

A Dogra from Jammu deploras the “slow death of our basic and fundamental humanity”

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On 5 August, the Narendra Modi-led government removed the special status accorded to Jammu and Kashmir under Article 370 of the Constitution. The government downgraded the state into two union territories, Jammu and Kashmir, and Ladakh. It then enforced a communications blockade in the region, which is still ongoing. The government has since claimed that the situation on the ground is peaceful, and that people of Jammu, Kashmir and Ladakh have all welcomed the move. News reports from the region, however, contradict this claim.

In “State Subjects,” The Caravan is featuring a collection of voices from various parts of the erstwhile state. Surbhi Kesar, a doctoral student based in Delhi and Bengaluru, discusses how the Dogras of Jammu came to have an anti-Kashmir view.

As Hindu Dogras from the Jammu region of the erstwhile state of Jammu and Kashmir, we were raised to view Kashmir as our land but Kashmiri Muslims as the others and the occupants of what was rightfully ours—the land and resources of the area called Kashmir. We were implicitly taught to believe that Kashmir, Kashmiri Muslims and Article 370 of the Constitution were to be blamed for the lack of economic opportunities and almost all the social schisms in the state. This narrative persisted even though the state was one of the highest-ranked in terms of per-capita income and human-development indicators. It was easier to fuel hate as the constant fear of the other was closer home.

This shaped the subjectivity of many of us who were raised in Jammu. Admittedly, the communalisation of the Kashmiri people’s demand for their political right to self-determination made it easier to mould the sentiments of the people of Jammu into an anti-Kashmir stance. The subsequent tragedy that unfolded in the 1990s—communal violence against the Kashmiri Pandit community in the region peaked during the decade— compounded this further. To a certain extent, this communalisation also provided legitimacy to the centre’s increased militarisation of Kashmir. The resulting anti-Kashmiri Muslim narrative made not just us, but the whole country, view the victims of this lack of political voice and communalisation as a threat to the sovereignty of the nation.

Today, my state no longer has the special status conferred by Article 370. Most people in Jammu, despite the curfew, rejoiced at the decision. They think that the revocation of the Article 370 will end all their economic problems, and more jobs and more economic prosperity are right around the corner. How does one, then, rationalise the fact that other

states, which were not bound by any such special status, face higher levels of poverty, unemployment and vulnerable employment, and worse levels of human development? A deeper analysis reveals that the issue is possibly more than simple economic reasoning.

History bears several examples of the political order creating the caricature of an enemy when questioned by the societies they were meant to represent or govern. The pattern is familiar—societies pushed to desperation erupted against the existing political order, and the political order created the caricature of an enemy that would take the fall so that extant power structures maintained their status quo. In the case of Jammu and Kashmir, the communalisation of the demands to self-determination contributed, in part, to this caricature and helped sway the narrative away from the real political demand. This also strengthened the political establishment's narrative of fighting against this enemy designate. The so-called Kashmir issue has been evoked several times over the past decades by various ruling dispensations to stir nationalistic sentiments among people whenever such an enemy was needed. The recent reading down of Article 370 was meant to be portrayed as a bold and decisive step towards vanquishing this enemy.

I speak only for myself here, not as a member of the Dogra community or as a part of any other community or institution—this specific incident particularly frightens me. How, I wonder in utter distress, could such a narrative be constructed that we as a nation are celebrating a state of declared and undeclared curfew in an entire region for over a month within our democratic polity? How could we celebrate and welcome some illusory prosperous future begotten by silencing and choking our neighbours?

To an extent, media censorship is to be blamed for this situation—many people in Jammu believe that things are fine in Kashmir. But it cannot simply be explained away as ignorance or the naiveté of the people. It is frightening because it is more than that. It is the slow death of our basic and fundamental humanity. If Kashmir is a showcase of coercive power, Jammu is symptomatic of the success of hegemonic power. We—Kashmiris, all of us from Jammu and Ladakh—have been mere pawns in this long political battle that has played out so tragically over the decades.

It is possible that over time the people of Jammu or the rest of the country realise what was unleashed. What worries me is that it might be too late by the time we reach that realisation. As the German philosopher GWF Hegel said, “The owl of Minerva spreads its wings only with the falling of the dusk.”