

Review paper

What Drives Kashmir's Youth to Join Militancy

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Kashmir 2016 is distinctly different, when the gun first surfaced in the valley. A new breed of militants is rising in Kashmir-young, educated, tech-savvy. The new generation has left all the comforts and chosen the path of violence. The ground reality in Kashmir is changing slowly but surely and it can be gauged even from plain statistics. If in 2013, thirty ones local youths join militancy, the number for 2015 jumped to 66, according to police records. The locals outnumbering what the security establishment refers to as 'foreign terrorists'. The youth of Kashmir are feeling frustrated, finding opportunities closing upon them. They find "Burhan" a new age militant, to be more of a role model than anybody else in the state. This is highly a disturbing trend and unfortunately for the last one or two years this has been picking up. All this makes for a complex situation and the state is clearly steering at a gloomy picture. In this paper, an effort would be made of to stretch the issues which pushed educated youth to knock the door of militants by coming into the forefront again? Towards this; the article is divided into two parts. In the first portion, the author has disseminate the various issues that pushed youth to join the militant ranks and subsequently in the latter part effort was made outby intending policy action .

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INTRODUCTION

The youth protuberance has been at the centre of any debate on Jammu and Kashmir during the past few years , in particular with reference to unrest in the Kashmir Valley, which limps back to upheaval before witnessing an little ease. Discourses on Kashmir are expectedly at variance, but the issues of youth find a place in each one of them. While there is more than a single layer of the problem that confronts the youth in Kashmir, at its heart is the political instability the state has witnessed since the partition of India.

Politics has been at the center stage of Kashmir's situation and today's youth, like their counterparts elsewhere, also set out their journey in tune with political freedom. However, more than 68 years have passed

since India got freedom but Kashmir's fate continues to hang in the balance. The reality is that the state once ruled by the *Dogra Maharaja* has been sliced into three – one part controlled by India, another by Pakistan and the third by China. Many tricks have been played to keep the Kashmir issue alive and not resolving it and this sense of denial of political rights has persisted across four generations now. While the part administered by Pakistan did not see any visible political revolt after it went into Islamabad's control in 1947, the Indian Jammu and Kashmir has always been under a constant shadow of political turmoil. This has significantly contributed to unrest among the youth.

Kashmiri youth have always been at the crossroads of

the situation, confused with having to face many issues at any one time. From deprivation of political rights, merit and justice, denial of a rightful place in the system, to undecided identity, they face a range of challenges. While unemployment is one aspect of the problem in Jammu and Kashmir that could push an ordinary youth towards frustration, a choked democratic space and a sense of insecurity in their own land remains the biggest obstacle in their growth. The quagmire they are caught in comes in the way of instituting their identity. They aspire for many things but are held back from pursuing any of them due to colossal pressure from all sides. Kashmir's youth have talent and are capable of channelizing it to turn their place into a real paradise, but the experiences of the past two and half decades have resulted in their failing to realize any dream of being free.

A continued feeling of living under siege in their own homeland, coupled with economic deprivation and denial of participation in the democratic processes, has led to dejection. This has ultimately forced these youth to get together to take on the police and other security forces on a large scale. Just one incident of fake encounter in the remote *Machil* area in 2010 in which three youth were killed by the army, allegedly to get rewards and promotions, triggered a long cycle of violent unrest in the valley. As the youth took to the streets to protest repeated violations of human rights and absence of justice to victims, the cycle finally ended with the killing of 120 civilians. Earlier in 2008 and 2009 too, the youth had actively participated in the protests in the *Amarnath* land row and alleged rape and murder of two women in Shopian, widely believed to have been done by the state forces. However, an inquiry by the Central Bureau of Investigation gave a clean chit to the forces and maintained that the women had died of drowning. Denial of the delivery of justice, lack of accountability and transparency has been a continuous trend since the onset of militancy and it showed its ugly consequences during this phase. The new generation used stones to challenge the state apparatus but the response was the bullet. The government's repressive strategy to counter massive public demonstrations in which hundreds of youth were killed only added fuel to the fire.

Noor Ahmad Baba, the political analyst, observes that after 2000 there was some hope that Kashmir was being addressed seriously, but by 2008 and 2010 this hope faded. "The two mass uprisings of (2008-2010) transformed the Kashmir issue and discontent from older to younger generation but the state dealt with it with heavier hands. They were snatching all hope of peaceful public demonstrations". He opines that it is much more dangerous today to participate in public demonstrations in Kashmir as people are constantly watched, targeted, and arrested.¹ For example, in 2010 alone, nearly 5000

youth were arrested for having indulged in stone pelting.² A few hundred, including some minors, were booked under the Public Safety Act (PSA), which has, of late proved to be more draconian than even the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA). In such an atmosphere, the youth find that the way out is to use weapons and to do it more clandestinely. Coordinator of the Jammu and Kashmir Youth Civil Society, Ovais Manzoor, said, "You will find one thing common in all the cases that most of the youth who took to arms were repeatedly harassed by police for taking part in 2008 and 2010 unrest in which more than one million people, mostly youth protested against the killings. They are arrested, harassed, beaten up in front of their families. Even in some cases their family members, sisters and mothers are heckled and offended. To give a collective vent to anger against the unjust administration, they find no better way other than taking up guns".³

Harassment of Kashmiri students in universities in the rest of India also stands testimony to the fact how suspicion vis-a-vis an ordinary Kashmiri is deep-rooted in the minds of a majority of Indians. Zahid Ahmad, a Kashmiri trucker who was set ablaze by Hindu zealots in the Udhampur district again on mere suspicion that he was exporting cattle have become household name across the valley. Similar other negative developments convinced the educated youth about the futility of mainstream politics and hence they searched for radical alternatives. The recent High Court decision on the beef ban prompted yet another wave of such protests. The extreme form of radicalization can be observed from the fact that the young Kashmiri boys are giving up jobs, professional and academic courses, and the comfort of their homes and choosing the path of militancy and violence and it can be gauged even from plain statistics. If in 2013, 31 local youths joined militancy, the number for 2015 jumped to 79, according to police records.⁴ This trend of local youth joining radical ranks acquired vigor since 2010, ushering in a peculiar trend in the tremor dynamics of Kashmir. As per A.S Dulat, former R&AW Chief and the Kashmir points man during the Vajpayee administration, the Valley today witnesses the pre 1996 era when the militancy had a predominantly a local color. A renewed fascination with the gun among a section of youth could be one of the most worrying features of militancy dynamics in Valley today. This emerging trend

²Shujaat Bukhari, *Kashmir's Youth Bulge, Eye on Kashmir, A Symposium on the Past and the Present of a Troubled State*, March 2013.

³Why J&K youth are opting for guns, *The Milli Gazette*, 28 April 2015.

⁴https://www.google.co.in/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=1&cad=rja&uact=8&ved=0ahUKEwiwieHvv97LAhWJjo4KHZqaD84QFggcMAA&url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.hindustantimes.com%2Fstatic%2Fthe-young-militants-of-kashmir%2F&usq=AFQjCNEjyD5w561i-RtO6AHqWNaTfRd4lQ&sig2=jBW7j026L8mhK5y6j2_Usw (Accessed on 22 February 2016).

¹Cited in *The Diplomat*, 22 August 2015.

is characterized by active participation of well-educated, even professionally qualified men attacked over the last two years.⁵

The growing reality in Kashmir is changing slowly but surely. Kashmir 2016 is distinctively different from 1989 when the gun first surfaced in Kashmir. In recent years many cases of youth with bright careers, some of them having professional degrees, joining militancy have come to light. Rafiq Ahmad Ahangar, alias Saifullah, 23, was killed in an encounter in May 2013 in Pulwama. He had completed his B. Tech from a local engineering college. Another militant, Masiullah Khan from South Kashmir, killed in 2011, had a degree in mechanical engineering. Sajad Yousuf, a Hizbul Mujahideen militant from Pulwama district, had a postgraduate degree in Islamic Studies.⁶ Ishaq Ahmad Parray, a teenager from South Kashmir's Tral sub-district, whose meritorious academic performance and studious attitude earned him the sobriquet of 'Newton', died in an overnight gunfight with forces in Dadsara village on 4 March 2016. Ishaq had scored 98.4 per cent in class X results announced in December 2011. He had secured the ninth position in the Kashmir zone.⁷ Militant Ashiq Hussain Dar, who was killed in an encounter in Heff Shermal, had MA (English) and B Ed degrees to his credit besides a government job. Ashiq, a resident of Turkewangam village from south Kashmir's Shopian district, was selected as Village Level Worker in the Jammu and Kashmir government in May 2014.⁸ Similarly, a young Kashmiri Naseer Ahmad Pandith, who was personal security officer of Altaf Bukhari, former minister for public and works department, had fled with two service weapons and some ammunitions in early 2015.⁹

The new breed of militants are not just well educated but often come from wealthy backgrounds. Burhan Muzaffar Wani, a 22-year-old boy, son of a school principal belonging to a wealthy family is the new face of militancy in Kashmir. Although he is based in South Kashmir's Tral area, his aura has almost touched every young Kashmiri's heart and mind. He has fired the young imagination and pushed them towards militancy. He is the commander of the largest indigenous militant group of Kashmir namely Hizb-ul-Mujahideen, now has a cash reward of Rs 1 million on his head. "He was responsible for the ambush in Tral forests wherein four army men were killed and their weapons were snatched. Burhan is

also believed to have carried the Hyderpora attack which inflicted heavy casualties on the army."¹⁰ Five years ago, Burhan Muzaffar was a normal schoolboy whose father wanted him to be a doctor and see patients for free on Sundays. One day, however, his life changed. He had gone out for a bike ride with his brother in their native village of Tral – just 40 kilometres from Srinagar – the summer capital of Kashmir, and a few Indian troopers asked him to buy some cigarettes. Both obeyed but on their way back, they were beaten up without any provocation, according to the family.¹¹ Khalid Muzaffar, his elder brother, fell unconscious and Burhan managed to run from the spot. While escaping he shouted, "I will take revenge for this."¹² Two weeks later, he ran away from home, never to return. And so he embarked on a journey against the oppression he faced. In the years to come, Burhan not only rose to fame among the youth but also became one of the most successful and wanted militants in Kashmir. Burhan has managed to give the slip to death and also recruit many others.¹³

In the South Kashmir districts of Pulwama, Shopian, Kulgam and the volatile Tral, Burhan is perceived as an unmatched hero. His newly-released video has created ripples within the government security apparatus, and has marked him as the poster boy of new militancy in Kashmir. He calls for a boycott of India and also asks that people to pick up arms and support the ongoing militancy movement. Burhan, in his video, called upon the youth of Kashmir to join them. He ardently stated that they were in a state of war with India, and now their tolerance was waning. He said, "We should unite for the sake of our motherland which has been oppressed for the last 60 years."¹⁴ The video is the first such address by a militant commander in Kashmir. Sources describe Burhan as a magnetic leader who delivers strong speeches and has turned into the face of a resurging militancy among the youth in the area.

Late Chief Minister Mufti Mohammad Sayeed acknowledges that Burhan has fired young imaginations and that the trucker's burning is a setback. "You may imprison him (Burhan) but you cannot imprison his mind. According to me they are fringe elements but we have to fight the idea... People pelted stones after Zahid's (the trucker) death. It was an outburst. You can't use bullets to contain protests. We have to fight it politically."¹⁵ Mufti knows the problem is essentially political. He also knows, deep in his heart, that

⁵cited in Centre For Land Welfare Studies, *Shifting Profile of Militancy in Kashmir*, 24 August 2015.

⁶ Educated Youths Taking up Arms, *The Kashmir Monitor*, 2 March 2015.

⁷ 'Newton' Among 3 Militants Killed In Tral Gunfight, *Greater Kashmir*, 4 March 2016.

⁸ Educated Youths Taking up Arms in Kashmir: A Big No to Govt Jobs, *Two Circles.Net*, 28 February 2015.

⁹ Policeman Posted At J&K Minister's House Runs Away with Two Rifles, *The Indian Express*, 29 March 2015.

¹⁰ Why J&K Youth Are Opting For Guns, *The Milli Gazette*, April 28, 2015.

¹¹ Kashmir's Young Rebels, *The Diplomat*, 22 August 2015.

¹² Cited in *The Diplomat*, 22 August 2015.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Cited in *The Nation*, Burhan Muzaffar Wani is the Bhagat Singh of Occupied Kashmir, 11 December 2015.

¹⁵ Kashmir's New-Age Militants, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C_z4-8NqPbQ

financial packages like the one announced by Prime Minister Narendra Modi on 7 November 2015 are not the balm his people need. Omar Abdullah is perhaps right – and he knows from experience – that “*you cannot throw money at the problem. If you think Modi will come here and announce a package and people will forget Burhan, that’s not going to happen...*”¹⁶

What could conceivably resolve the conflict in the minds of youth is free democratic space. But the way this has been choked from time to time has only contributed to the confusion, with the result that their energies have never been properly channelized. Much before the partition in 1947, the student’s movement in Kashmir had played an important role in the awakening of political rights, but in the 21st century such movements are not allowed, even in university campuses. With no independent student body being allowed to function, the frustration among the youth is on the rise. For example, Kashmir University has not allowed the student union to function on the campus. But two political parties from the mainstream camp have established their units, though they do not enjoy much support. Similarly, Congress General Secretary Rahul Gandhi has visited the campus twice to interact with the students. To keep this ‘activity’ confined to a particular ideology has proved counter-productive in winning the heart and mind of the youth.

To conclude, the story of Kashmir’s youth is straightly linked to broken promises, shrinking of democratic space and denial of any meaningful participation in a genuine democratic exercise. While youth in the rest of India have swiftly become part of a changing economic paradigm and possibly even benefited from it, the youth in Kashmir are still stalled in the question of their political future. The last 26 years have seen unprecedented pressure on Kashmiri youth, as they are the ones who have borne the brunt of the conflict. Thousands have been killed, jailed and many continue to languish in jails. Controversial laws such as the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA), denial of delivery of justice and merit are other important yardsticks which intensifies their belief that Jammu and Kashmir was never treated as an ‘integral part’ of India, unlike claims by governments and political parties. In such a constrained atmosphere, the youth in Kashmir are pushed to the wall. While they face the serious dilemma of political identity, their urge to be part of the rapid development around the world is also hitting a roadblock. Their aspirations are for political rights and a right to live with dignity, which could allow them to reap the benefits of economic development taking place in the subcontinent. Without addressing this political demand, the youth cannot be won over only by doling out economic largesse, which so far has only benefitted a small section of the political class in the valley. Even if they agree to wait for the resolution of political conflict,

the endemic corruption does not allow them to be away from this. That is why the widespread belief that corruption is a tool which New Delhi uses to legitimize its rule in Kashmir through its ‘selected’ people. Similarly, even if elections are genuine, the ordinary Kashmiris believe that they are always rigged to ‘select’ those people who suit Delhi’s agenda in Kashmir.

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