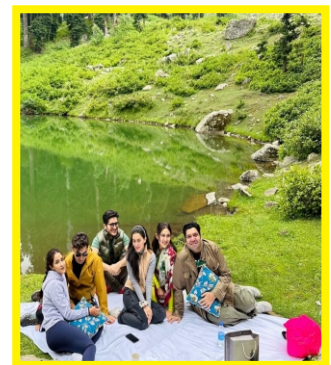




MONTHLY THEME

KASHMIR'S SWIFT SHIFT **FROM DISTURBANCE TO STABILITY**



VOL. 1 | No. 38

GLIMPSES OF MONTHLY THEME

AUG 2024

KASHMIR'S SWIFT SHIFT FROM DISTURBANCE TO STABILITY

Before 2019, Kashmir was a hotbed of unrest. The streets were often filled with the sound of shattering stones and the smell of smoke from burning tires. Protests and clashes between security forces and terrorists were a regular occurrence, leaving a trail of destruction and fear in their wake. Terrorist groups like Hizbul Mujahideen and Lashkar-e-Toiba roamed freely, striking at will and leaving a sense of dread in the hearts of civilians. The region was a battleground, with violence erupting in the form of encounters, grenade attacks, and bombings. The political landscape was equally unstable, with governments rising and falling like the seasons, and leadership that was as weak as it was ineffective. The economy suffered greatly, with tourism and business activities grinding to a halt as the unrest took its toll. And beneath it all, social tensions simmered, fueled by divisions along religious and regional lines, waiting to boil over at any moment. However, since 2019, the scenario has changed dramatically. The Indian government's decision to abrogate Article 370 and take a firm stance against militancy demonstrated strong leadership. Comprehensive counter-insurgency operations were launched, resulting in significant terrorist casualties. The security forces' presence and effectiveness increased, with improved intelligence gathering and coordination among agencies. Gradually, restrictions were lifted, and economic activities resumed. New infrastructure projects were inaugurated, and grassroots development initiatives focused on education, healthcare, and employment.

The numbers tell a remarkable story of transformation. In just two years, terrorist attacks plummeted by a staggering 70%, from 2018 to 2020. Stone-pelting incidents, once a daily occurrence, dwindled by a whopping 90% over the same period. As peace returned, tourists flocked back to the region, with arrivals surging by 20% in 2022 compared to 2019. The economy, once on life support, began to thrive, with growth soaring by 10% in 2022. Security forces, once stretched to the limit, became 50% more effective in 2022, a testament to their hard work and dedication. And perhaps most importantly, the community began to

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engage with development initiatives, participating actively in shaping their own future. The progress is undeniable, a beacon of hope in a region once ravaged by conflict.

The transformation from turmoil to tranquility in Kashmir can be credited to a potent combination of factors. Decisive political leadership and willpower set the tone for change, while enhanced security measures and counter-insurgency operations helped to root out militancy. Improved intelligence gathering and coordination enabled security forces to stay one step ahead, and the gradual restoration of normalcy and economic activities helped to revive the region's pulse. Moreover, a focus on grassroots development and community engagement empowered locals to take ownership of their future. Yet, despite this progress, challenges still linger - residual militancy, political discord, social and economic disparities, and external influences peddling propaganda. To cement the gains and create a lasting peace, sustained efforts are essential to address these residual issues and ensure that stability becomes the new normal in Kashmir.

CAUSES OF DISTURBANCE IN PAST

The political landscape of Jammu and Kashmir was a cauldron of unrest, simmering with discontent. The region was a tumultuous and volatile territory, plagued by decades of unrest, violence and bloodshed. In the past, the region was ravaged by secessionist movements, spearheaded by Pakistan-backed separatist groups that exploited religion as a weapon to preach a distorted brand of jihad. These groups, often bankrolled by foreign powers with a vested interest in destabilizing the region, lured vulnerable individuals with false promises of a utopian caliphate, exploiting their poverty, ignorance and religious fervor. The failure of successive governments to address the genuine grievances of the Kashmiri people, coupled with the absence of effective leadership, created a power vacuum that allowed these foreign-sponsored forces to flourish. The inability of the political class to find a lasting solution to the Kashmir issue perpetuated a cycle of unrest, violence and bloodshed, holding the region hostage to the whims of terrorists and their patrons. The result was a decade-long saga of turmoil, with development and progress remaining elusive and the people of Jammu and Kashmir caught in the crossfire. The region's economy was crippled, its infrastructure shattered, and its social fabric torn apart. The once-peaceful valleys and mountains of Kashmir were transformed into a battleground, where the sound of gunfire and explosions became a constant companion.

The secessionist movements, fueled by Pakistan's covert support, employed a range of tactics to achieve their goals. They recruited disillusioned youth, often from poor and marginalized communities and indoctrinated them with a radical ideology that emphasized the need for jihad and the creation of an Islamic caliphate. They also employed terror tactics, including bombings, shootings and kidnappings, to intimidate the local population and disrupt the functioning of the state. The Indian government, caught off guard by the sudden eruption of militancy in the late 1980s, struggled to respond effectively to the crisis. Its initial response, marked by heavy-handedness, only fueled flames of unrest, pushing more youth into arms of militants. Meanwhile, Pakistan continued to fish in troubled waters, using its proxies to destabilize the region and keep India on back foot. Its support for separatists was unwavering, providing them with funding, arms and training to wage a war of attrition against the Indian state. The Pakistani military played a key role in fueling the unrest, using its intelligence agencies to coordinate the activities of terrorists and provide them with strategic guidance. The consequences of this prolonged conflict were devastating. The people of valley suffered immeasurably, losing loved ones, livelihoods & a sense of security & stability. The region's economy was shattered, its infrastructure destroyed & its social fabric torn apart. The once-peaceful valley and mountains of Kashmir were transformed into a battleground, where sound of gunfire and explosions became a constant companion.

ECONOMIC INSTABILITY

Terrorism and foreign-sponsored separatism had ensnared the region in a vicious cycle of violence, causing it to plummet into an abyss of chaos, stone-peltings, hartals and economic stagnation. The region's heavy reliance on tourism, its lifeblood, had been severely impacted, leaving it underdeveloped and bereft of opportunities. The incessant turmoil had led to a dearth of jobs, leaving the population in a state of despair. The absence of peace and stability had resulted in a significant decline in tourist arrivals, leading to a drastic reduction in revenue. This, in turn, had stunted the region's economic growth, making it difficult for the government to invest in infrastructure development, education and healthcare. The economy had suffered greatly, with businesses shutting down and industries struggling to survive. The lack of economic activity had resulted in widespread unemployment, pushing the youth towards militancy and extremism. The region's potential for growth and development had been stifled by the constant turmoil, leaving it lagging behind the rest of the country. The people had been denied the opportunity to live a peaceful and prosperous life, their futures uncertain and bleak. The foreign-sponsored separatist movement had exploited the region's economic vulnerability, using it as a tool to further their own agenda. The constant influx of foreign funds had fueled the militancy, allowing it to sustain itself and continue its reign of terror. The government's efforts to address the issue had been hindered by the lack of cooperation from the separatist leaders, who had continued to fan the flames of violence and discord. The region had been trapped in a cycle of violence, with no end in sight, leaving its people to suffer the consequences.

FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO STABILITY

Jammu and Kashmir is preparing for the upcoming assembly elections— first since the abrogation of Article 370 in 2019—the region is experiencing a significant transformation in its security and economic landscape. The decision to revoke the region's special status has drastically changed the security situation, leading to a marked decrease in violence. Notably, there have been no major attacks on the civilian population recently, contributing to an overall sense of calm and security among the populace. The Jammu and Kashmir Police, in collaboration with the Indian Army, CRPF and BSF, have implemented a comprehensive security plan for the elections. This multi-layered strategy involves increased deployment of security forces, particularly in sensitive areas like South Kashmir; heightened surveillance using advanced technology and intelligence gathering; stringent checks, frisking and area domination operations; securing venues for campaign rallies and public meetings; and providing armed escorts and secure accommodations for high-risk candidates. The police have conducted detailed threat assessments for all candidates and are providing adequate security based on individual risk levels. Those deemed at higher risk due to their political affiliations or public profiles are being stationed at secure locations and given armed escorts during their campaigns.

In addition to improved security, the local economy is thriving, with businesses running better than ever. The Gross State Domestic Product (GSDP) of Jammu and Kashmir is estimated at \$ 2.30 trillion (approximately \$27.70 billion) for 2023-24, reflecting a compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 7.53% since 2018-19. The region has also welcomed 2.02 crore tourists in 2023, marking a resurgence in tourism, which is vital for the local economy. This influx includes over 50,000 foreign visitors, indicating a growing international interest in the region. Investment in Jammu and Kashmir has surged, with over 5,007 proposals for medium and small-scale enterprises, potentially injecting \$1.23 lakh crore into the economy and creating approximately 4.69 lakh jobs. Notable companies, including Emaar Group and Haldiram's, are establishing operations in the region, further enhancing economic prospects. The government's streamlined processes and new industrial policies have made it easier for businesses to thrive, contributing to an optimistic outlook for the future. The Indian Army and BSF have enhanced their vigilance along the Line of Control (LoC) and International Border (IB) to prevent any cross-border infiltration or terrorist activities. Area domination & checks in hinterland have been intensified as part of heightened security arrangements. The security forces have urged public to cooperate during checks & report any suspicious activities. The increased security presence and proactive measures have instilled a sense of confidence among the people, who feel more secure in aftermath of Article 370's abrogation. The combination of improved security, a booming tourism sector and significant investment opportunities has positioned Jammu and Kashmir on a path toward sustained economic growth and stability.

Border tourism has gained impetus in Jammu and Kashmir, with visitors expressing a preference for exploring the beautiful regions such as Keran, Teetwal, Suchetgarh, Dwar and more places that lie on the border.

INDICATORS OF STABILITY

(a) Reduced Violence: The reduction in violence in Kashmir following the abrogation of Article 370 on August 5, 2019, marks a significant shift in the region's security landscape. Prior to this decision, Kashmir experienced a high frequency of violent incidents, including stone-pelting and protests, leading to numerous civilian and security personnel casualties. For instance, from 2016 to 2019, approximately 124 civilians were killed in violent protests, whereas no such incidents occurred in the four years following the abrogation. ^{[1][2]} Statistical data from the Jammu and Kashmir police illustrates this decline in violence. From August 2016 to August 2019, there were 3,686 law and order disturbances, resulting in 191 civilian deaths. In contrast, between August 2019 and August 2022, only 438 disturbances were recorded, with civilian fatalities dropping to 110. ^{[2][3]} Additionally, the number of active militants has significantly decreased, with estimates suggesting a reduction from around 250 in late 2019 to just over 100 by 2022. ^[4] This decline is attributed to intensified anti-terror operations and a decrease in local recruitment into militant groups. The abrogation of Article 370 also facilitated the restoration of administrative control and the initiation of developmental projects, which have further contributed to the region's stability. The influx of investments and the revival of tourism indicate a shift towards normalcy, with the region witnessing over 1.88 crore tourists in the previous year alone. ^{[1][3]} While the situation remains fragile due to ongoing threats from infiltrators, the overall trend points towards a significant reduction in violence and a gradual return to normalcy in Kashmir. ^{[3][4]}

(b) Increased Economic Activity: Valley has witnessed a mixed economic performance and its economy has shown signs of recovery in recent years, it has also faced significant challenges that have hindered its growth.

[1] What changed in Kashmir in four years after abrogation of Article 370?, Deccan Herald.
[2] Comparative data of J&K police: Downward trend in Kashmir's curve of violence since last 3 years, Hindustan Times.
[3] Violence in Kashmir reduced after revoking of Article 370: Army, The Hindu.
[4] What Govt says about militancy in J&K since the scrapping of Article 370, Scroll.in

(I) GDP and Per Capita Income:

In the financial year 2019-20, J&K's economy shrank by 1%, followed by a further contraction of 1.2% the next year due to the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic. However, from the following financial year, the UT's economy started recovering, with a GDP growth of 8% in FY 2022-23, the first year not affected by the pandemic, outpacing the national GDP growth of 7% for the same period.

^[1] Despite this improvement, J&K's per capita income remains lower than the national average, growing from Rs 1.2 lakh in 2019-20 to Rs 1.7 lakh in 2022-23. ^[1]

(ii) Investment and Industrial

Growth: Since the New Industrial Policy came into effect in January 2021, the UT has received investment proposals worth Rs 84,544 crore in 42 industrial sectors.

^[1] However, the actual investment received on the ground has been sluggish, with only 414 units registered and an investment of just over Rs 2,518 crore. ^[1] The administration has received Rs 13,777 crore in land premium against proposed units. ^[1]

(iii) Sectors Contributing to the Economy:

The major sectors contributing to J&K's economy include agriculture and horticulture, tourism, handicrafts, industries, and government jobs. ^[2] The share of agriculture in the UT's GDP shrank from 18.4% in FY21 to 16.9% in FY23, while the services sector, which includes tourism, grew from 61.6% to 63.6%. ^[1] Tourism, a vital component of Kashmir's economy, accounting for 8% of the UT's GDP and employing approximately 100,000 people directly and indirectly, has been on the decline since 2016, with only 84,000 tourists visiting Kashmir valley since August 5, 2019. ^[2]

IMPROVED SOCIAL COHESION

Post August 2019, Kashmir has experienced notable improvements in social cohesion, evidenced by a significant increase in political participation and community engagement. The region saw its highest voter turnout in 40 years during the recent Lok Sabha elections, with participation rates jumping by 30 percentage points compared to 2019. Specifically, Srinagar, Baramulla and Anantnag-Rajouri recorded turnouts of 38.49%, 59.1% and 54.84%, respectively, marking the highest levels since 1984. For instance, in the Baramulla constituency, the voter turnout increased from 32.3% in 2019 to 59.1% in the recent elections, indicating a renewed interest in the political process among

the local population. Similarly, in Anantnag-Rajouri, the turnout rose from 28.8% in 2019 to 54.84%, showcasing a significant shift in voter behavior. The decline in terrorist activities has also fostered a more stable environment. Terrorist recruitment has dropped to single digits and incidents of stone-pelting and violent protests have virtually disappeared, with no significant unrest reported since the abrogation. This shift has led to a more secure atmosphere, allowing for increased community interactions and trust among different social groups. For example, the number of local youth joining terrorist ranks has declined from over 200 in 2018 to just a handful in recent years. Additionally, the absence of violent protests has enabled the resumption of economic activities and the restoration of normalcy in daily life, contributing to a sense of stability and security among the populace. Additionally, cultural initiatives promoting Kashmiri heritage have helped build a shared identity, enhancing social ties among diverse communities. Events like the Srinagar Lit Fest and the Ladakh Literature Festival have brought together writers, artists, and intellectuals from across the region, celebrating the unique cultural tapestry of Kashmir.

ENHANCED GOVERNANCE

E-Governance and Transparency: The implementation of e-Governance initiatives has played a crucial role in reducing corruption. With nearly 90% compliance in service delivery, the digitalization of government services has minimized face-to-face interactions between citizens and officials, thereby reducing opportunities for corrupt practices. The introduction of the e-Office system has streamlined processes, leading to annual savings of approximately Rs 200 crore by eliminating the traditional 'Darbar move' which involved transferring files between Jammu and Srinagar. ^{[1][2]}

Legislative Changes and Oversight: The Jammu and Kashmir Reorganisation Act has facilitated the extension of central laws to the region, which has helped standardize governance and accountability measures. Recent amendments to governance rules have increased the oversight role of the Lieutenant Governor, ensuring that critical decisions, particularly those related to police and public order, undergo thorough scrutiny before approval. ^[4] This increased oversight aims to enhance accountability and diminish corruption within the administrative framework.

Statistical Improvements: The National e-Governance Service Delivery Assessment (NeSDA) has recognized J&K for its robust performance in online service delivery across multiple sectors. These advancements reflect a commitment to good governance, with a focus on transparency and efficiency, contributing to a notable reduction in corruption levels compared to previous years. ^{[2][3]} Overall, the governance reforms post-2019 in Jammu and Kashmir have aimed not only at administrative efficiency but also at fostering a culture of transparency and accountability, significantly lessening corruption in the process.

CHALLENGES AND CONCERNS

The Kashmir region is plagued by a multitude of challenges and concerns, which have been exacerbated by terrorist infiltration from Pakistan. The presence of terrorist groups, such as Jaish-e-Mohammad and Lashkar-e-Toiba, supported by Pakistan, continues to destabilize the valley, complicating efforts for peace and stability. The region faces significant social and economic disparities, including high unemployment rates, limited access to education and healthcare and lower per capita income compared to the national average. The prolonged disturbance has led to a decline in tourism, a significant contributor to the region's economy, and restrictions on movement and economic activity have hindered the growth of local businesses. The Jammu Chamber of Commerce and Industries (JCCI) has expressed concerns about the proposed property tax, fearing it will further weaken the people economically. The socio-economic revival of Kashmir is contingent upon the cessation of violence and the establishment of a peaceful environment, which would encourage investment and the return of displaced individuals. External influences, particularly the geopolitical rivalry between India and Pakistan, play a crucial role in the Kashmir conflict. The withdrawal of NATO forces from Afghanistan has raised concerns about potential spillover effects in Kashmir, as regional dynamics shift. Misinformation campaigns and propaganda from Pakistan contribute to public sentiment and can escalate tensions further. The international community has a critical role to play in promoting a peaceful resolution to the conflict, but the complexities of the issue require a nuanced understanding of the historical, cultural and political context. The challenges in Kashmir are further compounded by the lack of effective governance and the erosion of trust between the government and the people. The need for a more inclusive and participatory approach to governance, which addresses the concerns and aspirations of the Kashmiri people, is critical to building a more just and equitable society. The challenges and concerns in Kashmir are multifaceted and require a comprehensive approach to address the complex historical, cultural, and political context of the region.