

A GENERATION RAISED ON GLOBAL SCREENS BEGINS QUESTIONING INHERITED POLITICAL CERTAINTIES.

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KASHMIR CENTRAL

KASHMIR RETHINKS PAKISTAN

The Iran-Israel conflict has ignited debates across the Muslim world but in Kashmir, it is triggering something deeper: a reassessment of Pakistan's role, revealing a new political consciousness among the youth.

Inside

▶ THE POLITICS OF
NORMALCY

▶ THE SHOW OF PERFORMATIVE
RELIGIOSITY

▶ GUREZ: FROM ISOLATION
TO INSPIRATION

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THE TERROR
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*expose
deception*

**RESTORE
ORDER**

MAKE A SPLASH

**INCULCATE
DEMOCRATIC SPIRIT**

KASHMIR CENTRAL



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VOLUME 5 | EDITION 5
1 APRIL 2026

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KASHMIR CENTRAL

TOURISM BOOM, FRAGILE FOUNDATIONS

As spring settles over the valley and the almond blossoms fade into full greenery, Kashmir enters the season it waits for every year. The arrival of tourists.

Hotels prepare months in advance. Houseboats repaint their wooden decks. Shikara owners repair their boats along the edges of the Dal Lake. Taxi drivers wait for airport arrivals. Restaurant owners restock kitchens. For thousands of families across the valley the tourist season is not merely a business opportunity. It is the backbone of their annual income.

Over the past few years tourism in Jammu and Kashmir has grown dramatically. Government figures proudly highlight record numbers of visitors. Photographs of crowded gardens busy boulevards and long lines of taxis moving towards hill destinations circulate widely on social media. The message appears clear. Tourism is booming.

But numbers alone do not tell the full story. For many people working within the tourism sector prosperity remains uneven. A successful summer season often carries the responsibility of sustaining families through the quieter winter months. Income arrives in bursts rather than stability. One unexpected disruption

whether weather related or political can alter an entire year of earnings. This is why tourism while valuable can never become the sole pillar of an economy.

Regions that depend entirely on seasonal visitors often discover that prosperity can be fragile. Tourism creates opportunity but it does not automatically create economic depth. The restaurants, taxis hotels, handicrafts and houseboats that thrive during peak months still require a wider ecosystem of investment industry and innovation to ensure long term stability.

Jammu and Kashmir possesses extraordinary natural beauty and hospitality but the real challenge for policymakers is to convert tourism into a gateway rather than a destination for economic thinking. Visitors bring attention visibility and spending power. The next step is to ensure that this attention encourages broader investment in technology agriculture manufacturing education and entrepreneurship.

A thriving tourist season should therefore not be seen as the final measure of success. It should be seen as the beginning of a larger opportunity.

For tourists, Kashmir will appear as a beautiful destination. For the people who live here the challenge is to ensure that beauty is supported by an economy strong enough to sustain life long after the tourists return home.



Bashir Assad

CONTENTS



◀ 05

WEST ASIA'S WAR AND A QUIET REASSESSMENT OF PAKISTAN IN KASHMIR

by **Bashir Assad**



◀ 10 **THE POLITICS OF NORMALCY**
by **Yawar Yousuf**



◀ 14 **THE SHOW OF PERFORMATIVE RELIGIOSITY**
by **Mohammad Zaid Malik**



◀ 18 **THE COACHING CAPITAL**
by **Mian Tufail**



◀ 24 **THE PAUSE IN JAMMU & KASHMIR'S DEMOCRATIC EXPERIMENT**
by **Waseem Assad**

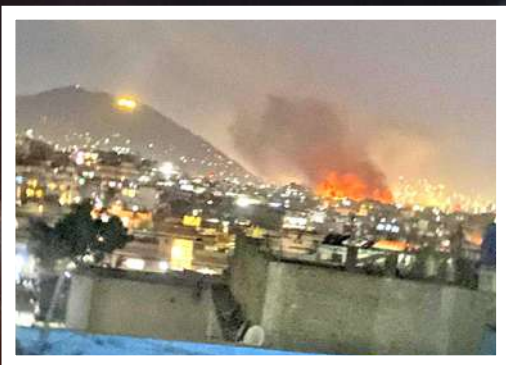


◀ 30 **GU'REZ: FROM ISOLATION TO INSPIRATION**
by **Mareaya Fayaz**



◀ 36 **BADAMWARI IN BLOOM**
by **Sohail Bashir**

WEST ASIA'S WAR



AND A QUIET REASSESSMENT OF PAKISTAN IN KASHMIR



by Bashir Assad

As the Iran-Israel conflict reshapes conversations across the Muslim world, young Kashmiris are increasingly reassessing Pakistan's perceived role as a voice of Muslim political solidarity, reflecting a quiet generational shift in political imagination.



The ongoing war involving Iran, Israel and the United States has stirred strong reactions across large parts of the Muslim world. From North Africa to South Asia, demonstrations, online campaigns and intense political discussions have emerged as communities react emotionally to the conflict and its wider implications. Across many Muslim societies the conflict is being interpreted not merely as a geopolitical confrontation but as a moment that touches a deeper sense of political and religious identity.

But far from the battlefields of West Asia, another development is quietly unfolding in Kashmir. It is not visible in official statements or organised rallies. Instead, it exists in conversations among young people, in university hostels, in late night debates in cafes, iftar parties and increasingly across social media platforms where global political discussions travel instantly across borders.

For decades the political



Across many Muslim societies the conflict is being interpreted not merely as a geopolitical confrontation but as a moment that touches a deeper sense of political and religious identity.

imagination of Kashmir was shaped by certain familiar reference points. Among them the image of Pakistan as a central voice of Muslim political solidarity held a powerful place in public discourse. Generations grew up hearing a narrative in which Pakistan's identity as an Islamic republic automatically positioned it at the forefront of Muslim causes across the world. Within that narrative Pakistan was often viewed not merely as a neighbouring state but as a symbol of Islamic political assertion. Yet global events sometimes begin to test old

assumptions.

The war surrounding Iran has triggered a wave of emotional reaction among Muslims across the world. For many observers the conflict has become a symbolic moment in which the broader question of Muslim unity is being discussed again with unusual intensity. One striking feature of the current discourse is that the long-standing Sunni-Shia divide appears far less visible in public debate than it once was. Across digital spaces many discussions now speak in the language of a broader Muslim sentiment rather than sectarian affiliation.

In Kashmir these global reactions are followed closely, particularly by the generation that has grown up in an era of instant information. International events unfold on their phone screens in real time through live updates commentary and competing political narratives from across the world. Young people scroll through statements by political leaders, reactions from scholars and activists and emotional responses from Muslim communities scattered across continents. Within this environment the positions adopted by different Muslim states are being watched carefully. And it is here that a subtle but increasingly visible shift begins to appear. The expectation that a country founded on an Islamic identity would occupy a visibly assertive position during moments of crisis affecting the Muslim world



Across digital spaces many discussions now speak in the language of a broader Muslim sentiment rather than sectarian affiliation.

has long been embedded in popular imagination. When global events appear to challenge that expectation, reactions inevitably follow.

When reality appears to diverge from those long held expectations the reaction among many young observers in Kashmir is not merely confusion or quiet reflection. In several discussions the sentiment has been far more direct. A visible sense of anger has surfaced in online conversations and private debates where Pakistan's response to the crisis is being openly criticised. Among sections of the younger generation the feeling expressed is that a country which has historically projected itself as a defender of Muslim causes has remained unexpectedly restrained at a moment many Muslims view as deeply consequential. This perception has triggered unusually blunt commentary in Kashmiri social media spaces where frustration rather than hesitation now defines the tone of the discussion.

This anger is not always expressed





through formal political language. Instead it emerges through everyday conversations where young Kashmiris compare the rhetoric of Muslim solidarity with the realities of global alliances and diplomatic caution. The discussions are often emotional, sometimes critical and frequently shaped by the intense imagery and narratives circulating online from the conflict zones of West Asia.

For many young Kashmiris the Iran war has therefore produced an unexpected psychological effect.

A student sitting in a hostel room in Srinagar or elsewhere can follow a speech in Tehran, a military update from Tel Aviv and a policy debate in Washington within minutes.

Instead of simply reinforcing traditional political loyalties, it has encouraged a generation to look at global politics with greater scrutiny. Questions are being asked about how Muslim states position themselves in international conflicts and whether the idea of Muslim political solidarity still carries the same meaning it once did.

What distinguishes this generation is the environment in which it has grown up. Earlier political narratives in Kashmir were shaped largely through local discourse and limited media channels. Today, the information landscape is radically different. A student sitting in a hostel room in Srinagar or elsewhere can follow a speech in Tehran, a military update from Tel Aviv and a policy debate in Washington within minutes. This constant exposure inevitably produces comparison.

Political actions taken by governments are immediately measured against their rhetoric. Statements are analysed, contrasted and debated across online platforms where thousands of voices participate simultaneously.



In such an environment political image that once appeared stable can change quickly. In Kashmir, this transformation remains largely informal. It rarely appears in speeches or official commentary. Yet the conversations unfolding among young people suggest that the symbolic image of Pakistan that once existed almost unquestioned in parts of Kashmiri political imagination is now being examined more critically. This does not necessarily translate into a uniform shift in political alignment. Public opinion in Kashmir has always been layered and complex, shaped by history identity and lived experience. But what appears to be changing is the tone of the conversation itself.

The younger generation is increasingly willing to evaluate political actors not only through inherited narratives but through their responses to contemporary global events. The Iran war has accelerated that process.

Across hostels, classrooms and online discussions, the questions being asked are different from those heard a decade ago. They revolve around credibility, consistency and the gap that sometimes appears between political rhetoric and geopolitical reality. For many observers this represents a generational transition rather than a sudden political transformation. The Kashmir that once consumed



political narratives largely through regional media now interacts directly with global information streams. This interaction inevitably reshapes how

political actors are perceived.

History often records political change through dramatic events, elections revolutions or treaties but sometimes the more significant transformation begins much more quietly. It begins in conversations that take place away from microphones and headlines. It begins when a generation raised in an interconnected world begins comparing political claims with the behaviour of states on the global stage. And it begins when familiar political symbols start to be viewed through a new and more questioning lens. In Kashmir that conversation has already begun.





The Politics Of **NORMALCY**

by Yawar Yousuf

Beyond the visible calm in Kashmir's streets and markets lies a deeper debate about what normalcy truly means for its people. As tourism grows and unrest declines, the valley quietly grapples with questions of economic opportunity, political trust and the lived realities shaping everyday life.

On a quiet evening, along the banks of the Jhelum river, the rhythm of life in Srinagar appears almost ordinary. Shops close at their usual hour. Families walk along the boulevard. Traffic moves through the intersections around Lal Chowk with the familiar impatience of any bustling city. The calmness of such moments has increasingly become part of the public narrative surrounding Jammu and Kashmir. In official speeches, policy statements and television debates one word appears again and again. Normalcy.

For many observers the phrase signals a profound transformation. Street unrest that once dominated headlines has visibly reduced. Public demonstrations that used to erupt unpredictably across towns and neighbourhoods have largely faded from everyday life. Markets that once closed abruptly during periods of tension now remain open through most of the year. Tourist arrivals steadily grow after deadly Pahalgam attack. Government officials speak of investment summits, infrastructure expansion and economic revival. The image presented to the outside world



Markets that once closed abruptly during periods of tension now remain open through most of the year. Tourist arrivals steadily grow after deadly Pahalgam attack.

is one of stability gradually replacing uncertainty.

Yet, beneath this narrative lies a more complex question. What does normalcy actually mean for the people who live here every day? Is stability simply the absence of visible unrest or does it represent something deeper rooted in social confidence economic security and political trust?

For ordinary residents of the valley, the meaning of stability is often measured through smaller and more personal experiences. It is the ability of a shopkeeper to keep his business open without fearing sudden shutdowns. It is the reassurance





Many residents recognise improvements in security conditions but remain cautious about declaring the transformation complete. For them stability is not only about the absence of unrest but also about the presence of self-confidence.

parents feel when their children travel across districts for college or work. It is the quiet relief of farmers who can transport produce to markets all over India without disruptions to transport routes. In this sense the reduction in street violence has undeniably altered the rhythm of everyday life.

Many residents acknowledge this shift openly. A generation that grew up during years of frequent curfews and volatile street protests now experiences a city that moves with greater predictability. Public spaces feel calmer. Evening markets remain active for longer hours. Weddings festivals and local events take place with

fewer interruptions. For shopkeepers, transporters and small traders these changes translate into practical benefits that are felt in daily earnings rather than in political slogans.

Tourism provides one of the most visible indicators of this new environment. The houseboats and shikaras that line the waters of the Dal Lake have once again become symbols of hospitality rather than uncertainty. Hotels across the valley report strong seasonal occupancy. Restaurants, craft shops and transport services benefit from the steady flow of visitors. For thousands of families whose livelihoods depend on tourism a

stable environment directly influences economic survival.

The government has frequently highlighted these developments as evidence of progress. Infrastructure projects are expanding; roads tunnels and connectivity between regions are taking place. Investment conferences and conclaves have attempted to attract corporate interest. Officials speak of a future in which the region becomes an economic hub for tourism, handicrafts, renewable energy and horticulture.

That said, the public perception of stability does not always align perfectly with official narratives. Many residents recognise improvements in security conditions but remain cautious about declaring the transformation complete. For them stability is not only about the absence of unrest but also about the presence of self-confidence.

Unemployment continues to shape conversations in homes, classrooms and market places in the valley. The aspiration for secure employment remains one of the defining features of the region's social landscape. In such circumstances economic growth narratives sometimes feel distant from the lived realities of young job seekers who struggle for a dignified life and social security.

The concept of normalcy, therefore, becomes layered with different meanings depending on who is asked to define it. For a tourist, visiting the valley for the first time, normalcy may appear complete in the bustling markets, scenic highways



and lively cafes. For a shopkeeper, it may mean uninterrupted business. For a farmer, it may mean reliable transport routes and fair market access. For a young graduate, it may mean something else entirely - the availability of dignified employment and a sense that the future offers genuine possibilities.

Security perceptions also shape how stability is understood. The security landscape remains at the heart of the discourse in Kashmir. The presence of security forces reinforces a sense of safety for many while for others it remains a reminder of political complexities. The coexistence of calm public spaces with a strong security framework reflects the delicate balance that defines the region today.

Public sentiment often moves quietly between relief and restraint. Many people appreciate the calm that has returned to daily routines. At the same time conversations within homes, tea shops and university campuses reveal a continuing desire for deeper political dialogue and long term clarity about the region's future. Stability in its fullest sense is not only about quiet streets but about the confidence citizens feel regarding governance, representation and participation in shaping their own future.

In towns beyond Srinagar similar reflections emerge. Traders speak of improved business conditions but also of rising costs and uncertain markets. Farmers worry about unpredictable weather patterns affecting apple harvests and tax-free import of fresh fruit from USA and Iran. Teachers observe that students increasingly discuss careers outside the region because opportunities within remain limited. These voices rarely appear in dramatic headlines, yet, they represent the everyday realities that shape how stability is experienced on the ground.

The politics of normalcy, therefore becomes less about slogans and



When young people feel that their education can translate into meaningful work. When businesses grow beyond seasonal tourism.

more about lived experience. It raises questions about how societies move from a phase of conflict toward a phase of confidence. History shows that genuine stability is rarely achieved through security measures alone. It grows gradually through economic inclusion institutional trust and social participation.

For Jammu and Kashmir, the present moment appears to be one of transition. The visible turbulence of earlier decades has eased significantly and the everyday rhythm of life has become calmer. Markets function. Schools operate. Tourism thrives. These are meaningful achievements for a region that has endured long

periods of disruption.

However, the deeper measure of stability will depend on whether this calm environment evolves into broader opportunity. When young people feel that their education can translate into meaningful work. When businesses grow beyond seasonal tourism. When public conversations include diverse voices without fear or hesitation. When citizens feel that they are participants rather than spectators in shaping their political and economic future.

True normalcy in any society is not simply the quietness of streets but the confidence of its people. It is the feeling that everyday life can move forward without uncertainty overshadowing each decision. It is the assurance that progress is shared rather than symbolic.

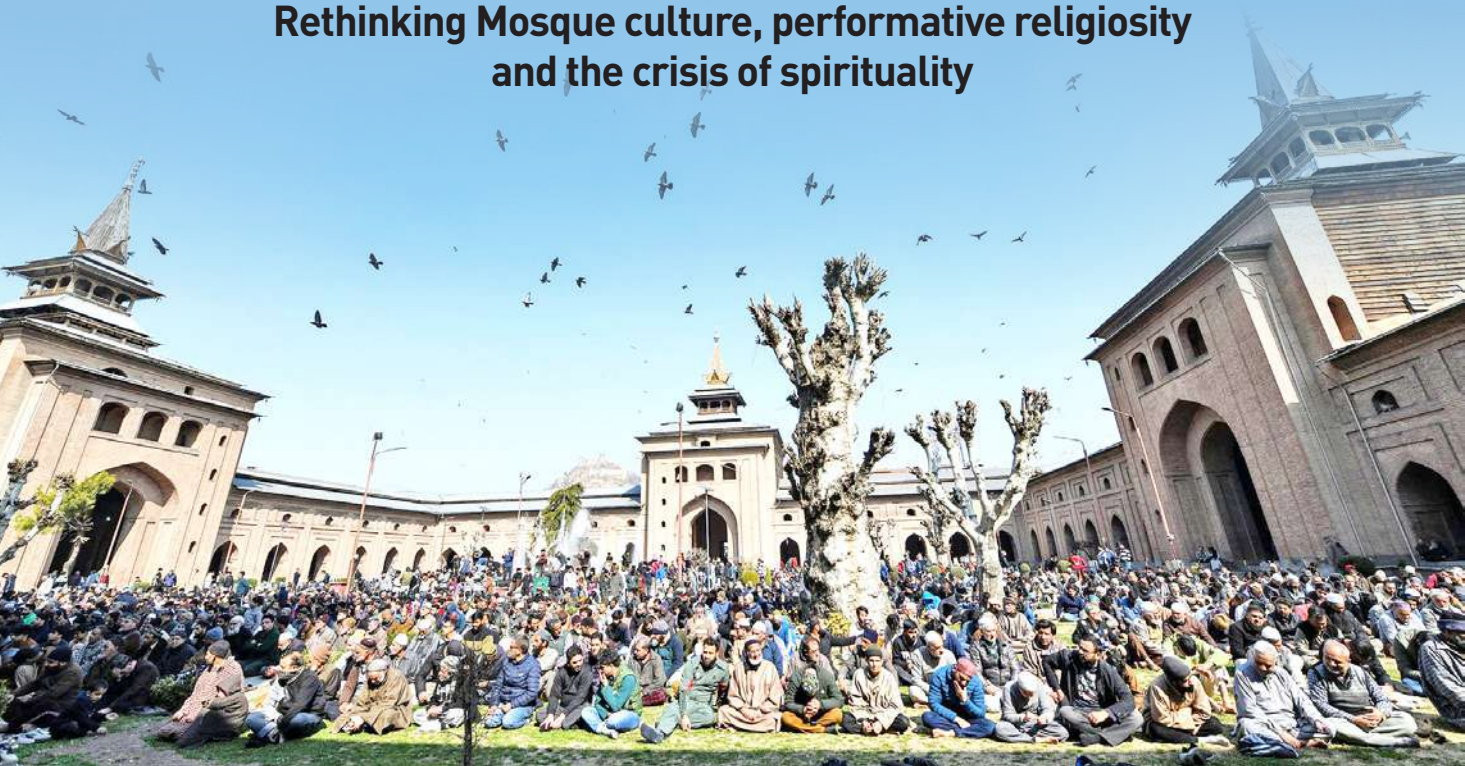
As the evening lights reflect across the waters of the Jhelum river, the city of Srinagar continues its slow transition into night. The calm visible in its streets offers a glimpse of possibility. Whether that calm matures into lasting stability will depend on how deeply the idea of normalcy takes root not only in official narratives but in the lived experience of every Kashmiri household.

The show of **PERFORMATIVE** **RELIGIOSITY**



by **Mohammad Zaid Malik**

**Rethinking Mosque culture, performative religiosity
and the crisis of spirituality**



Mosques (*Masajid*) have always occupied a sacred and central place in Islamic civilization. From the earliest days of Islam, they served not merely as spaces for prayer but as the living heart of Muslim society. The first mosque established in Islamic history, Masjid-e-Quba and later the Prophet's Mosque in Madinah, were vibrant centres where faith intertwined with education, governance, social welfare and intellectual exchange.

Within the walls of these early mosques, knowledge flourished. Scholars debated theology and philosophy, disputes were resolved, the poor were cared for and the moral compass of society was shaped. A mosque was never merely an architectural structure; it was the nucleus of a civilization built upon faith, knowledge and community.

Yet the contemporary reality in many Muslim societies tells a very different story.

Across large parts of the Muslim world, including Jammu & Kashmir, a quiet but significant transformation has taken place. The emphasis of religious life appears to have shifted from spiritual depth to symbolic display, from inner transformation to outward demonstration. In many places, religion is increasingly expressed through performative religiosity, visible markers of piety that often overshadow the deeper spiritual and intellectual essence of faith.

One of the most striking manifestations of this trend is the unprecedented surge in mosque construction.

THE MOSQUE BOOM

Over the past few decades, Jammu & Kashmir has witnessed a remarkable expansion in the number of mosques. Today, it is estimated that nearly



A mosque was never merely an architectural structure; it was the nucleus of a civilization built upon faith, knowledge and community.

15,000 mosques exist across the region. In many neighbourhoods, multiple mosques stand within sight of each other, sometimes separated by only a few streets or even a single lane.

The mushrooming of mosques does not necessarily correspond to population density or practical need. In numerous localities, several mosques serve the same small population of worshippers. Sectarian affiliations, organisational influence or local prestige often drive the construction of new mosques rather than genuine necessity.

The statistics reveal a paradox. Jammu & Kashmir's population stands at roughly 80-85 lakh, with approximately 45 lakh male Muslims forming the primary congregation for mosque prayers. On paper, this

suggests a ratio of roughly 250 to 300 individuals per mosque.

Yet the reality on the ground is starkly different. In many neighbourhood mosques, daily congregational prayers attract only 10-20 worshippers. Even Friday prayers, the most important weekly congregation, often bring together only 20 to 50 people in smaller mosques.

In contrast, a handful of historic and central mosques, such as Jamia Masjid Srinagar, Hazratbal Dargah and the large congregational mosques in districts like Baramulla, Rajouri and Poonch draw thousands of worshippers.

This imbalance highlights a curious phenomenon: while the number of mosques has multiplied dramatically, the number of active congregants has not increased proportionately. The result is a landscape where mosques stand plentiful, yet communities remain fragmented.

Another troubling dimension of this phenomenon is the functional dormancy of many mosques.

Ideally, a mosque should be a vibrant centre of community life. Historically, mosques remained open throughout the day, serving as places where people gathered not only to pray but to learn, discuss, seek guidance and build social solidarity.



Today, however, many neighbourhood mosques follow a different pattern. They open briefly for prayer, close soon afterward and remain locked for most of the day. In many cases, the mosque stays closed for nearly twenty-two hours out of twenty-four.

The silence that descends after prayer reflects a deeper issue: the mosque's role has gradually narrowed to a purely ritual function, rather than a holistic social institution. This shift reflects a broader transformation in religious culture.

RISE OF PERFORMATIVE RELIGIOSITY

Religion, by its very nature, carries both inner and outer dimensions. The outward practices like, prayer, charity, fasting is meant to cultivate inner spiritual growth of humility, compassion, discipline and awareness of God.

However, when outward practices become detached from their spiritual purpose, they risk turning into performative acts.

Yet when mosque construction becomes competitive, excessive or driven by prestige, it risks drifting away from its spiritual purpose.

In many contemporary Muslim societies, religiosity is increasingly expressed through visible symbols, architecture, rituals, clothing and public displays of piety. While these elements are not inherently problematic, they can become problematic when they replace deeper spiritual engagement.

Mosque construction has, in some contexts, become part of this culture of symbolic religiosity. Building a mosque is widely regarded as a noble act of charity and indeed Islamic tradition holds immense reward for those who contribute to

houses of worship. Yet when mosque construction becomes competitive, excessive or driven by prestige, it risks drifting away from its spiritual purpose.

In some communities, constructing a new mosque becomes a way of demonstrating religious identity, organisational influence or social standing. Donations are mobilised enthusiastically for new structures even when nearby mosques already exist. The result is an architectural abundance that does not necessarily translate into spiritual vitality.

THE FORGOTTEN COMMAND

This phenomenon also raises a deeper civilisational question.

Islam's first revelation was a command: "*Iqra*" means to read.

It was an invitation to knowledge, reflection and intellectual growth. The Quran repeatedly emphasizes the virtues of learning, understanding and wisdom. The Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) declared the

pursuit of knowledge obligatory for every Muslim, male and female.

For centuries, Muslim civilization responded to this call with remarkable intellectual achievements. Mosques and *madrasas* produced scholars who contributed to fields ranging from theology and law to mathematics, medicine, astronomy and philosophy.

But in many parts of the modern Muslim world, this intellectual tradition has weakened. While enormous sums of money are spent on constructing new mosques, far fewer resources are invested in educational institutions, research centres, libraries and skill development programmes.

This imbalance has tangible consequences. Communities struggle with low educational outcomes, unemployment, technological lag and limited professional opportunities for youth. Meanwhile, religious infrastructure continues to expand.

The contrast raises an uncomfortable question: have we prioritised structures over substance?

WHAT MOSQUES WERE MEANT TO BE

The issue is not the existence of mosques themselves. Mosques are essential to Islamic life and must always remain so. The question is how they are used and how they fit within the broader priorities of the

community.

In their original form, mosques served as multi-dimensional institutions. They were places where education thrived, where social issues were addressed, where charity was organised and where community bonds were strengthened. Reviving this spirit could transform existing mosques into dynamic centers once again.

Instead of constructing new mosques in every neighbourhood, communities could invest in strengthening existing ones, equipping them with libraries, classrooms, youth programmes and social initiatives.

Mosques could host tutoring sessions, vocational training, public discussions and community welfare programmes. They could become spaces where spirituality and knowledge reinforce each other. Such an approach would restore the mosque to its historical role as the heart of Muslim society.

Imagine if even a fraction of the resources currently spent on constructing new mosques were directed towards high-quality schools combining religious and modern education, libraries and research centres, vocational training programmes, scholarships for talented but underprivileged students, innovation and entrepreneurship initiatives. Such investments would

empower entire generations.

They would equip young people with the knowledge and skills needed to navigate the modern world while remaining rooted in their faith and identity. More importantly, they would align closely with Islam's foundational emphasis on learning.

A QUESTION FOR THE FUTURE

The proliferation of mosques across Jammu & Kashmir offers a moment for thoughtful reflection. Faith communities must ask themselves an important question: Are we strengthening the moral and intellectual foundations of society or merely multiplying physical symbols of religiosity?

Religion thrives not through architectural abundance but through spiritual depth, ethical conduct and intellectual vitality.

A single mosque that nurtures learning, unity and community engagement can achieve far more than multiple mosques standing silent and underused. The challenge before us is not to reduce religiosity but to restore its authenticity.

True faith lies not in the visibility of devotion but in its transformative power, the ability to elevate minds, uplift communities and inspire justice and compassion.

Mosques will always remain sacred symbols of Islam. Their call to prayer will continue to echo across cities and villages, reminding believers of their connection to the divine. But the renaissance of the Muslim community will not emerge from multiplying structures alone.

It will arise from reviving the spirit that once animated those structures, a spirit grounded in knowledge, unity and sincere spirituality. Minarets may rise toward the sky. Yet the true measure of faith lies in how high our minds and morals rise with them.





THE COACHING CAPITAL



by Mian Tufail

The rapid rise of coaching institutes across Jammu and Kashmir tells a deeper story about aspiration, opportunity and uncertainty. For thousands of young aspirants, competitive examinations represent the promise of security, even as the growing coaching culture reveals the pressures and limitations shaping the region's job landscape.

On winter mornings in Srinagar before the markets awaken and traffic gathers around the city centre, the narrow staircases above coaching centres, bookstores and stationery shops are already crowded. Young men and women climb these steps with backpacks, full of notebooks and borrowed hope. Inside the classrooms, whiteboards and digital boards glow with constitutional articles, economic indicators, current affairs, history and the language of governance. Outside tea stalls, photocopy vendors and small rented study rooms quietly sustain an economy that runs on ambition and expectation.

Over the past decade Srinagar and increasingly Jammu has transformed into something rarely acknowledged in national conversation - a coaching capital. Civil services academies, JKPSC and JKSSB institutes, SSC coaching centres, banking preparation hubs, NEET and JEE classrooms have multiplied across neighbourhoods. Entire buildings now function solely as preparation spaces. Parents speak in the language of attempts and cut offs. Families follow notification calendars with the same attention that farmers once gave to snowfall and harvest cycles.

In Jammu and Kashmir, the



In a region where large private industry remains limited and economic volatility has shaped everyday life, public service is not merely employment. For many families it is reassurance.

government job has long represented stability in a landscape that has often felt uncertain. A government position promises predictable income, social respect, gratuity security and a sense of permanence. In a region where large private industry remains limited and economic volatility has shaped everyday life, public service is not merely employment. For many families it is reassurance.

For thousands of young people, the path toward that reassurance runs through examinations conducted by institutions such as the Union Public Service Commission, the Jammu and Kashmir Public Service Commission and the Jammu and Kashmir Service Selection Board. Preparation for these examinations is rarely a short phase. It often becomes a defining chapter of early adulthood. Years are dedicated to studying subjects that range from history and constitutional law to economics governance and ethics. Aspirants structure their lives around preliminary examinations, main examinations, interviews and the distant possibility of selection.

The odds however remain unforgiving. Across India, less than one percent of candidates appearing





for the civil services examination ultimately secure final appointment. State level examinations also attract tens of thousands of applicants for only a limited number of vacancies. Despite this reality coaching centres continue to expand exponentially, test series multiply and new batches of aspirants enrol each year.

Why then does this aspiration remain so concentrated? Part of the answer lies in the structural realities of the economy. The private sector in Jammu and Kashmir while slowly evolving has not grown at a pace that can absorb the rapidly expanding educated population. Industrial corridors remain limited. Corporate headquarters are few. Tourism and agriculture remain vital pillars of the economy, yet both sectors are seasonal and vulnerable to wider disruptions. For many graduates competitive examinations appear to be the only clearly defined and socially validated pathway toward upward mobility.

Talking to *Kashmir Central*, Muneera, a female aspirant from Baramulla currently residing in a rented room in Srinagar, remarked, "As the private sector is almost non-existent in Kashmir and thousands of graduates and postgraduates pass out every year, it becomes extremely difficult to find opportunities there. Many of us dedicate years preparing

The private sector in Jammu and Kashmir while slowly evolving has not grown at a pace that can absorb the rapidly expanding educated population. Industrial corridors remain limited. Corporate headquarters are few.

for examinations conducted by JKSSB or JKPSC to secure our future and gain employment. The competition is massive and opportunities are limited but we have little choice except to tread this path."

There is also the powerful force of social expectation. In countless households preparation for civil services is not treated as an experiment but as a responsibility.

Families invest savings, delay expenditures and rearrange priorities to support a son or daughter pursuing this path. Success stories are celebrated widely across communities reinforcing the belief that perseverance will eventually be rewarded.

The prestige attached to these examinations becomes visible every time results are declared. Recently



sixteen candidates from Jammu and Kashmir qualified the prestigious Indian Administrative Services examination. Social media across the region remained abuzz with their success stories. Congratulatory messages poured in from every corner as families, relatives, teachers and friends celebrated the achievement. In many cases representatives of major political parties personally visited the homes of successful candidates to congratulate them. Such gestures further elevate the status attached to these examinations and reinforce the belief among young aspirants that clearing them represents one of the highest forms of social recognition. Yet beneath this architecture of aspiration lies a cost that is rarely calculated.

Financially, preparation can become an expensive undertaking. Coaching fees, accommodation, study materials, mock tests and years spent without stable income slowly accumulate into significant burdens. Middle class families often stretch their resources to support aspiring candidates. Some take loans. Others postpone important family expenses.

The psychological cost can be even heavier. Months sometimes years of preparation hinge on a single examination day. Failure is common and attempts are limited. Social comparison is relentless particularly in an age of social media where rank lists circulate instantly and success stories travel quickly across communities.

In study halls, overlooking the bustling markets and congested traffic on vital roads, students memorize constitutional amendments and policy frameworks while quietly confronting anxiety self doubt and the fear of disappointing those who have placed their faith in them.

Mental health professionals in the region increasingly report cases of stress related disorders among long term aspirants. Sleeplessness,



Failure is common and attempts are limited. Social comparison is relentless particularly in an age of social media where rank lists circulate instantly and success stories travel quickly across communities.

persistent anxiety and depressive symptoms often remain hidden behind disciplined routines and stacks of highlighted notes. Seeking counselling still carries stigma and admitting exhaustion is often perceived as a sign of weakness.

Years can pass in what many aspirants describe as suspended time. Graduates delay alternative careers reluctant to divert focus away from examination preparation. Private sector job offers are sometimes declined for fear that employment might dilute concentration. The culture of one more attempt stretches preparation into prolonged uncertainty.

Identity gradually becomes intertwined with aspiration. To be an aspirant is to imagine oneself as a future officer even when that future remains uncertain.

Abid, an aspirant studying from last four years for the JKPSC Combined Competitive Examination talking to KC said, "Competitive exams in J&K drain aspirants mentally and financially. We put every resource in the exams and the outcome is uncertain."



Ironically, the preparation culture itself has created a thriving micro economy. Coaching institutes employ faculty administrators, digital marketers and content creators. Guest lectures by former bureaucrats attract packed halls. Online platforms offering examination strategies attract thousands of followers. Photocopy shops remain open late into the evening as students duplicate notes and test papers.

A small economic ecosystem now survives on disciplined hope. Yet the system rests on scarcity. The number of aspirants grows each year while the number of available posts remains limited. The greater the competition the larger the preparation industry becomes. In this sense the coaching capital represents a paradox an economy sustained by structural

Delays in examination notifications or result declarations often deepen frustration among aspirants who have already invested years in preparation.

bottlenecks.

This reality raises important governance questions. Can the public sector realistically absorb the region expanding population of educated

youth? Are recruitment cycles timely predictable and transparent? Delays in examination notifications or result declarations often deepen frustration among aspirants who have already invested years in preparation. When examinations are postponed or entangled in litigation uncertainty spreads quickly through the aspirant community.

If aspiration is encouraged administrative efficiency must keep pace with it. There is also the larger economic question of diversification. When a significant portion of youth channels its intellectual energy toward a single occupational path, innovation in other sectors may suffer. Entrepreneurship requires risk taking imagination and experimentation. Competitive examinations reward discipline memorisation and adherence to structured syllabi.

When one form of ambition dominates, others often fade quietly into the background. A society dominant aspiration inevitably shapes its economic character. The story unfolding in these classrooms is not one of despair. There is resilience and intellectual engagement within this environment. Aspirants debate constitutional morality, economic policy, international relations and governance reforms with remarkable



seriousness. Many develop a deep awareness of national and global affairs.

An encouraging transformation is also visible in the presence of young women who now occupy front rows in coaching classrooms. Families that once hesitated now support daughters pursuing civil services careers. For many women the administrative services represent not only employment but also leadership visibility and empowerment.

Even so reliance on a single definition of success narrows the field of imagination. Entrepreneurship, skilled trades, digital services, creative industries and emerging technology sectors still receive less attention in public discourse. Career counselling structures remain limited and institutional support for alternative career pathways is only gradually developing.

The result is a widening imbalance. There is an oversupply of aspirants for a limited number of government posts and an undersupply of institutional encouragement for diversified professional growth.

Perhaps the most urgent dimension of the coaching capital phenomenon is its silent mental health burden. Long preparation cycles, intense competition and prolonged uncertainty can create psychological strain that remains largely unaddressed. Structured

The coaching capital ultimately acts as a mirror reflecting the hopes anxieties and economic realities of a generation. It reflects faith in institutional pathways and belief in merit based advancement.

counselling services, stress management programs and peer support initiatives within coaching environments could help reduce this silent suffering.

Ignoring this dimension would mean ignoring the human cost of concentrated ambition. The coaching capital ultimately acts as a mirror reflecting the hopes anxieties and economic realities of a generation. It reflects faith in institutional pathways and belief in merit based advancement. At the same time, it reveals structural limitations, limited industrial expansion and societal pressure.

Late into the night, inside classrooms near the Jhelum River thousands of young people underline passages from the Constitution and governance manuals. They are studying how the machinery of the state functions.

Perhaps it is time for the state and society to study their aspirations with equal seriousness and to ensure

that those aspirations are given space to expand rather than narrow.

Public service will always remain honourable and essential. The region requires capable administrators, teachers, officers and policymakers. Yet, no society thrives when opportunity narrows into a single corridor.

As Jammu and Kashmir continues to chart its economic future the real question is not whether young people should prepare for competitive examinations. The deeper question is whether competitive examinations should remain their only widely visible path toward dignity and stability.

Tomorrow morning the staircases will once again be crowded. Notebooks will open, lectures will begin and hope will gather under fluorescent lights. The real challenge, however, is ensuring that hope is not confined to a single examination hall but is given many doorways through which it can grow and flourish.



THE PAUSE IN JAMMU & KASHMIR'S DEMOCRATIC EXPERIMENT

24

KASHMIR CENTRAL | 1 APRIL 2026

With the expiry of District Development Councils, Jammu & Kashmir today stands without an elected grassroots framework for the first time in years. What began as a post-2019 push toward decentralised governance now faces a moment of uncertainty. The *KC* examines the rise of Panchayati Raj Institutions as engines of development, the gaps that persist within them and what their sudden absence reveals about the deeper trajectory of democracy in the J&K.

by Waseem Assad



The Jammu and Kashmir Panchayati Raj Act of 1989 had already laid the foundation for decentralized governance.



As the term of Jammu and Kashmir's District Development Councils quietly came to an end last month, the moment passed without spectacle but not without consequence. For the first time in recent years, the Jammu & Kashmir stands bereft of its entire three-tier Panchayati Raj structure. Panchayats had already fallen vacant, Block Development Councils had completed their tenure earlier and now with the expiry of the DDCs, the last elected link between the people and governance at the grassroots has dissolved.

What remains is not merely an administrative gap but a deeper democratic pause, one that compels reflection on what these institutions came to represent in post-2019 Jammu and Kashmir and what their absence signifies today.

The idea of grassroots democracy in Jammu and Kashmir is not new. The Jammu and Kashmir Panchayati Raj Act of 1989 had already laid

the foundation for decentralized governance. Yet for decades, this framework functioned unevenly, often overshadowed by a highly centralized political structure and interrupted electoral cycles. Local bodies existed but they rarely emerged as the primary engines of governance or development.

The events of August 2019 altered that trajectory fundamentally. The abrogation of Article 370 and the reorganization of the former state into two Union Territories triggered a sweeping administrative recalibration. In its aftermath, the emphasis on decentralization grew sharper, more deliberate and politically consequential. It was in this context that the three-tier Panchayati Raj system was not just revived but completed with the introduction of District Development Councils in 2020.

These councils were not merely an addition to an existing structure; they were conceived as its apex at the district level. For the first time, rural

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constituencies would directly elect representatives to a body responsible for planning, prioritizing and overseeing development at a scale that had previously been mediated through bureaucratic channels. Each district, with its fourteen elected members, acquired what many described as a “mini assembly”, a localized deliberative forum in the absence of a functioning Legislative Assembly at the time.

The timing of the 2020 DDC elections made them particularly significant. Conducted in the shadow of political uncertainty and heightened security sensitivities, they tested both administrative resolve and public willingness to engage in democratic processes. That participation did occur and across party lines, suggested a continuing faith in electoral mechanisms even amidst structural upheaval.

In the years that followed, the functioning of these councils revealed both the promise and the limitations of grassroots governance in a Union Territory framework. On one hand, the DDCs became visible nodes of local engagement. They provided a platform where citizens could directly approach elected representatives, often with immediate concerns

In the years that followed, the functioning of these councils revealed both the promise and the limitations of grassroots governance in a Union Territory framework.

relating to infrastructure, welfare schemes or administrative grievances. In districts like Kupwara, leaders such as Irfan Panditpuri articulated a

model of accessibility that resonated with constituents. His farewell remarks, reflecting an effort to serve beyond party lines, captured an aspiration that these institutions had begun to embody, a politics closer to the people.

At the same time, the structural constraints within which the DDCs operated were never entirely absent. The Union Territory’s governance model ensured that bureaucratic oversight remained strong and the extent of financial and administrative autonomy available to elected councils often came into question. For many members, the experience was one of negotiating space within a



system where ultimate authority lay elsewhere.

Security concerns added another layer of complexity, particularly in the initial years. Several representatives functioned under protection, limiting their mobility and by extension, their ability to engage freely with constituents. Internal dynamics within councils also reflected the evolving nature of these institutions. Leadership challenges and factional differences surfaced in multiple districts, pointing to the growing pains of a system still finding its equilibrium.

Yet, despite these constraints, it would be reductive to dismiss the impact of the DDCs. By most accounts, they did contribute to the acceleration of development work at the district level. Road connectivity projects, local infrastructure improvements and the implementation of centrally sponsored schemes found a more grounded execution mechanism. Perhaps more importantly, they reintroduced the idea that governance could be participatory at the most immediate level of people's lives.

The gradual unraveling of this structure began not with the DDCs but earlier. The terms of Urban Local Bodies expired in late 2023, followed by the conclusion of tenures for Panchayats and Block Development Councils in January 2024. For over a year, therefore, the lower tiers of the system had already ceased to function as elected entities. The DDCs remained the last operational layer, carrying the weight of grassroots representation until their own term concluded on February 24 this year.

With their expiration, Jammu and Kashmir now finds itself in a situation where all three tiers of Panchayati Raj Institutions stand vacant. The implications of this are both immediate and long-term. In the absence of elected representatives,



Road connectivity projects, local infrastructure improvements and the implementation of centrally sponsored schemes found a more grounded execution mechanism.

administrative machinery assumes greater responsibility but without the same degree of localized accountability or participatory input.

This transition has unfolded alongside political acknowledgments of the need to restore electoral processes. During a recent Assembly

session, Chief Minister Omar Abdullah spoke of the intention to conduct local body elections, while also pointing to a critical institutional gap, the absence, until recently, of a State Election Commissioner. That gap has now been addressed with the appointment of Shantmanu, administered oath by Lieutenant Governor Manoj Sinha in presence of Chief Minister and Cabinet Ministers. The appointment is more than procedural; it signals the reactivation of an electoral mechanism that had remained dormant for months.

What has followed is the beginning of a methodical, if cautious, process. Meetings involving senior administrative officials have laid out a roadmap for the revision of electoral rolls, a prerequisite for conducting Panchayat elections. The timeline, stretching from the integration of existing voter data



to the publication of final electoral rolls expected by May, next month, suggests that the groundwork is being laid with a degree of seriousness.

And yet, the process is not without its uncertainties. The question of reservations, particularly following the recommendations of the OBC Commission, remains unresolved. The conduct of elections to Urban Local Bodies is tied to a separate exercise of electoral roll revision. These variables introduce an element of unpredictability into what might otherwise appear as a linear progression toward elections.

In this interregnum, the larger question is not merely when elections will be held but what role Panchayati Raj Institutions will continue to play in the evolving governance framework of Jammu and Kashmir. Since 2019, these institutions have been positioned as central to the narrative of development and democratization. They have been presented as mechanisms through which power is devolved, accountability is strengthened and development is localised.

There is substance to this claim. In many parts of rural Jammu and Kashmir, panchayats and DDCs became the most accessible points of governance. They reduced the distance, both literal and institutional, between the citizen and the state. They enabled a form of decision-making that was more responsive to local needs, whether in the prioritisation of projects or the identification of beneficiaries.

At the same time, the experience of the past few years also underscores the limits of institutional design without corresponding autonomy. The effectiveness of PRIs is ultimately tied not just to their existence but to the extent of authority they are allowed to exercise. This tension between decentralization as policy and centralization as practice



Since 2019, these institutions have been positioned as central to the narrative of development and democratization.

continues to shape their trajectory.

The current vacuum, therefore, is not simply a pause in electoral activity; it is a moment that brings into focus the broader question of how deeply rooted grassroots democracy has become in Jammu and Kashmir. If PRIs are indeed the backbone of development, as they are often described, then their absence raises concerns about the sustainability of that development model in the interim.

And yet, there is also reason to view this moment as transitional rather than terminal. The administrative steps underway, the political statements expressing commitment to elections and the institutional reactivation through the appointment of the State Election

Commissioner all point toward an eventual restoration of the system.

The story of Panchayati Raj Institutions in Jammu and Kashmir remains unfinished. It is a story that began long before 2019, acquired new momentum in its aftermath and now stands at a point of temporary suspension. Whether the next phase strengthens these institutions further or exposes their vulnerabilities more starkly will depend on the choices made in the months ahead.

For now, the silence at the grassroots is palpable. The offices that once hosted elected representatives stand without them. The channels through which citizens engaged with governance have narrowed. And the promise of decentralized democracy, while not abandoned, waits to be renewed.

In that waiting lies both a challenge and an opportunity, the challenge of sustaining faith in democratic processes during periods of absence and the opportunity to rebuild these institutions with greater clarity, autonomy and purpose. Because in Jammu and Kashmir, perhaps more than anywhere else, the strength of democracy is ultimately measured not at the top but at the grassroots.

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GUREZ

FROM ISOLATION TO INSPIRATION



by Mareaya Fayaz

Once defined by months of isolation, Gurez is steadily rewriting its story. With record-time road reopening, growing tourism and a quiet blend of resilience and development, this remote valley is emerging as one of Kashmir's most compelling destinations where nature and culture converge.

▼
In the high mountains of North Kashmir, where winter once dictated silence and separation, the sound of machines cutting through walls of snow now carries a different meaning. It signals return of roads, of movement, of life itself.

When the Border Roads Organisation reopened the Bandipora-Gurez road in early 2026 in record time, it did more than restore connectivity. It quietly altered the rhythm of a valley that has long lived at the mercy of weather and geography. For decades, the road over Razdan Top, perched at over 3,300 metres, remained buried under snow for nearly half the year, sealing Gurez off from the rest of Jammu and Kashmir. Families prepared for isolation as a seasonal certainty, stocking supplies before the first snowfall closed the only gateway to the outside world.

This year, however, the story unfolded differently. Through sub-zero temperatures, icy stretches and relentless winds, teams worked with unusual urgency and coordination. The effort was not merely about reopening a road, it was about extending time itself, reducing the months of disconnection that have defined life in Gurez for generations.

As the snow recedes, another transformation becomes visible. The valley that once lay at the edge of accessibility is steadily moving towards the centre of attention.

Gurez, nestled along the Line of Control in Bandipora district at an altitude of around 8,000 feet, has begun to shed its long-standing image as a remote and restricted frontier. In its place, a new identity is emerging, one defined by pristine landscapes, cultural richness and an experience that feels untouched by the hurried rhythms of mainstream tourism.

The numbers reflect this shift but



This year, however, the story unfolded differently. Through sub-zero temperatures, icy stretches and relentless winds, teams worked with unusual urgency and coordination.

they tell only part of the story. What truly marks Gurez's rise is the nature of its appeal. Visitors are no longer drawn solely by scenery but by the promise of immersion into a place where rivers still define routes, where pine forests frame everyday life and where the mountains feel less like a backdrop and more like a presence.

The Kishanganga river flows quietly through this transformation, its waters now carrying not just the echoes of history but the stirrings of a new economy. Camp sites line its banks in summer, trekkers chart paths through alpine meadows and rafting introduced only recently



adds a new dimension to the valley's growing portfolio of experiences.

Yet, beneath this visible transformation lies a quieter, deeper story one that has unfolded over years and often away from public gaze.

The Indian Army, stationed across the region due to its proximity to the Line of Control, has played a crucial role in shaping the conditions that make this transformation possible. In a landscape where geography is unforgiving and infrastructure fragile, their presence has extended beyond security into the realm of everyday survival.

Through harsh winters, when snow isolates entire settlements, it is often the Army that ensures continuity, facilitating movement, supporting emergency evacuations and providing essential aid. In coordination with agencies like the BRO, it has helped maintain critical routes and opened access to areas that would otherwise remain cut off.

Over time, this role has evolved. Stability has created space for development and development has, in turn, made room for tourism.

In coordination with agencies like the BRO, it has helped maintain critical routes and opened access to areas that would otherwise remain cut off.

What visitors experience today as accessibility and safety is, in many ways, the outcome of years of sustained effort in one of the most sensitive border regions in the country.

Within the valley, the change is perhaps most visible in the lives of its people.

In Dawar, the administrative heart of Gurez and in smaller villages scattered along the valley, tourism





has begun to reshape aspirations. Homes are opening their doors as home stays, log huts are being adapted to host travellers and fields that once sustained families are now also supporting a growing local economy.

Recognition has followed effort. Gurez has been celebrated as an offbeat destination while Dawar has earned national acclaim as a model tourism village. But beyond awards, what matters more is the shift in confidence, a sense among residents that their homeland is no longer on the margins.

Local produce, once consumed within the valley, is now gaining identity beyond it. Gurezi rajma, potatoes and high-altitude herbs are emerging not just as commodities but as markers of place distinct, valued and increasingly sought after.

Growth, however, brings its own challenges and in a region as ecologically fragile as Gurez, the stakes are particularly high.

Efforts are underway to ensure that the valley's transformation does not come at the cost of its environment. Systems for waste



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collection and segregation are being strengthened, composting infrastructure is being developed and strict measures are in place to prevent pollution of the Kishanganga river. Awareness campaigns now

accompany tourism, reminding both residents and visitors that preservation is not optional, it is essential.

In this, Gurez is attempting something delicate: to grow without



losing the very qualities that make it unique.

Perhaps the most defining moment in this journey came in the summer of 2025, when the valley hosted its first National Tribal Festival in the remote village of Choorwan, near the Line of Control.

What unfolded there was not a typical government event. Officials arrived not to observe from a distance but to participate, to stay in traditional homes, to share

Around bonfires and under open skies, stories were exchanged, music filled the air and boundaries both physical and psychological seemed to soften.



meals and to listen. The Dard-Shin community, whose culture has long remained confined to the margins, found itself at the centre of a national conversation.

Around bonfires and under open skies, stories were exchanged, music filled the air and boundaries both physical and psychological seemed to soften. Tribal groups from across India joined in, creating a rare space of cultural dialogue in one of the country's most sensitive regions.

For Gurez, the festival marked a shift in identity. It was no longer just a destination of landscapes but a place of lived heritage inviting not just tourists but travellers willing to engage more deeply.

Beyond the present lies an ambitious future. Plans are underway to establish a dedicated tourism development authority, to improve infrastructure and to explore all-weather connectivity through tunnels and expanded road networks linking Gurez with Kargil and beyond. The vision is clear that's to transform the valley from a seasonal retreat into a year-round destination.

And yet, even as these plans take shape, the essence of Gurez remains rooted in something more enduring.

It lies in the reopening of a road after months of silence. In the resilience of communities that have learned to endure and adapt. In the quiet partnership between institutions that build, protect and sustain. And in the growing realisation that even the most remote corners can find their place in a larger story.

Gurez today stands at a rare intersection where geography, history and aspiration converge. It is no longer defined solely by its distance from the centre but by its journey towards it.

In that journey, the road over Razdan Top is no longer just a passage through snow. It is a passage into possibility.

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BADAMWARI

In Bloom

by Sohail Bashir

As almond blossoms unfurl in Srinagar's historic Badamwari, Kashmir quietly steps into spring. More than a floral spectacle, the festival marks the valley's first cultural awakening of the year blending with music, craft and community while opening the gates to a new tourist season.

There is a moment in Kashmir that cannot be marked on a calendar. It arrives quietly, almost gently, when the bare branches of almond trees in Srinagar's old city soften into pale pink and white and the long winter finally begins to loosen its hold. That moment lives in Badamwari.

With the inauguration of the Almond Blossom Festival 2026 by Omar Abdullah, the historic garden beneath the watchful silhouette of Hari Parbat once again transformed into the valley's first celebration of spring. Known locally as *Badam Vaer*, the garden is more than just a scenic space, it is where Kashmir announces its seasonal rebirth followed by the bloom of Tulips in a scintillating Tulip garden.

Badamwari blooms before the rest of the valley awakens. While the tulips of the Zabarwan foothills remain days away from opening and cherry trees remain undecided, the almond blossoms arrive early, almost impatiently, as if eager to break the silence of winter. Their brief, delicate life lends them a deeper meaning that they are not just flowers but a



As one enters the garden, the experience unfolds like a layered narrative of Kashmir itself. The scent of blossoms mingles with the sound of Sufi music drifting through the air, creating an atmosphere that feels at once spiritual and celebratory.

reminder of renewal, of time moving forward, of life returning.

The festival that now surrounds this bloom has grown into something far more immersive than a simple floral display. As one enters the garden, the experience unfolds like a layered narrative of Kashmir itself. The scent of blossoms mingles with the sound of **Sufi music drifting through the air**, creating an atmosphere that feels at once spiritual and celebratory. The music does not overpower the space; it settles into it, echoing softly against the garden's historic contours.

Nearby, groups of young





performers in traditional attire move in rhythm, their steps forming the graceful patterns of *Rouf* and other folk traditions. Their presence is not staged spectacle alone, it is continuity, a living thread connecting generations. Around them, artisans sit beside their work: finely painted papier-mache, hand woven Pashmina, carved walnut wood, each piece carrying the quiet dignity of craft refined over centuries.

There is warmth in the way people gather here. Families walk slowly beneath the blossoms, students pause for photographs, tourists linger a little longer than planned. At small stalls, steaming *samovars* pour out cups of *kehwa*, and the familiar comfort of Kashmiri bread and seasonal delicacies adds another layer to the experience. The garden becomes less of a venue and more of a shared space as intimate, cultural and alive.

What makes Badamwari truly

significant, however, is not just what happens within its walls but what it sets into motion beyond them. The Almond Blossom Festival has, over time, come to mark the **informal opening of Kashmir's tourist season.**

It is the valley's first invitation to the outside world each year, a soft, beautiful beginning before the grander spectacles of tulip gardens, cherry blossoms and summer landscapes take over.

Tourism authorities have increasingly shaped this moment with intention. The introduction of digital

Yet, despite these changes, the essence of the festival remains rooted in simplicity, a garden, blossoms, music and people.

conveniences like an e-ticketing system reflects a valley that is adapting, modernising and preparing for a wider influx of visitors. Yet, despite these changes, the essence of the festival remains rooted in simplicity, a garden, blossoms, music and people.

For locals, the festival carries a quieter, more personal meaning. After months of harsh winter, it offers a space to step out, to reconnect, to feel part of something shared. In recent years especially, such public gatherings have taken on added significance, becoming expressions of normalcy and collective belonging.

Badamwari, once neglected and now revived, mirrors this very journey. Its restoration is not just about landscaping or tourism, it is about reclaiming memory, about giving new life to spaces that have always been part of Kashmir's cultural soul.

As the blossoms reach their peak and slowly begin to fall, the garden prepares to hand over the season to the rest of the valley. Soon, tulips will bloom in ordered rows, mustard fields will turn the countryside golden and rivers will swell with melted snow. But the first whisper of it all, the first sign that Kashmir is awake again, will always belong to Badamwari.

And so, every year, spring in Kashmir does not begin with grandeur. It begins with almond blossoms, soft and fleeting, opening quietly in an old garden and with them, a valley begins once more.



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