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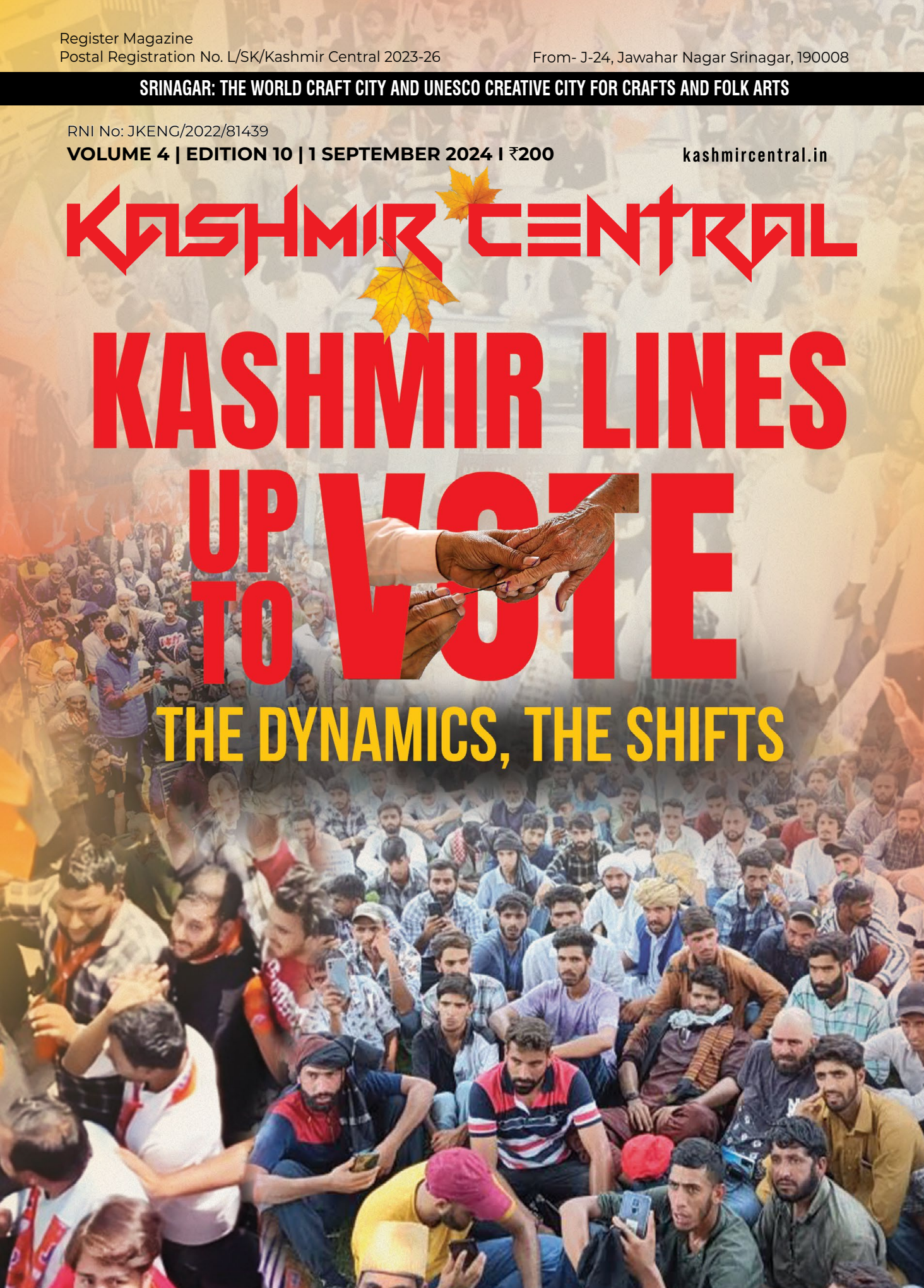
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KASHMIR CENTRAL



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VOLUME 4 | EDITION 10
1 SEPTEMBER 2024

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Participation in Elections A Strategic Political Game By Jamaat-e- Islami J&K

The ongoing assembly elections in Jammu and Kashmir are historic in many ways. The first election to the UT legislature after the abrogation of Article 370, by virtue of which the erstwhile state of Jammu and Kashmir enjoyed a unique constitutional position for about 73 years within the Union of India, has much significance the in backdrop of banned Jamaat-e-Islami deciding to field its representatives for the first time after the much-hyped elections of 1987 which are believed to have been rigged.

Going by its time-tested precedent of tactical retreat, to revive and rebuild its structures following the crackdown by the administration under UAPA in the recent past, Jamaat-e-Islami has decided to field its representatives as independent candidates from more than a dozen assembly segments in Kashmir region. Notwithstanding its strong and committed foot soldiers, Jamaat cannot even influence the outcome of the results owing to the disillusionment surrounding its duplicity.

The national media has given this impression that Jamaat-e-Islami could help undercut the power of regional forces like the National Conference and People's Democratic Party. Going by the perception of the public, this argument seems far from the reality. However, The Jamaat-e-Islami's participation in elections would certainly delegitimize secessionism and religious extremism. And this is what the intelligence agencies are precisely looking at. Jamaat's participation in electoral politics marks the end of an era which was dominated by the separatist narrative in Kashmir, with Jamaat having the sole proprietorship over the idea of separatism.

This is all together a separate debate that even before the inception of armed militancy in Jammu and Kashmir in 1989, Jamaat-e-Islami, despite its ideological influence over a sizable section of educated youths, could not make significant political imprints. By that account Jamaat-e-Islami Kashmir is no different from its ideological mother, Jamaat-e-Islami Pakistan. However, this is not the only similarity between the two. Like Jamaat-e-Islami Pakistan, Kashmir's Jamaat-e-Islami has functioned as a semi- government organization. Before 1989, Jamaat willingly and wittingly played the role of a saboteur in the hands of the successive regimes, vetoing the dissent by invoking religion.

For Jamaat, it could be a win-win situation as it could secure the lifting of the ban by the Ministry of Home Affairs. However, in the process it is likely to lose its moral authority and may end up as a non-entity.

Bashir Assad

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The More Things Change, The More They Stay The Same

by Bashir Assad





that was anticipated initially.

Soon after the events of 2019, Jammu and Kashmir witnessed a kind of political roiling with the formation of almost a dozen new political parties and their subsequent registration with the Election Commission of India. The trend of establishing new political parties was witnessed in both the regions of the newly formed Union Territory - Jammu and Kashmir. Political watchers and observers jumped the guns, signalling a titanic shift in the political landscape of Jammu and Kashmir. Factors on ground initially validated their assumption that Kashmir's political landscape had changed irrevocably.

75 years ago, French writer Jean-Baptiste Alphonse Karr wrote an oxymoron that resonates across cultures and political climes. Plus ça change, plus c'est la même. The English translation - the more things change, the more they stay the same.

At first glance, Karr's words seem illogical, but in context they make complete sense. Little would the erudite Frenchman know that nearly two centuries later, his words would fit Kashmir politics like a glove.

The abrogation of Article 370 in 2019 was followed by bifurcation of the erstwhile state of Jammu and Kashmir into two Union Territories and altered the region's governance. Despite the tectonic shift, combinations and permutations of Kashmir politics have not seen the transformation



NEW POLITICAL FORMATIONS HAVE BEEN UNABLE TO GAIN DOMINANT SPACE

▼
In March 2020, the disgruntled leader of Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) Syed Altaf Bukhari established the Jammu and Kashmir Apni Party as a centrist alternative focused on advocating for peace, development and the restoration of statehood, which the region lost following the abrogation of Article 370 in 2019. This was followed by massive resignations of Mehbooba Mufti's cadre.

The majority of those who



left PDP joined Altaf Bukhari. Kashmir watchers in the power corridors in New Delhi would see a viable political alternative in the newly formed Apni Party under the leadership of Altaf Bukhari.

Two-and-a-half years later, the Democratic Azad Party was launched on September 26, 2022, by former Congress leader Ghulam Nabi Azad. Azad's departure from Congress was also seen as a significant shift in the political landscape of Jammu and Kashmir.

Again, there was buzz in some circles that Azad enjoys clout in Jammu region, and Altaf would replace National Conference and Peoples' Democratic Party in Kashmir valley. Both Azad and Altaf started an onslaught on Kashmir's "political dynasts" with so much of fervour and enthusiasm.

Other smaller groups also took shape, like National Awami United Party, Aman aur Shanti Tehreek-e-Jammu and Kashmir, National Democratic Party, Voice of Labour Party, Haq Insaaf Party and the Jammu and Kashmir People's Movement.

SHAH FAESAL PROMISED 'HAWA BADLEGI', THE EXPERIMENT FAILED

▼
One party bucked this post-abrogation trend and formed a good six months before Article 370 was scrapped was the Jammu and Kashmir People's Movement (JKPM). The party was founded in March 2019 by former IAS officer Dr Shah Faesal and aimed to introduce a fresh perspective. JKPM's promise of 'hawa badlegi' (the winds shall change) on Kashmir faded after Faesal withdrew from politics in 2020.

Pertinently, all the newly established political parties had the support base of the old disgruntled political horses; Faesal's Peoples Movement was the only exception. As was expected by seasoned Kashmir watchers, none of the newly formed political parties could bring a fresh perspective to the political horizon of Jammu and Kashmir.



DISTRICT DEVELOPMENT COUNCILS COULD NOT YIELD FRESH POLITICAL ALTERNATIVES

AND WHY



Notwithstanding the anger and disillusionment of the public against National Conference and PDP over the events of 2019, new leadership could not emerge on the political landscape of Jammu and Kashmir. Initially, the newly constituted District Development Councils (DDCs) in 2020 were considered as launching pads for the new faces.

However, the powerful bureaucracy enjoying unbridled powers in absence of an elected government played saboteurs, scuttling every effort to groom new faces. It is equally true that many among the lot which emerged from the first ever DDC elections were either disgruntled elements of other political parties or those with doubtful credentials.

The District Development Council (DDC) elections in Jammu and Kashmir, held in December 2020 and January 2021, were a landmark event following the abrogation of Article 370 and the bifurcation of the state into Union Territories. These elections were the first major democratic exercise in the region post abrogation of Article 370. The DDC elections were conducted in eight phases, with over 50% voter turnout.

The establishment of DDCs was intended to decentralise governance and bring decision-making closer to the people. Each council, consisting of 14 members elected from each district, is responsible for planning and overseeing local development projects, providing a platform for grassroots political engagement.

However, bureaucratic hurdles coupled with social stigmatisation of political debuts, if any, didn't allow emergence of fresh perspective to the political landscape of Jammu and Kashmir.

WHY THINGS HAVE REMAINED THE SAME

There are reasons why Kashmir's political space has largely remained the same, despite waves of new political activity on the surface.

Kashmir's oldest political party, the National Conference, has retained its strength on account of its strong and committed organizational workforce, which has remained intact despite pulls and pressures.

Mehbooba Mufti's PDP was dealt a severe blow with almost all of her former ministers and legislators deserting her and joining newly formed political parties headed by Bukhari and Azad. Congress too was dealt a severe blow initially but only to the embarrassment of Azad, as most of them rejoined the Congress party within a month or so.

The perception that the disgruntled political horses change their loyalties for being opportunists having lust to stay in power by hook or by crook has been the abiding political reality. The political disgruntled political horses faced a humiliating drubbing in their respective assembly

The perception that the disgruntled political horses change their loyalties for being opportunists having lust to stay in power by hook or by crook has been the abiding political reality



segments during Lok Sabha elections. Sensing the mood of the electorate, the old political horses immediately after the decision by the ECI to hold elections in J&K in 3 phases starting from September 18, shifted their loyalties abandoning Altaf Bukhari and G N Azad.

With the formation of the Apni Party in 2020, Mehbooba

Mufti was left alone by the political opportunists. Now Azad and Bukhari have met with the same fate. Those who left Apni Party, Democratic Azad Party and Sajad Lone's Peoples Conference have re-joined their old political formations like PDP, Congress and in certain cases, the National Conference.

AZAD, BUKHARI AND SAJAD LONE COULD NOT EMERGE AS VIABLE POLITICAL ALTERNATIVES

▼

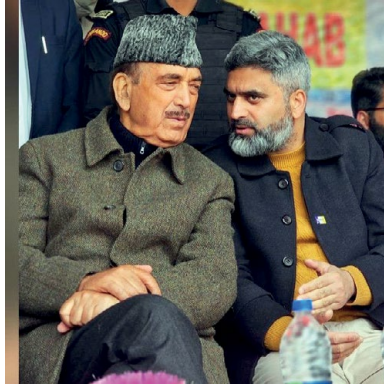
Azad, Bukhari and Sajad Lone have not emerged as the political forces that they were expected to be. The trio could not provide a viable political alternative to the National Conference, Congress and PDP – the traditional formations in Jammu and Kashmir. The pre-poll alliance between National Conference and Congress in Jammu and Kashmir stitched by Congress leader Rahul Gandhi and NC president Dr. Farooq Abdullah as such is the formidably dominating political force under the given scenario.

THE RISE OF ENGINEER RASHID

▼

The jailed political leader and recently elected Lok Sabha member from North Kashmir Engineer Rashid seems to be making an ambitious bid to provide a political alternative. Rashid outweighed the political stalwarts, former chief minister Omar Abdullah and People's Conference leader Sajad Lone. Both suffered a humiliating defeat at the hands of Rashid even though he has been in Tihar Jail since 2019 facing charges of terror funding.

The recently held Lok Sabha elections saw a record voter turnout of 58.46% in Jammu and Kashmir, the highest in the region in the past 35 years. This



unprecedented participation resulted in a historic victory for Engineer Rashid, an independent candidate from North Kashmir's Baramulla constituency, who managed to unseat the traditional stalwarts.

Simultaneously, the elections proved to be a significant setback for prominent regional leaders Mehbooba Mufti of the People's Democratic Party (PDP) and Omar Abdullah of the National Conference (NC). Mehbooba, contesting from South Kashmir's Anantnag constituency, faced a defeat, which many attribute to the region's disillusionment with her party's past alliance with the BJP.



YEARNING OF THE PEOPLE FOR ALTERNATE POLITICAL FORCES

▼

One could argue that the drubbing of Mehbooba Mufti and Omar Abdullah in Lok Sabha elections, in a way, reflects on the yearning of the people for viable political alternatives. However, the political chameleons failed to attract the electorate. As far as Engineer Rashid and his Awami Ittehad Party are concerned, the limited resources and continued incarceration of its leader are the major roadblocks for the party in providing an alternative to the traditional political parties. Still Er. Rashid's party could leave some lasting imprints on Kashmir politics in a few assembly segments of North Kashmir.

On the other hand, Mehbooba Mufti faces tough challenges as many youngsters enjoying a certain degree of clout in their respective pockets have deserted her in South Kashmir, making the contest even more difficult for her.

As of now, it seems a direct contest between BJP and NC-Congress alliance in Jammu and Kashmir. The fragmentation of sections of society in frontier districts of Poonch and Rajouri south of Pir Panjal could, to some extent, change the scenario. Let's wait and see how the events unfold, particularly under changing security scenarios, with the escalation in terrorist attacks in Jammu region.



Battle for Power in J&K

KASHMIR CENTRAL | 1 SEPTEMBER 2024

**POLL DYNAMICS AND REGIONAL
COMPLEXITIES**

by Yawar Yousuf



Jammu and Kashmir UT is gearing up for Assembly elections after a gap of nearly ten years. The Election Commission of India (ECI) took a call to this effect on August 16, announcing that the assembly elections would be held in three phases starting from September 18, and culminating with the final phase to be held on October 1. Results would be declared on October 4, 2024.

Significantly, it is after a long gap of 30 years that elections to the legislative assembly of Jammu and Kashmir will be held in just three phases. Jammu and Kashmir has witnessed long drawn and exhaustive election processes in the last 30 years, spanning over more than five phases.

Moreover, this would also be the first Assembly election after the scrapping of Article 370 in 2019 and bifurcation of the erstwhile state into two union territories of Jammu and Kashmir, and Ladakh. Some salient features of the Jammu and Kashmir Assembly elections 2024 are as follows:

- First elections to be held in absence of potential boycott call from the separatists
- First elections in the last three decades where Jamaat e Islami with fundamentally extreme credentials and pro-Pakistan leanings and linkages would participate in the elections.
- First elections to the UT assembly to be held after scrapping Article 370 of the Indian Constitution and its



In the backdrop of the first elections to the UT Assembly post abrogation of Article 370 in August 2019, it is crucial to delve into the intricacies, the limitations and the challenges presenting a complex and sensitive landscape

subsequent bifurcation into two union territories.

- First elections to be held in the shortest span of time in the last three decades.
- First elections to be held under the shadow of gun in Jammu region – owing to the escalation in deadly attacks on army by the hardcore highly equipped terrorists in the mountainous region of Jammu. Kashmir has been relatively calm during this period.
- First elections for an assembly which does not have its

erstwhile constitutional, residuary and legislative powers.

Kashmir Central tries to analyse the key stakeholders, the evolving political and security scenario, and the nuanced realities that would certainly influence the upcoming elections. In the backdrop of the first elections to the UT assembly post abrogation of Article 370 in August 2019, it is crucial to delve into the intricacies, the limitations and the challenges presenting a complex and sensitive landscape.



HARDENED POLITICAL NARRATIVES, POLARIZED POLITICAL DISCOURSE

The upcoming elections to Jammu and Kashmir Assembly will be held in the backdrop of abrogation of Article 370 in J&K and the revival of terrorism in Jammu region, which was declared terrorism-free 22 years ago, in 2002. The twin realities stand as a watershed moment, signalling a very complex situation which could certainly have an impact on the region's socio-political fabric. The hardened political narratives and polarized political discourse could add to the complexities, thereby

What remains the biggest challenge for the Indian state is the management of perceptions

unleashing a complex interplay of forces with conflicting emotions and intricately woven drawbacks.

The elections to the UT assembly, in a way, could have a cascading impact on the electoral landscape in the region. It is quite evident that the political forces – both regional and national – would resort to emotive

political narratives around the abrogation of Article 370 of the Constitution of India and the events that unfolded down the line since August 5, 2019.

FOCUS ON EMOTIVE ISSUES

▼
The regional political parties and the right-wing BJP have their individual, distinct

audiences in the two regions of Jammu and Kashmir – both very different from each other on various parameters. The political campaign is expected to be extremely polarized, pitching their respective constituencies against each other around emotive issues designed to enthuse and attract the electorate.

Both the regional forces of Kashmir enjoy significant support in sub-regions of Jammu, particularly in Poonch and Rajouri district along the Line of Control and Doda and Kishtwar districts in Chenab sub-region.

The BJP is focused on the Hindu majority districts of Kathua, Udhampur, Reasi, Samba and Jammu. All political parties are conscious of the importance of defining carefully, and segmenting in as real a way as possible, the political discourse to impress the respective audiences. The Kashmir-oriented political parties and the ruling BJP – both are hiding behind the noise around Article 370. As



the grievances and unfulfilled aspirations remain a potential challenge to the political parties across the divide, there seems to be classical unanimity in thought processes of the arch-rivals to navigate through the roughness taking refuge in emotive issues.

REPORT CARD POST 2019

Abrogation of Article 370 had remained on the top of the agenda of Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) for seven decades. The rightists had long argued that this constitutional provision prevented J&K from becoming

a fully integrated part of the Indian union, and that it fuelled separatism and stoked terrorism.

The argument put forth was that article 370 and 35A have given nothing but secessionism, terrorism, nepotism and widespread corruption to Jammu Kashmir. In 2019, the Modi government rendered article 370 and 35A infructuous, hence doing away with the special status of the erstwhile state of Jammu and Kashmir.

The decision to revoke the unique constitutional provision evoked polarized responses in the Jammu and Kashmir regions. People in the Jammu region celebrated the decision of the Modi government. Contrary to the jubilation in Jammu region, the monumental decision of abrogation of Article 370 was received with cynicism, suspicion and disbelief in Kashmir valley.

Historically, Jammu region has been a strong votary of complete integration of Jammu and Kashmir with the rest of the country. In Kashmir, the mainstream advocated for autonomous character



within the Union of India. The separatists fought for separation from India. Both political forces of Kashmir nurtured their respective constituencies. The voices for complete integration with the Indian state were marginalized and crushed.

THE CELEBRATIONS IN JAMMU AFTER ABROGATION, AND WHY

Jammu region, which has long supported the BJP's mission of revoking Article 370, erupted into celebrations following the abrogation of Article 370. More than ideological commitment and its political ramifications, the euphoria in Jammu was a vent against the dominance of Kashmir-centric political discourse of the last seven decades. The abrogation of Article 370 by the Modi government, therefore, meant a step towards correction of the power imbalance between the Jammu and Kashmir regions. The people in Jammu region – irrespective of race, religion and ethnicity – saw their empowerment in the disempowerment of the political elite of Kashmir, if not the fellow citizens in Kashmir.

CONUNDRUM OF TERRORISM AND ARTICLE 370

The abrogation of Article 370 finally resulted in altering the political standing of the state with the Indian Union, ending its unique constitutional



Leaving these separatist narratives behind, Kashmir has taken a visible turn towards development, economic empowerment and growth



arrangement within the union. Law-and-order situation has improved phenomenally, as the

New Aspirations Take Shape in J&K

Post Article 370

streets in Kashmir are calm for the first time in the last 35 years. There are no hartals, shutdowns, or stone-pelting demonstrations and hence no casualties.



The political forces in the state have completely different sets of audiences, the situation becomes even more complex when the interplay of forces having varied aspirations comes into expression. There is a clash of regional, religious and ethnic identities which has further aggravated in the last few years. Segmentation of society comes

TERROR THREAT IN LARGER JAMMU REGION

The number of terrorism related incidents have seen a surge in the last two years. The theatre of terrorism is expanding, with hardcore terrorists inflicting a heavy toll on security forces in the difficult terrains of Jammu region. The escalation in terror attacks poses a great challenge to the security forces. The situation is expected to worsen in the coming weeks and months.

A large number of hardcore war-veterans have infiltrated through the international border in Kathua and Samba districts. The infiltration bids from across a long Line of Control (LoC) in Poonch and Rajouri districts is a common practice now.

The alienation and insecurity among sections of youths in Kashmir post abrogation of Article 370 poses challenges to the security of the state. While recruitment in militant ranks has been low, hybrid terrorism has been an issue of concern for the security forces. The perceived disempowerment



could be one of the major contributory factors to the growing sense of insecurity among the vulnerable sections of youths in Jammu and Kashmir.

The abrogation of Article 370 was seen as a potential opportunity for integration and development. It has also unleashed a complex interplay of forces with multifaceted implications. The future course of action has ignited conflicting emotions and is intricately woven with both hope and potential drawbacks.

IMPORTANT TO FOCUS ON MANAGEMENT OF PERCEPTIONS

What remains the biggest challenge for the Indian state is the management of perceptions.

with major drawbacks. If the conflict of interest among the sections of society is perceived to be promoted, peace is disturbed.

As the people of the erstwhile state of Jammu and Kashmir prepare to articulate their sentiments in the upcoming assembly elections, the narratives are certainly going to be around the political theories that have framed India's Constitutional trajectory. Notwithstanding the legality and constitutionality of the post 2019 events, the lingering aspirations and unfulfilled promises will certainly influence the voter sentiments.

The fluid security scenario owing to the escalation in terrorism essentially in Jammu region further adds to the already complex situation. The truth is that the majority of the

people in both the regions were ready to accept the changing geo-political realities.

Initially there were positive signs for national integration, economic progress and democratic participation. For a couple of years post 2019 events, there was some seriousness in addressing the genuine concerns and real issues. A fair degree of progress was recorded on a host of indexes. But the anti-India forces were equally at work in sabotaging the nationalist narrative. These anti-India forces embedded fears and notions of further marginalisation, insecurity, deepening of undemocratic processes occupied the mind space in Kashmir valley.

SEPARATIST THREAT PERSISTS AMID SIMMERING DISCONTENT

While the abrogation of Article 370 has seemingly shelved separatism, the disaffection among sections of society



has not let separatism die down. Though subdued, the separatist threat persists amid simmering discontent. The upcoming elections are fraught with uncertainties. The iron-fisted approach has effectively contained armed militancy and achieved significant success in breaking the backbone of the terror ecosystem.

The government has got rid of the unscrupulous elements who were averse to the peace and peaceful environment in Kashmir. There must be more concerted efforts to take the peaceful majority on board.

KASHMIR'S POLITICAL CLIMATE IS UNDERGOING A METAMORPHOSIS

The most encouraging observation is that Kashmir's political climate is undergoing a metamorphosis. Kashmir was once dominated by calls for self-rule, autonomy and azadi. Leaving these separatist narratives behind, Kashmir has taken a visible turn towards development, economic empowerment and growth.

The political class is yet to navigate the transition. The shift in the narrative is being driven by civil society. The upcoming elections offer an opportunity to address grievances and chart a path towards stability and development. Even though there are lingering grievances and aspirations for self-governance, high voter turnout is expected for the revival of inclusive and participative democratic culture. With cautious optimism and honesty, these elections may usher in a new chapter in Jammu and Kashmir's complex evolution.





CASTE AND COMMUNITY DYNAMICS IN KASHMIR POLITICS



A CRITICAL EXAMINATION

by Mian Tufail

As the electoral process in Jammu and Kashmir gains momentum, it brings to light the complex and often contentious dynamics of caste and community in the region's political landscape. The party which was noted for consistently playing and capitalizing upon the caste and community factor in Kashmir is People's Democratic Party (PDP), led earlier by former chief minister Mufti Mohd Sayeed and now by his daughter Mehbooba Mufti.

This concentration of power among a small, well-connected community is reflective of a broader trend in Kashmir's political landscape. The dominance of the Mullah community is not limited to the PDP alone; it extends across other political parties which also exhibit a similar caste-based bias in their organizational structures and electoral strategies.



THE ROLE OF THE MULLAH COMMUNITY IN PDP

A critical analysis of the party's candidate selection and broader political strategy reveals a pattern that reflects the intricate and deeply rooted caste and community considerations that have long influenced Kashmir's politics.

The PDP, under Mehbooba Mufti's leadership, has been noted for its perceived favoritism towards members of

the Mullah community - a group that despite constituting only about 3.4% of the population, has come to exert significant influence over Kashmir's political and bureaucratic spheres. The Mullah community, traditionally comprising clans such as the Bukharis, Andrabis, Shahs, Qadris, and Naqashbandis, has seen a disproportionate representation in the PDP's ticket distribution. This is evident from the recent allocation of electoral mandates where a significant number of Mullah candidates have been favoured.

CASE STUDIES IN CANDIDATE SELECTION

The recent distribution of PDP tickets offers several illustrative examples of how caste and community considerations have shaped political decisions. In Zainpora Shopian, Ghulam Mohiuddin - a close associate of Mehbooba Mufti and a member of the Mullah community was selected as the party's candidate, sidelining Aijaz Mir, a seasoned politician with strong grassroots



The current state of Kashmir's politics, as exemplified by the PDP under Mehbooba Mufti, serves as a stark reminder of the enduring influence of caste and community considerations in shaping the region's political landscape

support. Similarly, in Pahalgam, Dr. Shabir Siddiqui, a political newcomer but a relative of Mehbooba Mufti and from the same caste, was preferred over more experienced candidates. In Devsar, Sartaj Madni, Mehbooba's maternal uncle, was chosen to contest, further underscoring the influence of familial and caste connections in the party's decision-making process.

These instances highlight a pattern where members of the Mullah community are often prioritized for electoral positions, particularly in constituencies where the PDP has the option to do so. In cases where no suitable Mullah candidate is available, individuals from other communities may be considered but this appears to be more of an exception than the norm.



THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF CASTE POLITICS IN KASHMIR

The prominence of the Mullah community in Kashmir's contemporary political scene is part of a longer historical trajectory. Prior to the mass exodus of Kashmiri Pandits in the 1990s, the Pandit

community held significant sway over the valley's power structures, dominating the political, bureaucratic and educational spheres. Their forced departure created a power vacuum that the Mullah community has since filled, leveraging their educational and social capital to establish themselves as key players in the region's political landscape.

While the Mullah community's rise to prominence can be attributed in part to their relative educational and social advantages, it also reflects the deeply entrenched caste consciousness that continues to shape political affiliations and power dynamics in Kashmir. Mehbooba Mufti's leadership of the PDP characterized by a pronounced emphasis on community-based politics represents a continuation of this trend.

THE IMPLICATIONS FOR KASHMIR'S POLITICAL FUTURE

The dominance of the Mullah community in Kashmir's political arena has far-reaching implications for the region's governance and social cohesion.



By concentrating power within a small, closely-knit group, the PDP and other parties risk alienating broader segments of the population, potentially exacerbating existing social tensions and undermining efforts to build a more inclusive political system.

At the same time, the persistence of caste and community-based politics in Kashmir raises important questions about the future of democratic governance in the region. As the electoral process unfolds, it remains to be seen whether political leaders will recognize the need to transcend narrow caste affiliations and embrace a more inclusive approach that reflects the diverse aspirations of all Kashmiris.

The current state of Kashmir's politics, as exemplified by the PDP under Mehbooba Mufti, serves as a stark reminder of the enduring influence of caste and community considerations in shaping the region's political landscape. While these dynamics have deep historical roots, their continued

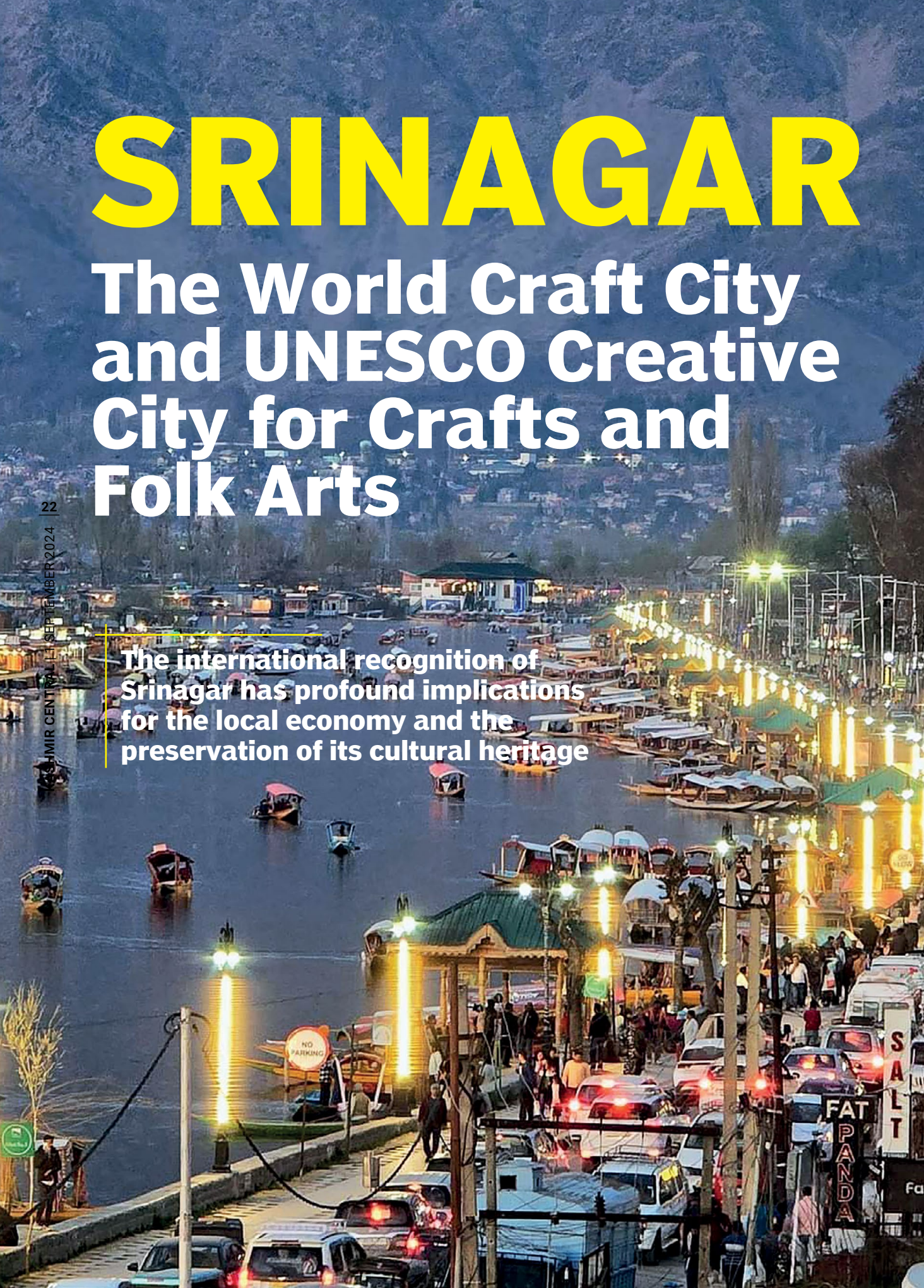
prevalence poses significant challenges to the development of a more equitable and representative political system in Kashmir. As the region moves forward, it is imperative that political leaders and parties alike strive to create a more inclusive and participatory democratic process that truly reflects the will of its entire people.



SRINAGAR

The World Craft City and UNESCO Creative City for Crafts and Folk Arts

The international recognition of Srinagar has profound implications for the local economy and the preservation of its cultural heritage



Srinagar is a city where art is intricately woven into the fabric of daily life. Its crafts reflect a deep connection with nature, history, and culture, passed down through generations. The city's artisans with their unparalleled skill and creativity produce a wide range of exquisite handicrafts that are admired worldwide. Some of the most iconic crafts of Srinagar include – Kashmir Pashmina, Kani Shawls, Papier Mâché, Walnut Wood Carving and Kashmiri Saffron.

THE JOURNEY TO GLOBAL RECOGNITION

Srinagar's journey to becoming a World Craft City and a UNESCO Creative City was not just recognition of its existing heritage but also a commitment to preserving and promoting its crafts on a global stage. The city's designation as a Creative City in 2021 was a significant milestone, as it placed Srinagar on a map of global cities that prioritize creativity as a strategic factor for sustainable urban development. This designation is not just an acknowledgment of the city's artistic legacy but also a platform for Srinagar to exchange ideas and collaborate with other creative cities around the world.

The recent declaration of Srinagar as a World Craft City further solidifies its position as a global center of craftsmanship. This recognition is part of a

larger effort by the World Craft City Programme to identify and promote cities that have made exceptional contributions to the field of crafts. For Srinagar, this is a testament to the dedication of its artisans and the enduring appeal of its traditional crafts.

implications for the local economy and the preservation of its cultural heritage. These accolades have attracted global attention to Srinagar's crafts leading to increased demand for its products and providing a significant boost



THE IMPACT OF GLOBAL RECOGNITION

The international recognition of Srinagar as a World Craft City and a UNESCO Creative City has profound

to the livelihoods of local artisans. Furthermore, this recognition has encouraged younger generations to take up traditional crafts ensuring that these skills are passed on and that the city's artistic heritage continues to thrive.

Moreover, the designation has opened up new opportunities for cultural exchange and collaboration with other creative cities. Srinagar is now part of a global network where it can share its experiences and learn from other cities that are equally committed to fostering creativity and preserving cultural heritage. As the city embraces its role on the global stage, it remains a beacon of creativity, tradition, and cultural resilience.



The Pride of Jammu and Kashmir

A Celebration of Our GI-Tagged Treasures

by Mian Tufail

Jammu and Kashmir, often referred to as the crown of India, is not only known for its stunning landscapes and rich cultural heritage but also for its unique and high-quality products that have earned the prestigious Geographical Indication (GI) tag. Beyond its stunning landscapes—ranging from snow-capped mountains to verdant valleys—Jammu and Kashmir is also known for producing some of the finest and most unique handicrafts and agricultural products in the world.

These products are not just commodities; they are an integral part of the region's identity, each deeply rooted in the traditions and skills passed

down through generations. The meticulous craftsmanship and dedication that go into creating these items reflect the soul of the people of Jammu and Kashmir, making them much more than mere objects of trade.

To protect and promote these unique products, several have been granted the prestigious Geographical Indication (GI) tag. The products which were granted GI tag so far includes, Kani Shawl, Kashmir Pashmina, Kashmir Sozani Craft, Kashmir Saffron, Kashmir Paper Machie, Kashmir Walnut Wood Carving, Khatamband, Basmati, Kashmiri Hand Knotted Carpet. This recognition not only helps in preserving the authenticity

and heritage of these items but also safeguards them against imitations and unfair competition. A GI tag is a sign that these products possess qualities or a reputation that are due to their origin in this particular region. It ensures that when someone buys a product labeled as Kashmiri Saffron or Pashmina, they are getting the real deal—an item that embodies the essence of Jammu and Kashmir.



For the artisans of Kashmir, Pashmina is a testament to their identity, culture, and the enduring legacy of their craft



Kashmir *Pashmina* The Jewel of Craftsmanship and Tradition

Among the many treasures this land offers, Kashmir Pashmina stands as a symbol of luxury, warmth, and timeless elegance. In 2008, this exquisite fabric earned the prestigious Geographical Indication (GI) tag, recognizing its unique qualities and the rich heritage behind its creation. But what makes Kashmir Pashmina

so special, and why did it deserve this esteemed recognition?

THE HERITAGE OF KASHMIR PASHMINA

The art of Pashmina weaving in Kashmir dates back to the 15th century when it was introduced by Sultan Zain-ul-Abidin, a revered ruler of the region. Pashmina, often referred to as



“soft gold” is derived from the Persian word “Pashm” meaning “soft.” It is crafted from the fine undercoat of the Chang Tangi goat, a breed native to the high-altitude regions of Ladakh. These goats, living at altitudes of over 14,000 feet, produce a fine, soft wool that is hand-spun and woven into luxurious shawls and fabrics.

The process of creating Pashmina is labor-intensive and requires exceptional skill. From combing the raw wool to hand-spinning the yarn and meticulously weaving the fabric, each step is carried out by master artisans who have inherited their skills through generations. The result is a fabric that is not only soft and warm but also incredibly lightweight and breathable.



THE QUALITIES OF KASHMIR PASHMINA

What sets Kashmir Pashmina apart from other wool products are its unparalleled softness, warmth, and delicacy. The fibers used in Pashmina are finer than human hair, measuring between 12 to 16 microns in diameter. This gives the fabric its signature softness and a feel



The GI tag has played a significant role in elevating the status of Kashmir Pashmina on the global stage

that is unmatched by any other woolen material. The lightweight nature of Pashmina makes it a versatile fabric, perfect for both chilly winters and cool summer evenings.

In addition to its physical qualities, Kashmir Pashmina is a work of art. The intricate designs, often featuring traditional motifs and patterns, are hand woven with precision and care. Many Pashmina shawls are further embellished with hand embroidery, known as “sozni” which adds to their beauty and value. Each piece is unique, reflecting the artisan’s creativity and skill.

THE GI TAG: A MARK OF AUTHENTICITY AND PROTECTION

In an era of mass production and imitation, the GI tag serves

as a seal of authenticity for Kashmir Pashmina. It ensures that the product is genuinely handcrafted in the Kashmir Valley using traditional methods and materials. The GI tag also protects the interests of the local artisans, safeguarding their livelihood and the integrity of their craft.

The recognition of Kashmir Pashmina with a GI tag was not just about preserving a product but also about preserving a cultural heritage. It acknowledges the centuries-old tradition of Pashmina weaving and the dedication of the artisans who continue to uphold this legacy. The GI tag has also helped combat the issue of counterfeit products that flooded the market, which often misled consumers and undermined the value of genuine Pashmina.

Today, Kashmir Pashmina is celebrated globally as a symbol of luxury and elegance. It has found its place in the wardrobes of royalty, celebrities, and fashion connoisseurs worldwide. Despite the advent of modern textiles, the allure of Pashmina remains undiminished with its timeless appeal transcending generations and trends.

The GI tag has played a significant role in elevating the status of Kashmir Pashmina on the global stage ensuring that it continues to be recognized as a product of unparalleled quality and heritage. For the artisans of Kashmir, it is not just a piece of fabric; it is a testament to their identity, culture, and the enduring legacy of their craft.

Kashmir

Walnut

Wood

Carving

A Timeless

CRAFT

In the heart of Jammu and Kashmir, the art of walnut wood carving has been a symbol of cultural heritage and exquisite craftsmanship for centuries. This traditional craft known for its intricate patterns and delicate designs recently received the coveted Geographical Indication tag. This recognition not only highlights the unique qualities of Kashmir's walnut wood carving but also protects the artisans' rights and the authenticity of the craft.

WHY KASHMIR WALNUT WOOD CARVING RECEIVED THE GI TAG

The GI tag is a prestigious certification that links a

product to its geographical origin, emphasizing its distinct characteristics that are attributable to that location. Kashmir Walnut Wood Carving earned this recognition due to several factors:

Exclusive Use of Walnut Wood: Unlike other regions where different types of wood are used, Kashmir's artisans exclusively work with walnut wood, known locally as 'Doon Kul'. The wood, sourced from the Himalayan region, is prized for its rich

The fine grain of walnut wood allows for detailed and delicate carvings often depicting motifs inspired by nature, such as chinar leaves, vines, and flowers





texture, durability, and unique grain patterns, making it ideal for intricate carving.

Skilled Artisans: The craft has been passed down through generations, with artisans mastering the delicate art of carving floral, paisley, and intricate lattice designs by hand. This skill is unique to the region, and the techniques used are a blend of Persian, Mughal, and indigenous Kashmiri influences.

Distinctive Designs and Techniques: The GI tag recognizes the specific carving techniques, such as 'undercut', 'openwork', and 'deep carving', which are characteristic of Kashmir's walnut wood artistry. These techniques create a sense of depth and texture, adding to the allure of the final product.

Cultural Significance: Walnut wood carving is deeply embedded in the cultural fabric of Kashmir often seen in the interiors of traditional homes, shrines, and palaces. The craft represents the artistic expression of the Kashmiri people and their connection to their land.

WHAT MAKES KASHMIR WALNUT WOOD CARVING SPECIAL?

The allure of Kashmir Walnut Wood Carving lies in its unparalleled craftsmanship and the quality of the wood itself. The fine grain of walnut wood allows for detailed and delicate carvings often depicting motifs inspired by nature, such as chinar leaves, vines, and flowers. Each piece is a work of art, requiring weeks or even months of meticulous work.

The deep brown hue of the wood, which darkens and becomes richer over time,

adds to its appeal. The carvings are not only beautiful but also functional often used in furniture, decorative panels, and jewelry boxes. The durability and timeless elegance of walnut wood products make them highly valued by collectors and connoisseurs alike.

CHALLENGES

Despite its rich heritage, the art of walnut wood carving faces challenges in the modern era. The industry has been impacted by the availability of cheaper, machine-made alternatives and a decline in the number of skilled artisans. However, the GI tag has provided a renewed impetus to preserve and promote this craft.

The government is working to support the artisans by providing them with platforms to showcase their work, both within India and internationally. Recently, initiatives have been launched to ensure the sustainable sourcing of walnut wood, protecting the environment while preserving the craft for future generations.



Kashmiri Saffron

The Golden Spice with a GI Tag



Saffron cultivation is a centuries-old tradition that has become synonymous with the region's rich cultural heritage. Revered as one of the most precious and expensive spices in the world, Kashmiri saffron known locally as "Kong" is not just a culinary delight but a symbol of the valley's unique agricultural identity.

In recognition of its exceptional quality and deep-rooted significance, Kashmiri saffron was awarded the Geographical Indication (GI)



tag in 2020. This accolade has not only boosted its global recognition but also safeguarded the legacy of saffron cultivation in Kashmir.

THE UNMATCHED QUALITIES OF KASHMIRI SAFFRON

Kashmiri saffron is distinguished by its unparalleled quality, which is a result of the unique climatic conditions and traditional farming methods



practiced in the region. The saffron crocus, *Crocus sativus*, thrives in the temperate climate of Kashmir, with its cool nights and warm days combined with the well-drained loamy soil of the valley. These natural conditions contribute to the production of saffron with a distinctive deep red hue, rich aroma, and potent flavor setting it apart from saffron grown in other parts of the world.

The saffron strands known as “stigmas” are meticulously hand-harvested from each flower, a labor-intensive process that involves great care and precision. The harvesting season which occurs in late autumn sees the fields of Pampore often

referred to as the “Saffron Town” come alive with vibrant purple flowers. Each flower yields just three stigmas, making the harvest a delicate and time-consuming task. The resulting saffron is known for its high levels of crocin, safranal, and picrocrocin - compounds responsible for its intense color, distinct aroma, and unique taste.

WHY KASHMIRI SAFFRON RECEIVED THE GI TAG

Kashmiri saffron’s GI tag ensures that only saffron cultivated in the designated regions of Kashmir particularly in areas like Pampore, Pulwama, Budgam, and Kishtwar, can be labeled and sold as Kashmiri Saffron.

This certification has helped preserve the traditional practices of saffron farming in Kashmir, which have been passed down through generations and has provided local farmers with a tool to protect their livelihoods against unfair competition.

The GI tag also serves as a guarantee of quality for consumers who can be assured that they are purchasing genuine Kashmiri saffron with its characteristic deep red color, strong aroma, and superior flavor. This has not only enhanced the global market value of Kashmiri saffron but also reinforced its status as a luxury spice with a rich cultural heritage.

THE CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE AND GLOBAL APPEAL

Kashmiri saffron has been a part of the valley’s history for over two millennia, playing a significant role in its cuisine, medicine, and traditions. It is an integral ingredient in dishes like Kashmiri Pulao, Rogan Josh and Kahwa adding a unique flavor and color that is unmatched by any other spice. Beyond its culinary uses, saffron is also valued for its medicinal properties and is used in traditional remedies for ailments ranging from digestive issues to depression.

The global appeal of Kashmiri saffron lies not only in its culinary versatility but also in its luxurious status. As one of the most expensive spices in the world, it is often referred to as “red gold”. The GI tag has further enhanced its prestige, making it a sought-after commodity in international markets.

The GI tag for Kashmiri saffron is a testament to the exceptional quality, rich heritage, and cultural significance of this golden spice. By safeguarding its authenticity and promoting its unique attributes, the GI tag ensures that Kashmiri saffron continues to shine as a symbol of the valley’s agricultural legacy. For the farmers of Kashmir, it represents a beacon of hope, preserving their time-honored traditions while securing a prosperous future for the region’s saffron industry.

Kashmir Papier Mâché

A TIMELESS ARTFORM WITH A GI TAG

The artisans' mastery of brushwork is evident in the fine lines and intricate patterns that adorn each item



An intricate art form renowned for its delicate beauty and craftsmanship was recently bestowed with the prestigious Geographical Indication tag. This recognition not only honors the artisans who have kept this tradition alive but also highlights the unique qualities that make Kashmir Papier Mâché a global treasure.

THE ART OF PAPIER MÂCHÉ: A LEGACY OF CRAFTSMANSHIP

Papier Mâché literally meaning “chewed paper” is an ancient technique that involves the creation of beautiful objects from paper pulp. The art was introduced to Kashmir in the 14th century by a Persian mystic, Mir Sayyid

Ali Hamadani, who brought with him a myriad of crafts including Papier Mâché. Over the years, this craft has become synonymous with Kashmiri artistry evolving into a symbol of the region's cultural identity.

Kashmir Papier Mâché is distinguished by its intricate designs and vibrant colors which are meticulously hand-painted on a variety of items ranging from decorative boxes

and trays to vases and Christmas ornaments. The process begins with the creation of the base form typically made from waste paper which is soaked, pulped, and then molded into the desired shape. Once dried the surface is coated with layers of smooth, polished paper and then painted with elaborate floral or geometric patterns. The final product is often lacquered giving it a glossy finish that enhances its aesthetic appeal.

WHY THE GI TAG

The Geographical Indication tag is a certification that links a product to its place of origin acknowledging its unique qualities and the traditional knowledge associated with its production. Kashmir Papier Mâché received the GI tag due to its historical significance, the skill involved in its creation, and its deep-rooted connection to



the craft but also ensure that each piece is unique.

The artisans' mastery of brushwork is evident in the fine lines and

the Kashmir Valley.

The GI tag ensures that only products made in Kashmir using traditional methods can be labeled as "Kashmir Papier Mâché". This not only protects the craft from imitation but also promotes the livelihoods of the artisans who have inherited this skill from their ancestors. The tag serves as a testament to the authenticity and quality of Kashmir Papier Mâché preserving its legacy for future generations.

THE UNIQUE QUALITIES OF KASHMIR PAPIER MÂCHÉ

What sets Kashmir Papier Mâché apart from other forms of this craft is its emphasis on detailed hand-painting and the use of natural colors. The motifs often reflect the natural beauty of Kashmir, with designs inspired by the region's flora and fauna, including Chinar leaves, lotus flowers, and birds. The colors used are typically organic, derived from minerals, plants, and other natural sources which not only contribute to the environmental sustainability of

intricate patterns that adorn each item. The process of painting is painstaking requiring immense patience and precision as the designs are built up layer by layer. This dedication to detail is what makes each piece of Kashmir Papier Mâché a work of art carrying the essence of the region's cultural heritage.

PRESERVING A CULTURAL HERITAGE

In an age where mass production and synthetic materials dominate the market, the GI tag for Kashmir Papier Mâché is a crucial step in preserving this traditional craft. It not only protects the authenticity of the product but also empowers the artisans by recognizing their skills and providing them with a platform to showcase their work on a global stage.

As we celebrate the recognition of Kashmir Papier Mâché with the GI tag, we are reminded of the importance of preserving our cultural heritage not just for its beauty but for the stories it tells and the legacy it leaves behind.



The Timeless Elegance of Kashmir's Kani Shawl

The Kani Shawl, a masterpiece of intricate weaving and design is not just a garment; it is a work of art that tells a story of tradition, craftsmanship, and the enduring spirit of Kashmir. This exquisite shawl has earned the prestigious Geographical Indication tag, a recognition that highlights its unique characteristics and the cultural significance it holds.

A LEGACY WOVEN THROUGH GENERATIONS

The origins of the Kani Shawl can be traced back to the

Mughal era, when it was a symbol of luxury and status. The word "Kani" refers to the small wooden sticks used by weavers to create the intricate patterns that adorn the shawl. Each Kani Shawl is a labor of love, taking months, and sometimes even years to complete. The weaving process involves an extraordinary level of skill and patience passed down through generations of Kashmiri artisans.

What sets the Kani Shawl apart from other woven textiles is its distinctive weaving technique. Unlike traditional looms where the design is created with a shuttle, the Kani Shawl is woven using the



“Twill-Tapestry” method. This technique allows the weaver to craft complex, multicolored patterns without the need for embroidery. The designs are often inspired by the natural beauty of Kashmir, featuring motifs like flowers, leaves, and vines, all brought to life through vibrant hues and delicate detailing.

THE ART OF KANI WEAVING

The creation of a Kani Shawl begins with the selection of



the finest Pashmina wool, sourced from the undercoat of Himalayan goats. This wool is renowned for its softness, warmth, and lightweight feel, making it the perfect material for a shawl that is both luxurious and practical. Once the wool is prepared, the weaver begins the painstaking process of crafting the design.

The Kani Shawl is woven using a pattern chart, known

Unlike traditional looms where the design is created with a shuttle, the Kani Shawl is woven using the “Twill-Tapestry” method

as “Talim,” which guides the weaver in creating the intricate motifs. Each Kani, is wound with a different colored thread, and the weaver meticulously interlaces these threads to form the design. The result is a shawl that appears as if it has been painted rather than woven, with each pattern seamlessly flowing into the next.

One of the most remarkable features of the Kani Shawl is

its reversible nature. The shawl looks just as beautiful on the reverse side, a testament to the skill and precision of the weaver. This quality, along with the complexity of the design and the time-intensive nature of the weaving process, makes the Kani Shawl a rare and valuable piece.

THE GI TAG: A MARK OF AUTHENTICITY AND PRIDE

The Geographical Indication tag awarded to the Kani Shawl is not just recognition of its unique characteristics but also a means of preserving the traditional craft. The GI tag ensures that only shawls woven in the specific geographical region of Kashmir, using the traditional Kani weaving techniques, can be labeled as Kani Shawls. This helps protect the artisans from imitation products and safeguards the cultural heritage of Kashmir.

The Kani Shawl’s GI tag also highlights its significance as a cultural symbol. Each shawl is a reflection of the weaver’s creativity and the rich history of Kashmir. By wearing a Kani Shawl, one is not just donning a piece of clothing but also embracing the legacy of a timeless craft that has been cherished for centuries. Whether draped over the shoulders of royalty or cherished as a family heirloom, the Kani Shawl continues to captivate hearts with its timeless elegance and intricate artistry.

Basmati

A CULINARY HERITAGE WORTH PROTECTING

The GI tag for Basmati ensures that only rice grown in the specific areas of Jammu and Kashmir can be labeled and sold as “Jammu Basmati”, preserving its reputation on the global stage



Revered for its distinct aroma, elongated grains, and exceptional taste, Basmati from this region is a culinary jewel that has rightfully earned a Geographical Indication tag. But what makes this variety of Basmati so special, and why has it become a symbol of pride and heritage for Jammu and Kashmir? Let's delve into the story of this extraordinary grain.

THE ESSENCE OF BASMATI: WHAT SETS IT APART

Basmati, often called the "Prince of Rice" is distinguished by its unique attributes which are a result of the region's specific climatic conditions, traditional farming practices, and the fertile soils of the Jammu plains. What truly sets Basmati apart from other varieties is its long, slender grains that expand upon cooking, releasing a captivating fragrance. This aroma often compared to the scent of Pandan leaves or popcorn, is due to the presence of a compound called 2-acetyl-1-pyrroline, found in high concentrations in Basmati rice.

The cool climate of Jammu and Kashmir, coupled with the mineral-rich soil fed by the rivers of the Himalayas, imparts a distinct flavor profile to the Basmati grown here. This rice is not just a staple; it is an integral part of the region's cultural identity, often gracing the tables during festive occasions and special ceremonies.

THE JOURNEY TO THE GI TAG: PROTECTING A HERITAGE

The Geographical Indication (GI) tag is a mark of authenticity and quality, indicating that a product possesses unique characteristics attributable to its geographical origin. For Jammu and Kashmir's Basmati, receiving the GI tag was a significant milestone. It wasn't merely recognition of the rice's exceptional qualities but also a means to protect it from imitation and to ensure that farmers in the region reap the benefits of their traditional practices.

The GI tag for Basmati was granted to protect its unique identity, preventing unauthorized use of the name by producers outside the designated region. This ensures that only rice grown in the specific areas of Jammu and Kashmir can be labeled and sold as "Jammu Basmati" preserving its reputation on the global stage.

In recent years, Basmati rice from Jammu and Kashmir has been at the center of international trade discussions, especially concerning its export to the European Union (EU). The EU has stringent regulations regarding the import of food products, and the GI tag plays a crucial role in ensuring that Jammu and Kashmir's Basmati meets these standards. The tag not only protects the rice's identity but also opens up markets that demand authenticity and quality.

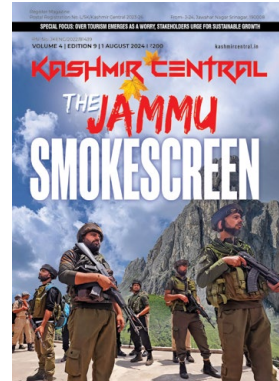
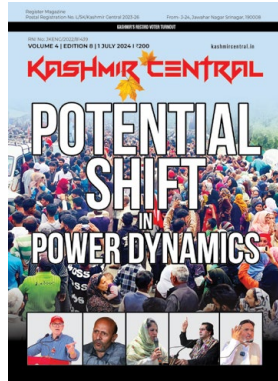
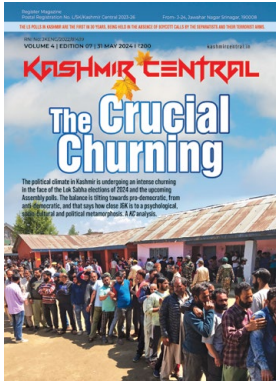
However, the region's farmers face challenges, including the need for better infrastructure, access to modern farming techniques, and protection from climate change's impacts. The recent floods in Jammu and Kashmir, for instance, have highlighted the vulnerability of agriculture in the region, making it essential for the government and stakeholders to invest in sustainable farming practices that can withstand such adversities.



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