

SIXTH AND SEVENTH REPORTS OF THE CONCERNED CITIZENS' GROUP ON KASHMIR

SEP 17-18, 2019 and NOV 22-26, 2019

The Concerned Citizens' Group (CCG) made two visits to Srinagar since August 5, 2019 when the Narendra Modi government revoked the special status of the state of Jammu and Kashmir and bifurcated it into two Union Territories.

The first visit to assess the mood of the people of the Kashmir Valley was undertaken on September 17. When four members of the group – Yashwant Sinha, Air Vice Marshal (Retired) Kapil Kak, Sushobha Barve and Bharat Bhushan – landed at Srinagar Airport, they were welcomed by a posse of policemen led by the District Commissioner and Senior Superintendent of Police of Budgam district. They informed the other three members were free to go to Srinagar, but Yashwant Sinha would not be allowed to leave the airport. The fifth member of the group, Wajahat Habibullah had reached the city earlier. However, those accompanying Sinha were told that should they want to return to Delhi along with him that too could be arranged.

After much insistence that a written order be produced giving reasons why Yashwant Sinha could not leave the airport, after a couple of hours an order from DC, Budgam was produced. It claimed that Section 144 of the Criminal Procedure Code was in force in Budgam, where the Srinagar Airport is located, and that if Sinha left the airport there was apprehension of breach of peace in the district. He was therefore advised to not move out of the Arrival Lounge of the airport.

At Sinha's insistence DC, Budgam held court at the airport lounge to hear his point of view. However, Sinha's representation fell on deaf ears. Attempts to put him on the next flight to Delhi failed as he insisted that he be given an official order sending him back to Delhi as the DC's order had advised his confinement to the Arrival Lounge

and said nothing about being asked to return to Delhi. Finally, an order came signed by the SSP, Budgam, modifying the earlier order which Sinha said he would defy and offered himself for arrest for not obeying the order under Cr P C Section 144.

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On the pretext of arresting him, he was forcibly put on wheelchair while other members of the CCG were locked up in the Airport Lounge under the charge of the Tehsildar and Deputy Tehsildar of Budgam. After half an hour or so the doors of the Lounge were opened when it transpired that Sinha had been forcibly put on the last flight to Delhi. The police pretended that no one had locked up the CCG members in the Lounge and the SSP threatened to sack the person who had done such a thing!

The rest of the group then proceeded to Srinagar after the six hour drama at the airport.

Over the next 24-hours, the CCG members met a cross-section of journalists, civil rights activists, and a member of parliament from Kashmir. This was not an easy task as there was communication blockade with both landlines and mobile phone services suspended.

The second visit of the CCG took place from November 22 to 26. Although during this visit, the members of the CCG were allowed to enter Srinagar, they were initially prevented allegedly for their own safety from visiting Pulwama claiming “impending terrorist threats” and later on they were told that they could not visit Shopian, Kulgam or even adjoining Budgam – basically, their movements were limited to Srinagar District.

Fortunately, people of these areas were allowed to come to Srinagar to meet the CCG in the hotel. A fairly large number of interactions became possible because of this.

The CCG applied formally to the Deputy Commissioner of Srinagar to pay a visit to four arrested leaders: Former Chief Ministers Dr. Farooq Abdullah and Omar Abdullah of the National Conference and Mehbooba Mufti of Peoples' Democratic Party as well as former MLA Mohammed Yusuf Tarigami of the Communist Party of India (Marxist). Some members of the group had managed to talk to Farooq Abdullah and Yusuf Tarigami on telephone promising to pay them a visit. However, the District Commissioner's office informed the CCG orally that they could not do so as only family members and officials permitted by the Union Home Ministry in Delhi could visit the arrested leaders. The findings of both the visits are given below.

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Response of Kashmiris during September 17 to 18 visit:

There was an air of depression when one talked to the local citizens. "We have lost our language (Urdu was the official language of the state), our state, our Constitution, our flag and our autonomy," one of them summed it all up in these words.

Most believed that the events beginning on August 5 and the subsequent ratification of the government's decisions in Parliament demonstrated that this was the end of politics in Kashmir and a process of controlling Kashmiris by force had begun. People are shocked and unable to recover from it.

Another person said that Kashmiris knew that Article 370 of the Indian Constitution might go one day. "Even the Congress party wanted to remove it from the Constitution. It had been hollowed out over time and was dead in 1953 itself. Removing the remaining provisions of Article 370 was nothing more than completing its '*uthala*' (last death rituals among North Indian Hindus). However, it had a symbolic value in keeping the Kashmiris in good humour," remarked another Kashmiri wryly.

Many wondered why the BJP government in Delhi needed to abrogate the provisions of Article 370 and Article 35A in the manner it did creating shock and awe all around besides plunging entire Kashmiri society into misery. Kashmiri students in the rest of India were unable to pay their fees or receive financial help from home because of the communication lock down which affected even banking transfers. Hospitals were open but there was no public transport or any way of getting in touch with doctors.

People felt that India had now put Kashmiris in a cage and conveyed to them definitely that Delhi will no longer listen to them. “When they saw what happened in Parliament where all parties supported the Modi government’s move, they finally knew that they were all alone. What happened was not surprising but the way it happened stunned people. The break-up of the state seemed like a vengeful act – as if we were being punished for something. There are people who wonder why a Union Territory was created? Why have I been gagged? You have had your way but let me also have my say,” argued a passionate senior citizen.

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It seemed that it was not so much the suddenness of the August 5 move by the Modi government but the way the entire operation was conducted by it that had shocked people. “The wound is so deep that it numbs you. It has brought shame. Family conversations are no longer possible. Parents know that their children have an uncertain future. Those who can afford to do so are sending their children abroad. Others are moving them out of Kashmir to the rest of India in the hope that they would remain safe,” lamented a parent.

The group found that there was both gloom and anger in the air and there was no outlet for sharing their emotional anguish with the people of the Valley as it was locked up and communications shut down. “Why have you created an atmosphere where everyone must support you and anyone who does not agree with you is designated an enemy?” a Kashmiri asked.

Even those who used to say that the future of Kashmir lies with India, people claimed, were unable to say that now. “Indians are seen as liars and Narendra Modi-Amit Shah as dacoits. People feel at one level that it is good that those who were with India are in jail. They laughed at Farooq Abdullah and thought he had got his just desserts (for supporting India) when he was arrested under the PSA (Public Safety Act),” claimed a social activist.

Another belonging to the National Conference asked, “Have people forgotten that Dr. Farooq Abdullah had said “Bharat Mata ki Jai” at the memorial meeting for Atal Bihari Vajpayee? Did he not stand for India always? What does Rule of Law mean in a country where Farooq Abdullah can be arrested under PSA? Is that not a self-goal by India?”

The big question that seemed to beg an answer was: Will Kashmiris reconcile to the situation or will there be a backlash? While no one seemed to have a clear answer to this question, there was apprehension about how the situation might unfold. There were those who said that it is quite possible that nothing might happen immediately but warned, “Don’t take the surface calm as acceptance of the situation. Things can change quite suddenly in Kashmir.” Others said that Kashmiris are known to take time to understand the situation, assess their own capability to take on the state and

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then they look for an opportunity. Yet some others suggested that because the entire situation was unexpected, people also had to be creative in their response.

For the time being, however, they seemed to have chosen mass civil disobedience – not opening their business establishments except for a couple of hours in the morning. No one seemed to have given the call for strike but people had opted for business closure as a mark of protest on their own. Schools and colleges were shut and although government offices were formally open, as public transport was

suspended, only those who had access to private transport attended.

Meanwhile it seemed that the Central government was trying to put together an alternative to the jailed mainstream political leaders by putting together a rag-tag group of Panches, Sarpanches, members of NGOs sponsored by the Army and “informers’ networks”. However, it did not seem to be reaching anywhere.

While people seemed to be waiting for a new leadership, it was unlikely that they would accept an imposed set of leaders like the motely crowd being put together by the government. One thing however is clear, no one seems in favour of India even though they are not speaking up for Pakistan. “People are waiting to see what Pakistan will do. They don’t want to listen to the mainstream leaders and surprisingly they don’t want to look up to the militants either. They say the militants are not educated, are emotional and take self-harming decisions like telling people not to sell their horticultural produce,” a Kashmiri social activist said. He predicted that the militant pressure not to sell apples this season will fizzle out soon.

CCG’s November 22-26 visit:

Nothing is normal:

The mass civil disobedience which had begun after the August 5 decisions of the Central government was continuing when the members of the CCG visited Kashmir again more than a month later. Shops and establishments which used to open only for a couple of hours every morning had extended their opening hours due to the winter setting in. However, when the Union Home Minister, Amit Shah, made an

announcement in Parliament on November 20 that everything was normal in the Kashmir Valley, shops and establishments were once again shut down in protest.

The education sector has been severely hit with schools, colleges and universities remaining shut in the Valley since August 5. Some schools, mostly private, that had opened were functioning with an average 10 to 30 per cent attendance. School buses were not running and parents had to ferry their children to school and back. In government schools, attendance was reported to be nil while all teachers were present.

Public transport was still off the roads.

Internet was still down although post-paid mobile services had started minus SMS (short message service). Fruit was being evacuated from orchards to the wholesale markets and trucks were plying on the highways carrying apples to far away markets. The process was not as smooth as in the previous years because of militant threats and the killing of some truck drivers and their assistants as well as non-Kashmiri labour engaged by orchard owners.

The entire political leadership of the mainstream political parties was still in jail. The Union Home Minister has claimed that of a total of 5,161 people arrested most had been released, with only 609 still in detention. Local human rights activists are in the process of compiling their own list of detainees. They claimed that 58 mainstream political leaders were in jail in Srinagar itself while a total of 350 were estimated to be incarcerated in the jails of J&K and about 240 distributed in jails in Uttar Pradesh, Punjab, Haryana and in Delhi. "The total number could be much higher," one of them claimed.

Those arrested and later released have had to provide 'community bonds' signed by neighbours, village co-residents, family members, etc. These bonds commit them to not publicly criticise the abrogation of the provisions of Article 370 or any related government policy. If they violate the bond then those who have given the commitment on their behalf are liable to be arrested. So they are virtually being held hostage by the state which is projecting community bonds as an innovative

achievement.

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A significant thing to note was that after August 5, it was not only the government which asked non-Kashmiris to leave the Valley. Even Kashmiris did the same. Surprisingly, their reason for this were twofold: one, they did not want to be blamed for any violence against non-Kashmiris or even their killings in an extreme case; and two, and this is what is surprising, they apparently wanted to show that they too could initiate demographic change! It is significant that the killing of five West Bengal Muslim workers and two Muslim truck drivers in Shopian was not protested to by the locals. This was unprecedented and is being explained by some saying that at one level locals think that this will deter outsiders from settling in the Valley.

'Death of expectations' and politicisation of society:

There was fear, apprehension and bewilderment amongst the Kashmiris mixed with a great deal of anger. Bewildered Kashmiris asked, "What does India want from us? What are your expectations from us? As for us, any expectation from India is dead."

A Kashmiri journalist pointed out how serious it could be when an entire society gives up hope for a better future: "When people stop protesting and accept virtual death quietly, then it is not only death of expectations but also the death of the State."

"I have never seen such mourning in this society. We have lost the capacity to talk to each other even though we want to unburden ourselves. The silence here is deafening. The people are befuddled. But when in their senses and less confused, they say violence is not the way to fight a fascist state. We have seen brute force at our doorstep before in the 1990s but we haven't seen this. This is totalitarianism,

fascism,” observed another Kashmiri newspaper editor.

The silence of the Kashmiris, certainly shows a lot of maturity. That alone has prevented the situation from becoming violent. “We will wait till we are stronger in articulating our point of view. They used to say about Hitler’s Germany that something has happened but it is yet to eventuate. So the situation in Kashmir is also yet to eventuate and it could unfold in a hundred different ways,” said a Kashmiri public intellectual.

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Another Kashmiri, a politician, said, “We have been insulted and we have not reacted deliberately and we must not react immediately. We may do nothing but the ground is ready for those with guns. That fear is imminent.”

Almost every Kashmiri has now become political and it is difficult to separate individuals from the politics that has been forced on them. Earlier, most people wanted to distance their children from the politics of resistance. Now they themselves want to participate in it for the sake of their children’s future. Even in middle class families there is grudging support for militancy because they say dialogue has not resulted in anything. Yet they don’t know what the road ahead could be.

The deliberate silence of the Kashmiris and their spontaneous civil disobedience may turn into non-cooperation in the coming days.

Fear of demographic change:

The revocation of Article 35A and the abrogation of the special provisions of Article 370 of the Indian Constitution has led to fears of demographic change in the Kashmir Valley and in the Muslim-dominated areas of Jammu.

The Kashmiris seemed to be working within an ideological frame. They believe that the Indian government wants to marginalise them if not annihilate them. This fear is expressed most vividly as fear of demographic change by creating new settlements for outsiders. There is also fear of the National Register of Citizens and how it could be used to legitimise settlers.

Three emerging strategies of the government are being watched with a lot of apprehension by Kashmiris: reconstruction and renovation of temples, setting up of a Medical City, and planning of settlements for Kashmiri Pandits and ex-servicemen.

The Central government has announced a plan of renovating and reconstructing 50,000 temples in the Kashmir Valley. However, Kashmiri Pandit activists in the Valley point out that in the entire Valley there are only 1842 temples, springs, caves and shrines that are considered holy and of these only about 1100 are big or small

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temples. "Who is giving them this number of 50,000 when even after including the Jammu region the number of temples is not more than 4,000?" they ask.

Kashmiris believe that the number may have come from the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), the mother organisation of the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in Delhi. A survey of broken or run-down temples is apparently being conducted by the Army. "This is a programme of the RSS. These temples will be their base. They could even be located near army camps. They are saying that a priest and a caretaker will be appointed for each temple and even their salaries are being specified. That will mean one lakh RSS-men in these temples which we expect will be built by the Army. If they come with their families, the number could go up to three to four lakh outsiders," observed a Kashmiri civil rights activist.

This plan of demographic transition, he believed, could be used in presently Muslim-dominated Poonch and Rajauri in Jammu as well. He also apprehended resistance

once land acquisition for these temples begins because then people will know that this is being done for demographic change.

The second prong of the government's strategy for bringing about demographic change, Kashmiris believe, would be so-called development projects like setting up a Medical City or Medicity with hospitals, medical and nursing colleges, super-speciality treatment centres, and residential accommodation for doctors, nurses and other paramedics. They believe that it might be difficult for local residents to oppose such ventures, which will necessarily bring outsiders to reside in the Valley, because they will be packaged as development projects.

The third strategy, the locals believe the government may use for demographic change is to create settlement enclaves for Kashmiri Pandits and ex-servicemen (Sainik Colonies). These plans have been on the drawing board for long but now apparently the process of land acquisition for such settlements has begun. "These will be militarised ghettos," predicted a Kashmiri.

Internet communication lockdown:

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Internet ban in J&K began on August 5 and has continued since till the time of writing this report.

The ban has affected students, job seekers, entrepreneurs, businesses and ordinary citizens alike. "Why was internet not blocked when the terrorist attack of 26/11 took place in Mumbai? Why was it imposed on Kashmiris because of the actions of the Modi government?" a businessman asked.

There are estimated to be 14 lakh children who were learning from online services.

Those wishing to appear for NEET (National Eligibility cum Entrance Test) or other competitive examinations for higher education are unable to do so because of lack of internet.

The tourism sector is in tatters because of the internet ban – it can neither market itself nor take any bookings. Kashmir had a nascent IT sector servicing Europe and the US. The lack of internet connectivity has meant that the IT sector is completely shut down. The handicrafts sector too has suffered. The months of July and August is when the handicrafts businesses book export orders for Christmas and New Year sales. However, both months were engulfed by the crisis imposed on the Valley's economy by the government's decisions.

Another businessman said, "Today every sector is based on the internet. And we have not had internet connection since August 5. Tourism was the first sector to be hurt and we suspect it would be the last to recover. The advisory (to the tourists to leave the Valley) was given by the government. So the resultant business losses were not our fault. Who will make good these losses? The government ought to come forward and do something."

A representative of the Kashmir Chamber of Commerce said that one of the consequences of shutting down the internet has been that the government is losing out on GST. "We have been asked to file our GST returns. Now that requires internet connectivity and SMS services to get the OTP (one time password) for filing returns. So we have been told to physically go to the District Commissioner's office and some internet booths have been set up there for filing GST returns. The moot question is – how do we generate bills with a four month long internet shut down and still file

returns?" one of them asked. New entrepreneurs can also not register their ventures without the internet, he pointed out.

Journalism and media services are also badly affected by internet blocking. Initially a closely monitored media centre with internet facilities for accredited journalists was opened in a hotel in Srinagar. But now it has been shifted to a government facility where probably monitoring of communication is easier.

Even government functioning has been affected by internet-blocking. People were unable to pay their electricity bills because the Power Development Corporation could not generate bills online. Only now have they begun to do so.

Interestingly, even the security forces have been handicapped by loss of internet facilities because social media posts helped them identify militants who were foolish enough to post their pictures on Facebook or Instagram. While there has not been a surge in militancy the blocking of social media has meant that the security forces have lost a valuable source of information.

Business and Horticulture losses mount:

Kashmir's economy plunged into an abyss with the government advisory issued in early August asking tourists and the non-Kashmiri labour force to leave. Even non-Kashmiri students studying in the Valley were advised to go home. In one move the entire economy was shattered across sectors ranging from tourism, handicrafts, Information Technology, industry and horticulture at a time which is normally their peak time. "It hurt the economy grievously and that process has not stopped," claimed a representative of the Kashmir Chamber of Commerce and Industry. He put the total estimate of loss to Rs.12,000 crore and mounting. However, he also agreed that this figure may not be a correct estimate as lack of communication with different districts had made assessment of the overall loss difficult.

The agricultural sector was one of the worst affected after August 5. The first sector to suffer was sheep-breeding. August 12 was the festival of Eid and this time because of the blockade imposed on the population, Eid was not celebrated publicly

and not even 30 per cent of the sheep were sold (they are sacrificed on Eid). The

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remaining 70 per cent according to farmers' representatives were sold at throwaway prices after Eid.

A spokesperson for the Kisan Tehreek said that although there was a bumper crop of cherry and pear this year, most of it could not be sent to other states even before August 5 (Cherry season is June and it is transported out in July) because of restrictions on highway movement. "Two days were reserved for the movement of army convoys and on the other days civilian traffic allowed only between 10 AM and 6 PM. This affected the distribution of the cherry and pear crop," he said.

After the August 5 internet shutdown the sale and distribution of apples was also affected. On top of that in the first week of November, an unexpectedly early and heavy snowfall destroyed many standing apple trees and the plucked fruit could not be packed and sent to the market. When it eventually did the quality of the fruit had deteriorated and it did not fetch the price it should have," he explained. Because of later harvesting, the estimate of the Kisan Tehreek was, that there was a 20 per cent reduction in the produce. Despite a bumper crop, more and more apples deteriorated to become Grade C (Kashmir produces about 40% Grade A apples, 30 per cent Grade B and 30 per cent Grade C).

Of the estimated 24 lakh MT of apples produced, apparently not more than 6 lakh MT has been transported for distribution. The market intervention by NAFED has not been very successful. "Rates were announced for various grades of apples but then were brought down using California standards for grading our apples. Only 1.5 lakh boxes of out of 10 to 11 crore boxes were taken by NAFED and then sold cheaply bringing the overall market price down for whatever was not sold through it. The movement on the highways is still not normal. Because of road blockage our fruit has deteriorated. Trucks are not allowed into the interiors of the districts and so the

farmer has to bring the fruit to the highways. Even that leads to deterioration in quality,” another Kisan Tehreek representative pointed out. He added that the total cold storage capacity in the Kashmir Valley was only for about 5 to 6 lakh boxes. Grade C apples and waste fruit accounted for an estimated 5.5 lakh MT this year and ideally it could be used in fruit processing units but there aren’t enough of them, he said.

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Due to untimely heavy snowfall on November 7 orchards and saffron fields have been damaged. According to Kisan Tehreek, “The government is saying that only 35% apple trees have been destroyed but our estimate is that about 45% trees have been destroyed and the total loss to horticulture is about 70%. Of the apple trees destroyed about 35 % cannot stand again because the damage is severe. The government ought to declare this a national calamity. The fruit is insured, but not the trees. There is 40% damage to saffron fields – only three harvests of saffron had been done up to now and two more were left. But now snow has destroyed the crop. Almond trees have also been damaged and so have walnut trees which grow at higher altitudes and there the snowfall was much more.”

The Kashmir Valley does not have big industry and houses mainly micro, small and medium enterprises (MSMEs). “As skilled labour from outside the region was asked to leave by the government, 80% of the production of the MSME sector has been hit,” claimed a representative of the Chamber.

The other issue of payment of bank loans. “When we do no business, how can we repay our bank loan instalments? So bank defaults will go up. To deal with defaulters, banks have told creditors that there will be no one-time settlements of loans. They are saying that they will sell the mortgaged property of the defaulters and recover their money. But who will they sell it to? We apprehend a big storm coming and are fearful of it,” a businessman said.

The overwhelming feeling among the people the CCG met was that the economic losses suffered by the Kashmiris, except for the sudden snowfall, were inflicted by the Government of India. For the first time people are saying that they must file a legal case against the Central government seeking compensation so that it becomes a deterrence for future misadventures. "The government prevented the movement of trucks on the highways and therefore they must take responsibility for hurting the apple trade," a Kashmiri apple grower remarked.

A civil society activist urged Indian civil society organisations to join in filing a petition seeking compensation for Kashmiris affected by its policies. "We don't have much hope in the J&K High Court. So the compensation suit must be filed in the Supreme

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Court. Perhaps some Indian civil society groups could join the J&K Chamber of Commerce in filing the suit."

Approval of militancy:

People in Kashmir tend to think that protests and civil disobedience will make no difference to the Government of India. So they are asking: What should be done which would make a difference? The prevalence of such questions may in fact be preparing the ground for a new phase of militancy.

Kashmiris say that the Indian state is on an ideological high. Therefore, it is unable to see that through its actions and pronouncements it is also encouraging and provoking extremist elements in J&K. "They feel emboldened and claim that they have been proven right. A section of militants and ex-militants says that Narendra Modi is our ally because he has drawn the lines of the conflict clearly with no subterfuge," said a civil society activist.

Approval of militancy is going up at a time when Pakistan is not interested in promoting an armed struggle in Kashmir, caught up as it is in compliance with FATF (Financial Action Task Force) guidelines on preventing money laundering and terror financing.

“The mood here is for suicide vests. Even members of elite families want to join the militancy. They say that now they can expect nothing from India as it can give them nothing,” a Kashmiri claimed.

That there is approval, even if not vocal, was evident in public silence on militants killing innocent truck-owners and five non-Kashmiri Muslim workers. “People don’t support the killing of innocents but they do not mind the message it sends to rest of India in the context of fears of demographic change,” a Kashmiri from Shopian said. He claimed that most of the recent killings were the work of a known militant commander and even if he ordered the killing of ten more innocents, he will remain a hero for the locals. “This is because people say that India has been unjust and in an unjust world, these kind of killings will happen,” he explained.

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There are youngsters in Kashmir who say that if we could do it (pick up arms) in the 1990s, it can be done again. However, it seems that the international climate, the state that Pakistan finds itself in and the wisdom of Kashmiri elders is preventing the youngsters from joining militancy.

The extremist elements are present on the ground in Kashmir but it seems that they are unable to do much because of a variety of circumstances. A youngster explained, “The only thing that is stopping militancy flaring up is Pakistan. There are hundreds of OGW (over-ground workers) in Shopian alone. They act as informers of the militants. They do not have arms and should they become available all these OGWs will pick them up gladly. But Pakistan is not opening the tap of militancy. So

the militants today neither have money nor arms.”

He pointed out that militant finance had also been harmed by the condition of apple trade. “In Islam here there is a concept of ‘ushr’ which is a portion of agricultural income which can be given to anyone for a good cause, even *jihad*. This is about 10% of the agricultural income of an individual or family. And people would give it to youngsters engaged in militancy as well. Even commission agents in wholesale market do not take their commission on 10 % of the apple boxes whose sale proceed will go towards ‘ushr’. Indian security forces do not understand this and they are constantly bewildered about how the militants finance themselves,” he explained.

Search for alternative leadership:

The Central government’s search for a new leadership in Kashmir seems to be two pronged: One, wean away some ambitious and experienced politicians from the mainstream political parties; and create new leaders from amongst the representatives of local bodies, the *Panches*, *Sarpanches* and representatives elected to the Block Development Councils.

The names of some politicians from the Peoples’ Democratic Party have been doing the rounds as those who could form the core of a new political formation. Some of them have had meetings in Delhi with the powers that be. However there seems to

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be no urgency in these efforts even to form a coalition of those willing to coordinate and cooperate with Delhi.

The promotion of a new leadership from the local body representatives also seems to be a non-starter. The most important thing to note is that only about 30 per cent

village and *halqas* have elected or 'selected' (only one contestant) representatives. The voting did not exceed about 7 per cent. And nearly 70 per cent of the villages in the Valley have no *panchayat* at all as no one had come forward to contest. In some villages and *halqas* there is either only one *Sarpanch* and no *Panches* or no *Sarpanch* and only one or two *Panches*. So there is very little that qualifies these village *Panches* and *Sarpanches* as democratically representative.

A group of *Panches* and *Sarpanches* that the CCG members met seemed to suggest that they were being used by marketing them as future leaders without trying to build their legitimacy on the ground. "There are arrangements for about 700 of them in hotels in Srinagar as ostensibly they cannot go back to their villages. But the reality is that only about 70 *Panches* and *Sarpanches* are staying in the hotels. The rest come only to collect their half of the money that these hotel owners get from the government which is Rs.1700 per day per person. This has already become a racket," one *Panch* said.

Another *Panch*, and the most vocal of them, said, "Amit Shah and Prime Minister Modi have marketed Panchayats as grassroots democracy in the Valley. But here we are seen as people who wanted the abrogation of Article 370. We may not be worthy of consultations but what would have happened if we had been consulted on removing Article 370 or Article 35A? The entire propaganda about panchayats is fake. Government's "Back to Village-I" started in June did not work at all and now they have announced 'Back to Village-II'. People are so sceptical that they are saying 'After Back to Village-I' you took away Article 370, what do you want to do after 'Back to Village-II'?"

Hardly any work is being done in villages in the Valley, according to these village body representatives. "No funds are being utilised in the villages. All government schemes are geo-tagged and require internet connectivity which is not there. So nothing is happening. There are other hurdles as well," said another *Sarpanch*. Most

complained that they had been promised a monthly stipend of Rs. 1500 for a Panch and Rs.2500 for a Sarpanch but since last December most claimed to have received only about Rs.5500 in total. The Panchayat Houses in the villages are in ruins and no one sits there, not even the Village Level Workers.

If from this rag-tag bunch of people, the Central government wants to create a new leadership for Kashmir, it is clearly faced with an uphill task.

Shape of things to come:

Neither the Kashmiris nor the Central government seem to have a clear plan of how to deal with the emerging situation in J&K.

Kashmiris may be doing nothing at present to protest the Central government's actions except showing civil disobedience, but there is feeling prevalent among them that the sacrifice of thousands of their youngsters will not be allowed to go waste. "The movement may be at its lowest ebb but people feel that it will rise again when the circumstances and the world order changes. As of now there is no plan. People say that the Valley is like a volcano. No one knows when and how it will erupt," a Kashmiri youngster claimed.

There is a slow realisation even among those (e.g. Kashmiri Pandits, living in the rest of India) who welcomed the removal of the provisions of Article 370 that the Central government does not seem to have a plan for the way forward.

"They must start talking to the people start a process of some kind. There is only a short window left for doing that. After that it is quite possible that a Wahabi/Jamat-e-Islami discourse might take over. No one is talking to hoteliers, houseboat owners, orchard owners and transporters to find out how they have been affected. At least the government should talk to them," one of them said.

Another Kashmiri who claimed that he had never identified with Pakistan or the separatists said, “The people of Kashmir have responded with great maturity. The Central government needs to incentivise it. Begin by reducing the presence of the military. Remove the Armed Forces Special Powers Act. Recognise that militancy is not driven by military strategy but by emotions. Deal with the militants at the level of

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their emotions and convince them that they should live for their notion of “azadi” and not die for it. But most importantly the Centre should undo a part of what they have done and then open a window for dialogue.”

But a dialogue with whom?

A Kashmiri summarised the dilemma of the government saying, “The only thing that the government in Delhi can do is to start a process of political engagement. But those it could engage with are the same people it has jailed. It is an earthquake like situation. The quake is over but rescue, relief and rehabilitation is yet to start.”

How things shape up in Kashmir will depend entirely on the government in New Delhi. If, however, normal politics is not given a chance, the people will find their own way of dealing with the reality they face.

Conclusion:

The psyche of the people of Kashmir has been deeply wounded by the actions of the government of India.

In view of the above findings, the CCG would like to make the following demands on the Central government:

1. Release forthwith all Kashmiris who were taken into preventive detention under Public Safety Act (PSA) – whether they are politicians,

- businessmen, academics, opinion makers or students - if they are not accused of any crime. If there are specific cases against individuals and they have been sent to jails outside the state, they should be brought back and housed locally. It is a punishment for their family members to travel to UP, Delhi, Rajasthan or Haryana to meet the prisoners.
2. Restore all internet and mobile phone connections in J&K. It is immoral to impose a collective punishment on the entire population of a region.
 3. Lift all curbs on all peaceful political activity and allow peaceful public protests
 4. Lift all restriction on the movement of public and commercial vehicles on the national highways to restore normal road communication links.

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5. Alleviate the fears of the Kashmiris about their future by starting a multi-level dialogue process with all those affected by the events following August 5
6. Compensate Kashmiri farmers and businessmen for their economic losses which were the direct result of unilateral action by the government.
7. Restore land rights to the local inhabitants and give up plans of demographic change and last but the most important:-
8. Restore the statehood of J&K by reuniting the two union territories created after August 5.

Signatories

Yashwant Sinha, former Finance and Foreign Minister of India

Wajahat Habibullah, former National Chief Information Commissioner

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Bharat Bhushan, Senior Journalist

