment of properties of terrorism facilitators is another deterrent that is proving to be effective.

Terror Financing and Narcotics

A concerted crackdown on terror financing has been a major shot in the arm for the security forces. Officials believe that one of the reasons why stone-pelting has stopped almost completely is because the funding that fuelled it has dried. But stone-

pelting was also curbed by stringent policing to identify and book the key instigators. National Investigation Agency probes into terror financing is also proving popular and effective—popular because, for the first time in decades, 'conflict entrepreneurs' who have profited at the expense of law-abiding citizens are in the cross-hairs of the investigation agencies; and effective because with funds drying up, sponsoring civil disturbances has become more difficult. The formation of the Terror Monitoring Group comprising the Income Tax Department, Enforcement Directorate, CBI, JKP, Research and Analysis Wing, and Intelligence Bureau has allowed these agencies to work in tandem against the terror finance networks. The Anti-Corruption Bureau has also become very active in countering terror finance (CFT) operations. The authorities appear to have finally recognised the importance of dismantling the ecosystem that sustains terrorism, both ideologically and financially. Even as the crackdown on money laundering and terror finance continues, the punitive action needs to be scaled up significantly.

An emerging area of concern in relation to CFT is the spectre of what officials fear is an impending narcotics epidemic in the Valley. But much of the evidence related to this is anecdotal. The data—21 arrests, 74 kgs of drugs seized, cash seizures of INR 22 lakh⁷—does not really bear out the stories of a narcotics epidemic. Yet, security forces and citizens alike believe that the terrorist-narcotics nexus is a serious development. The few instances in which drug addicts were found involved in either facilitating terrorists or engaging in a terrorist action have convinced some analysts and security personnel that narcotics is helping fuel terrorism in Kashmir. But there is yet no hard data to back this assessment. Some of the drugs are locally produced in remote, thickly forested areas of the Valley. After the suspension of cross-LoC trade, there is not much drug smuggling across the LoC. Most of the drugs found here—heroin, hashish and opium—are believed to be smuggled through the Punjab border and then transported into the Valley. Additionally, opioids (methamphetamines) are being trafficked from other parts of India.

Intelligence Network

The main reason for the dominance of the security forces and the successes that they have achieved in anti-terror operations is the robust intelligence network built and sustained over the years. The most remarkable aspect of the intelligence grid in the Valley is the interagency and interservice coordination and cooperation.

According to some security officials, almost 70 percent of the operations in the Valley are non-kinetic. The JKP claims that about 70-80 percent of the operations are based on intelligence generated by them. While technology intelligence (techint) is extensively used, it is the human intelligence (humint) network that gives the security forces their edge. According to the JKP, 60 percent of the intelligence it generates is humint and only around 30 percent techint. Precise and accurate intelligence has ensured that terrorists have a low shelf life. More importantly, it has minimised collateral damage in operations which is extremely critical in the war of narratives that is being fought on a parallel line with the separatists and their terrorist foot-soldiers.

The Rashtriya Rifles (RR) intelligence network is also notable. Over the years, RR units spread across the Valley have virtually mapped their entire area of responsibility (AOR). They know who lives where, who does what, how many people live in a particular house, who is related to whom, and who meets whom. They keep tabs on every small development in their AOR and have over the years managed to build, maintain, and update their database that remains in the unit record perpetually. Despite this, there have been many incidents of terrorism, but even in such situations, the RR is said to be able to gather information and hunt down the terrorists in a matter of days. According to top security officials, the RR's role in maintaining peace and in anti-terror efforts is indispensable for the foreseeable future. Officials point to the slight uptick in violence in North Kashmir after RR units were pulled out from Bandipore and Ganderbal. They have assessed that the entire Valley should be seen as one entity from the point of view of maintaining an effective counterterrorism security grid as piecemeal tinkering creates cracks that are exploited by the terrorists.

Radicalisation

The single biggest challenge and threat to the security and stability of the Valley is radicalisation. Indeed, the security forces have acknowledged that they have not been successful in curbing this phenomenon.

The ban on the radical Jamaat Islami⁸ has proven to be useful, but it has not degraded, dismantled, and demolished the radicalisation that exists in the Valley. In other words, the action against the Jamaat has proved to be only a necessary condition and not a sufficient condition to combat radicalisation. The move against the Jamaat was necessary because the group had infiltrated virtually every sphere of life in Kashmir. Its cadres and loyalists were said to be running around 500 schools (many of which are still functioning, albeit under a different label), teaching in universities, and in government and private schools. They were also said to be present in the bureaucracy, police, district administration, media, bar associations, and the judiciary. The Jamaat network was not only able to sabotage government efforts to normalise the situation, but also had a terror finance network that played a big role in mobilising street protests.⁹

The move to sack government staff with links to Jamaat and other separatist organisations has had some impact. But the government is somewhat diffident in completely cleansing the ecosystem of separatism inside its own ranks. The general expectation is that a few symbolic sackings of Jamaat's people in government service will have a ripple effect and force others to fall in line and/or sever their connections with the group. Sacking large numbers of government employees with dubious links could evoke an outcry. Even though the Jamaat has been forced to down its shutters, it continues to operate, albeit in a somewhat diminished manner, and is contesting the ban imposed on it. But its efficacy in farming out government contracts and jobs to its loyalists is said to now be seriously affected.

External influences and narratives spreading through the cyberspace have distorted the syncretic ethos of the Valley. Officials often bemoan the decline of 'Kashmiriyat', which is now being replaced by more literalist and fundamentalist interpretations of Islam. Adding to the problem are the radical preachers from all the three main schools of Sunni Islam—Deobandi, Barelvi and Ahle Hadith—coming from the Hindi heartland into Kashmir. The misuse of mosques, for spreading radical ideology and for collecting funds and providing sanctuary to terrorists, is a serious

challenge. With many mosques being built, it is not possible for the security forces to keep all under surveillance.

Despite the threat posed by radicalisation, the authorities have no systematic deradicalisation programme in place. For its part, the army is running a programme for some PSA detainees and some others who are suspected of gravitating towards terrorism, but it is somewhat ad hoc and not really structured the way deradicalisation programmes need to be. In any case, it is not part of the army's mandate to run deradicalisation programmes. On the civilian side, however, there is no real focus on making deradicalisation a priority. The army sees promise in the increased participation of women in public life through sports, activism, entrepreneurship, and other such activities. Top officials are convinced that the aspirations of women need to be encouraged. Empowering women by imparting them with skills and allowing them to assert themselves is being seen as a potential game changer in winning the war of narratives between the Indian State, which is backing the women and encouraging them to aspire for more, and the patriarchal, misogynist, Talibanised mindset of the separatist/Jihadist group.

The other game changer is education reform. For decades, the minds of young children are said to have been indoctrinated by propaganda in schools. At the same time, the army claims that there is no instance of any child educated in an army-run school having taken to terrorism or anti-state activities. This, they say, is evidence that if the education system is cleansed, it will go a long way in stopping radicalisation. But this is a long-term plan that must be accompanied by an impulse from the society to not allow radical preachers access to children.

Information Warfare

The challenge of radicalisation has been complicated by the relentless information war that is being waged from within and outside Kashmir. For instance, Pakistan, which is engaged in this war against the Indian state, is said to have received a lot of assistance from countries like Turkey. The Turks, as part of their state policy, are fully backing Pakistan by using modern technology and communication techniques to spice up their information war against India.¹⁰ While the security agencies have become wise to how Pakistan and its Jihadist auxiliaries are weaponising social media to poison the minds of people in Kashmir, they are struggling to come up with solid countermoves. Compounding this problem is the fact that the Pakistani terror machinery physically eliminates any Kashmiri who openly challenges the Pakistani and separatist narrative.¹¹

In recent months, the front organisations of Pakistan-based jihadist terror groups have expanded their outreach through social media by issuing statements, online magazines, and pamphlets in Hindi and other languages.¹² The information war revolves around telescoping into even a small incident and blowing it out of proportion to create a specific perception. The objective is two-fold: one, to manufacture and feed a sense of victimhood as part of the battle of ideas; two, attract international sympathy and media focus on Kashmir by feeding and agitating on half-truths and fabricated stories.

The entire information war campaign is said to be built around fabricated and exaggerated accounts of restricted religious freedoms in the Valley and the rest of India. There is also the fearmongering over demographic change and land rights being given to outsiders. Political disempowerment and absence of democracy is another issue around which grievances are said to be manufactured, as also on the lack of employment opportunities and economic deprivation (that Jammu and Kashmir ranks higher in Human Development Index than most other states of India¹³ is simply glossed over). The extended lockdowns, security check-posts, and collateral damage in anti-terror operations are also used to further the narrative.

Security officials maintain that the information war tries to influence the minds in Kashmir using not just developments in other parts of the Muslim world, such as Afghanistan or West Asia, but also in rest of India. While there is not much that the government in New Delhi can do about the former, it needs to think through the implications of polarisation in the rest of India and how it adds grist to the mill of the separatist propaganda in Jammu and Kashmir.

The security forces are trying to combat the information war but the effort is more individualistic than institutionalised. Even though there is an appreciation in the power corridors of New Delhi of the imperatives of information war, and some efforts are being made, there needs to be a greater focus and professionalism. A lot of what goes for information war in the government is ponderous, unengaging, extremely slow, and overly cautious. Officers who are dealing with the information war being waged by the Pakistan army's Inter-Services Public Relations wing are aware that it is a continuous job. But there is yet no structured or institutionalised system to ensure a round-the-clock proactive information war from the Indian side.

Crucially, there is said to be a realisation that while this battle of ideas must be joined, it cannot be won by simply imposing bans or internet shutdowns. Besides such blanket bans being counterproductive in dominating the narrative war, there is also the problem that the information (or disinformation) flow cannot be completely controlled. Technologically, there is the added complication of the difficulties involved in intercepting unauthorised apps. To be able to do this, the entire cyber traffic needs to go through government-monitored servers, which is another challenge entirely.

The effort, therefore, must be to focus on telling and selling the India story better, while simultaneously debunking the fake news and false propaganda. One thing that has worked in favour of the authorities and deprived the separatists/terrorists of propaganda stories is to try to avoid civilian casualties under all circumstances.

Enduring Challenges

Although the Indian security forces have seen many gains in recent months, experience has taught senior officials that the situation can turn negative quickly. Indeed, normalcy is ephemeral and any improvement in the security situation must be watched for some time before it can be said with certainty that things cannot slide back.

An important factor for the improved security situation is that Jammu and Kashmir has been under central rule since 2018. The 2019 constitutional reforms were an additional shot in the arm for the security forces.

While there may appear to be complete normalcy in the Valley currently, the odd incident of terrorism notwithstanding, the security forces are cautious and conservative in how they describe the situation. They have developed around two dozen metrics based on which they will determine if the situation has been resolved. These include, the number of civilian deaths in targeted attacks; radical speeches from mosques; funeral processions of separatist leaders and the sloganeering and participation; public expressions of loyalty to the nation; displays of the national flag and symbols; ridding Sufi shrines of Wahabi/Deobandi influences; tourism; economic activity; increased investments; and people not feeling scared of being targeted for going to army camps.

The security forces view the return of the political process with a sense of hope but also trepidation. Although they understand the importance of elections and an elected government assuming office, there is some fear that the local politicians will stymie the political process and undermine the State. The JKP worries that the free hand it has had in restoring law and order will become a thing of the past. An additional concern is that politicians could hound those officers who proved to be effective against the ecosystem that was working against the interests of the State. The progress made due to interagency cooperation and coordination could also be halted.

Some officials are of the view that a continuation of the existing administrative system for another year or two will ensure that any incoming political government will have neither any incentive nor opportunity to go back to the pre-constitutional reform days. As things stand, not enough has been done to dismantle the administrative and contractual environment that was exploited by the entrenched political players to their advantage. Under such circumstances, if the politicians return to power, they will likely do as they have always done, which will mean backsliding.

Missing the Political Plot

The failure of New Delhi to fix the politics in Kashmir threatens all the good that has happened in the Valley since the 2019 constitutional reforms. Although the Centre held elections for the district development councils (DDC) and panchayats in 2020, these institutions are still in a fledgling state and require extensive guidance and empowerment, which is missing. If the idea of these democratic institutions was to create a new political leadership, it does not seem to have taken off. Many of the elected DDC/panchayat members are inexperienced and unaware of how to handle and work with the bureaucracy. The result is that the seasoned and experienced bureaucrats are running circles around them and have become mini potentates in their districts and subdivisions. In addition, DDC and panchayat members must also confront the threat to their lives. Around two dozen panchayat members have been gunned down¹⁴ by terrorists since the grassroots governance institutions were restored in the Valley. It is tough for the security forces to provide security to each DDC/panchayat member, and placing them in safe houses defeats the purpose of these elected bodies. There is a real danger of this experiment fizzling out, which will be a setback to efforts to bring in a new crop of politicians.

Apart from the problems in making the DDCs and panchayat institutions effective, there is also the failure to reset the politics in the Valley. Although the Hurriyat has been all but decimated, the Jamaat Islami continues to operate, albeit from the shadows. Its influence has been dented but not degraded. Other mainstream parties also retain their pockets of support. The problem is that while these political parties have ostensibly been diminished, the new political leadership emerging from the DDC and panchayat institutions that was expected to fill the vacuum has not been able to do so.

Administrative Apathy

The 2019 constitutional reforms offered an opportunity to make sweeping changes in the administrative system in the newly formed union territory, but this has not happened. Part of the problem was the prolonged lockdown in the aftermath of the reforms, which hindered some of the plans to kickstart development activities. Additionally, within a few weeks of this lockdown being lifted, the COVID-19 restrictions were enforced.

The COVID-19 crisis gave the security forces space to dominate, but also halted the initiation of some planned development initiatives. Although current Lieutenant Governor Manoj Sinha is said to be decisive on administrative matters, there is a need to focus on making the larger administrative machinery more responsive and proactive. The problem is that the bureaucracy largely remains lethargic, inefficient, and unresponsive. Although efforts have been made to cleanse the administration of separatism supporters, there has been no purge of these elements; the government has taken action against only a handful of people. Even so, a certain degree of transparency has started creeping in the administrative system. Efforts are being made to distribute jobs evenly between the Jammu and Kashmir regions. Development projects are also being distributed between the two regions more equitably than in the past. Efforts are also being made to improve the power situation in the Valley. But complaints about corruption and rent-seeking are rampant and need to be addressed.

Vox Populi

Interactions with people^b in Jammu and Kashmir reveal that their aspirations, demands, and problems are not too different from those of people in other parts of the country. Protests on the streets are not about ‘*azadi*’ (freedom) but about wanting a proper school building or civic facilities. This is not to say that the separatist element has disappeared; only that it has been pushed into the background. The dilution of Article 370 appears to only be an issue for the political class. What does rankle the public, however, is the loss of statehood and conversion into a union territory. There is some expectation that this is a temporary measure and statehood will be restored after elections are held.

The 2019 constitutional reforms punctured the balloon of autonomy and separateness from rest of India. While people seem to have reconciled with the new reality, the politicians appear stuck in the past. This is why New Delhi’s failure to change the complexion of politics in the Valley is so glaring. While the State has managed to secure a grip over the security situation, this is only a necessary condition for restoring normalcy in Jammu and Kashmir. Without getting the politics right, the security situation can very easily deteriorate.

“Not enough has been done to dismantle the administrative and contractual environment in Kashmir that was exploited by the entrenched political players to their advantage. Under such circumstances, if the politicians return to power, they will likely do as they have always done, which will mean backsliding.”

b Such as elected representatives of local bodies, civil society members, students, activists, women and other citizens

Conclusion

Jammu and Kashmir appears to be standing on the cusp of a paradigm change. But for things to become irreversible, the Indian government needs to pay far greater attention to the challenges that continue to hamper a return to normalcy that is not superficial but substantive. An opportunity has been created because of the decision to break the logjam by making sweeping reforms in the constitutional framework to end the region's special status and integrate Jammu and Kashmir into the national mainstream. Wasting this opportunity will be unfortunate because it will take years before another such chance is either created or presents itself. [ORF](#)

Endnotes

- 1 “Delimitation of Constituencies in Union Territory of Jammu & Kashmir – Final Notification – Regarding.” *Election Commission of India*, ECI, May 5, 2022, <https://eci.gov.in/files/file/14157-delimitation-of-constituencies-in-union-territory-of-jammu-kashmir---final-notification---regarding/>
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