



A day in their life
Images of the indignities that ordinary Kashmiris suffer in their daily lives are rarely seen. Here, villagers move to a safer place during a gunfight in Anantnag district. NISSAR AHMAD

STATES OF MATTER

Off the people

Kashmir has always been a pawn in a larger political game. Power in the State is not wielded on the principle of popular representation, but on how Delhi's will can be imposed



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A ceasefire was operational in Kashmir through the Ramzan month, though for the people of the Valley, it mattered very little. Within hours of the ceasefire being revoked, the BJP pulled out of its uneasy cohabitation with the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP). Again, it mattered very little.

Power in Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) is not wielded on the principle of popular representation, but on how effectively Delhi's will can be imposed. Since democratic governance as a pretence was established in 1996, two political formations in Kashmir with a credible presence in Jammu have stepped up consistently to volunteer for the job. That limited range of choice between the National Conference and the state unit of the Congress was expanded by the arrival of the PDP in 2002.

The plan worked for a while but began to unravel after 2014, when the Narendra Modi government, driven by the conceit of its victory in the general elections, made a push for absolute power over J&K. The aggressive campaign produced a sharply polarised electoral outcome. As the Jammu and Kashmir regions went their separate ways, there seemed no viable option than an alliance of opposites behind the fig leaf of an agreed agenda.

In June 2017, Shujaat Bukhari, editor of *Rising Kashmir*, addressed a Delhi round table on Kashmir. Union home minister Rajnath Singh had spoken of a "permanent solution" in Kashmir. That was an unfortunate choice of terminology, though suggestive of the intent behind a large movement of armed forces into Kashmir and an effort through the media to create a mood for extreme military action.

The coalition government in the State, Bukhari observed, had acted in matters where the BJP's partisan interest was involved, such as West Pakistan refugees and Kashmiri Pandit exiles. Though part of the agreed agenda, the repeal of special security laws that allowed armed personnel the run of the land in Kashmir had been brusquely swept off the table.

All references to the dissident political grouping in Kashmir, styled as the Hurriyat (or freedom) Conference, had been eliminated. And the crafty choreography of meetings at the individual level aside, there had been little effort to dispel the enveloping aura of hostility with Pakistan.

Two days short of a year later, Bukhari was shot dead leaving his Srinagar office at the iftar hour. Investigations have ostensibly found that Bukhari's involvement in a parallel track of peace talks, involving non-governmental actors from India and Pakistan, may have provoked the hit job by the militant fringe. In Kashmir's political haze though, fact is often a matter of choice and numerous alternative theories have gained ground.

Much separates Kashmir from the rest of India and it all boils down to alternative worlds of fact. The first 10 days since the dismissal of the PDP-led coalition government witnessed a ramping up of security operations, with nine armed militants and four civilians killed. In statistical terms, there is little to distinguish this period from the month of supposed ceasefire, when the security forces claimed 24 lives.

Ghulam Nabi Azad of the Congress, a former chief minister of the State, had a point in calling out the kill statistics dubious, though he was certainly wrong in asserting a substantially better record under the Congress. His reward for suggesting that civilians had been disproportionate sufferers under the BJP was a firestorm of outrage and a petition in a Delhi court demanding his prosecution for sedition.

Statistics apart, mistrust was the issue, sourced in turn to competing visions of fact. Commitment to journalistic integrity, Bukhari felt compelled to call out the Ramzan ceasefire as a farce. He had to face relentless so-

cial media hostility for his editorial choices. In one of his final tweets, he urged serious thinking over the general understanding of Kashmir as "just a piece of land". If serious, his critics had to think through why the "fear of death is missing in Kashmiri youth".

It is a common refrain in Kashmir that India's strategy is about the land, not the people. Social contract theorists, from Rousseau to Rawls, have identified a shared moral code as the essential underpinning of a well-ordered society. Agreement in every respect is of course neither feasible nor desirable in forging a "general will" — just that when disagreements arise, there would be agreement on how to disagree.

By these criteria, Kashmir clearly lies beyond the pale. When its voice gains space in the national dialogue, it is only to be shouted down by angry and indignant news anchors. In a 2016 analysis of "sly Indian media lies", journalist Shahnaz Bashir observed that "with careful use of terms and words in framing Kashmir and its situation, the media narrative is short, affirmative, dogmatic, top-down and declarative". Images of the indignities that Kashmiris suffer in their daily lives, as the victims of the heavy-handed approach, are taken off the air, ostensibly in "national interest".

An independent civil society group that visited Kashmir recently encountered an air of resignation. Kashmir has always been a pawn in a larger game and the harder a political actor is seen to be and the harsher the rhetoric, the greater the potential rewards. The "general will", in other words, must exclude the Kashmiri perception. It is in forging this manner of a partial will based on exclusion that political success in India lies.

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