

THE SHIFT THAT BLUR THE LINE BETWEEN RELIGION AND CULTURAL IMITATION.

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KASHMIR TRANSITION From security to governance

Kashmir appears to be moving from a predominantly Security -centric framework towards what may be described governance grid

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GRID TO GOVERNANCE GRID**

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KASHMIR CENTRAL



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RECLAIMING THE SPACE FOR THOUGHT

Public life in any society is sustained not only by institutions and policies but by the quality of ideas that enable people to interpret change and locate themselves within broader contexts. In Kashmir, this intellectual tradition has historically offered depth and nuance to complex realities. In recent years, however, there is a perceptible thinning of this space. Discourse continues but it is often narrower in scope, cautious in tone and limited in analytical depth.

This is not a question of the absence of thought. Ideas persist in private conversations, academic settings and informal exchanges. What appears diminished is their public articulation, the willingness and the platforms to bring ideas into a shared space where they can be examined, debated and refined. The changing nature of media, with its emphasis on speed and reaction, has further altered this landscape, privileging immediacy over reflection and assertion over analysis.



The implications are subtle yet far-reaching. A thinner intellectual space reduces society's ability to engage with complexity and encourages simplified narratives at the expense of layered understanding. In a region like Kashmir, where realities are deeply interconnected, this can lead to distortions both within and beyond the region. It also creates a gap between lived experience and its wider representation, as external narratives increasingly fill the space left by a less visible internal voice.

At a time of significant transitions in governance, development and connectivity, the need for thoughtful interpretation is more pressing than ever. Reinvigorating this space calls for strengthening platforms of inquiry, encouraging reasoned debate and fostering a culture of rigorous engagement. Kashmir's intellectual capacity remains intact; what is required is its renewed and sustained presence in the public domain.

Bashir Assad

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TRANSITION

FROM SECURITY GRID TO

GOVERNANCE GRID



by Bashir Assad

A silent transition is redefining Kashmir's governance landscape. As administrative systems, digital platforms and welfare mechanisms expand, the state's presence is increasingly mediated through governance rather than security alone. We at KC explore this evolving paradigm while probing its limits in addressing deeper political realities.



For much of the past three decades, the experience of the state in Kashmir has been defined by its visibility in security terms. Checkpoints, patrols and the pervasive architecture of surveillance constituted not merely an administrative arrangement but a lived reality that shaped how governance itself was perceived. The state, in this sense, was not encountered through routine civic processes as much as through its capacity to maintain order.

What is now unfolding, however, is a quieter and more complex transition. Without any formal declaration or dramatic policy rupture, Kashmir appears to be moving from a predominantly security centric framework toward what may be described as a governance grid, where the everyday presence of the state is increasingly mediated through administrative mechanisms, welfare delivery and developmental outreach. This shift is neither absolute nor complete and the security apparatus remains firmly



Without any formal declaration or dramatic policy rupture, Kashmir appears to be moving from a predominantly security centric framework toward what may be described as a governance grid.

in place. Yet, the centre of gravity, at least in operational terms, is gradually expanding beyond it.

This transformation is best understood not through isolated developments but through the cumulative effect of multiple, seemingly disparate changes. Roads that penetrate previously inaccessible areas, digital platforms that streamline access to services and a more assertive district administration collectively signal a reconfiguration of how the state seeks to engage with society. In this emerging framework, governance

is not simply an adjunct to security; it is becoming a parallel and at times primary mode of state presence.

One of the most striking aspects of this shift is the increasing centrality of the bureaucracy. In the absence of a fully restored and functioning political structure, administrative institutions have assumed a more direct and expansive role. Decision making has become more centralized but its execution is often decentralized through district and sub district levels, creating a system that is both vertically controlled and locally implemented. The result is a form of governance that is simultaneously distant in its authority and immediate in its impact.

This has important implications for how legitimacy is constructed. Traditionally, political intermediaries played a crucial role in mediating between the state and the public, translating policy into practice while also articulating local concerns upward. Their relative marginalization has altered this dynamic. The citizen increasingly encounters the state not through elected representatives but through officials, digital interfaces and administrative processes. This does not eliminate the question of representation but it reframes it, shifting the locus of interaction from political negotiation to administrative access.

At the same time, there is



Welfare schemes are tracked, infrastructure projects are monitored and performance is increasingly quantified.

a discernible movement toward technocratic governance. The emphasis on measurable outcomes, time bound delivery and digital monitoring reflects a broader shift toward data driven administration. Welfare schemes are tracked, infrastructure projects are monitored and performance is increasingly quantified. This lends a certain efficiency and predictability to governance but it also introduces new forms of abstraction where complex





social realities are translated into metrics and indicators.

For a region like Kashmir, with its layered history and contested narratives, this raises important questions. Can governance, however efficient, substitute for political articulation? Does improved service delivery translate into deeper forms of legitimacy or does it coexist with unresolved political anxieties? The answers are neither immediate nor straightforward. What is evident, however, is that governance is being

There is a degree of acceptance, particularly in relation to developmental initiatives and improved access to services.

positioned as a stabilizing force, a means of normalizing the relationship between the state and society in the absence of a fully functional political process.

Public response to this transition has been marked less by overt expression and more by a form of quiet adaptation. There is a degree of acceptance, particularly in relation to developmental initiatives and improved access to services. At the same time, this acceptance does not necessarily imply a resolution of underlying political questions. Rather, it reflects a pragmatic engagement with the structures that are currently in place. People navigate the system as it exists, even as their perceptions of it remain layered and at times ambivalent.

The expansion of governance into areas previously defined by distance, both physical and administrative, is another important dimension of this shift. Remote regions, long at the margins of both development and attention, are increasingly being integrated into the administrative grid. This has the potential to alter long standing patterns of exclusion



but it also introduces new challenges related to sustainability, local participation and the preservation of social and ecological balance.

There is, however, an inherent tension at the heart of this transition. A governance grid, by its very nature, seeks to standardize, to bring diverse regions and populations within a uniform administrative framework. Kashmir, on the other hand, is characterized by its heterogeneity, its multiple identities, and its complex political history. The interaction between these two tendencies, standardization and particularity, will shape the trajectory of this transformation.

It is also necessary to recognize that this shift does not represent a departure from the past as much as an evolution of it. The security framework has not receded; it has been supplemented. What is emerging is a layered model of state presence, where security and governance operate in tandem, sometimes reinforcing each other, at other times existing in parallel. The long term sustainability of this model will depend on how these layers are balanced and how they respond to changing circumstances.

The strategic question, therefore, is not simply whether Kashmir is moving from a security grid to a governance grid but what kind of governance is taking shape in the process. Is this a transitional



The long term sustainability of this model will depend on how these layers are balanced and how they respond to changing circumstances.

arrangement, designed to manage a particular phase or does it represent the contours of a more enduring framework? And if it is the latter, how

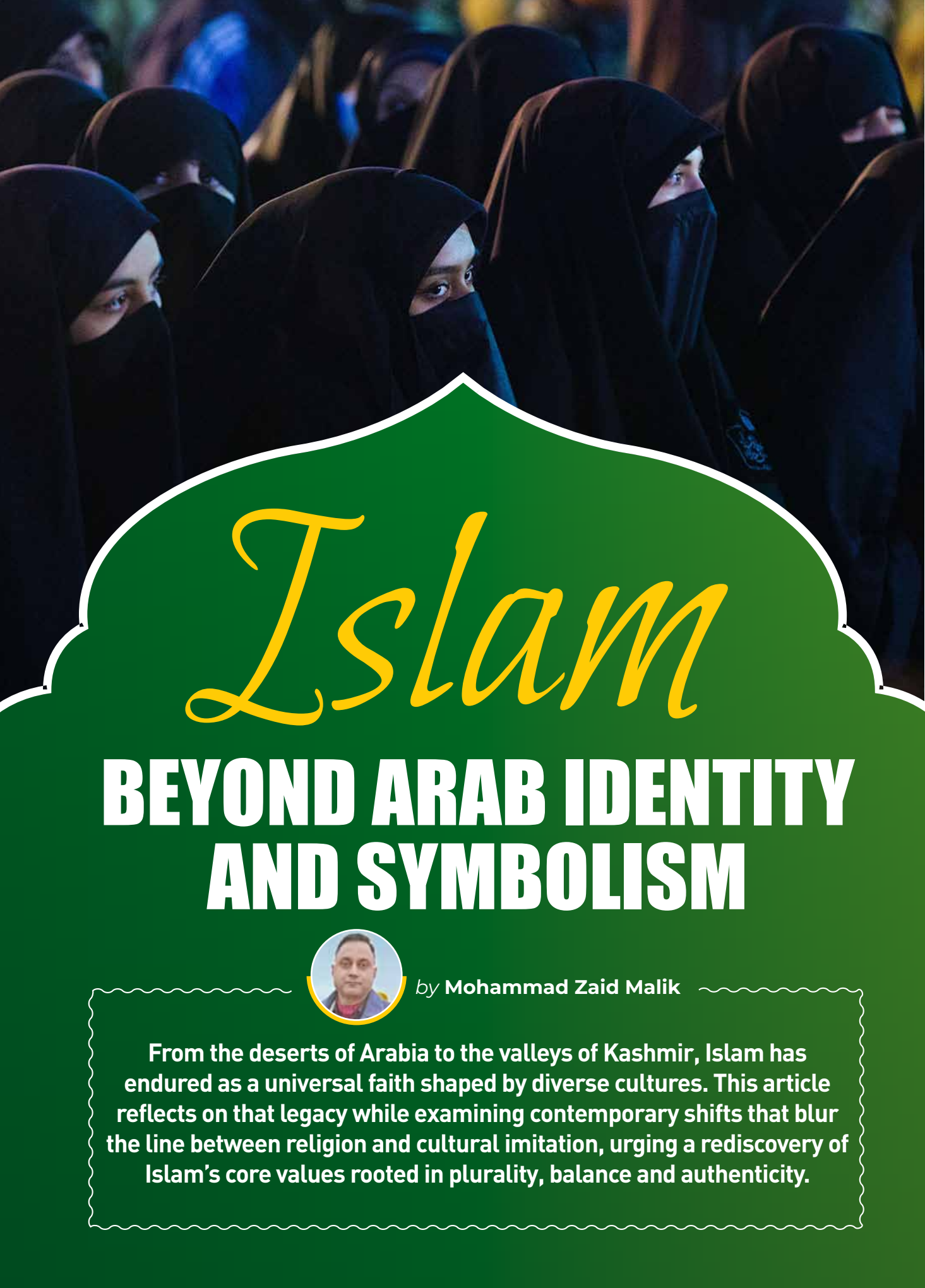
will it accommodate the demands of political representation, regional diversity and historical complexity?

These questions do not lend themselves to immediate answers but they underscore the importance of looking beyond the visible markers of change. The absence of dramatic events does not imply the absence of transformation. On the contrary, it is often in these quieter shifts that the foundations of future trajectories are laid.

What is unfolding in Kashmir today is precisely such a moment. The language of governance is becoming more prominent, the mechanisms of administration more pervasive and the interface between state and society more direct. Whether this leads to a deeper and more stable form of engagement or whether it reveals its own limitations over time, will depend on how this transition is navigated.

For now, it remains a silent shift, gradual, uneven and still in the making. But it is within this silence that some of the most consequential changes are taking place, reshaping not only how Kashmir is governed but how governance itself is understood in a region long defined by other imperatives.





Islam

BEYOND ARAB IDENTITY AND SYMBOLISM



by Mohammad Zaid Malik

From the deserts of Arabia to the valleys of Kashmir, Islam has endured as a universal faith shaped by diverse cultures. This article reflects on that legacy while examining contemporary shifts that blur the line between religion and cultural imitation, urging a rediscovery of Islam's core values rooted in plurality, balance and authenticity.

There are moments in history when a message emerges from a particular land yet refuses to belong to that land alone. Islam was one such message. It rose in the sands of seventh century Arabia but from its very inception, it spoke in a language meant for all of humanity. When Prophet Muhammad addressed his earliest followers, he was not laying the foundation of a tribe, a race or a civilisation bound to geography; he was articulating a moral and spiritual vision meant to transcend them all.

Within a remarkably short span of time, this vision traveled far beyond the Arabian Peninsula. It reached Persia, North Africa, Central Asia and eventually the Indian subcontinent. But what made this expansion extraordinary was not merely its speed or its political reach, it was the way Islam took root in different soils without uprooting the cultures it encountered. It created a shared spiritual center while allowing diverse cultural expressions to flourish around it.

At the heart of this universality was the idea of the *Ummah*, a community defined not by bloodline



Islam offered a moral compass, not a cultural mold. It provided principles of justice, compassion, humility and devotion but it did not impose a single way of dressing, speaking or living socially.

or territory but by faith. In this community, an Arab stood beside a Persian, a Turk beside an Indian, an African beside a Central Asian. They prayed in the same direction, recited the same Qur'an and believed in the same God. Yet they spoke different languages, wore different garments and preserved their distinct ways of life.

This distinction between faith and culture is not incidental; it is foundational. Islam offered a moral compass, not a cultural mold. It provided principles of justice, compassion, humility and devotion but it did not impose a single way of



dressings, speaking or living socially. As the great scholar Imam Al-Ghazali once emphasized, the essence of faith lies in the purification of the heart and the sincerity of intention, not in outward conformity to any particular cultural form.

For centuries, this balance defined the Muslim world. Even as political authority shifted from the *Umayyads* to the *Abbasids* and later to other empires, the sacred cities of Mecca and Medina remained spiritual anchors for all Muslims, not symbols of ethnic ownership. Islam's strength lay precisely in this ability to unify without homogenizing.

Nowhere is this historical dynamic more evident than in South Asia and particularly in Kashmir.

Islam arrived in the Kashmir valley not through conquest but through the gentle influence of saints, scholars and traders. Figures like Shah Mir Sayyid Ali Hamadani played a transformative role in shaping the spiritual and cultural landscape of the region. They did not seek to erase local traditions; rather, they engaged with them, refined them and infused them with Islamic ethical and spiritual values.

What emerged over centuries



What emerged over centuries was a distinctly Kashmiri expression of Islam deeply spiritual, inward looking and harmoniously woven into the cultural fabric of the land.

was a distinctly Kashmiri expression of Islam deeply spiritual, inward looking and harmoniously woven into the cultural fabric of the land. The rhythms of life in the valley, from its poetry and crafts to its architecture and attire, reflected this synthesis. The *pheran*, the shrines nestled among chinar trees, the soft cadence

of Kashmiri devotional poetry, all became part of a lived Islam that felt both universal and intimately local.

This historical experience underscores a crucial truth: Islam has never required cultural imitation to sustain itself. On the contrary, it has thrived precisely because it allowed cultures to retain their identity while



aligning with its moral framework.

Yet, the modern era has introduced new complexities.

The collapse of traditional empires after the first World War and the rise of nation states fragmented the political unity of the Muslim world. In the Arabian Peninsula, new states emerged, each shaped by its own national priorities. Over time, a subtle but significant shift began to take place. Cultural practices associated with the Arab world increasingly came to be perceived, in some circles, as markers of authentic Islamic identity. This shift has had far reaching consequences.

In many Muslim societies, including Kashmir, adopting Arab styles of dress, language and outward expression has gradually been conflated with religious devotion. The *abaya* replacing the *pheran*, the adoption of Arabian robes in religious spaces and the growing preference for imported symbols of piety are not merely changes in fashion, they signal a deeper transformation in how identity is understood. But this transformation raises an important question: when did faith become synonymous with cultural imitation?

Islam, as a religion, does not prescribe a uniform dress code tied to any specific geography. Modesty is a principle; its expression has historically varied across cultures. The assumption that one must resemble a particular region to be a better Muslim is not rooted in the core teachings of Islam. It is, rather, a product of historical and social developments that blur the line between religion and culture.

The renowned scholar Ibn Khaldun observed centuries ago that societies often imitate dominant cultures, especially when they perceive them as powerful or authoritative. This insight resonates strongly in the present context. The increasing association of Arab cultural forms with religious



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authenticity reflects not a theological necessity but a sociological tendency.

In Kashmir, this tendency carries particular implications.

The valley's cultural heritage is not superficial; it is a repository of collective memory and identity. The traditional attire, the local forms of religious expression, the centuries-old practices rooted in the land, these are not obstacles to faith. They are vessels through which faith has been lived and transmitted across generations.

When these cultural elements are sidelined in favor of imported symbols, something deeper is at stake. It is not merely a change in appearance but a gradual distancing



from one's own historical and cultural roots. Younger generations, observing these shifts, may begin to internalize the idea that their inherited traditions are somehow less Islamic, less authentic or less worthy. This creates a false and unnecessary tension.

Faith and culture are not adversaries. They operate on different planes. Faith provides ethical direction and spiritual meaning; culture provides context and expression. Confusing the two leads to a narrowing of both.

True religiosity cannot be measured by attire alone. It is reflected in character, in honesty, in compassion, in the way one treats



others and in the sincerity of one's relationship with God. A person clothed in the simplest local garment may embody the highest ideals of Islam, while another, dressed in the most visibly "Islamic" attire, may fall short of those same ideals.

Kashmir, with its layered history and rich cultural inheritance, stands at a delicate crossroads. The challenge it faces is not unique but it is deeply felt. It is the challenge of preserving a cultural identity while remaining firmly rooted in faith. This is not an either or choice.

A Kashmiri Muslim does not need to become culturally Arab to be spiritually authentic. The snow covered landscapes of the valley, the warmth of its traditional attire, the echoes of its local prayers and poetry, these are not deviations from Islam. They are expressions of a faith that

The snow covered landscapes of the valley, the warmth of its traditional attire, the echoes of its local prayers and poetry, these are not deviations from Islam. They are expressions of a faith that has found a home in a particular place and time.

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To preserve this balance requires awareness, especially among the

youth. It requires an understanding that Islam's universality lies in its principles not in any single cultural expression. It requires the confidence to embrace one's heritage without feeling that it compromises religious commitment. The future of Muslim societies, including Kashmir, depends in part on reclaiming this understanding.

The divisions that mark the contemporary Muslim world cannot be resolved through imitation or uniformity. They can only be addressed by returning to the foundational values that once made Islamic civilization a beacon of intellectual and moral vitality, justice, openness, humility and a respect for diversity within unity.

Recognizing the distinction between faith and culture is not a minor intellectual exercise; it is a necessary step toward restoring that balance. It allows communities to remain rooted without becoming rigid and to remain open without losing their identity.

Islam began as a universal message and it remains one. Its strength has never depended on cultural sameness but on its ability to guide diverse peoples toward a shared moral horizon.

In the quiet valleys of Kashmir, as in the bustling cities of the wider Muslim world, that horizon still calls. The task is not to imitate but to understand. Not to replace but to refine. Not to abandon identity but to elevate it through faith. And perhaps, in that balance, lies the true continuity of both heritage and belief.



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HOW INTERNAL DISSENT IS ERODING NC'S CREDIBILITY?



by Mian Tufail

As internal dissent in NC grows increasingly critical, the widening gap between electoral promise and governance reality in Jammu & Kashmir is becoming harder to ignore. Constrained authority, weakened accountability and centralized decision making are not only shaping governance outcomes but also raising deeper questions about credibility, coherence and the future of democratic politics in the region.



▼
In a functioning democracy, three pillars legitimacy, authority and accountability are expected to operate in synchrony. Legitimacy, derived from the ballot, empowers a government with moral and political authority. Authority, in turn, enables governance. Accountability ensures that such authority is exercised responsibly and remains answerable to the people. When aligned, these elements reinforce democratic health. When fractured, they produce dysfunction.

Nowhere is this dislocation more visible than in contemporary Jammu & Kashmir, where the post-2019 political architecture has redefined governance into a hybrid arrangement that's a part electoral, part administrative. Within this framework, the 2024 electoral victory of the Jammu & Kashmir National Conference was expected to mark a return to political normalcy. Instead, it has exposed the deep contradictions embedded in the region's altered political landscape.

Nineteen months into power, the government led by Omar Abdullah is confronting not merely an opposition challenge but an increasingly vocal dissent from within its own ranks. The unfolding tensions particularly involving Bashir Ahmad Veeri, MLA Srigufwara-Bijbehara and Agha Syed Ruhullah Mehdi, MP Srinagar, point toward a deeper crisis: a government struggling to reconcile its electoral legitimacy with constrained authority and diminishing accountability.

The NC's sweeping victory in the 2024 Assembly elections granted it undeniable legitimacy. Voters, fatigued by years of political uncertainty, placed their trust in a party historically associated with regional aspirations and governance experience. Yet, this mandate came with structural limitations. As a Union Territory with a legislature, Jammu & Kashmir operates under a



Within this framework, the 2024 electoral victory of the Jammu & Kashmir National Conference was expected to mark a return to political normalcy.

governance model where significant powers remain vested with the central administration.

This has created a legitimacy authority gap. While the NC possesses the electoral mandate, its capacity to exercise authority, particularly on core political issues such as restoration of

full statehood remains constrained. The result is a governance paradox: a government expected to deliver transformative outcomes without possessing the full institutional tools to do so.

In such a scenario, accountability becomes the first casualty. With limited authority to enact sweeping policy changes, the government increasingly relies on political messaging rather than tangible governance outcomes. Narrative replaces delivery; rhetoric substitutes reform.

DISILLUSIONMENT OF BASHIR AHMAD VEERI

▼
The rupture between the NC leadership and its own legislator Bashir Ahmad Veeri exemplifies this crisis. Veeri's electoral victory



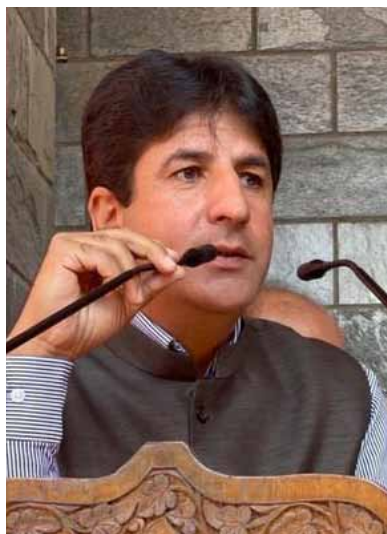
in Bijbehara was not insignificant. Defeating Iltija Mufti, daughter of former Chief Minister Mehbooba Mufti, he emerged as a representative of a younger, aspirational electorate. A substantial portion of his support came from first time voters, youth who expected structural reforms, particularly in employment and reservation policies.

Central to Veeri's campaign was his promise to address what he described as anomalies in Jammu & Kashmir's reservation framework. True to his word, he introduced a Private Member's Bill aimed at rationalising reservations and increasing the Open Merit quota.

What followed, however, revealed the fault lines within the ruling party.

Despite being listed on the Assembly agenda for nearly a year, the Bill was repeatedly deferred. When it was finally introduced, it faced resistance not from the opposition but from within the NC itself. Reports indicate that during internal party discussions, several legislators warned that the Bill could trigger social divisions and disrupt political equilibrium.

Central to Veeri's campaign was his promise to address what he described as anomalies in Jammu & Kashmir's reservation framework.



Chief Minister Omar Abdullah reportedly allowed the Bill to be introduced, only to make it clear that the party would oppose it during voting. When the moment arrived, Veeri found himself isolated, his own party voting against his proposal.

His emotional appeal on the Assembly floor was "for Allah's sake, allow the Bill for my children" was not merely a legislative plea; it was a reflection of the widening gap between electoral promises and political realities.

The rejection of the Bill marked more than a legislative defeat. It symbolised the erosion of internal democratic space within the party. Veeri's subsequent silence, his withdrawal from public engagement and the absence of outreach from party leadership point to a relationship that has moved from disagreement to estrangement.

REBELLION BY RUHULLAH MEHDI

▼
If Veeri's dissent is rooted in legislative frustration, the critique

from Agha Syed Ruhullah Mehdi is ideological and far more expansive.

Ruhullah, a prominent voice within the NC, has increasingly positioned himself as a conscience keeper of the party's original commitments. His recent remarks particularly in response to Chief Minister Omar Abdullah's comments about "political suicide" during the Budgam bypoll underscore a deepening ideological rift.

Rejecting the notion that politics is merely about electoral positioning; Ruhullah asserted that his struggle is not for Assembly seats or power but for the political, social and religious rights of the people of Jammu & Kashmir. His criticism of the party's conduct during the bypoll campaign accusing NC legislators of relying on money power and arrogance is unusually blunt for intra-party discourse.

More significantly, Ruhullah has accused the party leadership of betraying the promises made during the 2024 elections. This accusation strikes at the heart of democratic accountability. If electoral commitments are abandoned once power is secured, legitimacy itself begins to erode.

Ruhullah's strategy is not one of outright rebellion but of calibrated distancing. He remains within the party, yet consistently challenges



its direction. This quiet rebellion is perhaps more destabilising than open dissent, as it signals ideological fragmentation without triggering

Developmental outcomes remain limited, administrative responsiveness is questioned and policy innovation appears constrained.

formal disciplinary action.

POLITICS OF CONSTRAINT AND CONVENIENCE

The tensions involving Veeri and Ruhullah are not isolated incidents. They are symptomatic of a broader structural dilemma.

For the NC, constrained authority has necessitated political adaptation. Unable to deliver on larger constitutional or structural promises as promised, the party has increasingly reverted to narrative politics, emphasising historical grievances and positioning itself as a victim of central overreach.

While this strategy helps consolidate its core voter base, it does little to address immediate governance concerns. Developmental outcomes remain limited, administrative responsiveness is questioned and policy innovation appears constrained.

At the same time, the Bharatiya Janata Party, despite not being the ruling party in the Assembly, exercises significant authority through central oversight. Yet, its accountability to the local electorate remains indirect.

The Jammu and Kashmir





The dissent of leaders like Bashir Ahmad Veeri and Agha Syed Ruhullah Mehdi is a warning signal, an indication that the gap between promise and performance is widening.

Peoples Democratic Party (PDP), led by Mehbooba Mufti, operates with limited authority but seeks to leverage residual legitimacy through confrontational and religious politics.

PATRONAGE, PERCEPTION AND POLITICAL FATIGUE

One of the most significant consequences of this fractured structure is the persistence of patronage driven politics. With limited capacity for structural reform, political actors increasingly rely on symbolic gestures, selective interventions and constituency level patronage to maintain relevance.

This, in turn, reinforces public cynicism. Voters who participated enthusiastically in the 2024 elections now find themselves disconnected from governance outcomes. The perception that mandates do not translate into meaningful change weakens democratic engagement.

The cases of Veeri and Ruhullah amplify this perception. When elected

representatives themselves appear marginalised within their own party, it raises fundamental questions about internal democracy and decision making processes.

For Omar Abdullah, the challenge is both structural and personal. As a leader navigating a constrained political framework, he must balance administrative pragmatism with political expectations.

However, his handling of internal dissent, particularly the public snub of Veeri in the Assembly and the dismissive tone toward Ruhullah's criticism has contributed to perceptions of centralised decision making and limited tolerance for divergent views.

Leadership in such a context



requires not only governance acumen but also political accommodation. The absence of effective conflict resolution mechanisms within the party risks turning episodic dissent into sustained fragmentation.

The emerging question is whether the NC can recalibrate its internal dynamics and restore coherence to its political strategy. For this to happen, three shifts are essential. Firstly, Allowing space for dissent, encouraging policy debate and integrating diverse viewpoints can strengthen the party's institutional resilience. Second, while structural constraints cannot be eliminated overnight, transparent communication about governance limitations can help manage public expectations. Third, even within a constrained framework, incremental governance improvements particularly in areas such as employment, education and public services can rebuild credibility.

The story of the NC government in Jammu & Kashmir is not merely about political competition; it is about the viability of democratic governance in a structurally altered landscape.

The dissent of leaders like Bashir Ahmad Veeri and Agha Syed Ruhullah Mehdi is a warning signal, an indication that the gap between promise and performance is widening.

If unaddressed, this internal churn could evolve into a broader credibility crisis not just for the NC but for the democratic process itself in the region.

For now, the silence between Veeri and the party leadership and the measured defiance of Ruhullah, speak louder than any formal rebellion. Whether this moment leads to introspection or further fragmentation will determine the trajectory of politics in Jammu & Kashmir in the years to come. The mandate remains intact but its meaning is increasingly contested.

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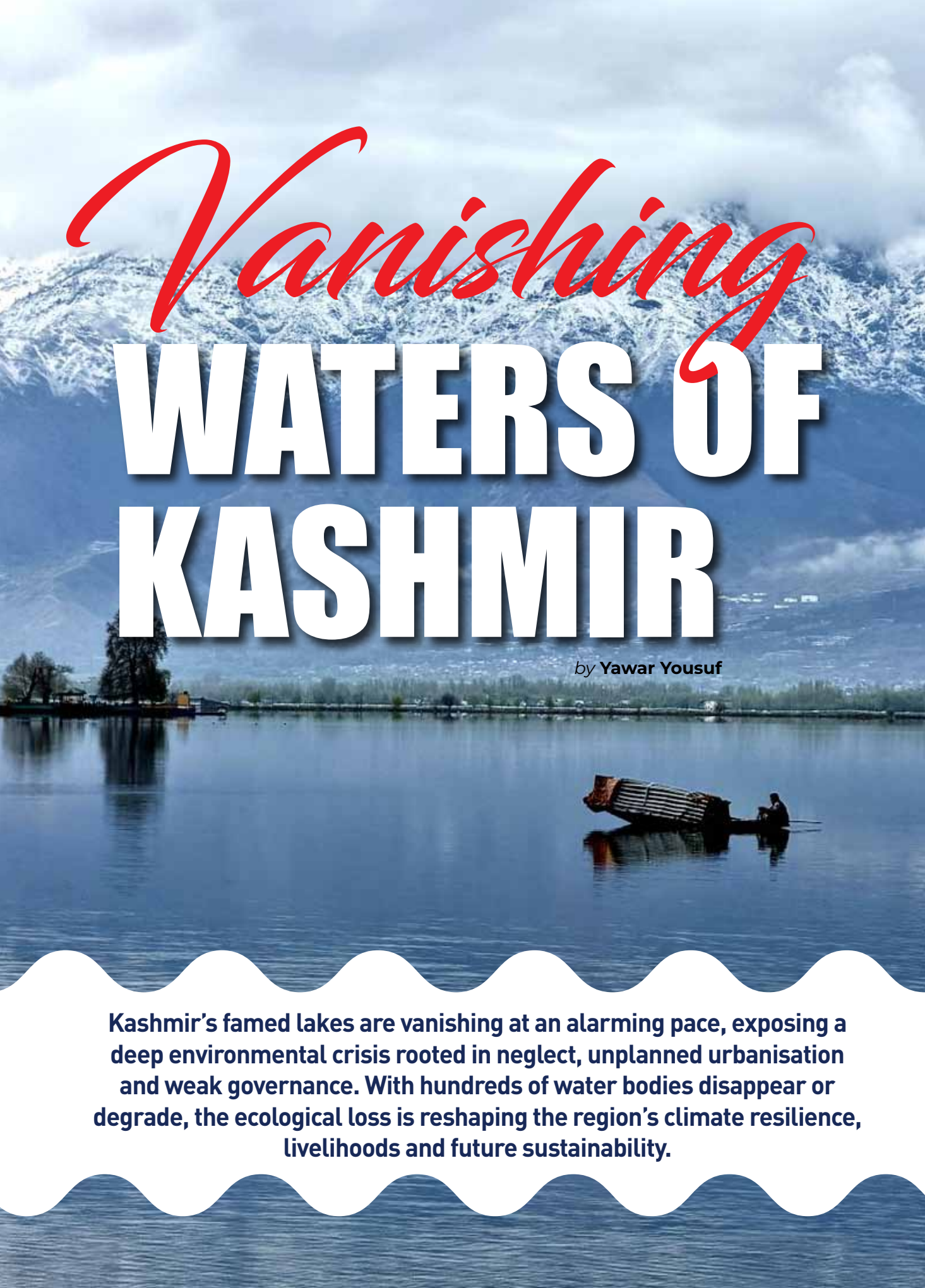
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Vanishing **WATERS OF KASHMIR**

by Yawar Yousuf

Kashmir's famed lakes are vanishing at an alarming pace, exposing a deep environmental crisis rooted in neglect, unplanned urbanisation and weak governance. With hundreds of water bodies disappear or degrade, the ecological loss is reshaping the region's climate resilience, livelihoods and future sustainability.

Jammu and Kashmir has for centuries been known as a land of extraordinary natural beauty, where snow-fed rivers, crystal springs, wetlands and lakes shaped not only the landscape but also the identity of its people. From the celebrated Dal Lake and Wular Lake to the countless lesser known alpine lakes, marshes and village water bodies scattered across mountains and plains, these waters have long sustained agriculture, moderated climate, supported biodiversity, attracted tourism and nourished livelihoods. Yet behind this image of paradise lies one of the gravest environmental crises facing the region today: the disappearance and degradation of hundreds of lakes.

Recent findings by the Comptroller and Auditor General exposed a deeply troubling reality. Out of 697 lakes officially recorded in Jammu and Kashmir in 1967, around 315 have disappeared entirely while many others have drastically shrunk or become ecologically dead. When degraded and functionally destroyed lakes are included, the broader public



Out of 697 lakes officially recorded in Jammu and Kashmir in 1967, around 315 have disappeared entirely while many others have drastically shrunk or become ecologically dead.

discourse now refers to the loss of nearly 365 lakes. Whether measured by strict statistics or wider ecological collapse, the message is unmistakable that the Jammu and Kashmir is witnessing a silent water tragedy of historic proportions.

This is not merely a matter of lost scenery. It is a story of administrative neglect, careless urbanisation, weak enforcement, public indifference and a dangerous failure to understand that lakes are not decorative assets but living systems essential to human survival. In a Himalayan region already threatened by climate change, erratic rainfall and growing water stress, the destruction of lakes is not just unfortunate, it is reckless.

For generations, lakes in Jammu and Kashmir performed functions far beyond their visible beauty. They acted as natural reservoirs, storing water during wet months and releasing it gradually during dry seasons. They recharged groundwater, supported fisheries, sustained lotus cultivation, provided fodder, moderated summer temperatures and hosted migratory birds. Wetlands absorbed excess rainfall and reduced flood risks. Wular Lake, one of Asia's great freshwater lakes, historically functioned as a vast sponge for the Jhelum basin. Dal Lake became the face of Kashmir's tourism economy. Hokersar wetland provided a haven for birdlife. Manasbal, Mansar and





Surinsar held ecological and cultural significance. Yet alongside these famous lakes existed hundreds of smaller, less glamorous water bodies whose value was no less vital. Their tragedy was that they were largely invisible to policymakers.

For decades, official attention remained concentrated on a handful of iconic lakes that held tourism value or political symbolism. Restoration schemes, beautification drives, media events and selective interventions focused repeatedly on Dal, Wular or a few other recognised names. Meanwhile, hundreds of smaller lakes, ponds, marshes and seasonal wetlands across districts received little mapping, no protection plans, weak monitoring and almost no legal defence against encroachment. This selective environmentalism reflected a dangerous mindset: preserve what is visible, neglect what is essential.

As towns expanded and land values rose, wetlands and lake margins increasingly came to be seen as vacant land waiting for conversion. Marshes were filled for colonies, roads and commercial complexes. Natural drainage channels feeding lakes were narrowed, blocked or built over. In

Meanwhile, hundreds of smaller lakes, ponds, marshes and seasonal wetlands across districts received little mapping, no protection plans, weak monitoring and almost no legal defence against encroachment.

some areas, construction debris was casually dumped into water bodies. In others, agricultural expansion gradually ate into lake boundaries. The damage was often incremental

rather than dramatic, which made it easier to ignore. A few truckloads of earth one season, a wall extension the next, a road alignment later and over time a lake disappeared from maps



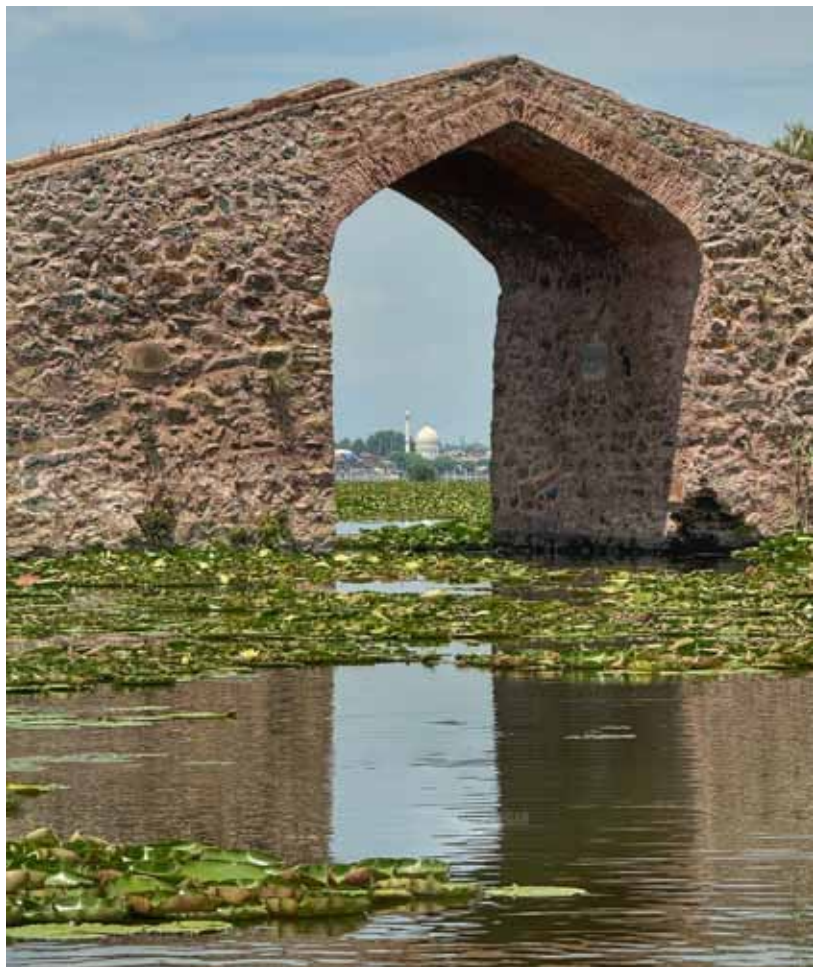
and memory.

What makes the crisis even more disturbing is that state agencies were not always passive observers. In several instances, government departments themselves approved or undertook projects in ecologically sensitive zones while publicly speaking of conservation. Regulations existed on paper but enforcement was selective and inconsistent. Powerful encroachers often faced little consequence while weaker offenders became symbolic targets. Such uneven governance eroded public confidence and normalised illegality.

The floods of 2014 should have marked a decisive turning point. That disaster demonstrated with brutal clarity what happens when wetlands shrink, floodplains are occupied and natural drainage systems are obstructed. Lakes and marshes that once stored excess water had already been reduced. Urban expansion had hardened surfaces and narrowed water escape routes. Yet although the floods triggered temporary awareness, the deeper structural lessons were only partially absorbed. Encroachment pressures continued, land conversion remained attractive and ecological planning never became central to development policy.

Government failure, however, is only part of the story. Society too must confront its share of responsibility.

Across many areas, environmental degradation has been normalised in everyday behaviour. Household waste is dumped into streams and lake edges. Plastic bottles and food packaging accumulate near tourist waters. Sewage flows untreated into connected drains. Construction material is stored on wetlands. Boundaries are quietly extended into common ecological spaces. Communities that passionately celebrate Kashmir's beauty often remain silent when that beauty is damaged in practical



Encroachment pressures continued, land conversion remained attractive and ecological planning never became central to development policy.

life. Public outrage that can quickly mobilise around political or social controversies rarely sustains itself around disappearing lakes.

This silence has consequences. Ecological theft flourishes where civic resistance is weak.

Tourism adds another layer of irony. Jammu and Kashmir markets its lakes as symbols of paradise. Visitors arrive for shikara rides, houseboats, birdwatching, mountain treks and scenic escapes. Yet unmanaged tourism can intensify pollution, crowding and construction pressure. Fragile alpine lakes increasingly face litter and disturbance. Popular waterfronts struggle with waste disposal. Commercial expansion near scenic zones often prioritises short term revenue over long term sustainability. The economy depends on nature even as it undermines it.

Climate change now makes this neglect far more dangerous than in previous decades. Himalayan systems are undergoing rapid stress through glacier retreat, changing snowfall patterns, sudden rainfall bursts and altered seasonal water availability. In

such conditions, every lake becomes strategically important. Natural water bodies store runoff, stabilise local climates, sustain biodiversity and buffer drought or flood extremes. Destroying them during a climate crisis is equivalent to dismantling safety infrastructure before a storm.

The loss of smaller lakes may prove especially damaging. Public attention naturally gravitates toward Dal or Wular but hundreds of modest wetlands and village lakes collectively perform enormous ecological work. They recharge aquifers, maintain soil moisture and support local agriculture, cool surrounding areas and preserve biodiversity corridors. Their disappearance rarely makes headlines, yet in aggregate it can be more destructive than the decline of one famous lake. They were sacrificed precisely because they lacked visibility.

Reversing this crisis requires more than symbolic clean-up drives or occasional announcements. Jammu and Kashmir needs a comprehensive water body restoration mission grounded in science, law and public participation. Every lake, pond, marsh and feeder channel must be accurately mapped using satellite imagery and field surveys. Boundaries must be legally notified and physically demarcated. Encroachments should be removed without fear or favour. No lake can survive if sewage continues to flow untreated into it, making modern waste and drainage infrastructure essential. Each district should have restoration plans tailored to its own geography rather than relying on Srinagar centric policymaking.

Equally important is community stewardship. Local residents are often the first to witness illegal filling, dumping or boundary changes. If empowered through village committees, citizen monitoring platforms and transparent grievance systems, communities can become



No lake can survive if sewage continues to flow untreated into it, making modern waste and drainage infrastructure essential. Each district should have restoration plans tailored to its own geography rather than relying on Srinagar centric policymaking.

defenders of nearby water bodies rather than spectators to their decline. Schools and universities should treat lakes not as background scenery but as living classrooms of ecology, climate and citizenship.

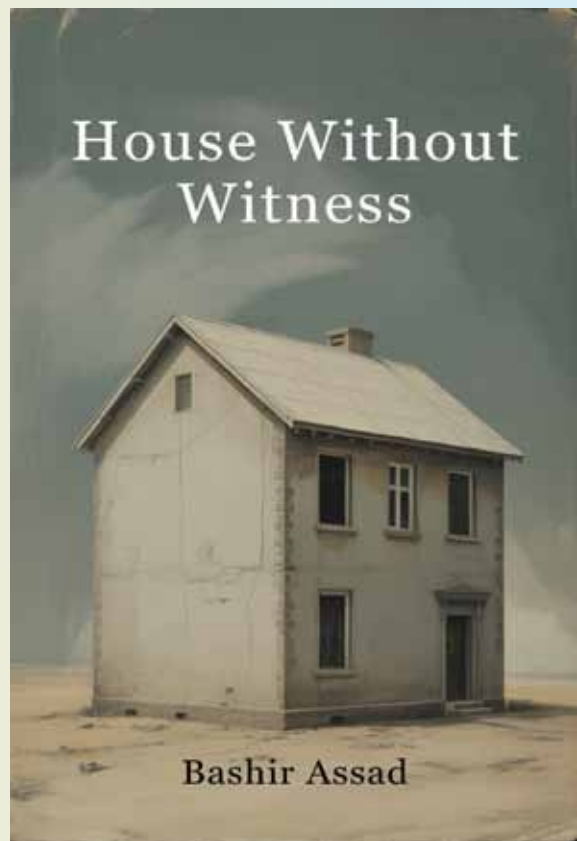
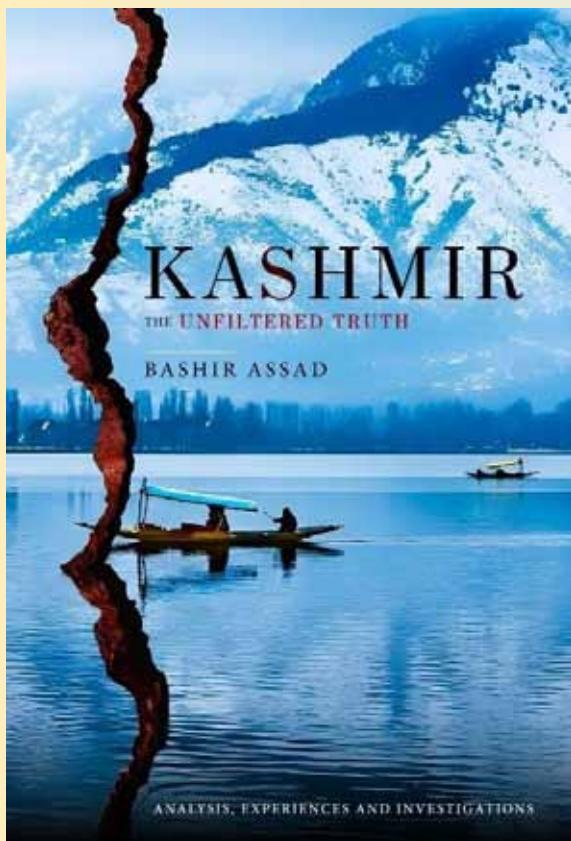
The disappearance of 365 lakes in Jammu and Kashmir is not just an environmental statistic. It is a measure of how institutions failed to plan, how development was poorly imagined and how society tolerated the erosion of common assets. Future generations may ask how a region famous across the world for its natural beauty allowed so much of its water heritage to vanish in plain sight.

That question will be difficult to

answer unless action begins now.

Jammu and Kashmir cannot continue selling paradise in brochures while losing it on the ground. Lakes are not ornamental features for photographs; they are the circulatory system of the landscape. They sustain farms, towns, tourism and wildlife and climate resilience. If they continue to disappear, the consequences will extend far beyond ecology into economy, health and security. The choice is stark. Either the region undertakes serious restoration led by accountable governance and active citizens or paradise will survive only in memory while its waters disappear forever.

The recent release of two books,
“Kashmir: The Unfiltered Truth”,
and **“House Without Witness”**
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KASHMIR

AT CROSSROADS AFTER WEST ASIAN CONFLICT



by Mareaya Fayaz

As tensions escalate in West Asia, their ripple effects are quietly reaching Kashmir's economy by impacting prices, livelihoods and fragile market systems.



▼

The escalating conflict between the United States, Israel and Iran has caused repercussions that extend well beyond the immediate battlefield. While the world's headlines are dominated by the geopolitical concerns, areas like Jammu and Kashmir are discreetly preparing for economic repercussions. Kashmir is especially vulnerable because of its unstable, consumption driven economy, significant reliance on horticultural exports and sizable diaspora labour in the Middle East.

From apple orchards to market

Higher fuel prices directly result in higher transportation costs for a region like Jammu and Kashmir, which is mostly dependent on imports for necessities.

places, conversations around the Valley reveal an increasing sense of uneasiness. People are expecting actual changes in lives, prices and long term stability rather than just responding to headlines. The long queues at petrol pumps and LPG agencies, rationing of essential commodities all show the fear of the aftermath of the ongoing conflict.

RISING INFLATION

▼

Inflation is one of the first and most noticeable effects of global conflict, and Kashmiris are already worried about growing costs. Oil supply channels are frequently disrupted by wars involving major world powers, which causes fuel prices to soar. Higher fuel prices directly result in higher transportation costs for a region like Jammu and Kashmir, which is mostly dependent on imports for necessities. The cost of food, building supplies and everyday necessities rises as a result of this domino effect. Due to the Valley's rugged geography and logistical difficulties, traders caution that even a slight increase in gasoline prices might greatly increase the cost of products arriving there.





Furthermore, those with lower and moderate incomes are disproportionately affected by inflation. A sizable portion of Kashmir's population relies on government jobs, small enterprises and agriculture; the region's economy is not highly industrialized. Households with poor income elasticity may find it difficult to tolerate sustained price rises, which could result in lower consumption and slower economic growth.

Horticulture, particularly apple growing, is the foundation of Kashmir's economy. The sector employs millions of people, both directly and indirectly, and contributes significantly to regional income. However, current geopolitical tensions have the potential to disrupt export markets and supply chains. The Middle East has long been an important market for Kashmiri goods. Any regional instability has the potential to disrupt demand, logistics and payment cycles. Shipping routes may become unpredictable, insurance rates may rise and customers may be hesitant to make significant purchases due to economic uncertainty. Furthermore, global market volatility can provide opportunities for competitive companies from other nations to gain market share. If

Horticulture, particularly apple growing, is the foundation of Kashmir's economy. The sector employs millions of people, both directly and indirectly, and contributes significantly to regional income.

Kashmiri exporters experience delays or higher costs, overseas purchasers may look for alternatives, creating long term damage to Kashmir's horticultural economy.

Local traders are likewise concerned about home surplus. If exports decrease, crops may overwhelm local markets, lower prices and reducing farmers profits. This twin pressure falling selling prices and growing input costs has the potential to impose major strain on the sector.

PEOPLES LIFELINE AT RISK

For decades, the Middle East has



provided an economic lifeline for many Kashmiri families. Thousands of workers from the region work in Gulf countries in sectors including as construction, services and retail. Remittances sent home serve an important role in maintaining household incomes and local spending.

However, with the violence cantered in the Middle East, Kashmiri expatriates are becoming increasingly concerned. Economic instability, business closures and security concerns may result in job losses or lower incomes. Workers in temporary or contract jobs are more vulnerable.

Families back home are already voicing concern about the uncertainty. Remittances are more than just supplemental income; for many families, they are the principal source of financial support. An abrupt disruption could have a direct impact on education, healthcare and daily living conditions.

Ishfaq Ahmad, who works at a multinational company in Abu Dhabi, share his views with *KC* and says, “I live in uncertainty that if conditions worsen I may have to leave my job. I have worked here for last 12 years and my kids go to school here. I have already sent my wife and children home amid safety concerns. I don’t know what I am going to do back home with no job or income.”

The likelihood of large scale return migration adds a further element of difficulty. If Kashmiri workers begin returning from the Middle East due to job losses or safety concerns, the local economy may struggle to accommodate them.

Jammu and Kashmir already has a significant unemployment rate, particularly among youth. The return of trained and semi skilled individuals would heighten competition for few job opportunities. Without sufficient planning and support structures, this could cause social and economic stress.



Economic instability, business closures and security concerns may result in job losses or lower incomes. Workers in temporary or contract jobs are more vulnerable.

Furthermore, reintegration is not uncomplicated. Many returning workers may not find job that matches their abilities or past pay. Starting a new firm necessitates the

acquisition of finance, infrastructure and market access, all of which are scarce commodities.

The psychological impact should also not be underestimated. Workers returning after years abroad may face uncertainty and a sense of displacement, further complicating their transition.

While some returning migrants may see business as a viable option, the reality on the ground creates considerable challenges. Access to credit remains a significant concern in Kashmir. Banks frequently request collateral and documents, which many individuals may be unable to supply.

Furthermore, the regional business climate is hampered by a lack of industrial infrastructure,





regulatory difficulties and market uncertainty. Starting a business in such circumstances poses significant risks, particularly during an economic downturn. There's also the issue of market saturation. Small firms, particularly in retail and services, are already functioning in a competitive market. New entrants may struggle to establish businesses without unique value propositions or external backing.

Beyond obvious economic indicators, the psychological aspect of uncertainty is essential. Fear of inflation, job loss and market volatility can all lead to lower consumer spending. When households anticipate terrible times ahead, they tend to reduce non-essential expenses.

This behavioural shift may have a compounding effect on the

Tourism provides a variety of jobs, from hotel owners and taxi drivers to artisans and street vendors. Any decline in this sector would have far-reaching effects.

economy. Reduced demand affects local firms, potentially reducing hiring or investment. Over time, this can lead to a self-perpetuating economic slump. In Kashmir, where small enterprises dominate the economy, consumer confidence

is especially crucial. A protracted period of uncertainty may depress entrepreneurial activity and impede economic recovery attempts.

Although not directly affected by the fighting, Kashmir's tourism industry may suffer as well. Global geopolitical issues frequently affect travel behaviour. International tourists may postpone or cancel excursions for safety reasons, even if the region remains unaffected.

Domestic tourism, which has been a major source of economic activity in recent years, may also slow if inflation lowers disposable incomes. Higher travel expenses and economic uncertainties may discourage discretionary vacation spending. Tourism provides a variety of jobs, from hotel owners and taxi drivers to artisans and street vendors. Any decline in this sector would have far-reaching effects.

Given the numerous challenges, there is an urgent need for proactive policy initiatives. To avoid excessive inflation, the authorities must closely monitor pricing patterns and ensure an adequate supply of critical commodities. Support for the horticulture industry is critical. This could involve supporting alternate export markets, giving transportation subsidies and ensuring that farmers receive timely payments. Strengthening cold storage and logistical facilities might also help to reduce losses.

Returning migrants require tailored rehabilitation programs. Skill mapping, financial support and credit are all options that can help them transition. Public works programs and job schemes may also offer temporary relief. Furthermore, creating a welcoming atmosphere for entrepreneurship through simpler rules, mentorship programs and market connections can stimulate self-employment.

The current geopolitical issue is more than just a far-off headline for many people in Jammu and



Kashmir; it is gradually permeating daily life. A shopkeeper hesitating before replenishing inventory, a farmer questioning whether this year's produce will find customers or a family nervously awaiting a call from a son employed in the Gulf are just a few examples of how it manifests in subtle but telling ways. Suddenly, it seems as though local reality and worldwide warfare are extremely close.

This moment serves as a reminder of how intertwined the globe has grown. The economic rhythm of regions like Kashmir can be subtly altered by decisions made in distant capitals, conflicts in oil routes or instability in West Asia. Additionally, the impact is frequently more profound and rapid due to the region's economy's heavy reliance on external connections, whether through horticultural exports, imports of necessities or remittances from migrant labour.

But Kashmir has experienced uncertainty in the past. Its residents are accustomed to upheaval and this lived experience frequently results in a particular form of resilience

that is grounded, pragmatic and community-driven. Families pool resources, neighbours help one another and local networks fill in the gaps left by formal systems. Once more, this social resilience will be crucial in mitigating the effects.

However, resilience cannot sustain the load indefinitely on its own. It is obvious that prompt and careful intervention is required. The daily reality of farmers, traders, workers and returning migrants must be taken into consideration

Economies rely on expectations, trust and a sense of stability rather than just numbers. Recovery is feasible if people feel safe enough to invest, spend and make plans.

by policymakers, who must act not just swiftly but also compassionately. Support systems need to be available not just advertised. Markets must be safeguarded, not only monitored. And in order to reconstruct their lives, people returning from overseas will want more than simply pity.

Regaining confidence is equally crucial. Economies rely on expectations, trust and a sense of stability rather than just numbers. Recovery is feasible if people feel safe enough to invest, spend and make plans. Even minor shocks can develop into long term setbacks if uncertainty persists for too long.

Kashmir is in a precarious position as it observes events taking place far outside its boundaries. Its social structure and economic systems will probably be put to the test in the upcoming months. However, there is a well-known strength, the capacity to adjust, persevere and rebuild within that ambiguity. The result will rely on how well local systems react as well as how world events develop. The tale of Kashmir's economic destiny is found in that equilibrium between vulnerability and resilience.



REIMAGINING TOURISM BEYOND GONDOLA

by Waseem Hassan

Beyond gondolas and houseboats, a new tourism is emerging in Kashmir. The one that seeks meaning, yet risks repeating old patterns.





For decades, the idea of tourism in Kashmir has been inseparable from a familiar visual vocabulary. The image of the gondola ride at Gulmarg Gondola, the houseboats resting quietly on Dal Lake and the lush green gardens of Pahalgam have long defined the region's tourist imagination. These sites, while iconic, represent a particular phase in the evolution of tourism in Kashmir, one that privileged scenic consumption and curated experiences over deeper engagement with the region's social and ecological realities.

In recent years, however, a subtle but significant transformation has begun to take shape. Tourism in Kashmir is gradually moving beyond these established circuits not merely in search of new destinations but in pursuit of a different relationship with place. This emerging trend, which may be described as ultra offbeat tourism, signals a shift from visibility to immersion and from spectacle to experience.

The rise of this form of tourism in Kashmir must be situated within broader global changes in travel behaviour but it also reflects region



Tourism in Kashmir is gradually moving beyond these established circuits not merely in search of new destinations but in pursuit of a different relationship with place.

specific dynamics. The saturation of traditional tourist hubs has altered both the supply and demand sides of the industry. Popular destinations, once associated with serenity and exclusivity now experience seasonal congestion, rising costs and a degree of cultural standardization. For a growing segment of travellers, particularly younger and more globally mobile individuals, this has diminished the experiential value of conventional tourism. In response, there is an increasing inclination to move toward spaces that are less mediated and more intimate.

This outward movement is visible in the growing interest in

regions such as Gurez valley, Bangus valley and Lolab valley in frontier districts of North Kashmir's Kupwara and Bandipora and Doodpathri in Budgam District of Central Kashmir. These landscapes, until recently peripheral to the mainstream tourist map are now being rediscovered as sites of ecological richness and cultural distinctiveness. Yet, what draws travellers to these spaces is not merely their relative obscurity. It is the possibility of encountering Kashmir in a form that is less curated and more lived.

In these emerging circuits, the experience of travel is increasingly shaped by forms of participation rather than observation. Visitors are drawn to homestays that offer insight into local ways of life, to agrarian settings where seasonal rhythms dictate daily activity and to high altitude terrains that demand physical engagement with the landscape. Travel, in this sense, becomes less about covering distance and more about inhabiting a place, however temporarily. It is this shift that distinguishes ultra offbeat tourism from earlier forms of alternative

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travel.

At the same time, this transformation is not without its complexities. The expansion of tourism into relatively untouched areas introduces new economic possibilities for local communities, many of whom have historically remained at the margins of the region's tourism economy. Small scale hospitality ventures, local guiding networks and community based initiatives have begun to create alternative livelihood pathways. In regions like Gurez and Lolab, where formal economic opportunities have been limited, tourism offers a means of localized development that is both immediate and tangible.

However, the very processes that enable this expansion also carry inherent risks. The incorporation of offbeat destinations into broader tourism circuits often initiates a cycle of exposure, commodification and eventual saturation. Infrastructure development, while necessary, can strain fragile ecosystems. Cultural practices, once embedded in everyday life, may be repackaged to meet external expectations. The

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challenge, therefore, lies in ensuring that the movement toward the offbeat destinations does not simply replicate the patterns that have already transformed more established There is also a deeper tension that

underlies the rise of ultra offbeat tourism in Kashmir. The region occupies a complex political and historical space and any engagement with its landscapes is inevitably mediated by these realities. For some



travellers, the appeal of lesser known areas is intertwined with a desire to understand Kashmir beyond its surface representations. Yet this raises questions about the ethics of such engagement. To what extent can tourism meaningfully access lived realities without reducing them to experience? And how can such encounters be structured in ways

Ultra offbeat tourism, if it is to sustain itself as a meaningful alternative, must be anchored in principles of ecological sensitivity, cultural respect and community participation.

that respect both the dignity and the autonomy of local communities?

These questions point toward the need for a more reflective approach to tourism, one that recognizes the limits of consumption and the importance of context. Ultra offbeat tourism, if it is to sustain itself as a meaningful alternative, must be anchored in principles of ecological sensitivity, cultural respect and community participation. This requires not only policy interventions but also a shift in the expectations and conduct of travellers themselves.

What is unfolding in Kashmir today is not merely a diversification of tourist destinations but a reconfiguration of the very idea of travel. The movement beyond the gondola is, in essence, a movement away from a fixed and familiar gaze toward a more open and exploratory engagement with place. It reflects a growing recognition that the value of Kashmir does not reside solely in its iconic landscapes but in the multiplicity of experiences that lie beyond them.

Yet, this transition remains fragile. The offbeat, by its very nature, exists in a state of becoming. It derives its meaning from its distance from the mainstream and this distance is continually eroded by the forces of visibility and demand. The future of tourism in Kashmir will therefore depend not on how quickly new destinations are discovered but on how thoughtfully they are engaged.

If Kashmir is to move beyond its established tourist imagination, it must do so with a sense of restraint and awareness. The real promise of ultra offbeat tourism lies not in opening up every untouched landscape but in cultivating a form of travel that allows those landscapes to retain their integrity. In that sense, the question is not simply where tourism goes next but how it chooses to arrive.

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