

OUR ACTIONS, OUR SILENCE HAVE CONSEQUENCES

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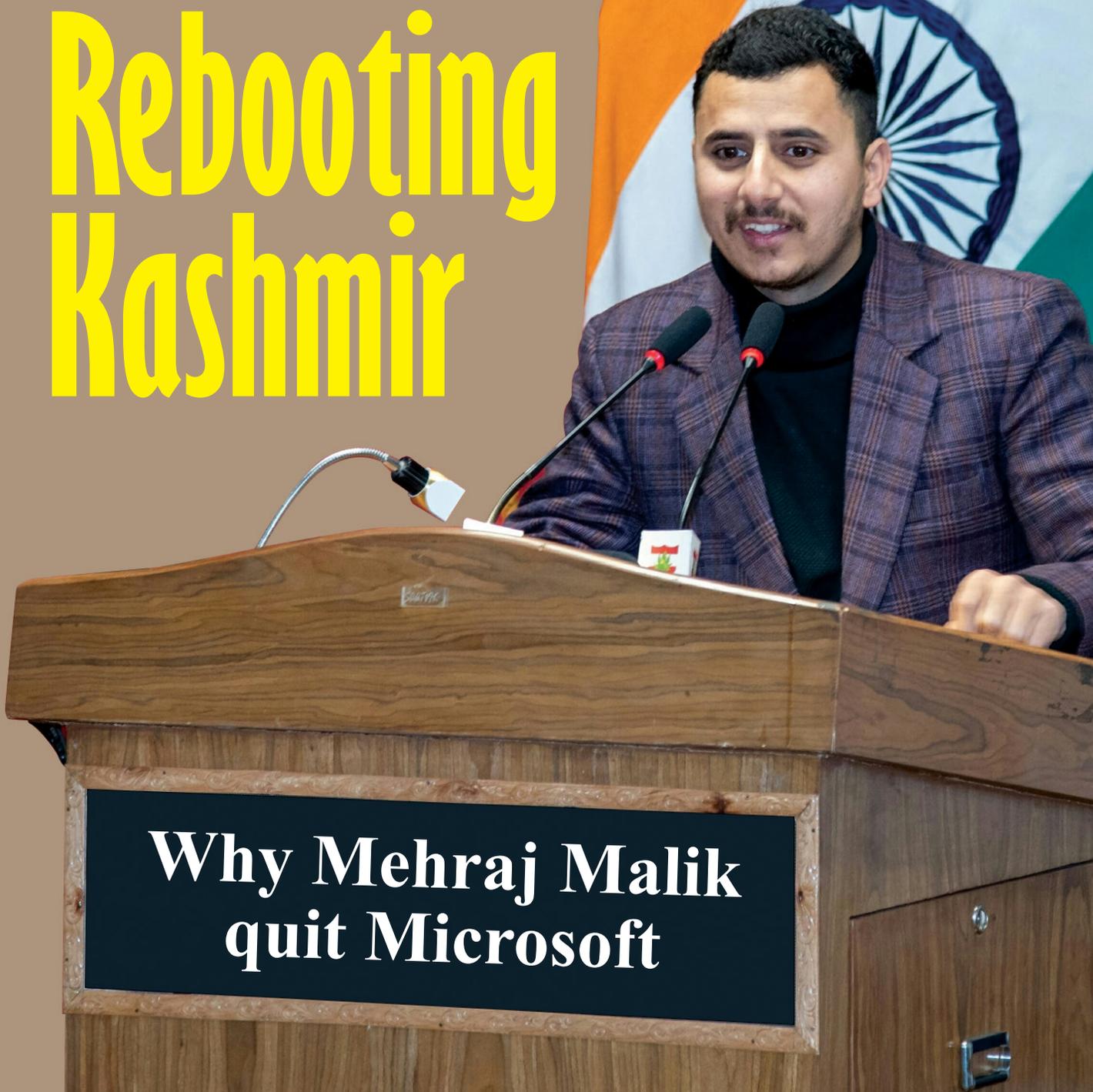
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KASHMIR CENTRAL

A KZINE INITIATIVE

Rebooting Kashmir



**Why Mehraj Malik
quit Microsoft**

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VOLUME 2 | EDITION 26
26 JUNE 2022

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Poor Services, Callous Staff SRINAGAR INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT OR BUS STAND?

Welcome to Srinagar International Airport. This message greets visitors at this airport throughout the day. The public address system is shoddy. All the rest that is blared out regarding the arrival or departure of flights is loud noise, since no words can be understood.

The authorities at the airport seem to be insensitive to the terrible, grating public address system. Airport infrastructure for flight arrival and departure has been improved. But the services within the airport leave much to be desired.

The facilities and services at Srinagar International Airport are worse than the small domestic airport at Jammu. Flights are scheduled 6 am onwards. The flights arrive on time but passengers are delayed because the ground staff of the airlines is not available. People taking early morning flights from Srinagar cannot have a cup of tea because the stalls start opening between 9 to 10 am.

The sweepers cleaning the premises are seen mopping the floor when the passengers are de-boarding from the flights. All through this, the automated message keeps playing at high volume: *Srinagar kay antirashtriye hawayi adde main aap ka swagat hain. Jannat kay is tukday ka anand le.*

Meanwhile, the *dimaag* is going *tukde* with all this noise, no tea and poor services.

Here are some more snapshots from Srinagar International Airport. The passengers are at the gates to board a flight which has arrived and is ready for departure. They are waiting helplessly for the ground staff, which is not available on duty. The washrooms are overcrowded and smell bad.

Even the crew supposed to replace the incoming crew is nowhere to be seen. SpiceJet particularly is the worst service provider. The delay is always there because either the ground staff is missing or the crew is late.

There are even reports that the airlines staff and officers are creating hurdles for late night and early morning flights because they don't want long work hours. According to a gentleman associated with an airline, the Srinagar airport can operate 12 flights in one hour. The operation has been limited four flights per hour because of poor functioning of the airport staff.

Bashir Assad



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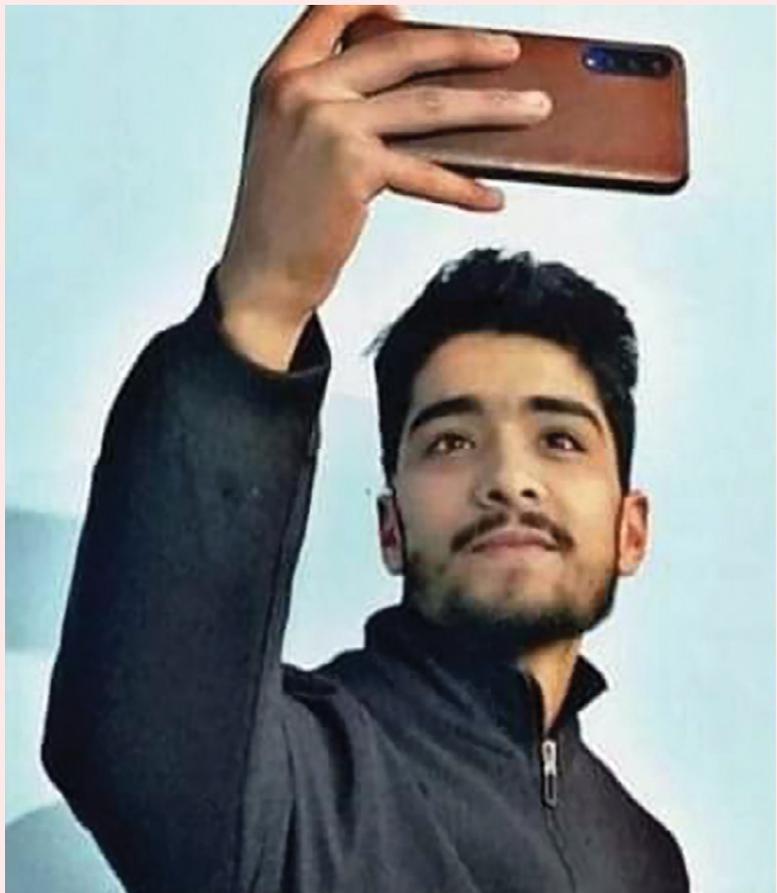


OUR ACTIONS, OUR SILENCE HAVE CONSEQUENCES

by **Bashir Assad**

▼
In some parts of south Kashmir, the movement of the jackboots gives a grim reminder of the situation of 1990s. In parts of Kulgam, Shopian, Pulwama and Anantnag districts, the Army and paramilitary troopers have scaled up vigil and movement. This has impacted normal life, more so in the late afternoon and early morning hours.

There are reports that people in these districts are asked to go to their homes early. The roads are deserted, making the areas present a scary look. The intensification of patrolling by the security forces has limited major activities only to a few hours of the day.



17-year-old Kaisar Ahmad Dar of Pulwama passed Class 12 with distinction. In February 2022, he joined militancy. "They have taken him away," Kaisar's mother Naseema Begum kept crying, referring to the militants



WE PICKED UP THE GUN, THE STATE RESPONDED

I am reminded of the wise words of my dear friend and senior defense analyst of the country Mr Qamar Aga. In 2016, in response to an observation with regard to the security concerns of the citizens in Kashmir, he said, “You have waged a war against the state. You have brought weapons from Pakistan to fight the might of the state. You should have anticipated the consequences at the time you decided to take arms supplied by the enemy state of the country against its military. I appreciate your concerns, but you are blindfolded to the events taking place across the globe. Wherever and whenever the non-state actors in any region

When non-state actors in any region take up arms, consequences are the same –suspension of the civil liberties. It may also result in suspension of fundamental rights because the state has the right to quell the upsurge by using its resources

and for any reason take up arms, the consequences are the same – the suspension of the civil liberties. In certain cases it results in suspension of basic fundamental rights essentially because the state, whatever the system of governance, has the right to quell the upsurge by using its resources”.

We have seen many transactions in Kashmir in the

last three decades of violence. At times it was the armed militant who would rule the streets and force the people to suspend normal life, follow diktats or face the music. The civilians would be threatened, intimidated and killed for not submitting to the gun-wielding militants and their ideological cousins. Grenades and blasts would occur at crowded places only to make the people submit to them.

When the state forces responded to the situation created by the militants, the civil liberties of the commoners were restricted, suspended and even in certain cases denied. The militant would go in hiding after creating a scene and the state forces would again target the civilians because the militant was not visible.

We have seen travesties and tragedies unfolding. There was phase when the militants vanished from the scene and security forces went back to the barracks. People had a respite from guns on both sides, and had just started tasting the fruits of normalcy and peace. However, this phase too was short lived.

HYBRID MILITANTS – THE INVISIBLE KILLERS

A new era of hybrid militancy has begun. We now live in times that are more uncertain than ever before. A non-designated militant who is any normal youth



Distraught family members of a youth who turned to militancy

engaged in normal activities carries a small weapon hidden in his clothing. He hits a target, hides the weapon and resumes normal life.

He has no previous crime history, so the security forces have no record on him. These youngsters are mixed with the people. You don't know whether the youngster on your left or your right is carrying a pistol and may shoot you.

In the last few months, this disturbing trend has aggravated. You never know who may be the next target, where and when. It could be a policeman at the traffic junction regulating the traffic. It could be a government employee who has just entered his office for duties. It could be a security officer who has gone to the market with his family during off-hours to do some shopping.

It could be someone like Samreen Bhat, a budding women artiste who had just returned home after performing on stage. It could be someone like Satish Singh, a poor driver with three daughters, a widowed sister and an aged mother. He could be killed while returning home after an exhaustive drive of nine days.

It could be a non-local young banker who got married just three months before. It could

be a poor vendor from Bihar selling Pani Puri in a street in downtown. It could be a famous chemist who has earned the goodwill of millions for selling quality medicine at subsidized prices. There is no guarantee. It could be anyone.

This is what the situation is. Listed and designated militants are in hiding. Boys with no criminal background are being used for the killings. The state forces are being held accountable for their non-action or for not going after the invisible undesignated unverified hybrid militants. The consequences can only be imagined.

ARE WE AS PARENTS KEEPING WATCH ON OUR WARDS?

▼

The police are under tremendous pressure. The Army is being grilled over civilian killings. The authorities have warned that all security forces must pull up their socks. In case of any civilian killing, the forces deployed on ground zero shall face the music.

The noises of jackboots have become louder day and night. The situation is scary. The question which we need to

Does the inability of the state to build a friendly relationship with the people justify violence or targeted killings by some amongst us? The response of a section of our people to pick up guns against the state has only brought us miseries and suffering

ask ourselves is this – Are we as parents keeping a watch on our wards? Are we trying to observe any changes in the behaviour of our loved sons? Are we wise enough to differentiate between the God-fearing son and the one whose mind has been poisoned by radical thought processes? Do we mourn the killing of all the innocents whose blood is spilled?

People have many complaints against the state. They complain that the state is uncaring. It does not address their concerns. It does not answer their questions. They complain that the officers are arrogant. They have unbridled powers with little or no accountability. The people complain that the state does not seek their approval for the controversial orders issued by it. They also complain that the state has closed its eyes and ears for the people.

But does the inability of the state to build a friendly relationship with the people justify violence or targeted killings by some amongst us?

The response of a section of our people to pick up guns against the state has only brought us miseries and suffering.

Our violent response has crippled our wings. Now even our silence has become tainted.

Let us ask ourselves certain fundamental questions before according sanction to the waywardness of our sons. Why are we as Kashmiri parents shocked every time our son picks up the gun or is arrested for being an OGW? Are we questioning those who indoctrinate our child? Are we analyzing what factors in the environment radicalize our child?

We have every right to question the intentions of the government. We are not a banana republic where no question can be asked. We have to find out the ways and means to make the authorities accountable and answerable to the people. At the same time we are under obligation to introspect and anticipate the consequences of violent behavior by any one of us.

Equally, we need to acknowledge that the violence and our silence is creating conditions and justifications for further delay of restart of political process. We should perhaps acknowledge that some part of the control is in our actions or chosen inactions.

Why are we as Kashmiri parents shocked every time our son picks up the gun or is arrested for being an OGW? Are we questioning those who indoctrinate our child? Are we analyzing what radicalizes our child?



The brother of Mehran, who turned to militancy in May 2021. His brother told media persons that the family had no idea of his inclination to join militancy

How Mehraj Malik is Working with the Youth to Rebuild Kashmir

MICROSOFT TO MY VALLEY



What was the turning point in your life that made you quit a company like Microsoft to come back to Kashmir?

There is no one particular reason when a person takes such a decision; it is actually a culmination of multiple thoughts which are going on in one's mind over a period of time. For a curious thinking mind, it needs a deep set of thoughts to make such a decision. So for me it was a big, bold and complicated decision.

almost as a habit without end. He presented his statements and I gave my rebuttals – the debate seemed to reach nowhere.

This discussion made a big impact on me. I thought hard on how to remove this blind hate hardwired into the mind of a section of our youth. How to lead them to a constructive and productive life. This thought stayed with me. It made think of my purpose of life, and the thought found a direction. It led to the work that I am currently

When you came back to Kashmir, what was your priority? How easy or difficult was it to convince people to get involved in your initiative?

When I came back, my primary idea was to look for the root cause of all the problems around. Second, be able to share my knowledge. I want to help a society where everyone lives a happy life.

I started getting associated with the NGOs, civil society, social activists, Mohalla Committees, Madrassas and various other institutions. Working with them, I came across a new set of problems which required immediate solutions.

Whenever I would feel anything was wrong, I would try to resolve it myself or would knock the doors of administrative authorities and the security forces to get the issues resolved. Initially it seemed easy. But as the months passed, new challenges emerged.

By this time I have come in contact with so many positive and negative elements of the society that I know it shall be difficult for me to raise my voice against any ills. Terrorist with guns and their sympathizers without guns mock, belittle, defame and at times try to boycott me. But being young blood, I am not afraid of the challenges. I continue to devote myself to what I believe in.

Tell us about your initiatives for the youth of Kashmir? How was the response and the opposition to it and how did

If I were to talk about an immediate cause, then it was the discussion with a mature Kashmiri young man aspiring to be a professor and looking for a temporary job in Bangalore. The discussion was around the Kashmir situation and the future of Kashmiri students. The arguments which he put forth were a combination of deep entrenched prejudices. They had become a constant source of hate for him and his ilk,

doing in Kashmir.

There was also an emotional reason. I found Kashmiri youth struggling to find a job to pay just Rs 10,000 a month. It struck me that elsewhere, I have encountered youth who are looking to be CEO in two decades. But Kashmiri youth are struggling even for a basic job. I tried to coach youth in all my free time. But the inner desire to look for my purpose grew deeper.



you overcome the challenges.
My initiatives are multi-faceted. I try to contribute to every part of the society, especially the youth. There are some distinct streams of work.

- * Streamlining education in Madrassas
- * Working with Islamic Scholars to spread the message of peace, coexistence, and love through constructive religion
- * Work against drug addiction, which is increasing amongst the youth



- * Create awareness amongst women regarding their rights, raise voice against domestic violence
- * Work on de-radicalization and engaging youngsters towards a 21st Century skill education... and so forth

We work in coordination with various groups of the society. Every idea in this world is bound have both takers and also those who oppose it. My journey has been full of young people with high energy and enthusiasm to learn as well as become volunteers. There are also those who do not like to see any positive thing happening around either because of their prejudices or due to their vested interests. I take them to be hardwired mentally, who don't understand real life.



My Initiatives, My Achievements

Some things are quantifiable and some are not. My work is more on the latter side. For example, I am reminded of some youth who reached out to me. I started helping them out in whichever capacities I can, especially through education.

After about a month they said to me, Sir we don't know why our thoughts were so negative before meeting you, but today we have a surprise for you. Then they stood up. One of them hinted to the last boy to play something on the speaker. What they played was the National Anthem. All of them standing in one line with their hands on their hearts and promising to work for the nation now onwards.

I was overwhelmed. I was overjoyed. Tell me, can we quantify this? Can we even think of rating something so beautiful like this? I don't know what my achievements are. But when a young boy puts his hands on his heart and says he loves India, I think it is the best thing I could get.

What was the biggest challenge that you faced?

Multiple small incidents have happened, which I ignore. These things are bound to happen if one wants to work against social evils and the deep-seated misconceptions in the society. The biggest and the only challenge I face in Kashmir is the gun being in the hands of the terrorists.

There are many people who are working for the betterment of Kashmir Valley. But day and night, Pakistan is trying to silence all positive voices. This is the biggest threat to a person working on ground.

What is your vision for Kashmir?

My vision for Kashmir is the vision of any common man residing in any part of our country - *Jiyo aur Jeene do. Sab mil jhul kar khush rahen, zinda rahen, aur ek dusre ka khayaal rakhen.*

What has been the biggest learning that you have achieved through your initiatives?

The biggest learning for me has been to be patient in difficult times. Patience shall carve good things for you. When I returned from Microsoft, the first year was crucial but comparatively easier. As time went on, new challenges emerged. Amongst all these challenges, I learnt to be patient against all odds.

What is your assessment of the youth of Kashmir?

Do you encounter strong radicalisation and indoctrination by Pakistan? Do you find them confused or do they have clarity of purpose? What other patterns have you encountered?

It is easy to ask – What is your assessment of Kashmiri youth? It is the most difficult question to be answered. There is no scale to measure the sentiments of youth in a place like Kashmir.

Yes, there is radicalization. Of course there is indoctrination by Pakistani groups. Yes, they are totally confused as they do not have clarity of purpose. The ground reality reflects a complex set of patterns based on the different experiences and exposures the youth has gone through in his life.

It is a complex combination of personal, family, societal, religious, modern lifestyle, financial situation etc. Every single individual is a different book. It takes immense effort and dedication to understand him/her. It is a complex setup. We need deep cultural, religious and rational approaches to come to any conclusion.

Despite budget provision of thousands of crores for education, skill development and welfare of the youth of Kashmir, has the government really been able to make an impact and create a positive connect? Kindly explain.

The biggest gap which makes mainstreaming difficult is the

basic assessment – using one yardstick for all. For a Kashmiri youth, mainstreaming is not the same as for a youth nationally or even globally.

For example, let's say a youngster in Delhi looks for a job after graduation. He will be happy with a job earning 20-30 K, and will hop on to it. It is not same for a Kashmiri youth. A few may opt for the job, but a section of them won't even give it a single thought. They will rather stay back at home, get involved in agriculture, or join the job and leave in six months, and in worst case do nothing at all.

It is creditable that our government has invested so much in skill development and other educational schemes. Thousands of youth are gaining employment this way. After a long time the youth have found something which can be an asset to their life in terms of skills.

These schemes hugely help in giving exposure to the youngsters regarding the sea of opportunities which exist around them. While these initiatives are highly desired, my entire focus is understanding whether the child or the youngster is able to get over personal prejudices and confusions. If tomorrow there is no job, will he fall back to the same behaviour patterns? It is extremely important to understand what is going on in the child's mind with regard to Kashmir's prism.

Misuse Of Government Budget

We know that some negative elements are able to get with their corrupt activities and defraud the youth. But now the government has come heavy on them and a lot of things are getting under control. Hopefully the future will be better.

Do you think romanticism of terrorism and terrorists is drawing youth towards them?

The answer is a big yes. A young boy is filled with thousands of imaginations. When he is not able to achieve any of those, he looks for an alternative which brings that imagined success and recognition. If there is a trigger situation, he is not able to control his emotions and jumps into the terror fray. Here he gets to experience the romanticism of terrorism as well as gets a feeling of being recognized, especially by the negative elements in the society. Due to these feelings, he chooses to remain in the terror network.

Tragically, it is also impossible to escape the terror network.

Do you think the government has taken the right approach to assimilate the youth into the mainstream? What have been the strengths and weaknesses of the government initiatives?

I have spoken above of the strength and value of government initiatives. I would highly appreciate if





the government continues to engage the youth in various activities as well as places huge focus on de-radicalization. As is the law of nature, nothing in this world is perfect, but with time and iterations things move towards perfection. The government works on various feedback mechanisms, grievance redresses in order to improve on things wherever it is lagging. I clearly see that the government's intentions are right and so the things will become right in the future.

How do you assess the drug menace among youth of Kashmir? Is it being addressed appropriately?

It is a big challenge of our times. Here in Valley, this issue is more complex and hidden. There are two kinds of nexus which are involved in drug

trafficking. One, those ruining our youth for petty money. The other is more dangerous. This is the Narco-Terror nexus. A lot of terror groups are using drugs as the means to mobilize money for their vicious terror activities.

At times they use minors and females to transport narcotics as well as the money which is generated through it. Every day, our police foils various attempts and catches drug peddlers while transporting narcotics. But since the groups and the nexus is improvising regularly, it becomes difficult to catch all of them.

What should be the roadmap for the government in Kashmir? What measures should be initiated for the integration of the youth with India?

Kashmir has gone through well-planned indoctrination since the early 70s. That indoctrination has become an inherited group of

misconceptions in the mind of children as young as 7 year olds. This is the real challenge. Employment, development, engagement – all these are important. But correcting this indoctrination is the primary task according to me.

This requires huge effort to be done across Kashmir through certain short term and some long term goals. People like me work day and night to ensure upliftment of the needy. But there is a lot more that needs to added in the 'to do' lists.

The first step is to understand the core problems. Second, find a workable set of solutions. Third, execute these solutions in an acceptable manner, so that the solutions actually work and make an impact, rather than ending up as a mere Tick in the checklist.

I highly appreciate the Administration who has taken pains to understand the issues and find solutions. Now is the time we need to take our work to the next level.



Jashn e Gurez

THE MANY WAYS IN WHICH KASHMIR FINDS ITSELF AGAIN

16

KASHMIR CENTRAL | 26 JUNE 2022

by Mareaya Fayaz





Hearing the word *Kashmir* may seem to bring an atmosphere of threat into the hearts and minds of people. But let me tell you as a Kashmiri – the dread built over Kashmir is also a media construct. We Kashmiris are happy, normal people trying to live happy, healthy and normal lives – the way people do nationally and globally. Yes, something awful happened in the 90s. Even now, in our present, there are reverberations and echoes of that horror.

But the youth of Kashmir and the people at large cannot be defined by the horrors of the 90s, or by the sad developments that we face even today. These sad developments, the killings and the targeted violence are a part



of our life. We are forced to live with them, but our life is much bigger. The youth of Kashmir are building for themselves happy, prosperous and abundant lives. Jashn e Gurez hence fits so beautifully with what we are and what we want to be.

Many in the national and

international media continue to build doomsday scenario for Kashmir – as if we are facing the end of the world here. Welcome to the real. Welcome to our blooming and blossoming Kashmir. You may think that it is easy for me to say this, since I am a Kashmiri.

Totally right. I know my Valley, my people. And if you come and visit us, you shall realize the same. Despite the challenges, we continue to build our lives the way we want to, with celebrations and diverse events.

INTER VILLAGE CRICKET TOURNAMENT

INTER SCHOOL VOLLEYBALL TOURNAMENT

One of those events is Jashn e Gurez, a-20 day festival organised by the Army in collaboration with the District Administration of Bandipora and the Jammu & Kashmir Tourism Department. The purpose of Jashn e Gurez was to Jashn e Gurez promote Gurez



as an offbeat adventure tourist destination, and increase the footfall of tourists to the valley.

The local residents are aware that such initiatives are very important for them for the socio economic development of Gurez. Jashn e Gurez showcased a plethora of adventure, sports and cultural activities. The event began on June 1, 2022 with an Inter Village Cricket Tournament.

Teams from various villages of Gurez participated in the event. There was also a team

from the Army and JK Police, setting up a friendly atmosphere for the youth playing the match.

On Day 4 of Jashn e Gurez, the Inter School Volleyball Tournament was organized by the Army at the Dawar Helipad. This was organized in collaboration with the Zonal Physical Education Department. More than 12 schools comprising 84 students –boys and girls – participated in the event. The Inter Village Cricket Tournament and also the Inter School Volleyball Tournament





turned out to be huge hits among the students, and were heavily attended.

On Day 6 of the event, the Army, the District Administration and J&K Tourism Department organized a Mega Cleanliness and Plantation Drive. The drive was organized on the occasion of World Environment Week, and was observed all across Gurez valley.

The cleanliness drive was flagged off from Dawar Market by the SDM and Forest Range Officer of Gurez. About 200 people took part in the event including representatives from the Army, the District Administration, Forest Department, Tourists, Hoteliers Association and students from different schools and youngsters. The rally culminated at Dak Bungalow, where saplings were distributed to the school children. Some saplings were planted in situ by the dignitaries.

The participants and the youth raised slogans of *Gurez Saj Raha Hai, Jashn-E-Gurez Ke Liye and Go Green, Go Gurez.*

MEGA SPORTS FESTIVAL

From June 7 to 12, a mega sports festival was organized as part of the Jashn e Gurez festival. The sports festival was organized by the Army in collaboration with Padma Shree Faisal Ali Dar's Ali Sports Academy and the District Administration, Bandipora. Three new sports have been



Yambarzal Dance Group



introduced in Kashmir over the last few years. These are Rugby, Pencak Silat and Wushu. These three sports were taught to children and youth from all across the Gurez valley during the event.

On the first day of the event, more than 200 children from the Tulail, Kanzalwan and Dawar sub sectors took part. The District administrations and the Army are working to include more children from other parts

of the country in the Jashn e Gurez event.

On June 11, Rajiv Rai Bhatnagar, Advisor to the LG, inaugurated a view point at Chorwan to promote border tourism. The Army has built the model view point to help visitors who are eager to see border regions this tourism season and are swarming Gurez. Officials said that the UT Administration is keen to promote tourism in Gurez to help the border

regions' economies and boost infrastructure development.

JOSH RUN AND WALKATHON

The Army organized a Josh Run and Walkathon in Gurez on June 13 June as part of the Jashn-e-Gurez festival. More than 200 boys and girls from various schools in the valley took part in the electrifying event. Additionally, more than 70 personnel of the Army, CISF and BSF took part in the activity.

Three categories were used to conduct the tournament. The 3 km race titled Children's Run for Fun was the first to start. Then the 10 km Josh Run for the youth and security personnel began thereafter.

Thereafter, the Girls Walkathon was flagged off. The 5 km brisk walk ended at the Habba Khatoon Spring.

DARD SHIN FESTIVAL

THE ANNUAL, MUCH LOVED GUREZ MELA

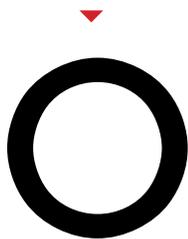
The media continues to build doomsday scenario for Kashmir – as if we are facing the end of the world here. Welcome to our blooming and blossoming Kashmir



part of the fest. These included the Departments of Forestry, Agriculture, Social Welfare and Animal Husbandry. A number of sports and food stalls were also set up. Other booths and handicrafts stalls were set up from where tourists could buy souvenirs from Gurez. The locals and tourists delighted in the Decathlon shop set up at the fest.

The army set up a medical check-up camp during the Festival for the benefit of the residents, who received free examinations and medications.

The Dard Shin Festival featured a variety of cultural programs by teams from schools, colleges, and also by musical troupes from all around the valley. All these programs focused on promoting the rich culture of the Dard Shin tribe of Gurez. Visitors also had a great time at the Log Hut Café run by the Army.



On June 14, the Dard Shin Festival was organized.

More than 2500 people including a large number of tourists visiting the area took part in the fest. Officers of the Army, BSF, CISF JKP and the District Administration also joined the festivities.

The event began with the much-anticipated and prized Pony Race, which is held every year in Gurez. The village games held during the Dard Shin Festival featured a number of thrilling competitions. These included the Pithu Race, the Inter-Village Tug of War, the Jalebi, lemon race and sack race for kids.

Fifteen booths were set up by various departments as

The killings and violence are a part of our life. We are forced to live with them, but our life is much bigger. The youth of Kashmir are building for themselves happy, prosperous and abundant lives





Jashn e Gurez showcased a plethora of adventure, sports and cultural activities. Such initiatives are very important for the socio economic development of Gurez

SHAM E GUREZ

On June 15, Gurez celebrated Sham e Gurez. More than 4000 locals, tourists, security personnel and officials of the Army, BSF, CISF, JKP and civil administration attended the star-studded evening. Everyone highly enjoyed the event and danced to the music of Kashmir's loved performers including Waqar Khan, Waseem Khan, Nargis Khatoon, Khan Amir and many others.

Along with the captivating musicals, the event featured a spectacular fireworks display which lasted for more than 30 minutes. The Army devoted the magical Evening to the people of Gurez, to show their appreciation for the people's unwavering support. The theme for the evening was *Ek Shaam Gurez ke Naam*.

MAXIMIZING YOUTH POWER

A major purpose of the event was to popularize Gurez as a travel and tour destination.



The other major purpose of the event was to encourage the youth to explore their talents and strengths, and participate in positive and affirmative peer activities. This shall also ensure that the youth stay away from drugs and also from radicalization.

I would say that events like these should be held regularly so that the youth find an appropriate channel for their energy. Hundreds of youngsters participated in diverse activities during the fest and found new energy and josh.

One of my friends, Dr Sanya Khan also attended Jashn e Gurez. She told me that she was mesmerized by the cultural festivities. She said that Jashn e Gurez was a happy and positive experience.

Sanya told me that she went for Jashn e Gurez with her father and a friend. "We had a great time because there were so many games and food vendors from many departments. We had the time of our life," Sanya said.

I look forward to attend more fantastic festivals in Gurez in the future.

THE BIGGER PICTURE

An Army officer told me that he was not surprised that Jashn e Gurez was such a huge hit. He said that the locals here are very supportive. For a year and a half, the Army has been organizing events in collaboration with the district administration. During 2021, a large number of events were organized. The

The Dard Shin Festival featured a variety of cultural programs by teams from schools, colleges, and also by musical troupes from all around the valley. They focused on promoting the rich culture of the Dard Shin tribe of Gurez

Gurez residents participate in the events with great enthusiasm.

The Army officer told me that the purpose of the events is not just to popularize Gurez as a tourism destination. The purpose is also to promote the culture and languages of the Dard Shin tribe, and encourage their youth to find pride in their history and culture.

It was a happy moment to witness how Kashmiri women and girls delighted in the celebration of their culture, and participated in their traditional dances. The viewers cheered with enthusiasm. This was new and so beautiful.

Outside Kashmir, many believe that the Valley is at a point of despair. The media loves to build the All-Is-Lost narrative. This does not reflect the truth. Kashmir is at the threshold of better times. The youth are making many positive and affirmative choices. That too defines Kashmir. That too defines who we are and what we want to be.



I loved it that boys and girls, men and women were given equal opportunity to contest and to enjoy the event. The happy faces of those performing at the event and the onlookers cheering with excitement tell me that it is high time such events become more common in the valley. It is about time these happy changes are normalized in Kashmir.

The new confidence that Kashmiri women have gained is unshakable. This is how it should be. Such events are a ray of hope for us all – that the youth of Kashmir can be part of joyous fests and have fun, like the youth nationally and globally.

These opportune changes are coming at the right time. We have suffered immensely at the behest of the people who don't want peace to prevail in Kashmir. Events like these are bringing us the joy and comfort that we have sought for so long.

Such events are also great for the local economy, and give a fillip to each sector. The Army had set up at least 48 centers for women who earn money by making souvenirs.

I am kicking myself for missing Jashn e Gurez. I am happy that I interacted with those who were at the event and got to know more about it. Next year it's on my calendar for sure.

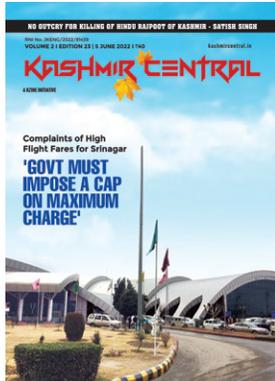
Events like these should be held regularly so that the youth to explore their talents and strengths, and participate in positive and affirmative peer activities. This will ensure that the youth stay away from drugs and also from radicalization



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