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### RESEARCH ARTICLE

#### AGITATIONAL DYNAMICS IN THE KASHMIR VALLEY AND ITS IMPACT

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#### Abstract

The state of Jammu and Kashmir (now a UT after the abrogation of article 370) is not only the casus belli of three wars between India and Pakistan but is also a possible nuclear flashpoint. Thus the security situation in Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) is a cause of concern not only for the two states but also for South Asia and the entire world. The state-sponsored proxy war in J&K and the resultant militarization of the entire state has turned the situation into a vicious spiral that threatens to go out of control every few years since the 1980s. The dynamics of Kashmir valley have also oscillated from peaceful marches on one end to the forced exodus of Kashmiri Pandits, mass murders by the terrorists, heavy-handedness by the security forces, and violent protests across the Kashmir valley. Amongst this melee of constant violence and curbs on a day to day freedom, the ultimate losers are the people of the state. The aspirations and happiness of these common people have somehow been lost on the state and national governments, the curbs on the flourishing of civil society, and the environment of fear generated by the so-called militants and militarization of the state. An analysis of these mass protests gives out the general mood of the public if not the actual aspirations of the people. The factors causing the security situation in the valley to deteriorate need to be taken cognizance of not only in the domain of law and order but also in the modifications to the approach required to renew and reestablish a compact with the people of the state.

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#### Introduction:-

The state of J&K, especially the Kashmir valley, has been the bone of contention between two major South Asian states – India and Pakistan. For India, Kashmir is an integral part of itself after its accession and for Pakistan, it has been the unfinished agenda of partition. Three wars have been fought between the two states since partition apart from the proxy war waged by Pak in the state. But the main stakeholders – the people of J&K, are the ones who suffer the consequences of this continuous struggle. Probably between the disputes of states, the aspirations of a people are trivialized – until that people rise in revolution, violent or non-violent. But still, do the people get their due – or their blood is but a means to the political ends of few and mighty? The spate of violent mass protests in 2008, 2010, and more recently in 2016 has broken the myth of prevailing normalcy and peace in the state of J&K.

The state of J&K has an area of 2,22,236 sq km and a population of 1.25 crores. The state has an IB, also called working by Pak of 209 km, LC of 772 km, and LAC of 826 km. The state is administratively divided into three divisions – Jammu, Kashmir, and Ladakh, Kashmir being the most populated with the least area and Ladakh with the max area and least population. The main demographic groups are the Kashmiris, residing in the Kashmir valley,

Gujjars and Bakarwals, Paharis, Dogras, and Ladakhis. The population of Kashmir valley is 69.1 lakh which comprises 96.4% Muslims, 2.45% Hindus, and 0.98% Sikhs (contributors 2018, Census 2011).

Kashmir valley saw the rise of armed insurgency supported by Pak in the late 1980s with the evolution of various militant groups or tanzeems like JKLF, HM, LeT, etc. The Indian state responded with massive deployment of army in the State along the Line of Control as well as the hinterland. The initial deployment of army and counter-insurgency operations raised a hue and cry about Human Rights violations worldwide. The massacre of protestors at Gaukadal in Jan 1990, the killing of protestors in Handwara during the same month, the Sopore and Bijbehara massacre in 1992 and 1993, the Konan Poshpora case, the extrajudicial killings by security personnel and fake encounters highlight the plight of common people of the state as well as the seeds of acrimony between the local population, security forces and the government (Bhat 2015). The counter-insurgency operations in the state have resulted in the death of approximately 16000 militants, 13500 civilians, and 4600 security forces personnel (n.d., South Asia Terrorism Portal).

However, with the election of the popular government of National Conference in 1996 and the dynamic changes in the strategy by security forces and the central government over some time as peace initiatives caused a steady decline in the armed insurgency till in 2008 it appeared that a semblance of normalcy might be achieved. But the situation in the valley again took a downward spiral with mass protests across the valley in 2008, 2010, and finally in 2016 which turned violent and resulted in many casualties to civilians and security forces personnel (Khan 2017). The period after 2010 saw a glimmer of hope with the situation in the valley stabilizing and people participating in the democratic electoral process in huge numbers. With the PDP securing a majority in the state elections in 2014 and forming an alliance with BJP the environment of suspiciousness prevailed and finally the killing of Burhan Wani, a local militant, by the Army on 08 Jul 2016 acted as a trigger which prompted immediately and mass protests across the Kashmir valley (Shah 2018).

#### **2008 Protests:**

The year 2008 marked the initiation of mass protests in the valley after a long duration wherein people in the valley defied curfew and restrictions imposed on them to come out onto the streets and protest against the State govt decision. The protests started on 26 May 2008 to oppose the decision of the State govt to transfer 99 acres of forest land to Shri Amarnath Shrine Board (SASB) for setting up shelters for the yatris coming for an annual pilgrimage to Amarnath Shrine, a revered Hindu shrine of Lord Shiva located near Baltal in Kashmir valley. The Muslim majority in Kashmir valley as opposed to the decision as they perceived it to be a ploy of the central govt to further dilute the provisions of Article 370 in the valley by allotting land to the shrine board. The Amarnath Yatra Sangharsh Samiti responded by blockade the valley from the Jammu side which is Hindu dominated. This created a regional divide between the regions of Jammu and Kashmir. The fruit growers in the valley joined the protests against the blockade and carried out a march to LC towards Uri symbolizing their intent of trading towards PoK. The protests were mainly peaceful initially but turned violent on 11 Aug 2008 after the police fired on protestors trying to cross the LoC and resulted in the death of 15 personnel. Agitations were suspended on 31 Aug 2008 after 61 days when the State govt canceled the decision to transfer land to SASB (n.d., Amarnath Land Transfer 2008).

#### **2010 Protests:**

Mass protests again erupted in the valley when the news broke on 11 Jun 2010 that three civilians of the Rafiabad area were killed by the Army in a fake encounter in Kupwara on 30 Apr 2010. The protests became violent and spiraled out of control when 17-year-old Tufail Mattoo was killed in police firing on 11 Jun. A vicious cycle of violence followed – protests resulting in more deaths by police firing, and thus fuelling further violent protests. Up to Sep 2010, 110 people were killed and 537 injured in these protests. Curfew was imposed in the valley and defied by the people. This was a new phenomenon wherein the people did not adhere to the restrictions imposed by the law and instead defying curfew became a standard practice. The govt sent an ‘all-party’ delegation to Kashmir to resolve the impasse. This was followed by the appointment of a team of three interlocutors who formulated a report – A New Compact With the People of Jammu and Kashmir, after detailed interaction with different sections of the populace in the Kashmir valley, and submitted to the govt (n.d., Kashmir Unrest 2010).

#### **2016 Protests:**

On 8 Jul 2016 Burhan Wani, a local militant was killed by the Army in an operation in Tral village in South Kashmir. The killing of Burhan Wani, who had become known as the poster boy of HM, triggered violent protests across the valley. The primary reason for the Burhan aftermath was that he was the face of a home grown insurgency

of Kashmir, not a Pak trained militant. His popularity on social media had made him a symbol of the self-determination struggle of the Kashmiris. The violent protests that followed resulted in the death of 85 civilians. Curfew was imposed in all 10 districts of the Kashmir region for continuous 53 days. Amarnath yatra was suspended and home recruitment for armed insurgency reached a peak. The open Pak support to the protests deteriorated the Indo-Pak relations. The use of pellet guns by the CAPF on the protestors became an international issue because of incidents of blinding of children. Regular protests as part of the calendar were issued by Hurriyat. Intifada-style stone-pelting became the order of the day and the vicious cycle of violence continued (n.d., Kashmir Unrest 2016).

#### **Anatomy of Mass Protests:**

A mass protest generally originates due to popular discontent among the public against the authority and has the inherent characteristic of being popular. These protests can be against policies of the state, HR violations, or any issue of public interest which the people expect as their right. However, the same cannot be contested for a violent crowd like that of stone pelters. These are, more often than not, orchestrated events manipulated either by paying the group inciting violence or mass propaganda. So how does a mass protest take place? In the Kashmir valley, the call for protest or band is generally given by the hardline faction of the Hurriyat. In the aftermath of Burhan killing, weekly protest calendars were issued by the Hurriyat which were propagated by mobiles, social media, and word of mouth. The people, particularly the youth in a particular area would blockade the routes passing through and pelt stones at military and civil vehicles. This would be followed by the arrival of security forces with whom the protesters would exchange verbal abuses and stones. The security forces would then retaliate with tear gas and eventually pellet guns or if the situation deteriorated, with real bullets. Any civilian casualty in such an event would invite further protests and solidarity marches for the killed civilians. This cycle of violence would continue further with inflammatory speeches in mosques on Fridays (R. 2017).

The protests in the valley, though initially triggered by separate incidents which resulted in widespread discontent amongst the Kashmiri populace, eventually took the turn of a mass movement for self-determination, or so is contented. An analysis of the anatomy of these protests needs to be carried out for correct assessment:-

#### **(a) Initiation of Protests:**

The initiation of protests has been peaceful and restricted to solidarity marches by the public in support of the slain civilian/ militant to participate in his funeral and mass prayers as in 2010 and 2016 or mass agitations against the govt policy as in 2008. The political rivalry between the two major political parties in the state has also been elementary to the initiation of these protests.

#### **(b) Violent Agitations:**

The protests soon turned violent in the face of opposition by security forces and stone-pelting by these crowds. The clashes of protesters with the security forces caused further casualties on both sides and thus started the cycle of violence.

#### **(c) Manipulation and orchestration:**

The militants, hardliners, religious extremists, and political opponents have all exploited this opportunity to fan the flames of discontent to suit their motives and created unrest in the valley. The separatists started issuing protest calendars, the religious preachers advocated and encouraged stone-pelting on security forces in the name of Islam and rival political parties encouraged the unrest to destabilize the government in power (Kumar 2016).

#### **(d) Arson:**

With the police and other security forces engaged in mob control in the entire valley, the situation became ripe for arsonists and looters to make hay. 34 incidents of arson in schools were recorded between July and December 2016.

#### **(e) Looting:**

The demonetization had a major impact on the mass agitations in the valley with a clampdown on payment to elements orchestrating the stone-pelting and arson activities. Looting of banks and ATMs has become a favorite tool for financing these activities in the absence of any law and order.

**(f) Snatching of Weapons:**

The Burhan aftermath has also seen a steady rise in the snatching of arms from the security forces personnel after attacking them. This can be reasonably assumed to cater for additional recruitment of local youth to militancy and a limited supply of weapons from across the border (Chauhan 2016).

**(g) Killing of Sarpanches/ prominent members of Society:**

The militants have also resorted to killing prominent civil society members at the panchayat levels to instill terror in the public as well as to show the incompetence of govt to protect them from the militants.

**(h) Breaking of cordon/ stone-pelting on Security Forces carrying out CT operations:**

The latest trend has been to carry out stone-pelting on security forces personnel involved in counter militancy operations wherein the crowds mobilize in large numbers to disrupt the operation.

**(i) Inclusion of College and School Students in the Protests:**

Gradually the separatists roped in school and college students in the protests and pictured of girls and boys in school uniform pelting stones on the security forces went viral on social media.

**Dynamics of Mass Protests:**

The protests in the valley in 2016 are inherently different from those of 2008 and 2010. They were triggered not by some govt policy or HR violation issue, as in 2008 and 2010 respectively, but the response to the killing of a known local militant. Though Burhan Wani was a leader of the pro-Pak HM outfit, he had never been to Pak for training and his popularity was based not on his violent exploits against the security forces but his exploitation of social media as a propaganda tool. The people of Kashmir identified with his personality and ideals. The 2010 protests were limited to Srinagar, Baramulla, Sopore, and Anantnag – primarily urban driven, whereas 2016 protests engulfed the entire valley – mostly rural areas of the valley. The huge gathering of the public at the mourning of Burhan Wani was symbolic of the solidarity of the public with the slain militant's family, but it soon spiraled into violent mass protests across the valley. The fragility of prevailing peace was evident from the relative ease by which the general public became violently opposed to the security forces – the symbolic expression of the Indian state. The public started coming in open support of the militants and tried to break security forces' cordons to save the surrounded militants, pelting stones many times. Mosques became the rallying places for protests wherein the religious leaders encourage and instigate people for demonstrations and stone-pelting. The smallest incident became a trigger for further violent protests. 'Azadi' slogan has only become stronger in response to the militaristic steps of the govt. The restoration of normalcy efforts of the govt is directed more towards wearing out the population rather than engagement with different sections of the society, thereby playing into the hands of the hardliners. The govt approach of shunning violence as a precondition to dialogue has not borne fruit, neither tends to relate the mass protests to hardline Islamic ideology. The ignorance of genuine concerns of the Kashmiris and the inability of the govt to redress them has only fueled the call for Azadi among the people, especially the youth (Masood 2016).

**Underlying Reasons for Mass Agitations :**

The primary causes for mass protests can be many – lack of democratic space for the people, absence of political engagement with the public, HR abuses by the authority, the prevailing sense of absence or denial of justice or fear of the trend of Hindutva and 'Ghar Wapsi' owing to the alliance of PDP with BJP. What do the people of Kashmir want with these violent protests – AZADI. 'Hum kya chahte – Azadi(n.d., youtube 2016)'. This concept of Azadi is not only complex to understand for the outsiders but also for the Kashmiris. It can have varied interpretations like freedom from Indian rule, freedom from poverty, from fear of the gun, from unemployment, etc.- but in layman terms, it generally refers to freedom from Indian rule. Why? The most important and serious issue is the heavy militarization of the state. People of Kashmir want freedom from being under the shadow of the gun at all times, freedom from being checked at any corner, freedom to move anywhere, and at any time of day or night without threat of being fired upon. But is that enough?

**The perspective of Security Forces:**

Security forces and intelligence agencies claim that these protests are managed and manipulated by Pak and its supporting hardliners through social media propaganda and channelizing of 'Hawala' money into the valley. Strong evidence has been corroborated by intelligence agencies to indicate that stone-pelting activities are managed and paid for. Most of the stone pelters belong to families below the poverty line. NC and PDP blame each other for instigating the protesters during respective govt rule. These protests are creating new and difficult challenges for the

state and central govt as there is no leadership to negotiate or reason with. This lack of defined leadership in these protests is both the strength and weakness of the protestors. The use of force on the stone pelters and protestors raises HR issues and precisely for this purpose is being manipulated by the inimical elements. Nonlethal weapons like pellet guns have caused more harm than good and have become evidence of the cruelty of the security forces. Moreover, the issue of keeping the presence of security forces restricted to the LC and reduce the numbers in the hinterland is countered by the security forces strategists that the hinterland would become a haven for armed insurgents and would lead to a massive increase in local recruitment. The presence of security forces in the hinterland is imperative for curbing the religious and social media drive for calling upon the youth in the valley to join the armed rebellion.

#### **Role of Social Media:**

Social media has played a pivotal role in the evolution of mass protests in the valley, especially in 2016. Whatsapp groups created in Pak have fanned the flames in Kashmir and incited and encouraged stone-pelting activities as well as local recruitment for an armed insurgency. The prompt succession of Burhan Wani by Sabzar Ahmad Bhat on social media as well as various threats made by the militants to the Police and people who inform about them to the army are some examples of the way social media is being exploited by the anti-India elements. Group messages are discreetly sent to various parts of the valley to coordinate the mass protests simultaneously, thereby dividing the efforts of the security forces (Saha 2017). The govt responds by restricting internet access in parts of the valley thus creating functional problems for the innocent public as well. Social media has become the sharpest tool of propaganda by the protestors to create and instill hatred amongst the local population for India and demand self-determination status.

#### **Burning of Govt Schools :**

The burning of govt schools in almost all districts of Kashmir and continuous disruption of school education of students are part of a calculated strategy to deny formal education to the children, who perforce would have to join the religious schools and create future recruits for the armed insurgency (Fareed 2016).

#### **An attempt at Radicalization of the Youth:**

About 70% of the total male population of Kashmir are below the age of 35 with a high unemployment index in the valley of about 41% which provides adequate opportunity to the hardliners to recruit new people (n.d., Peer, Mansoor 2020). The most effective strategy for them has been to radicalize the youth through social media campaigns and religious discourses against India at the mosques every Friday. Radicalization has the twin effect of bonding the people in the same thought process, i.e., against India as well as committing them to misinterpreted religious duties of Jihad. This puts in danger the whole Sufism culture of brotherhood in the Kashmir valley and manipulating the religious fervor against India. 'Azadi ka matlab kya – La Ila Illilah'. The initial indoctrination of the youth takes place in the jails which are the breeding ground of radical militants in the valley. The youth incarcerated under PSA for stone-pelting activities come in touch with jihadi ideology militants and with little career prospects in the valley are easily swayed towards radical ideology. The mushrooming of Madarsas in the valley is another symptom as well as a catalyst for growing extremist influence in the valley. The luring of local youth with higher studies and job prospects in Saudi Arabia through Islamic foundations does have its effect on the youth in face of high unemployment and deteriorating future in the valley. Easy availability of jihadist literature online and manipulation of social media by extremist Salafi ideology preachers is another major factor for replacement of Sufi Kashmiri ideology and tolerant traditions by extremist Wahabi and Salafi culture in Kashmir valley.

#### **The response of the State:**

The response of the State at best can be termed as 'reactive'. This reactive response has not been adequate to carry out damage control or engagement with the public. Precisely because of this lack of engagement, the true aspirations of the people of Kashmir have been neglected thus exposing them to be manipulation and radicalization by the hardliners and Pak supporting elements. The use of pellet guns on the protestors and the injuries to innocent children and women became the face of atrocities by the security forces on the people of Kashmir, still, the govt took months to ban the use of pellet guns by CAPF (Waheed 2016). The decision dilemma and policy paralysis at higher echelons of the central and state govt gave the hardliners a free run to spoil the law and order situation in the state and bring the entire govt machinery to a halt. The incidents of looting in the 2016 post-Burhan Wani incident only proved the incompetence of the govt to protect the 'fence-sitters' or the majority of people to live their normal lives which would naturally propel them towards the Pak supporting elements. The loss of business due to blockades causing waste of tourist season and export of fruits from the valley indicates only the failure of the govt to protect

the livelihood and basic rights of the common man. Restricting mobile and internet services in the valley might be a short term security requirement but certainly not an effective strategy to counter the newfound intifada tactics of mass protests. The restraint shown by the security forces is effective in the sense that it does not allow the cycle of protests to continue based on HR violations, but not enough to solve the issue of mass agitations. The govt also lost the faith of the public by not acting on the recommendations of the team of interlocutors constituted in 2010. In layman terms, govt only wants to contain the situation and not find a solution to it. The alliance of PDP with BJP in itself is in contrast with the religious ideas of the people of Kashmir who consider BJP Hindu ideology in conflict with Islamic ideals. The central govt also refused to engage with the separatists projecting a stubborn, if principled stance.

**Protests without Leadership:**

The mass protests and stone-pelting crowds do not have well-defined leadership. Though the protests and demonstrations follow the protest calendars issued by the Hurriyat, the separatists do not necessarily lead these mass agitations. The local leadership leading the stone-pelting or sloganeering in the protests is not well defined and hence cannot be engaged politically or administratively.

**Impact of Agitation Dynamics:****(a) Impact on Youth and Children:**

The youth and the children of the valley are the ones most adversely affected by these agitations. The booking of stone-pelting young persons under PSA further reduces the slim prospects of employment for them and they would henceforth be dependent on the aid provided to them by the separatists by Pak sponsored money. The burning of schools and the disruption of the formal education schedule of the children in the valley increases the prospects of them being influenced by the inimical elements in the misinterpreted call for Azadi and Jihad.

**(b) Impact on Local Population:**

The blockade during agitations causes functional problems to the entire population of the valley. The sick cannot be taken to hospitals, the employees cannot reach their job location, the farmers in villages cannot take the produce to the market, the consumer goods cannot reach the far-flung rural areas, the hotels and shikaras cannot earn due to massive reduction in tourists for security reasons and so on. The disruption of public services caused inconvenience to one and all apart from the deteriorating law and order situation prompting looting and arson in many places of the valley. The armed insurgents get bolder and carry out killings of govt supporters and sarpanches in the villages. Meanwhile, the govt has to pay the employees who are not contributing anything to the state being on leave (Mubarki 2010).

**(c) Impact on Development:**

All development programs of the govt come to a halt and corruption becomes rampant. A peace development package of 80,000 crores was announced by the Central govt for Kashmir in Nov 2015, however, the progress on implementation of the package has been less than satisfactory (n.d., Outlook Web Bureau 2018).

**(d) Impact on Security Forces:**

Security forces have the onerous responsibility of protecting the interests of the State and hence, are forced to respond to developing situations. The hatred amongst the public for the security forces is palpable and can be seen on occasions where the mob tries to snatch their weapons and pelts stones on the police personnel. The Army is faced with the dual situation of controlling mobs as well as carrying out counter-insurgency operations. Recently local public disrupts the counterinsurgency operations of the army by breaking through the cordon and pelting stones on the soldiers, thus helping the militants to escape. The security forces also have the pressure of maintaining maximum restraint while dealing with unarmed civilians who are pelting stones. The dual conflict of dealing with armed militants and civilians hurling rocks puts an enormous strain on the morale of the troops. The heavy tasking of the troops and hostile population increases stress in the security forces personnel.

**(e) Impact on Indo Pak Relations:**

The Indo-Pak relations have reached a new nadir with Pak openly interfering with the Kashmir affairs, calling Burhan Wani a martyr and observing 20 July 2016 as a Black Day in solidarity with his assassination by Indian security forces. Indian govt has responded by severing all political dialogue between the two states with the precondition of severing support to all terrorist activities in Kashmir and elsewhere in India. However, this

alienation of Pakistan internationally due to the diplomatic efforts of India has also hijacked the issue of Kashmiri discontent as the Indian govt has come to see the entire agitation process as a fabrication of Pak hidden agenda of supporting secessionist activities in India, and seeing these activities in Kashmir through that prism. The alienation of Pak has become symbolic of the alienation of the Kashmiri public.

**(f) Impact on Stability in South Asia:**

Kashmir is a potential flashpoint between the two South Asian nuclear powers – India and Pakistan. The prevailing situation in Kashmir is critical for both countries. Pakistan has always openly supported the insurgency in Kashmir at the world forum. The incidents of ceasefire violations (CFV) on the LoC since the Burhan killing increased manifold. Pakistan wants to exploit the internal disturbance in Kashmir to its advantage. It suits India to bring focus on Pak rather than Kashmir as the propagator of internal disturbance in the affairs of a sovereign state by promoting terrorism as a tool of state policy. Kashmiris feel that their struggle for freedom is hijacked by the rivalry of India and Pakistan, and hence want to make their movement further violent and aggressive to gain attention. This power and prominence struggle poses a grave danger to the stability in South Asia. Pakistan, though a democracy, is dominated by military and religious theocrats. Being a smaller state than India and dominated by military outlook, Pakistan makes the danger of a nuclear confrontation with India, a grim reality. Kashmir can well be the reason for the next conflict between India and Pakistan just like the previous three conflicts. The changing power configurations between India and the US, and Pakistan and China pose a real danger to not only to South Asia but also the world (Hilali 1999).

**(g) Impact on Regional Harmony in J&K:**

The agitations in the valley since 2008 have caused a faultline between the residents of Kashmir Valley and the Jammu region. Since Jammu is primarily Hindu dominated and Kashmir population is Muslim, this has led to a regional divide based on religious differences fanned by extremist groups on both sides. Kashmir is surrounded by mountain ranges and the main exit towards mainland India is through the Banihal tunnel towards Jammu. Also, the people of the Jammu and Ladakh region feel marginalized because of the attention the Kashmir valley gets in terms of funds and govt sops.

**Changing Political Narrative in the State:**

Since the 2014 elections, the political narrative in the state has undergone a massive change. PDP won the elections with a popular mandate and formed a coalition govt with BJP in 2014. However, after the Burhan aftermath and rising wave of agitations the voting percentage in the bye-elections in Apr 2017 dropped to 7% from 65% in 2014 and further to 2% where repoll was announced (n.d., Contributors 2017). The primacy of fringe hardliner elements has now occupied center stage in the valley with the local population boycotting the election process in away. The creation of a political vacuum wherein the political leaders are neither able to gauge the public sentiment nor influence the law and order situation to return to normalcy, is ideal for the hardliners and Pak supported elements to thrive thereby disbalancing and losing out on the gains made by the military and political leadership towards wooing the population of Kashmir to have faith in the Indian State. The political divergence in the regions of Jammu and Kashmir is deemed on the path of religious divergence thus promoting extremism against each other.

**Perceptions of Stakeholders:**

The impact of the mass agitations cannot be fully understood and analyzed if the perceptions of the stakeholders are not taken into account. The issue of who the actual stakeholders are is itself prone to vehement debate but practically any section who can influence the situation in Kashmir positively or negatively can be termed a stakeholder for the sake of comprehensive assessment. The main stakeholders, the people of Kashmir perceive these agitations as a struggle for their freedom from Indian rule. The backing out of security forces personnel, increasing bold attacks on SF installations, disruption of counter-insurgency operations of the security forces by stone-pelting crowds, and the inability of the security forces to control the situation has only reinforced their belief that ‘Azadi’ is around the corner and can be achieved by this strategy of mass protests and stone-pelting combined with boycotting of the electoral process and jamming the administrative machinery in the state. How far this perception is manipulated by false propaganda, religious discourse, and support from Pakistan is an issue for further deliberation but there is little doubt that the legitimacy earned by the political leadership in the free and fair elections since 1996 and goodwill earned by the Indian army during their relief efforts during natural disasters of 2005 earthquake, floods of 2014 and Sadbhawana projects has been lost to the changed public perception. Indian Army has been the prime instrument of the Indian State to contain the armed insurgency in the valley. Slowly shifting from attritional tactics to people friendly and surgical operation as well as commendable service in aid to civil authority during disasters, the Army

had brought the armed militancy under control by reducing the number of suspected armed militants in the state of J&K to around 400(n.d., South Asia Terrorism Portal 2017). However, the sudden rise in agitations and stone-pelting incidents and the deteriorating law and order situation in the valley has also caused concerns amongst the Army leadership about frittering away the military gains in the valley by political and administrative incompetence/indifference. The stable situation of peaceful years was not exploited by the administration and political leadership by fructifying the engagement with the Kashmiri populace and realizing their genuine aspirations.

The agitations have become a perfect opportunity for resurrection for the separatists who had almost lost their significance and influence among the people of Kashmir. The exploitation of public sentiment by deviating it according to their interests, the separatists resorted to the tactics of issuing weekly agitation calendar in the Burhan aftermath, thus reinforcing their legitimacy and power over the elected govt. The vicious cycle of violence and protests best suits the interests of the separatists whose agenda coincides with that of Pakistan and they have infused all their resources and influence to combine with the orthodox religious community to encourage the mass agitations (Haq 2017).

Pak has always maintained that the insurgency and protests in Kashmir are the indigenous struggle of the Kashmiri people for self-determination and independence from Indian rule though concrete evidence exists of mass funding of separatists by Pak to create trouble in Kashmir through protests and armed rebellion by providing weapons and trained mercenaries to various militant groups operating in Kashmir. However, India's diplomatic move of isolating Pak on the issue of terrorism has put Pak on the backfoot. Incidentally, the eruption of protests in 2016 was indigenous in response to the killing of local militant Burhan Wani. The Hurriyat and thereby Pak influence was instrumental in the continuance of the protests much longer after the solidarity for a local militant had faded.

### **Conclusion:-**

There is no doubt that the State and Central govt do not enjoy the faith and trust of the Kashmiri people. This is, however, not to suggest that the entire population of Kashmir has turned anti-India or pro-Pak. That the Indian govt could not exploit the peaceful time in the valley for meaningful engagement with the populace of Kashmir is evident from the ease with which the fringe hardline elements have gained prominence and resurrected themselves in the valley. The response of the state has not only been reactive but also harsh and ineffective. The military gains in Kashmir could not be evolved or transformed into concrete social and political gains by the center and state govt. The majority of peace-loving people feel cheated by the government on not being provided the social and physical security from the hardline elements and militants. The appointment of interlocutors and thereafter, the inaction on their recommendations has acted as a catalyst in the conviction of the public by the separatists and hardliners that the Indian govt is interested in just the containment of the situation and not a lasting solution in the interest of Kashmiris.

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