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BEYOND THE POSTCARD LIES A SOCIETY NEGOTIATING STABILITY, PERCEPTION, AND FATIGUE OF PROLONGED UNCERTAINTY.

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KASHMIR CENTRAL

THE ARCHITECTURE OF NORMALCY

The Architecture of Normalcy explores how tourism in Kashmir has evolved beyond economics into a powerful symbol of resilience, public confidence, and social continuity in a region shaped by decades of complexity.

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**INVESTIGATE
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*expose
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**INCULCATE
DEMOCRATIC SPIRIT**

KASHMIR CENTRAL



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1 JUNE 2026

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KASHMIR CENTRAL

FUEL ANXIETY AND THE FRAGILE ECONOMICS OF KASHMIR'S APPLE INDUSTRY

The growing fuel crisis and the steady rise in transportation costs are emerging as serious concerns for Kashmir's already fragile horticulture economy, particularly the apple industry that sustains rural livelihoods across the Valley. At a time when growers were already facing the effects of an unusually cold spring that disrupted flowering and pollination in several apple-producing areas, the additional burden of rising fuel prices threatens to deepen uncertainty for thousands of farming families. This year's horticultural season began with visible anxiety among orchardists. Prolonged cold temperatures during the crucial flowering stage adversely affected pollination, raising fears of reduced fruit setting and lower overall production. For an industry that supports lakhs of people through cultivation, packaging, transport, storage, and trade networks, even a moderate decline in yield carries serious economic consequences. The fuel crisis now adds another layer of vulnerability to an industry heavily dependent on transportation. Kashmir's apple economy survives through the uninterrupted movement of produce to markets across India. Every increase in fuel prices directly raises freight charges, packaging expenses, storage costs, and ultimately reduces the already shrinking profit margins of growers. The concern becomes more serious because large sections of rural Kashmir remain overwhelmingly dependent on horticulture for economic survival. Entire districts function around seasonal agricultural cycles linked to apple production. When the horticulture sector experiences stress, the impact extends far beyond orchards. Transporters, labourers, traders, packaging units, and small rural businesses all begin feeling the pressure simultaneously. The issue is not merely about higher operational costs. It is about declining economic confidence within a sector already battling climate unpredictability, market instability, and rising input expenses. Fertilizers, pesticides, cartons, cold storage facilities, and transportation networks have all become significantly more expensive in recent years. For small and marginal orchardists, the margin for economic survival is narrowing steadily. There is also a larger policy concern demanding urgent attention. Kashmir's apple industry cannot continue functioning entirely at the mercy of weather disruptions and transportation volatility without structural safeguards. The sector requires greater investment in cold chain infrastructure, localized processing industries, subsidized transport mechanisms, and scientific crop protection systems capable of insulating growers from recurring economic shocks.

The apple industry is not merely an agricultural sector in Kashmir. It is the backbone of the rural economy and a source of stability for vast sections of the Valley. At a moment when production fears and fuel anxiety are converging simultaneously, growers require not just reassurance, but visible policy intervention capable of restoring confidence before another difficult season slips further into uncertainty.

Bashir Assad

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PERFORMING NORMALCY: TOURISM AND THE PRODUCTION OF STABILITY IN KASHMIR

The Architecture of Reassurance

KASHMIR CENTRAL | 1 JUNE 2026 | 5



by **Bashir Assad**

The Architecture of Normalcy explores how tourism in Kashmir has evolved beyond economics into a powerful symbol of resilience, public confidence, and social continuity in a region shaped by decades of complexity.



Every summer, Kashmir begins preparing itself for observation. Roads are repaired with unusual urgency, flowerbeds appear along major boulevards, security visibility becomes more calibrated, and tourism statistics start acquiring political significance beyond economics. Hotels reopen after long winters, houseboats are repainted, taxi operators negotiate seasonal expectations, and social media fills with carefully framed images of lakes, mountains, tulip gardens, saffron fields, cafés, and snow-covered meadows. The Valley begins performing itself once again for visitors, for television cameras, for policy narratives, and increasingly for the digital gaze of the outside world.

Tourism in Kashmir has never been merely tourism. It has always carried symbolic weight disproportionate to its economic contribution. Tourist arrivals are interpreted as indicators of peace, decline in tourist numbers is read as evidence of instability, and every successful season is

In Kashmir, tourism functions not merely as an economic sector, but as a symbolic performance of stability where hospitality, perception, and political messaging increasingly converge.

projected as confirmation of political normalization. The tourist in Kashmir therefore occupies a peculiar role. He is not simply a consumer of landscape. He becomes an unwitting participant in a larger political theatre where his presence itself acquires interpretive value.

This relationship between tourism and politics is not unique

to Kashmir. States across the world often use tourism to signal stability and attractiveness. But in Kashmir the symbolism becomes unusually intense because tourism operates within the shadow of a conflict that has lasted for decades and has deeply shaped both internal society and external perception. The Valley has become a place where ordinary economic activity frequently acquires political meaning. A crowded market is not just a crowded market. A full hotel season is not just an economic indicator. Even photographs of tourists skiing, boating, or shopping become embedded within wider narratives about order, legitimacy, governance, and public mood.

Yet beneath this visible surface lies a more complicated reality. Tourism in Kashmir simultaneously functions as livelihood, aspiration, emotional relief, symbolic reassurance, and performance labour. It produces income but also anxiety. It creates optimism but also exhaustion. It offers visibility to local businesses while sometimes obscuring the deeper structural uncertainties that

continue shaping everyday life. The image of normalcy projected through tourism often exists alongside invisible forms of social fatigue that remain outside camera frames.

The uncertainty surrounding tourism in Kashmir cannot be understood merely through the language of market fluctuation or seasonal instability. It is rooted in a much deeper historical condition shaped by decades of political violence, externally sustained militancy, and recurrent disruptions to civilian life. The Valley's social and economic rhythms have repeatedly remained vulnerable to episodes of cross border terrorism that continue to interrupt processes of normalization even during periods of visible calm.

The significance of such violence extends far beyond its immediate security implications. Incidents targeting civilians, particularly those directed at symbolic sectors such as tourism, exert disproportionate psychological and economic consequences because they destabilize the very architecture of public confidence upon which tourism economies depend. The Pahalgam terrorist attack of last year, in which twenty-seven tourists were killed, represented precisely such a rupture. Beyond the human tragedy itself, the attack functioned as a reminder that the tourism sector in Kashmir operates within a fragile environment where perceptions of safety remain continuously susceptible to sudden destabilization by actors seeking to disrupt normal civic and economic life.

What is sociologically important is not only the episodic nature of such violence, but the long term behavioural adaptations it produces within society. Repeated exposure to uncertainty gradually generates what may be described as a culture of conditional normalcy, where communities continue to engage in

routines of commerce, hospitality, mobility, and public life while simultaneously internalizing the possibility of abrupt interruption. The consequence is the emergence of a society that learns to function not through the resolution of anxiety, but through accommodation with it.

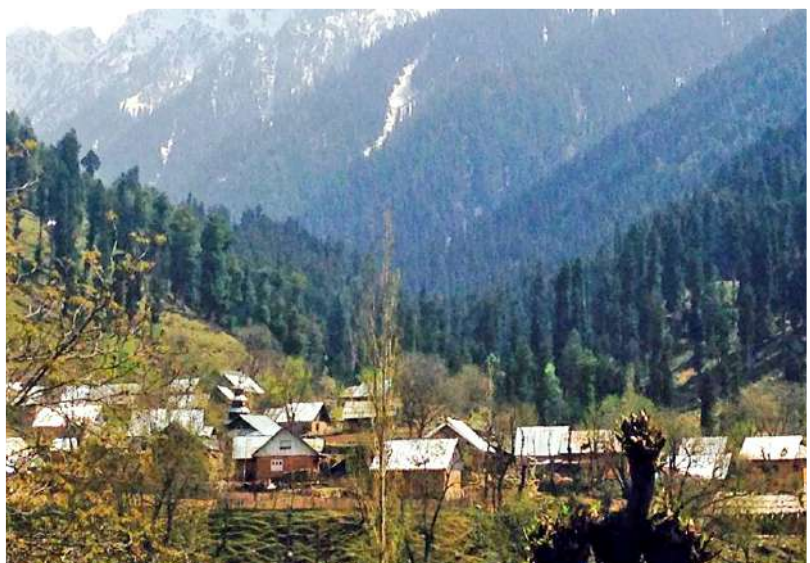
Tourism in Kashmir therefore exists within a paradoxical framework. It represents aspiration, recovery, and economic vitality, yet it also remains structurally dependent upon the management of insecurity generated by forces operating beyond the local tourism economy itself. The performative calm visible within tourist spaces must consequently be understood not as the absence of underlying tension, but as a socially cultivated response to a prolonged condition of geopolitical vulnerability.

What makes the Kashmiri tourism experience sociologically important is not merely the number of visitors or revenue generated. It is the way tourism restructures social

behaviour itself. Entire communities become dependent on seasonal perceptions generated elsewhere. Hotel owners monitor news channels not simply as citizens but as economic survivors. Taxi operators interpret political developments through anticipated tourist cancellations. Artisans track geopolitical tension through customer footfall. A single violent incident, even geographically distant from tourist zones, can collapse months of economic planning overnight. Stability therefore becomes not an experienced certainty but a fragile atmosphere continuously vulnerable to interruption.

The tourism worker in Kashmir consequently inhabits a psychologically complex position. He must project calm regardless of internal anxiety. He performs hospitality within an environment where unpredictability remains permanently present beneath ordinary life. This performance gradually evolves into a social

The deeper consequence of prolonged conflict is not only episodic violence, but the emergence of a society that learns to live under the permanent possibility of interruption while continuing to perform normalcy.





discipline. Smiling becomes labour. Reassurance becomes occupation. The maintenance of normalcy itself becomes economically necessary.

Visitors often encounter extraordinary warmth in Kashmir and interpret it simply as cultural hospitality. While hospitality certainly possesses deep roots within Kashmiri culture, the modern tourism economy has layered additional pressures upon it. For many workers in the sector, emotional presentation is inseparable from survival. The tourist must leave reassured, relaxed, enchanted, and willing to return. Negative atmospheres become economically dangerous. This creates subtle behavioural conditioning within tourism spaces where discomfort, political tension, frustration, or fear are carefully managed or concealed.

In recent years, social media has intensified this process. Tourism is no longer experienced privately. Every tourist now becomes a broadcaster. Lakes, cafés, gondolas, mountain roads, gardens, and snowfall are instantly transformed into circulating digital images consumed by millions. Kashmir increasingly exists simultaneously as physical territory and online visual product. Local businesses adapt accordingly. Cafés are designed for photography as much

The crowded cafés, houseboats, and tourist boulevards of Kashmir often conceal an invisible emotional economy in which reassurance itself becomes a form of labour and calm becomes economically necessary.

as for food. Tourist spots become stages for digital self-representation. Scenic beauty is curated for algorithms.

This digitalization of tourism has produced new forms of aspiration among Kashmiri youth as well. Young entrepreneurs open boutique cafés, adventure businesses, photography services, and luxury homestays designed around aesthetic appeal. A generation raised amidst conflict now seeks economic and psychological distance from older narratives through lifestyle entrepreneurship

connected to tourism culture. Yet this shift also produces tensions. The desire to project modernity and cosmopolitan normalcy often coexists uneasily with unresolved political memory and social anxiety.

What emerges is a layered social landscape where tourism simultaneously conceals and reveals deeper truths about Kashmir. On one level, tourism undeniably brings employment, mobility, optimism, and economic circulation. Entire sectors depend upon it. Thousands of families survive through seasonal tourism economies. On another level, tourism also produces what might be called performative stability. Public calm becomes economically incentivized. Emotional management becomes occupational behaviour. Social exhaustion becomes hidden beneath aesthetic presentation.

The outside observer often misunderstands this complexity because tourism images possess enormous persuasive power. Human beings instinctively associate crowded leisure spaces with safety and stability. When tourists ride shikaras on Dal Lake or upload videos from Gulmarg, external audiences naturally conclude that peace has returned. Yet visible leisure does not automatically reveal internal social conditions. A society may continue carrying deep uncertainty even while functioning outwardly with efficiency and hospitality.

Kashmir therefore presents a particularly important case study in how tourism can become intertwined with political symbolism and social psychology simultaneously. The Valley is not simply marketing beauty. It is continually negotiating perception. This negotiation occurs between the state and the outside world, between local society and economic necessity, and between visible calm and invisible fatigue.

The tourism season becomes a recurring cycle of collective emotional

investment. Every year brings hope that this season may finally provide sustained economic breathing space. Every year also carries underlying awareness that unpredictability remains one incident away. This unstable rhythm has shaped not only economic behaviour but emotional culture itself.

To understand tourism in Kashmir merely as leisure economics is therefore insufficient. It must also be understood as a theatre of reassurance, a mechanism of symbolic governance, and a social system through which ordinary people attempt to reclaim fragments of stability within prolonged uncertainty.

Tourism as Political Symbolism

The political significance attached to tourism in Kashmir has deep historical roots. Long before contemporary conflict transformed the Valley's social and security landscape, Kashmir occupied a special place within the political imagination of the Indian state. It represented beauty, harmony, and civilizational continuity. Tourism therefore became more than an industry. It evolved into a symbolic demonstration of integration, accessibility, and national belonging.

Over time, especially during years of insurgency and instability, tourism statistics acquired strategic importance. Visitor numbers began functioning as indirect indicators of political mood. Every successful tourism season was interpreted as proof that stability had returned. Every decline in tourist arrivals became evidence of insecurity and instability. Tourism gradually ceased to be a neutral economic activity and instead became deeply embedded within narratives of governance and legitimacy.

This symbolic burden continues today. Public discourse surrounding Kashmir tourism often exceeds ordinary economic analysis. Television coverage of crowded

tourist destinations frequently carries undertones of political messaging. Images of visitors skiing in Gulmarg or boating on Dal Lake are repeatedly circulated as visual confirmation that normal life has resumed. Tourism thus becomes a language through which political narratives are communicated both domestically and internationally.

The importance of these optics cannot be underestimated. In conflict affected regions, perception often becomes politically consequential. Governments seek visible indicators capable of communicating control and public confidence. Tourism serves this function effectively because it produces highly photogenic evidence of civilian movement, leisure, consumption, and social activity. A tourist destination filled with families conveys emotional reassurance more powerfully than official statements.

Yet this symbolic use of tourism also creates pressure upon local society. Economic dependency on tourism encourages communities to actively sustain atmospheres of calm even during periods of uncertainty. Public presentation becomes economically strategic. Shopkeepers, guides, drivers, hotel staff, and tourism operators learn to carefully manage conversations with outsiders. The visitor must encounter reassurance rather than anxiety. This does not necessarily involve deception. Rather, it reflects a social adaptation shaped by economic vulnerability.

Many tourism workers privately acknowledge this balancing act. They understand that tourists arrive carrying preconceived fears shaped by decades of media narratives about conflict. Their task therefore involves not only providing services but



emotionally disarming apprehension. Visitors are repeatedly told that conditions are safe, welcoming, and peaceful. Hospitality becomes intertwined with perception management.

This phenomenon produces what may be described as emotional labour under political conditions. The Kashmiri tourism worker must often suppress his own frustrations, uncertainties, or political opinions while interacting with visitors. Economic survival depends upon maintaining atmospheres of ease. Over time, this repeated performance shapes social behaviour itself. Public emotional restraint becomes normalized within tourism spaces.

The political use of tourism also influences administrative priorities. Tourist zones frequently receive concentrated infrastructural attention because they carry representational value. Roads leading to major tourist destinations are repaired with urgency. Public cleanliness campaigns intensify in visible areas. Security arrangements become carefully calibrated to maintain reassurance without appearing excessively restrictive. Tourist movement is closely monitored because disruptions carry symbolic consequences beyond economics.

This creates uneven developmental visibility. Areas central to tourism narratives often receive disproportionate attention while less visible localities continue facing ordinary infrastructural challenges. Tourism therefore contributes to spatial hierarchies where certain landscapes are curated for presentation while others remain peripheral to public imagery.

At the same time, tourism provides genuine economic relief to thousands of households. Any serious analysis must acknowledge this reality. For many families, tourism seasons determine annual financial survival. Hotel workers, transport



operators, handicraft sellers, pony owners, photographers, guides, restaurant employees, and countless informal workers depend upon tourist inflows. In a region with limited industrialization and restricted economic diversification, tourism functions as one of the few accessible income generating sectors.

This economic dependence deepens the political importance of tourism further. When livelihoods depend heavily upon perceptions of stability, communities become acutely sensitive to external narratives. News coverage, diplomatic tensions, militant incidents, security operations, and political developments are interpreted through anticipated effects on tourist behaviour. The economy itself becomes psychologically tied to perception management.

One of the most striking aspects of this phenomenon is the fragility of confidence. Tourism booms in Kashmir often coexist with underlying awareness that conditions remain reversible. A single major incident can trigger widespread cancellations within hours. Families who invest heavily at the beginning of a tourism season therefore operate under persistent anxiety. Economic optimism exists alongside structural insecurity.

This cyclical instability has profound sociological consequences. It discourages long term planning and encourages short term survival thinking. Tourism entrepreneurs often hesitate to make large investments because uncertainty remains permanently embedded within the sector. Workers experience repeated emotional swings between hope and disappointment depending upon seasonal fluctuations. Collective optimism becomes episodic rather than stable.

For policymakers and external observers, this complexity is crucial to understand. Visible tourism activity should not automatically be interpreted as evidence that deeper social anxieties have disappeared. Tourism can coexist with unresolved political tensions because societies possess remarkable capacities for adaptation. Human beings continue working, marrying, studying, travelling, and entertaining guests even under prolonged uncertainty. The continuation of ordinary life does not necessarily signify the resolution of underlying structural conditions.

Indeed, one of the defining features of modern conflict societies is their ability to normalize contradiction. Kashmir today simultaneously contains genuine hospitality and deep fatigue,

visible leisure and invisible anxiety, economic aspiration and emotional exhaustion. Tourism captures this contradiction more vividly than perhaps any other sector.

The tourist sees beauty, hospitality, and apparent calm. The local worker often sees opportunity mixed with fragility. The state sees symbolic validation. The policymaker sees indicators. The digital audience sees curated imagery. Each observer encounters a different Kashmir through the same tourism landscape.

Understanding these layered meanings requires moving beyond simplistic binaries of peace versus conflict. Kashmir's tourism economy exists within a far more complicated social reality where normalcy itself has become both aspiration and performance.

THE ECONOMY OF APPEARANCES

In contemporary Kashmir, appearance itself has acquired economic value. The presentation of calm, beauty, hospitality, and order now directly influences livelihoods for thousands of people whose economic survival depends upon external perception. This transformation has created what may be called an

economy of appearances, where visual reassurance functions almost like currency.

The growth of digital tourism has accelerated this process dramatically. Earlier generations of tourists carried back memories and photographs shared within limited personal circles. Today every visitor participates in global image production. Instagram reels, YouTube travel vlogs, drone footage, café photography, honeymoon videos, and influencer content circulate Kashmir continuously across digital platforms.

Entire commercial environments increasingly prioritize visual appeal. Cafés in Srinagar and Gulmarg now often resemble aesthetic studios as much as eating spaces. Interiors are carefully arranged for photography.

Tourism therefore no longer ends with physical visitation. It extends into permanent online representation.

This shift has changed how tourism spaces are designed and experienced. Entire commercial environments increasingly prioritize visual appeal. Cafés in Srinagar and Gulmarg now often resemble aesthetic studios as much as eating spaces. Interiors are carefully arranged for photography. Scenic corners are curated for social media visibility. Hotels advertise through cinematic imagery emphasizing serenity and luxury. Tourism operators market not only destinations but moods.

Young Kashmiris have adapted rapidly to this digital economy. A new generation of entrepreneurs now engages tourism through branding, visual storytelling, and lifestyle marketing. Adventure tourism, boutique stays, luxury camping, café culture, wedding photography, and curated travel experiences have expanded significantly. Social media fluency has become an economic skill.

At one level, this transformation reflects resilience and adaptability. After decades of instability, many young Kashmiris seek forms of economic participation disconnected from traditional political narratives. Tourism entrepreneurship offers possibilities of creativity, independence, and global engagement. It allows young people to imagine futures centered around mobility and aspiration rather than conflict alone.

Yet the economy of appearances also produces subtler consequences. When livelihoods depend heavily upon maintaining visual narratives of calm and beauty, societies gradually internalize pressures to suppress discomfort from public visibility. Negative atmospheres become economically dangerous. Frustration, political tension, social fatigue, or insecurity are pushed away from spaces associated with tourism



circulation.

This selective visibility creates distorted external understanding. Visitors often encounter highly curated versions of Kashmir where everyday anxieties remain hidden beneath hospitality and scenery. They leave believing they have witnessed the entirety of local reality when in fact they have mostly interacted with professionally managed emotional environments.

The tourism worker consequently becomes not only a service provider but a performer of reassurance. Drivers narrate safety. Hotel staff emphasize normalcy. Guides redirect uncomfortable conversations toward scenery and culture. Shopkeepers carefully read visitor psychology. This emotional management requires constant vigilance because tourism economies depend heavily upon customer comfort.

Such behavioural conditioning eventually reshapes public interaction itself. Tourism zones develop distinct emotional codes. Public conflict becomes socially discouraged because it threatens atmosphere. Calmness acquires economic necessity. Over time, these repeated performances can produce collective emotional exhaustion.

Many workers within the tourism sector privately describe this fatigue. They speak of the pressure to remain cheerful regardless of uncertainty, to reassure tourists even during tense periods, and to maintain optimism despite fragile economic realities. The emotional demands of hospitality under politically sensitive conditions differ substantially from ordinary tourism labour elsewhere.

The economy of appearances also influences how Kashmir is consumed intellectually by outsiders. Increasingly, external engagement with the Valley occurs through highly visualized narratives emphasizing beauty, leisure, and experience. Travel influencers frame Kashmir as paradise rediscovered. Wedding photographers present dreamlike landscapes detached from social complexity. Tourism campaigns foreground spectacle over history.

This aestheticization of Kashmir risks flattening public understanding. The Valley becomes reduced either to romantic scenery or geopolitical abstraction, leaving little space for nuanced recognition of its social transformations. Tourism imagery often unintentionally erases the psychological dimensions of prolonged uncertainty by replacing

complexity with visual consumption.

At the same time, many Kashmiris consciously participate in this aesthetic economy because it offers one of the few accessible routes toward economic mobility. This participation should not be simplistically dismissed as manipulation or denial. Rather, it reflects pragmatic adaptation within constrained structural realities. People work with the opportunities available to them. If beauty generates income, beauty becomes professionalized.

Still, important questions emerge. What happens to a society when appearance becomes economically central? What forms of self-censorship emerge when visibility itself influences livelihood? How does prolonged performance of normalcy affect collective psychology?

In Kashmir, these questions remain especially significant because the line between perception and governance has become increasingly blurred. Tourism imagery is not only commercial. It often carries implicit political meaning. Consequently, ordinary workers become participants in larger symbolic processes they neither fully control nor entirely escape.

One can observe this most



clearly during peak tourist seasons. Markets bustle, hotels overflow, cafés remain crowded late into the evening, and social media fills with celebratory content. Yet beneath this visible energy often lies profound uncertainty regarding duration. Tourism workers know that seasons can collapse abruptly. Economic confidence therefore remains cautious even during apparent prosperity.

The result is a peculiar social atmosphere where normalcy is simultaneously genuine and fragile. Daily life functions. Businesses operate. Visitors enjoy themselves. Yet an undercurrent of impermanence remains psychologically present. The performance of stability coexists with awareness of vulnerability.

For outside observers, especially policymakers and diplomats, recognizing this layered reality is essential. Tourism statistics alone cannot adequately measure social stability because visible calm may coexist with unresolved structural uncertainty. Nor should tourism success be dismissed cynically as mere propaganda because real livelihoods undeniably depend upon it.

The truth lies somewhere between celebration and skepticism. Tourism in Kashmir represents both authentic economic aspiration and symbolic political theatre. It embodies resilience while also revealing fragility. It creates opportunity while demanding emotional performance. It projects confidence while existing under permanent uncertainty.

In this sense, tourism becomes a mirror reflecting the wider condition of contemporary Kashmir itself.

BEYOND THE POSTCARD

The enduring tragedy of Kashmir's global image is that it often oscillates between two extremes. Either the Valley is represented as paradise untouched by history or as a conflict zone emptied of ordinary life. Both

The most important changes occurring in Kashmir today are not always visible through conventional political reporting or tourism campaigns. They are psychological, behavioural, and cultural shifts emerging gradually through decades of prolonged uncertainty.

images flatten reality. Both reduce a deeply complex society into simplified external narratives. Tourism plays a major role in sustaining this tension because it privileges visual beauty while often obscuring invisible social conditions.

Yet beneath the postcard imagery exists a society negotiating profound transformation. The most important changes occurring in Kashmir today are not always visible through conventional political reporting or tourism campaigns. They are psychological, behavioural, and cultural shifts emerging gradually through decades of prolonged uncertainty.

Tourism intersects with these transformations in subtle but significant ways. It shapes aspirations, public behaviour, urban culture, class formation, and emotional presentation. It influences how Kashmiris imagine themselves and how they wish to be seen by others. Increasingly, tourism spaces become arenas where competing visions of Kashmiri identity are negotiated.

One sees this especially among younger generations. Many urban youth today seek participation in global lifestyle culture through

cafés, fashion, music, photography, travel entrepreneurship, and digital branding. Tourism offers access to these worlds. It allows young Kashmiris to project cosmopolitan identities often disconnected from older representations of victimhood or conflict. This desire for reinvention is understandable. Generations raised amidst instability naturally seek emotional distance from inherited trauma.

At the same time, these transformations generate cultural tensions. Questions emerge regarding authenticity, memory, and belonging. Older social rhythms rooted in local traditions increasingly coexist uneasily with rapidly expanding consumer aesthetics imported through digital culture. Tourism accelerates this process by rewarding commercially attractive representations of Kashmiriness.

Traditional cultural practices sometimes become commodified for visitor consumption. Local identity risks being reshaped according to marketable expectations rather than lived continuity. Folk aesthetics are packaged into experiences. Heritage becomes performance. Landscapes become brands.

Environmental pressures intensify these contradictions further. Fragile mountain ecosystems face growing strain from expanding tourist infrastructure, waste generation, traffic congestion, and unregulated construction. Lakes suffer ecological degradation while simultaneously functioning as symbols of beauty essential for tourism marketing. The same economy that depends upon nature often contributes to its exhaustion.

Many local residents increasingly express ambivalence toward mass tourism. They recognize its economic necessity while also feeling overwhelmed by overcrowding, rising prices, environmental decline, and cultural commercialization. Some



speak privately of feeling alienated within spaces increasingly designed for outsiders rather than residents. Public infrastructure during peak seasons often becomes oriented toward visitors while local discomfort receives less attention.

This ambivalence reflects a broader sociological pattern visible across many tourism dependent societies. Economic reliance on visitors gradually alters relationships between local communities and their own spaces. Familiar landscapes become commercial zones. Public life becomes performative. Everyday interactions become transactional.

In Kashmir, however, these dynamics unfold within a context already shaped by decades of political conflict and emotional strain. Consequently, tourism does not simply transform economics. It interacts with deeper questions regarding dignity, visibility, identity, and psychological survival.

Perhaps the most striking aspect of contemporary Kashmir is the extraordinary capacity of ordinary people to continue constructing life amidst uncertainty. Weddings occur, businesses open, students pursue careers, tourists arrive, cafés flourish, families picnic beside lakes, and young people dream of futures larger than inherited instability. These realities are genuine and important. They should neither be romanticized nor dismissed. But

neither should they be misunderstood as evidence that deeper anxieties have disappeared. Human societies possess immense adaptive capacities. People learn to live inside uncertainty without necessarily resolving it. They create routines, aspirations, humour, hospitality, and economic systems capable of functioning even under prolonged structural tension.

Tourism in Kashmir must therefore be understood within this wider human context. It is not merely a state project, economic sector, or propaganda mechanism. It is also a collective attempt by ordinary people to reclaim fragments of dignity, mobility, and hope from circumstances often beyond their control. The shikara operator smiling before tourists may indeed feel genuine warmth toward his guests. He may also carry private anxieties about debt, uncertainty, and economic fragility. The café owner designing beautiful interiors may sincerely believe in a more open and modern Kashmir while simultaneously navigating invisible social and political pressures. The hotel worker reassuring nervous visitors may truly desire peace while understanding how fragile perceptions of stability remain.

These contradictions do not invalidate each other. They coexist because contemporary Kashmir itself exists within contradiction.

For diplomats, policymakers, and intellectual observers, this complexity

requires careful interpretation. It is easy to either celebrate tourism as proof of normalization or dismiss it entirely as superficial optics. Both positions miss the deeper sociological reality. Tourism in Kashmir is simultaneously authentic and performative, hopeful and anxious, liberating and exhausting.

Most importantly, tourism reveals how modern conflict societies increasingly function through management of perception. Visible calm becomes politically and economically consequential. Societies learn to curate themselves for external audiences. Emotional presentation acquires strategic value. Public life becomes partially theatrical not because people are insincere, but because survival itself demands performance.

Kashmir today stands at the intersection of these forces. It remains one of the most visually celebrated landscapes in the world while carrying invisible layers of fatigue accumulated across generations. Tourists often encounter beauty without fully perceiving the emotional discipline required to sustain the atmosphere through which that beauty is consumed.

And yet despite everything, Kashmir continues welcoming the world. Perhaps this is not merely economic necessity. Perhaps it also reflects a deeper civilizational instinct within Kashmiri society itself, an insistence on retaining hospitality, grace, and aesthetic sensibility even amidst prolonged uncertainty.

The visitor sees mountains, lakes, gardens, snowfall, and smiling faces. Beneath those images exists something more difficult to photograph: a society continuously negotiating between performance and reality, exhaustion and aspiration, fragility and resilience. That negotiation may ultimately be the truest story of tourism in Kashmir.

BEYOND SURVEILLANCE



REIMAGINING MADRASAS AND RELIGIOUS SEMINARIES IN JAMMU AND KASHMIR

by Yawar Yousuf

The debate surrounding madrasas and religious seminaries in Jammu and Kashmir has remained trapped within a narrow and repetitive framework for far too long. Public discourse oscillates between suspicion and defensiveness, between securitized scrutiny on one side and emotional religious rhetoric on the other. Governments frequently approach these institutions through the language of surveillance, regulation, and prohibition, while religious organizations portray criticism as hostility toward faith itself. Between these competing narratives, the central issue continues to remain largely unaddressed: the educational, intellectual, and developmental future of thousands of children studying in such institutions.

The discussion becomes even more intellectually impoverished because it is often reduced to simplistic binaries. Either madrasas are presented as sacred educational spaces beyond criticism, or they are viewed entirely through the prism of extremism and radicalization. Both positions obscure deeper structural realities. The real challenge lies neither in the existence of religious education nor in the faith of the students who enter these institutions. The challenge lies in the ideological orientation, educational isolation, and developmental limitations that characterize many such seminaries, particularly when they operate outside broader frameworks of modern intellectual and professional engagement.

It is important at the outset to distinguish between religion and ideology. Religion, in its civilizational and spiritual sense, concerns ethical conduct, metaphysical inquiry, moral discipline, and the cultivation of inner consciousness. Ideology, however, seeks social reproduction, organizational expansion, intellectual



The central tragedy of the madrasa debate in Kashmir is that it has remained trapped between securitized suspicion and emotional defensiveness, while the educational future of thousands of poor children continues to remain neglected.

conformity, and influence over public behaviour. Many religious seminaries across South Asia increasingly function not merely as theological institutions but as ideological ecosystems where particular interpretations of religion are reproduced generation after generation. The objective often extends beyond spiritual education toward the preservation and expansion of organizational influence.

This distinction is particularly significant in Jammu and Kashmir, where society has already endured decades of political instability, conflict, social fragmentation, and psychological exhaustion. In such environments, educational institutions assume immense importance because they shape future

social consciousness. The question therefore is not whether religious education should exist. Every society has the right to preserve theological traditions and spiritual learning. The question is whether thousands of economically vulnerable children should remain confined within educational systems that often fail to equip them with the intellectual, scientific, technological, linguistic, and professional capacities necessary for meaningful participation in the modern world.

The deeper tragedy is that many of these seminaries possess substantial physical infrastructure, community funding, social legitimacy, and organizational networks that could potentially become transformative educational assets if reimagined properly. Instead of emerging as centres of excellence capable of producing scientists, doctors, researchers, entrepreneurs, diplomats, technologists, civil servants, and scholars of religion grounded equally in modern knowledge, many remain confined within narrow pedagogical structures disconnected from contemporary intellectual realities.

Equally troubling is the absence of a coherent long term state policy regarding these institutions. Governments oscillate between neglect and crackdown. Periodic bans, raids, closures, or regulatory interventions may generate immediate political messaging,

but they rarely produce structural transformation. In many cases, prohibitory approaches merely lead to repackaging. Institutions change names, shift locations, alter organizational structures, or continue informally through decentralized networks. The underlying educational vacuum remains intact.

This reveals a larger policy failure. States often approach the madrasa question primarily as a security problem rather than a developmental challenge. Such an approach misunderstands both the sociology of these institutions and the aspirations of the families sending children to them. Most students studying in religious seminaries are not ideological actors. They are products of economic vulnerability, social inequality, and limited access to quality education. Their families frequently choose such institutions not because they reject modernity, but because these seminaries offer food, accommodation, basic education, social dignity, and a sense of structured belonging at minimal cost.

The problem therefore lies less with poor students and more with the intellectual architecture surrounding them. A child entering a madrasa is not born intellectually isolated. Isolation is socially produced through curricular limitations, institutional closure, restricted exposure, and pedagogical systems that prioritize doctrinal reproduction over critical inquiry.

What is needed in Jammu and Kashmir is not merely regulation, nor hostility toward religion, nor symbolic bans designed for political optics. What is needed is a civilizational educational intervention capable of transforming existing religious infrastructure into modern centers of excellence while preserving legitimate theological study within broader frameworks of contemporary learning.

The failure to imagine such a

transformation reflects not only administrative weakness but also intellectual laziness. It is far easier for governments to police institutions than to reform them. It is easier to issue closure notices than to create world class educational alternatives. Yet societies are not transformed through prohibition alone. They are transformed through vision.

IDEOLOGY, EDUCATIONAL ISOLATION, AND THE PRODUCTION OF INTELLECTUAL DEPENDENCY

One of the most uncomfortable but necessary observations regarding many contemporary religious seminaries is that they often function less as spaces of open intellectual exploration and more as systems of ideological reproduction. This reality is not unique to Kashmir or even South Asia. Across multiple regions of the world, religious organizations frequently establish educational institutions not simply for spiritual instruction but for the preservation of doctrinal authority, organizational continuity, and influence over future generations.

This does not imply that every madrasa promotes extremism or violence. Such generalizations are both intellectually dishonest and socially dangerous. However, it is equally dishonest to pretend that many seminaries operate as neutral educational environments detached from ideological objectives. Educational structures shape worldviews. Curricula influence consciousness. Institutional environments define the limits of acceptable thought. When educational systems remain excessively inward looking and disconnected from broader intellectual traditions, they risk producing intellectual dependency rather than intellectual

confidence.

The most serious consequence of such isolation is not necessarily militancy. It is intellectual narrowing. Students educated exclusively within rigid theological frameworks often emerge insufficiently equipped to engage with the complexity of contemporary society. Their exposure to science, philosophy, economics, constitutionalism, technology, literature, comparative religion, political theory, global history, and modern ethics frequently remains minimal. This educational confinement limits not only professional mobility but also cognitive flexibility.

In Kashmir, where generations have already experienced political uncertainty and social disruption, the consequences become even more pronounced. Societies recovering from prolonged instability require educational systems capable of producing adaptive, creative, critically thinking citizens. They require institutions that expand intellectual horizons rather than narrow them further.

Yet many religious organizations continue investing enormous financial and organizational energy into expanding seminary networks instead of building advanced hospitals, research universities, technical institutes, professional academies, innovation centers, or modern schools capable of competing nationally and internationally. This represents not merely a developmental gap but a moral contradiction.

If religious leadership genuinely seeks the welfare of the community, then educational investment should prioritize empowerment rather than dependency. A society cannot achieve dignity merely through the multiplication of preachers. It requires doctors capable of serving public health, engineers capable of building infrastructure, scientists

capable of contributing to knowledge production, entrepreneurs capable of generating economic mobility, and intellectuals capable of engaging the modern world with confidence.

The paradox becomes particularly visible when one examines the social composition of many madrasa students. A large proportion belong to economically vulnerable families with limited educational opportunities. Wealthier sections of society rarely send their own children into purely theological educational systems disconnected from professional advancement. Instead, they pursue modern schooling, international education, technical training, and professional careers. Consequently, seminaries frequently become educational spaces inhabited disproportionately by the economically marginalized.

This creates a troubling educational hierarchy within society itself. One class of children receives exposure to technology, languages, science, research, and global opportunity, while another remains confined within narrow pedagogical structures that offer limited pathways into the contemporary economy. The result is not merely educational inequality but the reproduction of social dependency across generations.

Such conditions also create fertile ground for ideological influence because intellectual isolation often increases institutional dependency. Students whose entire socialization occurs within closed theological systems may struggle to independently interrogate authority structures or critically examine inherited assumptions. The issue here is not faith itself. Faith and intellectual openness are not mutually exclusive. Some of the greatest scholars in human history combined spirituality with scientific and philosophical sophistication. The problem emerges when educational systems discourage curiosity, complexity, and



The problem is not the child studying in a seminary, but the intellectual isolation surrounding him. No society can progress by denying its most vulnerable children access to science, technology, professional education, and critical inquiry.

independent inquiry.

The tragedy is that this intellectual confinement frequently occurs despite the remarkable cognitive potential of the students themselves. Many madrasa students display extraordinary memory, discipline, linguistic ability, and commitment to study. With access to quality modern education, scientific training, digital literacy, and critical pedagogy, many could excel in fields far beyond narrow theological specialization.

This is precisely why the current debate requires reframing. The issue should not be approached through the emotionally charged language of religion versus secularism. Rather, it should be understood as a question of educational justice and national development. Are poor children entitled to the same quality of education, scientific exposure, professional opportunity, and intellectual mobility available to

more privileged sections of society? Or should they remain confined within systems that reproduce limited futures?

The answer to this question will shape not only the future of Jammu and Kashmir but the future relationship between religion, modernity, and social progress across South Asia more broadly.

THE FAILURE OF STATE POLICY

The governmental response toward madrasas and seminaries in Jammu and Kashmir has largely remained reactive rather than visionary. Policies emerge primarily during moments of security concern, political controversy, or administrative pressure. The result is an approach dominated by surveillance, registration drives, periodic crackdowns, financial scrutiny, and occasional bans. While states possess

legitimate authority to regulate educational institutions operating within their jurisdictions, regulation without transformation rarely produces meaningful outcomes.

The fundamental weakness of current policy lies in its inability to distinguish between institutions, actors, and objectives. Governments frequently approach seminaries through broad securitized frameworks that fail to address underlying educational realities. Closure of institutions may temporarily disrupt organizational networks, but it does not resolve the structural conditions that allowed such networks to emerge in the first place.

Indeed, history repeatedly demonstrates that purely prohibitory approaches often produce institutional adaptation rather than disappearance. Organizations change names, relocate operations, fragment into smaller informal units, or continue functioning through decentralized social networks. Ideological ecosystems rarely disappear through administrative notification alone. When demand for religious education persists and state educational alternatives remain weak, closure strategies often generate repackaging rather than reform.

This is where the absence of long-term strategic thinking becomes evident. Instead of asking how these institutions can be transformed into engines of educational excellence, policy discourse remains trapped within the narrower logic of control and containment.

The irony is that many seminaries already possess precisely the infrastructural foundations that governments struggle to create elsewhere. They have buildings, land, classrooms, hostels, kitchens, community support, donor networks, and established local legitimacy. Rather than viewing these spaces solely as sites of suspicion, the state

Bans and crackdowns merely produce institutional repackaging. The real challenge before the state is whether it possesses the vision to transform religious seminaries into centers of educational excellence capable of producing scientists, scholars, innovators, and enlightened citizens.

could have approached them as potential educational assets capable of being integrated into a broader developmental framework.

Imagine if the policy objective had been transformation instead of confrontation. Imagine if the government had initiated a phased program through which madrasa infrastructure was gradually integrated into modern educational ecosystems while preserving optional theological study within balanced curricula. Imagine if every district identified one or two major seminaries for conversion into high quality educational campuses equipped with science laboratories, digital classrooms, libraries, sports facilities, language centres, and professional training programs.

Such a project would require political courage, administrative sophistication, and intellectual clarity. But it would produce far more sustainable outcomes than recurring cycles of suspicion and closure.

The core problem is not the existence of poor children studying in seminaries. The problem lies in the educational environment

surrounding them. If a student currently memorizing theological texts in an isolated institution were provided access to mathematics, computer science, medicine, law, engineering, literature, philosophy, economics, constitutional studies, and global languages within the same educational ecosystem, the trajectory of that child's life could change dramatically. This is why the focus should shift from punitive institutional management toward developmental educational transformation.

The state must also recognize an uncomfortable sociological reality. Many families sending children to seminaries do so because state educational systems themselves often remain inadequate. In economically weaker areas, religious institutions sometimes provide food, accommodation, discipline, and educational continuity where public systems fail to inspire confidence. Unless governments create credible alternatives, criticism alone will not change parental choices. A genuinely forward-looking policy would therefore operate across multiple levels simultaneously.

First, theological institutions should be brought under transparent educational regulation ensuring curricular modernization, financial accountability, and minimum academic standards.

Second, students currently enrolled in seminaries should be systematically integrated into mainstream educational pathways through bridge programs, language training, science education, digital literacy, and professional counselling.

Third, state and private partnerships should be established to convert selected seminary infrastructure into hybrid educational campuses capable of offering world class modern education.

Fourth, teacher quality must become central. Educational



transformation is impossible if ideological rigidity continues dominating pedagogy. The issue ultimately lies less with children and more with those shaping intellectual environments around them.

This distinction is morally essential. The poor child studying in a madrasa is not the enemy of society. He is often one of its most neglected products. Punishing him for structural failures beyond his control would represent profound injustice. The real challenge lies in transforming the institutional culture surrounding him.

Unfortunately, current state approaches often prioritize immediate political optics over long term social investment. Crackdowns generate headlines. Transformation requires patience. Surveillance produces visible administrative activity. Educational reform demands sustained commitment across decades.

Yet societies are ultimately shaped not by symbolic state power alone but by the quality of educational imagination guiding future generations.

FROM SEMINARIES TO CENTRE'S OF EXCELLENCE

The most constructive approach to the madrasa question in Jammu and Kashmir lies neither in romanticizing existing structures nor in pursuing

Educational transformation is impossible if ideological rigidity continues dominating pedagogy.

endless cycles of prohibition. The real challenge is transformational: how can existing institutional infrastructure be repurposed toward educational excellence capable of serving both social stability and human development? This requires a complete shift in conceptual thinking.

Instead of viewing seminaries exclusively through the language of suspicion, the state should recognize that many already possess valuable assets including land, buildings, organizational structures, donor networks, and community legitimacy. These assets should not remain confined within intellectually narrow systems when they could become foundations for world class educational institutions.

A serious reform model would begin by identifying major seminary campuses across districts and gradually integrating them into comprehensive educational redevelopment programs. The objective would not be to eradicate religious study altogether. Societies have every right to preserve

theological traditions. The objective would be to ensure that religious education exists alongside modern scientific, technological, linguistic, and professional learning rather than replacing it. Such transformation requires ambitious partnerships.

The government could invite nationally reputed educational chains, universities, healthcare institutions, technological academies, and philanthropic organizations to adopt selected campuses under carefully regulated frameworks. India possesses numerous educational institutions with global reputations in science, medicine, management, engineering, and liberal arts. Why should students emerging from marginalized religious backgrounds remain excluded from such standards of excellence?

Corporate philanthropy and billionaire driven educational investment could also play a transformative role. India's wealthiest industrial and philanthropic families routinely invest in universities, hospitals, and educational foundations across the country. A visionary national project could encourage leading industrial groups and philanthropic trusts to take responsibility for establishing one major center of excellence in each district of Jammu and Kashmir.

The symbolism of such an initiative would itself be extraordinary.

Imagine a former seminary transformed into a state of the art educational campus equipped with advanced laboratories, modern libraries, digital infrastructure, language institutes, vocational training centers, sports academies, and professional mentoring systems. Imagine children previously limited to narrow theological instruction now studying artificial intelligence, medicine, robotics, biotechnology, constitutional law, environmental science, literature, entrepreneurship, and international relations.

Such transformation would not merely change institutions. It would alter the psychological horizons of an entire generation.

Importantly, the objective should not be cultural humiliation or forced deracination. Educational modernization succeeds only when accompanied by dignity. Students should not be made to feel that their religious backgrounds represent shame. Rather, they should be empowered to see faith and modern intellectual excellence as compatible dimensions of human development.

The historical Islamic intellectual tradition itself offers abundant examples of synthesis between spirituality and scientific inquiry. Medieval Muslim civilizations produced mathematicians, astronomers, physicians, philosophers, geographers, architects, and scholars who engaged the world with intellectual openness rather than pedagogical isolation. Contemporary seminaries frequently invoke historical Islamic greatness while remaining disconnected from the scientific and philosophical spirit that once animated those civilizations.

A genuine educational renaissance in Kashmir would therefore involve reclaiming intellectual curiosity rather than merely preserving doctrinal repetition.

This transformation also requires curricular courage. Students must be exposed to comparative thought, constitutional values, scientific reasoning, ethics, gender studies, environmental awareness, economics, digital literacy, philosophy, psychology, and global history. Education should expand cognitive possibility rather than narrow it.

Teacher reform is equally critical. Institutions cannot become canters of excellence while remaining intellectually captive to rigid pedagogical cultures. Faculty recruitment should

prioritize competence, openness, and interdisciplinary engagement. Professional educators, scientists, researchers, psychologists, language experts, and social scientists must become integral components of educational transformation.

Scholarship programs would further accelerate integration. Students emerging from redeveloped seminaries should receive pathways into leading universities across India and abroad. International educational partnerships could expose them to global academic standards while preserving rootedness within local society. The long term societal impact of such a strategy could be profound.

First, it would reduce educational segregation by integrating marginalized students into mainstream intellectual life.

Second, it would weaken ideological dependency by expanding exposure to multiple forms of knowledge.

Third, it would generate social mobility among economically weaker communities.

Fourth, it would strengthen national integration through opportunity rather than coercion.

Fifth, it would demonstrate that the state possesses confidence not merely to regulate institutions but to transform futures.

Most importantly, it would shift the moral centre of the debate.

The current discourse often treats madrasa students either as security concerns or passive recipients of charity. Both perspectives diminish human potential. The real challenge is to view these children as future scientists, scholars, administrators, innovators, physicians, writers, and leaders capable of contributing meaningfully to society if provided the right educational ecosystem.

No civilization advances by abandoning its vulnerable populations to intellectually restricted futures. Societies progress when they expand

opportunity, cultivate excellence, and democratize access to high quality education.

Jammu and Kashmir stands today at an important historical crossroads. It can continue oscillating between surveillance and symbolic bans while generations remain educationally marginalized. Or it can pursue a far more ambitious path rooted in transformation, dignity, and intellectual empowerment.

The choice ultimately reflects the larger question confronting the region itself: whether governance will remain reactive and securitized, or whether it can evolve into a genuinely civilizational project centered on human development.

The future of these children should not be confined to inherited ideological structures or endless political anxieties. They deserve laboratories instead of intellectual isolation, libraries instead of doctrinal confinement, and opportunities equal to any child studying in the finest institutions of the country.

The measure of a society is not how loudly it debates its problems, but how courageously it imagines solutions.

If Jammu and Kashmir truly seeks long term stability, social confidence, and intellectual renewal, then educational transformation must become central to that vision. Not because religion must disappear, but because no child should be denied the possibility of excellence in the name of preserving institutional stagnation.

The challenge is therefore not merely to regulate seminaries. It is to transform them from spaces of limited futures into institutions capable of producing enlightened citizens prepared for the complexities of the modern world.

Only then can education become not an instrument of confinement, but a bridge toward dignity, confidence, and collective progress.

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THE NEW KASHMIRI MIDDLE CLASS

ASPIRATION, CONSUMPTION, AND THE REWRITING OF IDENTITY

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KASHMIR CENTRAL | 1 JUNE 2026

by Waseem Hassan

One of the most significant transformations occurring in contemporary Kashmir is not immediately visible through conventional political analysis, security reporting, or diplomatic discourse. It is unfolding quietly within cafés, coaching centres, shopping patterns, digital spaces, educational migration, tourism entrepreneurship, lifestyle consumption, and the changing aspirations of an emerging urban middle class. While public attention continues to focus predominantly on conflict, constitutional change, militancy, elections, and security architecture, a parallel sociological shift has been gradually reshaping the emotional and cultural landscape of Kashmiri society itself.

A new middle class is emerging in Kashmir. It is younger, more digitally connected, more consumption oriented, more professionally aspirational, and increasingly integrated into wider national and global economic cultures than previous generations. Its members speak the language of startups, international education, remote work, digital branding, tourism entrepreneurship, lifestyle mobility, and professional advancement. They inhabit a social world shaped by economic aspiration, technological fluency, and expanding exposure to global cultural currents.

This transformation is historically important because middle classes often function as carriers of social transition. They reshape public behaviour, redefine respectability, alter cultural aspirations, and gradually influence the emotional vocabulary of entire societies. In Kashmir, however, the emergence of such a middle class carries unusually complex implications because it is unfolding within a region that is simultaneously experiencing accelerated connectivity, expanding



Instagram aesthetics, café culture, travel photography, startup language, and wellness lifestyles increasingly shape urban youth culture in ways unimaginable only two decades earlier.

consumer culture, and shifting social aspirations.

What is emerging in Kashmir is not merely a new economic class, but a new social imagination. Educational mobility, digital culture, entrepreneurship, lifestyle consumption, and professional aspiration are gradually reshaping how younger generations understand success, identity, and belonging in contemporary Kashmiri society.

One of the clearest indicators of this shift is the transformation of urban spaces across Srinagar and other towns. The rapid expansion of cafés, boutique restaurants, fitness culture, digital workspaces, photography studios, coaching institutes, curated tourism businesses, and luxury retail environments

reflects more than simple economic growth. These spaces function as symbols of belonging within a wider aspirational culture increasingly shared by urban middle classes across the world.

Young Kashmiris today consume global culture with remarkable fluency. They follow international fashion trends, operate online businesses, build social media brands, pursue digital content creation, prepare for foreign education, and participate in highly visual forms of self-presentation. Instagram aesthetics, café culture, travel photography, startup language, and wellness lifestyles increasingly shape urban youth culture in ways unimaginable only two decades earlier.

This transformation is partly technological. The smartphone has altered the social imagination of an entire generation. Kashmir's younger population today grows up with immediate exposure to global lifestyles, professional opportunities, consumer aspirations, and alternative modes of identity formation. The digital world has weakened older forms of social isolation. A student in Srinagar now inhabits the same online universe as students in Delhi, Dubai, London, or Toronto. Cultural aspiration is no longer geographically



confined.

After decades of economic uncertainty and limited opportunity, many young people increasingly seek personal mobility, professional recognition, and psychological distance from older patterns of social stagnation. Entrepreneurship, education, tourism, digital culture, and consumption become not merely economic activities but instruments of self-reinvention.

This explains why contemporary Kashmiri youth culture often appears simultaneously energetic and emotionally disciplined. A generation shaped by uncertainty has learned to pursue aspiration through adaptability, caution, and calculated ambition. Public behaviour increasingly emphasizes professionalism, presentation, and social mobility rather than overt ideological expression.

The rise of coaching centre culture illustrates this shift particularly well. Thousands of students across Kashmir now dedicate enormous energy toward competitive examinations, professional degrees, foreign education opportunities, and private sector careers. Educational migration to cities such as Delhi, Bangalore, Pune, Chandigarh, and Hyderabad has expanded dramatically. Families increasingly view education not merely as social prestige but as the primary route toward economic security and social advancement.

A generation shaped by uncertainty has learned to pursue aspiration through adaptability, caution, and calculated ambition.

Professional success increasingly functions as a marker of dignity and stability within middle class consciousness. The dream of government service, international employment, entrepreneurship, or global mobility carries enormous emotional weight because it represents entry into a wider world of opportunity beyond local limitations.

At the same time, this emerging middle class remains structurally fragile. Much of its economic confidence depends upon sectors vulnerable to fluctuation including tourism, private education, small entrepreneurship, digital commerce, and service industries. Economic optimism frequently coexists with awareness that opportunity remains uneven and competitive. The result is a social culture characterized by ambition combined with caution.

This fragility also shapes public behaviour. The new middle

class increasingly prioritizes stability, mobility, and personal advancement within changing social conditions. Silence therefore should not automatically be interpreted politically. In many cases it reflects professional pragmatism, social calculation, and the prioritization of aspirational mobility.

This distinction is crucial for policymakers and external observers. Contemporary Kashmir cannot be adequately understood through older binaries alone. Society has become far more layered, fragmented, and psychologically complex. Economic aspiration now functions as an independent social force capable of reshaping behaviour, language, and cultural identity.

Indeed, one of the defining characteristics of the new Kashmiri middle class is its ability to compartmentalize contradiction. Young people move between worlds with remarkable fluidity. They build startups while remaining deeply rooted in local identity. They embrace cosmopolitan lifestyles while preserving cultural traditions. They participate enthusiastically in consumer culture while remaining socially cautious and professionally strategic.

This coexistence of aspiration and rootedness defines much of contemporary Kashmiri society.

CONSUMPTION AND THE NEW SOCIAL IMAGINATION

Consumption in Kashmir today is no longer merely economic behaviour. It has become a language of identity, aspiration, belonging, and social transformation. The growth of cafés, branded retail spaces, luxury weddings, tourism entrepreneurship, fitness culture, imported fashion, lifestyle photography, and social media driven aesthetics reflects the emergence of a society increasingly

negotiating its future through visible participation in consumer modernity.

This phenomenon is especially pronounced among urban youth. For earlier generations, political identity often occupied the centre of public consciousness. For many younger Kashmiris today, however, personal branding, professional mobility, educational advancement, and lifestyle presentation increasingly shape social self-perception. The politics of aspiration has begun competing with older structures of social meaning.

The café culture emerging across Srinagar is particularly sociologically significant. Cafés today function not simply as commercial establishments but as symbolic social spaces where new forms of urban identity are performed. Young people gather for work, photography, conversation, networking, and aesthetic self-presentation. These spaces often project cosmopolitanism, creativity, and emotional openness in contrast to older forms of social conservatism and public rigidity.

Similarly, the expansion of tourism entrepreneurship reflects more than economic adaptation. Young entrepreneurs increasingly seek to rebrand Kashmir through visual storytelling, luxury experiences, adventure tourism, boutique hospitality, and curated



cultural experiences. They are not merely selling landscapes. They are attempting to reshape external perception and internal self-

Young Kashmiris increasingly construct identities through photography, fashion, travel content, fitness culture, artistic branding, and lifestyle entrepreneurship.

imagination simultaneously.

Social media has intensified these dynamics dramatically. Platforms such as Instagram and YouTube have transformed visibility itself into economic and social capital. Young Kashmiris increasingly construct identities through photography, fashion, travel content, fitness culture, artistic branding, and lifestyle entrepreneurship. Digital participation offers psychological distance from older narratives dominated by uncertainty and limitation alone.

The rise of luxury weddings illustrates another important dimension of this transformation. Wedding culture in Kashmir has become increasingly elaborate, aestheticized, and consumption driven. Photography, fashion, destination styling, curated décor, and digital circulation now occupy central roles. Such celebrations often function as symbolic affirmations of continuity, aspiration, and social status within a rapidly transforming middle class environment.

At one level, these developments reflect confidence and social energy. Human beings naturally seek beauty, celebration, intimacy, and visibility. But they also reveal a society increasingly using consumption to





Respectability in Kashmir increasingly derives not only from family lineage, religious standing, or political influence, but from educational achievement, entrepreneurial success, digital sophistication, and consumption capacity.

negotiate identity and status within expanding aspirational frameworks. Lifestyle performance becomes a way of participating in modernity itself.

This emerging consumer culture is also reshaping class identity. Respectability in Kashmir increasingly derives not only from family lineage, religious standing, or political influence, but from educational achievement, entrepreneurial success, digital sophistication, and consumption capacity. New elites are emerging whose authority rests upon economic aspiration and cultural fluency rather than traditional social structures alone.

Women's participation in this changing middle class culture is particularly significant. Increasing numbers of women now engage higher education, entrepreneurship, digital commerce, fashion industries, media work, healthcare professions, and public cultural life. Although structural gender inequalities remain substantial, urban middle class transformation has opened new

spaces of participation and visibility for many women.

This shift may ultimately carry long term consequences more significant than immediate political developments because changes in gender participation often reshape family structures, educational priorities, and cultural expectations across generations.

However, important tensions remain unresolved. The rapid expansion of consumer culture risks deepening social fragmentation between digitally connected youth and older generations, and between aspirational classes and economically marginalized communities. The new Kashmiri middle class remains highly uneven in its distribution.

Kashmir today increasingly resembles many modern transitional societies where consumption and aspiration coexist with uneven opportunity. Public life becomes more visually vibrant even while competition intensifies beneath the surface.

The new middle class therefore

represents not the end of older social realities, but the emergence of a new social grammar through which identity, ambition, and status are increasingly negotiated.

BETWEEN MOBILITY AND IDENTITY

The defining feature of the new Kashmiri middle class is its relationship with mobility. This generation seeks movement beyond inherited limitations through education, entrepreneurship, migration, professional advancement, and digital participation. It desires opportunity, global exposure, financial stability, and social recognition within a rapidly changing economy.

Migration plays a central role in this transformation. Educational and professional mobility have become major aspirations among middle class families. Students increasingly pursue higher education outside the Valley. Professionals seek employment in metropolitan cities or abroad. Families encourage geographic diversification as a strategy for long term economic security.

The dream of leaving temporarily or permanently reflects both ambition and expanding confidence. For many young Kashmiris, mobility symbolizes access to opportunity, exposure, and professional advancement. Large numbers of young people now inhabit transregional identities shaped simultaneously by Kashmir, Indian metropolitan culture, and global digital life.

This mobility is reshaping social psychology in important ways. Exposure to diverse educational environments, professional cultures, and social experiences often produces greater individualism, pragmatism, and adaptability. Young Kashmiris increasingly interact with broader national and international networks beyond traditional local structures.

Their social imagination becomes less geographically confined.

At the same time, many continue negotiating complex forms of belonging. Outside Kashmir they frequently encounter stereotypes, political assumptions, or cultural exoticization. Within Kashmir they sometimes feel socially transformed after prolonged exposure to external environments. The result is a generation often negotiating layered identities across multiple cultural spaces.

This complexity is especially visible in language itself. Contemporary Kashmiri youth frequently move between Kashmiri, Urdu, English, and Hindi depending upon context. Linguistic hybridity reflects broader cultural hybridity. Identity becomes increasingly fluid, situational, and adaptive.

The role of digital culture further intensifies this transformation. Young Kashmiris today experience life through simultaneous local and global reference points. A café owner in Srinagar designs interiors inspired by Istanbul, Dubai, or European aesthetics while operating

within a society shaped by entirely different economic conditions. Digital exposure collapses cultural distance, producing aspirations disconnected from older local limitations.

This creates both opportunity and pressure. On one hand, global exposure expands ambition and creativity. On the other, it intensifies competition and expectation. Consumer aspiration rises rapidly. Social comparison becomes constant. Success itself becomes increasingly performative.

The new middle class therefore exists within continuous negotiation between ambition and structural limitation. It seeks modernity while navigating uneven opportunity. It desires visibility while preserving social rootedness. It embraces cosmopolitan aesthetics while retaining strong cultural identity.

One of the most significant consequences of this transformation is the gradual privatization of aspiration. Earlier social movements often emphasized collective identity and mass politics. Contemporary middle-class culture increasingly emphasizes personal success,

family advancement, professional achievement, and individual mobility. Social energy shifts from collective ideological projects toward individualized life strategies.

The state itself has indirectly contributed to this shift through expanding emphasis on development, entrepreneurship, tourism, digital infrastructure, and investment narratives. Whether these initiatives fully succeed remains debated, but they have influenced public discourse by increasingly framing aspiration through economic language and developmental vocabulary.

This layered condition is shaping the new Kashmiri middle class in profound ways. It produces caution, pragmatism, resilience, adaptability, and ambition. The emergence of a new middle class undoubtedly represents an important sociological transformation. It reflects expanding aspiration, educational ambition, entrepreneurial energy, and integration into wider economic cultures. These developments matter deeply.

But they should not be interpreted simplistically. Consumer modernity alone cannot fully define social transformation. Economic aspiration may reshape behaviour without entirely dissolving older cultural frameworks.

The future of Kashmir will therefore likely be shaped not by a single dominant narrative, but by the interaction between multiple simultaneous realities: aspiration and rootedness, mobility and belonging, consumption and identity, entrepreneurship and social continuity.

The new Kashmiri middle class stands precisely at this intersection. It is rewriting identity not through dramatic ideological declarations, but through quieter transformations in lifestyle, ambition, language, education, migration, consumption, and social behaviour.



Managing Instability in the Modern *Middle East*



by Mohammad Zaid Malik



The contemporary Middle East is no longer merely a region experiencing recurring crises. It is increasingly becoming a geopolitical system in which instability itself has acquired structural permanence. What appears externally as a succession of wars, insurgencies, proxy confrontations, and humanitarian disasters is in fact the manifestation of a deeper transformation within the regional order: the gradual institutionalization of conflict as an enduring instrument of power, legitimacy, and strategic influence.

For decades, policymakers and international observers approached Middle Eastern instability as a temporary condition awaiting diplomatic resolution. Yet the persistence of violence across Palestine, Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Yemen, and the Red Sea corridor suggest a different reality. Conflict in the region is no longer simply episodic. It has evolved into a self-reproducing security architecture sustained by competing ideological visions, fragmented sovereignties, external intervention, proxy militarization, and the strategic



The creation of Israel in 1948 and the displacement of Palestinians during the Nakba did not simply redraw geography. It reshaped the political consciousness of the Arab world.

management of controlled instability.

At the centre of this evolving order lies the unresolved Palestinian question which continues to function not merely as a territorial dispute, but as the foundational psychological and political fracture of the modern Middle East. The creation of Israel in 1948 and the displacement of Palestinians during the Nakba did not simply redraw geography. It reshaped the political consciousness of the Arab world, produced enduring crises of legitimacy within regional regimes, and transformed resistance itself into a permanent organizing principle within Middle Eastern politics.





Yet the contemporary crisis can no longer be understood solely through the traditional Arab Israel framework that dominated twentieth century geopolitics. The region has undergone a profound structural transition. Conventional interstate warfare has gradually given way to asymmetrical conflict, ideological mobilization, and proxy confrontation. State sovereignty itself has become increasingly fragmented as non-state actors, transnational militias, ideological networks, and externally supported armed movements now exercise strategic influence once monopolized by formal governments.

No event accelerated this transformation more significantly than the Iranian Revolution of 1979. Iran's emergence as a revolutionary Islamic republic fundamentally altered the strategic grammar of the Middle East. Tehran no longer viewed itself merely as a nation state pursuing conventional regional interests. It increasingly positioned itself as the ideological centre of a broader resistance architecture opposed to Israeli power, Western influence, and Sunni Arab strategic alignment with

Hezbollah in Lebanon, Hamas in Gaza, Shiite militias in Iraq, and the Houthis in Yemen became components of a decentralized but interconnected geopolitical network designed to impose continuous strategic pressure without triggering total conventional war.

the United States.

This ideological repositioning transformed regional competition from a primarily territorial contest into a struggle over legitimacy, identity, and regional order itself. Iran's influence expanded not through direct territorial conquest, but through the cultivation of strategic depth via non state actors capable of projecting power across multiple theatres simultaneously. Hezbollah in Lebanon, Hamas in Gaza, Shiite militias in Iraq, and the Houthis in Yemen became components of a decentralized but interconnected geopolitical network designed to impose continuous strategic pressure without triggering total conventional war.

The significance of this model extends beyond military

effectiveness alone. Proxy warfare in the contemporary Middle East increasingly functions as a mechanism for managing escalation itself. Regional actors seek to avoid direct interstate wars that carry unpredictable and potentially catastrophic consequences, yet they simultaneously require controlled confrontation to preserve deterrence, ideological credibility, and domestic legitimacy. The result is the normalization of calibrated instability.

This strategic logic is particularly visible in the relationship between Israel and Iran. Despite decades of hostility, both sides have historically exercised caution regarding direct conventional war. Instead, confrontation has been displaced geographically through Syria, Lebanon, Gaza, maritime routes,

cyber operations, intelligence warfare, and targeted assassinations. Conflict thus becomes diffuse, continuous, and strategically managed rather than formally declared.

The Syrian conflict represents perhaps the clearest illustration of how modern Middle Eastern wars now operate as layered geopolitical ecosystems rather than isolated national crises. What began as an internal uprising rapidly evolved into a multidimensional struggle involving regional powers, transnational militias, great power competition, sectarian mobilization, energy corridors, and competing visions of regional order. Syria ceased to function merely as a sovereign state. It became an arena through which multiple actors pursued overlapping strategic objectives simultaneously.

Iran's deep entrenchment in Syria was not simply about preserving the Assad government. It was fundamentally about maintaining a contiguous axis of influence extending from Tehran through Iraq and Syria toward Lebanon and the Mediterranean. For Israel, this represented an unacceptable alteration of regional military geography. Consequently, Syria became the site of sustained but undeclared confrontation between two rival strategic architectures.

At the same time, the region's instability has increasingly acquired economic and institutional dimensions. Security sectors across the Middle East have expanded enormously over the past decades. Military industries, intelligence systems, border infrastructures, surveillance technologies, private security networks, and foreign military partnerships now constitute major components of state power and political legitimacy. In many cases, securitization itself has become economically and politically functional.

This is one reason why

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permanent instability proves so difficult to resolve. Entire state structures increasingly derive authority from the management of threat environments. Governments justify exceptional security measures through perpetual crisis conditions. Non state actors sustain relevance through resistance narratives. External powers maintain regional influence through security partnerships and military dependencies. Instability therefore becomes embedded not only in geopolitics, but within the institutional logic of the regional order itself.

The humanitarian consequences of this system have been devastating. Gaza, Yemen, Syria, and parts of Iraq and Lebanon have experienced prolonged civilian suffering on a scale that has normalized catastrophe itself within global consciousness. Yet even humanitarian crises increasingly operate within geopolitical calculations. Civilian suffering becomes instrumentalized through media warfare, diplomatic pressure, legitimacy narratives, and international polarization.

The recent cycles of violence in Gaza demonstrate this dynamic with particular intensity. Israel frames military operations through the doctrine of national security and

counterterrorism, while Palestinian armed groups position resistance as anti-occupation struggle. Regional powers simultaneously weaponize the conflict symbolically to reinforce ideological narratives and geopolitical alignments. Humanitarian catastrophe thus coexists with strategic calculation.

Meanwhile, the Abraham Accords introduced another major realignment into the regional landscape. The normalization agreements between Israel and several Arab states reflected the gradual erosion of the older Arab consensus centred exclusively upon Palestine. For countries such as the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain, strategic modernization, technological cooperation, economic diversification, and shared concerns regarding Iran increasingly outweighed traditional ideological confrontation with Israel.

This shift revealed a profound transformation within Arab political priorities. The central regional divide is no longer simply Arab versus Israeli. Increasingly, it is becoming a contest between competing models of regional order: one centred around strategic normalization, economic integration, and state stability; the other organized around resistance, ideological mobilization, and anti-Western geopolitical positioning.

Yet normalization itself has not resolved the underlying crisis. If anything, it has intensified fragmentation within the region. For Iran and aligned movements, normalization represents the institutional legitimization of Israeli regional integration without meaningful resolution of Palestinian statehood. For normalization states, however, perpetual confrontation increasingly appears economically unsustainable and strategically counterproductive.

This fragmentation reflects a deeper collapse of collective regional architecture. The modern Middle East

no longer functions through coherent blocs or stable alliances. Instead, it increasingly resembles a fluid security marketplace characterized by temporary alignments, overlapping rivalries, tactical partnerships, and fragmented sovereignties.

The role of the United States remains central within this evolving order, though its position has become increasingly paradoxical. Washington continues to function as Israel's principal strategic guarantor while simultaneously attempting to maintain broader regional stability. Yet American interventions over the past two decades, particularly in Iraq, profoundly reshaped the regional balance in unintended ways. The destruction of Iraqi state capacity intensified sectarian fragmentation, expanded Iranian influence, and accelerated the proliferation of non-state militias across the region.

More broadly, American policy increasingly reflects the limitations of external power management within fragmented geopolitical environments. Military superiority alone has repeatedly failed to produce durable political settlements. Instead, interventions often redistribute instability rather than resolve it.

Simultaneously, new global actors such as China and Russia have expanded their regional presence through economic diplomacy, energy partnerships, arms relationships, and strategic positioning. The Middle East is therefore no longer exclusively shaped by American hegemony. It is becoming integrated into a wider multipolar competition where regional instability intersects with global strategic rivalry.

Perhaps the most important feature of the contemporary Middle East is the normalization of unresolved conflict itself. Entire generations across the region have grown up within conditions where ceasefires replace settlements, deterrence substitutes for peace, and



The Middle East today stands at precisely such a threshold. The region is no longer moving predictably toward either comprehensive war or comprehensive peace. Instead, it increasingly oscillates within a controlled but highly combustible equilibrium sustained through proxy confrontation, securitized governance, fragmented legitimacy, and geopolitical competition.

temporary de-escalation is mistaken for stability. Political systems increasingly manage crises rather than resolve them.

This reality carries profound long-term implications. Societies exposed continuously to militarization, displacement, surveillance, ideological polarization, and economic insecurity gradually internalize instability as ordinary political existence. Public psychology adapts to perpetual uncertainty. Emergency conditions become normalized. Conflict becomes administratively managed rather than historically resolved.

The danger, therefore, is not simply the continuation of violence. It is the emergence of a regional order in which instability itself becomes permanently institutionalized.

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or comprehensive peace. Instead, it increasingly oscillates within a controlled but highly combustible equilibrium sustained through proxy confrontation, securitized governance, fragmented legitimacy, and geopolitical competition.

Without a serious rethinking of regional security architecture, sovereignty, Palestinian statehood, and external interventionism, the cycle is unlikely to end. Military superiority alone cannot produce durable legitimacy. Proxy warfare cannot indefinitely substitute for political settlement. Economic normalization cannot permanently bypass unresolved historical grievances.

Until these structural contradictions are addressed, the Middle East will likely remain trapped within an era where conflict is no longer an interruption of political order, but one of its defining organizing principles.

THE NEW ECONOMY OF DESPAIR

DRUGS, EASY MONEY, AND THE FRAGMENTATION OF KASHMIRI YOUTH

by **Sohail Bhat**

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KASHMIR CENTRAL | 1 JUNE 2026

The contemporary Kashmiri social landscape is increasingly being shaped by two parallel and deeply contradictory realities. On one side stands a visibly aspirational generation attempting to reposition itself through education, entrepreneurship, digital culture, tourism, technology, competitive examinations, and new forms of professional mobility. On the other side exists a growing ecosystem of narcotics, addiction, trafficking, informal criminal economies, and easy money networks that are gradually consuming another segment of the same generation. These two realities now coexist simultaneously

within Kashmiri society, often within the same neighborhoods, educational institutions, and even families.

This contradiction represents one of the most important yet insufficiently understood sociological transformations occurring in Kashmir today. Public discourse frequently celebrates the emergence of a new aspirational Kashmiri youth, and that transformation is undeniably real. One encounters young entrepreneurs opening cafés and startups, students preparing for civil services examinations, content creators building digital identities, professionals seeking global opportunities, and families increasingly investing in education

and social mobility. Yet beneath this visible narrative of aspiration lies another equally significant but deeply disturbing reality: the rapid expansion of drug addiction and narcotics trafficking across the Valley.

The scale of the crisis is no longer anecdotal. Rehabilitation centres across Kashmir report alarming increases in substance abuse among young people, including teenagers. Law enforcement agencies have repeatedly acknowledged the expansion of narcotics networks within the region. Public health professionals increasingly describe addiction not merely as a criminal issue but as a widening social and psychological emergency.



Some statistical assessments and rehabilitation data now suggest that Jammu and Kashmir has emerged among the most severely affected regions in India in terms of youth drug dependency, surpassing even states historically associated with narcotics crises.

Yet the deeper significance of this phenomenon lies not merely in addiction statistics. The narcotics crisis in Kashmir reveals something larger about the transformation of social values, economic behaviour, political conflict, and generational psychology. Drugs in Kashmir today cannot be understood only through the language of criminality or public health. They must also be understood through the sociology of prolonged conflict, the political economy of militancy, the culture of easy money, institutional corruption, fractured aspiration, and the emergence of parallel economies operating beneath formal structures.

The discussion becomes even more complex because the narcotics problem in Kashmir contains

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two interconnected but distinct dimensions. The first is addiction itself: the expanding number of young people consuming heroin, synthetic drugs, pharmaceuticals, and other narcotic substances. The second is trafficking: the sophisticated networks through which drugs move across borders, districts, and local markets while simultaneously generating enormous illicit financial flows.

These two dimensions increasingly reinforce one another. Addiction creates demand. Trafficking creates supply. But in Kashmir, trafficking has acquired additional strategic significance because narcotics are no longer merely commercial commodities. Increasingly, they intersect with militancy financing, underground networks, cross border destabilization, and informal conflict economies. This is why many security analysts now describe the phenomenon not simply as drug trafficking, but as narcotic terrorism.

The phrase may initially appear dramatic, but it reflects an evolving security reality. Over the past decade, state institutions significantly disrupted traditional hawala funding systems that once financed separatist and militant ecosystems in Kashmir. Surveillance mechanisms intensified. Financial monitoring expanded. Informal cross border transfers became more difficult. As older channels weakened, narcotics emerged as an alternative financial

architecture capable of generating sustained underground revenue.

This transformation fundamentally altered the strategic significance of drug networks. Narcotics trafficking now serves multiple functions simultaneously. It generates profits for organized criminal syndicates. It finances militant infrastructure. It corrodes social stability internally. And it produces psychological deterioration among youth populations already exposed to prolonged uncertainty and political fatigue.

The geography of trafficking further reinforces the complexity of the crisis. Narcotics do not originate solely within Kashmir. The Valley increasingly functions as both destination and transit corridor within a much larger transnational network stretching across South Asia. Drugs originating in Afghanistan often move through Pakistan before entering Kashmir through multiple channels. Simultaneously, narcotics circulate through Punjab, Rajasthan, and other Indian states, creating multidirectional trafficking flows rather than a single linear route.

This larger regional ecosystem cannot be separated from broader geopolitical instability. Afghanistan's decades long conflict economy historically produced one of the world's largest narcotics industries. Pakistan's border regions became deeply entangled with trafficking infrastructures over time. In such an environment, narcotics naturally intersected with arms networks, smuggling economies, insurgent financing, and informal border systems. Kashmir's geographical vulnerability and prolonged conflict exposure made it particularly susceptible to becoming incorporated into these wider underground circuits.

However, external networks alone cannot explain the internal spread of narcotics within Kashmiri

Patience weakened as a social virtue. Informal wealth became socially visible. Consumption aspirations expanded faster than legitimate economic opportunities.

society. The more uncomfortable question concerns why segments of local youth increasingly enter these ecosystems either as consumers, facilitators, or traffickers. The answer lies partly within the transformation of social psychology during decades of insurgency and political instability.

For nearly three decades, Kashmir functioned within an abnormal economic environment where informal money flows became normalized. Funds entered through multiple unofficial channels including cross border financing, hawala systems, political patronage networks, underground trade, and conflict linked economies. Large sections of society gradually became exposed to forms of unregulated wealth disconnected from ordinary labour structures.

This produced long term sociological consequences that are still insufficiently examined. One of the most significant consequences was the normalization of easy money psychology. Wealth increasingly appeared detached from productivity, entrepreneurship, or institutional professionalism. Young people observed individuals accumulating influence and resources through informal connections, political access, underground networks, or conflict

economies rather than through conventional labour and gradual economic mobility.

Over time, this altered the moral imagination of economic success itself. Labour lost prestige. Patience weakened as a social virtue. Informal wealth became socially visible. Consumption aspirations expanded faster than legitimate economic opportunities. The result was the gradual emergence of a fragmented aspirational culture where desires increasingly exceeded available institutional pathways.

This contradiction is crucial for understanding contemporary Kashmiri youth psychology. Today's young generation is simultaneously exposed to unprecedented visibility of global lifestyles through social media and unprecedented structural uncertainty within local reality. Smartphones expose Kashmiri youth to luxury culture, digital celebrity, fast consumption, global mobility, and aspirational modernity on a daily basis. Yet many continue facing unemployment, economic stagnation, political uncertainty, emotional exhaustion, and limited institutional trust.

Under such conditions, easy money economies acquire dangerous attraction. Drug trafficking becomes appealing not merely because it generates profit, but because it promises accelerated status mobility without the slow discipline of conventional labour. For many young participants, narcotics networks appear less like criminal structures and more like alternative economic systems functioning outside institutional constraints.

This is precisely where the crisis transcends ordinary criminality and becomes civilizationally dangerous. When societies begin losing faith in legitimate pathways of advancement, underground economies gradually acquire cultural legitimacy. The trafficker no longer appears

purely deviant. He increasingly appears efficient, resourceful, and economically successful within a society obsessed with visible consumption.

The tragedy is that this transformation disproportionately affects precisely those segments of youth already psychologically vulnerable. Many addicts emerge not from absolute poverty alone, but from emotional disorientation, social fatigue, fractured families, unemployment, suppressed anxiety, or identity instability. Addiction in Kashmir increasingly reflects not simply recreational behaviour but social despair masked beneath silence.

The situation becomes even more alarming when institutional complicity enters the equation. Law enforcement agencies have periodically uncovered cases involving facilitators linked to administrative structures, policing systems, or local protection networks. While such individuals represent only a small minority within institutions, their involvement reveals how narcotics economies penetrate formal structures through corruption and patronage.

This is one reason the narcotics crisis proves so resilient. Drug trafficking today operates not as isolated criminal activity but as a layered ecosystem involving smugglers, local distributors, financial intermediaries, compromised facilitators, cross border handlers, and consumers. Dismantling individual networks therefore does not automatically dismantle the larger system because demand, profit incentives, and structural vulnerabilities remain intact.

Meanwhile, public discourse often continues oscillating between moral panic and simplistic criminalization. Neither approach adequately addresses the deeper sociological dimensions of the crisis. Drug addiction cannot be resolved

Many addicts emerge not from absolute poverty alone, but from emotional disorientation, social fatigue, fractured families, unemployment, suppressed anxiety, or identity instability.

solely through policing because addiction itself often emerges from psychological and social fragmentation. Nor can trafficking be addressed through rehabilitation alone because trafficking increasingly intersects with organized crime, border management, corruption, and security challenges.

What Kashmir faces today is therefore not merely a narcotics problem. It faces the emergence of parallel value systems among youth populations. One value system remains rooted in education, professional mobility, entrepreneurship, and institutional participation. The other gravitates toward informal economies, accelerated consumption, emotional escape, and underground financial networks.

This internal fragmentation may ultimately become one of the defining social questions of contemporary Kashmir.

The danger is particularly severe because addiction destroys not only individual lives but collective social energy. A society already carrying decades of political exhaustion cannot afford widespread generational deterioration. Every addict represents not merely a personal tragedy but a weakening of social capacity itself. Families collapse emotionally. Communities internalize fear and

shame. Public trust deteriorates. Institutions become overwhelmed. And the future gradually narrows.

Yet despite the gravity of the situation, the response still lacks a sufficiently integrated long term framework. Security agencies approach narcotics primarily through law enforcement. Health professionals frame it through rehabilitation. Families often approach it through stigma and concealment. Politicians periodically invoke it rhetorically. But the crisis demands something larger: a civilizational response combining security strategy, psychological intervention, educational reform, employment generation, institutional accountability, and cultural reconstruction simultaneously.

Most importantly, Kashmir must confront the deeper moral economy that enabled the normalization of easy money culture in the first place. Societies cannot indefinitely celebrate visible wealth while ignoring the origins of that wealth. Nor can they expect youth to value patience and institutional discipline when informal power structures continue rewarding shortcuts and patronage.

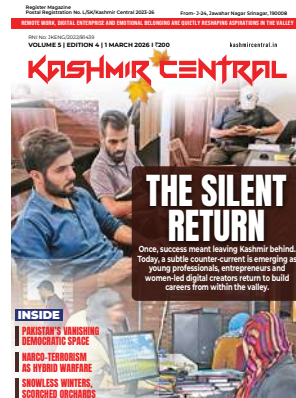
The future of Kashmir may ultimately depend upon which generation prevails sociologically: the aspirational generation seeking dignity through legitimate mobility, or the fragmented generation increasingly seduced by narcotics, informal economies, and accelerated consumption without moral restraint.

That struggle is no longer occurring invisibly beneath the surface of society. It is now unfolding openly across neighborhoods, campuses, rehabilitation centres, marketplaces, digital culture, and family life itself. And perhaps that is what makes the narcotics crisis in Kashmir far more than a law-and-order issue. It is increasingly becoming a battle over the moral, psychological, and civilizational direction of an entire generation.

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