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# KASHMIR CENTRAL

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**KASHMIR CENTRAL**



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VOLUME 4 | EDITION 8  
1 JULY 2024

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# Regulatory Mechanism Needed to **Cap High Airfares** to Srinagar



**M**ore than 1 million tourists have visited the picturesque valley of Kashmir in just the first four months of this year. According to official data, over 8000 passengers arrive at the Srinagar International Airport in about 100 flights being operated from the airport daily. The major chunk among the arrivals are tourists. The influx of tourists is expected to swell further amid rising temperatures in the plains of India.

The irrationally high airfares for Kashmir are a deterrent for many. Tourists are forced to choose some other holiday destination.

Surprisingly, airfares to some South Asian and Gulf nations are comparatively cheaper.

During previous years, hoteliers from Kashmir would increase the tariff manifold during peak season. To some extent, the UT administration has been successful in regulating the hotel tariff, but the sky-high airfares for Srinagar continue.

It has been the usual practice of airlines to steeply increase airfare to Srinagar during summer. Every year tour operators and other stakeholders associated with Kashmir's tourism industry are anguished by the sudden hike in airfares. There has been frequent demand for a regulatory mechanism which must impose a maximum cap on the increase in airfares.

Till now, flights have been the most convenient option to travel to Kashmir. National Highway 44 connects Srinagar to the rest of the country and has been upgraded at a huge cost. But the unpleasant weather conditions make it non-motorable for days together due to landslides, avalanches and shooting stones. Train service from Ramban to Reasi via the world's highest railway bridge built on Chenab River will begin soon. The Udhampur-Srinagar-Baramulla rail link is likely to be completed by year end.

It shall be appropriate if the authorities put in place a regulatory mechanism for airfares and stop the airlines from exploiting those who aspire to visit Kashmir.

**Bashir Assad**





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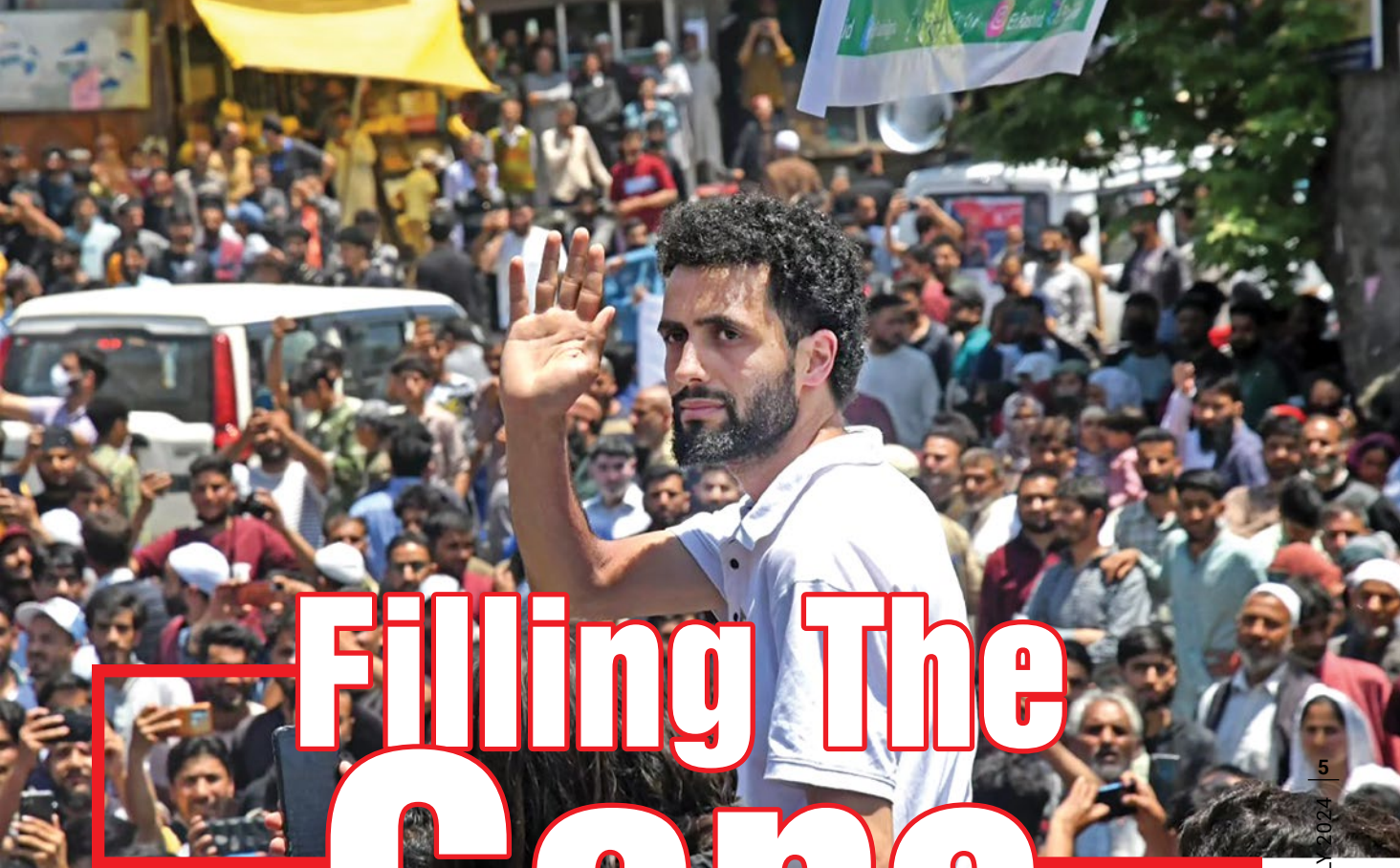
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# Filling The Gaps

by Bashir Assad

## Analytics Of Electing Engineer Rashid And The Interpretations Offered

**T**he overwhelming participation of the people in J&K in just concluded Lok Sabha elections stands as a watershed moment, redefining the region's socio-political fabric. While presenting potential opportunities for peace an, the record voter turn-out unleashes a complex interplay of forces with multifaceted implications. The final outcome of the election to the 3 seats of Kashmir region has ignited a tinderbox of conflicting

emotions and is intricately woven with both hope and potential pitfalls. Attempts to revive terrorism south of Pirpanjal in Jammu region and the abrupt spurt in terrorist activities merely a week after the formation of new government in New Delhi are both highly complex and sensitive topics, generating diverse reactions.

The election results of the three high profile Lok Sabha seats of Kashmir region where the National Conference of Dr. Farooq Abdullah won

two and the Baramullah seat was won by the jailed political leader Er. Rashid. It is crucial to delve into the intricacies and evolving dynamics surrounding the election results, which could certainly have an impact on the upcoming Assembly election in Jammu and Kashmir.

Electoral drubbing faced by two former Chief Ministers, Mehbooba Mufti from Anantnag-Rajouri constituency and Omar



Abdullah from Baramullah seat is certainly an articulation of the sentiment by the people of Kashmir and the election results is a trajectory of the political theories and alignments shaping the electoral landscape in the region.

For the first in last 35 years, elections in Kashmir were held without any boycott call by the separatists and their terrorist arms. Allegations of administration was “biased and partial” apart It could be argued that, in a way, this was the first election held in last 35 years literally in a free and fair atmosphere.

The region’s record voter turnout for Parliamentary

elections 2024 reflects the mood of the larger majority. Kashmir is witnessing an enormous shift from anti-democratic expression to pro-democratic sentiment.

There is a strong undercurrent for participatory democracy, as the region has been without elected government since June 2018. The huge turnout showcases the willingness of the Kashmiris to repose faith in the democratic system, redefine the political ambitions and aspirations. This report analyses the key stakeholders, potential scenarios, and critical considerations for ensuring a stable and inclusive political process.

Few Takeaways

The just concluded Lok Sabha elections in Jammu and Kashmir alongside the nation presents a very complex picture which needs in-depth analysis.

## NO GOING BACK TO SEPARATISM

One of the most talked about electoral wins of Lok Sabha 2024 has been the candidate from Baramulla constituency in north Kashmir Abdul Rashid Sheikh, popularly known as Engineer Rashid. He defeated former chief minister and political titan Omar Abdullah.

What makes his victory so distinctive is the fact that Rashid has been in Tihar Jail in Delhi for the last five years on charges of terror financing. His campaign was entirely managed by his sons Abrar, aged 23 and Asrar, aged 21.

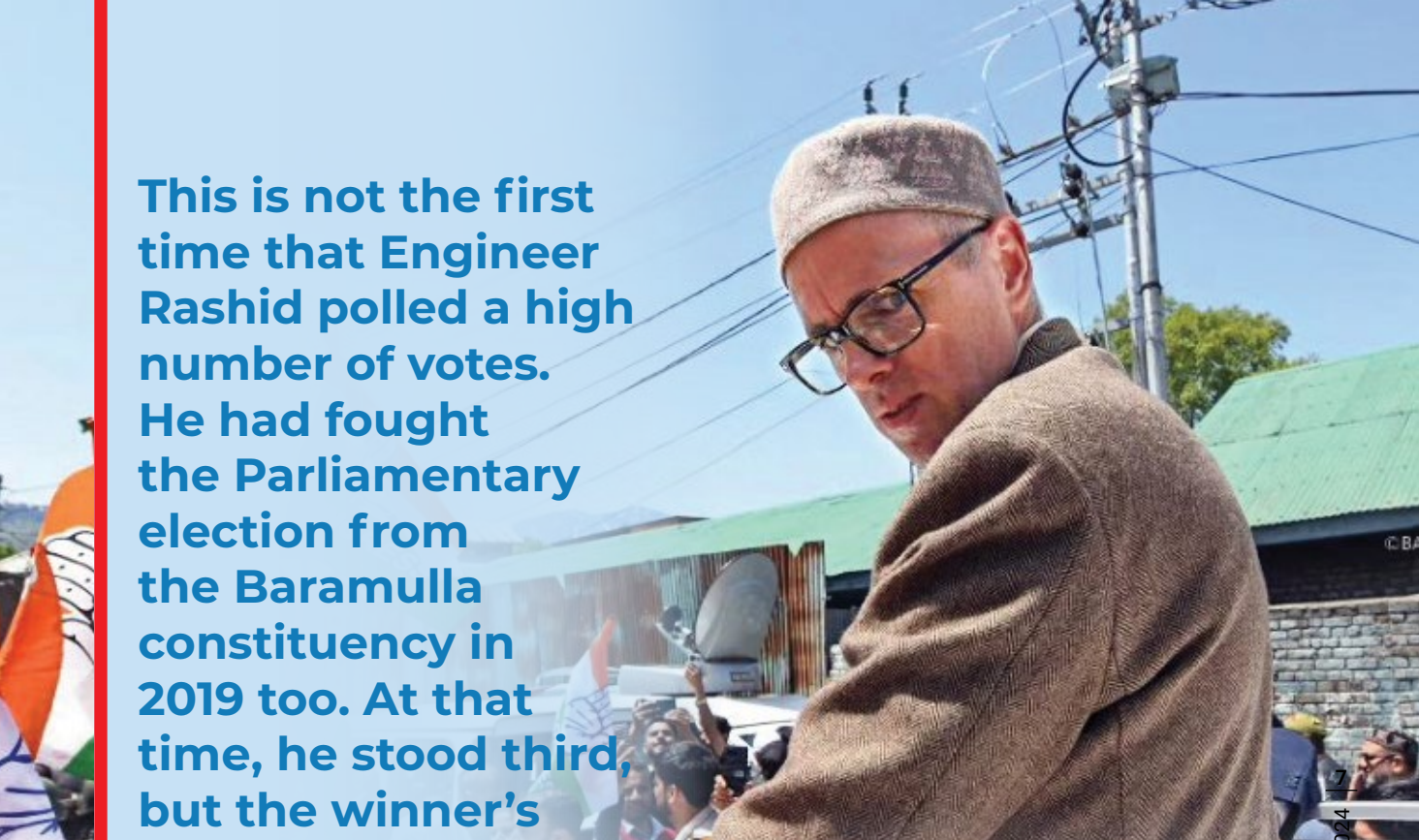
Rashid’s win has been analysed by media houses within the country and abroad. There is an opinion that Engineer Rashid’s win could revive the separatist politics in Kashmir.

This is a flawed argument which could not hold water.

Those who attribute the win of Engineer Rashid to separatist politics ignore the broad spectrum of reasons that led to his victory. Separatist politics isn’t among those reasons. As hinted at, there is a strong urge for the participatory democracy in the region and disillusionment with the separatist politics and







**This is not the first time that Engineer Rashid polled a high number of votes. He had fought the Parliamentary election from the Baramulla constituency in 2019 too. At that time, he stood third, but the winner's victory margin was thin. Rashid was only about 1000 votes behind People's Conference candidate Raja Aijaz Ali, and around 31,000 votes behind the winner and National Conference leader Akbar Lone. Voting in 2019 was 34.71 per cent. The paradigm shift this time was the spike in the voting percentage, at 59 per cent.**

secessionism. There is fatigue among the larger population with the prolonged violent conflict. However, this does not mean that the separatism has completely vanished from the horizon. The ideology is very much there so are the ideologues with the only difference that the ideology has lost the popular support.

---

## **THE LANGATE MLA CHARMED KASHMIR**

▼

In 2008, Abdul Rashid Sheikh, a middle-rung government officer from Langate, a town in North Kashmir, decided to contest the Assembly elections as an Independent candidate. Government jobs are highly coveted in J&K. Nobody quits a government job to do politics. His family was aghast and refused to speak to him.

Abdul Rashid had done a diploma in civil engineering. He had just 17 days before the elections for his campaigning. Kashmir places great emphasis on education. Rashid became Engineer Rashid, and campaigned vociferously, promising to fight for the problems faced by the commoners. He defeated the political stalwarts of his area and was elected MLA.



**K**ashmir is a land of many colours - in landscape as also in shades of political opinion. It is erroneous to paint Kashmir monochromatic.

Elections to India's powerful Lower House of the Parliament - the Lok Sabha - started on April 19 and finished on June 1. The three parliamentary constituencies in Kashmir recorded the highest voter turnout in three decades.

This was the first election in Kashmir after the abrogation of Article 370 of the Constitution of India. Kashmir surprised the nation and all global watchers with the record-breaking high turnout.

Voting in capital Srinagar stood at 39.49 per cent. In the last Lok Sabha elections

held in 2019, the corresponding figure was 14.43 per cent.

In the Anantnag-Rajouri constituency, voter turnout was 54.84 per cent. In 2019, the figure stood at 8.98 per cent for Anantnag constituency.

Baramulla constituency recorded the highest voter turnout of 59.1 per cent. In 2019, the figure stood at 34.6 per cent.

The winners for the Srinagar constituency and the Anantnag-Rajouri constituency are hugely influential religious leaders of these respective areas. A huge Pir-Mureedi religious factor was visible in the result.





How did the man from a small town in Kupwara become one of the most popular politicians of Kashmir? His success lies in his ability to stay a man of the masses.

Politicians across the world expect people to stand by them. Rashid stood by the people as one of their own, on issues that mattered to them. He financed the education of many poor and meritorious youth.

Always dressed in a simple kurta-salwar, popularly called the Khan suit in Kashmir, Rashid shunned the elitist ways of other Kashmiri politicians.

While other politicians of Kashmir moved with security and a cavalcade, Rashid remained the man next door. He mingled freely among people without any barricade of security. He interacted with them like a family member.

Rashid did not avail of a government vehicle and chose to move around Kashmir's towns and villages in his private car. Even as a legislator, he was known to take the local bus like a commoner, and even hitch a ride with someone on a two-wheeler. He remained simple and approachable in his public posturing.

Rashid was always swinging between separatism and mainstream politics.

In many circles in Kashmir, it is believed that people with separatist ideology voted for Rashid, and that he got the dissent vote. It is true that Rashid garnered the vote of this section also. But his victory goes beyond this.

## 98% Voting In Village On LAC

A Kashmiri village on the Line of Actual Control (LAC) with Pakistan has recorded the highest voting for Lok Sabha Elections 2024.

98 percent voting was recorded in Paul Shoker village (Banjra), Uri.

The village has 135 voters. 132 people cast their votes, taking the voting percentage to 98%.

Other villages on LAC also recorded heavy voting.

Churunda: 91 pc

Soni: 86 pc

Tilawari: 83 pc

Sukhdar: 82 pc

Thajal: 77 pc

Kashmiris have voted for peace, prosperity, and development.

There are multiple reasons why the Baramulla constituency powered Engineer Rashid to the Parliament.

## ENGINEER RASHID'S POLITICS SWINGING BETWEEN MAINSTREAM AND SEPARATISM

Of the nearly 10 lakh votes in his constituency, Rashid polled 4,72,481 votes. That's a whopping 45.7 per cent of the total votes polled in the constituency.

Some political analysts have concluded that Engineer Rashid's victory will revive the separatist and secessionist sentiment in Kashmir. It is also believed that all boycott areas voted for Rashid, seeing him as a separatist leader in a democratic costume.

This is a simplistic assumption. Kashmir is never monochromatic.







# FACTORS THAT EXPLAIN ENGINEER RASHID'S WIN

## THE SYMPATHY VOTE

As he fought elections from behind the bars and took on Omar Abdullah, the titan of Kashmir politics, Rashid rode the tsunami of the sympathy vote.

## LATE CAMPAIGN, TIDAL SUPPORT STRONG EMOTIONAL CONNECT OVER SOCIAL MEDIA

Former MLA Shoiab Lone told mediapersons that his family didn't have money to file his nomination, so his supporters pooled in money. "His win is the victory of our democracy," said Lone.

Rashid's sons Abrar and Asrar campaigned extensively for him. With tears in their eyes, they appealed to the voters to vote for their father so that he would be released from jail.

Thanks to his sons, Rashid rode Kashmir's robust social



media sector with high emotive appeal and built a strong connect with all Kashmiris.

Women and youths overwhelmingly voted in favour of Engineer Rashid. The sympathy factor played a huge role among the women of North Kashmir. He got the women's vote because of the strong emotional messaging of his sons. Interestingly, many women who had never voted before said they came to the polling booths because their children persuaded them to vote for Engineer Rashid.

Youths voted for Rashid in large numbers because his sons

were able to build a connect with their collective perception of insecurity. Their videos and posts garnered views and likes in huge numbers. Many of Kashmir's social media influencers further shared their content voluntarily, multiplying the outreach.

The Facebook page of Rashid's Awami Ittehad Party (AIP) now has more than three lakh followers.

Abrar Rashid said the family spent only Rs 27,000 on the campaign, to buy fuel for their car to go to the rallies. People came on their own.



## MEHBOOBA MUFTI'S STRIDENT CAMPAIGN

It is wrong to assume that Engineer Rashid's victory represents the ascendance of the separatist and secessionist sentiment in Kashmir.

For nearly 20 years, north Kashmir has been a peaceful region with low appeal for separatism. Barring a few Assembly segments, voting percentage in North Kashmir has always been significantly higher than South Kashmir. North Kashmir has also seen a good working relationship between the people and the Indian Army.

Meanwhile, Anantnag in South Kashmir has remained

the stronghold of the separatist ideology for decades. The extremist and separatist ideology held strong roots in South Kashmir.

Since the abrogation of Article 370, Mufti and her daughter Iltija Mufti have been far more strident in denouncing the government. By this argument, Mehbooba should have won the lion's share of the vote from Anantnag.

But it was not so. Mehbooba trailed in 14 out of 17 constituencies in South Kashmir. She lost by nearly three lakh votes to Mian Altaf Ahmad of National Conference.

Rashid's sons were very calculated in their campaign. They never spoke of separatism or separatists. They only focused on the demand for the release of their father.



*End of boycott culture: Lok Sabha Elections 2024 witnessed long queues outside polling booths in Kashmir*

## KASHMIR IS NOW DEFINED BY A STRONG PRO-DEMOCRATIC EXPRESSION

**W**e are witnessing a massive transformation of Kashmir society. For over 30 years, anti-democratic representation of grievances and violence ruled Kashmir. But Kashmiris have left their past behind. They have made a huge shift towards a strong pro-democratic expression.

In videos recorded by media channels outside polling booths, Kashmiris in their 40s and 50s admitted that they had never voted before and were enthusiastic about voting this time.

These videos brought another startling truth to light. A sizable percentage of senior adults said they had never seen an Electronic Voting Machine (EVM). EVMs were introduced in the country 1990s onwards in a phased manner.

Many seniors said that they remembered paper ballots only.

In the videos aired by the media houses, people

admitted that gun culture had only damaged Kashmir and had not yielded anything positive. They said they trust democracy and the power of the vote to ensure development.

There is no question of going back to the violent era of the past. Kashmiris have realised that they must voice their grievances by participation in the democratic process.

The huge turnout for the Parliament elections reflects that Kashmiris are earnestly waiting for total inclusion in democratic politics.

There is no doubt that there is a strong thrust on development and normalcy in Kashmir. Like any dynamic political entity, Kashmir faces issues like unemployment, growth, security and other concerns. Since 2018, there has not been any elected government in Kashmir. After the pro-democratic shift, Kashmiris want an elected government.



# The Valley Speaks Through The Vote

Jammu and Kashmir has made an indelible mark on electoral history of India with highest voter turnout in the just concluded parliamentary elections in last 35 years. Kashmir Valley witnessed a record voter turn-out as compared to the poll participation in 2019 general elections. The overwhelming participation is contextually both evolutionary and revolutionary.

by Zahoor Ahmad Shah

## 2024 Lok Sabha Election: An Analysis Of Jammu And Kashmir

Since the eruption of militancy in Kashmir in 1989, mainstream politicians and separatists have played an important role in Assembly elections and Parliamentary elections alike. But this is the first time that Parliamentary elections have evinced such high interest in Kashmir.

The significance of every election lies in its 'time and space frame' and the 'context' in which it is held. Usually, Parliamentary elections in

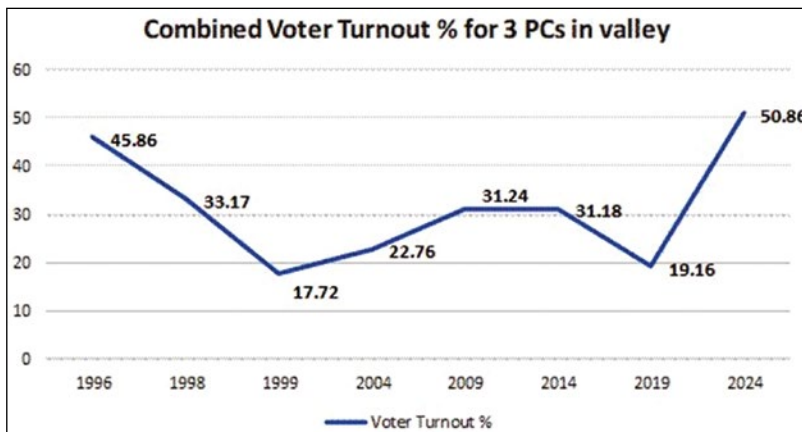


the erstwhile State of Jammu and Kashmir did not become talking points for the Valley. But owing to several factors, the climate this time was altogether different. Lok Sabha Election 2024 held great significance for Kashmir and is considered as an exceptional election in many respects.

This was the first election after the formation of J&K as a Union Territory (UT). Jammu and Kashmir was a state till August 5, 2019, when the special status of the State was revoked and it was divided into two Union Territories (Jammu and Kashmir; and Ladakh) under the Jammu and Kashmir Reorganization Act, 2019. The general elections were the first major polls since the elected State Assembly was dissolved and the UTs were brought under Centre's rule headed by the Lt Governor.

The 2024 Lok Sabha elections in Jammu and Kashmir marked a historic turning point in terms of democratic participation. The highest-ever voter turnout of the last 35 years was recorded in the Valley's three Parliamentary Constituencies (PC) — Srinagar, Baramulla, and Anantnag-Rajouri. This remarkable participation is a profound indicator of the evolving political dynamics – the major features being the end of boycott politics and a prevailing environment of freedom from terror.

Overall voter turnout for Jammu and Kashmir UT increased from 44.37 in 2019 to 58.46 in 2024. The Combined



**Note:** Due to delimitation exercise, the voter turnout data from previous elections for the PCs, may not be directly comparable  
**\*Graph depicts Gross VTR for 1996-2019; For 2024, VTR is at polling stations**

Voter Turnout (VTR) across the union territory stood at 58.46 per cent this year. The high voter turnout in Kashmir can be largely attributed to the efforts of J&K Administration and JK Police in creating a safe environment free from external threats. The administration's commitment to security and the monitoring of potential

threats from external elements, particularly "proxies of Pakistan" played a crucial role in ensuring the smooth conduct of the elections.

The National Conference (NC) and the Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP) won two seats each. Abdul Rashid Sheikh, popularly known as Engineer Rashid, won from the Baramulla Lok Sabha



constituency. He contested under the banner of Awami Ittehad Party (AIP) but was deemed to be an independent candidate.

Rashid's landslide victory against NC's vice president Mr. Omer Abdullah, one of the giants of Kashmir politics, was the highlight of the election. The victory of Rashid Engineer also shook the roots of People Conference (PC), pushing Sajad Lone to the third position in the Baramulla LS constituency.

For the Srinagar constituency, the major party candidates were Aga Syed Ruhullah Mehdi of NC, Waheed-Ur-Rehman Para of PDP and Mohammad Ashraf Mir from J&K Apni Party (JKAP). A total of 24 candidates were in the fray, including a woman candidate Waheeda Tabasum Shah; cancer surgeon Ashraf Qazi and social media influencer Jibran Firdous Dar.

Agha Ruhullah and Waheed Para separately sought votes from people against the revocation of the special status in 2019. BJP did not field any candidate in any of the three seats in Kashmir, including Srinagar.

Congress and National

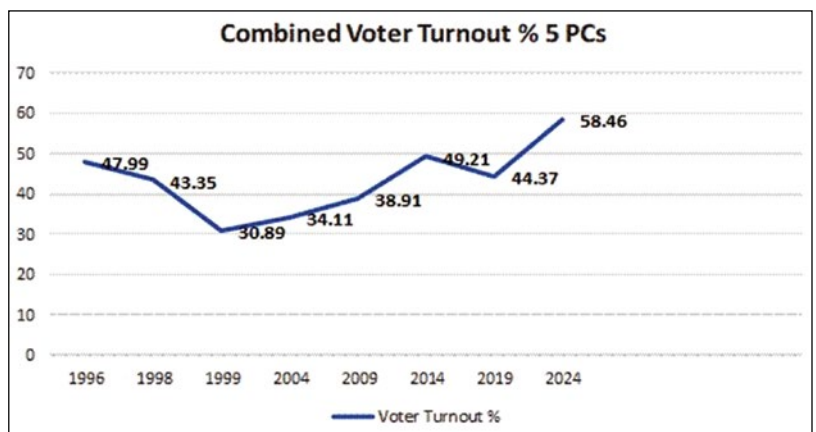
Conference had a pre-poll alliance as part of the Indian National Developmental Inclusive Alliance, commonly known by its acronym I.N.D.I.A. The partners believed that the alliance would help them in eliminating competition and consolidating the vote base.

### LS ELECTION DYNAMICS IN KASHMIR VIS-À-VIS JAMMU

The election was held in an atmosphere of the polarization of communities and structural fragmentation of valley votes. This coincided with a conjectural consolidation of votes in the rest of the UT.

The fragmentation of the valley electorate was largely seen as part of political strategy and electoral re-engineering.

One of the most significant changes noted during this election was the palpable sense of freedom from fear among the electorate. People felt safe participating in campaigning activities including night rallies, roadshows, and door-to-door campaigns, without the looming threat of violence or intimidation. This newfound confidence is a testament to



\* PC of Ladakh has been removed which was part of erstwhile state of J&K for comparison.  
 \*\* Graph depicts Gross VTR for 1996-2019; For 2024, VTR is at polling stations





the effective measures taken by security forces to decisively deal with the forces that threatened the democratic process.

The banned Jamaat e Islami (JEI) J&K was historically known for its opposition to electoral politics and its role in monitoring and targeting individuals involved in such activities. JEI members publicly participated in the recent elections. This shift is indicative of a broader change in the region's political climate. Participation of JEI reflects its recognition of the changing political dynamics in Kashmir and a potential shift towards a more open and democratic future.

Election and security officials made a sincere effort to enable the people of Jammu and Kashmir, especially the youth, to take part in the polls, which resulted in the record participation in the UT. Over Kashmir's robust social media, an increasing trend was seen where youths made a strong statement about their beliefs and strongly supported democracy.

An average of 50 per cent of voters across J&K are aged from 18-39. Their faith in democracy is reflected in the high voting percentage this year, which is an encouraging and positive sign.



### AGE WISE DISTRIBUTION OF REGISTERED ELECTORS (PERCENTAGE OF TOTAL ELECTORS IN A PC) IN UT OF J&K

Age Groups	Baramulla	Srinagar	Anantnag-Rajouri	Udhampur	Jammu
18 - 39 Years	56.02	48.57	54.41	53.57	47.66
40 - 59 Year	30.85	34.87	31.59	32.65	35.28
18 - 59 Years	86.87	83.44	86.00	86.22	82.94
60 & Above	13.13	16.56	14.00	13.78	17.06

The Election Commission made it possible for Kashmiri migrant voters living in relief camps in Delhi, Jammu, and Udhampur to cast ballots by mail or in person at specific polling places. EC provided a total of 21 special polling stations in Jammu, one in Udhampur and four in Delhi.





organising a para-scooter event in Kathua; raising awareness at 'Beating the Retreat' ceremony on Suchetgarh border; organising a mega awareness rally in Teetwal near LOC, close to Dal Lake in Srinagar to Chougan in Kishtwar; and performing an instrumental version of the ECI song on the highest railway bridge were some of the SVEEP efforts.

Well-known singers

## CASTE/COMMUNITY FACTOR

BJP won both Lok Sabha seats in Jammu by consolidating the Hindu votes in its favour. The National Conference played the 'Pir-Mureedi' card to win the LS elections in the Srinagar constituency and the Anantnag-Rajouri constituency. Aga Syed Mehdi Ruhullah is a well revered leader of Shia community with a good share of votes in Srinagar, Budgam and Ganderbal.

Mian Altaf is a highly respected and influential spiritual leader of Gujjar community. The community factor played a huge role in both constituencies, and NC took its advantage wherever it suited the party.

## LS 2024 WAS CELEBRATED LIKE A FESTIVAL ACROSS J&K

Lok Sabha Elections 2024 were celebrated like a festival in Jammu and Kashmir. Across



Kashmir, excited children and youths participated in awareness rallies, adventure sports events, nukkad natak, and many other activities organized by SVEEP (Systematic Voters' Education and Electoral Participation program), the flagship program of EC to raise awareness regarding voting.

Creating Igloos as a dummy polling place in Baramulla;

performed in a variety of locations including Lal Chowk, Gulmarg, Kulgam, and Anantnag. A record number of voters turned out to vote because of the resurgence of democracy and the triumph of the ballot in every corner of UT.

Another aspect highlighting the success of the LS Election in J&K was high participation of female voters, and their





increasing number. After addition of 2.3 lakh new voters in J&K UT, there are now 44.35 lakh male and 42.58 lakh female voters. The total number of voters stands at 86.93 lakh. The voter population and gender ratio in J&K has improved from

0.59 to 0.60, and 924 to 954 respectively.

The number of first-time voters, which constituted 3.4 lakh, played a decisive role in the LS Election. The number of voters with disabilities and transgenders was 67,400 and

158 respectively.

LS Election 2024 was an election of manifold dynamics and characteristics. The negative hype built by local politicians like Mehbooba Mufti regarding abrogation didn't hold true, and she also lost the election from the Anantnag-Rajouri constituency by a huge margin. For PDP, LS Election 2024 was no less than a nightmare.

Lok Sabha Elections 2024 shall be seen as a significant milestone in the electoral history of Kashmir. The election marked the change of hotbeds of hostility to enthusiastic polling areas. The youth flaunted the ink mark on their fingers to register their faith in democracy. For Kashmir, this is a huge leap.





# G-20, World Bank And A Heritage Kashmiri Craft



by Peer Mohammad Amir Qureshi





# Happy Times Ahead For Willow Wicker Craft

▼ In May 2023, exposure during the G-20 meeting in Srinagar gave a major boost to the age-old willow wicker craft of Kashmir.

Showcasing their wares at the exhibition organised for the G-20 delegates opened up new markets for the artisans. Over the last one year, the willow wicker artisans saw a manifold increase in revenue.

The Jehlum and Tawi Flood Recovery Project of the World Bank has also significantly boosted the willow wicker craft. The World Bank initiative launched the creative Shaksaaz Willow Wicker Work project in association with the renowned West Bengal NGO Kadamhaat.

The initiative involves training programs for 10 willow wicker master artisans. These include Bashir Ahmad Dar and Peer Mehraj Ahmad of Ganderbal, who have been engaged with this craft for generations.

The training with Kadamhaat has enabled the master craftsmen to add to the range of willow wicker products, and better understand the emerging needs of the market. The project earned the praise of the G-20 delegates.



Before the World Bank initiative and the G-20 exposure, most willow wicker crafts people used to make products for domestic use only.

Now, tourists from within the country and abroad seek their products. Designers from diverse places visit them with new ideas for their product range. The willow wicker craft of Kashmir is blooming again.

“We have so many bulk orders from within the country and abroad that we don’t even have time to sit,” said Bashir Ahmad Dar, a skilled craftsman in his 50s. “Before the World Bank initiative and the G-20 meeting last year, we were feeling that our heritage willow wicker craft was on the verge of extinction,” Dar added. In his home town, the delightful Ganderbal, traditional crafts such as wicker and willow weaving have flourished.

## THE WILLOW WORKS OF PEERPORA

Peer Mehraj Ahmad’s son Showkat Ahmad, 28, is committed to preserving his forefathers’ timeless craft. The family resides at Peerpora in Ganderbal. Showkat ardently champions the art of wickerwork, ensuring that this cherished tradition endures.

Willow Wicker Craft is known as Keani Keam in Kashmiri. The craft is testimony to the creativity of Kashmir’s master artisans, boasting a long tradition spanning centuries.

The locals refer to the

crafts people as Shaaksaaz. This sophisticated industry involves the exquisite weaving of willow reeds. It thrives most notably in Ganderbal district. The region’s unique geographic location provides the optimal soil and climatic conditions for developing and cultivating the willow wicker crops.

The journey starts with the planting of saplings. Once sprouted, each sapling is severed and replanted, allowing for the annual collecting of shoots. This cycle continues, producing a continuous harvest until the sapling is eventually uprooted. The planting season normally lasts from February to March, with a mature willow plant reaching a height of 2-3 meters.

## THE LABORIOUS PROCESS

The laborious harvesting process finishes in October. After the crop is harvested, the withy is precisely wrapped based on length and girth, signalling the start of its industrial voyage. The harvest is sold to a contractor, who distributes it to numerous craftspeople along with comprehensive instructions for the products to be made.

When the artisans receive the raw material, they first soften it by boiling the raw willow. This is done the traditional way in gigantic water boilers fired by wood. The



Plantation for willow wicker handicrafts. Photo by Peer Mohd Amir Qureshi



bundles are buried and weighted down by massive boulders and left to simmer overnight. After boiling, the softened bundles are retrieved and carried on to the next step: bark removal.



*Water boiler for willow wicker.  
Photograph by Peer Mohammad Amir Qureshi*

## GIGANTIC WATER BOILER WHERE THE WILLOW REEDS ARE SIMMERED OVERNIGHT

This delicate operation is carried out with a particular arrangement of sticks locally called zealan. The bark is recycled as fuel. The withies are dried in sunshine for days, till there is no trace of moisture left. Once again, the dried withies are arranged in bundles according on length and width.

## 'G-20 MEETING GAVE US NEW DIRECTION'

Traditionally, the art was used to make common home-use products like trays, baskets, and storage containers. Showkat and his uncle Bashir Ahmad Dar said that with more and people preferring to buy synthetic or plastic products, the art was gradually dying.

"A little more than a year ago, we used to think that this craft is seeing its last days. But just before the G-20 conference, the government intervened, and a Kolkata-based NGO named Kadamhaat showed us new direction," said Dar.



## PEER SHOWKAT AHMAD AT JAMMU AND KASHMIR TRADE SHOW

Showkat said that the NGO encouraged the artisans to weave new products in modern designs. The big break came when the government requested a willow wicker craftsman to

display his products at the exhibition organized for the G-20 delegates.

"The guests were delighted by this ancient craft. Many national and international delegates purchased pieces from our collection," said Showkat Ahmad. Now these artisans are engaged in meticulously crafting an array of exquisite wicker willow items including fruit baskets, bread baskets, picnic baskets, lamp shades, flower baskets, dog baskets, cat baskets and more," revealed Showkat with enthusiasm.

"Many times, foreign tourists specially come to see our craft. It is indeed a matter of pride for us that we are preserving and taking forward one of Kashmir's heritage crafts," added Dar.

The artisans are happy that Jammu and Kashmir Administration regularly organizes exhibitions where they can display their products. Showkat is thrilled that their





extensive collection featuring hundreds of unique designs is sold across the nation and abroad.

Designers from many parts of the country interact with the artisans and suggest innovations in their product range. “We have incorporated leather handles and zip chains in many of our items, which have been met with great admiration from our customers,” said Showkat.

Bashir Ahmad Dar highlighted that for generations, their family has been engaged with the wicker willow trade. “I have spent 35 years weaving these delicate objects. We have ten youngsters to master this craft, and they are working on over 150 new concepts,” said Dar. With increased revenue, there is renewed hope among



**“It is an enriching experience to participate in trade shows and exhibitions. “We interact with new people everywhere who give us new ideas of the emerging needs of the market, and we incorporate these ideas in our work”**

the artisans. The heritage craft supports about around 10,000 families.







*Bashir Ahmad Dar participating in Trade show 2024*

## YOUNGSTERS LEARNING WILLOW WICKER CRAFT

“The encouraging news is that the new generation is enthusiastically learning the art of wicker willow crafting from us,” highlighted Dar. He appreciated the efforts of J&K Administration, which regularly facilitates the craftsmen to showcase their products nationwide.

“Previously, our exports were limited. But now, hundreds of Kashmiri wicker items are



being shipped worldwide. By the grace of God, we are generating substantial revenue and providing financial support to over twenty families associated with our company, Peerpora Willow Works,” stated Dar.

Peer Showkat Ahmad said it is an enriching experience to participate in trade shows and exhibitions. “We interact with new people everywhere who give us new ideas of the emerging needs of the market, and we incorporate these ideas in our work. I am highly grateful for the support that we have received from the district administration and the Development Commissioner of Handicrafts,” said Showkat.

Clearly, for the wicker willow industry of Kashmir, happy days are here again.

**“Many times, foreign tourists specially come to see our craft. It is indeed a matter of pride for us that we are preserving and taking forward one of Kashmir’s heritage crafts”**



LIGHTS

ACTION!

# Cinema JOYS

## Return to Kashmir

by Mian Tufail





▼  
In July 2023, a video went viral in Baramulla, a bustling town in north Kashmir. A man in his late 50s was joyfully slurping an ice-cream after watching a movie in the newly opened cinema hall. The man was laughing that he was reminded of his teenage years when he would implore his mother for money so that he could watch a movie with his friends. “My teenage years are back again,” the man exclaimed happily in Kashmiri.

Such scenes have been witnessed in Srinagar, Kupwara, Shopian and Kulgam, where cinema halls reopened after about 30 years. Kashmiris love movies. They are reveling in the joy of going to the cinema, and also welcoming cinestars in the valley for shooting their movies.

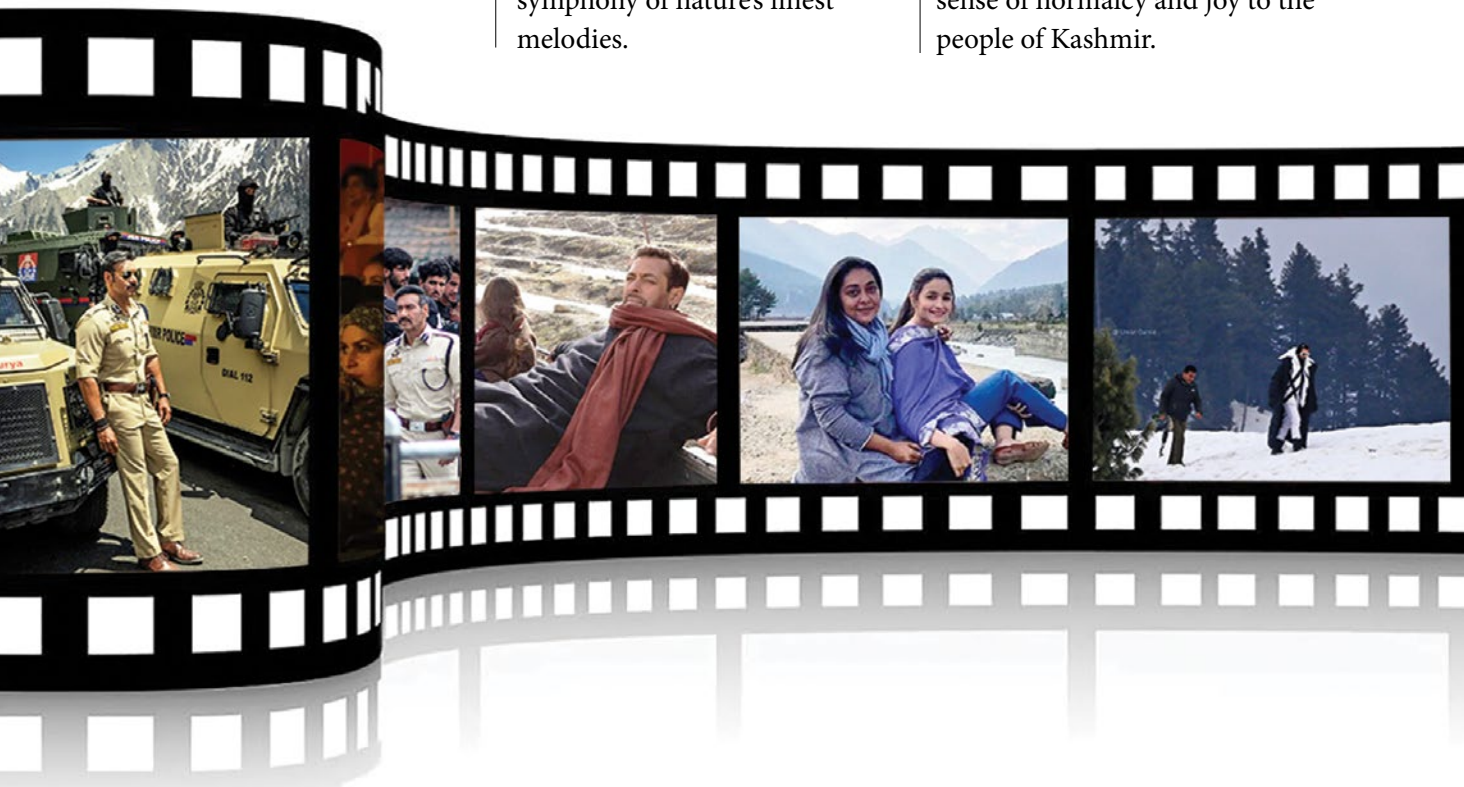


## HEARTWARMING COMEBACK OF CINEMA

▼

In the serene and majestic valley of Kashmir, a cinematic renaissance is taking place. This revival is not just a mere return to the past, but a rebirth filled with passion, hope, and a heartfelt connection to a land that has always been a symphony of nature’s finest melodies.

Kashmir, once the most coveted destination for Bollywood, is witnessing a heartwarming comeback of cinema, bringing with it stories that echo the whispers of its mountains, the songs of its lakes, and the warmth of its people. Today, a new chapter unfolds in the region with the revival of cinema, bringing not just entertainment but a profound sense of normalcy and joy to the people of Kashmir.



## A DREAM REAWAKENED

The return of cinema halls in Srinagar, Baramulla, Kupwara, Shopian and Kulgam marks a significant milestone in Kashmir's journey towards peace and cultural rejuvenation. Theatres in more townships are set to open soon, and Kashmiris are thrilled about it. We lived through more than 30 years of turmoil, where the melodies of the movie songs were drowned by the echoes of conflict. The silver screens are lighting up once again, casting a warm glow



of hope across the valley.

Kashmir's beauty is unparalleled, with its snow-capped peaks, verdant meadows, and crystal-clear lakes providing a canvas so vivid that it transcends the ordinary. This natural allure first captivated Bollywood in the 1960s and 70s, creating a golden era that charmed cinegoers with the country and abroad, heralding the powerful soft power of Brand Bollywood. Films like

Kashmir Ki Kali, Mere Sanam, Jab Jab Phool Khile and many more immortalized the valley's enchanting landscapes.

Today, Kashmir has welcomed a new dawn. With security improving and life returning to normalcy, the valley is once again opening its arms to filmmakers. The excitement is palpable as the people of Kashmir throng to the newly inaugurated theaters. The atmosphere is charged with

anticipation, reminiscent of bygone days. The resurgence of cinema has also attracted the attention of Bollywood, with megastars like Ajay Devgan and Emran Hashmi gracing the valley for their film shoots. Their presence is not just a testament to the region's captivating beauty but also a nod to its newfound peace and stability.

Last month, celebrated Bollywood director Rohit Shetty completed the shooting of his highly anticipated film Singham Again in Kashmir, featuring Ajay Devgn in the lead role. The director took to Instagram to share his experiences and express his gratitude towards the people of Kashmir. He described the Kashmir shoot schedule as the "most amazing and emotional" and highlighted the transformation of the region following the abrogation of Article 370.

Thousands of happy



Kashmiris thronged Lal Chowk in the heart of Srinagar city to see Ajay Devgn shooting for *Singham Again*. Emran Hashmi was in Baramulla for the shooting for his film *Ground Zero*, and the excitement among fans was palpable.

In a heartfelt conversation with KC, Ghulam Hassan of Sopore reminisced about his childhood memories linked to cinema. He recalled the joy and excitement of visiting cinema houses, which were tragically targeted by terrorists. “After the turmoil in 1990, cinema houses became prime targets for



cinema halls, watch movies and have fun. Now people across Kashmir are happy that cinema halls have opened here too,” said Bhat.

## CINEMA'S SOFT POWER

The intersection of Bollywood and Kashmir goes beyond cinematic allure; it touches the heart. By showcasing Kashmir's breathtaking beauty and cultural richness, films can shift perceptions, countering negative narratives and fostering unity and understanding. Bollywood's presence in Kashmir is more than a visual treat. It is an emotional journey that reconnects the audience with the valley's soul.

Bollywood's powerful influence on tourism cannot be overstated. The picturesque settings showcased in films often captivate viewers, compelling them to visit the locations featured on screen. By choosing to film in Kashmir, Bollywood has the unique opportunity to rejuvenate the region's tourism industry, which has faced significant challenges due to political instability.

The enchanting beauty of Kashmir, once vividly portrayed in classic films, can once again draw travelers from around the world, eager to experience its splendor firsthand. An increase in tourism can lead to sustainable economic growth, providing much-needed benefits to local communities and promoting a more positive



terrorists, who vandalized them in broad daylight,” he shared.

Hassan's eyes sparkled as he recounted his school days in Sopore. “We used to go to Samad Talkies after school hours,” he said, his voice tinged with nostalgia. “The romanticism, the action, the stories—they are still vivid in my mind. The enthusiasm was so high that we saved our pocket money just to watch movies. The

craze for Mithun Chakraborty, Amitabh Bachchan, and Raj Babbar was immense. We, the youth, saw ourselves in these actors. But the turmoil of the 1990s ruined everything.”

Javed Bhat, an entrepreneur at Pulwama, said that for years, Kashmiri youths yearned for joyful activities of leisure. “Since our teenage years, we always used to be excited about going to Jammu. There we would go to



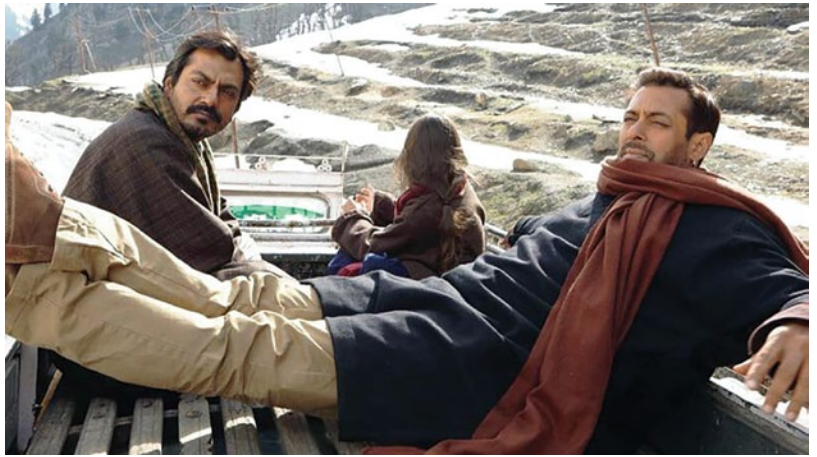


narrative about Kashmir. This renewed interest in Kashmir's breathtaking landscapes and rich culture can help foster a sense of hope and revival, transforming the region into a symbol of resilience and allure.

## A FUTURE ILLUMINATED

The revival of cinema in Kashmir is more than just the reopening of theaters. It is a revival of dreams, a resurgence of hope, and a reclaiming of joy. It is a reminder that after the darkest of nights, the dawn always comes. The people of Kashmir are not just watching films; they are witnessing the unfolding of their own stories of resilience, love, and triumph.

As we turn the page to this new chapter, the valley echoes with the laughter and cheers of its people. The story of Kashmir's cinema revival is not just about films. It is about a community coming back to life, a culture rediscovering its voice, and a region embracing a future filled with promise and peace.





# Now, British Movie Being Shot In Kashmir

**A** Million Dollar Tourist. This is the name of the British movie being shot in Kashmir with British actors, Kashmiri actors and the crew from Mumbai.

Over May and June, Verinag, Sinthan Top, Daksum, Kokernag and other beautiful spots in south Kashmir's Anantnag district have been abuzz with the shooting of the British movie.

The movie team will also go to Shopian for the shooting. About 70 per cent of the movie's production cost shall be spent on the shooting in Kashmir.





# TOURISM BLOOMS IN BORDER VILLAGES

38  
KASHMIR CENTRAL | 11 JULY 2024

by Mudasir Dar

Once secluded villages, Gurez and Keran have seen a massive transformation with tourist footfalls, bolstering the local economy with homestays

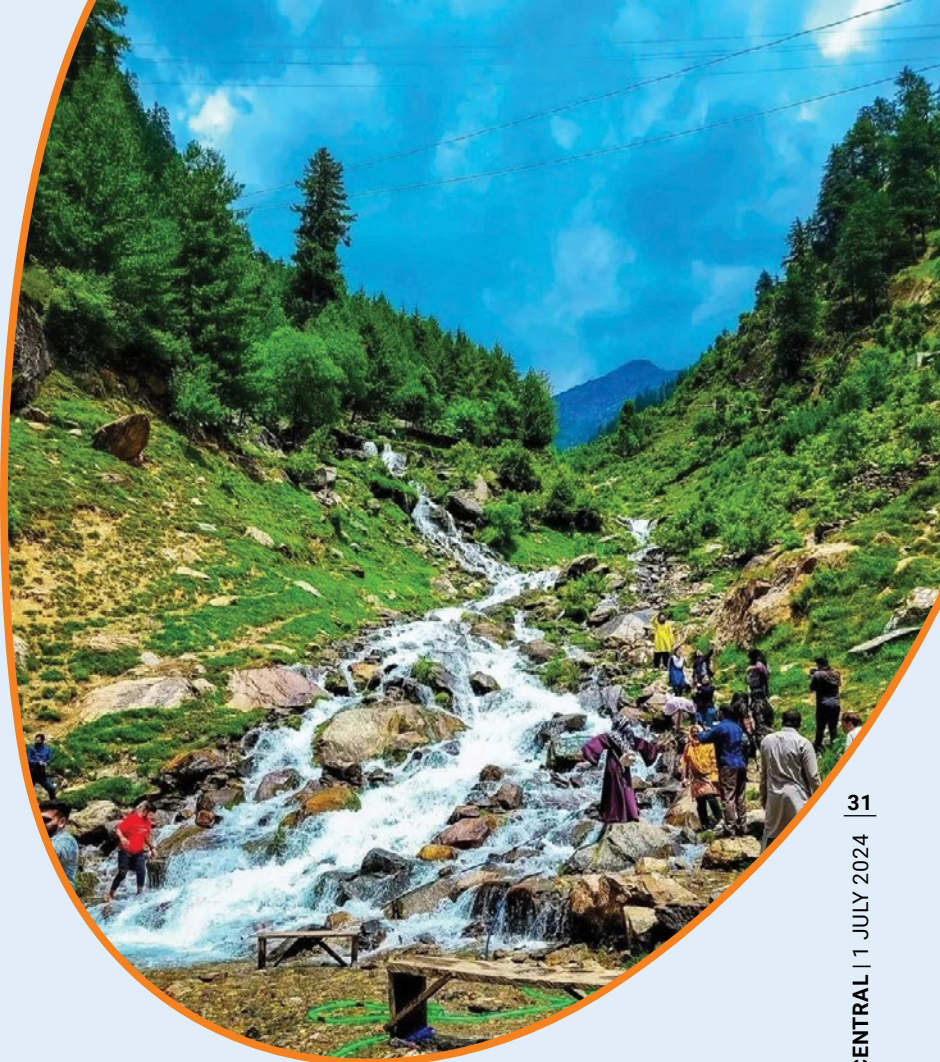


**T**he twin border villages of Gurez and Keran have emerged as a must-visit destinations in Kashmir. The Kishanganga River, with its breathtaking views, draws numerous tourists who camp along its banks, offering a unique and previously unimaginable experience. These villages have seen a turnaround after the abrogation of Article 370. The transformative changes in border tourism have been due to the government of India's initiatives ably supported by the Indian Army and Jammu and Kashmir police. In stark contrast, the border regions on the Pakistani side lag, highlighting the positive impact of India's strategic and developmental policies.

The once-isolated villages are now seeing massive tourist footfalls that has not only boosted the local economy but also provided a platform for

cultural exchange. The rise of homestays and local enterprises has given visitors a chance to experience the rich traditions and hospitality of Kashmiris,

while simultaneously uplifting the local communities. This shift from conflict to tourism symbolizes a broader narrative of peace and prosperity.





## GUREZ VALLEY

The beauty and serene atmosphere of Gurez located in Bandipora district of North Kashmir has seen tourism flourishing in the Valley. This region, which once saw little to no visitors, has now become a popular travel destination. Amir Anees, a local resident, attributes this surge in tourism to the efforts made by the government post-2022. These initiatives have created a positive atmosphere, drawing tourists from all over India and significantly boosting the local economy.

## RISE OF HOMESTAYS

Despite the limited number of hotels, the rise of homestays has provided ample accommodation options, allowing tourists to experience the local culture firsthand.

“The most important aspect of this tourism boom is the significant improvement in the livelihoods of the local people. Businesses have thrived because of the much-needed peace on the borders, with no shelling or disturbances. This stability is a positive step forward,” says Amir.

Youths in Gurez have set up stalls and roadside eateries,

known as dhabas, contributing to the area’s economic growth. Additionally, the valley’s famous agricultural products, such as rajma (kidney beans), jeera and potatoes are gaining popularity among visitors.

Gurez is divided into three main zones - Baghtor, Dawar and Tulail. Tourists prefer to stay at Dawar, the central hub of Gurez.

Amir, a mass communication graduate, has also ventured into the tourism industry by setting up a tent service. This service allows tourists and locals to spend the night in tents. “Weekends are usually jam-packed,” says Amir.







Mushtaq Ahmad, a local resident who has registered his property as a homestay, provides several rooms for visitors staying overnight at Gurez. “This homestay initiative has not only provided us with a source of livelihood but also an opportunity to promote our local culture and traditional dishes. When we prepare meals for our guests, we make sure to include Gurez’s famous rajma. Accommodating visitors in our homes offers them a comfortable stay and an authentic experience of our way of life,” he says.

The homestay model has proven beneficial for both the hosts and the guests. For the locals like Ahmad, it provides a steady income and a chance to share their heritage. For tourists, it offers a unique and immersive experience, allowing them to enjoy the warmth of Kashmiri hospitality while exploring the scenic beauty of Gurez Valley.



## TRANSFORMATION OF KERAN

The mesmerizing Kishanganga River, often seen in viral videos and social media reels, flows through the scenic Keran village, a frontier settlement in the Kupwara district along the Line of Control in Kashmir. Once a place only the locals knew, Keran is now witnessing a significant influx of tourists.

A secluded village has seen a metamorphosis. Previously, the residents were accustomed to a quiet life with minimal external interactions. Kishanganga River,

which is now a major tourist attraction, has brought a new vibrancy to the village.

Aijaz Ahmad, a local resident of Keran, often illustrates this transformation with a simple example of a shopkeeper’s journey. He recalls a time when a local shopkeeper, who had a small rundown shop, struggled to sell a few packets of biscuits to the sparse local clientele, earning just enough to support his family.

“Now, that same shopkeeper, in a slightly refurbished shop, finds it challenging to meet the demands of the numerous tourists during peak season,” says Aijaz. “This is the transformation from a no-go zone to a popular tourist destination. Social media reels filmed in Keran are garnering significant viewership, and this place has become a must-visit destination for many.”

Another local resident, Adil Ahmad, who runs a registered homestay, says the flourishing tourism has opened new avenues for income and hospitality. “Keran is now a famous place,” he says. “We couldn’t have imagined a more vibrant season, with people from distant places visiting Keran. This is the beauty of peace and development when people refuse to give space to the terror forces. Almost all the residents are now living happily, eager to register for homestays and serve the guests. These are lovely days, thanks to all who ensured peace and quiet prosperity, allowing tourism to flourish in Keran.”

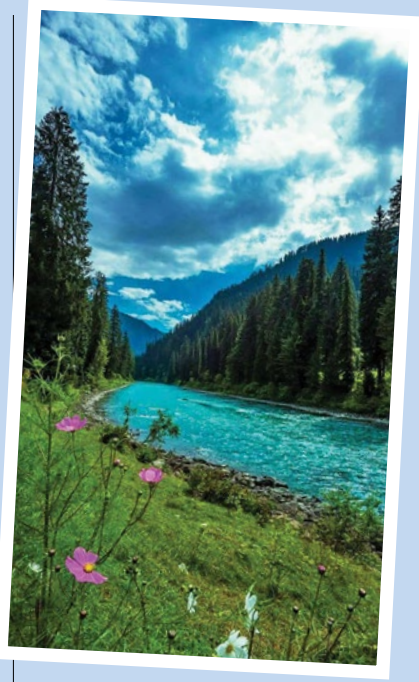


## RESHAPING TOURISM LANDSCAPE

It is not just tourists from outside Kashmir who are enjoying delightful holidays here. Kashmiris are doing so in equal measure.

Muzamil Ahmad, a visitor from South Kashmir, recounts his experience of visiting the twin border villages. "This is a significant development, allowing people to explore border villages," he says. "We had an entirely new experience in Gurez, different from other famous tourist spots. Our camping experience along the Kishanganga River was soothing, and the hospitality we received was exceptional. We wish the best for the people here, who have been excellent hosts."

The unique experiences offered by places like Gurez and Keran are reshaping the tourism landscape in Kashmir. The government's bold decision to open these areas to tourism has proven beneficial, fostering peace and prosperity. Since 2019, tourism, which is considered the backbone of Jammu and Kashmir, has been thriving.



The concept of homestays, a relatively new initiative, has significantly impacted the region. It has created a major connection point for sharing traditions, culture, and local life. Residents eagerly register their homes as homestays, welcoming tourists and sharing the rich heritage of the Union Territory. This shift has not only boosted the local economy but also enriched the cultural exchange between locals and visitors, making places like Keran and Gurez a shining example of the positive impact of tourism.





# Woman Power

## Initiative To Address Menstrual Health, Empower Women



by Abida War

It's taboo to talk of menstruation in Kashmir. The social conditioning is so deep that in many families, even mothers hesitate to talk about it to their daughter. Over the last few years, I have spoken at scores of awareness sessions across Kashmir, addressing girls on menstrual health and hygiene.





Every time, a hush falls upon the audience. The girls start fidgeting. They feel embarrassed that I choose to talk about this subject.

And simultaneously, Kashmir is also a progressive society. In January last year, we opened a sanitary pads manufacturing unit at Handwara. This was the third unit of its kind in Kashmir. The first two units were opened in Kupwara district and in Baramulla district in the second half of 2022.

The district administration played a pivotal role in opening all these units by providing the finance. Handwara is my hometown. As Supervisor in the government-run Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) Scheme and Chairperson of JKSEWWA (JK Solace Employees Working Women Association), a non-government organization, I was entrusted with the opening of the sanitary pads manufacturing unit in Handwara, and also with its functioning.



Now, we consider this unit our start-up baby, managed and run by women. The project is 'Ba-Ikhtiyar Kwateen, Khushkun Kashmir' – The empowered women of a happy Kashmir. We have the full support of the government in positive initiatives which empower women and provide them with employment. The Deputy Commissioner of Kupwara provided aid of Rs 5 lakh for setting up the project.

DC Kupwara and the J&K Education Department have pitched in to raise awareness regarding menstrual hygiene. Health and Hygiene Clubs

in various schools have been provided with sanitary pads. Regular talks on health, hygiene and menstrual awareness are organized.

## THE VISIBLE SHIFT IN ATTITUDES

Over the last one year, I have witnessed a definite shift in the attitude of women towards menstrual hygiene.

They understand that the health of women is closely

linked to menstrual health and hygiene. Hence women must be given safe options for menstrual hygiene management. The biodegradable sanitary pads manufactured at our unit are a significant step in this direction. These sanitary pads are made with banana stem fibre. They are 100 percent biodegradable.

The project was set up with the training provided to the women by Vatsalya Foundation, an NGO which has presence in 26 states across India. Local womenfolk were trained in handling the manufacturing process for the sanitary pads.





## SELF HELP GROUPS WILL RUN THE START-UP

Initially, we had set up manually operated machinery to manufacture the sanitary pads. Now we want to install more semi-automated machinery to achieve higher production. Currently, the unit can manufacture 1000 sanitary pads in assembly line production. Through the sale of sanitary pads, the unit is able to generate revenue. The price of the sanitary pad has been kept very low so that these remain easily affordable for all women.

*Irfana Zargar has been trying to create awareness about menstrual health and hygiene by distributing free sanitary pads to women and girls. She said that girls from poor economic background face challenges like limited access to sanitary pads, sanitation facilities and social support.*



**SPACE PROVIDED  
BY JENAB MOHD  
RAMZAN BEIGH**

▼  
The sanitary pads manufacturing unit at Handwara could be made functional with the support of a local philanthropist. Jenab Mohd Ramzan Beigh provided the use of his building for setting up the unit and did not charge any rent. He said that it made him feel happy that

**The sanitary pads manufacturing unit at Handwara could be made functional with the support of a local philanthropist. Jenab Mohd Ramzan Beigh provided the use of his building for setting up the unit and did not charge any rent**

women and girls of the area would get employment and they would be empowered through the new project that has been started in the township.

Such initiatives act as a force multiplier. They carry strong, positive messaging of empowerment and inspire girls and women to be self-reliant.



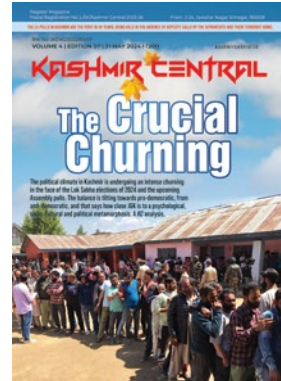
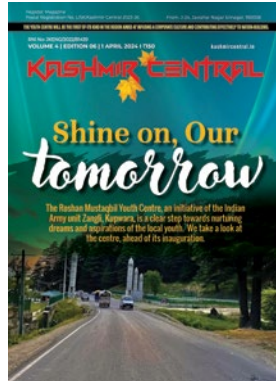
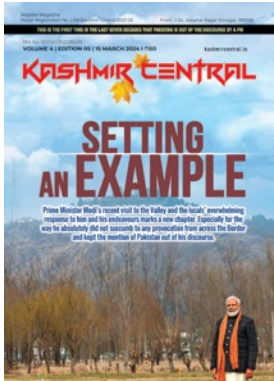
*Students at a training and awareness workshop on women healthcare*



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