

AS PAK-ADMINISTERED KASHMIR SIMMERS AND CHINA WAITS IN THE WINGS, THE VALLEY FINDS PEACE IN THE SACRED.

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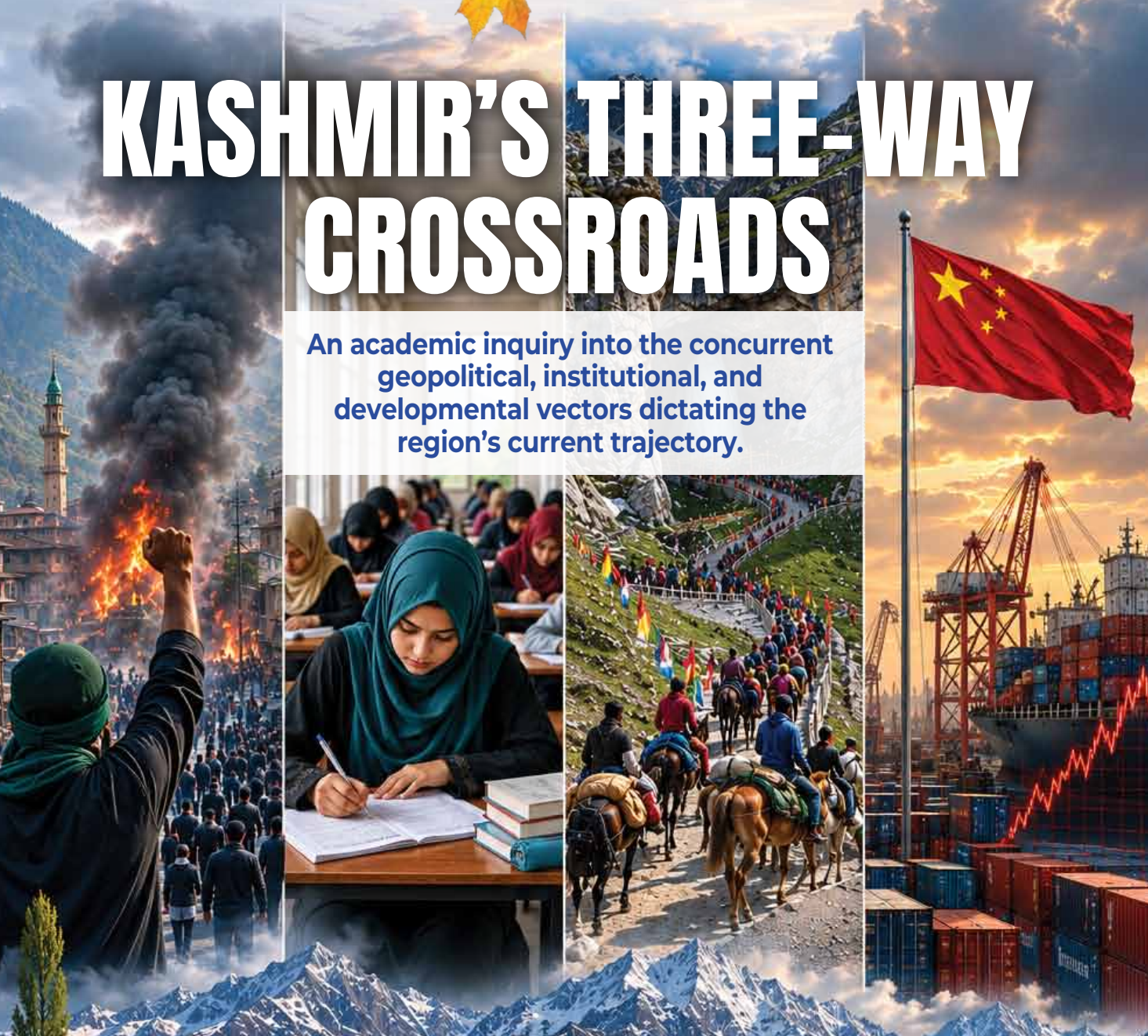
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KASHMIR CENTRAL

KASHMIR'S THREE-WAY CROSSROADS

An academic inquiry into the concurrent
geopolitical, institutional, and
developmental vectors dictating the
region's current trajectory.



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KASHMIR

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MAKE A SPLASH

INCULCATE
DEMOCRATIC SPIRIT

KASHMIR CENTRAL



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VOLUME 5 | EDITION 8
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KASHMIR CENTRAL

THE UNSETTLED FRONTIER

For much of the international community, Pakistan-administered Kashmir remains one of the least examined political spaces in South Asia. Overshadowed by developments elsewhere in the larger Kashmir conflict, the region rarely attracts sustained attention unless events escalate beyond the ordinary. Over the past two years, a series of developments suggest that important changes are underway across the Line of Control.

The most visible manifestation of this shift has been the growing frequency of public disturbances and episodes of unrest witnessed across different parts of the Pakistan Administered Kashmir.

What began as sporadic protests over electricity tariffs, inflation, taxation, and rising costs of living has gradually evolved into a broader pattern of mobilization. Demonstrations, road blockades, strikes, confrontations, and prolonged shutdowns have become increasingly common features of public life. The scale and persistence of these incidents distinguish them from routine expressions of dissatisfaction and point toward a deeper transformation in the political atmosphere of the region.

The significance of these disturbances lies not merely in their occurrence, but in their cumulative effect. For decades, Pakistan-administered Kashmir was often portrayed as politically quieter than many other parts of the wider Kashmir region. While grievances existed, they seldom translated into sustained mass mobilization capable of drawing widespread public participation. Recent events suggest that this assumption may no longer hold true.

A notable feature of the current phase is the diversity of those participating in public protests. Traders, transporters, students, employees, civil society groups, and ordinary citizens have increasingly found themselves represented within these mobilizations. The issues being raised are often economic in nature, however, the language of protest increasingly reflects wider concerns about governance, accountability, and public representation.

Equally striking is the emergence of a more organized culture of collective action. Social media networks, local advocacy groups, and community organizations have enabled grievances to travel rapidly across districts and communities, creating a degree of political interconnectedness not previously visible at this scale.

This trend is particularly significant because it reflects a changing public mood. The disturbances are no longer isolated local events confined to individual towns or districts. They are increasingly perceived as part of a larger regional conversation about public expectations and the relationship between citizens and institutions.

For observers of the Kashmir region, these developments deserve careful attention. The territory occupies a strategically sensitive location within one of the chronic conflicts. Changes in public sentiment, patterns of mobilization, and the frequency of unrest therefore carry implications that extend beyond the immediate events themselves.

Whether viewed through the lens of governance, public mobilization, or regional stability, the growing disturbances across the territory represent one of the most consequential yet underreported developments in contemporary Kashmir. The current unrest suggest that this silence is becoming increasingly difficult to sustain.

Bashir Assad

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THE UNHEARD KASHMIR

Governance, Dependency and the Crisis of Representation in Pakistan Administered Kashmir



KASHMIR CENTRAL | 1 JULY 2026 | 5



by **Bashir Assad**

The violent protests in Pakistan-Administered Kashmir reveal a growing gap between democratic participation and effective political power. This article examines how evolving public expectations are challenging existing structures of governance, representation, and accountability.



For nearly eight decades, the Himalayan region of Kashmir has occupied a unique place in international politics. It has generated wars, shaped national identities, influenced military doctrines, and drawn the sustained attention of diplomats, scholars, and policymakers across the world. Yet despite this extensive body of literature, one part of the region has remained curiously under-examined in serious international scrutiny: Pakistan Administered Kashmir (PAK), officially referred to as Azad Jammu and Kashmir (AJK).

This relative invisibility is not merely an academic gap. It reflects the structure of the Kashmir discourse itself, which has largely evolved around the India–Pakistan strategic rivalry, developments in Indian-administered Jammu and Kashmir, and the broader geopolitical implications of South Asia's most enduring territorial conflict. In comparison, Pakistan Administered Kashmir has often been treated as a politically settled and adminis-

tratively stable space, whose internal dynamics require limited analytical attention.

Recent developments challenge this assumption. The waves of protests witnessed across Muzaffarabad, Rawalakot, Bagh, Mirpur, Kotli, and other urban centres during the period 2024–2026 have exposed tensions that extend far beyond immediate concerns such as inflation, electricity pricing, taxation, or administrative inefficiency. While economic grievances have undoubtedly acted as the immediate catalyst for mobilization, the scale

and persistence of public dissatisfaction point toward deeper structural questions of governance and political representation.

The central argument of this essay is that the current unrest in Pakistan Administered Kashmir represents a crisis of political representation rather than merely a crisis of economic management. The protests reflect growing public unease regarding the relationship between authority and accountability, between constitutional autonomy and practical dependency, and between representative institutions and substantive political agency.

The significance of this development extends beyond Pakistan Administered Kashmir itself. Situated along a highly militarized frontier and adjacent to critical geopolitical corridors in contemporary Asia, the region occupies a strategically sensitive position within the wider South Asian security landscape. Understanding its internal political evolution is therefore essential not only for assessing the governance and future trajectory of Pakistan Administered Kashmir, but

The protests reflect growing public unease regarding the relationship between authority and accountability, between constitutional autonomy and practical dependency

also for understanding emerging patterns of state-society relations, legitimacy, and stability in conflict-affected border regions across South Asia.

FROM LIBERATION NARRATIVE TO GOVERNANCE QUESTION

Since 1947, Pakistan's approach toward Pakistan Administered Kashmir has been shaped by a delicate balancing act. On one hand, Islamabad has consistently maintained that the entire former princely state of Jammu and Kashmir remains disputed and subject to final resolution. On the other, the territory has required functioning institutions capable of delivering governance, administration, public services, and political representation.

The result has been the creation of a distinctive constitutional arrangement that seeks to preserve the appearance of autonomy while maintaining strategic coherence with Pakistan's broader Kashmir policy. For decades, this arrangement remained relatively stable. The liberation narrative served as a central source of political legitimacy, and public discourse was largely framed through questions of self-determination, identity, and the unresolved status of Kashmir. Within this framework, governance-related concerns often remained secondary.

Today, however, the political environment is undergoing a gradual but meaningful transformation. A younger generation has emerged with little direct memory of the formative events that shaped earlier political consciousness. Instead, its expectations are shaped by education, migration, digital connectivity, and exposure to global governance standards. This generation evaluates institutions less by symbolic narratives and more by performance and delivery.

As a result, political discourse is shifting from liberation-centered frameworks toward governance-cen-



The demonstrations were not organized around abstract constitutional questions; they were rooted in everyday material concerns.

tered concerns. Citizens increasingly ask not only what institutions represent, but how effectively they function. Issues such as service delivery, employment, transparency, administrative responsiveness, energy costs, and public accountability have become central to political legitimacy.

This shift represents one of the most important political developments in Pakistan Administered Kashmir. The significance of the recent protest movement lies precisely in this transition. The demonstrations were not organized around abstract constitutional questions; they were rooted in everyday material concerns. Yet these concerns inevitably expanded into broader questions of governance and representation.

The issue was not simply the price of electricity. It was the question of who determines that price, who benefits from such decisions, and who can be held accountable when those deci-

sions produce public hardship. Such questions directly engage the foundations of political legitimacy.

THE MAY 2024–2026 PROTEST CYCLE: BEYOND ELECTRICITY BILLS AND SUBSIDIES

Observers attempting to interpret the recent unrest in Pakistan Administered Kashmir often emphasize its immediate triggers: electricity tariffs, inflation, taxation policies, fuel prices, and wider economic pressures. These factors are undeniably important. However, reducing the movement to economic grievances alone risks obscuring its deeper political meaning.

Economic protests frequently function as expressions of broader political dissatisfaction. Historical experience offers multiple examples. The Arab Spring began with socioeconomic grievances but rapidly evolved into demands for accountability and political reform. Similar trajectories have been observed in parts of Latin America, Eastern Europe, and Africa. Material grievances often serve as the entry point for collective mobilization, but the underlying drivers frequently lie in governance structures themselves.

Pakistan Administered Kashmir appears to be experiencing a similar dynamic. The protest movement brought together constituencies that do not typically share unified political platforms: traders, transport operators,



professionals, students, civil society activists, and ordinary citizens. This breadth of participation is politically significant. Narrowly focused movements tend to remain sector-specific, whereas broad coalitions often indicate more generalized systemic dissatisfaction.

The language of protest further underscores this evolution. While economic demands remained central, the discourse increasingly incorporated themes of accountability, transparency, responsiveness, and public participation. Citizens are not merely demanding financial relief; they are asserting claims to political recognition and agency.

This distinction is critical. Economic crises can often be addressed through fiscal adjustments, subsidies, or administrative reforms. Crises of representation, by contrast, are more complex, as they concern the perceived legitimacy of governance itself.

The central challenge, therefore, extends beyond economic management. It concerns whether existing institutions possess sufficient credibil-

Many systems around the world maintain extensive representative institutions while remaining dependent on external centres for critical decisions.

ity and authority to effectively channel and respond to public demands.

THE MIRAGE OF AUTONOMY: CONSTITUTIONAL ENGINEERING AND MANAGED SELF-GOVERNMENT

Pakistan Administered Kashmir represents one of the most complex constitutional arrangements in South Asia. The territory possesses its own president, prime minister, legislative

assembly, judiciary, and administrative structure. On the surface, these features suggest substantial self-government and institutional maturity.

However, political authority cannot be assessed solely through institutional design. Political science distinguishes between formal autonomy and substantive autonomy. Formal autonomy refers to constitutional structure and institutional appearance. Substantive autonomy refers to the actual capacity of institutions to independently shape political outcomes.

This distinction is essential in understanding the governance structure of Pakistan Administered Kashmir. Many systems around the world maintain extensive representative institutions while remaining dependent on external centres for critical decisions. The key issue lies in the gap between institutional form and effective authority.

In the case of Pakistan Administered Kashmir, this gap produces a recurring political dilemma. Citizens participate in elections and engage with representative institutions, yet

simultaneously question whether these institutions possess sufficient authority to address major structural challenges independently.

Having observed the politics of Kashmir for several decades, I have repeatedly encountered a recurring pattern: elected governments are often judged by outcomes over which they appear to exercise only limited control. Over time, this disconnect carries profound consequences. Public expectations are directed toward institutions that possess formal authority but are widely perceived as lacking the capacity to shape critical decisions. As a result, confidence in the political process gradually erodes. Elections continue to be held, governments change, and constitutional procedures remain intact, yet public dissatisfaction persists. In my view, this enduring frustration stems not from the absence of democratic processes, but from the unresolved gap between authority, accountability, and the actual locus of power.

This dynamic contributes to what may be described as representative fatigue: a condition in which citizens continue to participate in democratic procedures while increasingly doubting their substantive effectiveness. Over time, this environment becomes conducive to periodic mobilization, protest, and political agitation.

The central issue, therefore, is not the absence of democratic institutions. It is the extent to which those institutions are perceived as capable of exercising meaningful control over the decisions that shape citizens' everyday lives.

THE STRUCTURE OF DEPENDENCY: FISCAL, ADMINISTRATIVE, AND POLITICAL

Let's now turn to the machinery that produces and sustains this gap: the layered structure of dependency that defines Pakistan Administered Kash-

mir (PAK).

At the centre of this structure lies fiscal dependency. Despite possessing an elected government and a defined constitutional framework, the region's financial architecture remains heavily reliant on transfers, grants, and negotiated allocations from the Government of Pakistan. Revenue generation within PAK is structurally limited by geography, scale, industrial base, and the absence of large diversified taxation capacity.

This dependence is not merely technical. It has direct political consequences. When fiscal space is externally determined, policy space is correspondingly constrained. Budgets are negotiated rather than fully autonomous; development priorities are often aligned with broader federal frameworks; and long-term planning is frequently shaped by availability of externally routed funds rather than

Public expectations are directed toward institutions that possess formal authority but are widely perceived as lacking the capacity to shape critical decisions.

internally generated surplus.

The result is a governance model in which responsibility is decentralized, but decisive authority remains significantly externalized.

ADMINISTRATIVE DUALITY AND THE QUESTION OF DECISION-MAKING POWER

Alongside fiscal dependency exists an administrative duality that further complicates governance. On paper, Pakistan Administered Kashmir possesses its own civil administration, secretariat, and executive hierarchy. In practice, however, key layers of bureaucratic influence remain closely integrated with federal systems and broader national administrative structures.

This produces a layered chain of decision-making in which authority is formally distributed but functionally concentrated. Local institutions are often responsible for implementation, while strategic direction, resource approval, and policy ceilings are influenced by external institutional actors. This duality is particularly politically sensitive because it exists within a contested territorial context. As a result, administrative procedures are frequently interpreted through a political lens, even if they originate from routine governance logic at certain occasions.

The consequence is a persistent



ambiguity in public perception: who is ultimately responsible for outcomes—local institutions or external authorities?

ELECTORAL DEMOCRACY WITHIN STRUCTURAL CONSTRAINTS

Elections in Pakistan Administered Kashmir provide a visible and functioning democratic process. Political parties compete, governments change, and electoral participation is relatively robust. However, the scope of electoral competition exists within boundaries that are structurally defined.

Certain foundational constitutional assumptions are not part of mainstream electoral contestation. Political discourse largely operates within a consensus framework regarding the territory's overarching constitutional alignment. Within this framework, political debate tends to focus on governance efficiency, development priorities, and resource distribution rather than alternative constitutional futures.

This produces what may be described as bounded democracy: competitive in form, but circumscribed in scope.

Importantly, this boundedness does not negate the reality of democratic practice. Rather, it highlights

the distinction between procedural democracy and expansive political sovereignty. Citizens vote, governments change, and public debate exists but the range of permissible systemic alternatives remains limited.

Over time, this structure contributes to a subtle but significant political effect: electoral outcomes are seen as meaningful but not transformative. This perception reinforces the sense that political change occurs within administration rather than through it.

THE ECONOMY OF DEVELOPMENT AND THE POLITICS OF INFRASTRUCTURE

Development occupies a central place in the governance narrative of Pakistan Administered Kashmir. Roads, bridges, hydropower projects, urban expansion, and connectivity initiatives are frequently presented as markers of progress and integration.

Yet development in the region also reflects a specific political economy. Large infrastructure projects are often shaped by strategic, energy, or regional connectivity priorities that extend beyond local developmental planning cycles. While these projects bring tangible benefits, they can also generate uneven outcomes across districts and social groups.

A recurring feature of this model is the concentration of development in specific corridors or nodes, often linked to broader national or trans-regional objectives. Peripheral areas, particularly those with difficult terrain or lower strategic visibility, may experience slower or more fragmented development outcomes.

This unevenness feeds directly into political perception. Development is not interpreted solely as economic improvement; it is also read as a distribution of attention, inclusion, and political relevance.

In this sense, infrastructure becomes not only a development tool but also a symbol of political positioning within a wider system of priorities.

CIVIL SOCIETY, PUBLIC EXPRESSION, AND THE BOUNDARIES OF DISCOURSE

Despite structural constraints, Pakistan Administered Kashmir possesses an active and increasingly vocal civil society. Journalists, teachers, lawyers, traders, student groups, and local activists participate in public discourse on governance, rights, and development.

Digital platforms have further expanded the reach and speed of political communication, allowing grievances



and debates to circulate rapidly across districts and communities.

This duality reinforces a pattern seen in other semi-autonomous contexts: robust debate on administration, combined with constrained debate on sovereignty.

THE PROTEST AS POLITICAL TRANSLATION, NOT DISRUPTION



The protest should therefore be understood not as an external disruption to the system, but as an internal translation of accumulated governance tensions into visible political form.

What makes the recent mobilization significant is not only its scale, but its communicative function. It translated diffuse grievances over electricity pricing, taxation, inflation, and public services into a more unified language of accountability and representation.

This translation matters because it indicates a shift in political consciousness. Economic grievances did not remain purely economic; they became vehicles for articulating questions about authority, responsibility, and institutional legitimacy.

In this sense, protest functions less as a breakdown of order and more as a diagnostic signal within the system: a way of expressing that existing institutional arrangements are not fully aligned with public expectations.

THE CRISIS OF REPRESENTATION REVISITED



When viewed together, fiscal dependency, administrative duality, bounded electoral democracy, uneven development, and constrained discourse produce a structural condition that can be described as a crisis of effective representation.

This is not a crisis of democratic form. Institutions exist, elections occur, and governance structures func-

Recent patterns of collective action indicate that public mobilization is becoming more organized, issue-based, and capable of transcending traditional political divisions.

tion. Rather, it is a crisis of perceived political efficacy: the sense among citizens that formal mechanisms of representation do not fully translate into control over the most consequential decisions affecting their lives.

This gap between participation and power is the defining feature of the current political moment in Pakistan Administered Kashmir.

It explains why economic issues so quickly acquire political depth, why protests expand beyond their initial triggers, and why dissatisfaction persists even in the presence of functioning institutions.

CONCLUSION: STABILITY, STRAIN, AND THE LIMITS OF MANAGED EQUILIBRIUM



Pakistan Administered Kashmir occupies a politically complex space shaped by history, geopolitics, and institutional design. Its governance model has generated structural tensions that periodically surface in the form of protest and political mobilization.

The central paradox remains unresolved: a system designed to balance autonomy with alignment, representation with oversight, and local governance with external coordination.

In recent years, this balance has come under increasing strain not because institutions have collapsed,

but because public expectations have evolved faster than institutional adaptation.

The developments examined in this study suggest that Pakistan Administered Kashmir may be entering a new phase in its political evolution. The central issue is no longer confined to questions of administrative performance or economic management. Rather, it concerns the growing tension between expanding public expectations and institutional arrangements that many citizens increasingly perceive as insufficiently responsive to their political and economic aspirations.

Recent patterns of collective action indicate that public mobilization is becoming more organized, issue-based, and capable of transcending traditional political divisions. While these movements have thus far focused largely on economic grievances and governance concerns, they also reflect a broader transformation in political consciousness. Citizens are increasingly asserting claims not merely as recipients of state policy but as stakeholders seeking greater influence over decisions that affect their daily lives.

If these trends continue, Pakistan Administered Kashmir is likely to witness more frequent and more sophisticated forms of public mobilization in the years ahead. Periodic protests may evolve into sustained civic movements capable of exerting greater pressure on existing institutions. The region may therefore experience an intensification of contestation over questions of representation, accountability, and political agency. In this sense, the emerging challenge is not one of immediate instability, but of a gradually widening gap between rising societal expectations and the institutional mechanisms available for their expression. How this dynamic unfolds may well shape the next chapter of politics in Pakistan Administered Kashmir and influence the broader trajectory of the region's governance landscape.



SHRI AMARNATH JI YATRA

Where Faith Meets the Spirit of India



by Muhammad Zaid Malik



The journey is physically demanding, environmentally harsh, and logistically complex. Yet year after year, pilgrims undertake it with unwavering devotion, believing that within the icy depths of the cave resides the divine manifestation of Lord Shiva.

▼
Every summer, as the Himalayan winter loosens its grip and the snow begins to retreat from the high-altitude passes of Kashmir, a remarkable human movement begins to unfold. It is not driven by trade, tourism, or migration. It is driven by faith.

From the plains of India, thousands of pilgrims begin their journey toward one of the most revered Hindu shrines—the sacred Amarnath Cave, located deep within the mountainous terrain of the Kashmir Himalayas. The journey is physically demanding, environmentally harsh, and logistically complex. Yet year after year, pilgrims undertake it with unwavering devotion, believing that within the icy depths of the cave resides the divine manifestation of Lord Shiva.

To describe the Shri Amarnath Ji Yatra merely as a religious pilgrimage, however, is to miss its larger civilizational significance. It is also a vast annual convergence of India's diversity. A temporary movement of people that transforms the high Himalayas into a space where geography, faith, language, and culture intersect in extraordinary

ways. In this sense, the Yatra is not only a journey to a shrine. It is a journey into the idea of India itself.

THE SACRED GEOGRAPHY OF AMARNATH

▼
The Amarnath Cave, situated at an altitude of over 3,800 metres, occupies a unique place in the religious imagination of Hindu devotees. Inside the cave, a naturally formed ice stalagmite is revered as a symbol of Lord Shiva. According to tradition, this formation waxes and wanes with the lunar cycle, reinforcing its sacred significance.

The shrine is accessible through two principal routes—Pahalgam in south Kashmir and Baltal in central Kashmir. Both routes traverse steep ascents, narrow paths, glacier-fed streams, and unpredictable mountain weather.

For pilgrims, the physical difficulty of the journey is an inseparable part of its spiritual meaning. The hardship is not incidental; it is integral. It is believed that devotion is deepened through endurance, and faith is strengthened through effort.

What essentially makes the Yatra particularly distinctive is not only the





sacred geography of the destination, but the social geography of the journey itself. For several weeks every year, Kashmir becomes the meeting point of pilgrims from across India.

INDIA ARRIVES IN KASHMIR

One of the most remarkable features of the Amarnath Yatra is the sheer diversity of its participants. Pilgrims arrive from every corner of India—Gujarat, Maharashtra, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, West Bengal, Bihar, Punjab, Odisha, and many other states and union territories. They speak different languages, follow different customs, and carry distinct cultural traditions. These differences do not divide them during the yatra. They coexist within a shared rhythm of movement, prayer, and endurance.

A group from southern India may find itself resting alongside pilgrims from Punjab. A family from Gujarat may share tea with devotees from Bengal. Conversations occur in fragmented Hindi, gestures, and

The Himalayas, in this brief seasonal window, become a space of compressed India—a living mosaic of the country's cultural plurality.

shared understanding rather than linguistic uniformity. The Himalayas, in this brief seasonal window, become a space of compressed India—a living mosaic of the country's cultural plurality. But this mosaic is not complete without the people who inhabit the region year-round.

THE UNSUNG ARCHITECTURE OF THE YATRA: KASHMIR'S ROLE

While the spiritual dimension of the Yatra is widely acknowledged, its practical success rests significantly on the participation of local communities

in Kashmir. As pilgrims enter the Valley and proceed toward the base camps, they encounter a vast network of support systems operated by local residents. Pony owners, locally known as *Beej Pooniwalas*, carry supplies and assist pilgrims along difficult stretches. *Pithuwalas* shoulder luggage across steep gradients. *Palkiwalas* provide transport for elderly or physically challenged pilgrims. Tent operators, shopkeepers, transporters, hoteliers, and volunteers create the essential infrastructure that sustains the pilgrimage economy. A significant proportion of these service providers are from Kashmiri Muslim communities.

This fact, often understated in broader narratives, is central to understanding the Yatra as a social institution rather than merely a religious event. The pilgrimage, in its functioning, becomes a shared enterprise. It is enabled not only by administrative arrangements and security frameworks, but also by everyday acts of cooperation, service, and hospitality extended by local residents.

BEYOND RITUAL: A FIELD OF HUMAN INTERACTION

▼ The most enduring impressions of the Yatra often arise not at the shrine itself, but along the journey. A pilgrim from West Bengal receiving assistance from a young pony handler in Pahalgam. An elderly devotee from Maharashtra being carefully carried across difficult terrain by a local *Palkiwala*. A group from Gujarat sharing meals with Kashmiri workers after a long day's climb. A conversation between strangers who share neither language nor background but are bound by a common purpose.

These interactions are not structured by formal agreements or institutional programmes. They are spontaneous, situational, and deeply human. Collectively, they form a powerful social phenomenon.

They reveal how, in moments of shared difficulty, distinctions of religion, region, and identity often recede into the background, replaced by cooperation and mutual dependence. In such moments, the Yatra becomes more than pilgrimage. It becomes a temporary social ecosystem in which strangers become collaborators in a shared journey.

THE ECONOMIC LIFELINE OF THE MOUNTAINS

▼ Beyond its spiritual and social dimensions, the Shri Amarnath Ji Yatra carries substantial economic significance for the region. For thousands of households in Kashmir, the pilgrimage season represents one of the most important sources of annual income. The demand generated by the Yatra supports multiple layers of the local economy.

Transport operators provide

services to pilgrims arriving from outside the region. Small and medium-scale hospitality establishments operate at full capacity. Tent owners, food vendors, porters, and guides find seasonal employment. Local artisans and shopkeepers benefit from increased commercial activity. Even informal workers find opportunities within the expanded economic ecosystem created by the pilgrimage.

In many areas along the Yatra routes, the seasonal economy linked to the pilgrimage becomes a stabilizing factor for rural livelihoods. It is not only a religious event passing through Kashmir. It is also a recurring economic cycle that sustains thousands of families.

In an era marked globally by identity politics, polarization, and cultural fragmentation, the Amarnath Yatra offers a contrasting image. It is a space where large-scale human interaction is structured not by division but by convergence.

Pilgrims of different languages walk together along difficult terrain. Local residents of different backgrounds collaborate in service roles. Administrative and security agencies coordinate logistics. Religious devotion becomes the shared emotional framework that connects participants.

The Yatra does not erase differences. But it temporarily reorders them. It demonstrates that collective human experience can be organised around shared purpose rather than separation. This is perhaps its most understated significance.

One of the most interesting sociological aspects of the Yatra is the gradual transformation of identity that occurs during the journey itself. At the beginning, participants arrive as distinct individuals—defined by region, language, occupation, and background. As the journey progresses, these distinctions begin to soften. A pilgrim becomes a “yatri.” A





porter becomes a “helper.” A stranger becomes a companion. Identity becomes functional rather than categorical.

What matters is not where one comes from, but how one participates in the collective movement toward the shrine. This temporary reconfiguration of identity is one of the subtle but powerful features of the Yatra.

The spiritual meaning of the Amarnath Yatra is rooted in devotion. But its lived reality is also shaped by service. Devotees express faith through pilgrimage. Local residents express participation through facilitation. Both forms of engagement contribute to the continuity of the Yatra.

In this interplay, a deeper narrative emerges—one that extends beyond religious boundaries. It is a narrative of shared humanity expressed through cooperation under difficult conditions. In a world where differences are often emphasized, the Yatra quietly demonstrates the possibilities of coexistence grounded in mutual respect and necessity.

When the pilgrimage concludes, and devotees begin their return journey to their respective states, they carry with them more than religious

The spiritual meaning of the Amarnath Yatra is rooted in devotion. But its lived reality is also shaped by service. Devotees express faith through pilgrimage.

fulfilment. They carry memories of the mountains, the physical challenge of the journey, and the experience of collective devotion.

But they also carry something less tangible. They carry encounters. Encounters with people from different backgrounds. Encounters with Kashmir’s hospitality. Encounters with moments of assistance, kindness, and cooperation that shaped their journey.

For many pilgrims, these memories become inseparable from the spiritual experience itself. The Yatra thus leaves behind a residue of human connection that extends beyond the duration of the

pilgrimage.

The Shri Amarnath Ji Yatra is often described in religious terms, and rightly so. It is a sacred pilgrimage deeply embedded in Hindu belief and practice. But to view it solely through this lens is to overlook its broader significance. It is also a civilizational event. A recurring moment in which India’s diversity becomes visible in motion. A space where geography enables encounter. A process through which strangers become co-travelers. A system in which faith and service operate together to sustain a shared journey.

At a time when much of the world is marked by division, the Yatra offers a different image—one of temporary unity forged through purpose, hardship, and cooperation. It is not a solution to political or social challenges. But it is a reminder of what becomes possible when human beings move together toward something larger than themselves. That is why the Shri Amarnath Ji Yatra remains more than a pilgrimage.

It is one of the most enduring annual expressions of India’s plural ethos—where faith meets geography, and geography, for a brief moment each year, becomes a shared human space.



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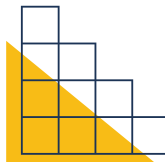
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WAITING FOR A VACANCY

EDUCATION, ASPIRATION AND THE POLITICS OF WAITING IN KASHMIR

by Sohail Bhat

In Kashmir, an entire generation is waiting-for a vacancy, a result, a future. This essay explores how the gap between education and opportunity has created a culture of prolonged uncertainty, where aspirations remain high but the path to adulthood grows ever longer.



At six o'clock on a cold winter morning, long before the markets of Srinagar begin to stir and before office-goers emerge onto the roads, hundreds of young men and women can already be seen standing outside examination centres. Some clutch transparent folders containing admit cards and identity documents. Others revise handwritten notes one final time beneath streetlights. Parents wait nearby in parked vehicles, offering last-minute words of encouragement. Tea vendors move through the crowd. Conversations revolve around cut-off marks, vacancies, previous papers, coaching centres, and rumours circulating through Telegram groups.

For a few hours, the future appears concentrated within the walls of a school building converted into an examination centre. The candidates entering those gates are not merely competing for jobs. Many are competing for adulthood itself.

Some have been preparing for two years. Others for five. Many for longer. They carry degrees, postgraduate qualifications, professional certificates, and the accumulated expectations of entire families. Yet despite years of education, countless examinations, and enormous personal sacrifice, they remain suspended between aspiration and achievement.

The scene has become so familiar across Kashmir that it scarcely attracts attention anymore. Yet it represents one of the most profound social transformations unfolding in the region today.

For decades, education was presented as the most reliable route to social mobility, economic security, and personal advancement. Parents invested their savings in schooling. Families endured financial hardship to send children to colleges and universities. Teachers repeated a promise that seemed both simple



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and credible: study hard, earn qualifications, and opportunities would follow. For previous generations, that promise largely held true. For today's generation, it increasingly does not.

Across Kashmir, thousands of educated young people find themselves trapped in an extended cycle of preparation, examinations, recruitment delays, litigation, waiting lists, and uncertainty. Their lives are organised around vacancies that may or may not materialise, appointments that may or may not arrive, and opportunities that seem perpetually just beyond reach. This is not simply a story about unemployment. It is a story about suspended adulthood.

It is a story about a generation that did everything society asked of it, only to discover that the path between education and opportunity had become longer, narrower, and far less certain than anyone anticipated. It is the story of Kashmir's Exam Generation.

THE PROMISE THAT SHAPED A SOCIETY

Few institutions command greater respect in Kashmiri society than education. For much of the twentieth century, education represented both aspiration and escape. It offered a pathway out of poverty, a means of social advancement, and a source of dignity in a region frequently marked by economic constraints and political uncertainty.

In villages scattered across the Valley, families often invested in education at considerable personal cost. Agricultural income was diverted toward school fees. Jewellery was sold to finance university studies. Parents with limited formal education viewed their children's academic success as the culmination of sacrifices extending across decades.

Education became more than learning. It became hope institutionalized. A familiar sequence emerged: school, university, employment, marriage, stability. For

many families, this sequence evolved into an unwritten social contract. Academic effort would be rewarded. Qualifications would generate opportunity. The future would justify the sacrifice.

The remarkable expansion of educational access during the last three decades strengthened these expectations. Universities grew. Colleges multiplied. Enrolments increased dramatically. More young Kashmiris entered higher education than ever before.

By most conventional indicators, this should have been a success story. Instead, it generated an unexpected contradiction. As educational attainment expanded, the labour market failed to expand at the same pace. The result was not simply unemployment. It was the mass production of aspiration without the parallel production of opportunity.

WHY THE GOVERNMENT JOB BECAME THE ULTIMATE DREAM

To understand contemporary Kashmir, one must understand the extraordinary symbolic power of government employment. In many parts of the world, young graduates pursue careers across a wide range of sectors. In Kashmir, however, government employment has historically occupied a unique position. A government job offers something increasingly rare: certainty. Regular salaries, institutional protection, pension benefits, social prestige, and long-term stability make public-sector employment exceptionally attractive.

In a region where private enterprise remains relatively limited and economic volatility remains common, such stability acquires enormous value. Consequently, government employment ceased to be merely one career option among many. It became the benchmark



Over time, the government employee became a cultural symbol of achievement. A teacher represented respectability. A civil servant represented success. An officer represented arrival. Entire generations grew up internalizing these assumptions.

against which all other opportunities were measured. Parents encouraged it. Relatives admired it. Society rewarded it.

Over time, the government employee became a cultural symbol of achievement. A teacher represented respectability. A civil servant represented success. An officer represented arrival. Entire generations grew up internalizing these assumptions. The examination hall therefore became something more than an administrative mechanism. It became the gateway to social legitimacy.

THE RISE OF THE COACHING REPUBLIC

The most visible consequence of this transformation is the emergence of an enormous coaching economy. Across Srinagar and other urban centres, coaching institutes have become among the most influential

educational institutions in contemporary Kashmir.

Their advertisements dominate public spaces. Their success stories circulate on social media. Their classrooms are filled with aspirants preparing for civil services, banking examinations, police recruitment, teaching positions, administrative services, and countless other posts. Entire local economies now revolve around examination preparation. Hostels accommodate students from distant districts. Photocopy shops reproduce study material. Bookstores stock competitive guides. Libraries operate at full capacity. Online educators attract thousands of followers.

The coaching industry has become one of the fastest-growing sectors associated with youth aspiration. Its growth reflects a striking paradox. The shortage of jobs has itself generated employment. An entire economy now exists around

preparing people for opportunities that remain limited. In many respects, Kashmir has become a society preparing for examinations.

LIVING IN PERMANENT PREPARATION

Preparation is supposed to be temporary. For many young Kashmiris, it has become permanent. An examination notification appears. Candidates intensify preparation. Months pass. The examination is conducted. Results are delayed. Legal challenges emerge. Recruitment procedures become contested. Another notification appears. The cycle begins again. Years disappear within this repetitive sequence. What begins as a one-year plan gradually extends into three years. Three years become five. Five become seven.

Many aspirants eventually realize that they have spent a significant portion of their twenties preparing for a future that remains uncertain. The most difficult aspect of this experience is not hard work. It is the inability to predict when the waiting will end. Life becomes organized around events that remain outside individual control. The next notification. The next examination. The next result. The next vacancy. The next possibility. The future becomes

For many young Kashmiris, it has become permanent. An examination notification appears. Candidates intensify preparation. Months pass. The examination is conducted.

perpetually deferred.

PORTRAITS FROM THE WAITING ROOM

Behind every recruitment statistic lies a personal story. Across Kashmir, thousands of young people inhabit remarkably similar biographies. A postgraduate from Kupwara spends six years preparing for various examinations while watching former classmates build careers elsewhere.

A woman from Anantnag postpones marriage because she remains convinced that one more recruitment cycle may finally produce success. A graduate from Baramulla appears in examination after

examination, qualifying repeatedly but never securing final selection.

Their circumstances differ. Their experience does not. All inhabit a condition of prolonged anticipation. All continue investing faith in a promise whose fulfillment remains uncertain. Their lives illustrate a striking sociological reality. Waiting has become one of the most common shared experiences among educated youth in Kashmir.

THE HIDDEN ECONOMICS OF WAITING

The costs of unemployment are usually measured in lost income. The costs of waiting are much larger. Years spent preparing represent years not spent acquiring professional experience. They represent delayed earnings, delayed independence, delayed investment, and delayed confidence. Families absorb substantial financial burdens. Coaching fees accumulate. Accommodation costs rise. Examination fees multiply. Transportation expenses increase. Study materials require constant updating. For households with modest incomes, these expenditures represent significant sacrifices. The deeper cost, however, remains invisible—Time.

The most productive years of youth are increasingly consumed by uncertainty. Aspirants invest thousands of hours in preparation while remaining excluded from meaningful participation in the economy. The opportunity cost is enormous.

DELAYED ADULthood

Perhaps the most profound consequence of examination culture lies beyond economics. It concerns adulthood itself. Traditionally, education marked the transition



into adult life. Today, employment performs that function. As employment becomes delayed, adulthood itself becomes postponed. Marriage is deferred. Independent households are delayed. Financial autonomy remains elusive. Major life decisions become conditional upon recruitment outcomes. Many young people describe feeling trapped between adolescence and adulthood. They possess qualifications associated with maturity but lack the economic independence traditionally associated with adult status. The result is a prolonged period of social limbo. An entire generation finds itself waiting not merely for employment but for life to begin.

FAMILIES AND THE BURDEN OF HOPE

The Exam Generation is sustained by family sacrifice. Behind every aspirant stands a network of emotional and financial support. Parents invest savings accumulated over decades. Siblings contribute income. Households adjust priorities. Family expectations become intertwined with examination outcomes. A government appointment therefore represents far more than individual success. It validates collective sacrifice. It confirms that years of investment were worthwhile. Failure, by contrast, is rarely experienced individually. Entire families share the disappointment.

This collective dimension helps explain the emotional intensity surrounding recruitment processes. The examination hall has become one of the few places where the aspirations of entire households converge.

THE PSYCHOLOGY OF UNCERTAINTY

The emotional consequences of prolonged preparation are difficult to quantify. Hope and disappointment



**Every achievement becomes visible.
Every delay becomes public.
Every vacancy becomes a collective obsession.
Social media has expanded access to information.**

alternate continuously. Each recruitment notification generates optimism. Each delay generates anxiety. Each result generates anticipation or frustration. The cycle repeats endlessly. Unlike conventional employment, examination success depends upon numerous factors beyond individual effort. Competition intensifies. Vacancies fluctuate. Policies change. Procedures evolve. Consequently, uncertainty becomes a permanent feature of everyday life. The challenge is not merely failing. It is never knowing whether success remains one attempt away or permanently out of reach.

Digital technology has transformed examination culture. Telegram channels, WhatsApp groups, YouTube educators, and online mentoring platforms ensure

that aspirants remain connected to recruitment discussions twenty-four hours a day. Notifications arrive constantly. Rumours circulate rapidly. Success stories spread instantly. The result is a culture of perpetual comparison.

Every achievement becomes visible. Every delay becomes public. Every vacancy becomes a collective obsession. Social media has expanded access to information. It has also intensified pressure. The examination experience no longer ends when students leave the classroom. It follows them everywhere.

KASHMIR AND THE MANUFACTURING OF ASPIRATION

Kashmir's Exam Generation is not an isolated phenomenon. Across large parts of Asia, Africa, and the Middle East, educational expansion has outpaced job creation. Governments successfully produced graduates. Economies failed to produce sufficient opportunities. The result has been the emergence of educated populations confronting persistent uncertainty.

What makes Kashmir distinctive is not merely the intensity of dependence upon public employment. It is the extent to which society periodically constructs symbolic figures around whom an entire generation organizes its aspirations.

In the decade preceding the abrogation of Article 370, a section of Kashmiri youth witnessed the emergence of local militant commanders who, through a combination of political circumstances, social media visibility, and public fascination, acquired an influence that extended beyond the sphere of militancy itself. For many vulnerable and disoriented young people confronting unemployment, uncertainty, and a crisis of direction, these figures became symbols of purpose, identity, and recognition. Their appeal was often less about ideology than about visibility in a society where many felt invisible.

The post-2019 period witnessed a very different phenomenon. As militancy declined and competitive examinations increasingly became the principal pathway to social mobility, public institutions, coaching centres, and social media platforms began celebrating successful candidates with unprecedented intensity. Civil service toppers, administrative officers, and examination rank-holders emerged as the new public heroes. Their photographs dominated newspaper pages, social media feeds, coaching advertisements, and public discussions. Success stories were amplified not merely

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to celebrate achievement but also to offer alternative role models for a generation searching for direction.

The intention behind this shift was understandable. It sought to replace the romanticization of

conflict with the romanticization of achievement. Yet the unintended consequences deserve attention.

Just as the earlier glorification of militant figures created unrealistic expectations among some sections of





youth, the contemporary celebration of exceptional examination success has occasionally produced its own distortions. A handful of extraordinary success stories are repeatedly presented as representative outcomes, while the vastly larger population of aspirants who never secure such positions remains largely invisible. The result is a new hierarchy of aspiration. Thousands of young people internalize the belief that success in a competitive examination is not merely a career achievement but the primary measure of personal worth and social validation. When success remains elusive, disappointment is often experienced not as a professional setback but as a personal failure.

The consequences are increasingly visible. Coaching centres are filled with candidates who measure their self-worth against a tiny number of highly publicized success stories. Social media constantly reinforces the impression that perseverance inevitably leads to triumph, even though the mathematics of competitive recruitment makes such outcomes statistically impossible for the overwhelming majority of applicants. As years pass without success, frustration often transforms into

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anxiety, self-doubt, depression, and a growing sense of inadequacy. The burden is particularly heavy because failure is no longer experienced privately; it unfolds in a public culture that relentlessly celebrates the winners. In this sense, Kashmir's examination culture reflects a broader transformation in the politics of aspiration. The heroes have changed, the symbols have changed, and the pathways have changed. What remains constant is a society in which large numbers of young people continue searching for recognition, dignity, and a meaningful place in the future.

The challenge, therefore, is

not simply unemployment. It is the concentration of collective hope into a very narrow set of socially celebrated outcomes. When an entire generation is encouraged to pursue the same destination, the inevitable consequence is that many will find themselves waiting outside a door that only a few can ultimately enter.

Kashmir therefore represents a particularly concentrated expression of a broader global trend. Across many societies, educational expansion has created aspirations faster than economies can create opportunities. Yet few places illustrate the emotional and social consequences of that imbalance as vividly as Kashmir, where the examination hall has become not merely a site of recruitment, but a theatre of hope, recognition, and increasingly, disappointment

THE SOCIOLOGY OF WAITING

Waiting is often treated as an inconvenience. In reality, it is a powerful social force. Waiting shapes behaviour. It influences decisions. It reorganizes lives. For Kashmir's educated youth, waiting has become institutionalized. People wait for notifications. They wait for examinations. They wait for results. They wait for appointments. They wait for certainty. The expectation that opportunity may arrive tomorrow encourages the postponement of alternative choices today. Businesses are not started. Migration plans are delayed. Other careers remain unexplored. Waiting becomes self-perpetuating. It transforms from a temporary condition into a permanent social reality.

One of the most significant consequences of educational expansion is credential inflation. As more people acquire degrees, degrees themselves lose their scarcity. Qualifications that once guaranteed



distinction become commonplace. Candidates accumulate additional credentials to remain competitive. Master's degrees follow bachelor's degrees. Professional certifications follow master's degrees. Preparation becomes endless. The irony is profound. Kashmir has become more educated than ever before. Yet educational achievement increasingly coexists with economic insecurity. The value of education remains immense. The certainty once associated with educational success does not.

The greatest challenge posed by the Exam Generation is not unemployment alone. It is the gradual erosion of belief. Modern societies depend upon confidence in merit. Citizens must believe that effort can produce reward. Students must believe that education has meaning. Families must believe that sacrifice is worthwhile. When these assumptions

weaken, social trust begins to erode. The consequences are subtle but significant. Cynicism replaces optimism. Doubt replaces confidence. Institutions struggle to retain credibility. The challenge therefore extends far beyond recruitment. It concerns the broader relationship between society and opportunity.

Every era leaves its mark upon the people who come of age within it. Some generations are shaped by conflict. Others by migration, economic transformation, or technological change. For many young Kashmiris, the defining experience of their generation may ultimately be waiting. Waiting for a vacancy. Waiting for a result. Waiting for an appointment order. Waiting for financial independence. Waiting for adulthood. Waiting for the future.

Kashmir's Exam Generation is among the most educated in the region's history. It is ambitious,

resilient, and deeply invested in the promise of upward mobility through education. Yet it remains caught within a widening gap between aspiration and opportunity.

The significance of this phenomenon extends far beyond employment statistics. It touches family structures, mental health, migration patterns, social trust, marriage, identity, and the very meaning of education itself.

The examination hall has become one of the defining institutions of contemporary Kashmir—not because it guarantees opportunity, but because it concentrates hope. And hope, perhaps more than anything else, is what continues to bring thousands of young people back to those examination centres every year, carrying admit cards in their hands and entire futures on their shoulders, convinced that this time the waiting may finally end.



KASHMIR AND THE NEW ASIAN GEOPOLITICS

by KC Desk

Kashmir is no longer viewed solely through the India–Pakistan lens. As China emerges as a major regional stakeholder, the region is becoming part of a wider Asian strategic landscape shaped by connectivity, competition, and geopolitical change.

For much of the twentieth century, the Kashmir region was understood through a relatively stable analytical framework. It was a territorial and political conflict between India and Pakistan, shaped by Partition, sustained by competing claims of sovereignty, and periodically intensified by military confrontation. Diplomatic engagement, academic analysis, and international commentary largely operated within this bilateral lens.

Even when external actors expressed interest, they were generally viewed as secondary-responding to, rather than shaping, the core dynamics of the conflict. Over the past two decades, however, this framework has begun to show its limitations.

A quieter but structurally significant transformation has taken place in the wider Asian strategic environment. The rise of China, the expansion of cross-border infrastructure, shifting patterns of economic connectivity, and the growing importance of frontier regions have collectively altered the geopolitical context within which Kashmir is situated.

The conflict has not changed in its historical origins. But the environment surrounding it has

The conflict has not changed in its historical origins. But the environment surrounding it has changed in ways that are increasingly difficult to ignore. Kashmir is no longer only a bilateral question.

changed in ways that are increasingly difficult to ignore. Kashmir is no longer only a bilateral question. It is becoming part of a broader strategic geography linking South Asia, Central Asia, and western China.

Understanding this shift is essential not because it replaces existing narratives, but because it adds an additional layer of strategic complexity that now informs the calculations of all principal stakeholders.

THE ENDURING INDIA-PAKISTAN FRAMEWORK

Despite emerging changes, the India-Pakistan dimension remains the central axis of the Kashmir

conflict. Security concerns, political positions, domestic considerations, and historical narratives continue to define the core of the disagreement. Military deployments, diplomatic exchanges, and periodic crises reinforce the enduring salience of this bilateral structure.

For both states, Kashmir remains closely tied to questions of national identity, territorial integrity, and internal political legitimacy. These factors ensure that the conflict retains its historical centrality.

However, while the India-Pakistan framework remains foundational, it no longer operates in isolation. It is now embedded within a wider strategic environment that influences how each side evaluates risks, opportunities, and external alignments. This evolving context does not replace the bilateral dispute. It modifies its parameters.

GEOGRAPHY AS STRATEGIC CONTINUITY

Geography has always been central to the Kashmir question, but its strategic significance has evolved over time. The region occupies a sensitive location at the intersection of South Asia, Central Asia, and the western Himalayan frontier. Historically, this positioning made it a zone of interaction, movement, and contestation. In the contemporary period, geography has regained strategic importance through a different pathway: connectivity.

Infrastructure development, cross-border linkages, and regional corridors have transformed the way states perceive frontier spaces. Areas once viewed primarily through a security lens are now also evaluated through the lens of mobility, access, and integration. Kashmir, in this sense, is no longer only a contested territory. It is also part of a broader geographic continuum that influences regional connectivity and strategic



planning across multiple states. This shift in perception is subtle but significant.

CHINA'S EVOLVING STRATEGIC POSITION

China's role in relation to Kashmir is often misunderstood when framed in conventional political terms. It is neither accurate to describe Beijing as a direct participant, nor sufficient to treat it as a distant observer.

China's engagement is best understood as the gradual emergence of a set of strategic interests tied to regional stability, infrastructure development, and frontier security. These interests have expanded in parallel with China's broader economic and geopolitical rise.

At the centre of this evolution is the increasing importance of western China's connectivity to adjacent regions. Infrastructure networks, trade routes, and logistical corridors linking inland China to broader markets have elevated the strategic relevance of surrounding territories.

In this context, stability in neighboring regions acquires indirect but tangible importance. The key shift is not political involvement in the dispute itself, but the embedding of Chinese interests within the wider regional environment in which the dispute exists.

THE CONNECTIVITY LAYER AND REGIONAL INTEGRATION

One of the defining features of contemporary Asian geopolitics is the rise of connectivity-driven strategy. Infrastructure projects, transportation corridors, energy linkages, and trade networks increasingly shape how states think about regional geography. These developments have introduced a new layer to the Kashmir context.

Territories adjacent to the region are now part of broader connectivity



Infrastructure networks, trade routes, and logistical corridors linking inland China to broader markets have elevated the strategic relevance of surrounding territories.

architectures that link multiple parts of Asia. Roads, tunnels, energy systems, and logistical routes contribute to an emerging geography of movement that transcends older political boundaries. From a strategic perspective, this creates new forms of interdependence. Stability, predictability, and infrastructure security become important considerations for multiple stakeholders operating within overlapping regional systems. Kashmir is therefore not isolated from these developments. It is situated adjacent to them, and increasingly influenced by them. This does not

alter its political status. But it does alter its strategic environment.

SECURITY CALCULATIONS IN A CHANGING ENVIRONMENT

In contemporary strategic thinking, security is no longer defined solely in military terms. It also includes infrastructure resilience, economic continuity, and regional stability. For major stakeholders in Asia, including China, India, and Pakistan, these considerations increasingly intersect. Periods of tension between India and Pakistan are no longer viewed exclusively through bilateral security dynamics. They are also assessed in terms of their potential impact on broader regional stability.

Similarly, developments in border regions are evaluated not only for their immediate tactical implications but also for their influence on long-term strategic planning. This does not imply convergence of interests. It implies the multiplication of variables. Kashmir, in this context, becomes part of a wider matrix of security considerations that extend beyond traditional boundaries.

THE INDIA-CHINA STRATEGIC INTERFACE

Another important dimension shaping the regional environment is the evolving relationship between India and China. Over the past decade, this relationship has undergone significant changes, particularly in relation to border infrastructure, strategic competition, and regional influence. These developments have introduced a new layer of complexity into Asian geopolitics.

Kashmir now exists within a broader environment in which India and China are engaged in parallel processes of competition and managed interaction. This does not mean that Kashmir is the centre of India–China relations. Rather, it means that developments in and around Kashmir are increasingly interpreted within that wider strategic context. The result is a more interconnected regional system in which multiple issues influence one another across different geographic and political domains.

THE TRIANGULAR STRATEGIC ENVIRONMENT

Taken together, these developments suggest the emergence of a triangular strategic environment involving India, Pakistan, and China. This triangle is not symmetrical in nature, nor is it defined by equal participation in the Kashmir conflict.

Instead, it reflects the overlapping interests, calculations, and strategic considerations of three major regional actors whose policies intersect in and around the wider Kashmir region. India and Pakistan remain the principal contenders to the conflict.

China represents an increasingly important contextual actor whose interests are tied to regional stability, connectivity, and broader strategic

For major stakeholders in Asia, including China, India, and Pakistan, these considerations increasingly intersect. Periods of tension between India and Pakistan are no longer viewed exclusively through bilateral security dynamics.

calculations. The interaction between these three dimensions introduces additional complexity into an already long-standing and sensitive geopolitical issue. Importantly, this does not transform the legal or political structure of the dispute. It transforms the strategic environment in which the conflict exists.

WHAT THIS MEANS FOR REGIONAL STABILITY

The emergence of a more complex strategic environment carries implications for how stability is understood in the region. Stability is no longer a purely bilateral concern between India and Pakistan.

It is increasingly linked to broader regional dynamics, including infrastructure development, economic connectivity, and great-power relations in Asia. This does not reduce the importance of bilateral dialogue or conflict management mechanisms. On the contrary, it reinforces their importance within a more complex system. As the number of relevant variables increases, the value of structured engagement also increases. The challenge lies not in replacing existing frameworks, but in adapting them to a changing environment.

For populations living in the Kashmir region, these broader

strategic shifts are often indirect and uneven in their impact. Daily life remains shaped primarily by local governance, economic conditions, employment opportunities, and social dynamics. However, geopolitical developments contribute to the broader environment in which these local realities unfold.

Infrastructure, security arrangements, and regional stability influence economic prospects and long-term planning. While the strategic triangle involving India, Pakistan, and China operates at a state level, its effects are felt, in varying degrees, at the societal level.

This interaction between high-level geopolitics and ground-level reality remains an important dimension of the Kashmir context.

The Kashmir dispute retains its historical foundations and its central bilateral structure. However, the strategic grammar within which it is discussed is undergoing gradual change. The rise of China, the expansion of connectivity-driven development, the evolution of India–China relations, and the increasing importance of regional infrastructure have collectively contributed to a more complex environment. This does not redefine the dispute. It reframes its context.

Kashmir is increasingly situated within a broader Asian strategic landscape in which multiple actors, overlapping interests, and interconnected systems shape the environment surrounding the border conflict. For analysts, diplomats, and military planners alike, the key challenge is not to abandon established frameworks, but to refine them. The India–Pakistan dimension remains central. But it now operates within a wider strategic field that must also be taken into account. In this sense, the future of Kashmir will continue to be shaped by its history. But it will also be shaped by the changing geometry of Asia itself.



ECONOMICS OF GLOBAL TARIFF WAR

by Dr Mehraj Ud Din Shah

The global tariff war is transforming trade, investment, and economic power across continents. While protectionism may deliver short-term gains, this analysis argues that technological innovation—not tariffs—will ultimately determine the winners of the new world economic order.

A significant tariff war was looming around the globe in late 2025 and early 2026. Its headwinds were sure to slip many nations into economic stagnation, including the US. Nonetheless, the apparent small pause is unsupportive to set the order right. The tariff policy corrections demand core macroeconomic analysis and estimations; otherwise, shooting arrows in the air doesn't scare the enemies.

In the International Trade landscape, the tariff wars have a long history. They have been happening even before 1839. Nevertheless, since 2018, the tariff war has gained heightened momentum, when the US and China engaged in retaliatory tariff attacks. This panorama at first instance shook the edifice of the free trade framework of the World Trade Organization (WTO) and drove the nations to revisit their tariff policies with exclusive inward-looking objectives. Factually, the global tariff war reveals a complex interaction between national interests and global economic efficiency. While the tariffs may provide a temporary advantage to selected industries and serve some strategic policy objectives of a country. However, their broader economic effects are generally negative.

The recent tariff war of 2025 and early 2026 that the USA has initiated against some of its ideological rivals, like China, Mexico, Canada, India etc. has created global ripple effects in business and trade. It unleashed an undesirable impact on the global business environment and consumer income and savings. Admittedly, it may have augmented domestic demand and consumption of US goods, and helped the country to generate some additional cash flows to recompose its revenue arithmetic. Unfortunately, this double-edged knife had cut the US economy

While this tariff war added new trade opportunities for the Indian economy. India emerged as one of the countries that benefited from companies seeking alternatives to China.

sharply. It has caused a reduction in their real income, savings, and has led to the postponement of their current consumption and demand. The fluid shock had reduced production, employment, and GDP in the US to -1.4% in 2025 (down from expectations of 1.9%) say experts. However, the critical argument is how the move has impacted the economies of China, Mexico, Canada, and other broader parts of the world, against which the tariff war was not directly aimed. It did impact China's electronics, machinery, and consumer goods industries and slowed their production and employment. However, China

identified new partners and diversified its export market, strengthened its trade relations, and substituted the US to a greater extent. Similarly, Mexico observed the nearshoring of US companies in Mexico. This augmented the production, employment, and income in Mexico and pulled down the consequent US revenue flows. Canada also forged new trade relations and minimised the adverse fallout of tariffs spike. While this tariff war added new trade opportunities for the Indian economy. India emerged as one of the countries that benefited from companies seeking alternatives to China. It increased foreign investment into sectors such as electronics, pharmaceuticals, and manufacturing. The Indian government promoted initiatives like "Make in India" to attract global businesses. However, India also faced challenges, including competition from other emerging economies and disruptions in global supply chains that affected its exports and imports. Conversely, many Southeast Asian Countries, including Vietnam, Thailand, and Malaysia, benefited as multinational companies moved production away from China. These countries attracted new investments and increased exports. Nevertheless, it is pertinent to acknowledge that the



countries that were heavily integrated into global supply chains experienced disruptions and increased costs. Higher tariffs reduced trade efficiency and contributed to their slower global economic growth. Developing countries dependent on international trade were particularly vulnerable to fluctuations in demand and investment.

The global onslaught of tariff wars is enormous and beyond the scope of exact estimation. A recent research report on tariff war hints that the cost of the global tariff war was not less than \$1.7 trillion in 2014 and had a profound negative impact on the GDP of all countries. The average country's real GDP had fallen by 2.8%. Rightly, the buoyancy and adverse fallout of the renewed tariff war have doubled over the previous tariff war, and its adverse effects are more daunting and economically catastrophic. This had halted the economic transition and momentum of the emerging economies that are heavily dependent on intermediate input trade. Moreover, the recent tariff war had unfolded new opportunities for many countries, especially for ASEAN, to replace China and gain

A recent research report on tariff war hints that the cost of the global tariff war was not less than \$1.7 trillion in 2014 and had a profound negative impact on the GDP of all countries.

access to export markets in countries where China had significant presence. Factually, it had given a big dent to China's Information and Technology Industry and somewhat added benefit to India's Information and Technology sector. While in China, the panorama had augmented its Research and Development (R&D) budget and enhanced its competitive ability, thereby it would yet again emerge as a net gainer from this Tariff War.

Needless to mention, China spends around \$785 billion annually on Research and Development,

which is roughly about 2.6% of its GDP. While India and Japan together spend only \$ 276 billion annually, which is somewhat less than 0.7% and 3.4% of their GDP, respectively. China's absolute spending is over ten times higher than India's, and almost four times that of Japan, creating a vast disparity in technological innovation and infrastructure scale. The whopping budget of China on R&D certainly would emerge as a driving force for its export sector, and over the years, the US Tariff War initiatives would prove meaningless and irrelevant to the global world order. Further, the deglobalization framework that the US is contemplating to strengthen in the years to come would become its core economic disadvantage. Consequently, there is an apprehension for the US to lose the markets that it largely controls under its geopolitical spectrum. The new world trade order would be significantly governed by the comparative cost and technological advantage rather than the geopolitical considerations.

Therefore, for the fitness of the global business ecosystem, tariff wars have no place, and protectionism should no longer be a relevant trade ideology of nations. The countries shall invest excessively in technology and innovate their products that benefit the masses around the globe. This system alone will protect global resources and augment overall growth. The ideology of dictating to nations to buy or not to buy from certain nations is nothing more than economic misguidance. The nations should learn to safeguard their economic interests and protect its resources.

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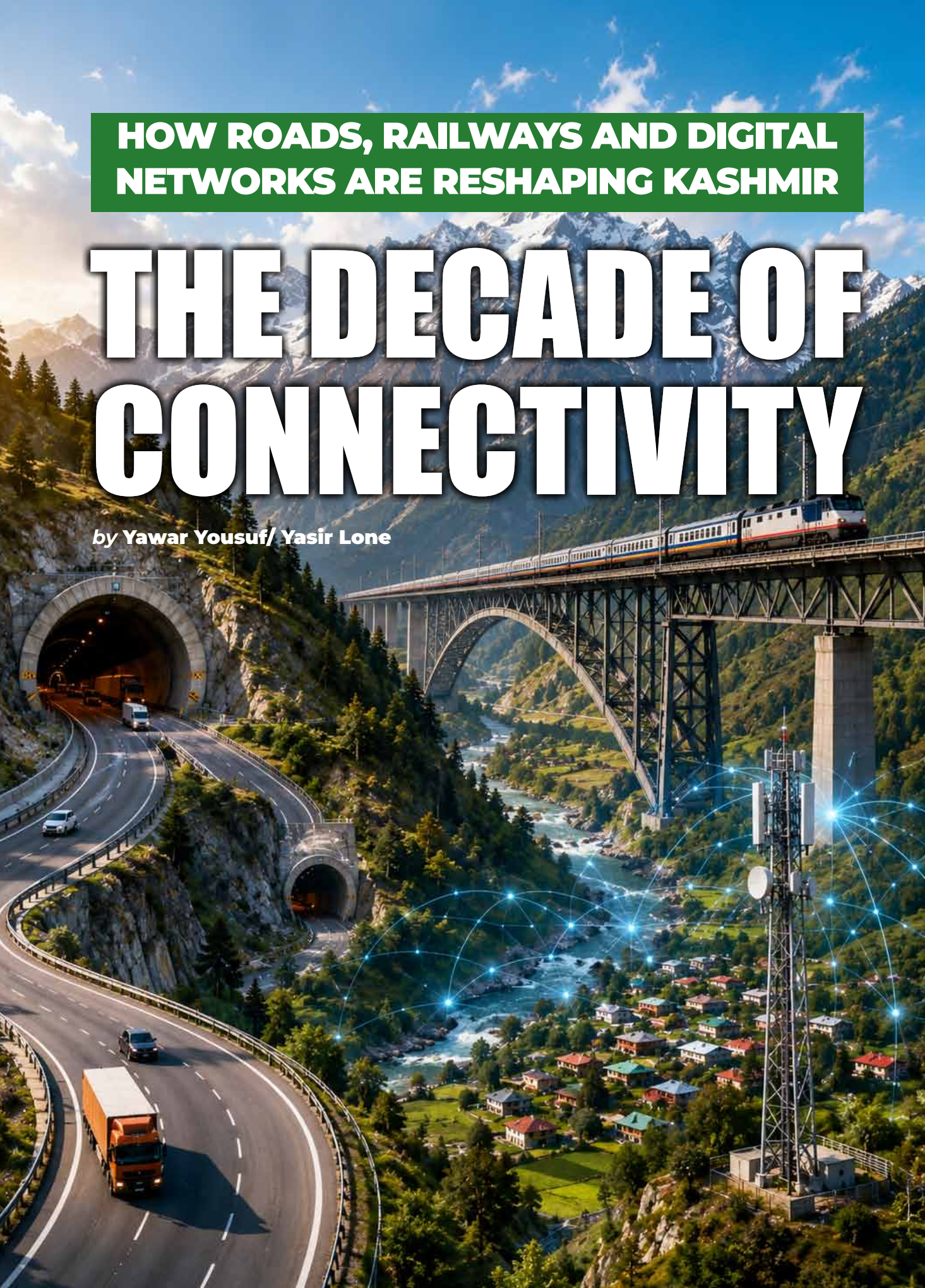
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**HOW ROADS, RAILWAYS AND DIGITAL
NETWORKS ARE RESHAPING KASHMIR**

THE DECADE OF CONNECTIVITY

by Yawar Yousuf/ Yasir Lone



For much of its modern history, Kashmir has been discussed through the language of conflict, diplomacy, security, and constitutional politics.

Governments changed, policies evolved, and public debates shifted, yet the dominant narratives surrounding the region remained remarkably consistent. Kashmir was viewed primarily as a political question, a strategic frontier, or a security challenge.

Beneath these larger narratives, another transformation has been unfolding. It is a story not of political slogans but of roads, tunnels, railways, bridges, and digital networks. It is a story about mobility, accessibility, and integration. It is a story about how geography itself is being reshaped.

Over the last decade, Jammu and Kashmir has witnessed one of the most ambitious periods of infrastructure development in its contemporary history. Major highways have been expanded, tunnels have pierced mountain barriers, railway networks have extended across some of the world's most challenging terrain, and digital connectivity has reached

Beneath these larger narratives, another transformation has been unfolding. It is a story not of political slogans but of roads, tunnels, railways, bridges, and digital networks.

communities that once remained isolated from broader economic and social networks.

The significance of these developments extends far beyond engineering achievement. Infrastructure changes the way people live. It changes how goods move, how businesses operate, how students access education, how tourists travel, and how regions connect with larger markets. In many ways, infrastructure determines the practical possibilities available to society.

Viewed through this lens, the last decade may ultimately be remembered as a period in which

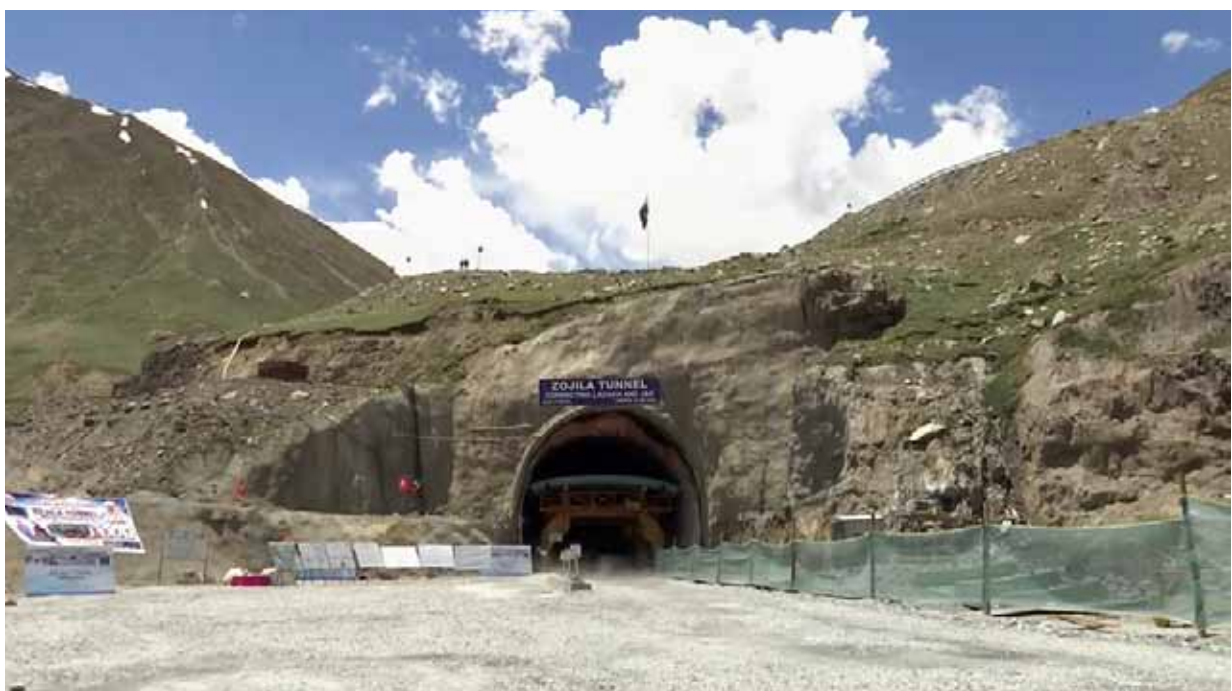
Kashmir underwent a profound transition from relative geographic isolation toward unprecedented connectivity.

REIMAGINING GEOGRAPHY

Kashmir's geography has always been both a blessing and a constraint. The mountains that give the region its extraordinary beauty have historically imposed significant costs on movement and communication. Harsh winters, difficult terrain, and weather related disruptions frequently affected transportation and economic activity. For generations, accessibility remained one of the central challenges confronting development.

The transformation of this reality is perhaps most visible in the succession of tunnel projects that have altered the region's transport landscape.

The opening of the Dr. Syama Prasad Mookerjee Tunnel, formerly known as the Chenani Nashri Tunnel, in 2017 marked a major turning point. Stretching over nine kilometres, it reduced travel distance on the Jammu Srinagar National Highway and significantly improved





reliability on one of the most critical routes linking the Valley with the rest of India.

The Banihal Qazigund Tunnel further strengthened this transformation. Together with the historic Jawahar Tunnel, these projects have gradually reduced the vulnerability of the highway to weather related disruptions and have improved year round movement of people and goods.

The next phase of this connectivity revolution is unfolding even further north. The Z Morh Tunnel has substantially improved winter access to Sonamarg, one of Kashmir's most important tourist destinations. More consequential still is the Zojila Tunnel, currently under construction beneath the Zojila Pass. Once completed, the tunnel will provide all weather connectivity between Kashmir and Ladakh, overcoming a mountain route that historically remained closed for several months every year because of heavy snowfall and avalanches.

The strategic and economic implications of the Zojila Tunnel extend beyond transportation. It will connect communities more reliably,

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improve logistics, facilitate tourism, strengthen commercial linkages, and reduce the sense of remoteness that has long characterized parts of the Himalayan frontier.

When viewed collectively, these projects represent something larger than engineering success. They signify an effort to reduce the historical constraints imposed by geography itself. The mountains remain, but many of the barriers they once imposed are steadily receding.

The transformation is equally

visible across Kashmir's expanding road network. Improved rural roads have linked villages to markets, schools, hospitals, and administrative centres. Districts that once appeared distant from economic activity are increasingly integrated into broader commercial systems. Farmers gain quicker access to markets. Small businesses can reach larger customer bases. Tourism operators can expand into previously inaccessible destinations.

Economic geography changes when mobility improves. Areas that once appeared peripheral become connected. Distances that discouraged investment become manageable. Opportunities emerge where isolation once imposed limitations.

Perhaps no project better symbolizes this transformation than the arrival of rail connectivity. For decades, the idea of connecting Kashmir to the national railway network represented one of independent India's most ambitious engineering visions. Today, that vision is increasingly becoming reality.

Railways are not merely transport systems. They are instruments of integration. They reduce costs,

increase mobility, encourage commerce, and reshape perceptions of distance. The railway network promises to strengthen Kashmir's links with wider markets while making travel more affordable and accessible for ordinary citizens. Its long term significance may ultimately prove comparable to that of the highway system itself.

THE CONNECTED FUTURE

Physical infrastructure tells only part of the story. The last decade has also witnessed a remarkable expansion of digital connectivity across Kashmir.

Smartphones, broadband services, digital payments, online education platforms, telemedicine, and e governance initiatives have transformed daily life in ways that would have seemed unimaginable only a generation ago. Digital networks have reduced some of the disadvantages traditionally associated with geographic remoteness. A student in Kupwara can access educational content from institutions located hundreds of kilometres away. An entrepreneur in Baramulla can market products nationally through digital platforms. Tourism operators can reach customers directly through social media and online booking systems.

Digital networks have reduced some of the disadvantages traditionally associated with geographic remoteness.

For younger generations especially, digital integration has become as important as physical integration.

These developments are gradually reshaping the region's economic landscape. Connectivity alone cannot solve every challenge confronting Kashmir. Unemployment remains a significant concern. Private sector expansion continues to face structural obstacles. Many young people still struggle to translate educational achievement into economic opportunity.

Yet connectivity alters the environment within which these challenges are addressed. Regions attract investment more easily when transportation improves. Businesses expand when logistics become reliable. Tourism grows when destinations become accessible. Service sector opportunities increase when digital networks connect

local talent with national and global markets.

Connectivity does not automatically create prosperity. But prosperity is difficult to achieve without connectivity.

Perhaps the most important aspect of this transformation is that it is experienced through everyday life rather than political rhetoric. A patient reaching a hospital more quickly, a farmer transporting produce to market, a student travelling for higher education, a tourist visiting a remote destination, or a business owner conducting online transactions rarely thinks in terms of grand strategy. They experience infrastructure as convenience, opportunity, and possibility.

This is what makes connectivity uniquely consequential. Its impact unfolds gradually through thousands of ordinary interactions that collectively reshape society.

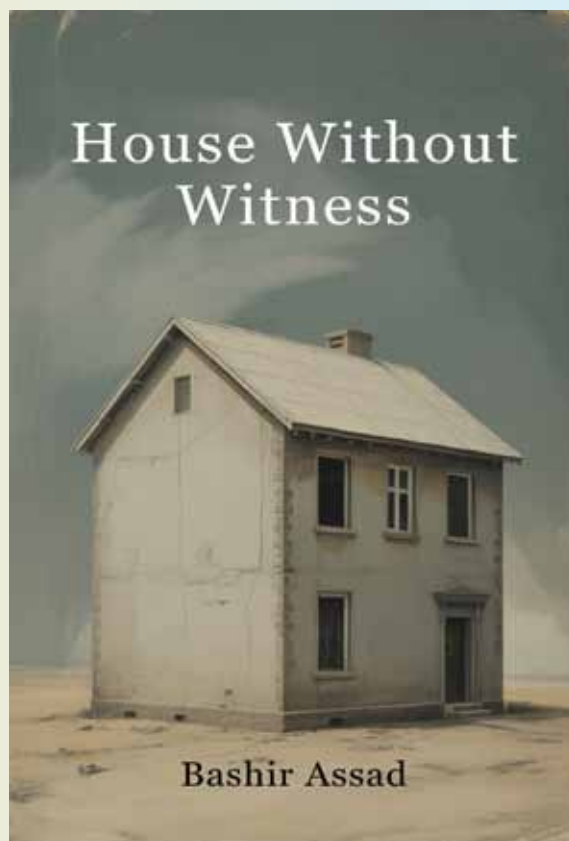
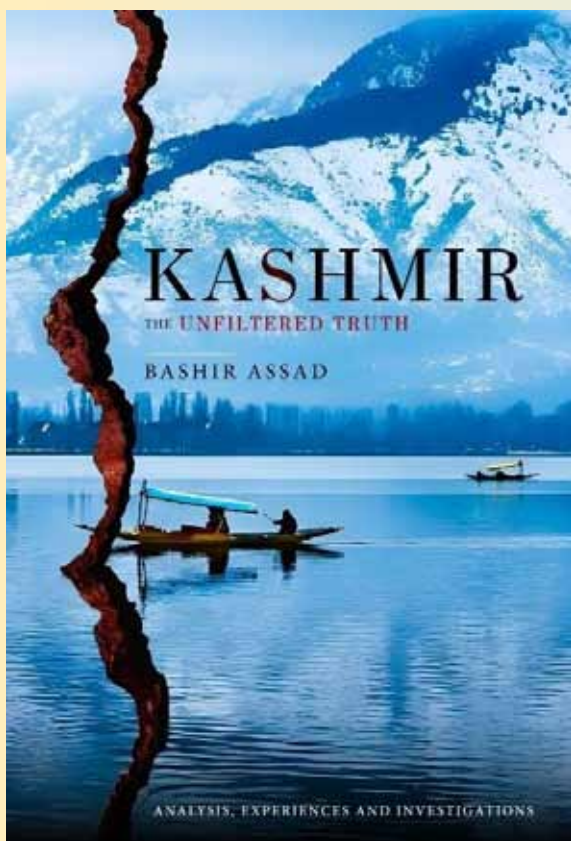
The political debates surrounding Kashmir will undoubtedly continue. History, identity, and competing narratives will remain central to public discourse. Yet alongside these debates, another story is taking shape. It is measured in kilometres of highways, tunnels carved through mountains, railway lines crossing valleys, villages connected to markets, and digital networks linking people to opportunities beyond their immediate horizons.

From the Jawahar Tunnel to the Zojila Tunnel, from mountain roads to railway corridors, and from physical infrastructure to digital highways, the last decade has witnessed a transformation that is redefining how Kashmir connects with itself and with the wider world.

In the years ahead, historians may identify many forces that shaped contemporary Kashmir. Among them, the story of connectivity may well prove to be one of the most significant.



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