

## Reading between the Lines of the Concerned Citizens' Group Report on Jammu and Kashmir

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*Examining the situation on the ground in Jammu and Kashmir, the article argues that while the Concerned Citizens' Group Report harbours a few blind spots in defining communalism and separatism, its contribution to comparing the situation in Jammu vis-à-vis Kashmir cannot be discounted.*

The Concerned Citizens' Group (CCG) visited affected areas of Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) in the light of increased cross-border firing between India and Pakistan on the Line of Control (LoC) and the International Border. The group aimed to find out what changes had taken place in the Valley and "whether there were any moderating influences that could prevent youngsters from taking up the gun."

In the nearly three-decade-long military suppression in J&K, there have been several attempts by public-spirited persons to visit and share their findings in the form of reports. Starting with the Committee for Initiative on Kashmir and the People's Union for Civil Liberties—Citizens for Democracy in 1990 to the present time, a number of such efforts have tried to create an informed opinion regarding the "Kashmir Question," the public mood in Kashmir, as well as conditions on the ground resulting from armed conflict. In contrast to the initial reports, which took a stance on the Kashmir question upfront, either supporting right of self-determination or advocating autonomy, the situation now is one where most

efforts are cagey in talking about solutions. Perhaps, it is politically expedient in contemporary India to sidestep this because the country has regressed so far that even espousal of autonomy for J&K was denounced by the Prime Minister as “anti-national”. In other words, when neither self-determination nor autonomy are part of the conversation, it means that Kashmiris have to basically surrender and allow themselves to be assimilated. If facts brought out by reports drive a hole through the official narrative whose bravado and bluster is coming asunder, it essentially amounts to sticking one’s neck out.

The CCG comprised of former union finance minister Yashwant Sinha; Air Marshal (retd) Kapil Kak; former chairperson of the Central Information Commission and the National Commission for Minorities, Wajahat Habibullah; journalist Bharat Bhushan; and Executive Secretary and Programme Director of the Centre for Dialogue and Reconciliation, Sushobha Barve. Since 2016, four reports have been released based on their visits and interaction with people in Kashmir. These reports have provided a glimpse of the overall ground situation and the public mood in Kashmir to the Indian public, and to that extent, countered chauvinistic reportage on Kashmir. What distinguishes the fourth report (Sinha et al 2018) from the first three, however, is that it has widened the canvas and devoted time to the situation in the border areas and the Jammu region. It does not provide us a detailed account of the situation and lacks a historical perspective. However, what is significant is that the story of Kashmir is linked to developments in Jammu.

The latest report from February 2018 speaks of the devastation caused by cross-border shelling and residents being turned into “itinerant migrants in their own country.” The team found it “shocking ... that no long-term strategies were being devised to alleviate their [border residents’] suffering. Even the short-term measures seemed to be ad-hoc and patchwork at best,” In Nowshera, 23 out of 59 villages are situated close to the Line of Control (LoC). Of these 23 villages, 12 villages with a population of 13,100 have been affected by shelling. Damages included the death of four persons, injuries to 8 persons, destruction of 124 houses, loss of 189 livestock and injury to another 189, and destruction of three school buildings. In Nowshera, 71 schools have been shut down. In Uri, 8 villages with a total population of about 7,000 persons have been affected and 1,500 people have already moved out. Although no casualties were suffered, 30 houses in Churanda, 22 in Sillikot, and two in Tillawadi were damaged.

The people repeatedly told the team that they wanted “to either resolve this through dialogue or through a decisive war which settles the issue once and for all.” Some people opposed the method of *muh-tod jawaab* (jaw-breaking response) across the border because people in the region suffer due to border shelling. They instead suggested giving “a tough reply from Delhi or Mumbai.” There were some who wanted the ceasefire restored. Voters from border areas in Jammu voted for the Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP) after being convinced that Pakistan would be taught a lesson by the BJP-led government. These locals are disenchanted with the BJP not because they espouse peace themselves, but because they are angry that rather than making Pakistan pay a price, the government is making them

suffer. Thus, the plight of the border residents is a clear sign that their strident support is conditioned by opposition to being the main sufferer. People do not want to be made into sacrificial lambs in effort to cause “pain” to Pakistan; they want the suffering shared by the country.

Talking about Jammu, the report says that the perception among the locals was that “in the coming days, the situation in Jammu was likely to become difficult to handle. The growing disappointment with the state government and increasing communal divide could make the situation in Jammu quite provocative.” However, the report goes on to argue that “the Kashmir valley has been on the boil off and on, but the Jammu region becoming politically volatile is a new phenomenon.” The report also says that “religious divide ... has clearly been deepened,” pointing to the attack on Sunjuwan camp, the two benches of J&K High Court (in Jammu and Srinagar) ruling differently on the unfurling of the state flag, and the abduction, rape, and murder of eight-year-old Asifa, which saw communities being divided along religious lines. Resentment was voiced by many that the central government only focused on Kashmir. It is true that Jammu and Kashmir has been declared as “Disturbed Area” where there is legal immunity for the armed forces. However, the “focus” on Kashmir in reality means yet another brutal and bloody phase of military suppression; “Operation All-out” is experienced in all its horrific detail in Kashmir and not in Jammu.

It is also worth remembering that the present times have precedents—the massacre of Muslims in Jammu under the Dogra Hindu rule during partition in August–September 1947, the Praja Parishad’s and later the Jan Sangh’s demand in the 1950s for a “merger” of J&K into India (including the vitriolic campaign of Jan Sangh leader Shyama Prasad Mukherjee), and the formation of village defence committees (with 95% Hindu members [28,000 out of 29,000 Special Police Officers]) in the Jammu division in the 1990s. The 2008 Amarnath movement in Jammu saw the proponents of Hindutva carry out a vicious campaign for inciting attacks on Muslims. This also included a month-long economic embargo on the Valley to punish Kashmiris. It is intriguing why the group ignored the rising tide of attacks since 2014 by Hindutva agitators on people (invariably Muslims) accused of cow smuggling, cow slaughter, or beef consumption.<sup>[1]</sup>

In the last four years, Hindutva-led forces have continued to operate while feeling empowered, knowing that harsh action will not be taken against them. A spate of attacks—lynching, harassment, foisting of false cases of imagined “hurt”—has been taking place and has already begun to vitiate relations between communities in Jammu. Kashmiris have only persisted in their demand for ascertaining the wishes of all the people of J&K and have in response been subjected to bloodletting. To define these developments as “communalism” or “separatist narratives” is to mute the bigoted chauvinism of the Indian government which has shown no inclination to resolve the seven-decade-long dispute. Similarly, to characterise the Jammu-based Hindutva group’s politics as “communalism” is to downgrade what represents crass Hindu majoritarianism. Such blind spots devalue the

report.

However, these blind spots notwithstanding, what makes the report poignant is its acknowledgment that developments in Jammu affect Kashmir and vice versa. It brings into focus the futility of cross-border shelling as well the rise in militancy and highlights that “normalcy” is not what the youth have experienced in Kashmir. The report says that inspiration for joining militancy is “not coming from Pakistan or its intelligence agencies, but from local militant youth icons.”

The report goes on to say that “there is a feeling” that the Indian government is “unable to control terrorism” because it wants “its constituency to feel that India is effectively replying to Pakistan which is projected as the root cause of all problems.” In other words, the report offers useful insights for constructing a counter-narrative which is closer to the ground reality of J&K where even the army chief has now conceded that “neither the security forces nor ‘terrorists’ would achieve their goals through [waging war].” As good is an admission that Operation All-out has failed.

## End Notes:

[1] The cow slaughter ban was introduced in J&K by the Dogra Hindu rulers in 1862 under S 298 (A) of the Ranbir Penal Code.

## References:

Sinha, Yashwant, Kapila Kak, Bharat Bhushan and Sushobha Barve (2018): Report of the Fourth Visit, *Concerned Citizens' Group*, February 23-27.

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