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PERSPECTIVES ON THE ‘NEW NORMAL’ IN KASHMIR

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ABSTRACT

This report collates insights from unstructured interviews with people in South Kashmir about their lives following the Constitutional amendments of August 2019 that revoked the special status of the erstwhile state of Jammu and Kashmir under Article 370, and

repealed Article 35A. The conversations with the respondents covered issues such as their livelihoods and the economy, the bureaucracy, and militancy in the region. The report is an attempt to document some of the most crucial impacts of the Constitutional amendments which directly affect the everyday lives of the people in the Valley.

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INTRODUCTION

On 5 August 2019, the government of India revoked the special constitutional status of the state of Jammu and Kashmir under article 370 of the Constitution, and abrogated article 35A which had allowed the state to define who the ‘permanent residents’ of the state are and what rights and privileges are attached to such residency. Since then, analysts have dissected the manifold ramifications of the government’s decision. New Delhi took the decision, according to some analysts, to alter the institutional framework in accordance with future aspirations of the stakeholders of Jammu and Kashmir.¹ Other analyses cautioned that the new structures will fuel the negative perceptions of the people of the region towards the Union government.²

Indeed, statements from both “autonomists”—spoken for by regional parties, and “centralists”—represented by New Delhi—have not helped eliminate these negative perceptions. On 22 August 2020, the autonomists, consisting of six regional political parties of Jammu and Kashmir including the National Conference (NC) and the People’s Democratic Party (PDP), issued the ‘Gupkar Declaration’ to demand for the restoration of Article 370 and Article 35A in the form that they took before the August 2019

amendments.³ The Declaration argued that the constitutional changes were “spitefully short sighted” and “grossly unconstitutional”, and they have changed the relationship between New Delhi and J&K.⁴ The Union government, for its part, defended the amendments and said they were made to ensure better administration, good governance and faster economic development in the region.

This special report is an attempt to gather lay perspectives in the Valley. Between May and December 2020, the author engaged in face-to-face personal interviews with different groups of people in the Kashmir Valley—farmers, business and trading community, and the youth. The author chose to speak to these communities to fill the gap in analyses that have been done on the region in the past 30 years. The interviews—which were in the vernacular—were conducted either in public places like markets and colleges, or inside the homes of the respondents. They aimed to draw insights into the people’s expectations of the administrative structures that were established after the constitutional changes. The author then consulted secondary sources including government statements and data, as well as news reports, to provide context to the inferences drawn from the exercise.

FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

Administration

The interviewees for this report agree that the COVID-19-induced lockdown was only a subset of the lengthy security “lockdown” in Kashmir that ended in February 2021.^a Both measures, in their view, have been used to make structural changes in the bureaucracy in the region. A former Chief Minister and current Member of Parliament has pointed out that most of the high-ranking officers in the J&K Police, government offices, and banks are now Hindus, which was not the case before 5 August 2019.⁵ For example, Lieutenant Governor Manoj Sinha’s 13-member secretariat does not have a single Muslim official.⁶ Most of the staff in the offices of the director-general of police (DGP) and the Chief Justice of the High Court, as well as senior staff of the Union Territory’s chief secretary, are non-Muslims.⁷ Similarly, the 10-member governing body and board of directors of the J&K Bank has only two Kashmiri Muslims.⁸ In May 2018, out of nine members of the governing body and the board of directors, five including the chair were Muslims.⁹

A majority of the elderly people that this author interviewed for this report see no distinction between the current administration and the Dogra one that governed the region from 1846 to 1947.¹⁰ During the Dogra period, Muslims were generally not permitted to become officers in the state’s military and were virtually unrepresented in the state’s civil administration. The administration was largely representative of the Sikh and Hindu “martial” castes such as Dogras and Rajputs.¹¹

Economy

Between August 2019 and July 2020, the economy of Kashmir lost INR 400,000 million and more than 100,000 jobs—mostly in the sectors of handicraft, tourism, and information technology.^{b,12} In September 2020, the Lieutenant Governor (LG) announced a INR 1,3500-million economic stimulus package for tourism and other sectors that have been hardest hit by the economic fallout amidst both the security lockdown, and the COVID-19 pandemic.¹³ Under the package, the government waived 50 percent of electricity and water bills for hoteliers and tourism businesses. The LG also announced a credit of INR 200,000 at 7 percent interest to those working in the handicraft and handloom sector.¹⁴

a At the time of writing this report, 4G services have been restored and security bunkers that were put up in Srinagar have been pulled down.

b Tourism alone contributes 7 percent of Kashmir’s GDP.

In November 2020, the LG announced the formulation of a plan to make Kashmir a “preferred tourist destination”. The announcement was made during a virtual inauguration of the Comprehensive Mansar Rejuvenation and Development Plan worth INR 1980 million, which aims to make the Mansar lake in Jammu an important tourist destination.

Another sector that has been severely hit by the cascading impacts of the security lockdown and COVID-19 is horticulture—the second most important sector of Kashmir’s economy on which more than 1.5 million families are dependent. Within this sector is the apple industry, which produces 2.2 million metric tonnes of produce every year worth INR 80 billion¹⁵ and contributes eight percent of J&K’s GDP. In 2019, threats from militants, and the government’s military response, delayed the harvest for over a month during peak harvest season. Hundreds of farmers were forced to either sell their produce at throwaway prices or leave them to rot. By March 2020, when the nationwide lockdown was enforced as a response to the initial onslaught of COVID-19, more than three million cartons of apples lying in cold storage did not get any buyers.¹⁶

In 2020, despite the high demand for apple, 80 percent of production was ruined by substandard fungicides and pesticides, and many farmers were pushed to indebtedness.¹⁷ The farmers in Kashmir who were interviewed for this report, accused the government of colluding with pesticide companies.¹⁸ Following the outcry, the government established two state-of-the-art pesticide testing labs in north and south Kashmir.¹⁹

With the economy reeling under the twin impacts of the Constitutional amendments and the lockdown, the educated youth numbering 250,000 have found it more difficult to seek gainful employment.²⁰ According to the Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy (CMIE), the unemployment rate in October 2020 in the new UT of Jammu and Kashmir was at 16.2 percent—the second worst across India.²¹ It quickly grew to 21.9 percent by January 2021, making J&K India’s highest-ranked region in terms of unemployment.^{c, 22} In response, the Jammu and Kashmir government on 10 July 2020, advertised 8,575 class-4 posts to be filled through the J&K State Selection Board (JKSSB). After 17 days, some 323,690 jobseekers had responded.²³ In January 2021, LG Sinha announced the INR 284000-million Industrial Development Package-2021, aimed at creating 450,000 new jobs and attract INR 20,000 million in investments over the next 17 years.²⁴

c Compared to the national average unemployment rate, which is at 6.7 percent.

While high levels of unemployment have been an enduring problem in the region, the educated youth interviewed for this report are of the view that the situation has worsened after the Constitutional amendments. They shared their fears of not being able to go outside Kashmir for work because of what they perceive is the growing prejudice against Muslims, which is not helped by what they view as loud anti-Kashmiri rhetoric being broadcast in national television.²⁵

Militancy

Upon the revocation of the special status of the erstwhile state of J&K, the Home Minister of NDA government on the floor of the Raja Sabha referred to Article 370 as the “root cause” of radicalism and terrorism in the state.²⁶ Indeed, following August 2019, authorities have been able to control militant activities in the Valley, especially in South Kashmir that became the hub of militancy and terrorism after 2016. Many militant leaders, including Riyaz Naikoo of Hizb-ul Mujahedeen (HM), were killed by security forces.²⁷ Over the entire 2020, some 47 top commanders belonging to various outfits were killed.²⁸

The number of stone-pelting incidents and strikes have also drastically come down after 5 August 2019, as have protests at encounter sites.²⁹ According to official data, Kashmir witnessed only 255 stone-pelting incidents in 2020³⁰ as compared to 1,999 in 2019, 1,458 in 2018, and 1,412 in 2017.³¹ Many of the interviewees for this report noted that mass participation in ‘quasi-violence’ including stone-pelting has decreased substantially, as compared to pre-August 2019. They said they felt safer, especially for their children. A reason for the decline in quasi-violent incidents is that state forces, especially Army officials, have been reaching out to the people to attempt to redress their grievances. For example, on 21 February 2021 the Army organised a youth interaction programme under ‘Mission Pehal’ at Town Hall Pulwama.³²

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In 2020, 225 militants,³³ including 37 foreigners, were killed in joint security operations in the Kashmir Valley including the Pir-Panjal range.³⁴ In 2019, the number of killed militants was recorded at 154, including 35 foreigners.

The string of setbacks that the militants suffered in South Kashmir have forced them to rethink strategies and shuffle bases. Central Kashmir, especially Srinagar, has emerged as the new base of militancy. Out of 203 militants killed in 2020, 19 including HM's operations chief Saifullah Mir, and the outfit's district commander Junaid Ashraf Sehrai, were killed in Srinagar; in 2019, four were killed in Srinagar.³⁵

It is also notable that the presence of foreign terrorists in the region has declined, owing to the heightened alertness of state forces. For example, in 2019, 130 infiltrations were recorded across the Line of Actual Control (LOC); from January to October 2020, only 30 have managed to cross the LOC.

In 176 counter-militancy operations conducted by security forces from January to October 2020, 245 weapons were recovered.^{d, 36} The militants are facing acute shortage of weapons and ammunition as increased vigil along the LoC has repeatedly thwarted Pakistan's efforts to smuggle weapons into J&K.

With the LoC gateways shut, Pakistan-backed militants have resorted to using drones to drop weapons along the Line of Control (LoC).³⁷ In June 2020, the Border Security Force (BSF) shot down a Pakistani drone in the Kathua district of Jammu region near the international border. The drone was loaded with four batteries, two Global Positioning Systems (GPS), seven Chinese grenades, and a sophisticated US-made M4 semi-automatic carbine.³⁸

The Centre has undertaken other measures to arrest militancy. The ban on funeral rallies of slain militants from June 2020 has ensured that the terror organisations can no longer utilise these emotionally-charged occasions as recruitment channels.³⁹ Curtailing the internet speed to 2G from 4G also minimised the rampant flow of misinformation and radical content.^{e, 40}

Moreover, the government's surrender and rehabilitation policy has been well-received. According to J&K police, in 2020, eight militants surrendered during encounters⁴¹ and more than 50 are believed to have surrendered quietly.⁴²

d Of these, 101 were handguns and 144 were various types of assault rifles including AK47, AK56, M4, and Insas. An average 10 rounds for each pistol were recovered, and an average of 66 rounds per assault rifle.

e The measure, however, has received widespread criticism as it makes online education extremely difficult.

It remains to be seen, however, if such measures and policies will have long-term and sustainable impacts on arresting militancy in the region. After all, there are indications that dissatisfaction among the people has not abated. Such dissatisfaction stems from many issues, including those related to temples, new domicile rules, and continuing incidence of misuse of power by police and state forces. Moreover, the role of Pakistan remains highly relevant to the question of whether or not the region will resolve its challenges in the near future.

On 23 September 2019, Union Minister G. Kishan Reddy said that around “50,000 [Hindu] temples” have been closed down in Kashmir over the years and that some of them have been destroyed and idols defaced. He said they have ordered a survey of such temples,⁴³ adding that the government plans to reopen them soon. However, according to Sanjay Tickoo, a prominent Kashmiri Pandit leader who heads the Kashmiri Pundit Sangarish Samiti (KPSS), there are only 4,000 temples in J&K.⁴⁴

There is also the matter of the new domicile rule. On 31 March 2020, New Delhi issued a notification of J&K domicile rule which made any person who has lived in the UT for 15 years or those who studied in Kashmir for seven years and appeared in the 10th or 12th class examination from the state, eligible for gaining domicile status in Jammu and Kashmir. This notification was criticised by people not just in the Valley, but also in Jammu.

The Jammu BJP unit expressed fear that the new domicile rule will create a situation where “only the lower level jobs will be reserved for locals and the higher-level jobs will be open for all.”⁴⁵ The J&K Apni Party too, had similar reservations, calling the domicile reforms a “casual attempt” by New Delhi to “deceive people of J&K.”⁴⁶

Militants are also able to continue recruiting young Kashmiris into their fold because of the excesses by the J&K police under the Public Safety Act (PSA) and Unlawful Activities Prevention Act (UAPA). In 2020 alone, as many as 635 over-ground workers (OGWs) were arrested, of whom 56 were booked under the PSA.^f

d The police categorise “anybody who supports the militants” as an OGW. A person providing a safe house, passage, information or acting as a messenger for suspected militants automatically comes under the radar of the police as an OGW.

The atmosphere is fuelled by instances such as the Shopian fake encounter. On 18 July 2020, three boys from Rajouri were killed by security forces on mere suspicion of them being militants.⁴⁷ There is frequent frisking by security forces in public for anyone provoking suspicion, and there is what residents say are the commonplace Cordon and Search Operations (CASO). These incidents only serve to fuel the sense of alienation among the youth in the region.⁴⁸

As for the role of Pakistan—increasing global pressure has forced Pakistan to find new ways of keeping its stakes in Kashmir. Islamabad revived Al Badr, the long-defunct terror group with 17 fresh recruits in July and August. The military commanders in Rawalpindi also helped establish The Resistance Front (TRF), a new militant outfit with a non-religious name on the lines of the Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Front (JKLF) to foment further disturbance in the Valley. TRF was created to heighten the attacks on security forces after the amendment of Article 370.⁴⁹

“It remains to be seen if the post-August 2019 measures will have a long-term impact on arresting militancy in the region.”

CONCLUSION

The administrative and legal reforms implemented in the Valley by New Delhi following the Constitutional amendments of August 2019 have constrained militancy. At the same time, however, the new socio-administrative and economic structures have increased the sense of alienation among the people. The current situation in Kashmir urgently needs deft political manoeuvring and rebalancing from New Delhi.

The political leadership at the Centre must realise that it is time to renew India's ties with the people of the region by initiating a series of serious and sincere interlocution measures. Interviewees for this report expressed a heightened sense of fear and suspicion regarding their identity, and the absence of any

proactive outreach by New Delhi has strengthened these perceptions of victimhood. The widespread dissatisfaction in rural areas could further upset the equations with New Delhi. The Centre must therefore make sincere efforts to revive the economy of rural Kashmir, which has been in a state of deepening recession because of the double blows of the lockdown and administrative apathy.

New Delhi has managed so far to side-line global players and multi-nation organisations from the conflict in the region. New Delhi must ensure that the new political process should stress on an integrational approach. It can start by establishing a clean and corruption-free administration with due representation of the local people.

“The political leadership at the Centre must realise that it is time to renew India's ties with the people of the Valley.”

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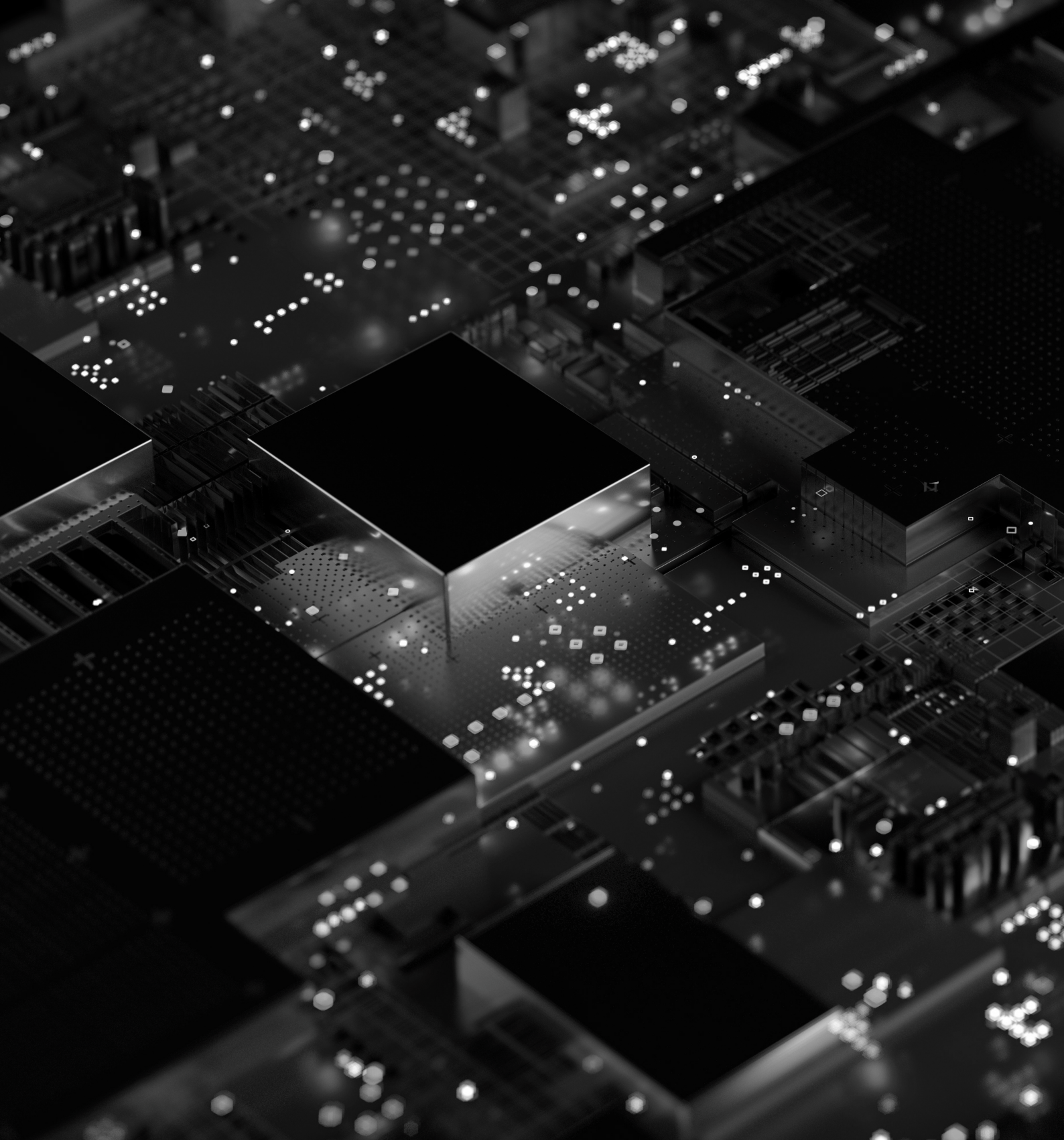
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