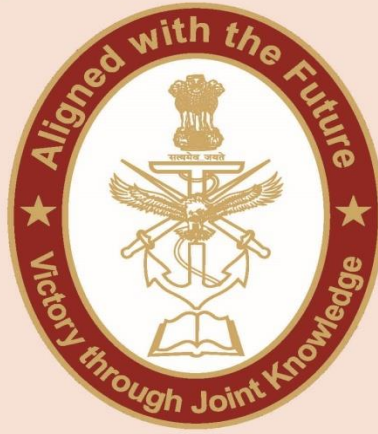


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Kashmir's Killing Fields: What do They Tell us?



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Pakistan-sponsored terrorism and its supporters are trying to cripple Kashmir from within. While New Delhi has made all the efforts to secure Kashmir militarily and bring back governance on the track, it is the Kashmiri society that needs to introspect about the wrongs it has committed and undo them before it is too late.

The recent spate of killings in Kashmir should not surprise anyone. It is the continuation of what was preached and practiced by the likes of Maqbool Bhat, Syed Ali Shah Geelani and Yasin Malik. There is no difference between the rationale they followed and what is being practiced today by misguided elements i.e. establishment of an 'Islamic state' through religious supremacy. Therefore, it will be a mistake to contextualise the recent trend of targeted killings with the sentencing of Yasin Malik for life, frustration among terror groups, abrogation of Article-370 etc.

Back in 1980s and 1990s, motivated to wage *jihad*, terrorists persecuted the Hindu Pandit community (and killed progressive Muslims too) and drove them out of Kashmir. Unabated, it continues till date. The Kashmiri Muslims have become victim of their own silence. They were silent when young Kashmiri boys crossed over to Pakistan Occupied Kashmir (PoK) to

get trained and returned to the Valley with arms to wage *jihad* against the Indian state. As a result, two generations of Kashmiri Muslim boys have been lost to terrorism and religious radicalisation. The Kashmiri society has chosen to remain silent even when their third generation is falling prey to newer versions of religious radicalisation and Pakistan's drug warfare.

While the demand for azadi and alternatively merger with Pakistan have lost traction over the years in Kashmir, religious extremism has remained a centripetal force. The latter has aggressively come to the fore – brazenly fighting for the cause of religion. For centuries, Kashmir has remained a religiously inclusive society, but the convergence between various extreme schools of thoughts and terror groups operating in the Valley, and import of foreign interpretation of Islam has challenged the very basics of the Kashmiri society.

While Pakistan-sponsored terrorist organisations primarily influenced the Kashmiri youth and drew its cadre from the Valley, in the past few years some crucial changes have happened on the ground.

There has been a slow and steady replacement of Sufi mosques with radical Islamist/Wahhabi mosques that have been spreading radicalisation in a very subtle manner. Wahhabi Islam is not new to Kashmir. It is believed that it arrived in the Valley more than a century ago, but in last 30 years, the strait-laced interpretation of Islam propagated through Wahhabi mosques has intruded the mindset of a section of Kashmiri youth and their social behaviour. It has also been observed in the religious discourse of the leaders at mosques and messaging by the local terrorists.

Certain Indian intelligence agencies attribute this to the massive funding from West Asian countries that have been pumping money in Kashmir to build Wahhabi mosques and madrasas. The number of Wahhabi mosques including the Ahle Hadith have gone up from a few hundred to over 2,000. The sect is in direct conflict with the tolerant culture of Kashmir. As a result, the traditional Sufi Islam has taken a back seat and the ultra-conservatives have expanded their influence.

The showcasing of Islamic State flags after Friday prayers and lynching of the Kashmiri security personnel should have left no doubt that Islamic radicalisation has gained roots. The latest targeted killings are a continuation of the same. According to reports, the security agencies have unearthed an ISIS video which is believed to be shot in Kashmir in which the organisation claims to have prepared three groups in the Valley and is also believed to be behind the recent targeted killings. Not that such killings have not taken in the past, but the pronouncement by terror groups have become bolder and louder than before.

Such ideological mutations could not have taken place in absence of an ecosystem comprising of religious radicals, terror organisations, intelligentsia, Kashmiri identity politics, social sanction to acts of terrorism and Pakistan. They have worked in unison to create a narrative that 'New Delhi can never prevail over the Valley, the Indian state will be defeated and azadi will be achieved'. While none of these has happened, Kashmir is left disillusioned.

Pakistan has left no stone unturned to abuse Kashmir's disillusionment. It has implemented the same policy it adopted in Punjab – sponsor terrorism, give arms to the youth and make them addicted to drugs. After the Indian security agencies choked the hawala routes and infiltration dropped following the abrogation of Article-370 and the recent ceasefire between India and Pakistan – drug trade has become an alternative to raise money to fund terrorism. For the purpose, Pakistan has ensured a steady supply of contrabands.

Drugs pushed from Punjab and other parts of India into Kashmir cannot be denied, but its contribution is very little as compared to what is being smuggled via the LoC. Sandwiched between the Pir Panjal ranges and PoK, Poonch is strategically located to push drugs and arms to be used in the Jammu region and for transporting them to the Valley. Whereas Kupwara in north Kashmir, and Pulwama and Shopian in South Kashmir – the hub of terrorism has also become the centres for drug trade in Kashmir. The former, because of its proximity to PoK is prone to drug smuggling, the latter grows poppy to meet local demands.

As a result, in the recent past drug consumption has reached alarming proportions. Maximum drug abuse has been reported by the youth aged between 15-30 and a rising number of Kashmiri girls have also reportedly started to abuse the banned substances.

New Delhi has been criticised for all its commissions and omissions, but it has made all the efforts to secure Kashmir militarily and bring back governance on the right track. It is the Kashmiri society that needs to introspect about the wrongs it has committed and undo them before it is too late. The course correction must come from within.

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CERTIFICATE

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