

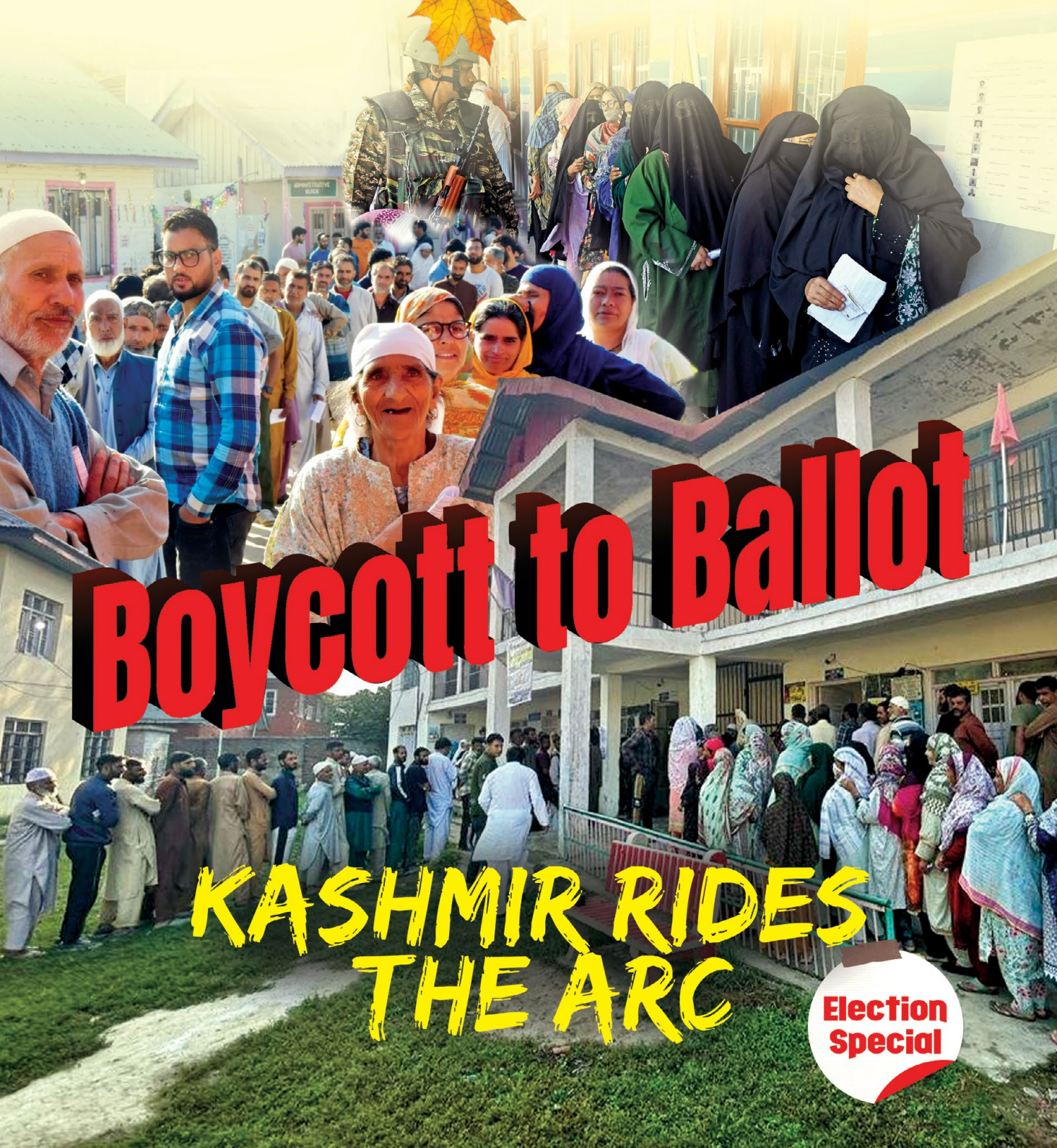
KASHMIR'S TRADITIONAL POLITICAL PARTIES ARE FACING AN EXISTENTIAL THREAT, AND WHY

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KASHMIR CENTRAL



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VOLUME 4 | EDITION 11
1 OCTOBER 2024

Editor-in-Chief

Bashir Ahmad Bhat
(Bashir Assad)

Editor

Gayatri Mohan

Sub Editor

Mian Tufail

Legal Advisor

Adv Mudasir Ahmad Sheikh

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Email:

Kashmircentral997@gmail.com

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ELECTION TIME IN KASHMIR

The valley is witnessing an election fervour, possibly the first of its kind in more than three decades, PDP, one of the major players here is however, counting its days. While the party has lost most of its top leadership post scrapping of the article 370, party president Mehbooba Mufti is not contesting and as it seems on ground it is up for a contest in seats numbering in single digits.

Engineer Rashid and his AIP has emerged as one of the major players in this election. He has the capability of denting the vote count of PDP and NC but the effect on PDP's vote share could be more significant. The MP has attracted some of the major faces of the PDP and made the contest at least a three-way in most of the seats and in South Kashmir this is more at the cost of the PDP than NC. NC's foothold is much wider while PDP is more a South Kashmir party.

The entry of Jamaat has further complicated the equation for the PDP. Jamaat played a significant role in PDP's coming to power on both the occasions. Now when the Jamaat has fielded its own candidates the first player to lose the vote share has to be PDP.

Besides the PDP's reign is more recent and still fresh in the mind of voters than NC's and the President by fielding her daughter from the Bijbehara constituency has only strengthened the dynast label for herself and her daughter.

While it is a matter of speculation whether Engineer Rashid and Jamaat are just a local force or the pawns in a game played by the Delhi, what is clear is that the PDP has too many holes to plug to prevent its boat from sinking.

After the death of its founder Mufti Mohd Syed the Party has run out of the glue to hold its leader and cadre in place. Perhaps the party founded in the midst of peak militancy is breathing its last with it.

Bashir Assad

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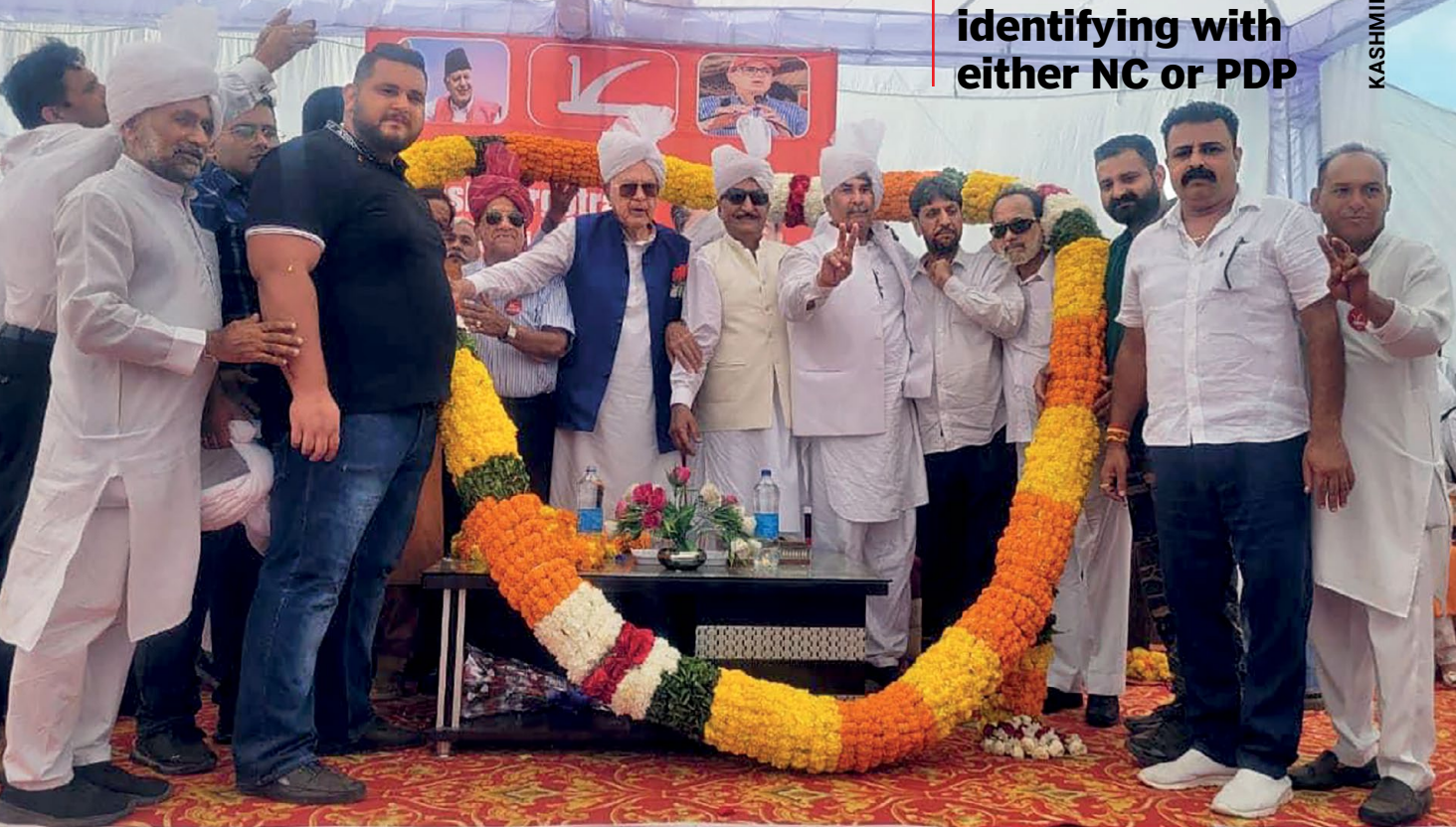
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KASHMIR'S TRADITIONAL POLITICAL PARTIES ARE FACING AN EXISTENTIAL THREAT AND WHY

by Bashir Assad

The number of fence sitters in Kashmir seems larger than the number of voters identifying with either NC or PDP



▼
The 2024 elections to the Jammu and Kashmir Assembly have been the most stimulating elections in the electoral history of the erstwhile state, now Union Territory.

As the first phase has peacefully commenced for 24 seats, unprecedented and unparalleled events are shaping which could certainly have a lasting impact on the electoral future of this sensitive and volatile region. This is the first election in the history of Jammu and Kashmir where the popularity of the parties and the clout of the leadership is at its nadir.

BACKLASH BY VOTERS

▼
 We are witnessing purely a candidate-based election where the leadership or the party have the least influence over the electorate. There is deep cynicism among the people after watching the shenanigans of Kashmir's traditionally powerful parties and their leadership. The constant accusations of corruption, malpractices and nepotism and the propensity to ignore the voters has potentially contributed to a backlash by the electorate. The result is the disenchantment among the voters across regions and religions.

The mounting disillusionment with the political parties and their leadership has finally forced the voters to think





locally. The ongoing election in Jammu and Kashmir is primarily about the candidate, and his or her individual ability to connect with the voters.

The traditional leadership, whether Dr. Farooq Abdullah and his son Omar Abdullah of National Conference or Mehbooba Mufti of Peoples Democratic party are creating a lot of noise in their media statements, but they are missing in action. The traditional elitist leadership seems to be confined to their own garrisons.

There is deep cynicism among the people after watching the shenanigans of Kashmir's traditionally powerful parties and their leadership

Rather late, Mehbooba realised the potential wave against her daughter Iltija Mufti, who is making her electoral debut from the family's home constituency Bijbehara in South Kashmir. Consequently, Mehbooba toured the length and breadth of the family's erstwhile stronghold on September 14 literally with a begging bowl.

LACKLUSTRE HOLD OF POLITICAL ELITES

As both NC and PDP are being widely condemned as not only being unrepresentative but also hijacked by elites and subverting the power of the people, voters appear to be turning away from traditional political parties. The personal clout of the elitist leadership has vanished to unimaginable levels.

Earlier, a nominee of one or the other party would rely on the leadership to fetch votes. Ironically, now the roles have reversed. The leadership is now dependable on the individual ability of the candidate. Late Sheikh Muhammad Abdullah

had famously said, "You have to vote even if my nominee is an electric pole".

Not to be outdone, late Mufti Muhammad Sayed had said, "People in South Kashmir vote for me, not for the candidate. It does not matter who is the candidate - a bull or a buffalo". This was the level of their confidence. Now times have changed, and the reality is different. Much depends on how able the candidate is, as there are absolutely no takers for the elitist leaders.

POLITICAL DYNASTS ARE AWARE OF THE EXISTENTIAL THREAT

We are witnessing a new phenomenon in Kashmir where the era of people pursuing the political bigwigs is almost over. A trend of the political elites going directly to the people has begun. Though this kind of churning is somehow messy, the fact remains that political parties in Kashmir are facing the greatest challenge – the threat to their existence.

Indeed, a steadily increasing share of voters tends to identify as unaffiliated with either party. The number of fence sitters in Kashmir seems larger than the number of voters identifying with either NC or PDP. The situation on ground viz-a-viz the overwhelming response of the people towards the individuals seen as the fringe in the recent past is an expression of disenchantment and disillusion against the traditional parties and politics.

THE RASHID PHENOMENON

Riding On Emotional Vulnerability Of Kashmiri Youth

The more BJP stays firm on political polarization, the more are the chances for the voters to stay attached to the traditional Kashmir-oriented political parties



We are aware that individuals like Member Parliament from North Kashmir, Engineer Rashid, are riding on the emotional vulnerability of the youth in Kashmir. The undercurrent of the political anger against the erstwhile ruling elite has shaken the Abdullaha, the Muftis and others of their ilk.

One thing is clear. Kashmir is not going back to the traditional politics of yore. It is immaterial whether Engineer Rashid is able to consolidate the emotional outburst of the youth or not. Kashmir politics is under transition from traditional politics to a more open and direct democratic system.

However, what seems to be dangerous is the policy to allow the propagation of an illegitimate narrative for

Omar Abdullah is worried about winning at least one of the two constituencies from which he is contesting



electoral gains. This may come haunting to the policy planners in due course of time (KC is dealing with this subject separately in the same issue).

Soon after Er. Rashid's "Kashmir issue" rhetoric, Mehbooba Mufti too started a fresh rant against the Indian state. So now we again have the competitive anti-India narrative blaring from the loudspeakers in Kashmir. It is expected the voices of discord would get louder day by day.

POLARIZED CAMPAIGN IN JAMMU IS HELPING KASHMIR'S POLITICAL DYNASTS

The extremely polarized campaigning by BJP in Jammu region is the only thing which

keeps Kashmir's political elites relevant. The polarization inspires the psyche to greater levels to hold on to the traditional parties.

The more BJP stays firm on political polarization, the more are the chances for the voters to stay attached to the traditional Kashmir-oriented political parties. In such a scenario, every fresh entry into Kashmir politics is being looked upon with suspicion as being planted and projected by the BJP.

A narrative is being built that erosion of traditional elitist political parties is a loss for democracy in general. The argument is that traditional political parties are the core institution of democratic accountability because they offer competing visions for public good. Voters, it is argued, have





sitting Member Parliament from Central Kashmir, Aga Syed Ruhullah Mehdi, who is emerging as the star campaigner for National Conference throughout the region because of his hardline position against the events of August 5, 2019.

Ruhullah, a young Shia leader, is known for his hard anti-BJP stance. He is the only person in the National Conference who enjoys considerable goodwill and influence among the masses after his interventions in the Lok Sabha. Here too, there's a twist. MP Ruhullah Mehdi is not the leader of the National Conference. Leadership rests with the Abdullahs.

no idea how complex the state and its institutions are. It is being reinforced that the voters cannot see or foresee the “hydra-headed” state and its intricacies. It is being painstakingly projected that only the traditional political leaders and parties have the expertise to deal with the state.

Simultaneously, we are witnessing that the growing discontent against the political elites shapes an explicit opinion about the traditional political elites being “illegitimate” and exploitative. Dr. Farooq Abdullah is no more as actively campaigning as he had been, essentially because his graph of attracting the crowds has dramatically declined.

Omar Abdullah, on the other hand, is worried about winning at least one of the two constituencies he is contesting from Central

Kashmir's Ganderbal and Budgam segments. It is only



THE PREVAILING DILEMMA NOBODY HAS THE ANSWERS

As of now the political scenario in Kashmir seems to be chaotic. Nobody either from the traditional elitist political class or from the emerging fiery individuals have the answers to the prevailing dilemma.

Er. Rashid's growing popularity could be short-lived. Rashid, who spent five years in jail, has no idea about the current dynamics of Kashmir politics. It was clear to a seasoned analyst that on his release from jail on September 11, Rashid started from where he had left five years back, having no idea of what has changed in the last five years.

However, he seems to have dedicated the whole election campaign to the thousands of Kashmiris detained after the abrogation of Article 370 under UAPA, and who are languishing in jails for years "without trials". This is genuinely an issue close to the heart of everyone in Kashmir. Rashid is doing everything to consolidate his support base by making this issue the central theme of his election campaign. Beyond that, Rashid could not flag the genuine and legitimate concerns. Rashid in other words is a replica of late hawkish separatist leader Sayed Ali Geelani - no answers, only questions.

The kind of political mobilization witnessed currently is an indication that people in Kashmir are experimenting with alternatives to elitist party-driven democracy. It may have limited impact on the outcome of the result, but the public opinion is certainly turning. What seems to be a fringe as of now could be the mainstream in the coming years.

Building Leadership Credentials

It takes years of grassroots activism and contesting elections to build leadership credentials. In electoral democracies, those who desire political power contest election after election, just to increase their support-base among their voters. It takes decades for them to get their own vote share to a certain threshold where they can deliver a multiplier effect to any formation they decide to join. The political freebees, known for shifting their loyalties and flow with the tide, are seldom able to gather mass around them. The freshness and clean-slate images are very prudent for any viable political alternative.

WILD CARD ENTRY

Jamaat e Islami Factors Into J&K Elections

Many believe that
Jamaat fighting
elections is a win-
win situation for
both New Delhi
and Jamaat



For decades, Jamaat-e-Islami (JEI), an Islamist socio-political-religious organisation, rejected India's rule in Kashmir. JEI boycotted and spearheaded the boycott campaign for three decades, asking voters to boycott elections, arguing that participation would give New Delhi legitimacy over Kashmir.

JEI spawned armed movements that continue to fight for Kashmir's separation from India. The Jamaat became the fountainhead of the armed rebellion after the most controversial Assembly elections of 1987. Jamaat declared the militant outfit Hizbul Mujahideen the party's armed wing in 1990. (The Jamaat distanced itself from the hardliners in November 1998.)

Jamaat e Islami delegation comprising four of its senior leaders entered into secret talks with the Government of India after it faced stringent crackdown by the administration and was banned for five years. Now, at least 10 Jamaat-backed candidates are contesting the elections, leading to confusion, hope, anger and speculation bordering on conspiracy theories. Out of 10 seats it contests, Jamaat is giving a close fight only in Kulgam assembly segment of South Kashmir.

Kulgam had been a traditional hot bastion of Jamaat. However, in the 1996 elections the Communist leader Yousuf Tarigami won the seat with the support of the National Conference. Since 1996, Tarigami has represented



Kulgam in the Legislative assembly for four consecutive terms. This time Jamaat is giving sleepless nights to Tarigami.

The popular perception is that Jamaat is a proxy of BJP and will go with BJP for government formation. Though there is also an opinion that Jamaat is confused and is fighting a paradox.

Historically Jamaat has always acted as a semi-government organization and has helped the successive regimes both in Srinagar and New Delhi to dilute the mandate of the political opponents. Therefore, it seems a conscious

decision of Jamaat to participate in elections.

Many believe that Jamaat fighting elections is a win-win situation for both New Delhi and Jamaat. It is believed that New Delhi shall expose Jamaat and de-legitimise the separatist narrative, while Jamaat shall secure lifting of the ban and revive its organizational structures.

The ongoing elections as such are unique and historic and have the potential to alter the dynamics of political power in Jammu and Kashmir. It is the beginning of the end of elitist politics beyond doubt.



UNDERSTANDING

**THE FLAWS IN
KASHMIR
POLICY**

**AN ANALYTICAL
PERSPECTIVE**

14
KASHMIR CENTRAL | 1 OCTOBER 2024

by Mian Tufail



such as during the 1977 elections when Mirwaiz Farooq was used against NC left a lingering resentment. This event did not merely weaken NC but fueled sentiments against the Indian state. The policy of propping up opposition against the NC, while electorally successful in the short term, has often contributed to an anti-India discourse in the valley. These decisions resonate beyond individual elections and shape the broader psyche, particularly among the youth in Kashmir.

The bail granted to Engineer Rashid has sparked speculation about its possible impact on the National Conference's electoral fortunes

The Union government's approach to Kashmir has long been a subject of debate, with its policies oscillating between short-term electoral gains and a broader vision for long-term stability. The recent bail granted to Engineer Rashid, a prominent Kashmiri politician and Member Parliament Baramulla, brings back into focus the intricate dynamics of electoral politics in the region. His political actions, it is argued, might dent the National Conference (NC) electorally but the consequences of such developments raise serious questions about the long-term impact on Kashmir's socio-political landscape.

THE DILEMMA OF ENGINEER RASHID'S BAIL

The bail granted to Engineer Rashid has sparked speculation

about its possible impact on the National Conference's electoral fortunes. While some view this as part of a larger strategy to fragment the opposition vote thereby weakening NC, the broader implications are far more significant. The challenge lies in the evolving narrative where political gains often come at the cost of long-term stability.

In past elections, New Delhi's attempts to undercut NC's power,





NATIONAL CONFERENCE'S COMPLEX LEGACY

The National Conference led by the Abdullah family has a complex legacy in Kashmir's political history. Farooq Abdullah and Omar Abdullah have both faced criticism for prioritizing protocol and power during their tenures. The party has been accused of corruption and a dynastic style of leadership and often patronizing tainted political leaders. However, one must distinguish between NC's flaws as a party and its role in shaping the political narrative in Kashmir.

NC has been accused of rigging elections in 1987 when allegations of election rigging sparked widespread unrest. Yet, despite these accusations the NC cannot be solely blamed for the eruption of violence in Kashmir. By the time the 1987 elections occurred there was already an undercurrent of discontent. Pakistan capitalized on this unrest, introducing gun culture to the valley and fueling militancy.

It is important to note that

The challenge lies in the evolving narrative where political gains may come at the cost of long-term stability

NC has never been overtly associated with promoting separatism. In fact, many separatist movements in Kashmir have developed in opposition to NC's dominance in the region. While the party has faced accusations of electoral malpractice, it has generally supported Kashmir's integration within the Indian Union. The rise of separatism, therefore, must be understood as a reaction to broader political and socio-economic conditions, rather than the actions of any one party.

THE ROLE OF JAMAAT-E-ISLAMI AND ITS INFLUENCE

A significant aspect of the political landscape in Kashmir has been the role of Jamaat-e-

Islami (JeI). Often operating like a semi-government organization, JeI has historically played a dual role: on one hand, acting as a counterbalance to the ruling elite, while on the other hand, fostering an ideology that has proven to be a fertile ground for separatism.

The Union government's policy towards JeI has been ambivalent, at times using the organization to counterbalance the power of mainstream political parties like NC. However, this strategy has inadvertently legitimized JeI's influence and its ability to mobilize support particularly among the youth. Over the years, a generation has emerged in Kashmir, influenced by JeI's ideology and increasingly disillusioned with the Indian state.

While this strategy may have yielded short-term electoral benefits for New Delhi in the past, its long-term consequences are deeply concerning. JeI's influence has contributed to the growth of an anti-India narrative in Kashmir, which has only grown stronger over time. The government's failure to recognize the deeper ideological impact of JeI on the Kashmiri psyche is one of the critical flaws in its Kashmir policy.

FRAGMENTATION OF THE POLITICAL MANDATE

Engineer Rashid's potential to fragment the political mandate in the current elections is not an isolated incident. Over the years, New Delhi's policy of



encouraging smaller political actors to weaken dominant parties has become a familiar tactic. However, this approach, while effective in preventing NC from consolidating power has broader implications for the region's political stability.

The emergence of fragmented mandates creates a vacuum in the political discourse where no single party can claim a clear mandate to govern. This, in turn,

creates space for narratives that are increasingly hostile to the Indian state. Rashid's ability to dilute NC's electoral influence may benefit certain actors in the short term but the long-term consequence is the strengthening of a narrative that challenges the Indian Union's legitimacy in Kashmir.

While the National Conference has its share of flaws, it is not responsible for the

rise of separatism in Kashmir. The separatist movement has often developed in opposition to NC's dominance, and the party's pro-India stance has been overshadowed by its internal weaknesses. The government's focus on weakening NC, while electorally beneficial, has failed to address the deeper ideological challenges that threaten the region's stability.

If New Delhi is serious about achieving long-term peace in Kashmir, it must rethink its approach. The focus must shift from short-term electoral strategies to addressing the socio-economic and political grievances of Kashmir's youth. Only by engaging with the aspirations of the next generation can the government hope to build a stable and prosperous Kashmir within the Indian Union.



J&K ASSEMBLY ELECTIONS 2024

BARAMULLA CONSTITUENCY

BREAKING DOWN THE ELECTORAL PLAY

A FAMILY FEUD DOMINATES THE CONTEST

The district's seven constituencies reflect the broader complexities of regional political dynamics, where family rivalries, personal legacies, youth movements and shifts in party allegiances intersect

by Mian Tufail

▼
The Baramulla district of Jammu and Kashmir, often seen as a political bellwether for the region, stands at the heart of a fascinating electoral contest in the ongoing Assembly elections. Comprising seven assembly constituencies – Sopore, Rafiabad, Uri, Baramulla, Gulmarg, Wagoora-Kreeri, and Pattan – the district is witnessing a highly competitive and unique political maneuvering this election season. With a large number of candidates vying for power, a diverse range of issues and deep-rooted family rivalries, the Baramulla Assembly elections are set to leave a significant mark on the political trajectory of Jammu and Kashmir.

THE POLITICAL IMPORTANCE OF BARAMULLA

▼

Baramulla district holds immense political significance for the entire Jammu and Kashmir region, not only because of its strategic location but also due to its diverse demographic and political makeup. From the militancy-affected Sopore, often seen as a political tinderbox, to the bordering Uri constituency, which has its own unique set of challenges, Baramulla's seven assembly constituencies present a benchmark of Jammu and Kashmir's political dynamics.

In these elections, the spotlight on Baramulla is

brighter than ever, with each constituency representing a key battleground, and the outcomes here are likely to have a broader impact on regional politics.

THE FAMILY FEUD

▼

The Baramulla constituency stands out in these elections due to an intra-family battle that is generating significant attention. Two key members of the prominent Beigh family are squaring off against each other, making this constituency a hotspot of political intrigue.

Javid Hassan Beigh, a candidate from the National Conference (NC), is running against his uncle, Muzaffar Hussain Beigh, who is

contesting as an independent. This intra-family contest reflects the shifting allegiances within the Beigh family and by extension within the broader political landscape of Baramulla. Muzaffar Beigh, one of the founding members of the People's Democratic Party (PDP) in 1999, has had a tumultuous political career particularly following the abrogation of Article 370 in August 2019.

Despite his apparent disengagement from active politics following the abrogation Muzaffar Beigh made a notable appearance earlier this year, joining the PDP leadership in paying tribute to Mufti Mohammad Sayeed on his death





Baramulla's seven assembly constituencies present a benchmark of Jammu and Kashmir's political dynamics

anniversary. This reappearance raised questions about Beigh's political intentions, as he claimed never to have left the PDP. However, his current independent candidacy indicates a departure from his party roots contributing to the complexity of the Baramulla race.

Javid Hassan Beigh, on the other hand, represents a new generation within the National Conference. His candidacy signals NC's intention to bring fresh faces into their fold while



capitalizing on the family's political legacy in the region. The nephew-uncle rivalry has added a personal dimension

to this contest where local dynamics, including family loyalties and historical alliances will play a decisive role.

SOPORE Ghulam Rasool Kar's Legacy and Afzal Guru's Brother Surprise

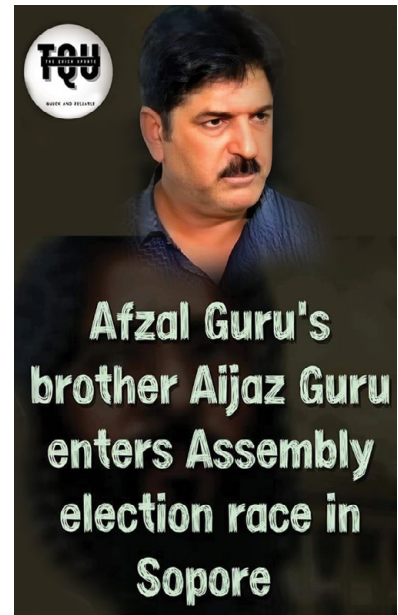
Sopore, often referred to as the "Apple Town" due to its vast apple orchards is a region marred by militancy and political unrest. This constituency is home to a politically charged contest that ties into Afzal Guru, the Parliament attack convict who was hanged in 2013. His brother, Ejaz Guru, is one of the key candidates in this election contesting against Irshad Rasool Kar of the National Conference.

Ejaz Guru has made it clear that he is running on a platform that seeks to distance himself from his brother's ideology stating that he wants to "clean the family's image." His bid to redefine the Guru family's political presence in Sopore adds an interesting layer to the contest.

However, Sopore remains a stronghold for Jamaat-e-Islami



(JeI), which has significant sway over the constituency. After the forging of alliances, JeI votes may provide a boost to Engineer Rashid's party, particularly its candidate Advocate Mursaleen. While Mursaleen is gaining traction, the contest still revolves around traditional political parties like the NC. Sopore's election results will be closely watched and the legacy of father of Irshad Kar, Ghulam Rasool Kar is intact in



the minds of electorate. Irshad Kar is consolidating votes on the name of his party NC and the contribution of his father. His sister Musarat Rasool Kar was the chairperson of Sopore Municipal Council and has attained huge respect among the people by his pro-people policies and decisions. Musarat has thrown her weight behind his brother Irshad Kar.



WAGOORA-KREERI A Triangular Contest of Significance

The Wagoora-Kreeri constituency is embroiled in a three-way political contest that exemplifies the changing dynamics of Baramulla's politics. Safina Beigh, wife of Muzaffar Beigh, is contesting as an independent candidate, positioning herself against the NC-Congress alliance candidate Irfan Hafeez Lone and Basharat Bukhari of the PDP.

Safina Beigh's candidacy has drawn significant attention especially given her close ties to political power as the wife of one of Baramulla's most prominent politicians. She currently serves as the DDC Chairperson of Baramulla, a position she holds with the backing of the People's Conference led by Sajad Lone. Safina's political ambitions reflect the ongoing influence of the Beigh family, even as her husband steps away from traditional party structures.

Irfan Hafeez Lone, an advocate by profession has a reputation for being a staunch defender of Kashmiri rights, particularly for his role in contesting the abrogation of Article 370 in the Supreme Court. His campaign has focused on grassroots engagement, making him a formidable candidate with a growing base of support.

On the other hand, Basharat Bukhari's political career has been characterized by party-



switching. After leaving the PDP in 2020 to join the National Conference, Bukhari briefly aligned himself with the People's Conference before rejoining the PDP ahead of these elections. His repeated shifts between parties have complicated his standing in the constituency but

his experience in governance may yet work to his advantage.

The Wagoora-Kreeri contest is likely to be one of the most intense, as each candidate brings unique strengths to the table with local alliances and family networks playing crucial roles.



RAFIABAD The Fight Across Age Groups

Rafiabad's contest is a battle between experience and youthful ambition. The primary candidates are Javed Ahmad Dar of the NC, Yawar Dilawar Mir of the Apni Party, and Abdul Gani Vakil of the People's Conference.

Javed Ahmad Dar, a seasoned politician and former Minister of State for Health, is looking to leverage his experience and long-standing connections within the constituency. However, the real challenge comes from Yawar Dilawar Mir, who stunned political observers by defeating the old guard in the 2014 elections. Representing a younger, more dynamic generation of politicians, Yawar's campaign has focused appealing to younger voters and addressing their issues.

Abdul Gani Vakil, despite



being a veteran and former Congress minister, has faced repeated electoral defeats. His current candidacy under the banner of the People's Conference represents his continued determination to break through in Rafiabad, although he remains an

underdog in this triangular contest.

PATTAN Shia Vote Is The Key Factor

Pattan constituency, with its sizable Shia population, has long been a stronghold for the Ansari family. Imran Reza Ansari, the candidate from the People's Conference, is seeking to extend his family's dominance, having represented the seat since 2008. His father, before him, held the seat for several terms, making the Ansaris synonymous with Pattan's political landscape.

However, this time around, the contest is far from a foregone conclusion. The National Conference is mounting a serious challenge, with its candidate Reyaz Bedar hoping to capitalize on the influence of prominent Shia





cleric Aga Syed Ruhullah to eat into Ansari's vote bank. The Shia vote, therefore, will be the determining factor in Pattan, as both sides seek to consolidate their support in this demographically crucial constituency.

URI Political Dynasts and Independent Aspirants

The Uri constituency, located on the Line of Control, has always

been geopolitically sensitive and its political contests are no less intense. In this election, the contest is primarily between Dr. Sajad Uri of the NC and Taj Mohiuddin, an independent candidate.

Dr. Sajad Uri, son of NC stalwart Shafi Uri, is contesting on the back of a political legacy that has long held sway in the

region. His family's historical connection to the NC gives him a substantial advantage but Taj Mohiuddin's independent run complicates the equation.

Taj Mohiuddin, a former Congress minister, initially joined the Democratic Progressive Azad Party (DPAP) led by Ghulam Nabi Azad. However, his decision





to leave DPAP and contest as an independent has raised eyebrows, particularly since he was seen as a key figure within Azad's fold. Uri's political landscape, therefore, becomes a battle of legacies versus independence.

GULMARG **Restoring NC's** **Bastion**

The Gulmarg constituency, traditionally an NC stronghold has witnessed significant political shifts over the years. Farooq Ahmad Shah, a retired bureaucrat running on the NC ticket is looking to restore the party's dominance after it lost the seat to Ghulam Hassan Mir during the 2008–2014 period.

Ghulam Hassan Mir, a veteran politician and former minister, is now contesting as Apni Part's candidate and he remains a strong contender. His political acumen and deep-rooted connections within the constituency make him a formidable challenge for Shah. But now equation has changed after Apni Party started to work as proxy and Shah has find easy

Assembly Election 2024 is not merely about local governance but also about shaping the broader political narrative of Jammu and Kashmir in the years to come



ground to sway his voters.

The Gulmarg contest is, therefore, a clash between tradition and personal influence, with the electorate torn between the NC's historical appeal and Mir's individual popularity.

THE BROADER IMPLICATIONS FOR JAMMU AND KASHMIR POLITICS

The outcomes of the Baramulla Assembly elections will provide critical insights into the future of Jammu and Kashmir's politics. Baramulla's contests also shed light on the changing political landscape post-Article 370 in Jammu and Kashmir. Whether it is the reassertion of traditional political forces like the National Conference, the rise of independents or the influence of smaller regional parties, the electoral verdict in Baramulla will likely reverberate across the region and set the tone for future political engagements.

The diverse and dynamic nature of Baramulla's political contests, combined with its symbolic significance makes it a focal point in the 2024 Assembly elections. As the candidates battle it out in these seven constituencies, the election is not merely about local governance but also about shaping the broader political narrative of Jammu and Kashmir in the years to come.

ELECTION DYNAMICS IN GANDERBAL

by Sheikh Abid





After the Election Commission of India announced the Assembly election dates in erstwhile state of Jammu and Kashmir, the region saw a continuous resumption of full-scale political revamp in the power corridors of union territory.

Legislative Assembly elections are scheduled to be held in Jammu and Kashmir from 18 September to 1 October 2024 in 3 phases to elect 90 members of Jammu and Kashmir Legislative Assembly. The votes will be counted, and the results will be declared on 8 October 2024.

Scenes from the main cities and towns to the interiors of valley are abuzz with the



hustle bustle of political rallies, roadshows, sloganeering and voter enthusiasm, creating an atmosphere of a new hope among people to finally elect their own representatives and form a popular government after a lull of ten long years.





ASSEMBLY POLLS 2024 – GANDERBAL'S SNAPSHOT

Over 2.08 lakh electorates across two constituencies set to exercise their right to franchise on 25 September

267 Polling Stations established by ECI across the district.

The district comprises two Assembly Constituencies: Kangan (ST) and Ganderbal with 2,08,018 registered voters, including 1,04,162 males and 1,03,856 females.

AC 17-Kangan (ST) has 78,904 voters (40,000 males and 38,904 females) with 110 polling stations. Likewise, AC 18-Ganderbal has 1,29,114 voters (64,162 males, 64,952 females) with 157 polling stations.



CANDIDATES FROM GANDERBAL

1. NC's Omar Abdullah

Omar's contestation was a surprise to all as earlier he had expressed his dissatisfaction in contesting from anywhere. It is pertinent to mention that earlier, Omar had said he would not participate in the Assembly polls. His name appeared in the NC's list of 32 candidates for Phases II and III released on Tuesday 27 August.

Ganderbal has been NC's Bastion from Generations

Omar represented Ganderbal



from 2009 to 2014 when he was the chief minister (CM) of the NC-Congress coalition government. His grandfather, Sheikh Abdullah, represented the seat in 1977. Omar's father, former CM Farooq Abdullah, who is the president of NC, won the seat in 1983, 1987, and 1996.

This shows how strong NC's loyal voter base is in the main Assembly seat of Ganderbal.

These numbers along with the traditional strong support still makes NC one of the strongest contenders of this seat this time too. The support of congress to NC through its





INDIA alliance negotiations makes their win percentage more obvious given the shifting of Congress vote in NC's kitty.

2. PDP's Bashir Ahmad Mir

Bashir Mir is a renowned social cum political activist hailing from Kangan area of Ganderbal. He is locally very popular for his public cum social services.

Bashir Mir had lost by a thin margin of 1432 votes in the 2014 Assembly elections, securing 24,380 votes against NC's stalwart Mian Altaf, who won with 25,812 votes. This

popularity makes him the only formidable opponent for Omer Abdullah in Ganderbal, given his popularity among youths and other sections of the electorate.

3. Other Parties

Other parties include DPAP's Jin Qaisar Sultan, a youth leader trying his luck under Gulam Nabi Azad's party ticket.

Similarly Ishfaq Jabbar, NC's former MLA from Ganderbal, is now contesting under the banner of Kashmir United Movement, after he was



expelled from NC on anti-party allegations.

BJP is in a silent mode in Ganderbal with almost zero support in the district. Also there has not been much political activity by BJP in the



area. Altaf Bukhari's Apni Party & Ishfaq Jabbar's KUM are called BJP proxies in the region. It is also pertinent to mention that jailed MP currently on bail Engineer Rashid's party has also nominated its candidate for Ganderbal. Sheikh Ashiq, the former KCCI chairman & AIP member, will be fighting from Ganderbal constituency on the AIP ticket.

Kangan constituency

Kangan constituency is an interesting case study of exciting candidates, both having a strong following, along with socio religious and political privilege.



contest for the Scheduled Tribe (ST) seat, marking a significant shift in the region's political landscape.

Mehar Ali, a fourth-generation descendant of

resident of Waliwar in Lar Tehsil of Ganderbal district. He is the son-in-law of a prominent Sufi saint from the Naga Baji family of Bandipora.

Notably, there are around 10,000 first-time voters after the 2014 Assembly elections, and approximately 35,000 voters belong to the age group of 18-29 years. This would also decide to a larger extent the fate of contesting candidates as new generation educated youth seek vision & concrete roadmap over traditional dynastic lineage and privilege while choosing their representatives.

Tailpiece

Amidst the backdrop of changing political tides, Ganderbal stands poised to make a significant impact in the larger narrative of the state's governance and development. And on 8th October we will witness a new chapter on who is who of the future political discourse of Kashmir's democratically elected government after a decade of silence on public representation. Till then, let us vote and wait.



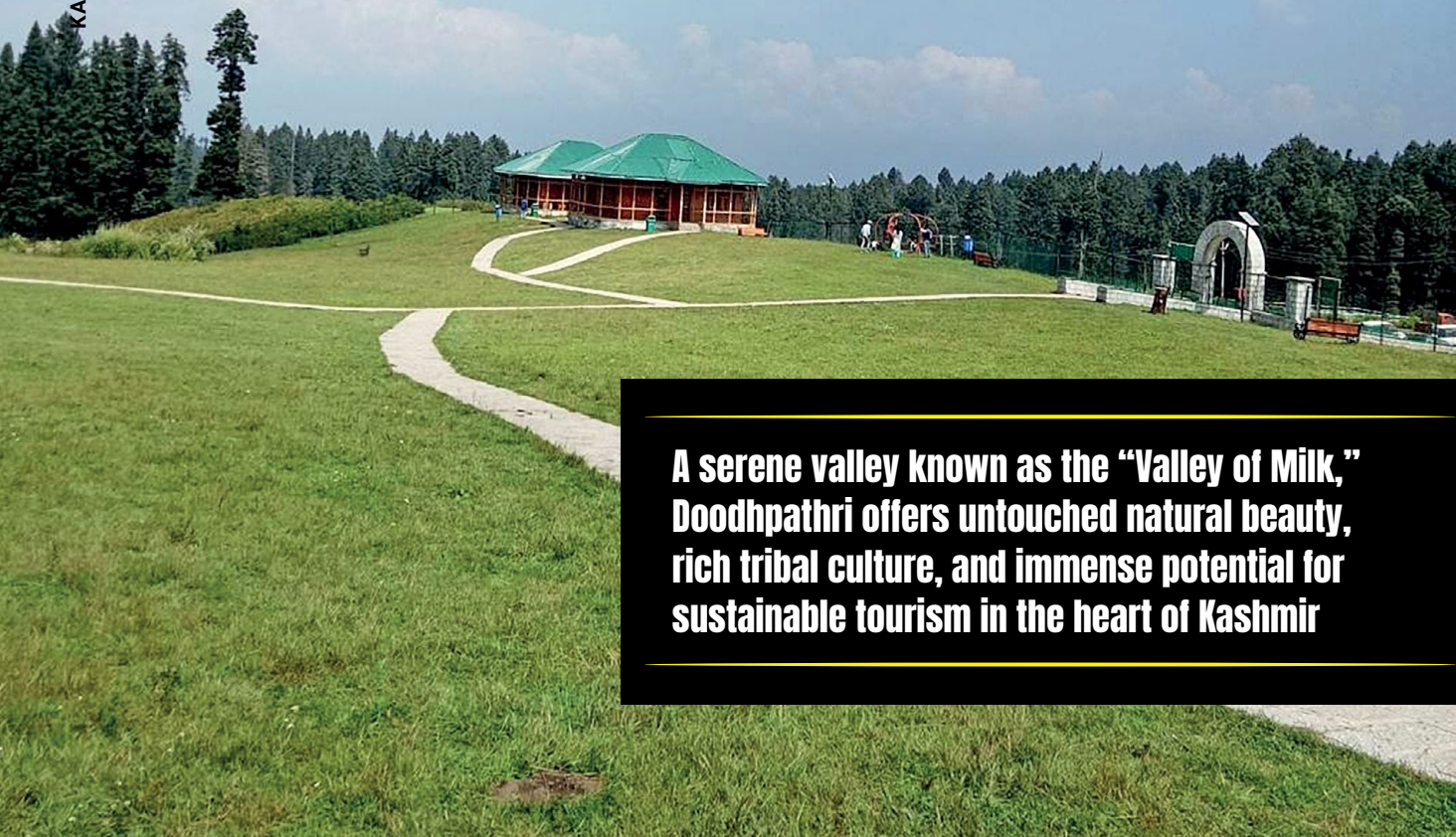
Since Kangan is a designated ST seat, both the strong contenders from two big rival parties NC & PDP are expected to witness a head on battle.

For the first time, two Alis – Mehar Ali and Jamat Ali – will

revered Sufi saint Baba ji Shab Larvi and Syed Jamat Ali, belongs to the Gujjar family of Baba Nagri in Kangan Tehsil. Jamat Ali, a retired bureaucrat turned politician, belongs to the Pahari community and is a

DOODHPATHRI A HIDDEN GEM IN KASHMIR'S TOURISM MAP

by Mir Tanveer



A serene valley known as the “Valley of Milk,” Doodhpathri offers untouched natural beauty, rich tribal culture, and immense potential for sustainable tourism in the heart of Kashmir



Nestled in the heart of Kashmir's Budgam district, Doodhpathri is emerging as a new destination on the region's tourism map. Known as the "Valley of Milk," this pristine location offers an untouched natural landscape that rivals the more established tourist spots in the Kashmir Valley. As more travellers discover the serene beauty of this destination, Doodhpathri is witnessing an increasing influx of tourists—both local and from afar—offering an opportunity for sustainable development that respects the valley's delicate ecosystem while empowering local communities.

THE MYTH AND MAGIC OF THE VALLEY OF MILK

Doodhpathri lies in a bowl-shaped valley of the Pir Panjal Range, 2,730 meters (8,960 feet) above sea level. Its alpine terrain is surrounded by snow-capped mountains, dense forests of pine, fir, and deodar, and lush



meadows that seem to stretch endlessly. The valley derives its name, which translates to "Valley of Milk," from a mystical tale that has been passed down through generations. According to local folklore, Sufi saint Sheikh Nooruddin Noorani (RA) once travelled through this valley and when he needed water for ablution, he struck the ground with his staff. Miraculously, milk began to flow which he later transformed into water, saying he could not perform ablution with milk.

Adding to this legend, the valley is renowned for its abundant production of milk as the local Gujjar and Bakarwal tribal communities rear cows and produce dairy products

like milk, curd, and cheese. This connection between folklore and the valley's natural resources lends Doodhpathri its unique cultural identity.

A SCENIC JOURNEY FROM SRINAGAR

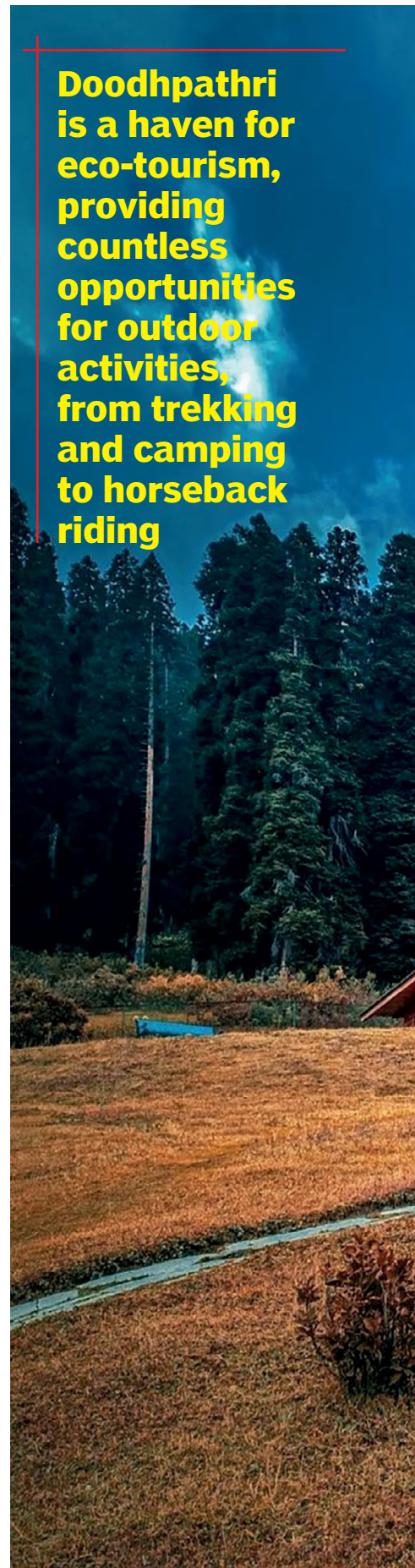
Located just 45 to 50 kilometers from Srinagar, Doodhpathri is a one-hour journey that winds through picturesque villages like Khan Sahib in the Budgam district. En route, travellers are treated to panoramic views of agricultural fields and orchards of walnuts and pears, nestled amid the region's natural landscape. Along the roadside, women entrepreneurs set up small stalls offering traditional Kashmiri delicacies, such as, Makki ki Roti, Saag and locally-made pickles, providing a taste of authentic Kashmiri cuisine in a setting that enhances the travel experience. These small ventures also serve as a means of economic empowerment for local women, allowing them

to earn a livelihood through tourism.

NATURE'S SOLITUDE: A HAVEN FOR ECO-TOURISM

Upon arrival, Doodhpathri greets tourists with a breathtaking landscape, where one can feel immediately connected to nature. The valley's vast, open meadows and thick forests provide a sense of solitude and peace, offering an escape from the hustle and bustle of urban life. For the nature enthusiast, Doodhpathri is a haven for eco-tourism, providing countless opportunities for outdoor activities, from trekking and camping to horseback riding.

Adventurers will find numerous trekking routes, offering varying degrees of difficulty, leading deeper into the Pir Panjal Range. The more daring can embark on mountaineering expeditions that take them to higher



Doodhpathri is a haven for eco-tourism, providing countless opportunities for outdoor activities, from trekking and camping to horseback riding



elevations, where panoramic views of the surrounding peaks and glaciers reward their efforts. Horseback riding is another popular activity in the valley, especially for families and school children, allowing them to explore the terrain while experiencing the rustic charm of traditional Kashmiri village life.

EXPLORING THE TRIBAL LIFESTYLE

One of the most fascinating aspects of visiting Doodhpathri is the chance to experience the unique lifestyle and culture of the local tribal communities. The Gujjars and Bakarwals have inhabited this region for centuries, and their mud houses, known as Khotas, dot the valley's landscape. Visitors can witness the simplicity of life as these tribes people engage in age-old traditions, including cattle and sheep rearing, producing organic dairy products and living off the land. Their rich cultural heritage and connection to nature evoke a



sense of nostalgia, offering a glimpse into a way of life that has remained unchanged in the face of modernity.

The summer months bring a surge of activity to Doodhpathri, as the nomadic tribes graze their livestock in the valley's meadows before descending to lower altitudes when autumn arrives. This vibrant seasonal shift is a reminder of the deep connection between the land and the people who call it home.

**SCENIC
ATTRACTIONS:
MUJPATHRI,
PALMAIDAN, AND
DISKHAL**

Doodhpathri's natural beauty is not confined to a single location. Several nearby spots offer tourists a variety of landscapes



and experiences. One of the most popular is Mujpathri, a hamlet just 3 kilometres from the main valley, nestled on the banks of the Shaliganga River. Here, visitors can relax by the river's crystal-clear waters,

enjoying the cooling breeze and the soothing sound of the flowing river. The peaceful ambiance makes it an ideal spot for picnics or a short rest after a trek.

Further along the trail is

Palmaidan, located 5 kilometers from Doodhpathri. This expansive meadow, surrounded by towering deodar and pine trees, is scattered with massive boulders—hence its name, which translates to “Stone Ground.” The area is a favorite grazing ground for shepherds and cowboys during the summer months and offers a rustic charm that appeal to nature lovers and photographers alike.

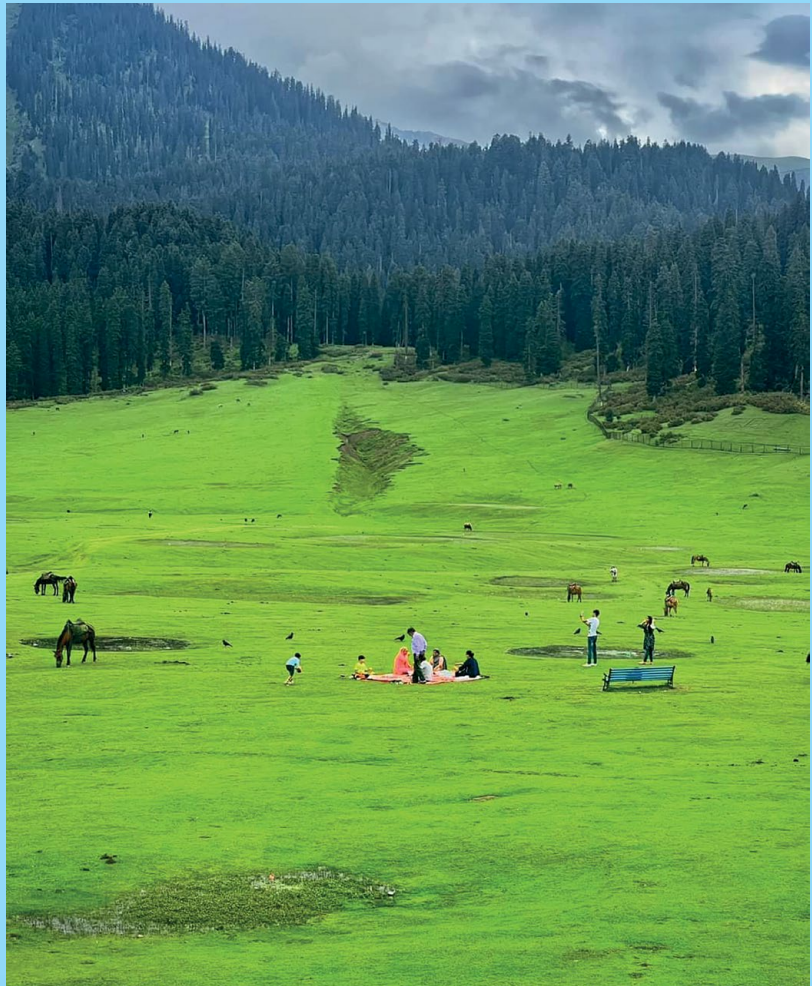
For those seeking a more challenging hike, Diskhal is a must-visit. Located 10 kilometers from the Shaliganga River, this beautiful meadow sits atop a mountain and offers stunning views of the Ashthar Glacier. The trek to Diskhal is a rewarding experience for those willing to venture off the beaten path, promising panoramic vistas and a sense of adventure.

THE NEED FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

As Doodhpathri’s popularity grows, so do the challenges

of maintaining its ecological balance and ensuring sustainable development. One of the primary concerns for tourists and locals alike is the lack of proper infrastructure, especially in terms of road

connectivity, parking facilities, and telecommunication networks. Poor internet and phone connectivity have hindered the valley’s full potential as a tourist destination, and efforts to improve these services are essential.



The local government and the Doodhpathri Development Authority (DDA) must prioritize the preservation of the valley's natural habitat by enforcing strict regulations to control littering, prevent the degradation of flora and fauna, and limit pollution. Eco-sensitive areas like Doodhpathri should not bear the brunt of over-tourism, and both the local authorities and visitors must work together to minimize the impact of human activity.

Sustainable tourism also means involving the local communities in the region's development. The creation of homestays—where tourists can experience authentic Kashmiri hospitality while staying with local families—will not only provide a source of income for residents but also promote cultural exchange. Such initiatives would help shift the focus away from commercialized tourism and encourage a more personal and immersive travel experience.

BUILDING DOODHPATHRI'S TOURISM FUTURE

For Doodhpathri to realize its potential as a premier tourist destination, the local government must invest in infrastructure development. Better road connectivity and adequate parking facilities will ensure smoother travel, reducing the traffic congestion that can make reaching the valley a hassle for tourists. Moreover, boosting basic

amenities like clean public restrooms, proper waste disposal systems, and clear signage's will enhance the visitor experience.

To preserve the valley's natural charm, the authorities must restrict disruptive activities such as off-road driving, which can damage the fragile grasslands and disturb the wildlife. Instead, promoting eco-friendly alternatives, such as horseback riding and trekking, can help protect the environment while providing tourists with unique ways to explore the valley.

A FUTURE JEWEL OF KASHMIR TOURISM

Although still a developing destination, Doodhpathri's pristine landscape, cultural

richness, and tranquil ambiance make it a hidden jewel in Kashmir's tourism crown. As infrastructure improvements continue and sustainable tourism practices take root, the valley has the potential to become one of Kashmir's most sought-after destinations. Doodhpathri offers more than just scenic beauty—it promises peace, adventure, and a deep connection with nature, making it a true paradise for those seeking a break from the hectic pace of modern life.

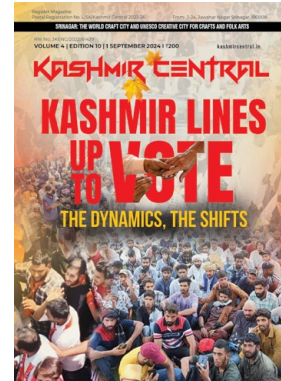
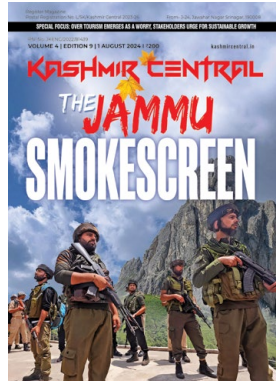
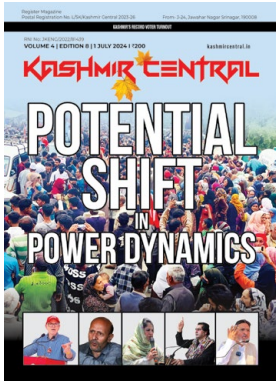
As the world increasingly seeks out eco-friendly and culturally enriching travel experiences, Doodhpathri stands ready to welcome tourists, not as a fleeting stop, but as a cherished memory etched in the heart of Kashmir's tourism map.



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