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KASHMIR CENTRAL

THE SILENT RETURN

Once, success meant leaving Kashmir behind. Today, a subtle counter-current is emerging as young professionals, entrepreneurs and women-led digital creators return to build careers from within the valley.

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DEMOCRATIC SPACE**

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razor sharp analysis

INCISIVE REPORTING

**INVESTIGATE
THE TERROR
ECOSYSTEM**

*expose
deception*

**RESTORE
ORDER**

MAKE A SPLASH

**INCULCATE
DEMOCRATIC SPIRIT**

KASHMIR CENTRAL



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VOLUME 5 | EDITION 4
1 MARCH 2026

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KASHMIR CENTRAL

YOUTH AT THE HEART OF KASHMIR'S NEXT CHAPTER

As winter recedes and the first blossoms appear along the banks of the Jhelum River, March brings with it not just a change in season but a reminder that Kashmir's true spring lies in the aspirations of its youth.

In recent months, Jammu & Kashmir has witnessed notable developments from renewed tourism initiatives and winter sporting events to infrastructure and energy investments. The successful hosting of the Chinar Open Winter Games and increasing tourist footfall in destinations such as Gulmarg and Pahalgam reflect growing confidence in stability and normalcy. These are all positive signs. However, the deeper question remains that how do these developments translate into sustainable opportunities for our young population?

Over 60% of Jammu & Kashmir's population is under the age of 30. This demographic reality is both strength and a responsibility. Economic packages, tourism promotion campaigns and infrastructure projects must move beyond macro statistics to create direct employment pathways like, skilled, dignified and locally anchored.

Tourism revival, for instance, should not only boost hotel occupancy rates but also encourage local entrepreneurship in home stays, crafts and eco-tourism, strengthen vocational institutes in hospitality management and integrate digital training so youth can leverage online platforms for business growth.

Similarly, the expansion of hydroelectric projects and infrastructure development must prioritise skill training and local hiring, ensuring that growth is inclusive rather than extractive.

Education reform is equally central to Kashmir's future. Universities and colleges must align curricula with emerging sectors like, renewable energy, information technology, sustainable agriculture and tourism management. Collaboration between academic institutions and industry can help bridge the long standing gap between degrees and employability.

At the same time, social challenges such as rising drug abuse cases among youth demand urgent, compassionate intervention. Development cannot be measured only in crores sanctioned or projects inaugurated. It must also be measured in rehabilitation centres strengthened, counselling services expanded and young lives redirected toward purpose.

Politically and socially, Kashmir continues to navigate complex transitions. Stability has improved in many areas and incidents of public unrest have declined significantly. This shift provides a critical window, an opportunity to replace cycles of uncertainty with cycles of opportunity. The coming years must focus on deepening democratic engagement, rebuilding trust at grassroots levels and empowering panchayats, entrepreneurs, educators and civil society leaders.

The narrative of Kashmir should no longer oscillate solely between conflict and calm. It must evolve toward capacity and creativity. Our artisans, athletes, engineers, teachers and young innovators deserve to be at the centre of that story.

Kashmir's destiny will not be defined only by policy decisions taken in distant corridors of power. It will be shaped in classrooms, workshops, farms, start-up hubs and tourism enterprises across the valley and Jammu region. The true measure of progress will not be headlines rather it will be hope. And hope, when nurtured through opportunity and inclusion becomes the strongest foundation for lasting peace..

Bashir Assad

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PAKISTAN'S VANISHING

DEMOCRATIC SPACE

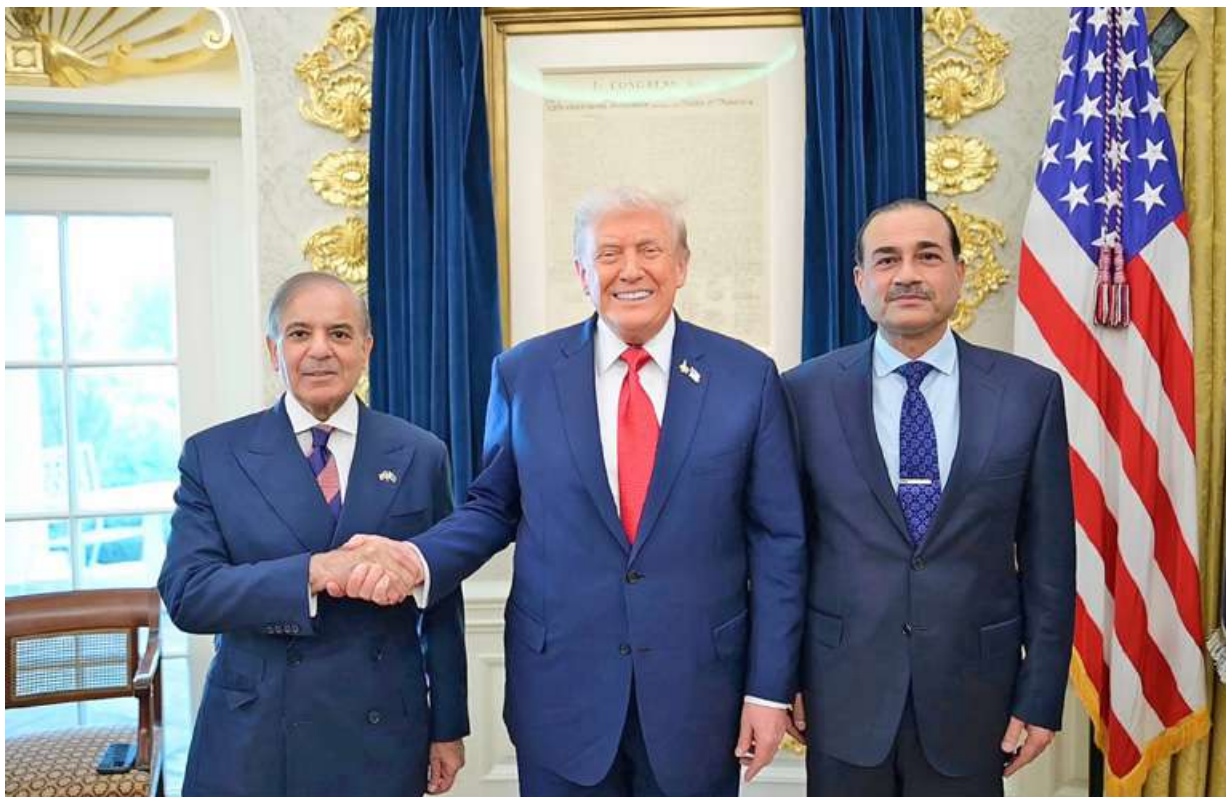
ECHOES OF ZIA IN ASIM MUNIR'S ERA

Nearly four decades after Zia-ul-Haq's rule ended, Pakistan's political conversation remains trapped in arguments born during his martial law years. Drawing on contemporary social media debates, cultural memory and political commentary, this story examines how Zia's Islamisation, repression and militarisation of governance still echo in today's hybrid order.



by **Bashir Assad**

Watching General Asim Munir steadily undermine Pakistan's political system, consistently shrinking the space for elected leadership and leaving almost no room for civilian voices in domestic governance or diplomatic decision-making, I chose to write on the legacy of General Zia-ul-Haq. The parallels between past and present



have become too stark to ignore and the recurring imprint of military decree over democratic debate compelled me to revisit how Pakistan arrived at this moment and why its political and intellectual space continues to contract under familiar patterns of control.

The legacy of General Zia-ul-Haq continues to animate debate across Pakistan's public sphere and recent discussions on Urdu social media in early 2026 reveal how profoundly his era still shapes the country's political memory and contemporary anxieties. Nearly four decades after the plane crash that ended his rule, the arguments surrounding his influence remain emotionally charged, ideologically divided and socially consequential. This persistence itself is a testament to how deeply his policies penetrated Pakistan's institutions, public life and national psyche. In the most common thread running through these discussions, Pakistanis revisit what



In the most common thread running through these discussions, Pakistanis revisit what is widely termed the “dark legacy” of the Zia era.



is widely termed the “dark legacy” of the Zia era, the belief that the late 1970s and 1980s marked a turning point that reconfigured society at its foundations. Social media commentary repeatedly points to the radicalisation that emerged from the transformation of seminaries into recruitment and training grounds for militant groups, a development inseparable from the geopolitics of the time. The rise of sectarianism is frequently cited as another enduring outcome of his state led Islamisation project, which, according to critics, generated long lasting communal

divides and deepened fault lines that subsequently became entrenched in everyday life. The notion that the social fabric itself was damaged beyond repair through polarisation, intolerance and an entrenched ideological rigidity features prominently in the analyses shared across platforms.

Alongside these societal shifts, political repression under Zia remains a core theme in ongoing commentary. His 11-year martial law is remembered as a period in which democratic life was suspended and dissent was crushed with systematic force. Posts and essays circulating throughout 2025 and 2026 describe widespread suppression of rights, the curtailment of civil liberties and the harassment of protestors and political opponents. This was also, according to contemporary critics, the moment when the military fully transitioned from a professional defence institution into a political actor whose influence over civilian authority would persist long after Zia's death. Whether described as the birth of hybrid rule or the point of no return for civilian supremacy, the political consequences of his regime still feature heavily in conversations



Posts and essays circulating throughout 2025 and 2026 describe widespread suppression of rights, the curtailment of civil liberties and the harassment of protestors and political opponents.

about Pakistan's current governance model. Crucially, many commentators point out that Zia's rule replaced debate with decree; argument, dissent and public reasoning were rendered subversive and the state's word became the only acceptable truth. This shift did not merely silence voices in his own time, it set the precedent for a Pakistan where conversation gradually lost value and decree became the default instrument of governance. The institutional lesson learned during the Zia era that authority flows downward, unquestioned became embedded in the political culture of the state of





Pakistan.

The question of Islamisation remains one of the most divisive areas where opinions sharply diverge. Supporters often from older generations or specific ideological circles particularly Jamaat-e-Islami Pakistan and its progeny in Jammu and Kashmir continue to remember Zia as a “*Mujahid*,” a leader who introduced Shariat courts, strengthened religious identity and sought to align the country with Islamic principles. They view his project as an attempt to restore moral clarity and cultural authenticity in the

Some writers mockingly credit him for today's cycles of mob violence and for what they describe as a socially sanctioned intolerance born of a state sponsored moral order.

face of what they saw as Westernising trends. Yet contemporary social media critiques portray his Islamisation drive as selective, instrumental and deeply cynical, arguing that religion was deployed primarily to legitimise personal rule rather than to uplift society. Viral posts accuse him of institutionalising extremism, normalising the misuse of blasphemy laws and embedding discriminatory structures especially gender inequality through the 1979 *Hudood Ordinances* into the legal and cultural framework. Some writers mockingly credit him for today's cycles of mob violence and for what they describe as a socially sanctioned intolerance born of a state sponsored moral order.

Zia's geopolitical choices also play a significant role in recent analyses, especially his decision to turn Pakistan into a “frontline state” during the Soviet-Afghan war. While this alignment brought extensive American aid and elevated Pakistan's strategic position, many social media commentators argue that it also inundated the country with weapons, militants and a proxy war mindset whose repercussions the nation still battles. The argument that Pakistan was dragged into an externally sponsored conflict, with lasting costs to its internal security, appears repeatedly in Facebook threads, Urdu political commentaries and Diasporas discussions.

What makes the 2026 discourse particularly revealing is the increasing



tendency to compare Zia's political manoeuvring with contemporary developments in Pakistan.

Commentators frequently suggest that the hybrid governance model, where civilian authority is overshadowed by military influence, echoes structures first consolidated under Zia. In this historical mirroring, many writers locate the roots of today's political instability, institutional fragility and recurring democratic breakdowns. A significant portion of this commentary directly references the current posture of Pakistan's military establishment under Asim Munir, arguing that he is following in Zia's institutional footprints by shrinking democratic and intellectual space.

Critics claim that under his command, dissent is once again treated as sedition, political restructuring is carried out through coercive means and the media operates under intensified pressure. Academics, journalists, activists and even non-political citizens increasingly express concern that the boundaries of permissible speech are narrowing rapidly, much like they did during Zia's regime. The comparison is often drawn sharply that if Zia replaced debate with decree, contemporary Pakistan is witnessing a revival of that same ethos silencing disagreement not through argument but through administrative force and institutional intimidation. Where Zia used ideology as the instrument



Academics, journalists, activists and even non-political citizens increasingly express concern that the boundaries of permissible speech are narrowing rapidly, much like they did during Zia's regime.

of control, critics argue that Asim Munir's establishment uses national security, morality and state stability as

the new language of decree.

This perspective also finds resonance in the analyses of Urdu newspapers and international media, including a widely discussed BBC News Urdu article from November 2025 that explored how Zia's vision has seeped into political and military institutions for nearly half a century. That long institutional memory, critics argue, now shapes not only the state's political behavior but its intellectual temperament: questioning, critique and open debate are treated as threats to national coherence. Pakistan, in this sense, appears to have fully transformed into Zia's imagined





order, not an Islamic republic guided by moral clarity, as his proponents would say but a controlled republic governed by decree, suspicion and institutional guardianship.

The commemorative dimension also remains visible each August, when anniversaries of his death reignite old debates. Right wing publications such as *Nawai waqt* continue to portray him as a “Memaar” (builder) of Pakistan, celebrating his efforts to shape an Islamic system and position the country as a leader in the Muslim world. Columns like those of Mujeeb-ur-Rehman Shami in *Roznama Dunya* revisit the mystery of the Bahawalpur plane crash, sometimes framing his death as martyrdom and a national tragedy. In contrast, social media responses to these commemorations are often harsh, with users recalling

Urdu literature, as highlighted in analyses published by newspapers like Dawn, remembers the era as one marked by unprecedented censorship and state-sponsored moral policing. Writers such as Mushtaq Ahmed Yousufi are frequently cited in online discussions for their sharp critiques of the intellectuals who defended Zia’s repressive policies.

what they describe as the destruction of the social fabric, the proliferation of *jihadi* networks and the embedding of extremism in state policy. Posts widely shared on Facebook and X lampoon the period as one that legalised inequality and institutionalised sectarian discrimination under the guise of religious reform.

The literary and cultural reflections from the Zia period also continue to inform today’s evaluations. Urdu literature, as highlighted in analyses published by newspapers like Dawn, remembers the era as one marked by unprecedented censorship and state-sponsored moral policing. Writers such as Mushtaq Ahmed Yousufi are frequently cited in online discussions for their sharp critiques of the intellectuals who defended Zia’s repressive policies. These cultural memories reinforce the view that authoritarianism under Zia extended far beyond political control, it attempted to control expression, imagination and artistic freedom.

Together, the strands of debate visible in 2025–2026, whether laudatory or condemnatory, illustrate how Zia-ul-Haq’s legacy continues to sit uneasily at the centre of Pakistan’s ideological contestations. For supporters, he remains a leader who sought to fortify Islamic identity and resist external pressures; for critics, he is the architect of extremism, institutional decay and political authoritarianism. But the most telling feature of the current discourse is not simply the polarisation, it is the recognition that Pakistan’s present cannot be understood without revisiting the deep imprints of his rule. In the recurring invocation of his memory, Pakistanis are not merely arguing about their past; they are struggling to make sense of a present that still bears the fingerprints of decisions made decades ago and a future that continues to grapple with the structures he left behind.

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THE *Silent* RETURN

WHY EDUCATED KASHMIRI YOUTH ARE CHOOSING TO COME BACK?

by Sohail Ahmad

For decades, migration defined success for Kashmiri youth. Today, a dispersed but meaningful counter-current is emerging. From remote professionals working metropolitan jobs in Srinagar to women building digital enterprises from their homes, subtle recalibration redefining young aspirations in the valley.

On a pale winter morning, as mist rises gently above the waters of the Dal Lake and shopkeepers lift their shutters in civil lines area in Srinagar, 29-year-old Aamir opens his laptop in a quiet cafe overlooking the boulevard. His screen flickers to life with dashboards, data streams and code repositories connected to a fintech firm headquartered in Pune. Five years ago, his mornings began differently with Bengaluru traffic, glass towers and rented apartments shared with strangers. Today, he works the same job, earns the same salary and collaborates with the same team but from the city he once believed he had to leave to succeed.

“I used to think ambition meant distance,” he reflects. “Now I’m not so sure.”

Aamir’s decision is not dramatic enough for headlines. It has not been recorded in migration data or policy briefings. Yet it represents something quietly significant. Across Jammu & Kashmir, a subtle recalibration is underway. Educated youth who once migrated for higher studies, corporate employment and professional training are beginning cautiously to return.



Across Jammu & Kashmir, a subtle recalibration is underway. Educated youth who once migrated for higher studies, corporate employment and professional training are beginning cautiously to return.

Not in hounds which could form statistics. Not in waves but in steady, deliberate steps.

For decades, outward migration defined aspiration in the region. Engineering graduates left for

southern India’s technology hubs. Civil services aspirants relocated to Delhi’s coaching districts. Hospitality students sought placements in Mumbai, Goa or abroad. The motivations were practical and compelling: limited local industry, constrained private sector growth, episodic instability and a pervasive belief that opportunity required geographical separation from home. Parents encouraged departure. Students internalised it. Success was often measured in miles travelled.

But the past few years have reshaped global work patterns. The pandemic accelerated the normalisation of remote employment. Distributed teams became common. Physical presence in corporate offices became negotiable. Companies learned to manage productivity without centralised workplaces. High-



speed internet connectivity, once inconsistent in parts of the Jammu and Kashmir, has expanded. Digital infrastructure has strengthened. The geography of employment has quietly loosened.

For many young professionals from Kashmir, this shift has opened a door that did not previously exist: the possibility of earning metropolitan incomes while residing locally.

The economics are persuasive. Living costs in cities such as Bengaluru, Delhi or Mumbai have risen sharply. Rent, transport, schooling and lifestyle expenses often consume substantial portions of salaries. By contrast, residing in Srinagar or Jammu significantly reduces expenditure while preserving income streams tied to national or international markets. For some, returning home is not merely sentimental. It is financially rational. Yet economics alone does not fully explain the silent return.

There is also emotional capital at play. The weight of aging parents, the pull of familiar language and the comfort of shared memory. Years spent in distant cities often bring professional growth but also a sense of cultural dislocation. Festivals

For many young professionals from Kashmir, this shift has opened a door that did not previously exist: the possibility of earning metropolitan incomes while residing locally.

are celebrated virtually. Family milestones are missed. The landscape of childhood becomes a place visited during annual leave. In this context, returning does not signify retreat. It represents recalibration.

Tourism revival has further strengthened the sense that opportunity can exist locally. Destinations such as Gulmarg, Sonamarg and Pahalgam have experienced renewed visitor interest, particularly during winter seasons. Promotional campaigns and sporting events have projected images of



stability and hospitality. Hotels report encouraging occupancy during peak months. Transport and ancillary services benefit from seasonal surges.

But beyond the macro narrative of tourism growth lies a more nuanced development. Returning youth are not limiting themselves to traditional roles within established businesses. Many are entering the sector as creators rather than employees. Boutique homestays are emerging in orchard properties. Curated trekking experiences are being marketed directly to niche audiences through digital platforms. Food entrepreneurs are reimagining traditional Kashmiri cuisine for contemporary consumers. Travel planners operate from laptops, coordinating bookings and itineraries across districts.

These ventures are modest in scale but significant in implication. They suggest a shift from dependency on public sector employment toward diversified private initiative.

Perhaps the most under-acknowledged dimension of this transformation is the rise of women led entrepreneurship. Social media platforms have become storefronts for craft revival, apparel innovation, culinary ventures and educational



Food entrepreneurs are reimagining traditional Kashmiri cuisine for contemporary consumers. Travel planners operate from laptops, coordinating bookings and itineraries across districts.

services. Young women who pursued higher education outside the region are returning with new skills and broader exposure. Some launch online tutoring academies serving students across India. Others create brands that blend traditional aesthetics with modern design

sensibilities. Digital payments and courier networks allow products crafted in Srinagar to reach customers in metropolitan markets without intermediaries.

Operating from home, these entrepreneurs circumvent infrastructural and cultural





constraints that once limited female economic participation. The implications extend beyond income generation; they reshape perceptions of women's roles within local economies.

At the same time, agriculture, the backbone of rural livelihoods is experiencing cautious experimentation. Young graduates are exploring cold storage solutions for apple supply chains, branding initiatives for saffron and organic certification models to access premium markets. Technology driven approaches to irrigation, soil monitoring and direct-to-consumer sales are emerging in pockets. These initiatives remain fragile, often dependent on individual risk-taking rather than systemic support. Yet they signal that returning youth are not abandoning traditional sectors; they are attempting to modernise them. The silent return, however, is not a seamless success story.

Structural constraints remain formidable. Venture capital is scarce. Angel investment networks are underdeveloped. Regulatory procedures can be daunting for first time entrepreneurs. Outside central Srinagar, co-working spaces and collaborative hubs are limited. Seasonal fluctuations in

Young graduates are exploring cold storage solutions for apple supply chains, branding initiatives for saffron and organic certification models to access premium markets.

tourism create income volatility. Youth unemployment, particularly among graduates without remote employment, continues to pose serious challenges. Competitive exam preparation remains a dominant pathway for many, reflecting both aspiration and scarcity of alternatives.

Educational institutions stand at a crossroads. Universities and colleges must align curricula with emerging economic realities. Training in renewable energy, sustainable tourism management, digital services, agritech innovation and entrepreneurial finance could bridge the persistent gap between degrees and employability. Partnerships between academia and industry including structured internships and incubation centres would convert isolated return stories into systemic momentum. Without such ecosystem development, the silent return risks remaining confined to those already employed remotely or financially secure enough to experiment.

There is also a psychological dimension to consider. For years, departure was almost synonymous with progress. To leave was to advance; to return was often interpreted as compromise. That narrative is evolving. Migration





is becoming cyclical rather than permanent. Professional identity no longer requires permanent separation from home. Youth are beginning to imagine careers that are geographically fluid shaped by digital connectivity rather than fixed office locations.

This shift in imagination may prove more consequential than any infrastructure investment.

It would be premature to declare a large scale reverse migration. The numbers are not yet clearly visible in official data. The movement remains dispersed, anecdotal and personal. Many continue to leave and many will continue to do so in pursuit of specialised education and career growth. The silent return does not negate outward mobility; it complements it.

But social change often begins at the margins, not the centre. What appears anecdotal today may form the foundation of tomorrow's trend.

March in Kashmir offers an apt metaphor. Snow recedes slowly. Almond blossoms emerge tentatively along bare branches. Transformation does not announce itself with spectacle. It unfolds quietly, persistently, beneath the surface.

In cafes along the Jhelum River in Srinagar, in modest home offices overlooking neighbourhood lanes, in orchard homes being converted into guest lodges and in classrooms where digital screens connect local tutors to national audiences, a recalibration is underway. It is not loud enough



**Almond blossoms
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for prime time debate. It does not fit neatly into political binaries. It is neither triumphalism nor despairing. It is simply a generation reconsidering its relationship with home.

Whether this recalibration evolves into durable transformation will depend on policy responsiveness, infrastructure expansion, financial inclusion and social openness. If

nurtured thoughtfully, it could convert intellectual capital into local capacity, reduce brain drain and stimulate diversified economic growth. If neglected, it may dissipate into isolated stories of individual resilience.

For now, however, the significance lies in the choice itself. A choice made not out of compulsion but out of conviction. A choice that suggests ambition and belonging need not be mutually exclusive.

The future of Jammu & Kashmir will continue to be shaped by complex political, social and economic forces. Yet amid those larger currents, the quiet decisions of individuals' matter. Each return is a statement that possibility exists here, that roots can coexist with reach, that home can be a site of innovation rather than limitation.

And perhaps, in these unheralded returns, lies the outline of a different narrative for Kashmir, one written not in departure but in deliberate return.

NARCO-TERRORISM AS HYBRID WARFARE AND THE CENTRALITY OF J&K POLICE

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by Mohammad Zaid Malik

From rising heroin seizures to preventive detentions and community-based rehabilitation, the fight against narco-terrorism in Kashmir reveals policing as a form of counter-hybrid warfare. This analysis situates the Jammu and Kashmir Police at the heart of a complex battle where crime, addiction and terrorism converge, highlighting their expanding role as both security actors and social stabilisers.



Hybrid warfare does not announce itself with tanks or troop movements. It advances silently, exploiting social fractures, psychological vulnerabilities and illicit economies. In Kashmir, narcotics have become one of the most effective non-kinetic weapons deployed against internal stability. The response to this threat has not been led from distant command rooms or border posts but from within society itself. At the heart of this internal security battle stands the Jammu and Kashmir Police, functioning not merely as a law and order force but as the principal counter hybrid instrument of the Indian state in the valley.

In Kashmir, narcotics have become one of the most effective non-kinetic weapons deployed against internal stability.

The weaponisation of drugs in Kashmir mirrors classic hybrid warfare doctrine. Since the early 1990s, alongside armed militancy, narcotics entered the region through cross border routes. What appeared as criminal activity was, in effect, a strategic design. Drug trafficking generated terror financing, debilitated youth, fuelled criminality and created

societal fatigue without provoking overt military retaliation. This convergence of crime, terrorism and psychological degradation represents a deliberate shift from visible violence to sustained internal erosion.

It is within this grey zone that the Jammu and Kashmir Police have assumed decisive importance. Unlike conventional forces, the police operate continuously among the population, possessing granular human intelligence, legal authority and operational permanence. In a hybrid conflict where threats are embedded within civilian spaces, JKP is not a supporting arm, it is the frontline force.

The scale of narcotics enforcement in Jammu and Kashmir over recent years underscores this reality. NDPS cases have risen steadily from 1,173 in 2019 to 1,978 in 2023, with over 9,000 cases registered since 2019. These figures do not indicate policy failure;



they reflect enhanced detection, intelligence penetration and sustained pressure on drug networks. The dramatic increase in heroin seizures, nearly 2000 percent between 2017 and 2022, further demonstrates the effectiveness of police-led interdiction.

More significantly, the Jammu and Kashmir Police have disrupted narco-terror networks at their most vulnerable nodes. Through preventive detentions, habitual traffickers and facilitators have been neutralized before they could regenerate supply chains. In 2024 alone, up to March, over 1,500 NDPS cases resulted in more than 2,200 arrests and 274 preventive detentions. This is not routine policing; it is pre-emptive internal security action consistent with counter-hybrid warfare principles.

Hybrid warfare targets demographics and in Kashmir the youth are the primary objective. With a majority of drug users falling between 17 and 33 years of age, addiction threatens not only public health but future economic productivity, social leadership and security manpower. The Jammu

Through preventive detentions, habitual traffickers and facilitators have been neutralized before they could regenerate supply chains.

and Kashmir Police has recognized this dimension and acted beyond enforcement. By facilitating de-addiction referrals, supporting rehabilitation frameworks under the Nasha Mukht Bharat Abhiyan and engaging communities directly, the police have positioned rehabilitation as a form of counter-terrorism. In 2023-24 alone, over 31,000 individuals received de-addiction treatment, with police playing a pivotal enabling role.

The convergence of drug abuse, crime and terror logistics presents a uniquely dangerous hybrid threat. Heroin dependency, costing up to Rs, 88,000 per month per user, pushes addicts toward theft, smuggling and

courier roles. Left unchecked, this creates a pipeline from addiction to organised crime and ultimately to terror facilitation. The Jammu and Kashmir Police have effectively policed this grey zone, disrupting criminal drift before it matures into insurgent support. This early intervention function is one of the least visible yet most critical contributions of policing in hybrid conflict environments.

The challenge is compounded by the adaptive nature of narco-networks. Trafficking has become more decentralised, technologically enabled and financially layered. The involvement of individuals with social influence or access to resources adds further complexity. Yet, the willingness of the Jammu and Kashmir Police to act against facilitators irrespective of status has reinforced deterrence and institutional credibility. In hybrid warfare, credibility and persistence are force multipliers and JKP has demonstrated both.

The fight against narco-terrorism in Kashmir cannot be separated from the broader counter-insurgency framework. Drugs are not a side issue; they are a strategic weapon aimed at exhausting society quietly. The Jammu and Kashmir Police stands as the primary custodian of the internal front, defending communities, preserving youth potential and choking the financial arteries of terrorism.

As the nature of conflict continues to evolve, Kashmir offers a clear lesson: hybrid wars are ultimately won or lost inside society. In that decisive space, the Jammu and Kashmir Police have emerged not just as an enforcer of law but as a stabilising force, a security institution and a shield against silent warfare. The battle against narcotics is therefore not merely a social campaign, it is a national security imperative and the J&K Police is at its center.

SNOWLESS WINTERS, SCORCHED ORCHARDS



by Mian Tufail

Snowless winters and prolonged dry spells are stressing Kashmir's orchards, threatening apple production and the livelihoods tied to the valley's horticulture economy, while signaling a deeper climate shift with far reaching ecological and economic consequences.



▼
In Kashmir, winter has always been more than a season. It is the valley's silent architect, shaping rivers, nourishing springs and preparing orchards for the bloom of spring. Snow resting on the Pir Panjal and the higher Himalayas has traditionally functioned as a natural reservoir, melting slowly to sustain agriculture and drinking water systems through summer. This winter, however, the valley has been confronted with a disquieting absence of snowfall, of rainfall and of the climatic certainty that once defined life in Kashmir.

The winter of 2025-26 has unfolded with prolonged dry spells and unusually warm days, culminating in Srinagar recording temperatures close to 20°C in mid-February, nearly ten degrees above normal. For residents,



This winter, however, the valley has been confronted with a disquieting absence of snowfall, of rainfall and of the climatic certainty that once defined life in Kashmir.

the warmth may have felt pleasant but for orchardists and environmental observers it signaled a deeper disruption. Weak western disturbances, vanishing snowfall and precipitation deficits exceeding 50 per cent across many parts of Jammu and Kashmir have collectively pointed toward what climate scientists now describe as a snow drought, a winter lacking the snowpack essential for ecological and economic stability.

Nowhere is this climatic shift more visible than in the orchards that define Kashmir's rural landscape. Apple belts stretching across Shopian, Pulwama, Baramulla and Kupwara are showing early signs of stress. Orchardists speak of moisture starved soil, sun burnt buds and premature fruit fall as witnessed in 2025, indicators that the crisis is no longer abstract but unfolding in real time. Ghulam Mohammad Bhat, an apple grower from Sopore, captures the anxiety shared by many farmers. Talking to KC, he said, "Two months without rainfall have exposed orchards to relentless sunlight, damaging buds and would reduce quality. We farmers dependent entirely on rain fed cultivation, the absence of winter precipitation have become a threat to both our yield and livelihood."

The vulnerability of rain fed orchards is a structural reality of Kashmir's horticulture. Official estimates indicate that nearly sixty per cent of orchards lack assured irrigation, relying instead on seasonal rainfall and snowmelt. This dependence has rarely been problematic in the past when winters delivered consistent snowfall. Today, however, climate variability has exposed the fragility of that system. Experts warn that moisture stress not only affects the current crop but weakens tree health and reduces flowering potential in subsequent seasons, setting off a cycle of declining productivity.

The scale of the challenge becomes more evident when viewed



This dependence has rarely been problematic in the past when winters delivered consistent snowfall. Today, however, climate variability has exposed the fragility of that system.

through the lens of the valley's economy. Horticulture is not merely an agricultural activity in Kashmir; it is a cornerstone of economic life. More than 3.5 lakh hectares are under apple cultivation, producing between 20

and 25 lakh metric tonnes annually. Nearly half of Kashmir's population is directly or indirectly linked to the sector, whether through farming, labour, packaging, transport or trade. The apple industry alone contributes close to ten per cent of the region's economic output and generates millions of workdays each year. A disruption to this sector therefore reverberates far beyond orchards, affecting rural incomes, market dynamics and allied industries.

Agricultural economists caution that the effects of climate variability on horticulture can ripple through the entire economic ecosystem. Reduced fruit size and quality translate into lower market prices, shrinking farmer incomes and diminished employment for seasonal workers. Cold storage units, transporters and traders

experience reduced volumes, while export markets face supply fluctuations. In a region where horticulture forms the backbone of rural cash flow, even modest production declines can reshape consumption patterns and economic stability.

The scientific explanation for the unfolding scenario lies in the warming trend observed across the western Himalayas. Rising temperatures are increasingly converting snowfall into rainfall and reducing the duration for which snow remains on mountain slopes. Independent weather observers note unusual developments at higher altitudes, including the possibility of routes like Mughal Road remaining open during February, a rare occurrence historically. Such changes reflect not just short term weather anomalies but a gradual climatic shift altering the valley's hydrological rhythm.

Hydrologists emphasise that winter snow is central to Kashmir's water security. Gradual snowmelt feeds the Jhelum river, irrigation canals, wetlands and springs, sustaining agriculture through the dry months. Reduced snowpack therefore threatens summer water availability, drinking water supply and hydropower generation. Observations from recent warm winters have already shown declining discharge from several springs, raising concerns about groundwater recharge



The horticulture sector faces an additional biological challenge in the form of disrupted chilling hours. Apple trees require prolonged cold exposure during dormancy to ensure proper flowering and fruiting.



and long term water stress.

The horticulture sector faces an additional biological challenge in the form of disrupted chilling hours. Apple trees require prolonged cold exposure during dormancy to ensure proper flowering and fruiting. Warmer winters interfere with this natural cycle, leading to irregular blooming, poor fruit set and increased susceptibility to pests and diseases. Agricultural scientists warn that repeated warm winters could gradually push apple cultivation to higher altitudes, leaving lower belts less productive or even unsuitable for traditional varieties.

Environmental observers caution that the combined effects of reduced snowfall, declining spring discharge and stressed vegetation may represent early signs of ecological degradation. While the notion of desertification may seem exaggerated for a region known for its water resources, experts stress that the process begins subtly, through shrinking wetlands, drying soil and erratic vegetation patterns. Kashmir's warming winters, declining snow cover and precipitation deficits form a pattern that warrants close attention.

Beyond agriculture, the climate shift is altering other facets of the valley's economy and culture. Winter tourism, once dependent on reliable snowfall, has become increasingly unpredictable, affecting hospitality and local employment in destinations like Gulmarg, Pahalgam and Sonamarg. Hydropower projects reliant on steady river flow may face lean summer periods, complicating energy generation. Rural households dependent on horticulture related labour may encounter income uncertainty, reinforcing the socio-economic implications of climatic change.

Residents across the valley are already noticing subtle transformations. Almond blossoms could appear weeks earlier than usual, Dal Lake freezing for shorter durations and snow free



Winter tourism, once dependent on reliable snowfall, has become increasingly unpredictable, affecting hospitality and local employment in destinations like Gulmarg, Pahalgam and Sonamarg.

plains during peak winter have become recurring observations. These changes, while gradual, are reshaping Kashmir's seasonal identity and raising questions about the future of its snow fed ecosystem.

For policymakers and agricultural planners, the unfolding crisis underscores the urgency of adaptation. The need for irrigation infrastructure, climate resilient farming practices and improved weather advisories has become increasingly evident. Equally important is the development of long term water conservation strategies to buffer the valley against erratic precipitation patterns. Experts argue that the challenge is no longer about

responding to isolated weather events but about building systemic resilience to climate variability.

The narrative emerging from Kashmir's orchards is therefore one of uncertainty and transition. A February afternoon touching twenty degrees may offer temporary comfort but it also symbolises a disruption of the climatic balance that has sustained the valley's economy for generations. For orchardists like Ghulam Mohammad Bhat, the concern extends beyond the present harvest to the future of farming itself. He reflects on seasons that once followed a predictable rhythm, contrasting them with today's erratic weather and blurred seasonal boundaries.

Kashmir now stands at a climatic crossroads. Its orchards, rivers and rural livelihoods are intricately tied to winter snowfall and hydrological stability. If current trends persist, the valley's identity as a snow fed horticultural haven may gradually give way to one marked by water stress and uncertain agricultural output. The story unfolding in Kashmir is not merely about a dry winter or a difficult harvest; it is about the delicate balance between climate, economy and culture in a region where the fate of orchards mirrors the fate of the land and people itself.



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Bringing **KASHMIR'S BORDER AREAS ONTO THE TOURISM MAP**



by **Mareaya Fayaz**

From Teetwal and Tulail to Karnah and Gurez, a new era of peace, community resilience and the Army's outreach is transforming Kashmir's frontier landscapes into emerging tourism frontiers.



For decades, Kashmir's tourism narrative revolved around its iconic destinations like, Gulmarg's snowy slopes, Pahalgam's pastoral charm and Srinagar's shimmering Dal Lake. Yet beyond these celebrated landscapes lies another Kashmir, tucked along the Line of Control where valleys unfold in silence, rivers cut through rugged terrain and villages stand as living testimonies of resilience.

Places such as Teetwal, Tulail, Keran, Machil, Tangdhar, Gurez and the lesser-known hamlets of Karnah, Hajipass and Masilburis represent a

frontier of beauty that has remained largely unexplored. Today, with an improved security environment and renewed administrative focus, these border areas are gradually stepping into the spotlight, carrying with them the promise of a new tourism chapter for the valley.

The story of border tourism in Kashmir is inseparable from the story of conflict and calm. For years, these regions were synonymous with cross border shelling, restricted movement and the anxieties of life on the frontier. Tourism was not merely absent; it was unimaginable. However, the reaffirmation of the ceasefire understanding along the LoC in February 2021 marked a turning point. The

Today, with an improved security environment and renewed administrative focus, these border areas are gradually stepping into the spotlight, carrying with them the promise of a new tourism chapter for the valley.



gradual decline in hostilities brought a sense of normalcy to villages that had long lived under the shadow of uncertainty. Roads reopened, travel advisories softened and perhaps most importantly, curiosity replaced caution among travellers.

As peace took root, the untapped potential of these landscapes began to reveal itself. Teetwal offers a rare blend of history and natural splendor where the famed Kaman Bridge stands as a symbol of connection and hope. Tulail valley, extending beyond Gurez, remains one of Kashmir's most pristine stretches, an expanse of alpine meadows, wooden hamlets and glacial streams that evoke a timeless wilderness. Karnah, with its breathtaking vistas and cultural richness and Masilburis, nestled amid dense forests and high ridges, embody the raw charm of Kashmir's frontier life. These places are not merely scenic destinations; they are living cultural landscapes where traditions, folklore

and community bonds continue to thrive.

The reopening of border destinations following security reviews by the administration last month has further strengthened this transformation. Remote pockets of Kupwara have witnessed a remarkable influx of visitors while Uri and Gurez have also recorded encouraging tourist

Roads reopened, travel advisories softened and perhaps most importantly, curiosity replaced caution among travellers.

numbers. Lolab Valley's recognition as the best offbeat destination in 2023 underscores a growing acknowledgment of Kashmir's hidden treasures. For residents who once sought shelter in bunkers during shelling, the sight of tourists exploring their villages has become a powerful symbol of change.

Yet the emergence of border tourism is not solely the result of improved security. It is equally a story of local aspiration and institutional support. Residents, particularly youth, have begun to view tourism as a pathway to livelihood and stability. Homestays in Keran, Tangdhar and Tulail have emerged as intimate windows into local life, offering visitors an authentic experience of Kashmiri hospitality while generating income for families. The cultural simplicity,





traditional architecture and organic lifestyles of these villages have become key attractions, often leaving visitors with memories that extend beyond scenic photographs.

Central to this evolving narrative has been the role of the Indian Army, whose presence in these regions extends beyond security. In many remote border villages, the Army has functioned as a lifeline, facilitating infrastructure development, providing healthcare outreach and supporting educational initiatives. Under programmes such as Operation Sadbhavana, schools, vocational training centres and community projects have been established, helping bridge developmental gaps. Army supported cultural events, adventure activities and local fairs have also contributed to promoting these regions as safe and welcoming destinations.

In many remote border villages, the Army has functioned as a lifeline, facilitating infrastructure development, providing healthcare outreach and supporting educational initiatives.

The Army's engagement with youth through sports initiatives, skill-development programmes and national integration tours has fostered a sense of confidence and connectivity. For many young residents, participation in recruitment drives and

educational programmes has opened new avenues, reducing the vulnerabilities that once plagued border communities. Women empowerment initiatives and vocational training for marginalised groups have further strengthened the socio-economic fabric, ensuring that tourism growth is inclusive and community driven.

Despite these encouraging developments, challenges remain. Infrastructure continues to lag behind the growing tourist interest. Many border destinations lack adequate accommodation, reliable transport networks and consistent communication facilities. Harsh weather conditions and restricted access in certain areas add to the complexities of travel. The need for structured tourism planning, improved road connectivity and professional guiding services is evident. Locals and stakeholders have



also voiced the demand for dedicated development authorities, particularly for regions like Gurez and Tulail, to ensure coordinated and sustainable growth.

The concept of homestays has emerged as a practical solution to infrastructure constraints while preserving the authenticity of these destinations. Encouraged by the administration and supported by security agencies, homestays not only provide accommodation but also deepen cultural exchange between visitors and hosts. However, awareness about these opportunities remains limited, highlighting the importance of targeted promotion and digital outreach to position border tourism on the national and international travel map.

Beyond economics, the rise of tourism in these frontier regions carries profound social implications. The return of weddings to village homes, the revival of local festivals and the visible enthusiasm of residents welcoming travellers all signal a renewed

The concept of homestays has emerged as a practical solution to infrastructure constraints while preserving the authenticity of these destinations.

sense of normalcy. Tourism has become a bridge, connecting isolated communities with the wider world, fostering dialogue and reshaping perceptions about life along the LoC.

In this broader transformation, the collaboration between the government, local communities and the Indian Army stands out as a defining factor. Administrative efforts to re-open destinations, improve connectivity and encourage private invest-

ment are gradually complementing grassroots initiatives. Meanwhile, the Jammu & Kashmir government and Army's continued engagement in developmental and outreach activities has reinforced the confidence necessary for tourism to flourish. Together, these efforts are not only bringing visitors to the borderlands but also restoring hope among residents who long awaited such opportunities.

Kashmir's border regions today stand at a crossroads between memory and possibility. The valleys of Teetwal, Tulail, Karnah and Masilburis embody both the scars of conflict and the promise of peace. Their inclusion on the tourism map is more than a geographical expansion; it is a narrative of resilience, partnership and renewal. As travellers seek experiences beyond crowded destinations, these frontier landscapes offer a rare blend of serenity, adventure and cultural depth.

The journey of border tourism in Kashmir is still unfolding, shaped by evolving realities and sustained efforts. What remains undeniable is the transformative power of peace and collaboration in unlocking hidden potential. If nurtured with thoughtful planning, community participation and continued institutional support, these remote valleys can redefine Kashmir's tourism identity by inviting the world not only to witness their beauty but also to understand the strength and spirit of the people who call them home.



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AS THE TIDE SHIFTS...

KASHMIR CENTRAL | 1 MARCH 2026 | 24



by Uzma khan

Kashmir has been recently navigating shifting tides of peace, progress, and ambition. The journey ahead might be fraught with challenges, but as the valley sheds the shackles of conflict, a brighter, more hopeful future begins to emerge on the horizon.

JAMMU & KASHMIR. Here, a complex tapestry of political, social, and historical threads, weaves the narrative of a place long marred by conflict. The recent years, however, have witnessed a subtle but significant transformation in the security environment, offering a glimmer of hope for peace, progress and a renewed sense of ambition in the valley.

NEW DYNAMICS UNFOLD

For decades, the Kashmir Valley has been synonymous with conflict and strife. Tensions between India and Pakistan over the territory have often erupted into violence, leaving a trail of tragedy and human suffering. However, recent diplomatic efforts have led to a fragile ceasefire agreement, offering a temporary respite for the long-suffering residents of the region.

The Line of Control, the de facto border between the two nuclear-armed neighbors, has witnessed a decrease in cross-border hostilities after the Operation Sindoor. This tentative peace has allowed the people of Kashmir to breathe a sigh of relief but the scars of the past bloodshed carried out by Pakistan in the streets of the Valley remain etched in the collective memory.

SEEDS OF PROGRESS

The changing security environment in Kashmir has paved way for economic resurgence and development. The region's picturesque landscapes, once overshadowed by conflict, are now becoming a canvas for progress and prosperity. Initiatives aimed at promoting tourism, agriculture, and entrepreneurship have gained



The recent years, however, have witnessed a subtle but significant transformation in the security environment, offering a glimmer of hope for peace, progress and a renewed sense of ambition in the valley.

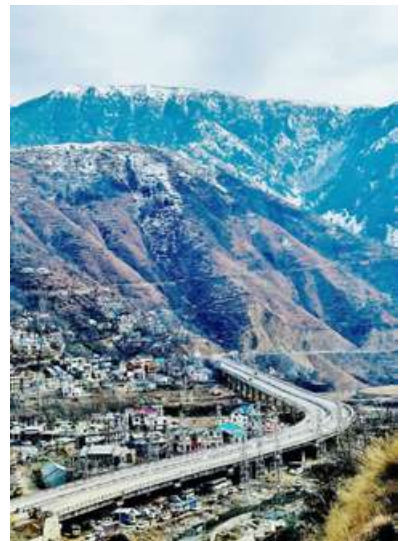
momentum, bringing rejuvenating hope to a population that has long grappled with economic challenges.

Tourism, once stifled by terrorism concerns, is experiencing a renaissance. Visitors from across the globe are drawn to the valley's breathtaking beauty, ancient cultural heritage, snow capped mountains of Gulmarg and Sonamarg and warm hospitality. The restoration of iconic landmarks, such as the historic places of Srinagar, the enchanting Dal Lake, signals a commitment to preserving Kashmir's rich cultural architecture while inviting the world to witness its splendor.



Agriculture, the backbone of Kashmir's economy, is witnessing a modernisation drive. Technological interventions, improved irrigation systems, and market linkages are empowering local farmers to increase productivity and diversify their crops. PM KISAN has become a boon to the farmers all over the country and specifically in Kashmir. This shift not only enhances food security but also contributes to the overall economic

Technological interventions, improved irrigation systems, and market linkages are empowering local farmers to increase productivity and diversify their crops.



upliftment of the region.

Entrepreneurship is emerging as a catalyst for change, with young Kashmiris harnessing their talents and creativity to build innovative enterprises. Start-up incubators and government support programs are nurturing a culture of innovation, transforming the Valley into a hub for young minds to thrive and contribute to the national and global economies. The recent interaction of entrepreneurs with PM Modi during a rally at Bakshi Stadium in Srinagar is a testament of the progressive





economic landscape of new Jammu and Kashmir.

ASPIRATIONS OF THE YOUNG

Amidst the changing security landscape and economic rejuvenation, the youth of Kashmir are redefining their aspirations. Long haunted by the spectre of conflict, this generation is embracing education, technology, and global connectivity to shape a future unburdened by the shadows of the past.

Educational institutions are witnessing a surge in enrollment, with students eager to explore diverse fields of study. The youth of Kashmir are increasingly looking beyond traditional career paths, seeking opportunities in science, technology, arts, and entrepreneurship. The shift is not only indicative of a desire for personal growth but also a collective ambition to reshape the narrative of Kashmir on a global stage.

Technology is playing a pivotal role in empowering Kashmir's youth. Access to the internet and digital platforms has opened doors to information, communication,

The youth of Kashmir are increasingly looking beyond traditional career paths, seeking opportunities in science, technology, arts, and entrepreneurship.

and collaboration. Social media is providing a platform for young voices to be heard, fostering a sense of connectivity that transcends geographical and political boundaries. Pertinently, the previous governments in J&K had always blocked the internet after minor incidents on the streets of the valley. Despite internet blockade during those times, terrorism was still not contained and roamed free and at large. But our today is certainly different.

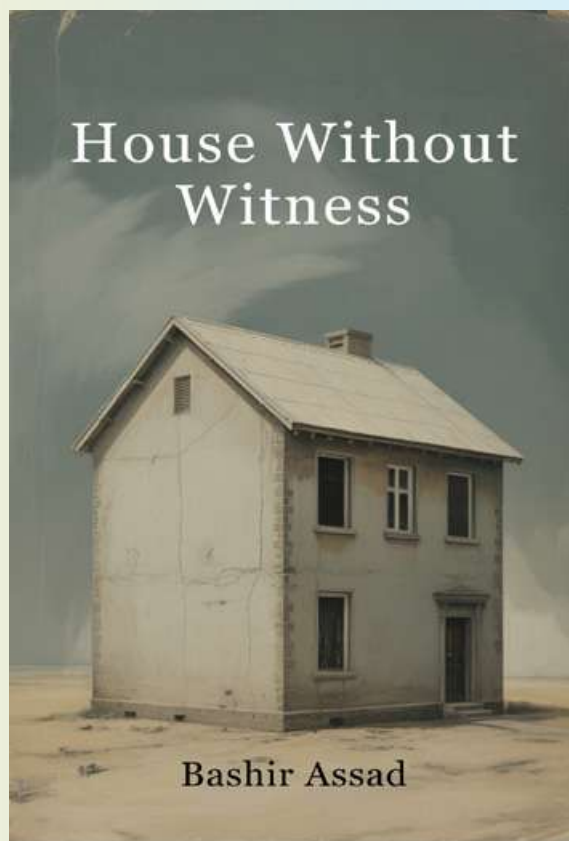
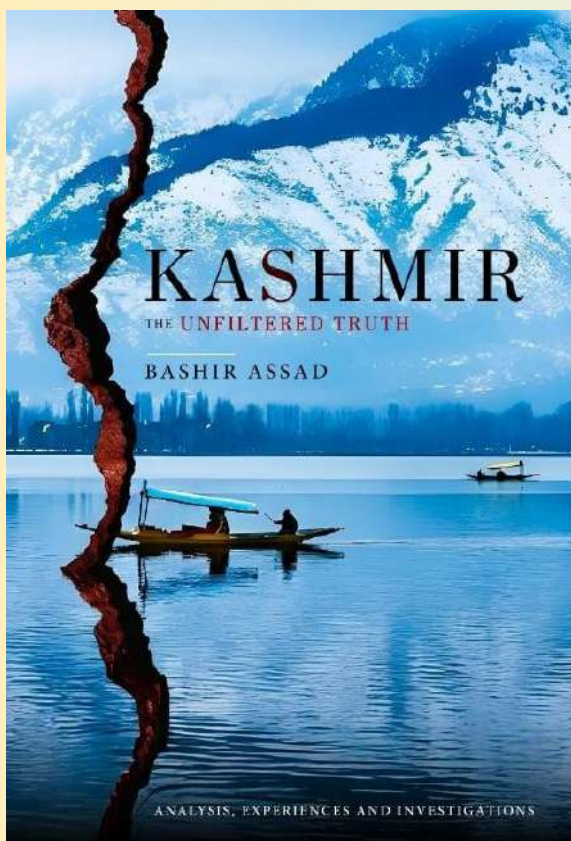
NAVIGATING THE ROAD AHEAD

Internal challenges, including the ongoing debate over the special status of Jammu and Kashmir, also cast a shadow over the region's stability. Striking a balance between regional autonomy and national

integration remains a complex puzzle that demands careful consideration and dialogue with stakeholders of the new J&K. The road to lasting peace and progress in Kashmir requires a multifaceted approach. Simultaneously, efforts to enhance economic development, educational opportunities, and social cohesion within the valley must be intensified to create a foundation for lasting change.

The changing security environment has laid the groundwork for a new chapter - one that holds the promise of peace, progress, and ambitious aspirations for the resilient people of Kashmir. The journey ahead is fraught with challenges but as the region gradually sheds the shackles of conflict, a brighter, more hopeful future begins to emerge on the horizon.

The recent release of two books,
“Kashmir: The Unfiltered Truth”,
and **“House Without Witness”**
are available on
Amazon and Flipkart for the readers.

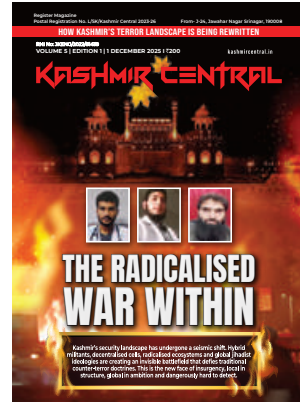


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