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RESEARCH ARTICLE

**THE POSTCOLONIAL FAULTLINES OF A COMPOSITE STATE: HISTORY,
IDENTITY, AND THE POLITICS OF FRAGMENTATION OF KASHMIR**

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Abstract

This article examines the postcolonial formation of Jammu and Kashmir as a composite state shaped by the violent transition of 1947 and its enduring internal fault-lines. It argues that the simultaneity of invasion, mass violence, and hurried accession produced a political entity marked by uneven legitimacy, divergent regional memories, and unresolved questions of representation. Drawing on a historically grounded interpretive approach, the article traces how these foundational tensions evolved into competing regional identities and contemporary fragmentation. It highlights the interplay between internal dynamics and external influences, including Pakistan's role, and concludes that any sustainable political future must engage with these layered histories rather than bypass them.

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Introduction:-

The Kashmir question, often presumed to have receded into diplomatic inertia, has in recent years returned to analytical relevance through a series of subtle but consequential developments. Competing cartographic assertions in the region's neighbourhood, renewed geopolitical engagements involving Pakistan, and the persistent symbolic invocation of Kashmir within transnational political discourse have collectively unsettled the perception of closure. These developments, though varied in form, point to a deeper reality: the Kashmir question remains unresolved not only in territorial or diplomatic terms but within its internal political and historical architecture.

This article argues that any serious engagement with the present must return to the formative moment of 1947, when Jammu and Kashmir transitioned from a princely state into a postcolonial political entity under conditions of extraordinary violence and uncertainty. That transition did not produce a coherent or consensual state. Instead, it generated a composite formation marked by uneven legitimacy, differentiated experiences of violence, and competing regional aspirations. These structural tensions have persisted across decades, shaping political behaviour, identity formation, and contemporary debates on fragmentation.

Material and Methods:-

This study employs a qualitative and interpretive methodological framework grounded in historical analysis. It relies primarily on secondary sources, including scholarly works, historical accounts, and analytical literature on Jammu and Kashmir. The approach does not seek to produce quantitative measurement but rather to interpret patterns of political development, regional divergence, and identity formation over time. The method involves close reading of key historical moments, particularly the events of 1947, the early post accession period, the insurgency of the 1990s,

and subsequent political developments. These are examined not as isolated incidents but as interconnected processes that have shaped the region's political trajectory. This approach is particularly suited to the subject matter, where the central questions concern legitimacy, memory, identity, and structural contradiction, all of which resist purely empirical quantification and require interpretive engagement.

Review of Literature:-

The academic literature on Kashmir is extensive and multidisciplinary, encompassing history, political science, international relations, and sociology. Scholars such as Sumantra Bose have examined conflict dynamics and possible pathways to resolution, while Victoria Schofield has provided detailed historical narratives of the region's political evolution. Chitralkha Zutshi's work on identity formation has been particularly influential in understanding the cultural and regional dimensions of Kashmiri consciousness. Christopher Snedden has explored the diversity of political opinion within the broader region.

Much of this literature has focused on the external dimensions of the conflict, particularly India Pakistan relations and the territorial dispute. Other works have examined constitutional developments, governance, and insurgency. However, there remains a relative gap in sustained analysis of the internal contradictions of Jammu and Kashmir as a composite state formed under conditions of violence and urgency. This article builds upon existing scholarship while shifting the analytical lens inward, focusing on how the state's formation embedded fault-lines that continue to shape its internal political dynamics.

Results:-

The analysis indicates that the transition of 1947 produced a structurally fragile political entity. The princely state of Jammu and Kashmir, characterized by significant regional diversity, entered the postcolonial order without a unified political consensus. The events of late October 1947 were decisive. The entry of tribal fighters from Pakistan's northwest frontier, supported by elements within Pakistan, triggered administrative collapse in the Kashmir Valley. Simultaneously, the Jammu region experienced large scale communal violence, resulting in mass killings and displacement of Muslim populations. These parallel traumas created divergent regional memories that would shape political narratives for decades.

The accession to India, formalized on 27 October 1947, occurred within this context of crisis. While legally valid, it lacked the deliberative process that might have produced broader political consensus across the state's diverse regions. This distinction would later inform debates on legitimacy and representation. In the immediate post accession period, particularly between 1947 and 1953, there existed a perception among sections of the population, especially in the Valley, that the new political arrangement offered the promise of empowerment. This perception was closely associated with the leadership of Sheikh Muhammad Abdullah. However, his arrest in 1953 marked a significant rupture, altering the trajectory of public trust and introducing a sense of political uncertainty.

Over subsequent decades, these foundational tensions manifested in different ways across regions. The Valley experienced increasing political alienation, culminating in the insurgency of the 1990s. While rooted in local grievances, this insurgency was significantly shaped and sustained by external support from Pakistan, including training and logistical assistance to militant groups. Jammu, meanwhile, articulated grievances related to political representation and perceived dominance of Valley-centric politics. Ladakh intensified its demands for autonomy, eventually leading to its administrative separation. The composite structure of the state thus evolved into a configuration marked by regional divergence rather than integrated coexistence.

Discussion:-

The Violent Birth of a Composite State:-

The apparent dormancy of the Kashmir question in international discourse has, in recent years, given way to a quieter but unmistakable reactivation. From competing territorial narratives in the region's immediate neighbourhood to the renewed diplomatic positioning of Pakistan and the persistent symbolic circulation of Kashmir within broader political and ideological networks, the issue has resurfaced in ways that defy claims of closure. Simultaneously, internal political shifts within Jammu and Kashmir have intensified debates over identity, representation, and regional autonomy, revealing fractures that extend beyond the familiar frame of interstate conflict. This convergence of external attention and internal fragmentation invites a reconsideration of the moment from which the modern political entity of Jammu and Kashmir emerged. The events of 1947 did not simply produce a territorial outcome; they established a composite state marked by uneven legitimacy, differentiated memories of

violence, and unresolved regional aspirations. It is within this historical frame that the contemporary re-emergence of Kashmir must be understood.

The princely state of Jammu and Kashmir in 1947 stood at a uniquely precarious intersection of empire, geography, and communal transformation. It was not merely another princely territory navigating the end of British rule. It was a layered political space where multiple identities, regional histories, and competing aspirations coexisted without a unifying political consensus. Unlike many princely states that made relatively swift decisions regarding accession to either India or Pakistan, Jammu and Kashmir hesitated. That hesitation was not indecision in a narrow sense but a reflection of its internal diversity and the absence of a singular political will that could speak for all its regions.

The Valley of Kashmir, with its Muslim majority and a distinct linguistic and cultural identity, was politically mobilized in ways that differed from the Hindu majority districts of Jammu, where anxieties about political marginalization had already begun to take shape. Ladakh, geographically remote and culturally distinct, was only loosely integrated into the administrative imagination of the state. The ruler, Maharaja Hari Singh, presided over this complex formation at a moment when imperial withdrawal was accelerating and the subcontinent was descending into one of the most violent partitions in modern history. His initial attempt to delay accession reflected a desire to preserve autonomy, but it also revealed the limits of princely authority in a rapidly transforming political landscape. The situation changed dramatically in late October 1947 when armed tribal groups from Pakistan's northwest frontier entered Kashmir. Their advance toward Srinagar triggered widespread panic, administrative breakdown, and a rapid erosion of whatever remained of the Maharaja's authority. The state machinery, already fragile, began to disintegrate under pressure. As fear spread across the Valley, the ruler fled from Srinagar to Jammu, leaving behind a vacuum at a moment when the very existence of the state was under threat. It was within this atmosphere of urgency and collapse that the decision to accede to India was taken.

Yet the crisis unfolding in the Valley was only one dimension of a much larger upheaval. At the same time, the Jammu region was witnessing a catastrophe of immense proportions. Widespread violence against Muslim populations, carried out in a climate charged with communal vengeance and political insecurity, resulted in large scale killings and displacement. Estimates suggest that hundreds of thousands were affected, making it one of the least acknowledged yet most consequential tragedies associated with the partition of the subcontinent. The simultaneity of invasion in the Valley and massacre in Jammu produced a dual trauma that would shape the moral and political memory of the state in profoundly different ways across regions.

It was under these extraordinary and highly pressured circumstances that the Instrument of Accession was signed on 27 October 1947. Legally, the accession was executed in accordance with the constitutional framework available at the time and was accepted by the Indian Dominion. Yet its context mattered as much as its legality. The decision emerged from an immediate security crisis rather than a deliberative political process involving broad based consultation across the state's diverse regions. This distinction would later become central to debates about legitimacy, consent, and representation.

The new political entity that entered the Indian Union was therefore not a settled or cohesive unit. It was a composite state held together by the imperatives of security and the aspirations of a newly independent nation that sought to demonstrate its commitment to pluralism. Jammu and Kashmir came to be seen, in many ways, as a microcosm of India's diversity, embodying multiple religions, languages, and cultural traditions within a single administrative framework. This vision carried both promise and tension. It suggested the possibility of coexistence but also contained within it unresolved contradictions that had been intensified rather than resolved by the events of 1947.

In the immediate aftermath of 1947, the political transition in Jammu and Kashmir was not uniformly experienced as coercive or externally imposed, particularly within the Valley. For a brief but significant period between 1947 and 1953, there existed a perception among sections of the population that the new political arrangement carried the promise of empowerment and emancipation, anchored in the leadership of Sheikh Muhammad Abdullah, who at that time commanded broad popular legitimacy across the region. This phase, however, proved to be short lived. The arrest of Sheikh Abdullah in 1953 marked a decisive rupture, not only in political leadership but in the trajectory of public trust, transforming what had initially been perceived by many as a moment of possibility into one increasingly viewed through the lens of uncertainty, disillusionment, and contested legitimacy. In Jammu, the memory of communal violence and demographic upheaval produced its own narratives of insecurity and grievance. Ladakh, though less directly affected by the violence of 1947, remained peripheral to the dominant political discourse, its concerns often mediated through administrative arrangements rather than direct representation. The

postcolonial state that emerged from this crucible attempted to manage these differences through a combination of constitutional innovation and political negotiation. Special provisions were introduced to accommodate the unique circumstances of Jammu and Kashmir within the Indian Union. Democratic institutions were gradually extended, even as questions of representation, autonomy, and regional balance persisted. For a time, this arrangement provided a framework within which competing aspirations could be negotiated without immediate rupture.

Yet the underlying tensions did not disappear. They remained embedded in the structure of the state, shaping political alignments and social perceptions in ways that were not always visible but rarely absent. The idea of a composite state, while normatively appealing, rested on a fragile foundation. It required continuous political management, mutual accommodation, and a degree of trust that was difficult to sustain in a context marked by historical trauma and divergent regional experiences.

Regional Identities and the Politics of Fragmentation:-

As the decades unfolded, the unresolved tensions of 1947 began to manifest more explicitly in the political life of Jammu and Kashmir. The eruption of armed insurgency in 1990 marked a turning point that transformed not only the relationship between the Valley and the Indian state but also the internal dynamics among the regions of Jammu, Kashmir, and Ladakh. While the insurgency, at the face of it, drew upon local grievances, political discontent, and a crisis of legitimacy within the region, it was essentially shaped and sustained by external support, particularly from Pakistan, which provided varying degrees of political backing, training, and logistical assistance to militant groups operating in the Valley. The Valley consequently descended into a prolonged period of militarized conflict, marked by violence, displacement, and deepening alienation. This conflict did not remain confined to the Valley in its effects. It reverberated across the entire state, reshaping perceptions, identities, and political priorities.

In Jammu, the instability in Kashmir was increasingly viewed through a lens of regional imbalance. Sections of the population began to articulate grievances related to political representation, resource allocation, and administrative attention. There emerged a perception that the politics of the Valley disproportionately influenced the governance of the state as a whole. These sentiments were not uniform across Jammu, which itself is a region of considerable diversity, but they gained sufficient traction to influence political discourse.

Ladakh, for its part, intensified long standing demands for greater autonomy and recognition of its distinct cultural and geographical identity. Over time, these demands culminated in administrative reconfiguration, reflecting both local aspirations and broader political calculations. The separation of Ladakh into a distinct Union Territory was not an isolated development but part of a longer trajectory in which regional identities sought institutional expression outside the framework of the composite state.

The insurgency period also accelerated the hardening of identities within the Valley. The experience of prolonged conflict reinforced a sense of distinctiveness and, for many, a perception of political estrangement. This was accompanied by significant demographic changes, most notably the displacement of Kashmiri Pandits, which further altered the social fabric of the region. The loss of everyday pluralism had implications not only for inter community relations but also for the broader idea of shared belonging within the state.

One of the most revealing moments in this evolving trajectory came in 2008 with the Amarnath land controversy. What began as an administrative decision regarding land allocation to a religious board quickly escalated into a major political crisis. In the Valley, it triggered widespread protests, reflecting concerns about land, identity, and political intent. In Jammu, it generated a powerful counter mobilization, framed around issues of regional pride and perceived discrimination. The two regions entered into a phase of direct confrontation, marked by economic disruptions, mass protests, and a sharp escalation of rhetoric.

This episode exposed the depth of inter-regional polarization that had accumulated over decades. It demonstrated that the composite framework of the state had not succeeded in reconciling competing identities but had, in some respects, intensified them by placing them in continuous interaction without adequate mechanisms for resolution. The crisis also revealed how quickly administrative decisions could acquire symbolic meaning in a context where trust was limited and historical grievances remained unresolved. In the years that followed, these dynamics continued to evolve. Political discourse in Jammu increasingly included calls for separate statehood, grounded in narratives of neglect and under-representation. While such demands did not represent a unanimous position, they reflected a significant shift in how sections of the region perceived their place within the broader political structure. Of late, within Kashmir, there are emerging voices suggesting that the unity of the former state should not be maintained at

the cost of addressing its internal contradictions. This marked a departure from earlier positions that emphasized the indivisibility of the state.

The most sensitive and potentially volatile dimension of this evolving landscape lies in the mixed regions of the Chenab Valley and the Pir Panjal belt, including districts such as Poonch and Rajouri. These areas are characterized by complex demographic compositions and histories of both coexistence and conflict. They occupy a strategic and symbolic position in any discussion of regional reorganization. Competing claims over their political alignment reflect broader tensions between administrative logic and historical imagination.

For some in Jammu, the argument is grounded in existing administrative boundaries and the need for coherent governance structures. For others, particularly those influenced by historical proposals and political narratives associated with Kashmir, these regions are seen as culturally and politically linked to the Valley. The coexistence of these perspectives creates a situation in which territorial questions are not merely technical but deeply embedded in questions of identity and belonging.

The risks associated with these dynamics are significant. History offers repeated examples of how territorial disputes in demographically mixed regions can escalate into broader conflicts when not managed with sensitivity and foresight. The memories of past violence, including the events of 1947 and subsequent periods of tension, remain present in collective consciousness. Any attempt to redraw political boundaries or reconfigure administrative arrangements without careful consideration of these memories carries the potential to reopen old wounds.

Understanding the transition of 1947 is therefore not simply an exercise in historical reconstruction. It is central to interpreting the present and anticipating possible futures. The invasion, the massacres, the flight of the ruler, and the hurried accession created a political entity whose internal coherence was always contingent. The postcolonial framework sought to stabilise this entity through institutions and constitutional arrangements, but it did not fully resolve the foundational questions of legitimacy, representation, and regional balance.

The challenge today lies in engaging with these questions in a manner that acknowledges complexity rather than simplifying it. Any sustainable political arrangement must take into account the diversity of experiences within Jammu and Kashmir, the historical trajectories that have shaped regional identities, and the evolving aspirations of its people. This requires moving beyond binary frameworks and recognising that the region's realities do not lend themselves to easy categorisation.

At the same time, there is a need for caution in how political narratives are constructed and mobilised. Narratives that emphasise division without recognising interdependence can deepen fragmentation. Conversely, narratives that insist on unity without addressing underlying grievances risk appearing disconnected from lived experience. The task is to find a balance that allows for both recognition of difference and the possibility of coexistence.

The history of Jammu and Kashmir since 1947 suggests that neither imposed uniformity nor unrestrained fragmentation offers a stable path forward. The former risks suppressing legitimate aspirations, while the latter can lead to new forms of conflict. The idea of a composite state, despite its challenges, remains relevant insofar as it recognises the region's diversity as a foundational reality. The question is how such a framework can be reimagined in a way that is responsive to contemporary conditions.

This reimagining requires a willingness to confront uncomfortable histories, including the violence of 1947 and the subsequent decades of conflict. It also requires creating spaces for dialogue that include voices from all regions and communities. Without such engagement, political decisions risk being perceived as externally imposed or internally exclusionary, thereby reinforcing the very mistrust they seek to overcome.

The story of Jammu and Kashmir is often told through the lens of international conflict or national politics. Yet its internal dynamics are equally significant. The relationships between its regions, the evolution of its identities, and the management of its diversity are central to understanding both its past and its future. The events of 1947 were not merely a beginning. They set in motion processes that continue to unfold, shaping the region's trajectory in ways that are still not fully understood.

If there is a lesson to be drawn from this history, it is that political arrangements cannot remain static in the face of changing realities. They must evolve in ways that are attentive to context, inclusive in approach, and mindful of the

consequences of both action and inaction. For Jammu and Kashmir, this means engaging seriously with the faultlines that have defined it since its transition from princely state to postcolonial entity.

The region's future will depend not only on how these faultlines are managed but also on whether there is a broader commitment to building relationships that transcend them. This is a long and uncertain process, shaped by forces both internal and external. Yet it remains essential. Without such effort, the patterns of fragmentation that have marked the region's history risk continuing into its future.

Conclusion:-

The transition of Jammu and Kashmir in 1947 created a composite state whose internal coherence remained contingent from the outset. The simultaneity of invasion, communal violence, and hurried accession produced a political entity marked by uneven legitimacy and divergent regional experiences. Over time, these foundational contradictions evolved into enduring faultlines, shaping political behaviour, regional identities, and contemporary debates on fragmentation. External intervention, particularly by Pakistan, and internal governance challenges further intensified these dynamics.

A sustainable political future for the region cannot be achieved through administrative measures alone. It requires engagement with historical memory, recognition of regional diversity, and a willingness to address the underlying contradictions of the composite state framework. The question is not merely how to preserve territorial arrangements but how to construct a political order that accommodates diversity while maintaining coherence. This requires moving beyond simplified narratives and engaging with the complexity that has defined Jammu and Kashmir since its transition into the postcolonial order.

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