



Journalist Fellowship Paper

Killing the story: How the Kashmiri press was silenced after the region lost autonomy

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This paper cannot begin to describe the challenges you reckon with every day, but it tries.

Introduction

Irfan Amin Malik was having a quiet evening at home with his family. It was August 14, 2019, the eve of Indian Independence Day celebrations. Security was tight, especially in South Kashmir, where Malik lives. All the phones were dead. There was no internet. But they had blocked out the fabled “curfewed night” for the moment.¹

“I was showing my wife some pictures on my phone,” he remembered. “Then my sister – she was downstairs – called us to say someone was knocking on our door. My parents went out and found security forces in our compound. They had not just opened the door; they climbed over the walls. I saw 50 to 60 security personnel. It was like they had come to capture a big terrorist.”

They had come to arrest Malik, a journalist.² He covered South Kashmir for a well-known local daily, *Greater Kashmir*. “The first thing that came to my mind was my phone and my wallet,” he remembered. “I thought: ‘They will question me. My phone would show I had done nothing wrong. I was just doing my job.’”

An officer asked him to accompany them to the police station, about half a kilometre away. No reason was offered, Malik said. At the station, the police constables were polite, but told him they could not let him go that night. “They said they had orders: if I go away from the police station, their job will be in danger,” said Malik. He was put up in a small room with two beds – one for him and another for a police constable. “He was nice,” said Malik. “We had a chat. He asked me: ‘Who do you talk to when you file a story, which police officers do you know?’”

¹ The phrase is attached forever to Basheer Peer’s powerful account of growing up in Kashmir during the conflict. Peer, B., 2009. *Curfewed night, A Memoir of War in Kashmir: A Frontline Memoir of Life, Love and War in Kashmir*. Noida: Random House India.

² Zargar, S., 2019. ‘Greater Kashmir’ Journalist Detained By Security Forces Released. [online] HuffPost. Available at: <https://www.huffpost.com/archive/in/entry/greater-kashmir-journalist-detained-irfan-amin-malik_in_5d55834ae4b0eb875f206e94> [Accessed 12 July 2021].

It was not until the following evening, Independence Day, that Malik was released from custody. “When I was released, they asked me to sign some documents,” said Malik. They were written in difficult bureaucratic Urdu. Malik had to ask his uncle to decipher what they said. “It was a bond. It mentioned that my detention was necessary for peace in a particular area. If I was out there, I would be a threat to peace.”

The events leading up to Malik’s arrest went back nine days to August 5, 2019, when the Indian government stripped the state of Jammu and Kashmir of autonomy and split it into two Union Territories, directly controlled by the central government.



An Indian security force personnel keeps guard alongside a road during restrictions after the government scrapped the special constitutional status for Kashmir, in Srinagar August 15, 2019.

REUTERS/Danish Ismail

Or maybe the events went back 70 years, to when India and Pakistan became two separate states in 1947. Both states claim the entire territory of Jammu and Kashmir – a crown-shaped piece of land once ruled by the Dogra kings. The two countries have fought

three wars over it, leaving the region divided by a makeshift ceasefire line that has come to be known as the Line of Control (LoC).

Since 1989, the Kashmir Valley on the Indian side of the LoC has also had an armed movement for secession from the Indian state. While some factions of the militancy favoured merging with Pakistan, others wanted an independent Jammu and Kashmir.³

On August 5, 2019, the Indian Parliament attempted to snuff out that debate by revoking the autonomy guaranteed to Jammu and Kashmir under Article 370 of the Indian Constitution. It also repealed Article 35A, which ensured special protections to people defined as permanent residents of Jammu and Kashmir. The two new Union Territories were Ladakh, an expanse of mountainous desert that is partly claimed by China, and Jammu and Kashmir, two regions hyphenated by geopolitics but coexisting in an uneasy truce.

My study is focused on the Kashmir Valley. When India's central government (popularly referred to as "the Centre") revoked autonomy on August 5, 2019, it cited militancy in Kashmir as one of its reasons.⁴ The unruly Valley, which demanded "azadi" (freedom) from the Indian state, had to be co-opted into the project of "national integration".

For their project to succeed, it was important their legislative changes received favourable press coverage. From the largely state-centric national media, the government had little to fear. The local press was another story.

One of the many outcomes of the conflict was the extraordinary growth of the Kashmiri press. Over the past three decades, it had become the cornerstone of a Kashmiri public sphere dominated by the demand for *azadi*. Since 1989, Kashmir's burgeoning press had

³ Chakravarty, I. and Naqash, R., 2017. '*Kashmir wants Islamic rule like Saudi Arabia*': Much has changed from Burhan Wani to Zakir Musa. [online] Scroll.in. Available at: <<https://scroll.in/article/843803/kashmir-wants-islamic-rule-like-saudi-arabia-militancy-has-changed-from-burhan-wani-to-zakir-musa>> [Accessed 12 July 2021].

⁴ Chaturvedi, R., 2019. *Article 370 cause of corruption and terrorism: Amit Shah*. [online] The Economic Times. Available at: <<https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/article-370-cause-of-corruption-and-terrorism-amit-shah/articleshow/70546744.cms?from=mdr>> [Accessed 12 July 2021].

negotiated the external pressures from both militant groups and the state, who were engaged in an information war.

By 2019, the government had developed more sophisticated tools of control, while militant groups were decimated. So when the Centre moved in on August 5, it was able to shut down a vibrant, adversarial local press almost overnight.

Attempts to curb freedom of speech in Kashmir through physical restrictions such as internet shutdowns and curfews have been well documented.⁵ I would like to focus on other tools of control that were sharpened over decades of conflict. The state was able to gain influence over the Kashmiri press by controlling the levers of production: government advertisements were withheld or released according to the content that was published. Journalists and editors critical of the government and security forces faced legal action, harassment and violence. Finally, government policies explicitly controlling the press were formulated. To tell the story of the crackdown, I interviewed reporters and editors in Srinagar, the capital city of Jammu and Kashmir. Most ran or worked for traditional print outlets based in Kashmir.

Names of some of the editors interviewed for this paper have been withheld to allow them to speak freely on the events leading up to and following August 5, 2019.

While the press was being silenced, almost all of the political leadership in Kashmir was rounded up and arrested or detained. Activists, lawyers, individuals identified as a threat to peace were also swept into preventive detention. The crackdown on the Kashmiri press was necessary to manage perceptions around the August 5 legislation. I also argue it was part of a more ambitious project to remake the Kashmiri public sphere: from its politics to its information economy.

⁵ Johri, N., 2020. *India's internet shutdowns function like 'invisibility cloaks'* | DW | 13.11.2020. [online] DW.COM. Available at: <<https://www.dw.com/en/indias-internet-shutdowns-function-like-invisibility-cloaks/a-55572554>> [Accessed 12 July 2021].

August 5, 2019: a disappearance

“Early morning on August 5, around 4am, I heard a banging on my door,” said a sub-editor at a leading English daily in Srinagar. “I went to open the door and my mother told me to stop; she would come with me. I thought it was the Army. We went outside and saw it was our then managing editor. He said they might revoke Article 370, they won’t allow movement tomorrow, so we’ll be in the office. We watched [the proceedings in] Parliament on TV, taking notes from news channels in Delhi on what was happening in Kashmir.”

Kashmir had disappeared. In the week leading up to August 5, thousands of additional troops had poured into the Valley and hundreds had been detained. On the evening of August 4, mobile internet was blocked. Broadband went next. Around midnight, mobile phone connections stopped working. On the morning of August 5, Kashmiris woke up to a complete communications blackout.⁶ Landlines and cable connections had also been severed. There was no officially declared curfew, but announcements from security vehicles patrolling the streets at dawn told people to stay home. Not only did very little information come in or go out of Kashmir, the residents of one street did not know what was happening in the next. “Kashmir has been turned invisible, even inside Kashmir,” journalist Muzamil Jaleel wrote.⁷

The government maintained that “normalcy” prevailed in the Valley, and that it had taken in the legislative changes without protest. To the outside world, the Valley shrank to a small, securitised area of Srinagar – a square of “normalcy” visited by reporters from Delhi and beamed across the world. In the national media, especially on television channels, coverage of the Article 370 decision was largely celebratory. While reporters from Delhi

⁶ Chakravarty, I., 2019. *Ground report: In Kashmir, an ominous silence broken by whispers about mass arrests.* [online] Scroll.in. Available at: <https://scroll.in/article/933757/ground-report-in-kashmir-an-ominous-silence-broken-by-whispers-about-mass-arrests?fbclid=IwAR18sHiJtZRqfbYEIALEnXGLYIr6ycn0Kl765y8mnWue-A2wa-Lc_ZEkG4k> [Accessed 12 July 2021].

⁷ Jaleel, M., Masood, B. and Akhzer, A., 2019. *Kashmir Valley has seen many a lockdown but why this time it is so different.* [online] The Indian Express. Available at: <<https://indianexpress.com/article/india/valley-has-seen-many-a-lockdown-but-why-this-time-it-is-so-different-article-370-kashmir-amit-shah-5884129/>> [Accessed 12 July 2021].

were politely allowed to pass through most security checkpoints, Kashmiri journalists faced threats, harassment and even physical violence.⁸

The administration carefully controlled the flow of news from a “media centre” set up at Sarovar Portico, a plush hotel in Srinagar. Most establishments were shut in the lockdown, but this hotel had been kept open for journalists flying in from Delhi. Here, the Department of Information and Public Relations set up a stage in a large hall. Every evening, officials from the Union Territory administration would take the stage to brief journalists on “normalcy” in Jammu and Kashmir.



Journalists work at a government-run media center at Sarovar Portico hotel in Srinagar, August 20, 2019. REUTERS/Adnan Abidi

For weeks, this was also the only source of internet access for journalists in Kashmir. About four computers were rigged up in the hall. Reporters could file their stories from

⁸ Chakravarty, I., 2019. *Kashmiri press went offline but still reported on Article 370 – despite all the odds.* [online] Scroll.in. Available at: <<https://scroll.in/article/933951/kashmiri-press-went-offline-but-still-reported-on-article-370-despite-all-the-odds>> [Accessed 14 July 2021].

there in the evenings. Among the crowd of journalists and bureaucrats, reporters say, were intelligence officials watching who marked attendance at the media centre.⁹

Few local newspapers could go to print. Of the publications based in Srinagar, *Kashmir Life* stopped publishing for a week, the *Kashmir Narrator* for over a month. Among the Urdu dailies, *Chattan* stopped publication for about a week, *Daily Afaq* for 15 days. Some of the leading English dailies, such as *Greater Kashmir* and *Rising Kashmir*, did manage to publish editions on August 5 and the week after that. But these were editions with barely four pages, mainly containing news taken down from television channels. There was no word from reporters in districts outside Srinagar. News agency wires were hard to access because of internet curbs. The editorial pages featured articles on health and wellness.

“We’ve seen bad times,” said the sub-editor at the English daily. “During the summer uprisings of 2008, 2010, 2016, we’ve seen suppression. This time it was a different ball game.”

⁹ Naqash, R., 2020. *Panopticon of fear and rumours: Inside Kashmir’s media centre during lockdown*. [online] NewsLaundry. Available at: <<https://www.newsLaundry.com/2020/02/05/a-panopticon-of-fear-and-rumours-inside-kashmirs-media-centre-during-lockdown>> [Accessed 14 July 2021].

The ‘markaz’ and the Valley

A public sphere, in the work of Jürgen Habermas, is defined as “a communicative space in which ideas and information, discourses and opinions find representation and elaboration and thereby help constitute civil societies”.¹⁰ The Indian national media and the Kashmiri press reflected two entirely different public spheres.

The national media – largely centred in Delhi, speaking in English or Hindi – traditionally shaped a broad, pan-Indian consensus on political issues. But the subcontinent, with its diverse communities and languages, cannot be reduced to a single, homogenous public sphere. Cultural historian Ananya Jahanara Kabir, for example, speaks of competing public spaces, each constituted by a different collective identity, each with its own logic but entangled with others.¹¹

At the national level, much of the mainstream media embodies the majoritarian politics that has come to dominate India’s public life. So its celebration of “national integration” shaped a consensus on the August 5 decisions in the Indian mainland.¹² Left to itself, the Kashmiri press was unlikely to have followed that narrative. For decades, Article 370 had marked out Jammu and Kashmir as politically and geographically distinct. The Valley, with its predominantly Kashmiri Muslim population, and its history of struggle against Dogra rule, was also politically distinct from Jammu. The Kashmiri press, which had grown during three decades of conflict, was traditionally adversarial to the state.

Consider *Greater Kashmir*, for many years the most widely circulated English daily in the Valley. It started life as a periodical in 1987 (the same year as the state assembly elections that were widely believed to have been rigged by the Centre). It became a daily in 1993 (the year that the All Parties Hurriyat Conference, a conglomeration of separatist political

¹⁰ Habermas, J., 1974, 1989, 1996, in Cottle, S., 2006. *Mediatized conflict*. Maidenhead: Open Univ. Press, p.20.

¹¹ Kabir, A., 2009. *Territory of desire*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, p. Page 4.

¹² Republic World. 2019. *REPUBLIC EXPLAINER: Here are the 12 changes in Jammu & Kashmir after Centre revokes Article 370 & 35A*. [online] Available at: <<https://www.republicworld.com/india-news/general-news/republic-explainer-here-are-the-12-changes-in-jammu-and-kashmir-after-centre-revokes-article-370-and-35a.html>> [Accessed 14 July 2021].

parties, was formed). The newspaper's name and logo – a map of undivided Jammu and Kashmir – seemed to signal aspirations for a distinct Kashmiri polity.



The frontpage of Greater Kashmir on August 6, 2019 – a day after Article 370 was revoked (Supplied: Ipsita Chakravarty)

A number of local Urdu publications including *Chattan*, *Alsafa*, and *Afaq Srinagar*, also cropped up in the mid- to late-1980s. “There was so much going on,” said a media researcher in Kashmir who asked not to be named.¹⁵ “The Centre-State relationship was being restructured and the political actors were gearing up for the infamous 1987 elections. Since separatists were also fighting the elections, the local newspapers were fully into covering mainstream political developments. Kashmir’s public sphere was changing. There was a desperate need to maintain an informed citizenry in the context when even separatists were jumping in the electoral race.”

The elections of 1987 fed into a disillusionment with political processes in Kashmir. By 1989, local youth were crossing the LoC for arms training and returning to the Valley as militants. The papers launched in the first decade of the conflict fed a hunger for local news. There was no telling which town was curfewed, which village was under an Army

¹⁵ Name retracted due to heightened security risks in Kashmir.

crackdown, where the latest gunfight had broken out, whose son had disappeared the night before. “When there is a threat to your life, the only thing that keeps you alive is to stay updated,” said researcher Raashid Maqbool, who grew up in downtown Srinagar, an epicentre for the militancy in the early days.

Besides, as the conflict shut down schools and businesses, residents of the city suddenly found themselves with time on their hands. “Entire evenings would be spent watching TV,” continued Maqbool. They started with Doordarshan, the Indian state broadcaster, which usually reported the government version of events. Then they would tune into radio stations “to reconfirm” the news. These included Radio Pakistan, BBC Urdu and Sada-e-Hurriyat Jammu and Kashmir, a station run from the other side of the LoC and later banned by the Indian government.

These habits of news consumption and conversation are now acknowledged as a cultural trait. “Kashmiris would wake up and go to the mosque, then to the baker and ask what had happened that day – I’m talking about the pre-mobile phone era,” said the editor of a Srinagar newspaper. “Then they would listen to radio stations. Then they would go to work and speak to colleagues about it.”

A growing press fueled the conversation. By 1995, a Committee to Protect Journalist report found there were 12 major dailies, 30 smaller ones and 20 weekly newspapers in Srinagar – then a city of 650,000. The press grew exponentially over three decades of conflict: 117 new titles were registered between 1987 and 1996, 200 were registered between 1997 and 2006. Between 2007 and 2016, a decade where militancy gave way to mass civilian protests, 500 new titles were registered. Local English-language publications started multiplying from the late 1990s.¹⁴

Growing literacy swelled readership but a media researcher in Kashmir¹⁵ points out other important factors that drove a demand for local news. Residents of the Valley did not buy the “national media narrative”, he said. It was the local press that reflected their lived

¹⁴ Showkat, N., 2020. Mapping the Mediasphere in Jammu & Kashmir. *SAGE Open*, 10(4), p.215824402096807.

¹⁵ Name retracted due to heightened security risks in Kashmir.

realities and covered the minutiae of regional political developments. These newspapers spoke the language of the Kashmiri public sphere, a language of dissent.

National coverage of the politics of Kashmiri separatism was replete with guns and fanatics, described as stemming partly from religious fundamentalism, and partly thanks to the machinations of Pakistan. The local press spoke more freely of Kashmiri self-determination and covered separatist politics in tandem with pro-India parties. In the early days of the militancy, publications such as *Chattan* even carried interviews with militant commanders.

During the second wind of the armed movement, which picked up pace up a decade ago, interviewing militants was no longer within the realm of the permissible. But local papers extensively covered militant funerals, where large crowds of mourners chanted slogans for *azadi* – evidence of popular support for the new militancy.

They also devoted their energies to reporting on human rights violations: from enforced disappearances and shootings to violent police action on protesting crowds that left hundreds dead or maimed.

Much of the politics was expressed in a battle over terms. Early on, Urdu publications called militants “*mujahid*”, or those who fight on behalf of Islam. Most publications later settled for “*askariat pasand*”, roughly translating to “those who take up arms”, or “*jungjoo*”, combatants. While state authorities inveigled the national media into calling armed fighters “terrorists”, the Kashmiri English press stuck to the politically neutral “militants”. “We came up with a new style sheet,” said a former editor for an English daily. Instead of “security forces”, the paper spoke of “government forces” cutting down youth in Kashmir. Instead of referring to the “national highway” running through Kashmir, they spoke of the “Srinagar-Jammu highway”, refuting the idea of a road running through a territorially integrated country.

Pressures from the national public sphere, with its centre of gravity in Delhi, always acted on the Valley. Decades of conflict have fed into the spectre of the “*markaz*”, or centre, controlling public life in the Valley. According to popular lore, sinister machinations of

the *markaz* are behind a range of events in Kashmir: from changes in the local government to the splintering of a militant group, from rumours that set off panic to the placement of street lamps.

The press became an arena for the unequal political contest between the *markaz* and the Valley. Professor of political science Gadi Wolfsfeld describes such contests as “public confrontations between a government and at least one other antagonist in which the state [...] has a significantly superior amount of coercive reserve at its disposal”.¹⁶ Competition over the news media, he writes, is “part of a larger and more significant contest among political antagonists for political control”.

In the case of Kashmir, this was not just a contest between the national and local press, but a battle for control over the local press itself. Eventually, the state won.

Veteran journalists in Kashmir will tell you there was considerable pressure from armed groups in the early years of the militancy. This ranged from editorial control and banning newspapers should they not provide favourable coverage to direct violence against journalists, abductions and attacks on newspaper offices. Nineteen journalists have been killed in Kashmir since 1990. Most cases went unsolved, put down to “unidentified gunmen”. Who was to blame – militant or state agency – depended on your politics.

Certainly, the Kashmiri press was already feeling the pressure from the state. Many local journalists reporting in Kashmir in the 1990s will tell you stories of violence from security forces, interrogations and detentions. Then came the FIRs (first information reports), preliminary police complaints made before investigations can be launched. In 1991, seven journalists, including Ghulam Jeelani Qadri, the editor of *Afaq*, were booked for publishing a statement by the Hizbul Mujahideen. An arrest warrant was issued three years later. The

¹⁶ Wolfsfeld, G. (1997). Pg 2. *Media and political conflict: news from the Middle East*. Cambridge [England], Cambridge University Press.

police did not act on it until 26 years later.¹⁷ Few FIRs made it to the courts. Even those that did were regarded as tools of harassment. “I have three-four cases against me,” the editor of an English magazine in Srinagar said casually.

There were other means of controlling coverage of events in the local press. Being economical with information, for instance. “In the initial stage of the militancy, the flow of information from the government side, including security forces, was very low – in some cases, even zero,” said Yusuf Jameel, who reported from Kashmir for BBC Urdu in the 1990s. “We reporters would extract information on events and incidents from people we knew in the police department, intelligence agencies and government, and who would talk to us privately. We would add this information to our copy to make it balanced. There were no official spokespersons or regular briefings. At a later stage, the police department started issuing handouts on the day's incidents in the evenings.”

The government and armed forces always preferred talking to journalists “para-dropped” into Kashmir from Delhi, lamented one Kashmiri editor.

Like militant groups, the government periodically banned publications for carrying content that was not to its taste.¹⁸ Four Urdu papers were banned in 1990. Two of them never resumed publication. As Kashmir entered a decade of mass protests, the local press was seen as an instigator and more bans followed. *Rising Kashmir* was forced to stop publication during the protests of 2008 and 2010. When protests broke out again in 2016, the government shut down printing presses in the Valley for three days and the *Kashmir Reader* was banned for a month for allegedly inciting violence.

The most well-worn means of containing the local press, however, was through withholding funds. “There are four key sources of revenue for any media,” said the editor of the English magazine in Srinagar. First, there were advertisements from the local

¹⁷ Masood, B., 2019. Jammu and Kashmir: Editor held 26 years after warrant, court slams cops. [online] The Indian Express. Available at: <<https://indianexpress.com/article/india/jammu-and-kashmir-editor-held-26-years-after-warrant-court-slams-cops-5799938/>> [Accessed 15 July 2021].

¹⁸ Naqash, R., 2016. *Only 'Kashmir Reader' was gagged, but all newspapers in the Valley must toe a tricky line.* [online] Scroll.in. Available at: <<https://scroll.in/article/819287/kashmir-reader-was-gagged-but-all-newspapers-in-the-valley-must-toe-a-tricky-line>> [Accessed 23 July 2021].

private sector, which barely exists in Kashmir. Second, corporate advertisements from various parts of India, which rarely reached the Valley. Third, central government advertisements. Finally, there were advertisements from the local Department of Information, the mainstay of the Kashmiri press. Early in the militancy, leading dailies were accused of taking funds from both sides – government and separatist. Whatever the truth of these allegations, the government soon wielded far greater financial control over the local press.

As far back as 1988, the Srinagar-based *Wadi Ki Awaz* had filed a petition urging the release of government advertisements. The paper met the criteria for circulation and regularity, the petitioners argued, so it was discriminatory to withhold government advertisements. The government had replied that the paper was publishing “secessionistic and anti-national activities”. The High Court of Jammu and Kashmir ruled that, in the absence of a well-defined policy on the media, advertisements could not be withheld.¹⁹

A policy did emerge the next year, laying down a framework for regulating the press. There were financial punishments for publishing content that could “bring into contempt or hatred” the government or the governor, or “grossly misrepresent the policy and activities of the said Government”.²⁰ But the policy remained silent on advertisements. These continued to be withdrawn and released as the government pleased.

In 2008 and 2010, as civil protests raged in Kashmir, central government ads were withdrawn from leading dailies in the Valley.²¹ Central ads to three leading English dailies have been withheld since then and thinned to a trickle for most Kashmiri publications. In 2017, a Union Home Ministry report suggested that the government establish greater “control” over mosques, madrasas, newspapers and television channels. Later that year, the ministry recommended that the state government stop advertisements to papers that

¹⁹ *Ghulam Nabi Shaida v. State Of Jammu & Kashmir And Others* [1988] Writ Petition No. 989 (High Court Of Jammu And Kashmir).

²⁰ Bareactslive.com. n.d. *Jammu and Kashmir State Press and Publications Act, 1989*. [online] Available at: <<http://www.bareactslive.com/JK/JK109.HTM>> [Accessed 16 July 2021].

²¹ Pandey, M., 2011. *Home ministry cracks whip on Kashmiri newspapers over 'anti-India' news*. [online] India Today. Available at: <<https://www.indiatoday.in/india/north/story/home-ministry-cracks-whip-on-kashmir-media-over-anti-india-news-143081-2011-10-11>> [Accessed 23 July 2021].

published “anti-national articles”.²² By August 2019, the state of Jammu and Kashmir had been erased and the local directorate of information was part of the Union Territory administration, taking directions from the Centre.

The *markaz* had emerged from the shadows. It was officially in charge.

²² Javaid, A., 2017. *Stop ads if papers print ‘anti-national’ articles: Centre to Jammu & Kashmir*. [online] Hindustan Times. Available at: <<https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/stop-ads-if-papers-print-anti-national-articles-centre-to-jammu-kashmir/story-Up188nqUzsNcqr7zhTCwzK.html>> [Accessed 23 July 2021].

Under fire

In truth, the Centre had moved into the Valley a year earlier.

On June 18, 2018, Shujaat Bukhari, the founding editor of *Rising Kashmir*, walked out of his office in Srinagar's Press Colony to be shot dead by unidentified gunmen. Bukhari had escaped several assassination attempts before.²³ He was a well-known figure both in Kashmir and in Delhi, a familiar face in television debates on Kashmir and a frequent columnist for both Indian and Pakistani publications. He was also known to be involved in "Track 2" peace talks, an informal dialogue between Indians and Pakistanis, separate from official diplomatic channels.

Like other killings in the Valley, his death was never fully explained. It was speculated that his role in the peace talks had not been well received in some quarters. The police pointed to a blog maintained in Pakistan, which named Bukhari as well as other journalists and activists as "Indian agents".²⁴ The assassination was initially pinned on the Lashkar-e-Taiba and the militants allegedly involved were later shot dead by security forces. But eventually, the police investigation trailed off.

Two days after Bukhari's death, the state government fell. It had been a coalition between a Kashmiri party and the regional unit of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), also in power at the Centre. The BJP walked out of the coalition, citing a rise in militancy among other reasons for its desertion. It was a decision dictated by the party leadership in Delhi.²⁵ Jammu and Kashmir was brought under temporary Central rule. This was extended

²³ Chakravarty, I., 2018. *The man who talked peace in Kashmir: Shujaat Bukhari defended dialogue to the last*. [online] Scroll.in. Available at: <<https://scroll.in/article/882691/the-man-who-talked-peace-in-kashmir-shujaat-bukhari-defended-dialogue-to-the-last>> [Accessed 23 July 2021].

²⁴ Naseem, I., 2018. *Pro-Pakistan blog, which had hit out at Shujaat Bukhari, continues to threaten journalists and leaders in Kashmir-India News*, Firstpost. [online] Firstpost. Available at: <<https://www.firstpost.com/india/pro-pakistan-blog-which-had-warned-shujaat-bukhari-continues-to-threaten-journalists-and-leaders-in-kashmir-4629781.html>> [Accessed 23 July 2021].

²⁵ Mathews, L., 2018. *Here's why the BJP dumped the PDP, and it has nothing to do with terror*. [online] The Indian Express. Available at: <<https://indianexpress.com/article/india/heres-why-the-bjp-dumped-the-pdp-and-it-has-nothing-to-do-with-terror/>> [Accessed 23 July 2021].

indefinitely until the Indian Parliament formally erased the state and split it into two Union Territories on August 5, 2019.

Many Kashmiri journalists believe the government crackdown on the local press really began in the aftermath of Bukhari's assassination. Methods perfected over decades of conflict were put to use: police action against journalists and a squeeze on revenue sources. The editor of an English magazine called the year leading up to August 5, 2019, a "dry run" for what was to follow. "A campaign was launched to discredit the media in Kashmir," he said. "It was aimed at criminalising the media. There were attacks on the credibility of journalists."

Security agencies directed their attention at individual journalists. A pattern emerged: journalists were usually charged with involvement in terror cases or financial irregularities. But chargesheets and conversations with police officials would reveal objections to their reporting work.²⁶ One reporter has spent three years in prison for allegedly "harbouring militants". But the police also objected to his reports on Burhan Wani, the militant whose death had sparked mass protests in 2016.²⁷

By mid-2019, three prominent editors had faced police action.²⁸ First, the 26-year-old arrest warrant against Qadri, the editor of *Daily Afaq*, was enacted. Now 62, Quadri was arrested at his home in the middle of the night and released a day later. Then, the National Investigation Agency, a central police body set up to probe terror cases, summoned the editors of *Kashmir Reader* and *Greater Kashmir* to Delhi. The charges were never officially revealed, although many speculated they were connected to the

²⁶ The template was set with the arrest of photojournalist Kamran Yousuf, who was accused of not being a "real journalist" and jailed in Delhi for six months. Staff, S., 2018. *Kashmiri photojournalist Kamran Yousuf granted bail in NIA case against him for 'stone-pelting'*. [online] Scroll.in. Available at: <<https://scroll.in/latest/871779/kashmiri-photojournalist-kamran-yusuf-granted-bail-in-nia-case-against-him-for-stone-pelting>> [Accessed 23 July 2021].

²⁷ Chakravarty, I., 2018. *'He is writing against forces in uniform': J&K police say they may file a new FIR against reporter*. [online] Scroll.in. Available at: <<https://scroll.in/article/892929/he-is-writing-against-forces-in-uniform-j-k-police-say-they-may-file-a-new-fir-against-reporter>> [Accessed 23 July 2021].

²⁸ Zargar, S., 2019. *'Anti-national coverage': There is a quiet crackdown on the local press in Kashmir*. [online] Scroll.in. Available at: <<https://scroll.in/article/931001/anti-national-coverage-there-is-a-quiet-crackdown-on-the-local-press-in-kashmir>> [Accessed 23 July 2021].

newspapers' coverage of the 2016 protests. Some reports implied *Greater Kashmir* was under the cosh for allegedly taking funds from separatist groups in the 1990s.²⁹

Whatever the charges, the interrogation of Fayaz Kaloo, the editor of *Greater Kashmir*, signalled the old status quo in Kashmir would no longer hold. Kaloo had edited the paper since 1987, shrewdly steering it through political pressures from all sides. Till the early 2000s, said one former employee, *Greater Kashmir* still retained some of its character as a “newspaper of resistance”. But increasing dependence on government advertisements and corporate advertisements – usually subject to government approval – had prompted the newspaper to strike a careful balance between the popular sentiment for *azadi* and the state narrative. Through the decades, Kaloo had remained connected to all power centres in the Valley, accruing political influence. Now the old omertà between government and separatist forces was broken, and the press was caught in the middle.³⁰

By February 2019, *Greater Kashmir* was feeling the pinch. Government advertisements in the paper, as well as to *Kashmir Reader*, were banned, although no official communication had been sent. In April 2019, the ad ban was extended to *Kashmir Uzma*, the Urdu daily that is Greater Kashmir's sister publication. A year after Kashmir lost autonomy, a government official at the Department of Information in Srinagar admitted to me that ads to some newspapers had been stopped for five months in 2019. “You know how it was before abrogation [of special status],” he said. “They wrote what they liked. They don't write against the government anymore. They favour the government now.”

Other revenue streams also dried up. The editor of an English magazine, for instance, spoke of an “arrangement” with the Jammu & Kashmir Bank which had ensured a steady stream of funds for about a decade. Once Central rule was imposed, the interim administration started a crackdown on the bank, the state's oldest financial institution,

²⁹ Quint, T., 2019. '*Greater Kashmir*' Editor Questioned over Terror Funding, *Articles*. [online] TheQuint. Available at:

<<https://www.thequint.com/news/india/editor-greater-kashmir-questioned-nia-2016-militant-burhan-wani-killed-encounter>> [Accessed 23 July 2021].

³⁰ Zargar, S., 2019. '*Anti-national coverage*': There is a quiet crackdown on the local press in Kashmir. [online] Scroll.in. Available at:

<<https://scroll.in/article/931001/anti-national-coverage-there-is-a-quiet-crackdown-on-the-local-press-in-kashmir>> [Accessed 23 July 2021].

closely linked to Kashmiri aspirations for autonomy. That halted the funds which went to the magazine.

A loss of public trust did not help falling revenues, he said. Newspapers running state advertisements were “identified by people as working for the system”, he explained. It did not help that Bukhari’s death had intensified the swirl of rumours around the Kashmiri press and individual journalists – which side they worked for, whose payroll they were on. “We lost 15% of our revenue after Shujaat was killed,” said the magazine editor.

Drained of funds, battered by legal prosecutions, held suspect by both the government and the public, the Kashmiri press was already weakened by the time the state was dismembered on August 5, 2019.

‘Write with care’

The editor of the English magazine in Srinagar thought the days following the legislative changes would surely be the last for his newsroom. But quitting was not an option. If they shut shop now, it would be difficult for him to ever work again – the message was conveyed by “friends in the media”, he said. “When I felt compelled, I went to the civil secretariat and I asked, ‘Tell me, do you have some dos and don’ts?’ They said, ‘no’. But when I was leaving the office, they said, ‘*zara ahtiyat se likhna*’.” The warning was in Urdu: write with care.

As Kashmir went through cataclysmic political changes, politics dropped off the pages of its newspapers.³¹ Online editions could not be updated because of the internet ban. For weeks, the websites of *Greater Kashmir* and *Rising Kashmir* remained frozen on August 4, when pro-India leaders in Kashmir had met to declare they would protect special status. It was as if they had not been whisked away the next day and imprisoned for months, as if there had been no mass arrests of separatist leaders, lawyers and activists, as if Kashmir had not gone under the strictest lockdown in living memory.

In the international media and sections of the independent national media, there were reports on human rights violations by security forces in the districts of South Kashmir and protests in a Srinagar neighbourhood.³² The Kashmiri press, once dedicated to documenting the toll of conflict, barely spoke of it. “We carried small, vague updates, not big stories,” the magazine editor told me in rueful tones.

What accounted for this silence? There were physical curbs such as the communications blockade, the lockdown, and the presence of troops at every street corner. The Kashmir Editors’ Guild, which had been the most prominent press body in the Valley, cited these

³¹ Chakravarty, I., 2019. *Kashmiri press went offline but still reported on Article 370 – despite all the odds*. [online] Scroll.in. Available at: <<https://scroll.in/article/933951/kashmiri-press-went-offline-but-still-reported-on-article-370-despite-all-the-odds>> [Accessed 23 July 2021].

³² Chakravarty, I. and Zargar, S., 2019. *Raids at night, handbills by day: Army siege in South Kashmir escalates after special status revoked*. [online] Scroll.in. Available at: <<https://scroll.in/article/935245/raids-at-night-handbills-by-day-army-siege-in-south-kashmir-escalates-after-special-status-revoked>> [Accessed 23 July 2021].

curbs as a reason for its lack of protest. “We could not meet for a year. The situation was such – the lockdown, curfew,” a member of the guild explained. As for the dearth of political news, what was left to report on? “Our mainstream leaders, separatist leaders were all locked up,” he said. “All their political activity and statements had stopped.” It was censorship by default, he said.

But that was not the whole story. If there was a formal government veto on critical reporting, few editors or reporters in Srinagar will speak of it. Instead, most journalists talk about a cloud of suggestion and fear emanating from the government, paralysing the local press.

The message went out in a number of ways. In the early weeks after August 5, 2019, journalists leaving their homes were travelling into oblivion. You could be arrested or beaten up and no one would know. And there had been actual arrests – Qazi Shibli, editor of *The Kashmiriyat*, an online only news portal, was held days before August 5 and questioned about his coverage of the security build up in the run up to the legislative decisions.³⁵ His family reportedly had no word on his whereabouts for two months, when it emerged that he had been transferred to a prison in the state of Uttar Pradesh along with other political prisoners. The stories of arrests and interrogations chilled others into silence. One journalist said he still slept in his day clothes when he visited his home in South Kashmir in case the police came for him again in the middle of the night. It was the kind of fear that bred self-censorship, several journalists said.

Those who still wrote critical reports were met with intimidation, even open rebuke. “Now, the SSP [senior superintendent of police] will call up the reporter directly and threaten to lodge a FIR,” said one young journalist in Srinagar. Irfan Malik, the reporter arrested in a midnight raid on August 14, 2019, recalls a friendly chat with a police officer shortly before he was released from custody. He remembers asking the officer why he had been arrested. “He said, Irfan, it’s unofficial but I’ll tell you – I want you to continue

³⁵ Team, N., 2020. *After nine months in jail, journalist Qazi Shibli detained again by Srinagar police*. [online] Newslandry. Available at: <<https://www.newslandry.com/2020/08/03/after-nine-months-in-jail-journalist-qazi-shibli-detained-again-by-srinagar-police>> [Accessed 23 July 2021].

doing journalism but it should steer clear of politics and conflict. Do sports journalism,” Malik recounted.

Others speak of more subtle messaging. For instance, word would be sent out through journalist colleagues that a certain story was not liked by the administration. Or security officials would casually mention reports critical of the government in conversation. But there was nothing casual about these remarks, journalists felt. They were meant to convey that the report had been noted and the reporter was being watched.

The message trickled down through editorial diktats in newsrooms, where reporters say they were warned not to stray from the government line. “Our editor clearly told us: the days of that journalism are over,” said a sub-editor at an English daily in Srinagar. “He said it in front of everyone: ‘Now you are an employee, if I see anything that goes against the interests of the organisation, you will be fired. If you want to fight for those principles of journalism, you may leave.’”

A young reporter at another English daily said she was instructed to do “soft” stories. “Our editors said, in this situation, we have to think of our life, our family,” she recalled. They were encouraged to do stories on health and how patients were doing amid the communication blackout. Stories more directly linked to the political situation were embargoed. About a year after special status was revoked, she had filed a report saying 95% of the Valley’s youth were against the move. The report was put in cold storage, she said. The fear of losing government advertisements seemed to have prompted editorial caution, as we will explore in the next chapter.

Many other stories died a quiet death because of stonewalling by government sources, local journalists say. In the early days after special status was revoked, the flow of information was controlled from the media centre at Sarovar Portico, where government spokespersons and bureaucrats would hold daily briefings. As the excitement around the August 5 measures died out, journalists from the national and international media moved out of the Valley. The briefings petered out. Local journalists could report press releases

handed out by the Department of Information. But specific questions were rarely entertained. Without an official version, many stories could not be published.³⁴

As the briefings at Sarovar Portico wound down, local journalists were herded into the offices of the Department of Information at Srinagar. Here, a few computers in a cramped, airless room did duty as the new media centre. While other curbs were eased, internet restrictions remained in place for 18 months in the Valley. For months, the media centre at the information department was the only source of high speed internet for Kashmiri journalists, many of whom had to drive for hours to file their stories. News from districts outside Srinagar inevitably dried up.



Journalists use the internet as they work inside a government-run media centre in Srinagar January 10, 2020. REUTERS/Danish Ismail

“The government used to get to know the public mood from newspapers,” said the editor of an Urdu daily. “That has stopped.”

³⁴ Chakravarty, I., 2020. ‘Not available for comment’: Journalists in Kashmir complain about being stonewalled by officials. [online] Scroll.in. Available at: <<https://scroll.in/article/960042/not-available-for-comment-journalists-in-kashmir-complain-about-being-stonewalled-by-officials>> [Accessed 23 July 2021].

Cut down to size

The August 5 crackdown crippled the local press in material ways, leaving it shorn of revenues. Government advertisements, long used to control the local press, dried up overnight. Even when the ads started trickling back, they would be withdrawn abruptly if newspapers published critical content, local journalists say.

“If the government found something that didn’t go down well with them, next day there would be no ads,” recalled the sub-editor from an English daily. “From 1,500 square centimetres, it would be 30 square centimetres the next day. This happened four or five times [in the three months after special status was revoked]. So we understood what was happening.”

For the Kashmiri press, this was a debilitating loss. Publications that depended on government advertisements were on the brink of collapse a year after special status was revoked. In September 2020, *Kashmir Life* had seen a 60% fall in revenue since March 2019 while sources in the *Daily Afaq* claimed they had lost even more over the past year.

Even magazines like *Free Press Kashmir*, which had a large online readership and depended on private advertisements, struggled to stay afloat. Till August 7, a contributing editor in Delhi had run the news desk. Then they asked him not to publish articles online. “We were scared our journalists would be rounded up,” said Qazi Zaid, who runs the publication. About 1,000 copies of the print weekly were still published, the pages filled with reports from news agencies, to keep the licence alive. But the website was closed till May 2020.

“The entire reporting team was disbanded,” said Zaid. The long lockdown had crippled the local economy, which meant advertisements dried up. “We shut down because the market shut down – that was the biggest censorship,” said Zaid. They switched to a subscription model when the website relaunched since private advertisers had backed out. But with the local economy destroyed, subscriptions are also hard to come by.

The loss in revenue shrank the Kashmiri press. First, it forced salary cuts and layoffs. One fact-finding report, published a month after special status was revoked, said many major publications had had to lay off 75% of their staff in the immediate aftermath of August 5, 2019. Reporters from the districts, who could not file stories without an internet connection, bore the brunt of these layoffs.

Malik had started reporting for *Greater Kashmir* in October 2016, the year of the Burhan Wani protests. He lost his job after August 5, 2019. “The reason given? We should have reached office in spite of the curfew and communication blockade, we should have filed stories on pen drives,” he said.

According to the sub-editor at the English daily, many publications did not fire reporters, but merely “disengaged” them. “They sent a memo saying we are not firing you, but no work, no wage,” he recounted. A year later, as the restrictions eased, some reporters were hired back. But newsrooms and salaries remained depleted. According to estimates provided to me by staff at *Rising Kashmir*, about 40% of its newsroom was laid off and the rest took 40% salary cuts. *Kashmir Life* laid off three people out of a staff of 20, a number it achieved by implementing 50% salary cuts for those who remained.

Revenue losses and the long lockdown also meant a drastic fall in the circulation of local newspapers. Urdu newspapers had already seen a fall in circulation since their heyday in the 1990s. The numbers fell further. Take *Daily Afaq*, which had a circulation of 40,000 to 50,000 in its early days. By 2019, about 10,000 copies were distributed daily and these numbers fell even further after the August 5 lockdown. *Chattan*, which also had a circulation of about 50,000 in the 1990s, only printed 2,000 copies after the lockdown.

An official in Srinagar’s information department refuted the spending freeze when I enquired about it: he claimed government ad spending had actually doubled in recent years. Before 2016, it had been Rs 18 crore, he said. In 2016, the year that saw widespread protests and newspaper bans, the government had budgeted Rs 24 crore. In 2019-2020, he said, Rs 35 crore had been budgeted for advertisements to newspapers but “liabilities go up”. For instance, the government launched a “Back to Village” programme, where

bureaucrats visited rural areas and held conclaves with local residents. That had driven up the expenditure to Rs 40 crore, the official explained. In Kashmir alone, he claimed, 177 publications received government ads in 2020. In the early days after special status was revoked, according to the official, the biggest beneficiary was *Greater Kashmir*, reinstated in the government rosters after five months of being left out in the cold. *Rising Kashmir* was second, he said.

In the weeks that followed August 5, 2019, the front pages of both newspapers ran full page government ads. These explained the benefits of removing special status.³⁵

³⁵ Zargar, S., 2019. *Government ads in J&K papers insist that scrapping special status will end state's 'backwardness'*. [online] Scroll.in. Available at: <<https://scroll.in/article/937251/government-ads-in-j-k-papers-insist-that-scrapping-special-status-will-end-states-backwardness>> [Accessed 23 July 2021].

‘Do we kill the story?’

The crackdown on the Kashmiri press has left its imprint on the very nature of news. While some stories dropped off the pages entirely, others were treated differently post August 5, 2019. Three subjects, in particular, reflect a marked change: gunfights between militants and security forces, civil protests, and separatist politics.

In Kashmir, gunfights are euphemistically called “encounters”, as if to suggest chance meetings between militants and security forces.³⁶ A term originating from the security establishment, it has entered the press and common parlance. It is used to describe carefully planned counterinsurgency operations. Security forces acting on intelligence will circle specific houses or localities where militants are believed to be hiding. Inevitably, these operations culminate in an exchange of fire. While security forces have also suffered casualties, most gunfights end when the militants are killed. Over the last decade, local residents have often breached security cordons, pelting stones at soldiers in an effort to help militants escape.

For years, the facts of these gunfights have been disputed: who opened fire, whether the militants were asked to surrender, whether civilians were killed, whose bullets killed whom. Local accounts and the state version have often diverged. After August 5, 2019, reporters started avoiding the sites of these gunfights, relying on press releases by state agencies instead. Those who did visit the sites to collect local accounts found themselves unable to get a state response to specific questions or allegations. “How do you report a gunfight without an Army or a police quote?” asked Zaid. “Do we kill the story?”

If local voices faded from stories on gunfights, local protests were also muffled. The mass protests of the past decade had been covered avidly by the Kashmiri press. It recorded public furies against the government as well as the state crackdown on protesters. After August 2019, civilian injuries may still be reported but recounting the anti-government

³⁶ Chakravarty, I. and Naqash, R., 2016, *Anatomy of an encounter: Cordon, crackdown, stones and death*. [online] Scroll.in Available at: <https://scroll.in/article/824474/anatomy-of-an-encounter-cordon-crackdown-stones-and-death> [Accessed 23 July 2021]

sentiments that drive protests has become taboo. “We could write about the injuries but not about the *azadi* slogans,” said the editor of an Urdu daily. “It was a narrative they did not want us to carry. But how can you deny it? It exists in Kashmir. We were allowed to publish the other narrative before.”

Alongside the expression of anti-government sentiment, reporting separatist politics was also proscribed. Statements made by the separatist leadership of the Hurriyat have disappeared from news pages.

Greater Kashmir, the Valley’s most widely circulated English daily for years, reflects this sea change in coverage. Contrast the paper’s reports on a gunfight in Frisal in South Kashmir, which took place in 2017, and one in Nawakadal, a crowded locality in Srinagar, in 2020. Both incidents left militants and civilians dead. Both left houses reduced to rubble, blown up by security forces during the operation.

Of the Frisal 2017 incident, the newspaper reported local militants had appeared at the funeral of their “slain colleagues” to offer a gun salute.³⁷ Thousands of mourners had gathered for the funeral to chant “anti-India” and “pro-freedom” slogans. Another report notes the anger of the “resistance leadership” over civilian killings.³⁸

The Nawakadal gunfight that killed three militants left a trail of blasted houses in the densely packed old quarters of the city. Three civilians, including a 13-year-old boy, were trapped in the fire and rubble and later died of their injuries. Local residents also alleged looting by security forces.³⁹ While some online outlets detailed the ravages of the gunfight, most print publications reported the police version of events. *Greater Kashmir*

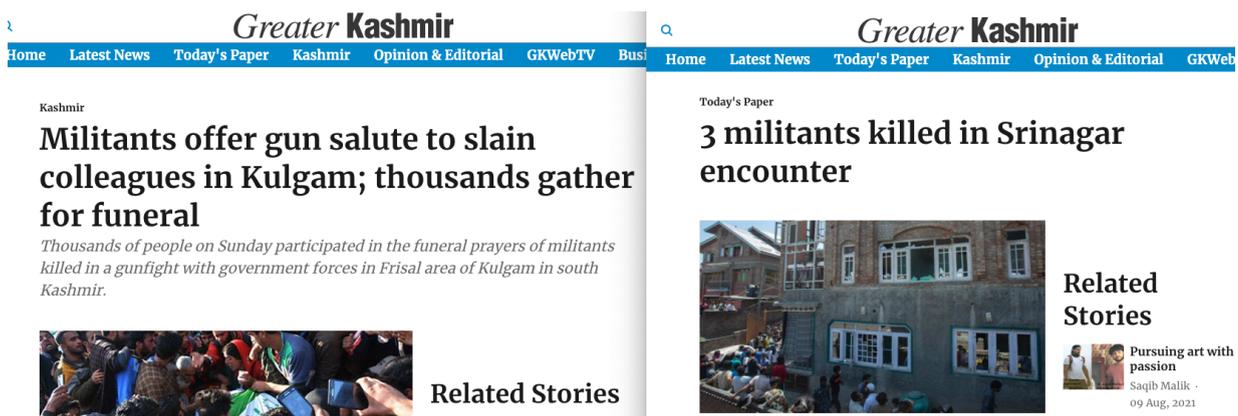
³⁷ 2017, *Militants offer gun salute to slain colleagues in Kulgam; thousands gather for funeral*. [online] Greater Kashmir. Available at: <https://www.greaterkashmir.com/kashmir/militants-offer-gun-salute-to-slain-colleagues-in-kulgam-thousands-gather-for-funeral> [Accessed 23 July 2021]

³⁸ GKNN, 2017, *Resistance leadership aghast over civilian killings at Frisal*. [online] Greater Kashmir. Available at: <https://www.greaterkashmir.com/kashmir/resistance-leadership-aghast-over-civilian-killings-at-frisal> [Accessed July 23 2021]

³⁹ TKW Staff, Srinagar gunfight: At least 15 houses destroyed. [online] The KashmirWalla. Available at: <https://thekashmirwalla.com/2020/05/srinagar-gunfight-at-least-15-houses-destroyed/> [accessed 23 July 2021]

reported that the militants had been asked to surrender before the gunfight began in earnest⁴⁰ and that they were later buried in a North Kashmir district, far away from protesting crowds.⁴¹

It does take note of the boy's death, but shies away from reporting the public's outrage, with only one report quoting the leader of a pro-India party entreating the government to rehabilitate those who had lost their homes in the gunfight.⁴²



Contrasting coverage of a gunfight between 2017 and 2020. (Screengrab)

Public anger was once the focus of *Greater Kashmir's* reportage, particularly during the mass protests of 2016. The protests were triggered by the killing of Hizbul Mujahideen commander Burhan Wani. The militant, who had popularised a new wave of local militancy through social media and become a household name in Kashmir, was shot dead in a gunfight on July 8, 2016. A headline two days later, printed in red, echoed the public cry of grief and rage: “Burhaaaaaan”.⁴³ It was followed up with reporting on the number of

⁴⁰ Ibn-Yusuf, S., 2020, *3 militants killed in Srinagar encounter*. [online] Greater Kashmir. Available at: <https://www.greaterkashmir.com/todays-paper/3-militants-killed-in-srinagar-encounter> [Accessed 24 July 2021]

⁴¹ Baba, A., 2020, *Nawa Kadal gunfight| Slain militants buried in B'la graveyard*. [online] Greater Kashmir. <https://www.greaterkashmir.com/editorial/nawa-kadal-gunfight-slain-militants-buried-in-bla-graveyard> [Accessed 24 July 2021]

⁴² GK-News-Network, 2020, *Nawa Kadal gunfight: Gul seeks rehabilitation of fire victims*. [online] Greater Kashmir. Available at: <https://www.greaterkashmir.com/kashmir/nawa-kadal-gunfight-gul-seeks-rehabilitation-of-fire-victims> [Accessed 24 July 2021]

⁴³ Scroll Staff, 2016, *Bidding adieu to 'Commander Burhan': How Kashmir's newspapers covered the death of a militant*. [Online] Scroll.in.

protesters killed and injured in the security crackdown. Headlines counted the days of protest: “Day 3”, “Day 100”, “Day 137”.⁴⁴

Pellet guns used to quell protests – supposedly non-lethal weapons that killed several people and blinded and maimed hundreds – became a flashpoint for public anger. On July 31, 2016, *Greater Kashmir* carried a profile of a boy who had been hit by pellets “almost everywhere” and was in a critical condition.⁴⁵ A headline from November 18, 2016, is evocative: “33 pellet victims have dead eyes, hundreds of others ‘just perception of light’”.⁴⁶ Most of these reports are accompanied by graphic pictures of pellet victims’ injuries, their bodies a silent rebuke to the state.

Compare this to a report on pellet injuries from May 7, 2020.⁴⁷ Protests had broken out after the killing of another Hizbul Mujahideen commander in South Kashmir. The report merely quotes hospital authorities as saying four civilians with bullet injuries and 20 with pellet injuries had been admitted. The accompanying picture: a shot of the busy hospital entrance. The wounded bodies have disappeared from news pages.

Threaded through reporting on the public anger of 2016 was the voice of the Hurriyat, referred to as the “resistance camp” or the “joint resistance leadership”. For months, the separatist leadership had issued a weekly “calendar”, outlining a schedule for shutdowns and demonstrations.⁴⁸ Most local newspapers, including *Greater Kashmir*, routinely published the weekly calendar. The Hurriyat was treated as an alternative power centre in

<https://scroll.in/article/811495/bidding-adieu-to-commander-burhan-how-kashmirs-newspapers-covered-the-death-of-a-militant> [Accessed 24 July 2021]

⁴⁴ Bashir, A. and Muhammad. G., 2016, *Day 137: Pellets injure 15 in Sopore*. [online] Greater Kashmir.

<https://www.greaterkashmir.com/todays-paper/day-137-pellets-injure-15-in-sopore> [Accessed 24 July 2021]

⁴⁵ Nissa, Z., 2016, *Hit by pellets ‘almost everywhere’, Pulwama boy battles for life*. [online] Greater Kashmir.

<https://www.greaterkashmir.com/todays-paper/hit-by-pellets-almost-everywhere-pulwama-boy-battles-for-life> [Accessed 24 July 2021]

⁴⁶ Nissa, Z., 2016, *33 pellet victims have dead eyes, hundred of other just ‘perception of light’*. [online] Greater Kashmir.

<https://www.greaterkashmir.com/todays-paper/33-pellet-victims-have-dead-eyes-hundreds-others-just-perception-of-light> [Accessed 24 July 2021]

⁴⁷ Nissa, Z., 2020, *24 civilians with pellet, bullet injuries shifted to Srinagar*. [online] Greater Kashmir.

<https://www.greaterkashmir.com/editorial/24-civilians-with-pellet-bullet-injuries-shifted-to-srinagar-hospitals> [Accessed 24 July 2021]

⁴⁸ Naqash, R., 2016, *Restrictions, dheel and more: A Kashmiri curfew glossary*. [online] Scroll.in.

<https://scroll.in/article/811868/restrictions-dheel-and-more-a-kashmiri-curfew-glossary> [Accessed 24 July 2021]

the Valley, shaping its politics as much as pro-India parties. On November 8, 2016, “Day 123” of the protests, “resistance leaders” met “stakeholders” in the Valley to decide on a future course of action, *Greater Kashmir* reported.⁴⁹ They included quotes from business traders and transporters, hit hard by the months-long shutdown, as well as civil society and religious leaders.

After August 5, 2019, the “joint resistance leadership” disappeared from news pages. *Greater Kashmir* now refers to them as “separatist leaders”, the same language used by the national press. There are few statements carried from the Hurriyat leadership. *Greater Kashmir* is also laconic about the crackdown on the Hurriyat, which started months before special status was revoked and continued long after.

When Ashraf Sehrai, the 76-year-old leader of one the Hurriyat faction, was detained under a preventive detention law and transferred to a prison in Jammu, it merited only a brief update on July 12, 2019.⁵⁰ He died of COVID-19 in May 2021, still in prison.

What is covered in detail instead is the resignation of Syed Ali Shah Geelani, a veteran separatist leader, from the Hurriyat faction he had headed for decades. *Greater Kashmir* carried the text of Geelani’s resignation letter, which lays open the rifts within the Hurriyat.⁵¹ Two more articles analyse the resignation. One quotes Kashmiri academics, who say it “generates debate”.⁵² Another report covers a senior police official’s reaction: Geelani’s resignation, he says, “signals the failure of separatism”.⁵³

⁴⁹ GK Web Desk, 2016, *Day 123: Resistance leaders, stakeholders meet to discuss future strategy*. [online] Greater Kashmir. Available at: <https://www.greaterkashmir.com/kashmir/day-123-resistance-leaders-stakeholders-meet-to-discuss-future-strategy> [Accessed 24 July 2021]

⁵⁰ Ibn-Yusuf, S., 2020, *Ashraf Sehrai detained under PSA*. [online] Greater Kashmir. Available at: <https://www.greaterkashmir.com/news/front-page-2/ashraf-sehrai-detained-under-psa/> [Accessed 24 July 2021]

⁵¹ Ibn-Yusuf, S., 2020, *Geelani resigns from Hurriyat Conference*. [online] Greater Kashmir. Available at: <https://www.greaterkashmir.com/news/front-page-2/geelani-resigns-from-hurriyat-conference/> [Accessed 24 July 2021]

⁵² Naqushbandi, U., 2020, *Decision generates debate*. [online] Greater Kashmir. Available at: <https://www.greaterkashmir.com/editorial/decision-generates-debate> [Accessed 24 July 2021]

⁵³ Bhargav, S., 2020, *Resignation of Syed Ali Geelani signals failure of separatism in Kashmir: DGP*. [online] Available at: <https://www.greaterkashmir.com/gk-top-news/resignation-of-syed-ali-geelani-signals-failure-of-separatism-in-kashmir-dgp> [Accessed 24 July 2021]

A new media policy

On May 15, 2020, the government of the Union Territory of Jammu and Kashmir announced a “New Media Policy”. It was issued by the Department of Information and Public Relations, which now described itself as “the single window for information and communication for the government”.

Government prescriptions on how the press should conduct itself are not new to Kashmir. As early as 1978, the state government had laid down criteria for newspapers to be eligible for public advertisements. In 1989, after strictures from the court, the government released a framework for regulating the press. Both sets of rules betrayed a preoccupation with policing “anti-national” content, often conflated with anti-government content. But neither was as broad-based and explicit as the New Media Policy of 2020, which gives form to previously unwritten assumptions and practices.

First, it seems to redefine all news flowing from the government as publicity. The policy was aimed at “creating a sustained narrative on the functioning of the Government in the media”. One of the key challenges was to “ensure that the Social Media space is proactively occupied”. This was because the “transformative process” of revoking special status had not been covered by the media to the government’s satisfaction. It had brought in “people-friendly laws” and “positive changes” on the developmental front, the policy document says, but the media had focused on the “security aspects”. The formation of a special social media unit and guided tours for journalists were proposed as remedies to the situation.

Second, the policy spelled out mechanisms to vet both news content and journalists working in the Valley. These were apparently needed to address “the issue of fake news” and “plagiarism”. Before government ads were issued, the “antecedents” of the newspaper or web portal, of the editor and the publisher, and of the “key personnel” would be examined. Journalists asking for government accreditation would be put through a “robust background check”. The Department of Information would also parse through all published content, not just for “fake news” but also for “unethical or anti-national

activities.” Government ads would be stopped to “any media which incite or tend to incite violence, question sovereignty and integrity of India”. Journalists and publications could face criminal proceedings if found guilty of these “offences”. Security agencies were enlisted in this effort to vet and monitor the press.

Third, the policy laid down fresh criteria for “empanelment”, or inclusion in the list of publications eligible for government advertisements. Publications could get struck off the list for failing to meet the requirements of circulation, regularity and print area. They could also be disqualified for “misrepresentation or falsification of data or any other illegal activity or failure to maintain public standards”.

The new media policy formalised the state’s power to monitor and punish journalists for their work. Although it was announced by the Department of Information, much of the control over the press has been exercised by security agencies over the last two years. One photographer found herself booked under an anti-terror law for an old picture of protests that had floated up on social media. Another journalist for a national daily was booked for “fake news” – that was the police term given to news that had not been confirmed by official channels.⁵⁴

In July 2020, the cyber police interrogated Fahad Shah, editor of the *Kashmir Wallah*, an online only outlet, for its coverage of the Nawakadal gunfight.⁵⁵ It was one of the few local outlets that had departed from the government line. A growing discomfort with the reporting on gunfights led to the police banning journalists from going near “encounter sites” or covering them live. It was in the interests of law and order and national security, the police reasoned.⁵⁶

⁵⁴ Chakravarty, I., 2020, *FIRs against Kashmiri journalists sends message that media exists at the mercy of security agencies*. [online] Scroll.in. Available at: <https://scroll.in/article/959874/firs-against-kashmiri-journalists-sends-message-that-media-exists-at-the-mercy-of-security-agencies> [Accessed 24 July 2021]

⁵⁵ Scroll Staff, 2020, *J&K: ‘Journalism is not a crime’, says ‘The Kashmir Walla’ after police again summon its editor*. [online] Scroll.in. Available at: <https://scroll.in/latest/967069/j-k-journalism-is-not-a-crime-says-the-kashmir-walla-after-police-again-summon-its-editor> [Accessed 24 July 2021]

⁵⁶ Scroll Staff, 2021, *J&K Police advisory barring journalists from encounter sites is undemocratic: Editors Guild*. [online] Scroll.in. Available at: <https://scroll.in/latest/992563/j-k-police-advisory-barring-journalists-from-encounter-sites-is-undemocratic-editors-guild> [Accessed 24 July 2021]

Amid surveillance and punitive action against the press, the administration further tightened its belt on advertising. By December 2020, it had “de-empanelled” 34 newspapers, suspended advertisements to 13 and issued notices to 17 others for “alleged plagiarism” and “poor content”.⁵⁷

To the chagrin of individual reporters and editors, the new media policy drew few collective protests from the major press bodies in Kashmir.⁵⁸

⁵⁷ Javaid, A., 2020, J&K de-empanels 34 newspapers, suspends ads for 13, issues notice to 17 for ‘malpractice’. [online] ThePrint. Available at: <https://theprint.in/india/jk-de-empanels-34-newspapers-suspends-ads-for-13-issues-notice-to-17-for-malpractice/586914/> [Accessed 24 July 2021]

⁵⁸ Zargar, S., 2020, *Jammu and Kashmir’s new media policy is aimed at demolishing the local press, editors say*. [online] Scroll.in. Available at: <https://scroll.in/article/964900/jammu-and-kashmir-s-new-media-policy-is-aimed-at-demolishing-the-local-press-editors-say> [Accessed 24 July 2021]

Conclusion: the broken accord

The new media policy dovetailed neatly into the Centre's project of fashioning a "Naya Kashmir", or New Kashmir. It is to be a polity that breaks with the past.⁵⁹

All the institutional safeguards that had preserved a distinct regional identity have been dismantled. New Kashmiri parties that speak Delhi's political language have been floated. Elections to newly created local government bodies have been held to refocus the conversation on jobs and roads, away from autonomy and self-determination.



Indian policemen stand guard near a shop with its shutters sprayed with graffiti in Srinagar, India August 10, 2016. REUTERS/Danish Ismail

Delhi promised in 2019 that statehood would be restored once the unruly Valley was brought to heel. Before that, the Centre has another ambitious project to complete: delimitation, or redrawing of the parliamentary and assembly constituencies in Jammu

⁵⁹ 2019, *PM Modi very confident of building Naya Kashmir, says top entrepreneurs keen to invest in J&K*. [online] News18. Available at: <https://www.news18.com/news/india/modi-very-confident-of-building-naya-kashmir-says-top-entrepreneurs-keen-to-invest-in-jk-2267081.html> [Accessed 24 July 2021]

and Kashmir. Many see this as a route to reducing Muslim-majority Kashmir's influence on the legislative assembly.⁶⁰

How Kashmiris received these changes is not known. A curious silence has descended on the densely storied Kashmiri public sphere that had been shaped by opposition to Delhi. But then, the very idea of a representative public sphere – a matrix of popular ideas and opinions made visible by the press – has been undermined in Kashmir. The silence does not necessarily mean acquiescence to the vast changes sweeping across the Valley.

It speaks rather of a broken accord between the Kashmiri public and the press that it once felt represented by. Public responses to political measures and the lived experiences of ordinary Kashmiris no longer find space in the local press. Local journalists now speak of encountering a bitterness and mistrust that used to be reserved for the “*markazi*” national media. “We are at the receiving end of both the government and the public,” said the editor of the Urdu daily. “We are called ‘*bhika maal*’ [sold goods]. People think we are embedded journalists, not showing what’s happening on the ground. Our reporters get chased away.”

Another journalist, a reporter for an English daily, testified to this breakdown in relations. His newspaper had banned updates that indict the ruling party or security forces, and this had been noticed by readers, he said. It had not gone down well. “When we don’t have these updates, people tease you, heckle you in public spaces,” he said. The cruellest cut of all? “People question whether we are journalists.”

⁶⁰ Zargar, S., 2021, Will Kashmir's mainstream leaders stand against Modi's plan to carry out delimitation? [online] Scroll.in. Available at: <https://scroll.in/article/998945/will-kashmirs-mainstream-political-leaders-stand-against-modis-plan-to-carry-out-delimitation> [Accessed 24 July 2021]