

Jammu and Kashmir  
Women's Role in the post-1989  
Insurgency

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The conflict in the northern-most State of India – Jammu and Kashmir – has had its share of support from Kashmiri men and women alike. While the men crossed over to Pakistan-administered-Kashmir (also known as Pakistan occupied Kashmir) to receive training in arms, and came back to ‘liberate’ their ‘motherland’ from India, the women were at the forefront of protests and rallies, and provided psycho-social support to their men folk. In turn, the men got killed and the women bore the brunt of it, saddled with the burden of fatherless families, and sometimes in the form of the most gruesome human rights violations. ‘*Azaadi*’ (freedom) remained a distant dream.

Till the year 1990, women in Kashmir chose to remain within the peripheries of their homes, and basked in the glory of the syncretic traditions, culture and heritage of Kashmir. It was only in the early 1990s that the anger at losing loved ones to the bloody conflict between India and Pakistan brought the women out into the streets. Uncertainty, confusion, lack of a choice, lack of education and an uncertain future with no clear roadmap to follow were some of the factors that pushed women into going along with their men. To determine any kind of role played by

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women in the insurgency movement in Jammu and Kashmir, we need to understand their position in the given society.

In an environment of subterfuge, the *burqa* [enveloping outer garment worn by women], which has been projected as a symbol of Islam, becomes a functional necessity. Just as the woolen *phiran* [gown] became a dreaded garment for the security forces, with militants being able to hide deadly weapons within its folds without being detected, so too, the *burqa* helped clandestine operations, often required in troubled times.<sup>1</sup>

The Pakistan-based militant infrastructure has a fairly strong tradition of keeping women out of their organizational activities. Nevertheless, in the post-9/11 period, there is some evidence that women have been involved in such activities as well, particularly as couriers and in the operation of front organizations. Front activities include political mobilization and demonstrations, propaganda, financial mobilization or transfer of funds, coordination of protests against Security Force operations on 'human rights' platforms, mobilization and intimidation of women to impose 'moral codes of conduct', including, particularly, the *hijab* (veil) and a 'proper' dress code that excludes western dresses.

The concept of front-line female militants is not a novelty anymore, at least globally. There have been reports of women being involved in attacks in Jordan; women suicide-bombers have very widely been used by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) of Sri Lanka: the assassination of former Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi on May 21, 1991, being the most publicized of such offensives; and women bombers have been used by Kurdish guerilla groups in Turkey. Chechen rebel commander Shamil Basayev has long boasted of his regiment of Black Widows, the wives of men apparently killed by Russian forces.

However, closer to home, the agenda of terrorist groups is to create a new 'Islamic State' which has no interest in the liberation

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<sup>1</sup> Shiraz Sidhwa, "Dukhtaran-e-Millat: Profile of a militant, fundamentalist women's organisation," in Kamla Bhasin and Ritu Menon, eds., *Against All Odds: Essays on Women, Religion and Development from India and Pakistan*, New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1994, p. 128.

or welfare of its women. The conventional notion of women's role in militant operations is related to erecting support structures, fund-raising, public relations and political representation. Experts remain divided over whether female suicide bombers will be more widely deployed by al Qaeda, whose conservative philosophy restricts women to an auxiliary role in the *jihād*.<sup>2</sup>

This new-found 'extremist' image of women as 'killers' is quite an antithesis to the 'home-maker' and/ or 'life-giver' images they are commonly associated with. Insurgent groups are beginning to employ more and more women in their cadres because their actions generate greater media coverage, arguably boosting the militants' propaganda battle.<sup>3</sup>

Witnessing women traditionally associated with domestic duties taking part in frontline militancy operations can have a shaming effect on the men, 'impelling more of them to take part', says Laleh Khalili, a lecturer in Middle-Eastern politics at the School of Oriental and African Studies in London.<sup>4</sup> Attacks by women also shatter 'the male monopoly over *jihād*', according to Mustafa Alani, a counter-terrorism expert with the Gulf Research Centre in Dubai.<sup>5</sup>

Women, as they grow old, become more dominant in the household as well as in society. Women are considered to be more perceptive and emotionally stronger than men. Women are also emotionally volatile towards the male gender. If a girl child sees the male members of her family being persecuted, she feels more strongly about it than her male counterpart. Similarly, a woman feels strongly about any perceived atrocities committed against her community.

Lawlessness emerges in several grades in any society, which eventually leads to a situation as serious as militancy or terrorism. And such a situation flourishes if women do not stop or check it, and/ or if they believe in the purpose such a situation would serve. The principal reason why they would abet it is when they believe that their men are being persecuted.

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<sup>2</sup> Neil Arun, "Women bombers break new ground," [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle\\_east/4436368.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/4436368.stm).

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

For Kashmiri women – mothers, wives, sisters and daughters – negotiating space for their men folk has become a way of life, whether it is taking up the issue of missing sons and husbands or providing food and shelter to militants in their homes – a story every single house in Kashmir must be familiar with.

A report published by the Women's Initiative in 1994 titled "Women's Testimonies from Kashmir: The Green of the Valley is Khaki" documented the sentiments of women of all age groups on daily issues of survival in Kashmir. The introductory chapter of the report says:

What of the sister who hears that her 13-year-old brother has been 'picked up' for interrogation, knowing as she does that she may never see him again?... How does the mother who has lost three sons find the strength to carry on? What does it mean to be the wife or a sister of a militant? How does she bear the pain of death and separation? How does the woman looking at her innocent son rendered impotent by torture at the hands of the Forces keep her faith in humanity alive...? These women are perhaps the bravest of all, for they continue to live and struggle for what they believe to be right. They form the backbone of the (insurgency) movement. They are the ground which sustains life in the midst of death, humanity in the face of guns.<sup>6</sup>

It is not surprising at all, then, that women who found themselves under these strange circumstances, for no fault of their own and very little choice, consciously or unconsciously supported the Kashmiri insurgency.

...Looking at the many faces of Kashmiri women in conflict, it shows how women's political activism was rooted in their everyday concerns of managing survival, that is, 'stretched' roles. From the icon of the sorrowing mother who grieves in private but sacrifices her son for the cause, is the transformation of the mother as agency, who takes her private grief into public space thus politicizing it, e.g., the Association of the Parents of the

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<sup>6</sup> *Women's Testimonies from Kashmir: The Green of the Valley is Khaki*, New Delhi: Women's Initiative, 1994, p. 2.

Disappeared. Motherhood is seen as available for mobilization as resistance but also for co-optation in support of militarism and nationalism.<sup>7</sup>

Kashmiri women were politically the most active during 1989-90. To the world, the image of Kashmiri women is that of mothers, wives and daughters covered from head to toe, leading protest marches and facing the blows of police batons. For months together, such photographs filled the pages of local and national newspapers. The capital city of Srinagar was flooded with women everyday in early 1990 and the streets reverberated with the slogan: *'Marde mujahid jag zara ab, waqt-e-shahadat aaya hai!'* (Awaken you holy fighters as the time has come for martyrdom.) Such activism was perhaps a liberating experience for most Kashmiri women.

Women have supported or been part of the Kashmiri insurgency movement in broadly four ways.

### **Motivators**

Convinced of the role of *jihad* and *jihadis*, women provided psychological support to Kashmir's men folk as mothers, sisters and wives. The *Mujahideen* were glamourized and projected as heroes. Women would go to great lengths to be able to see a *jihadi*. To be identified as mother/sister/aunt of a *jihadi* was a matter of great pride for Kashmiri women.

Traditional Kashmiri folklore or *wanuwan* of the early 1990s is a typical and accurate example of the prevalent scenario.

*Yim mujahid zoraware, Yem kapaise aayaie*

*Yim aayi sarhad pareyaie, Tim kapare aaie*

*Sopore kerekh cross firing, Waremuli kerekh chaire*

(These powerful mujahids, where did they come from? They came from across the border, from the other side. They resorted to cross-firing at Sopore, and took tea at Baramulla)

*Kalashnikov lagai balayai*

*Yenav ladayat path fairaleh*

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<sup>7</sup> Rita Manchanda, "Where are the Women in South Asian Conflicts?" in Rita Manchanda, ed., *Women, War and Peace in South Asia: Beyond Victimhood to Agency*, New Delhi: Sage, 2001, p. 34.

(Don't give up this fight for freedom; I shower my life on this Kalashnikov)

*Main mujahidov behan*

*Praraie hideoutas*

(O my beloved mujahid, I will wait for you at the hideout.)

Strong sentiments towards *azaadi* and against India and the 'Hindustani' forces also find a mention in the folklore.

*Sari samhav kabus nemehav*

*Aagus manghav azaadi*

[Why don't we all (Kashmiris) get together and pray for *azaadi*]

*Dari bar bandkar*

*Hindustani fauj hai aav*

(Close all doors and windows: the Hindustani forces are coming!)

*Saien tehreekh kya chhaie*

*Jaan waisiwaye*

*Asi me marew ase chhe*

*Insaan wasiswaye*

(Our struggle for freedom is genuine. So why do you torture us for that? We are humans too!)

Instances of women giving overnight shelter and food to militants and protecting them from the security forces' are common. However, whether they did this out of choice or due to the lack of one is highly debatable. Young Kashmiri girls romanticized the idea of falling in love with a *mujahid*, and many eventually did run away and/or marry them, lured by the risk and glory that came with such an association. However, in one particular incident in the Darhal village of Rajouri district in early 2006, a young girl was able to convince her *mujahid* suitor to give up arms if he wanted to marry her.<sup>8</sup>

In the case of young men who became 'martyrs' for the Kashmiri cause, their mothers were almost worshipped. Huge crowds gathered when militant's bodies were brought to their homes. The mothers were often heard making statements which glorified the dead men and how lucky they were to have given birth to a martyr. Thus, an article posted on the Kashmiri Global Network called *Kashnet* noted:

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<sup>8</sup> Field notes, November 2006.

Sara, 65, mother of a slain JKLF [Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Front] militant, Mushtaq Ahmad Kutay, said 'I am proud that my son laid his life for freedom of Kashmir.' Mushtaq was among the seven militants, including JKLF commander Sheikh Abdul Hamid, killed during a boat capsizing after an encounter at Aali Kadal on November 19, 1992. 'Ten days were left for Mushtaq's marriage when he left home on some mission. Before leaving, I offered him sweets and kissed him,' Sara recounts. 'I did not weep when his body was brought home. Instead I offered prayers at Dastgeer Sahib to thank Allah as my son laid his life for a noble cause,' she said.<sup>9</sup>

In a personal interview, the widow of a Hizb-ul-Mujahideen militant, who is also a mother of two sons, said: "Children of a freedom fighter ought to be freedom fighters."<sup>10</sup>

In the Surankote *tehsil* (revenue division) of Poonch district, the dominant Gujjar population actively supported Kashmiri militants, who were extremely friendly with the locals. The women happily provided for these young men, who promised them 'azaadi'. However, the Kashmiri militants were progressively outnumbered and overpowered by the Pakistan-based and supported Lashkar-e-Toiba (LeT) militants, soon turning the area into a major operations' base for the LeT, so much so that it was commonly referred to as 'mini Pakistan'. Many considered the area a 'liberated zone' till as late as 2002. Obviously, this would have been impossible without local support, particularly from the women of the area since the men usually stayed away from their homes for long stretches of time to graze their cattle in greener pastures, and for other work. However, in a complete turn of events, the locals, especially the women, were grossly mistreated by the 'foreign *mujahids*', leading to widespread resentment against them. The villagers, both men and women, due to complete disillusionment with the militants, joined hands with the Army and helped them 'clear' the

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<sup>9</sup> "We're proud of our slain sons," *Greater Kashmir*, Srinagar, November 11, 2006.

<sup>10</sup> Field notes, September 2006.

area in one of the most massive operations carried out by the Indian forces in Jammu and Kashmir – *Operation Sarpvinash* – in the year 2003. Today, the twin villages of Kulali-Marrah are known for Kashmir’s first all-woman Village Defence Committee (VDC),<sup>11</sup> the other two having come up in the Reasi and Mahore regions. Though only a dozen women in Surankote are formally registered as VDC members, more than a hundred women in the entire area can use AK-47s, Self Loading Rifles (SLR), Light Machine Guns (LMG) and revolvers.

This major development clearly indicates that, in the case of Surankote, the women were easily led to believe that the militants were their saviours because they (the militants) promised them deliverables in the form of ‘*azaadi*’. They were able to do so primarily because the area was literally cut off from the rest of the world due to its difficult mountainous terrain and also because most people, due to lack of exposure and education, had no reason whatsoever to disbelieve the militants. However, it is also true that the women were often forced to provide for the militants for fear of their own lives as of their dear ones.

### **Protest marches, rallies and demonstrations**

Women repeatedly raised their voices against human rights violations in Kashmir. In the case of *mujahids* being killed or in anti-India rallies, women participated in a significant manner. According to a senior police officer, women often registered FIRs (First Information Reports) in Police Stations stating that a person had gone missing, when actually the person was operating as a militant. Women also pursued the cases of the release of their sons and/or husbands. This ‘activism’ ran parallel to the Kashmiri ‘struggle for freedom’.

It was not uncommon for Kashmiri women to allege rape by security forces. And in some cases, the allegations were not true. In fact they were encouraged to give testimonies against

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<sup>11</sup> VDCs are self-protection groups formed by the local people in their respective villages. Such groups were advocated by the Government of India in the early 1990s to combat terrorism wherein villagers were provided weapons and trained in their use by the police.



violations committed by the Indian security forces, and were exploited as victims and targets of the Indian agenda.

Kashmiri women have picketed the streets of Srinagar and other towns and villages to voice their agitation about rape and killings by the Security Forces, and have been an important part of the well-oiled propaganda machinery of the militants.<sup>12</sup>

Sheba Chhachhi, a photographer and installation artist, notes:

A small number of photographs of crowds of women protestors can be culled from the 1990-91 files. These images are taken as an affirmation of women's support for the armed struggle..."

### **Dukhtaran-e-Millat and Muslim Khawateen Markaz**

The emergence of an organized women's group was apparent in early 1990, when the Dukhtaran-e-Millat [Daughters of the Faith] gave a call for women to march to the United Nations on March 14, the first curfew-free day after the Channpora rape incident. Thousands of women filled the Maulana Azad Road that leads from Lal Chowk at the city centre to Gupkar, where the UN office is situated.<sup>13</sup>

The Dukhtaran-e-Millat (DeM) was formed in 1981. In 1987, the 'women activists' of the organization came on the streets, fought for reservation of seats for women in buses, took action against families that demanded dowry, and arranged marriages for girls who belonged to economically backward families. Says DeM chief Asiya Andrabi:

Since my brothers were already into separatist politics, my initiation into the anti-India sentiment happened automatically while I was still in school. I was used to Police raids much before I jumped full-time into the freedom movement. I was enamoured by the heroic deeds of the *mujahideen* and yearned to join the *jihad*. For me, *jihad* is not just a means to an end: it is a

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<sup>12</sup> Sidhwa, p. 123.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, p. 125.

lifelong mission. Allah says in the *Quran* that *jihad* is the only way to uproot evil from this world... And for me, Osama bin Laden symbolizes *jihad*. He has the courage to challenge the world's superpower, America. As much as I hate George Bush for being the oppressor that he is, I respect and admire bin Laden for his bravery. In fact I want my sons to follow in his footsteps and serve Islam and Allah the way bin Laden is doing.<sup>14</sup>

In the early 1990s, the DeM issued notices to women to dress according to the Islamic dress code i.e. wear a veil. For about two months, they even advertised in newspapers. But despite this, many women did not wear the *burqa* when in public. And as a warning to such women who did not observe *purdah* in public, the DeM activists threw paint on their clothes. Andrabi comments:

The Indian Government accused Dukhtaran-e-Millat and said Asiya Andrabi throws acid on women who do not observe *purdah*. India has also accused me of acting as a messenger for militant organizations. My house was raided; office locked up, and I had to go underground. This propaganda against me by the Indian Government is because I am anti-India. Dukhtaran-e-Millat's ideology is anti-India. My activists have staged rallies against atrocities committed by the Indian Security Forces. I believe that Kashmir rightly belongs to Pakistan. It has all the similarities — religion, culture, language. I do not trust any Hindustani. They are all agents of the Government of India. My mission is to drive India out of Kashmir, and then spread Islam in the State. And Islamization is not possible till such time that India continues to rule Kashmir.<sup>15</sup>

In September 1995, the DeM was held responsible for a bomb blast that killed Mushtaq Ali, a photographer from *Agence France Presse*, in Srinagar. According to news reports, a woman dressed in a *burqa* entered the *BBC/Reuters* office in Srinagar and introduced herself as a member of DeM. She dropped off a parcel

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<sup>14</sup> Interview with the author, June 2006.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

addressed to Yusuf Jameel, the *BBC* and *Reuters* correspondent in Kashmir. Ali opened the package which promptly exploded, killing him and injuring two others. The DeM denied responsibility for the attack, but it is highly likely that the perpetrator of the bombing was a member of the group.

In 2001, the group made headlines for publicly supporting a campaign of violence against women who refused to wear the *burqa*. The campaign was waged by a previously unknown group called Lashkar-e-Jabbar (LeJ). Despite DeM's support, even the most militant of Kashmiri separatists condemned LeJ's actions.<sup>16</sup> The Hizb-ul-Mujahideen and Harkat-ul-Mujahideen came out openly against the dress code and said women should not be pressured to wear the *burqa*. The separatist All Parties Hurriyat Conference (APHC) and several other religious, social and political groups also criticised the move as anti-Islam<sup>17</sup>.

Andrabi made headlines for weeks together for her protests and agitation against those involved in the sex scandal that rocked the Kashmir Valley in mid-2006. In an interview to *Kashmir Observer*, the DeM chief said:

We never had faith in CBI (Central Bureau of Investigation). We never trust Indian judiciary... India, under a craftily hatched conspiracy to keep Kashmiris slaves for ever, is using rapes and sex scandals as weapons of war and tools for slavery – thus molesting the chastity of our daughters. Let us fight against nefarious designs collectively...<sup>18</sup>

In her profile of the DeM, Shiraz Sidhwa notes:

Representing the most well-defined women's group in the Valley, the Dukhtaran-e-Millat operates within a larger context of passive resistance by Kashmiri women as a whole. This role has taken different forms, ranging from shielding militants in their homes, misleading the

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<sup>16</sup> <http://www.tkb.org/Group.jsp?groupID=4005>.

<sup>17</sup> "Lashkar-e-Jabbar men target unveiled woman," *The Tribune*, Chandigarh, September 13, 2001.

<sup>18</sup> "CBI Shielding Big Fish: Asiya," *Kashmir Observer*, Srinagar, August 6, 2007

security forces and acting as couriers and information-gatherers.<sup>19</sup>

The Muslim Khawateen Markaz (MKM, Muslim Women's Centre) chief, Anjum Zamrooda Habib, popularly called Behenji, got immense mileage and became a household figure after she saved the life of JKLF chief Hamid Sheikh.

A familiar sight became the *burqa* or *chadar* shrouded activists of the MKM acting as guards or sounding alerts as the Security Forces approached, blocking their way in the narrow alleys and twisted staircases, to give time to the militants to escape.<sup>20</sup> MKM activists were routinely spotted providing physical support in the form of food and clothes to jailed militants and would even collect money for bails.

The founder of MKM Mohtarma Bhaktawar said they started as social workers in 1986. In 1990, after the Gaunkadal massacre, when security forces killed 60 people in a peaceful demonstration, they joined the *Azaadi* movement. She said: 'Kashmir is occupied by both India and Pakistan. We are Kashmiri women. We have drunk the milk of Kashmir. We are committed to independent Kashmir. We respect all religions. We are not fundamentalists. People of all religions will live side by side. Kashmiri *pandits* should come back here, this is their motherland. We welcome them back and we will protect them if they join our struggle for self-determination.' The women of Khawateen Markaz believe in 'dressing according to our conscience'. They do not insist on *burqa*. They believe '*jism pe libaas is purdah*', which means clothing which does not reveal the contours of the body and a cloth which will cover hair.<sup>21</sup>

While the DeM (which began as a 'school' to impart the teachings of the Holy Quran to women who were deprived of religious education) is still operating, the MKM is largely defunct. The DeM was banned in June 2002 and cases were

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<sup>19</sup> Sidhwa, p. 127.

<sup>20</sup> Harinder Baweja, "Challenge of the Veil," *India Today*, New Delhi, September 15, 1991.

<sup>21</sup> Urvashi Butalia, ed., *Women's Testimonies from Kashmir: The Green of the Valley is Khaki*, New Delhi: Kali for Women, 2002 pp. 23-24.

registered under the Prevention of Terrorism Act (POTA) against Andrabi on charges of allegedly receiving money from the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), Pakistan's external intelligence agency, through *hawala* channels.<sup>22</sup> Nevertheless, Andrabi was very sure that Kashmiri women had not picked up the gun. She said something as extreme as that would only happen if all the men in Kashmir died. Her activists, however, did propagate the use of the knife in 1994 while protesting against the sexual harassment of women.

### Individual Instances

Almost overnight, ordinary women found themselves carried away by the emotional high tide of activism, and were transformed. There are numerous such instances. Thus, 'Fareeda was released on August 19 following her arrest on the night intervening August 13 and 14, in the wake of her announcement to celebrate Pakistan's Independence Day in a grand way.'<sup>23</sup>

Women have also been acting as couriers of money. For instance,

On March 24, 2002, the arrest of Shamima Khan, a Srinagar-based Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Front (JKLF) activist, at Kud on the Jammu-Srinagar National Highway, was followed by recovery of Rs. 4.8 million meant for Yasin Malik, Chairman of the JKLF. Khan revealed during interrogation that she had received the money from a Hurriyat activist, Altaf Qadiri, at a hotel in the Bagh Bazaar area of Kathmandu in Nepal.<sup>24</sup>

Further, the Special Branch of Delhi Police had arrested Anjum Zamrooda Habib, chief of the MKM, which is also a constituent of the 23-party Hurriyat Conference, while allegedly coming out

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<sup>22</sup> South Asia Terrorism Portal, [www.satp.org/satporgrp/countries/india/states/jandk/terrorist\\_outfits/dukhtar\\_an.htm](http://www.satp.org/satporgrp/countries/india/states/jandk/terrorist_outfits/dukhtar_an.htm)

<sup>23</sup> "Laskar-e-Jabbar is an Indian Outfit," *Kashmir Images*, Srinagar, August 22, 2001.

<sup>24</sup> Kanchan Lakshman, "J&K: Losing the War against Terrorist Financing?," *South Asia Intelligence Review*, Vol. I, No. 17, November 11, 2002, [http://www.satp.org/satporgrp/sair/Archives/1\\_17.htm](http://www.satp.org/satporgrp/sair/Archives/1_17.htm).

of the Pakistan High Commission with Rs 307,000, allegedly meant for separatists as '*nazrana*' (token money).<sup>25</sup>

A senior Army official explained why women were mostly used as carriers of money:

We do not check very thoroughly any vehicle in which a family is travelling, keeping in mind the sensitivity of children and women being there... Women used their traditional invisibility in the public sphere to create space for their activism. As they are seen as less threatening, they are less watched.<sup>26</sup>

The officer, however, believed that women had neither been involved in the transfer of weapons and arms and ammunition, nor used as human bombs.

However, in the Avantipura explosion, which happened soon after the October 2005 earthquake, a woman blew herself up on National Highway 1-A that connects the Kashmir Valley to India. Pakistan-based Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM) claimed it was a *Fidayeen* (suicide squad) attack, and the woman, Yasmeena Akhtar, was a suicide bomber. But investigations have yet to establish whether Yasmeena was actually a suicide bomber or was merely transporting explosives from one place to another, and whether the explosion occurred due to a mistake on her part. Media reports, however, clearly point towards Yasmeena's involvement much beyond the role of a mere transporter. "...Some officers believe their camp was Yasmeena's target and the explosives went off accidentally. At the blast site they had found three live hand grenades and pieces of a torn combat pouch - a belt with big pockets, that's tied around the chest. ...At the district court in Pulwama, 20 miles away, a clerk showed ... the records of the investigation and pictures of the explosion. The file describes Yasmeena as a girl who 'wore explosives on her body for the purpose of a terrorist suicide attack aimed at hurting the security forces and the police. She killed herself when the

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<sup>25</sup> "Pak diplomat named in FIR for funding militants," *Times of India*, Delhi, February 7, 2003.

<sup>26</sup> Manchanda, p. 15.

explosives went off accidentally near the Avantipura police headquarters'.<sup>27</sup>

The JeM actually hailed her as the first woman suicide bomber of the many more to come!

It is interesting to note Asiya Andrabi's opposition to the use of women as suicide bombers:

She argued that Islam did not allow women to be combatants, especially suicide bombers. 'It is against the dignity of a Muslim woman that the parts of her body be strewn in a public place. If a combatant or a suicide bomber is a woman, her dead body is bound to fall or be scattered in a place full of men.' ...She supported suicide bombing by men; her objection to suicide attacks by women seemed to rest on the notion that a woman's modesty must be preserved even in death.<sup>28</sup>

Dardpora, commonly known as the village of half-widows, in Kupwara District, is very close to the Line of Control (LoC). Almost all the men folk are 'absent', having been killed either in fratricidal wars or by the Indian Security Forces in the early years of militancy, or having simply 'disappeared'. Widowhood had become the dominant marker of these women in Dardpora. According to unconfirmed reports, the 'half-widows' of Dardpora village make some easy money even now by showing shortcuts in the mountains to militants.

Media reports<sup>29</sup> did mention women crossing the border for arms' training. However, there is little evidence to substantiate either women's training in arms or their actually picking up guns and resorting to violence in the name of Kashmiri nationalism.

## Underlying Drivers

Several factors contributed to women getting swayed into supporting the insurgency. The politics of everyday life and survival was perhaps, the most crucial one.

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<sup>27</sup> Basharat Peer, "The bride with a bomb," *The Guardian*, London, August 5, 2006.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Sukhmani Singh, "Velvet Gloves, Iron Hands," *Times of India*, September 22, 1990.

Women's activism in conflict flows from their everyday concerns of keeping the family together. But in conflict, women's everyday activity as reproducers and nurturers gets highly politicized because it ensures community survival.<sup>30</sup>

Education, or the lack of it, helped various agencies at work to influence women and mould their thinking and subsequent behavior in their favour. According to the 2001 census, the percentage of female literacy in Jammu and Kashmir is 41.82, and the sex ratio is 900 females per 1,000 males.<sup>31</sup> While there are no clear indicators of how many women have been killed during the nearly two decades of violence in Kashmir, unconfirmed reports put the number of widows in Kashmir to 11,000. Another 6,000 are half-widows: women who do not know whether their husbands are dead or alive.<sup>32</sup>

The absence of organized women's groups working for gender justice and equality and the subsequent emergence of fundamentalist women's groups like the DeM and MKM, have played on the women's psyche. Fundamentalist militant groups like the Allah Tigers and, later on, DeM, forced the Muslim women to wear the *burqa*. And the *burqa*, which was supposed to protect Kashmiri Muslim women from the evil eyes of any stranger, in fact made them more vulnerable to the Security Forces' suspicion.

The fear factor was enhanced exponentially by the presence of groups like the LeJ. The existence of LeJ was first reported by the local media in Jammu and Kashmir in August 2001 following two incidents. In the first incident, two unidentified youth poured diluted acid on two school teachers in the Khanyar area of Srinagar on August 7. The next day, an armed terrorist threatened all students and teachers of a girls' school in Srinagar with violence, unless they adopted the 'Islamic' dress code. Following these incidents, an unidentified person was reported to have informed the local media in Srinagar that his outfit, the Lashkar-e-Jabbar, was responsible for these threats and attacks. He added

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<sup>30</sup> Manchanda, pp. 23-24.

<sup>31</sup> Jammu and Kashmir, Census of India,  
<http://www.censusindia.net/profiles/jk.html>.

<sup>32</sup> Butalia, *Women's Testimonies from Kashmir*, p. 21.



that the outfit meant 'business in implementing the Islamic dress code in Kashmir'. According to the extremist interpretation, Muslim women must always wear the *burqa* in public. News reports in the aftermath of these incidents also claimed that these were succeeded by isolated incidents of firing by unidentified terrorists on unveiled women in south Kashmir over the next two months (September – October 2001), which left three women injured.<sup>33</sup>

When Kashmiri women realized that there were multiple agencies present on the scene and that some foreign militants were not really fighting for the cause of Kashmir, and were only mercenaries, they stopped supporting them. The simultaneous clashes, at several layers, between the different agencies, destroyed the social fabric of Kashmir completely and *'azaadi'* became a receding dream.

Human rights violations have been the single-most important factor in driving women to rebellion. A 22-year-old girl, who was allegedly raped by a Security Force trooper, declared: "I crave revenge. I am tempted to pick up a gun and retaliate, but I fear for the rest of my family." Andrabi expressed extremist sentiments on the issue: "We are thankful to the Indian security forces for the atrocities they commit. The more excesses they commit, the more number of women will be willing to join the cause of freedom."<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> [www.satp.org/satporngtp/countries/india/states/jandk/terrorist\\_outfits/lashkar-e-jabbar.htm](http://www.satp.org/satporngtp/countries/india/states/jandk/terrorist_outfits/lashkar-e-jabbar.htm)

<sup>34</sup> Interview with the author, June 2006.