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KASHMIRI GIRLS - BREAKING THE STEREOTYPES



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KASHMIRI GIRLS - BREAKING THE STEREOTYPES

A long history of violence, terrorism and separatism has severely impacted the lives of women in the region. They have faced various forms of discrimination, violence and harassment. Kashmiri women have encountered multiple challenges, including limited access to education, healthcare, economic opportunities, restrictions on their mobility and exposure to gender-based violence. They had to live through years of trauma due to the violence and terrorism pushed by Pakistan. Apart from direct attacks on the Kashmiris, Pakistan had propagated the self-made religious literature to radicalize Kashmiri society. Post Abrogation of Article 370, J&K government has made strong efforts to reduce the gap between women and men entrepreneurs in a systematic manner. More than three years down the line these efforts have started achieving the desired results. The situation of Kashmiri women is improving rapidly with efforts of LG government and the Union Government in the region. The women are breaking the barriers and giving a tough competition to the male entrepreneurs. They are taking to social media and showcasing their hidden talents and creativity. Social media is providing them a platform to express themselves and become economically empowered.

With increasing use of social media even Women from rural areas are taking to the digital space to share their stories and talents. Rural women are defying the social norms of the society with each social media post. They are breaking stereotypes and dispelling preconceived notions with every social media post. In the face of religious conservatism and patriarchy, the new generation of women in Kashmir – models, makeup artists, singers etc. have employed their creativity to create successful social media influencer careers. Kashmiri young girls are choosing versatile careers and giving a healthy competition to the male population. They are looking for employment avenues that were once considered unfit for them. With changing scenario of Kashmir, the dynamics of Kashmiri society have also transformed from acute conservatism to evolving liberalism. Kashmiri girls are not just restricted to few particular fields;



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but they are exploring every opportunity that is coming at their hands. Last year Sadia Tariq from Srinagar became the first Indian girl to get a Wushu World Gold Medal at the Moscow Wushu Stars event. The transformation has not just restricted to individual pursuits, but there is a sprout of women's sports clubs and leagues. A testament of resilience and women empowerment is Nadiya Nighat who apart from playing for clubs, doubles up as a coach for the Kashmir Hero FC and travels through the Union Territory organizing academies to train young girls. She is making her name in a male-dominated sport. Nadiya trains more than 40 girls and boys today. The household of Nighat primarily depends on Nighat's own earnings as a professional footballer and coach.

The popularity of Kashmiri women excelling in sports is reaching the other states and is becoming a testament for transformative power of breaking gender norms. Kashmiri women are not only dominating the playing fields but also the hearts and minds of the people, witnessing a paradigm shift. In a region where terrorism had often overshadowed stories of triumph, the resilience of Kashmiri women in sports and other fields stands tall. It serves as a beacon of hope, breaking barriers and scripting a fresh narrative for generations to come.

CONDITION OF WOMEN IN PAST

Women's political and social empowerment is an area where all societies fall short to a certain extent, particularly the patriarchal Kashmiri society. Because of its traditional and rural character, Kashmiri society suffers more than any other Indian society. In India, despite the progressive policies being taken by successive governments ever since Independence, the percentage of women in the Lok Sabha from 1952 to 2014 stood at 6.91% whereas, in the Rajya Sabha for the same period it stood at 9.62%. Similarly, in all walks of life, women are absent and the situation is even worse in Kashmir. The political positions of a few women belonging to noble families or dynasties are misleading and do not reflect the reality on the ground. An attempt was made to empower women at various levels by reserving seats and constituencies for women. However, here too, either elite women grab the opportunities or their men rule through the façade of these women.

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RELIGIOUS CONSERVATISM IN KASHMIR

Religious conservatism has been a major issue hindering women empowerment in Kashmir valley. Kashmiri men influenced with the radicalism have undergone no modification in their attitude towards women. The ideology spread by Jamaat e Islami and other radical elements in Kashmir disallow interaction of women with the modern world. However, in reality, Islam considers women as equal to men. Contrastingly, in Kashmiri society, women have been restricted to the kitchen only. They are not given equal status as that of their counterparts.

The outrage over 16-year-old Kashmiri girl Zaira Wasim, who played the role in Bollywood film Dangal is perplexing and it is essential to comprehend the rationale behind such inhospitable behaviour. Back in 2013, three Kashmiri girl rock band Pragaash had gained international recognition. However, the band members faced extreme abuse and hate on social media. *Pragaash* is a Kashmiri word meaning 'from darkness to light' which in English translates to the 'first ray of sunlight'. The members of the band were given death threats after they performed in public at Srinagar. The Pragaash girls, like Zaira Wasim, were also accused of being un-Islamic and shameless. They eventually gave up. However, stopping was not enough. Zaira had to issue an apology letter, which was later withdrawn. Now in case if music is a sin in Islam, then it should be for both men and women. However in valley women remain on the top of the list of religious fanatics. They not only want to control the choices of women, but also choose for them. Religion and gender politics have always played a prominent role in the dynamics of Kashmiri society. Drawing such a nexus between art, religion, and gender has placed women at a double disadvantage – from outside as well as inside. The terrorism and violence has damaged the fabric of Kashmiri society and religious undertones have been hostile to the freedom of choice for women in the valley.



Both these cases involve the unfortunate murder of women. Whenever the Kashmiri women had ventured out to realise their potential, the radical elements always placed hurdles in their way. Kashmir had various forms of art that have flourished equally over a period of time. However, the hostile attacks on young Kashmiri girls are disastrous and religiously motivated. The bizarre disharmony needs to be fought from within. The Kashmiri women have to regain and rediscover their valuable place in the renditions of both the Muslim and Kashmiri artists.

CHANGED SCENARIO OF KASHMIR POST ABROGATION OF ARTICLE 370

Post the abrogation of Article 370, the valley has witnessed several initiatives which are transforming the lives of Kashmiri women and promoting gender equality in the region. Govt is promoting schemes for women empowerment in Jammu and Kashmir. Mr Manoj Sinha, who took charge as the Hon'ble Lieutenant Governor of J&K in August 2020 has been focusing on numerous initiatives aimed at improving the lives of Kashmir women.

The initiatives like J&K Rural Livelihood Mission is transforming the lives of Kashmiri women and facilitating in promotion of entrepreneurship and self-employment among women in rural areas. Kashmiri women are receiving training in various skills, including handicrafts, tailoring and food processing under this initiative. They are being provided with seed capital and marketing support to start their own businesses. From the first, Mr Manoj Sinha focused on improving the access of women to education. He launched the **Super 75 Scholarship Scheme** in December 2020 through which free coaching is being provided to underprivileged students, especially meritorious girls belonging to poor families. The scheme has benefited to around four thousand students from different districts of Jammu and Kashmir.

Besides this, Government launched **The Sakhi One-Stop Center** which provide essential services and support to victims of violence and abuse. Government also launched Mission Youth initiative which aims to engage and empower the youth, including women in the decision-making process. Mr Sinha has left no stone unturned for the empowerment of youth and women in Jammu and Kashmir. In addition to these initiatives, Manoj Sinha has also emphasised the need for gender sensitisation and awareness in Jammu and Kashmir. He has sensitised young boys and men on gender equality and women rights to create a more inclusive and safe society.

The impact of these initiatives on empowerment women in Jammu and Kashmir has been significant. The J&K Rural Livelihoods Mission has helped to create over 2,000 women entrepreneurs in the region, providing them with a sustainable source of income and economic independence. The Super 75 Scholarship Scheme has helped to increase the number of girls attending coaching classes, leading to a significant improvement in their academic performance. The Sakhi One-Stop Center has provided crucial support to women who have faced violence and abuse, helping them to access the justice and support they need.

These efforts require more expansion to ensure that women in Jammu and Kashmir have equal access to opportunities and are empowered to lead fulfilling lives. A society that respects and values its women is a society that thrives and prospers. The leadership of Mr Manoj Sinha is a welcome step towards creating a more inclusive and equitable society in

Jammu and Kashmir. It is pertinent to mention some examples which we all have seen in the backdrop of appointments of women to the top posts. Be it the appointment of woman Vice Chancellor in Kashmir University, Woman Secretary in Sports Council, election of Woman Chairperson in JK Haj Committee, and other positions is a crucial step towards gender equality and inclusivity in the region. The appointment of women in the top positions is seen as a ground-breaking move that challenges the traditional gender roles and stereotypes that have dominated the region.

These appointments reflect a changing mind-set and a commitment towards gender equality and women's empowerment in Jammu and Kashmir. Women in these positions can serve as role models and inspire other women to break free from traditional gender roles and stereotypes and pursue their aspirations. However, there is still a long way to go towards achieving gender equality and women's empowerment in Jammu and Kashmir. Despite these appointments, women in the region still face several challenges, including limited access to education, healthcare, and economic opportunities, and exposure to gender-based violence and abuse. Therefore, it is essential to sustain and expand the efforts towards women's empowerment and gender equality in the region. The leadership of Mr Manoj Sinha and the government is crucial in this regard, and their commitment to women's empowerment and gender equality needs to be reinforced and continued.

EVOLVING MODERNIZATION IN KASHMIR

According to the latest report by the National Crime Records Bureau, Jammu and Kashmir women have suffered various crimes, including rape, molestation and domestic violence. The report also highlights the low rate of society's intervention in such cases, which further exacerbates the problem. Despite these challenges, women in Jammu and Kashmir have shown remarkable resilience and courage in overcoming the obstacles to their empowerment. However, over the years, there has been a significant increase in women's participation in various fields, including politics, education, and entrepreneurship. Women in Jammu and Kashmir have also formed self-help groups and cooperatives, which have

helped them to access credit and to market their products.

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In four years, Kashmir has witnessed a massive transformation that was once hard to imagine. A roadmap has been framed for next 25 years including the changes envisioned to happen in the union territory J&K. Kashmir is witnessing a paradigm shift in women empowerment and attitude towards them. Kashmir has come a long way from extreme conservatism to the evolving phases of liberalism. There are no frequent protests, stone-pelting and shutdowns. Separatist politics which spread the hatred and religious indoctrination has disappeared. The success stories of women are revolving everywhere on media platforms. The shift in attitude of Kashmiris towards nation building has helped valley to receive record breaking tourist foot-fall. Tourists are now visiting the hitherto no-go zones near the border with Pakistan. The on-going transformation is principally driven by the suppression of separatist politics, decline in terrorism and the growth in tourism.

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KASHMIRI GIRLS LEADING THE COUNTRY

Kashmiri girls are leading from the front on both national as well as on international stage. They are receiving appreciation and bringing laurels for their country, thereby proving wrong the religious extremists who constrained their freedom for decades. In past, they had to face limited opportunities, gender bias and societal expectations that related women to traditional roles. In present times, they are outshining boys in every field from scientific studies to sports. Kashmiri girls have come a long way in sports and are standing firm as a testament to commitment and determination. The remarkable achievements of individual female athletes like the female football coach Nadiya Nighat, power lifter Arifa Bilal, kickboxer Tajamul Islam and Sadia Tariq will act as a towering inspiration for generations to come. ^[1]

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[1] *How Kashmir has changed in four years after Art 370 abrogation*, Riyaz Wani August 16, 2023.

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RIISING KASHMIRI WOMEN INFLUENCERS

Women from rural Kashmir are challenging societal norms with each passing day. They are stimulating a wave of digital change in the region. Kashmir region is marked by job scarcity, its youth, particularly women grapple with limited opportunities. In midst of challenging situations, social media has emerged as a beacon of hope, offering a platform for self-expression and economic empowerment. [2] In the ever-evolving world of content creation, a group of remarkable women from rural Kashmir are utilizing the digital platform to showcase their talents. In the meanwhile, they are dismantling stereotypes and defying prejudices. Women from valley are challenging the patriarchy with their each social media post. Despite facing religious conservatism and patriarchal power structures, this new generation of Kashmiri women including models, make-up artists, singers, social media icons etc have harnessed their creativity to create their prosperous careers. Some of the successful women social media influencers are mentioned below.

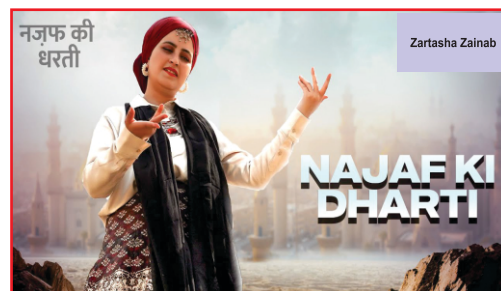
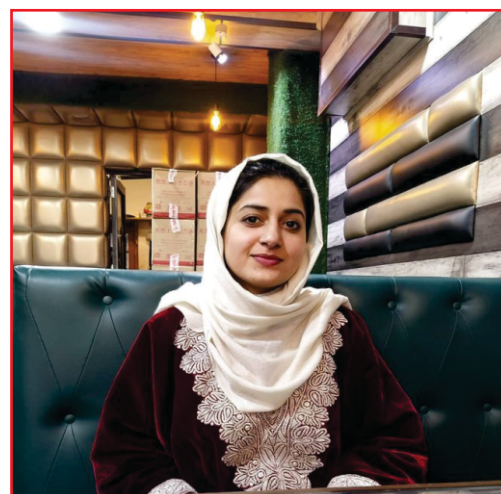
a) Mateena Rajput: Mateena is a well-known actor from Handwara area of Kupwara who gained immense popularity among the youth of J&K for her Instagram content. The content she posts on her account ranges from film promotions, glimpses of everyday life to reels showing new outfits and travel destinations. In the beginning of her journey, she encountered several challenges and it was difficult for her to make rural people understand the value of digital space. However when she succeeded everyone acknowledged her efforts. Mateena has now more than 68,000 Instagram followers on her Instagram account. [3]

b) Sayeda Hubza Ali: Sayeda Hubza Ali is a popular vlogger who captures daily life, family moments, new locations and related stuff on her social media accounts. She lives in remote village of Uri area in north Kashmir's Baramulla district. At the onset of her journey, she had to deal with a lot of negative comments, but she remained committed and ignored them. She allowed her journey to flourish and has now 60,400 and 27,000 followers on her facebook page.

c) Farah Zaidee: Farah is content creator who lives in Kupwara district. She is a passionate advocate for social change who shares awareness videos and host live sessions to raise awareness about gender-based violence. Her social media journey has also been a means to share her travel experiences. She travelled to a lot of villages for her fieldwork during which she captured the scenic beauty and kept sharing that with people. Farah earns through her social media by doing paid promotions for different brands. Farah believes that the digital space offers an essential avenue for self-expression. Farah is an Instagram sensation with over 62,300 followers and has 17,000 followers on Facebook. Farah encountered various attacks from accounts impersonating as women and also faced criticism from the extremist elements.

d) Saba Shafi: Saba Shafi is the first female make-up artist specializing in bridal make-up from the remote Seelo village in north Kashmir's Sopore. When Saba introduced this concept, people were apprehensive about spending thousands of rupees on make-up. It was challenging for her to convey the importance of looking beautiful, especially on one's wedding day. Saba uploads photos and videos of herself and some brides on her Instagram handle, 'makeupbysaba'. Her uploads feature the make-up artistry and emphasise the significance of looking beautiful for special occasions. Her Instagram handle has amassed a following of 1.56 lakh followers.

e) Zartasha Zainab: Zartasha is a talented Pahari community singer from a remote village of Baramulla. She is celebrated by youngsters for her captivating short reels and covers of popular songs. However, she had to overcome numerous challenges to become a social media influencer. With 16,000 followers on Instagram, Zartasha is one of the social media influencers who has sung in many popular songs in valley and is on the rise in the world of music.



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breaking records and shattering stereotypes in various fields including sports.**

KASHMIR GIRLS IN SPORTS FIELD



a) Areebah Ajaz: Abreebah is a 16-year-old Kashmiri girl based in Dubai. She is passionate about sports including skating, swimming and badminton. She has secured many medals so far. In November 2023, she participated in the Interschool Roller Skating competition in Dubai and won two back-to-back gold medals. ^[4]

b) Dar Saawya Ashiq: Dar Saawya Ashiq is an 11-year-old girl from Kulgam who won the title at 11th National Pre-Teen, Pre-Junior and Junior Championship at Patliputra Sports Stadium in Patna, Bihar in Dec 2023. Around 1400 players were representing 34 States and Union Territories in the Championship. When reflecting on her success, Saawya highlighted the challenges faced by athletes in a conservative society of Jammu Kashmir.

c) Sadia Tariq: Sadia Tariq is among the brilliant players who won the gold medal in Moscow Wushu Stars Championship which was held in the Russian capital in February 2022. Sadia Tariq from Srinagar has consecutively bagged gold medals in 19th and 20th Junior National Championship held in Haryana on March 2021 and Jalandhar Oct 2022 respectively. In the Moscow Wushu Stars Championship, Sadia won the gold medal by defeating a local favourite at the event in 2022. Since then she started to play on regular basis and featured in many events like sub-juniors National Taekwondo championship etc. Back in 2018, she won bronze medal in Hyderabad for International Junior Taekwondo Championship and also participated in Imphal, Nagaland for 64th National school games. ^[5]

d) Tajamul Islam: Tajamul Islam, 13-years-old, is the first young girl from Kashmir to represent India in kickboxing Championship in Cairo, Egypt. A class-7th student, Tajamul defeated Argentina's Lalina in the finals and secured a gold medal. Earlier in 2016, she had represented India in Italy also. ^[6]

e) Nadiya Nighat: Nadiya Nighat is one such young and determined professional football player who confronted societal norms to pursue her passion. She is Kashmir first and only female football coach from Kashmir who has reformed the attitudes of people through her love for the sport. She pushed herself to play football which is a problematic choice in Kashmiri society. She had to tolerate taunts from her relatives, neighbours and even from her own family. At first, her parents did not encourage her since she came from a financially weak family. Nadiya had to face the brunt of even physical torture. She was beaten with belts. Nadiya's parents were forced by the society that sports is not for girls. She was discouraged from going out as her parents feared the taunts from neighbours and relatives. ^[7] However, she stood firm and determined. Nadiya was the only girl among 47 boys in a Football academy in Srinagar. She was spotted by Mohammed Abdullah who ran an academy at the A S College in Srinagar. Nadiya learnt the basics of the game from him. Not everyone was comfortable with the idea of a girl playing with boys. However, this did not stop from pursuing her passion. The turning point came in 2010 when she was selected for the nationals. It was at this juncture, when her parents acknowledged her as a sports person. But it was enough for her, since she wanted to transform the way people thought about girls and she was successful to some extent in bringing about some change in the thinking of people towards girls taking up football as a sport.

[4] Kashmiri girl Tajamul Islam wins world, Times of India, Oct 30, 2021.

[5] Kashmiri Girl Wins Gold Medal In Moscow Wushu Stars Championship, Kashmir Life, Feb 27, 2022.

[6] Kashmiri Girl to Represent UAE in Roller Skating Competition, Greater Kashmir, Dec 11, 2023.

[7] I have made Football the kick of my life: Nadiya Nighat, Nakul Shivani, Awaaz The Voice, 2023.

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CONCLUSION

The past decades have been ghostly for the women in Kashmir as they have fought a long battle against the terrorism and violence. They have suffered emotionally and physically. Numerous agencies, including the international agencies, have documented the sexual exploitation, torture and rape of Kashmiri women by terrorists. The situation of women in the Kashmir valley has improved with implementation of the laws and regulations that focus on their betterment, security and safety. Women of Kashmir have fought against all odds and their resilience and empowerment go hand in hand. However empowerment requires internal and external support which has been made possible with extension of central laws to the UT. Women of the valley have become more resilient due to the steps taken by the system to empower them. However, the situation of the Kashmiri women needs more improvement in education, health and economic empowerment. Legal and psycho-social counselling and campaigns against stereotyped patriarchal mentality that can transform the future of the women in the valley.



