

# Kashmiri Students outside Kashmir: Insecure and Threatened

Kashmiri students and youth are living in a hostile environment outside the state

## CONCERN

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Over the past few years, especially since the BJP-led government came to power at the centre, the feelings of alienation among Kashmiri people have shown signs of rapid increase. Despite the announcements of economic packages at various points of time in the recent years, the trust deficit among the people of the Valley has continuously increased. These days, the state has been witnessing intensifying trajectory of uprisings, cutting across both rural and urban areas.

Unlike the uprising in 1990's, which was orchestrated by Pakistan, the uprisings that we see in the current phase in the valley have been mostly indigenous in nature, though there is no denying that Pakistan is trying to fish in troubled waters. The Indian state has, thus, failed to restore faith in democracy among the people of the conflict-torn region. As New Delhi, with deployment of 7 lakh army, chose to be content with the status quo in the state, the conflict has hit the youth of the beleaguered valley badly, depriving them of the basic facilities and infrastructure needed to thrive in this competitive world. Yet the ambitions of the youths have surged in the recent years, and they started excelling in various fields such as Civil Services and science and technology etc. This has led to a boastful development in favour of the Indian state: that is the high outflow of Kashmiris to other states for education and jobs, which, I think, should be a real source for flame of hope to be kept burning, as far as the natural integration of Kashmiris with the mainstream India

is concerned.

The youth are coming out in droves to study in various states of India despite the feeling of rage towards the Indian state for not being sincere on the fundamental issues underlying the conflict. The presence of Kashmiri students is increasing day by day across most of the educational institutions in the country, which is important to cultivate a natural bond between Kashmiris and the rest of India.

However, in the recent years, there has been a rise in the incidents of harassment against Kashmiri students in various parts of the country. As per the data collected by the Hindustan Times, from Feb 2013 to April 2016, there have been at least 30 reported attacks on Kashmiri students studying in various colleges outside the valley. Since the onset of the ongoing uprising following the death of Burhan Wani in July, 2016, Kashmiri students have been attacked in several states of India such as Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Delhi, Uttar Pradesh, and Haryana etc. Many students have been expelled by their respective colleges, and there have been instances of Kashmiris being booked for sedition merely on the basis of their posts and comments on Facebook, following the complaints made by the local students.

On several occasions, the victims alleged that they received cold response from the local police when they sought their help. In the latest incident on 27 September, six Kashmiri students were beaten up inside the campus of Ganga Institute of Technology and Management, Jhajar, by their counterparts and security guards. The students also alleged that even the hostel warden beat up a Kashmiri student without listening to their version of

the incident.

The apathy shown by the college authorities and police in the recent years towards Kashmiri students has created a sense of insecurity among the latter in various colleges and universities. Kashmiri students outside the valley do not have the same amount of freedom as enjoyed by their other counterparts in their day to day life. A somewhat harsh comment or a post on Facebook by a Kashmiri is enough to lead to his expulsion, or a case of sedition filed against him or her even if it is not directly intended to hurt others. On the other hand, he has to quietly listen to abuses and labels, provoking them, and thereby, ultimately landing them into serious trouble. At a time when there is hardly a day in the state without hundreds being injured, blinded and a few killed, it is expected that emotions would run high among some Kashmiri youths studying outside the valley. Under such circumstances, college authorities and police are expected to deal quite sensitively with them.

But on the contrary, the callousness witnessed towards Kashmiris in some cases in the recent years accentuates the growing 'us vs them' mentality. Two weeks ago, a student from Srinagar, Mudassir Yousuf, was expelled from Aligarh Muslim University for posting an objectionable comment on Facebook over the Uri terror attack on army base. The student had offered his apology to the Vice Chancellor, stating that he was carried away by sentiments. In Udaipur, one more Kashmiri student, Mudassir Rashid, has been booked, on 29 September, for sedition based on his comment on Facebook related to Uri terror attack. Last month, in a similar incident, Chattisgarh Police arrested a Kashmiri man, Taufiq Ahmad, who worked in Bhilai with Vivo Mobiles, for liking a Facebook post. The student is still languishing in jail.

The fallout of the growing intimidation and retaliation that youths of Kashmir are facing outside their native place can be far larger than one can realize at this point of time. Once the problem crosses the maximum threshold limit, the consequences of it would start bursting out in uncontrolled manner. For quite some time now, there has been growing sense of reluctance among Kashmiri youths to travel to other states of the country for receiving education and jobs due to fear of reprisal from the ultra-nationalist groups for the unwavering demand for independence from a huge section of population in the valley. And what adds to their apprehension is the intensifying surveillance on Kashmiris across the country since March this year; in the wake of student protests at Jadavpur University and JNU in favour of the freedom movement in Kashmir.

The unfriendly attitude towards Kashmiris by a section of Indian population and the disproportionate punishment they are given, in relation to what appear to be their negligent actions driven by sentiments, by the police and some college authorities has the potential to mentally distance them from the mainstream India forever. If this continues, it may set a downward spiral trend on the outflow of Kashmiri youths from the valley and can also lead to a large scale flight of Kashmiris back to their homes. The current unrest in the Valley may end in sometime soon, but the effect of the hostile environment Kashmiris youths are subject to on their psyche is irreparable. Central government in tandem with the state government must come forward to address the problem before it is too late.

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## Kashmir Story Post 'Surgical Strikes'



### COVERAGE

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Currently what Kashmir is watching are three parallel realities. The first bids for the India's 'surgical strike' inside Pakistan-administered Kashmir. The other competing reality suggests it was a 'cross fire'. After all Pakistanis were on toes across the de facto perimeter following deadly Uri attack and quick revenge calls by New Delhi and handle bar-moustached soldiers. This reality dwarfs the claim of five-directional border incursions by Indian soldiers without getting detected. Credible entity - the UN and the reportage of *The Washington Post*, *BBC* and *The New York Times* somewhat cast doubts on the first reality as well. New Delhi may, however, want to release some evidences to back its claims.

The third, which is important - at least to Kashmiris content with the overall global reportage on 2016 Kashmir uprising - is that the Uri attacks and the subsequent bravado of both armies have pulled the Kashmir story out of the front pages. It's here New Delhi must be feeling slightly comforted. Pictures of pellet-hit faces on the front page of *The New York Times* and elsewhere were quite an international embarrassment.

With the conflicts raging in Syria and Yemen, the American media's obsession with Donald Trump and news of UK's Brexit moves, it was extraordinary to find yet again stories in the global press of killings and pellet victims, stone hurling against New Delhi's rule in the Himalayan region, curbs on newspapers and Internet, and over-militarisation of Independence-demanding Kashmir. The mood reminiscent of 90s and the previous uprisings of 2008 and 2010 forced a rethink among Indian human rights

The Kashmir story has been sidelined after the recent India-Pakistan flare up

activists and doves.

The Uri attack and the 'surgical strikes' have sidetracked this coverage. It was also after a long time that the Kashmir uprising moved the otherwise inert Pakistan, which is seen forcefully promoting Kashmir's right of self-determination at all international forums. Twice in 2008 and 2010, when Kashmiris launched massive anti-New Delhi protests, Islamabad was looking for means to soothe itself. Tehreek-e-Taliban fighters had penetrated deeper into Pakistan. Islamabad's Kashmir policy was in tatters. It was desperately looking for a breathing space. As one Kashmir editor friend mocked, "Suicide bombing is fast becoming a national game in a country where cricket is oxygen." Adding to the national bewilderment, narratives and counter-narratives, Pakistani elites awed by neighbouring India's growth story and movies were chiding the army led by dormant Ashfaq Parvez Kayani.

The operation of *Zarb-e-Azb* in June 2014, however, took the battle into the mountainous fiefdoms of the TTP rebels who were either killed or forced into Afghanistan. It changed the dynamics of a deadly insurgency inside the country. The war immediately reversed TTP's gains. Pakistan also turned the heat against Muttahida Qaumi Movement (MQM) to re-establish its writ in the Sind province whose leader Altaf Hussain spoke from self-imposed exile against Pakistan in August and earlier.

The success of *Zarb-e-Azb* - billed to be one of the world's largest counter-insurgency operation - was also important to secure the Chinese investment of \$46bn that links historic Chinese city of Kashgar with southern energy-rich Gawadar port. Called China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), this investment is planned to shoot up to \$150bn. "CPEC will blaze a whole new trail," say Chinese President Xi Jinping and Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif. With

the economic recovery and stalemate in Afghanistan despite rival India securing some foothold, Pakistan tasted quick feats. It's in this setting that Kashmir's homegrown uprising has taken place following Burhan Wani's killing. It's perhaps for the first time that Pakistan has named and hailed a Kashmiri rebel leader at the UN.

PM Nawaz Sharif said Wani is a "symbol of the Kashmiri Intifada, a popular and peaceful freedom movement..." before the world leaders at the UN general assembly. Wani's stature thus has grown more than iconic Kashmiri rebels Maqbool Bhat or Ishtaq Majeed who led some of the first battles in Kashmir. In fact there is a realisation within the Kashmir's resistance leadership that Pakistan has been promoting the Kashmir cause from the pulpit of power this time around.

The violence against the people hasn't, however, died down. As I write this, social media is humming with the news of mass arrests and violent protests in Kashmir where 90 people have been shot dead so far and thousands injured. There are allegations that volunteers inside the hospitals are being detained. A Sufi cleric, Moulana Sarjan Barkati, famous among locals as *Azadi Chacha* (or Freedom Uncle), who rose to prominence for introducing lyrical pro-Kashmir slogans, was recently arrested and charged under Public Safety Act (PSA) called "lawless" by rights group Amnesty International. A noted human rights defender Khurram Parvez is serving jail under the same law. Parvez was arrested from his home last month.

On social media - that has become an alternate voice of Kashmiris - new videos and photos show raiding soldiers burning down or destroying this year's harvest - rice and apple both - spine of Kashmir. Now this is evocative of the notorious "scorched earth" policy (under which crops were burnt during harvest

spell and granaries emptied) followed by the colonial French troops during Algeria's occupation.

On September 28, *Kashmir Reader* reported that Indian forces have set ablaze rice crops in the villages of Budran, Aadina, Kanihama and Mazhama in central Kashmir. The Facebook feed of another influential paper *Rising Kashmir* shows pictures of destruction in the rice fields of another defiant village in south Kashmir: *Greater Kashmir* too has been reporting the raid on harvest.

This isn't a new normal though. I observed the trend in January 2013 when the government forces overran an apple orchard in northern town of Sopore uprooting over a hundred and fifty fully-grown trees after an overnight gunfight left five rebels dead. The collective punishment was meant to discourage the locals from hosting rebel fighters.

*Kashmir Reader*, one of the fiercely independent papers in Kashmir focusing on stories often ignored by nationalist media, stands muzzled now. The gag order says the paper must shut operations because it can "incite violence and disturb peace." One wonders what incites violence? Burning down of crops or reporting it!

Back in the mountains, Pakistan doesn't want to acknowledge the so-called 'surgical strikes'. Because then Islamabad will have to respond to it as well. Indian forces sense this. That's why villages in India's Punjab and elsewhere in Kashmir contiguous to Pakistani borders have been emptied for a possible wider escalation. With its army stretched along the Durand Line, Pakistan has smartly chosen to deny India the legitimacy of 'surgical strikes' which New Delhi desperately wants to market to its people and also to the world.

This is where we are. The Kashmir story has been pushed aside by the Pakistan and India flare up. The story of over two months uprising inside volatile Kashmir and how the government forces are scuttling it by all means stands distracted.

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## The Unsung Heroes of Kashmir

The ambulance drivers 'drive' our healthcare institutions; let's honour and award them



### APPRECIATION

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It goes without saying that any place runs best and to its full potential if the manpower that runs the system is available in strength and on time. In a healthcare institute, be it a laundry done bed sheet, a medicine given or a meal served in time, an operation (elective or urgent) carried by a doctor and his support staff, all this can be done if concerned manpower is present. If anybody is missing, the whole system goes haywire and at times it can be a matter of life and death.

All these personnel have to be at their place of work to begin and end their respective jobs. And in the prevailing turmoil in our valley, it is clear that the staff cannot come to perform their job if it is left for them to come on their own. In these hard times, they have to be brought to their place of duty in vehicles that are considered safe and not/less amenable to the wrath of the public and anger of the forces. These vehicles are the lifeline of these healthcare institutes be it a tertiary care facility, a district hospital, a PHC or a dispensary. For last three months everything including the ambulances, hospital buses, minibuses and cars have been pressed into service to get the staff from various locations throughout the day, 24 x 7 and the guys who run these vehicles - the drivers - are at the forefront of this massive exercise.

Directorate of Health services with a cobweb of health centers scattered throughout the valley has a driver force of about 500. SKIMS hospital and medical college have about 100 workforce and Government Medical College and its associated hospitals have about 100 of them. Private health sector though not much in the scene may have 100 odd staff. Totaling about 800, these heroes are responsible for smooth running of our health institutes in these times of distress and disturb. They have driven in curfews, hartals, rallies, agitations, blockades, stone hurling and extreme chaos. Some have spend days and even weeks away from their homes, their parents, children and dear ones, for carrying doctors, paramedics, nurses, sanitation staff, administrative people so that all are present to run the facility.

They are the unsung heroes of the valley's health. These drivers of the health sector have been exemplary in their zest, courage and dedication in all these years of turmoil in the valley. They have played a part that is well beyond any superlative we might give them. Running vehicles on roads full of tension on all fronts is heroic; they face stones, rage, anger, wrath, abuses (physical and verbal) and bullets. It is really risky. Be it the unfortunate Ghulam Nabi Bhat who died in the past, or the fortunate Abdul Aziz Kala from SMHS beaten multiple times while carrying staff in his ambulance; Ghulam Muhammad Sofi from Ganderbal, who despite being himself injured by pellets did his duty of ferrying the patient right up to his destination; Mukhtar Ahmad and Nisar Ahmad Mir again injured on duty - all these brave hearts are driven by their zeal and passion to serve. They work far beyond the scheduled timings; rather, they work beyond their physical limits. Their families sacrifice too as they see them much less often than the families of other employees.

Long back these guys had been given a tag of lesser mortals by our social system, but times have changed. Most of them are now an educated lot and have an extra mile of dedication. These unsung heroes have never been given their due in terms of the recognition and the sacrifices they have made. We need to salute these heroes of our society and ask the administration and the social organizations to honor these people from time to time, so that they are encouraged and serve us better. These men are unlike most of other employees who work static inside buildings. Being out on the risky roads, they should also be given a risk allowance. The government can award or felicitate these men for their bravery and the NGOs can do so at their own level. Such acts will encourage these people to work with more enthusiasm and zeal in future. Had it not been due to these 'drivers' of the health care institutions, these places would have been without all those necessities, be it a bed sheet, a life saving medicine, a meal, and all those necessary surgeries would not be possible.

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