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Pakistan's Academic Scholarships to J&K's Youth: A Charade



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Introduction

Militancy erupted in Kashmir in the early 1990s and ever since then, Pakistan has used a diverse set of means to destabilise the security situations in the Valley. Apart from providing tangible support to terror activities – initially in terms of Pakistani proxies, and later through a constant provision of arms, ammunition, training, and necessary funds – Pakistan has additionally engaged in a whole range of means to influence the Valley's stability in the cognitive domain — thus, waging a psychological war against the Indian State. The youth of Jammu and Kashmir (J&K), which is the primary target of this State-sponsored psychological war, has subsequently been falling victim to various forms of 'radicalisation.'

Key Points

- In February 2020, Pakistan announced 1,600 academic scholarships for students of J&K in colleges across Pakistan – including PoJK.
- Coming exactly 6 months post abrogation of Article 370, Security Agencies red-flagged the development.
- A series of developments in three consecutive years – 2018, 2019, and 2020 – link these scholarships with the All Party Hurriyat Conference as well as the possibilities of fuelling terrorism in J&K.
- Given the security risks involved, such developments also have the potential to cause collateral damages.
- Can be read as a part of a larger psychological war waged by Pakistan against India.

'Radicalisation' in itself has contested definitions attached to it, even within different arms of India's national security apparatus. But, it has been periodically identified in the forms of radicalisation through mosques and madrassas; propagation of extremist literature; influence



situation in the newly formed Union Territory of J&K and provides certain policy recommendations- both in the short-term and long-term.

Tracing the Timeline: Three Events in Three Consecutive Years

This patronisation of J&K's youth by Pakistan is not a recent phenomenon. It emerged over two decades ago when the country rolled out 100 such scholarships for students from 'Indian-occupied Jammu and Kashmir' for the first time in 2004.⁵ The discussions in this regard began in 2003, and as reported by *the Dawn*, information regarding the same was 'conveyed to the Indian side by the then Pakistani Education Minister's foreign office'.⁶ These were offered in colleges across Pakistan for information technology (IT), medical, and engineering courses at graduate and post-graduate levels. Additional courses including BSc Veterinary, BA Economics, and MBA were added on the request from the All Party Hurriyat Conference (APHC). The involvement of the APHC has been quite prominent ever since.

Hundreds of Kashmiri students have got themselves enrolled across these universities with the current figure reportedly as high as 700 students – most of them pursuing an MBBS degree.⁷ Notably, these students are mostly offered a 100 per cent scholarship and accommodation, along with other benefits.⁸ But, of late, three events in three consecutive years – 2018, 2019, 2020 – when read collectively lead to certain concerning propositions, especially in the emerging security context since the abrogation of Article 370. The assessment is as follows:

I. 2018: In 2018, a National Investigation Agency (NIA) charge sheet, while investigating a terror funding case, reportedly mentioned a document seized from the residence of the Chairman of the separatist party Jammu Kashmir National Front, Nayeem Khan, recommending the admission of a Kashmiri student in a 'standard medical college' in Pakistan as 'her family (had) remained committed to the freedom struggle through thick and thin.'⁹ The report suggested the existence of dozens of such 'recommended' students who 'were either relatives of ex-militants or relatives of families of active militants who had indulged in various anti-national activities.'¹⁰ Although a cut off percentage for availing these scholarships does exist, however; the recommendations of the Hurriyat leaders play a big role in selection of the candidates. It has been further reported that each year, dozens of students travel across the border on student visas – at least 50 of them for pursuing an MBBS alone – on the recommendation of the Hurriyat or the Hizbul Mujahideen chief Syed Salahuddin-led United Jihad Council based in PoJK's Muzaffarabad.¹¹ Similar letters of



recommendation reportedly seized by the NIA from the residence of the separatist leader Shahid-ul Islam addressing the Pakistan High Commission regarding the issuance of these scholarships, along with the earlier mentioned letter of resignation by Syed Ali Shah Geelani¹²- further confirms this proposition.

II. 2019: In 2019, the case that raised significant controversy was of a Kashmiri student who had pursued her MBBS from the Mohtarma Benazir Bhutto Shaheed Medical College in PoJK's Mirpur district through one of these scholarship programmes.¹³ On her return, India's National Board of Examination refused to allow the student to take the Foreign Medical Graduate Examination/Screening test (that is considered mandatory for any Indian who obtains a medical degree from a foreign country). But, following the intervention of the J&K High Court, the student was allowed to take the examination, and eventually granted relief. However, the court noted the requirement of a government advisory in place as a caution for students against taking up such courses in the illegally occupied territory.¹⁴ Following this, the University Grants Commission (UGC) and the Medical Council of India (MCI) issued a notice, in May 2019 and August 2020 respectively, declaring that any student having obtained a degree from colleges in PoJK shall not be eligible to practice in India. The MCI notice stated:

"Pakistan is in illegal and forcible occupation of a part of the territory [...]. Accordingly, any medical institution in Pakistan occupied Jammu & Kashmir and Ladakh (PoJKL) requires permission/recognition under the Indian Medical Council Act, 1956. Such permission has not been granted to any medical college in PoJKL."¹⁵

This has been a matter of concern for students who have already availed these scholarships, or are currently availing those. In addition to this, continuous police inquiries and other security proceedings that follow up with the return of these students (due to the security complications attached) call for a resentment among the concerned students.¹⁶

III. 2020: In 2020, the development that significantly added to the cumulated developments of the past two years came in February (as mentioned earlier) when the Pakistan National Assembly's Standing Committee for Federal Education and Professional Training announced 1,600 scholarships for J&K's students across colleges in Islamabad, Lahore, Karachi, as well as PoJK. Under this, the number of seats have reportedly been significantly hiked: 320 to 600 for medicine; 240 to 490 for engineering; and 250 to 490 for other courses.¹⁷



In the fallout of the abrogation of the special status of J&K, the move was red-flagged by the security agencies that reportedly claimed that there indeed have been instances in the past of Kashmiri youth 'proceeding to Pakistan on student visas through the Wagah-Attari border' having returned through the LoC as terrorists.¹⁸ In April 2020, three of the five terrorists neutralised by the security forces in an operation in J&K; named Adil Hussain Mir, Umar Nazir Khan, and Sajjad Ahmed Hurrah had travelled to Pakistan in 2018 through visas issued by the Pakistan High Commission in New Delhi. However, the purpose of their visit remains unknown. Also to note, as of now, over 200 youths from J&K who have travelled to Pakistan through visas have been reported missing.¹⁹

Amidst this, an interesting development has been the introduction of a Turkish-angle to this education-charade. Recently released intelligence reports claim that Turkey has been increasingly involved in radicalisation of youth by attracting Kashmiri as well as Muslim students from other parts of India by means of 'lucrative scholarships and exchange programmes through various State-sponsored NGOs.'²⁰ These reports have claimed that these students, once landed in Turkey, are 'approached and taken over by Pakistani-proxies' who in turn take the charade forward. NGOs including Turkey Youth Foundation (TUGVA), Presidency of Turks Abroad and Related Communities (YTB), Turkish Airlines, Yunnus Emre Institute (YEI), Turkey's Diyanet Foundation (TDF) and Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TIKA) have been named in the said reports.²¹

Reading the Implications

The scale of enrolment, thereby, raises concerning questions regarding the drivers of the numbers involved. It is reported that while initially, following the opening up of the Indian economy in the early 90s, students elsewhere in the country emigrated to western countries for higher education; wherein, the students from the Kashmir Valley opted for Russia (a popular destination for studying medicine) and gradually for Bangladesh and Pakistan.²² What calls for the sizeable enrolment of the students from the Valley for these scholarship programmes are reasons, such as: limited number of opportunities for higher education in the Union Territory of J&K; inability to secure admissions in other desired colleges of repute in other Indian states; and the attractive financial relief and the guarantee attached with the Pakistani scholarship programmes given the criteria of hailing from a particular region. Besides, the preference towards studying medicine in the Kashmiri society also explains the reason behind a majority of the beneficiaries emigrating to pursue MBBS courses.



In addition, resentment with respect to the security of the students from the Valley studying in other cities across India, has also been linked to the increasing tilt towards these scholarships. For instance, a case in point is the offer for sponsoring the higher education of over 67 expelled Kashmiri students studying in the Swami Vivekananda Subharti University in Meerut not only by the Pakistani government, but also by the terror-outfit Jamaat-ud-Dawa, following a 2014-incident.²³ All of the 67 students declined the offered sponsorship. But, this incident was widely conjectured of having encouraged a feeling of affinity for such possible opportunities of securing higher education outside the country- with Pakistan becoming one of the prime destinations. A series of such incidents are increasingly becoming the cause of the resentment.²⁴ While it is indeed necessary to take disciplinary actions against any student engaging in anti-state activities, however, the imperative lies in ensuring that it be done within the constitutional realms of India. In this regard, any sense of insecurity felt by any Indian citizen; thereby, can be considered an obvious factor for generation of alienation/resentment among the population in question - in this case, the youth from J&K.

Given the aforementioned state of affairs, two propositions emerge: First, through established involvement of the Hurriyat leaders, the Pakistani establishment has been using the academic aspirations of the Kashmiri students to in turn facilitate their radicalisation and thereby, motivate them to engage in anti-India activities – at worst joining terrorism. Second, in the event of no immediate radicalisation of these students, given the political and security complications attached once they return to India, possibilities of generation/accentuation of a cycle of grievances/alienation emerge – that in turn act as a potential trigger for becoming radicalised in the future.

Collectively, these propositions, along with the fact that the population in consideration comprises an educated group of young doctors, engineers, and professionals, further multiplies the seriousness of the risks involved. Wherein, the risks entail: their capabilities to influence a larger group of population through modern and more attractive means of communication (thereby acting as a long-term risk); as well as at worst materialise more technologically-supported on-ground operations in the Valley, or elsewhere (the immediate risk).



Policy Recommendations

In an overall assessment, certain steps need to be taken in order to prevent and contain the risks this phenomenon poses, only more seriously in the times that have followed since the abrogation of Article 370 in 2019.

I. Short-Term

First, public advisories should be regularly released by all the responsible authorities, taking cue from the UGC and MCI, cautioning students against taking admissions in colleges in PoJK. To ensure that students are aware that degrees so obtained will not be recognised by India, shall play a key role- preventing any form of compromise with the students' careers. To make it more effective, such advisories must be circulated beginning at senior school levels, to ensure a wider reach.

Second, awareness regarding the existing national scholarship programmes in India, for the students, for example the 'Prime Minister's Special Scholarship Scheme for Jammu and Kashmir students'²⁵, must be boosted through senior schools in J&K. Additionally, it must be ensured that the grants under these scholarships are timely disbursed. A diverse set of similar attractive scholarships must be rolled out for various exchange programmes across universities in India and abroad, study tours, research projects, etc. However, such scholarships must be progressively granted strictly on the basis of merit.

Third, while studying elsewhere in the country, hostel accommodation must be given to all students from Jammu and Kashmir. In case of non-residential colleges, the central and state governments in collaboration must ensure provision of accommodation through government hostels. More importantly, raising of separate hostels exclusively meant for students from J&K must be discouraged, in order to promote greater assimilation and integration of students from J&K with students from other parts of India, and elsewhere.

And fourth, it is imperative to ensure the security of the Kashmiri students studying across the country. While segregation into separate hostels should be a discouraged idea, the Internal Complaints Committees (ICC) must be strengthened as an immediate point of contact for any requirement in this regard. Furthermore, additional arrangements must be made for 24*7 helplines dealing with student-security.



II. Long-Term

First, increased opportunities for preparation of various national level examinations (engineering, medicine, and other professional courses) at home shall play a key role in tackling a majority of the aforementioned 'causes'. Initiatives like the 'Petronet-Kashmir Super 30' – that function as a part of the Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) of Petronet LNG in collaboration with Centre for Social Responsibility and Leadership (CSRL) and the Indian Army²⁶ – must be expanded.

However, in place of the Security Forces, the initiative must be primarily coordinated by the Union Ministry of Education and by that of the UT of J&K once the legislature is in place. Reservations for the students in various colleges across the country, however, must be strictly discouraged. These might bring a two-way impact: result in unutilised potential of the aspirational youth (hampering their personal growth), as well as discourage channelising their energy for constructive activities (posing potential threats to India's national security in time).

Second, academic infrastructure beginning at the school level must be better facilitated, and distance education, not only given the existing pandemic situations but also due to the uncertain security situations that result in the frequent hampering of education, must be encouraged. For this adequate measures must be taken to facilitate the modern techniques of education. Given the security risks, in order to discontinue hampering education, logistics should be developed for provision of high speed internet with restricted access to specific websites to function on exclusively registered devices for students that could be monitored. In the event of any undesirable use of this network, tracing and tracking could be an easier job. How this can be put in place shall require adequate R&D.

Third, there should be selective monitoring of all social media platforms in coordination with the counter-terrorism teams at the district, state and national level. For example, Facebook's 'Counter-terrorism and Dangerous Organizations' team²⁷ tasked to monitor and take down terrorist and extremist content from platforms like Facebook and Twitter needs to work in coordination with the national security agencies to tackle the said threats. Keeping in due consideration the sanctity of the fundamental rights conferred to the Indian citizens, anti-India activities must be clearly defined and subsequently conveyed to social media companies while jointly countering violent extremism, radicalisation, and terrorism.



Fourth, influence operations are mostly built upon deep-rooted pre-existing grievances and alienation of the target population. Wherein, limited exposure offers a vulnerable ground for influence operations which can be reverted by exposing the Kashmiri youth to varied narratives and perceptions since childhood. In this regard, ensuring a wider exposure of the students of J&K at a mass scale beginning at middle school levels (classes VI and beyond) through regular interaction with schools across the country, can encourage development of critical thinking – a basic self-defence requirement against influence operations. Besides, inter-state funded exchange programmes, summer camps, curricular/sports events can be initiated at the school level which will help build a gradual and seamless process of assimilation among the Kashmiri youth, apart from creating a pre-existing defence against influence operations.

Fifth, in a globalised world, emigration of students for higher education cannot, and should not be hampered. It is here that the role of Indian Embassies, particularly the intelligence representatives, becomes important. Embassies are considered to be a point of contact for the diaspora/emigrants during times of distress. For emigrating students, this practice could be slightly reviewed. Regardless of the country, the emigrating students must be kept in constant communication with Indian Diplomatic Missions and Embassies, through various cultural events, periodic gatherings, among others, to ensure their security and restrict any unwanted external influence.

And sixth, measures regarding ensuring security and promoting assimilation and integration through scholarships and funded exchange programmes senior school level onwards must be undertaken for students from the Union Territory of Ladakh and North-eastern states.

Conclusion

The means and measures adopted by India's western adversary have been rapidly evolving over time. Thereby, newer as well as pre-existing means of radicalisation, jacketed in sober appearances, are for India to pro-actively detect and remedy without delay. Particularly with respect to the annual practice of providing academic scholarships by Pakistan, it would require a comprehensive effort – in terms of security as well as governance – by the Indian government. Encouraging widened exposure of the students in question beginning at school levels, and not exclusively while in college, would play an instrumental role in containing the impact of the influence operations of the said kind. Ultimately, it must be realised that



psychological wars are fought in the cognitive domain, which thereby require similar responses.

End Notes

¹ The data provided in the paper has been derived from various sources available in the public domain.

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³ Bashaarat Masood (2020), "Explained: How Pakistan offers professional courses to Kashmiri students," *The Indian Express*, 22 July, 2020. Available online at <https://indianexpress.com/article/explained/syed-ali-shah-gilani-pakistan-medical-education-kashmiri-students-hurriyat-6491266/>, accessed on 10 October 2020.

⁴ Ministry of Planning, Development and Reform, Government of Pakistan (2019), "Public Sector Development," n. 2.

⁵ "100 Scholarships for IHK students okayed," *The Dawn*, 2 June, 2005. Available online at <https://www.dawn.com/news/141772/100-scholarships-for-ihk-students-okayed>, accessed on 21 October 2020.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Azaan Javaid (2020), "Kashmir cops 'questioning' students enrolled in Pakistan colleges, cite radicalisation fear", *The Print*, 14 August, 2020. Available online at <https://theprint.in/india/governance/kashmir-cops-questioning-students-enrolled-in-pakistan-colleges-cite-radicalisation-fear/481221/>, accessed on 13 October 2020.

⁸ Bashaarat Masood (2020), "Explained: How Pakistan offers," n. 3.

⁹ Shishir Gupta (2020), "Security Agencies ref-flag Imran Khan's 1,600 scholarship plan for Kashmiris," *Hindustan Times*, 11 June 2020. Available online at <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/security-agencies-red-flag-imran-khan-s-1-600-scholarship-plan-for-kashmiris/story-3vdJugg1JIRTOCqnaWh0pM.html>, accessed on 12 October 2020.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Nirupma Subramanian and Bashaarat Masood (2020), "Geelani's resignation blows lid off Pakistan medical college racket and the shadow war with Hurriyat," *The Indian Express*, 5 July 2020. Available online at <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/geelani-resignation-pakistan-medical-college-racket-hurriyat-conference-6490597/>, accessed on 15 August 2020.

¹² Namrata Biji Ahuja (2018), "Pakistan funding terror through Hurriyat, says NIA," *The Week*, 10 February 2018. Available online at <https://www.theweek.in/news/india/pakistan-funding-terror-through-hurriyat-says-nia.html>, accessed on 12 September 2020.

¹³ Mudasir Ahmed (2019), "High Court grants relief to Kashmiri woman who obtained degree in PoK", *The Wire*, 7 December 2019. Available online at <https://thewire.in/law/jk-high-court-mbbs-degree-pok-relief>, accessed on 11 September 2020.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Azaan Javaid (2020), "Kashmir cops 'questioning' students," n. 7.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Fawad Yusufzai (2019), "Good news for IHK students," *The Nation*, 4 June 2019. Available online at <https://nation.com.pk/04-Jun-2019/good-news-for-ihk-students>, accessed on 31 October 2020.

¹⁸ Shishir Gupta (2020), "Security Agencies ref-flag Imran Khan's 1,600 scholarship plan for Kashmiris", *Hindustan Times*, 11 June 2020. Available online at <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/security-agencies-red-flag-imran-khan-s-1-600-scholarship-plan-for-kashmiris/story-3vdJugg1JIRTOCqnaWh0pM.html>, accessed on 12 October, 2020.

¹⁹ Siddhant Sibbal and Namrata Agrawal (2020), "Over 200 youths with Pakistani visas go missing in Kashmir, intelligence agencies on alert," *Zee News*, 25 June 2020. Available online at <https://zeenews.india.com/india/over-200-youths-with-pakistani-visas-go-missing-in-kashmir-intelligence-agencies-on-alert-2292080.html>, accessed on 12 September 2020.



²⁰Shishir Gupta (2020), The Hindustan Times, "Intelligence Agencies to probe new Turkish NGO outreach in Kashmir: Official," 18 September 2020. Available online at <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/intelligence-agencies-to-probe-new-turkish-ngo-outreach-in-kashmir-official/story-fFXlcpCylVz9jF6bqB7GrO.html>, accessed on 10 October 2020.

²¹Ibid.

²²Bashaarat Masood (2020), "Explained: How Pakistan offers," n. 2.

²³Sameer Yasir (2020), "Suspended for 'sedition', Kashmiri students refuse Pak scholarships," Firstpost, 07 March 2020. Available online at <https://www.firstpost.com/politics/suspended-for-sedition-kashmiri-students-refuse-pak-scholarships-1423667.html>, accessed on 12 October 2020.

²⁴Imran Ahmed Siddiqui (2020), "Kashmiri student allegedly assaulted, called 'terrorist'," *The Telegraph India*, 16 October 2020. Available online at <https://www.telegraphindia.com/india/kashmiri-student-allegedly-assaulted-called-terrorist-by-landlady-in-new-delhi/cid/179490>, accessed on 16 October 2020.

²⁵All India Council for Technical Education (2016), "Prime Minister's Special Scholarship Scheme for Jammu and Kashmir students". Available online at https://www.aicte-jk-scholarship-gov.in/resource/InstructionsDBT16_17.pdf, accessed on 15 October 2020.

²⁶Petronet LNG. Available online at <https://www.petronetng.com/NewsContent.php?newsid=429>, accessed on 15 October 2020.

²⁷Erin Sal Tman (2020), "Algorithms, AI alone can't help Facebook tackle online extremism. It needs people too," *The Print*, 29 August 2020. Available online at <https://theprint.in/opinion/algorithms-ai-alone-cant-help-facebook-tackle-online-extremism-it-needs-people-too/490927/>, accessed on 12 October 2020.

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