

April 5, 2023

A Sensitive Portrayal of Kashmir after '5 August'

By: Kapil Kak

An intense narrative of recent transformations in Jammu and Kashmir's socio-political and economic landscape keeps the focus on the region's hapless people.

It is *Sonth* (springtime) in Kashmir. The air is heady with narcissi in glorious bloom. A million tulips in myriad colours embellish the Zabarwan foothills. The skyline is dotted with white almond, cherry and pear blossoms, and the pink flowers of plum trees. The adrenaline rush of daily life, shops doing brisk business, traffic jams, and a palpable tourism boom, all serve to create optics that fit into the ruling dispensation's narrative of 'normalcy'.

The truth is of uneasy calm.

Conversations with a wide cross-section of society reveal people as being angry, fearful and in despair. They lament how the criminalisation of dissent has abolished all discussion of the centre's unilateral constitutional changes of 5 August 2019 for Jammu and Kashmir.

As many have observed, 5 August 2019 started a tragedy unfolding in slow motion. Unlike in the 1990s, the endpoint is indeterminate.

A Dismantled State: The Untold Story of Kashmir after Article 370, Anuradha Bhasin's new book, grippingly recounts a story of that black swan moment that needed to be told. Bhasin is the executive editor of *Kashmir Times* and has a sharp understanding of Kashmir. Her explorations analyse how the period after 5 August 2019 adversely transformed the socio-political and economic landscape and impacted the people of Jammu and Kashmir in complex ways.

Article 370 read down

As many have observed, 5 August 2019 started a tragedy unfolding in slow motion. Unlike in the 1990s, the endpoint is indeterminate. It pumelled people's hopes, aspirations, and desire to lead normal lives.

Ahead of what Bhasin terms a "constitutional fraud" – the reading down of Article 370 – the government ruthlessly clamped down on communications and movement in Jammu and Kashmir. Tens of thousands of security personnel were added. Mainstream as well as separatist political leaders, lawyers, businessmen, and academics were incarcerated.

Bhasin underscores how, due to the state's actions, "the Kashmiri spirit was being broken both inside and outside the jails."

The large-scale arrests conveyed a clear message: "Speaking up would not be tolerated and even a mild criticism of the new changes would warrant police action." The only kind of politics permitted, "is the one that is endorsed, certified and stamped by the party in power at the Centre."

The chapter *Jackboots to the Face* has tragic accounts of unremitting sufferings faced by the common people. Bhasin underscores how, due to the state's actions, "the Kashmiri spirit was being broken both inside and outside the jails by keeping them deprived of any communications." Moreover, "the fear of the PSA [Public Safety Act] was widespread, transcending class divides," as was the dread of custodial disappearances.

The overarching consequence has been that of "extraordinary fear, unfathomable despair, a sense of impotency, broken spirit and psychological trauma." The mental health caseload has witnessed a substantial rise. Official data from the central government estimates that one million of Jammu and Kashmir's estimated population of about 14 million suffer from drug abuse.

Persistent apprehensions

Even as dozens of petitions against the reading down of Article 370 await listing and hearing by the Supreme Court for over three years, the government began tinkering with domicile and land laws. It set up a Delimitation Commission, which hastily redrew constituencies and arbitrarily increased the number of seats in the legislative assembly. Bhasin sees these decisions as part of the ruling dispensation's ideological agenda and desire to shift the political centre of gravity from the Kashmir valley to Jammu.

In response, a quad of trends is discernible. First, a Kashmiri today feels deeply isolated. No wonder the Congress party's Bharat Jodo Yatra earlier this year witnessed overwhelming and widespread participation. People saw the walk as the first genuine outreach and an attempt to heal the wounds inflicted through collective "punishment and humiliation." Second, Kashmir's majority community has begun to identify itself more with the principal minority in the rest of India. Third, with the Hurriyat in disarray, the political space for the moderate leader Mirwaiz Umar Farooq has expanded substantially. More so when he has been in house arrest since 5 August 2019 and has not been allowed to deliver his weekly sermons for 182 consecutive Fridays.

|| Shades of grey have begun to recede from public imagination, particularly amongst Kashmir's young, who see the situation as a 'war' between 'us' and 'them'.

As an indication of the people's anger at the constitutional changes, Bhasin cites the results of the 2020 District Development Council elections, the first polls held since 5 August 2019. The People's Alliance for Gupkar Declaration, a coalition seeking restoration of Jammu and Kashmir's special status under the Constitution, won a majority in 13 of the 20 districts.

Bhasin adroitly evaluates the changed mood even in Jammu and Ladakh regions that initially welcomed the centre's moves. She is spot on in her claim that "Jammu's higher potential for prospective settlers in view of its comparative calm and its geographical and cultural proximity to north India engender far greater fears of 'scavenger hunt' for business opportunities, purchase of land and jobs by outsiders."

In Ladakh, the initial responses to the region being separated from Jammu and Kashmir were in sharp contrast. Leh district celebrated while Kargil district bewailed the snapping of its linkages with Kashmir. Nearly four years on, Bhasin outlines how the leadership of Leh and Kargil has "come together to bat for protection of lands and jobs [... and to] seek full Statehood."

Trends in militancy

"Peace, security and end to terrorism' were being seen as end-results" of the actions of 5 August 2019. Yet, as Bhasin writes, data from the home ministry shows that since 5 August 2019, fatalities in Jammu and Kashmir rose to 3.2 a month from 2.8 a month during the five years before.

As Bhasin notes, shades of grey have begun to recede from public imagination, particularly amongst Kashmir's young, who see the situation as a 'war' between 'us' and 'them'. Instances of selective targeting of ethnic and religious minorities, including Kashmiri Pandits, "reveal signs of a more virulent militancy." Bhasin quotes a Kashmiri Pandit leader avowing that "the scrapping of Article 370, far from addressing the woes of the community, has further jeopardised the prospect of building bridges and threatens the existence of the non-migrant Pandits."

Bhasin understandably recognises militancy as arising from "unaddressed political dispute, subversion of democracy and democratic rights of the people and neglect of human rights violations." From 1990 onwards, Pakistan has continued to provide active and profuse assistance. She affirms the post-2010 phase of new militancy was a "reaction to excessive militarisation and disproportionately brutal response of the State." Bhasin cautions: "By unilaterally integrating Kashmir – the most fragile region – India has ended up pitching its tent on a potential minefield that is waiting to explode."

Clampdown on media

Bhasin comes into her own when she bemoans the absence of an enabling environment for mediapersons to practice their profession and have the right to freedom of expression. "The system," she pronounces, "is designed to produce a silent media."

|| "Journalists will be judged on the barometer of unwavering loyalty to the government."

In the ominously titled chapter *Speak Not, for Your Lips are Sealed* Bhasin laments that the local media has been decapitated to permit 'normalcy' to thrive. Under a new media policy instituted in June 2020, "journalists will be judged on the barometer of unwavering

loyalty to the government. Every word and column written will virtually need a certificate of authenticity.”

She is unsparing of national television channels who “metamorphosed into [the government’s] cheerleaders [... and] were busy interpreting Kashmir’s silence as normalcy.” Bhasin maintains that while “the Indian print media did not go into a euphoric celebration of the Indian government’s actions in Kashmir, but it did choose to remain by and large silent about the suppression of civil liberties.”

Rather fittingly, Bhasin has dedicated the book to her late father, Ved Bhasin, who not only founded the former state’s oldest newspaper, *Kashmir Times*, but also courageously strove for peace, democracy and justice for his state throughout his life. Her book lives up to these noble ideals.

A Dismantled State: The Untold Story of Kashmir after Article 370 is brilliantly crafted, exhaustively researched, and powerfully articulated. Its insightful, intense, and fascinating narrative keeps the focus on the hapless people, notably those in the Kashmir valley. No facet of the immensely complex Kashmir issue has been left unaddressed. Bhasin’s book is indeed an untold story told with rare sensitivity and empathy.

Air Vice Marshal Kapil Kak (retired) is part of the civil society process for conflict-resolution and peace-building in Jammu and Kashmir.