[**Assault on Kashmiri identity**](https://www.dawn.com/news/1713159/assault-on-kashmiri-identity)

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INDIA’S ruling Bharatiya Janata Party continues the assault on Kashmiri culture and identity and imposes its Hindutva ideology on occupied Jammu and Kashmir.

A recent [tweet](https://twitter.com/MehboobaMufti/status/1571782732761681921) by Mehbooba Mufti, former chief minister of J&K, focused attention on the forced singing of a bhajan (Hindu hymn) at a school in Kulgam and elsewhere. A video of Muslim students singing the bhajan circulated widely on social media, prompting fierce protests from Muslim organisations.

The Muttahida Majlis-i-Ulema, comprising 30 Kashmiri organisations, denounced the action and said it was designed to accelerate “the so-called integration of the younger generation with the Hindutva idea of India”. It called this part of efforts to erode the region’s Muslim identity.

Led by Kashmiri leader Mirwaiz Umar Farooq, who has been in detention for the past three years, the religious body pointed to attempts to “browbeat” Muslim scholars and undermine their role, citing the recent arrests of religious leaders in India’s latest intensification of repression.

Last month, two ulema were arrested and several Islamic scholars charged under the draconian public safety act in a crackdown on Muslim groups in Kashmir. These arrests were roundly [condemned](https://www.dawn.com/news/1710834) by Pakistan. A Foreign Office statement described the illegal detention of Islamic scholars as “yet another Indian attempt to rob the Kashmiri people of their distinct religious and cultural identity”.

The BJP has also taken control of the J&K Waqf Board and thus all its properties across the region including Srinagar’s Eidgah, a historic ground for congregational prayers. Condemning this in a message from jail, Shabbir Shah, vice chair of the All Parties Hurriyat Conference (APHC), accused the BJP government of infringing the religious rights of Muslims. Other Kashmiri leaders portrayed it as part of the BJP’s efforts to occupy prominent places of religious significance for Muslims throughout the occupied territory. This includes the control of shrines.

As a Kashmiri journalist told me, “Seizing control of shrines is not an innocuous move; it is a repressive action aimed at eliminating their political role as well as their Muslim identity.” He explained that shrines have been an integral part of Kashmir’s political and social landscape. “They have not only provided spaces for worship, but in a region under occupation for decades, they have often been the only places where Kashmiri Muslims could meet and confer. That space has now been taken away.”

The BJP has taken other steps in its onslaught against Kashmiri culture.

For the past 100 years or more, Urdu was the official language of J&K. But in 2020, India’s ruling party ended Urdu’s exclusive status by legislation that made Hindi, Kashmiri and Dogri official languages in J&K, in addition to Urdu and English. There are moves afoot to change the script of the Kashmiri language from Nastaliq to the Devanagriscript. Kashmiri sources in the occupied Valley say this has already been done unannounced and unofficially.

The BJP is trying to disempower Muslims and erode their religious and cultural identity in the occupied region.

A series of actions to disempower Kashmiris and change the Muslim identity of Kashmir have followed India’s [illegal annexation](https://www.dawn.com/news/1498227) of J&K on Aug 5, 2019. With abrogation of Article 370 of the Indian constitution, which gave the state special status, J&K was bifurcated and absorbed into the Indian Union. This was in blatant violation of UN Security Council Resolutions that bar the parties from bringing about any material change in the situation.

**Read:** [*Why Kashmir matters*](https://www.dawn.com/news/1638896)

Delhi then imposed a lockdown and communication clampdown and carried out mass arrests of political leaders and activists in a sweeping crackdown.

According to the September 2022 briefing by Amnesty International, ‘We are being Punished by the Law’, in the three years since August 2019, “the Indian government has drastically intensified the repression of the people of J&K … by subjecting them to multiple human rights violations. These violations include restrictions on rights to freedom of opinion and expression; to liberty and security of person; to movement; to privacy; and to remedy and access to justice. The authorities have committed these violations with absolute impunity.”

In contravention of international law and UN resolutions, Delhi has carried out administrative and demographic changes to disempower Muslims in Kashmir. It introduced [new domicile rules](https://www.dawn.com/news/1545748) and has, since August 2019, issued over 3.4 million so-called domicile certificates to non-Kashmiri outsiders, who were made eligible after abrogation of Article 370 and 35A of the Indian constitution. This action resembles Israel’s illegal settlement policies and is characteristic of tactics used by occupiers.

The Modi government also proceeded with a plan to gerrymander electoral constituencies to give Jammu greater representation to reduce Muslim representation and shift the political balance to Hindus in the region. The plan to carve out new constituencies was announced by India’s Delimitation Commission in May 2022. This gives Jammu six more seats in the 90-member J&K Assembly while Kashmir is to be given one more. This will take Jammu’s total seats to 43 leaving Kashmir with 47. The malign intent of this move is evident from the fact that Kashmir Valley’s population was close to seven million while Jammu’s population is 5.3m according to the 2011 census (the last India held). Estimates of Kashmir’s current population are obviously higher.

The aim behind this delimitation is to hold elections that the Modi government could then claim have ‘normalised’ the situation and ‘endorsed’ its August 2019 action. But this plan has met fierce resistance from Kashmiri leaders including traditionally pro-Indian politicians who in the past participated in elections, consistently boycotted by the APHC for being sham exercises. All have called the plan unacceptable and rejected it as a travesty of the principle of one man one vote. In July, the chief electoral officer in the occupied Valley announced granting voting rights to any Indian citizen, even temporary residents, in another attempt to change the region’s demography

Can the Modi government achieve these sinister objectives? Can Kashmir’s Muslim identity be so easily obliterated by coercive measures and administrative diktats? These actions have in fact only intensified anger and resentment among the people of Kashmir and reinforced their will to resist the injustice of occupation. As Farooq Abdullah, former chief minister of J&K, warned not long ago “Kashmir could explode like a volcano”.

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