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Targeted Killings in Kashmir: Does the Mainstream Narrative Hold Significance?



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Introduction

Targeted killings have again grabbed limelight in the Kashmir Valley. As of August 2022, 21 individuals have lost their lives to targeted attacks.¹ The term 'targeted killing' seems to have got multiple connotations with targeting of Kashmiri Pandits in the Valley being the most prevalent. Every single killing by the extremists is in fact a 'targeted killing' intended at achieving a certain goal. Most common targets of such attacks have been individuals who have certain 'affiliation with State'—direct or indirect.

Over the past several years, local policemen have been attacked frequently which accounted for a rising percentage of security force casualties. According to official data, 11 policemen were killed in 2019, making up 13% of the 83 security force fatalities. This increased to 26% in 2020², when 16 out of 60 members of the security forces killed comprised police

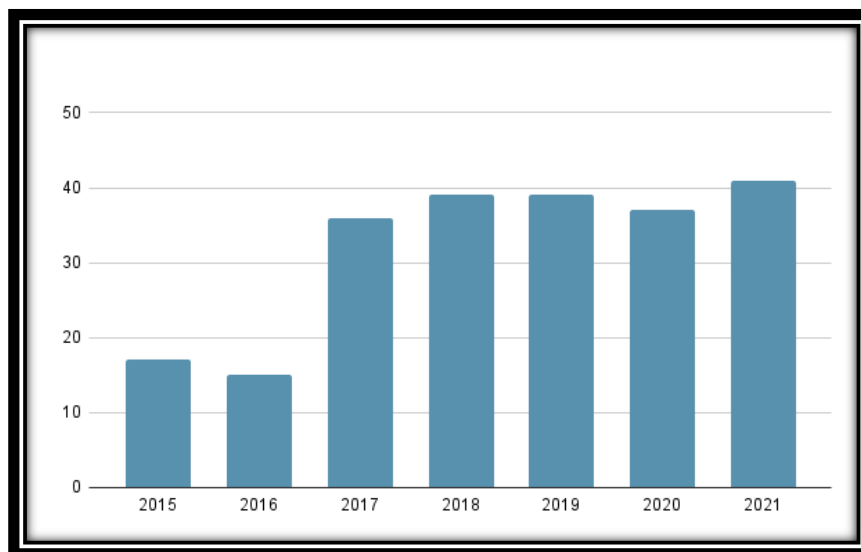
Key Points

- Between 05 August 2019 and 09 July 2022, J&K witnessed 118 civilian killings, of which 05 were Kashmiri Pandits, and 16 belonged to other Hindu and Sikh communities, thus reflecting that civilians have been killed irrespective of their religion.
- The civilian killings have raised questions on the rehabilitation policy and the civil society of J&K for being mute spectators.
- The rehabilitation package, introduced in 2008, was intended to integrate Pandits into the society, which did not happen. Instead, the economic aspect took centre stage and pushed back the social dimension attached to it.
- Criticism from the Civil Society of Kashmir, on political matters, should be seen as an opportunity to reflect and respond to the people's concerns.
- Civilians cannot tackle such violence at an operational level; instead, they can generate a sensible discourse.
- Emanation of interpretations, particularly from State led agencies, must be based on thorough investigations backed by sociological studies.
- A generous and genuine outreach to people is essential. Local political parties can use their influence to counter terrorism/ militancy.

officers. In 2021, police officers made up to about half of the 42 security personnel killed in militancy-related incidents. Therefore, emphasising particularly on attacks against Kashmiri Pandits may not lead to any conclusion; rather understanding the general psyche behind such attacks could offer some leads.

Although civilian killings' is not a new phenomenon in Kashmir, they make it to headlines when there is a sharp surge in such attacks. It can be said that civilian killings have never actually stopped in the valley; rather it has witnessed periods of sharp surge and relative downslide. After a relatively calm period from 2008-2016, terror strikes seem to be increasing again, and civilians, including those belonging to the minority community, are getting targeted more increasingly. Militancy, though has apparently receded, but is not dead.

Figure 1: Number of Civilian Killed in Terror Attacks (2015-2021)



Source: Parliamentary Q&A, Ministry of Home Affairs³



According to information provided by the Ministry of Home Affairs in the Parliament on 20 July 2022, since 05 August 2019, the UT saw an average of 3.26 terror attack casualties each month⁴, compared to 2.8 fatalities per month in almost five years prior.⁵ Between 05 August 2019 to 09 July 2022, the UT witnessed 118 civilian killings wherein 05 were Kashmiri Pandits and 16 belonged to other Hindu and Sikh communities.⁶ Furthermore, information obtained by virtue of an RTI in 2022, indicated that during the previous more than three decades, militants killed as many as 1,724 persons in J&K, of whom 89 were Kashmiri Pandits.⁷ The RTI further revealed that "apart from the 89 Kashmiri Pandits, 1,635 persons of other religions were also killed over the same period".⁸

These figures reflect the fact that both Muslims and Hindus have suffered at the hands of militants. However, it appears that only the killings of Kashmiri Pandits seems to gain attraction. This highlights the fact that 'militants are non-discriminate in their killings'. It is expected that the State should preclude such attacks. Religious based identification of such killings, directly means playing in the hands of terror organisations. It is to be noted that an overwhelming majority in the Valley has no affiliation to extremist groups but when the religious angle is invoked more rigorously, in such killings, it somehow alienates the vast majority of Kashmiri Muslims. Kashmiris have been killed irrespective of their religious identity; hence, acknowledging this fact will pave the way for understanding the plight of the people and eventual reconciliation.

It is a fact that targets against Kashmiri Pandits have the potential to create 'fear psychosis of greater magnitude within the Community' as they are a minority considering the population dynamics of the region. The vulnerability and fear of Kashmiri Pandits has intensified due to the tumultuous political environment and the intermittent but persistent killings since 2019. The growing fear among Pandits is palpable.

Civilian killings between 2000 and 2005 were mostly concentrated in Jammu's Poonch, Rajouri, and Doda districts as well as northern Kashmir's Baramulla and Kupwara. The



majority of killings between 2006 and 2016 occurred in Baramulla and Kupwara. But over the past five years, the number of fatalities has suddenly shifted to the South Kashmir districts of Pulwama, Anantnag, Kulgam, and Shopian. For instance, civilian killings had peaked to 39% in Pulwama in 2019.⁹ This reflects a clear change in the strategy of extremist groups. The shift in base of militancy is another major worry for the security forces— apart from increased activity in the South, militants are also focusing on the capital city of Srinagar, which is a significant change since the police had previously deemed Srinagar district free of militancy in the Autumn of 2020.

Security Response

The recent targeted killings of civilians in the Valley, mostly carried out by 'The Resistance Front' (TRF) represents a change in the strategy used by those attempting to destabilise J&K, including an obvious attempt to widen the religious divide. The TRF¹⁰ is reported to be an amalgamation of long-standing organisations in the Valley viz. Lashkar-e-Toiba, Jaish-e-Mohammed, and Hizbul Mujahideen, and this new identity is giving each group a plausible deniability. Security agencies believe that TRF is an attempt by Pakistan to portray militancy in Kashmir as an 'indigenous' movement. Recent encounters have made it evident that these militants are loosely trained, often equipped only with pistols and no longer publicise themselves on social media like recruiters did during the 2015–17 period. Considering that they could only be partially active, the majority of them would be termed 'overground' militants, or 'hybrid', as the security establishment commonly defines them.¹¹ Hybrid militants are individuals who does not feature in any terror watchlist but are radicalised enough to carry out an attack and then resume normal life, thus making it more difficult for the security establishment to trace them.

J&K Police has noted that Pakistan has been sending consignments of pistols from across the International Border.¹² Although, several consignments have been seized, however, many have made it into the hands of hybrid militants, who are now targeting civilians. To



counter the rise in recruitment, the Home Ministry has asked J&K Police to work on multi-dimensional fronts to prevent the local youth from joining terrorist ranks. But with few surrenders, and high level alienation, the security forces have a difficult task ahead.

Since, the possibility of crossing over to Pakistan and getting an arms training has declined, the individuals, wanting to join militant ranks have to first prove their capability to the terror handlers if they are capable of joining the group. While remaining based in the Valley, individuals have to demonstrate their ability before being recognised as militants by a group. Hybrid attacks, some argue, is part of the training before becoming a full time militant.

As the first and foremost priority, the security agencies should do criminal profiling of those involved in targeted attacks. Equally important is to establish the reasons behind such attacks. Hybrid attacks have some degree of ambiguity attached to them, however, it does not make the security agencies less accountable.

In response to a question in Rajya Sabha, over the steps taken by the Government to stop the frequent attacks on the Kashmiri Pandits, MHA stated¹³ that the Government has taken several measures to ensure safety of Kashmiri Pandits in the valley. These includes a robust security and intelligence grid, day and night area domination, proactive operations against terrorists, round the clock checking at Nakas, patrolling in areas wherein the Kashmiri Pandits reside, and deployment of security forces at strategic points to thwart any terrorist attack. Despite positive outcomes on the development front, the security apparatus continues to remain on the edge in Kashmir.

Political Response to the Killings

There has been resounding condemnation of the targeted attacks from political leadership in Kashmir. This reflects that political leaders from J&K have spoken out and showed their resentment towards the killings of innocent civilians. This, however, is not only the sentiment of political leaders— the majority of Kashmiri Muslims share the pain and plight of Kashmiri



Pandits. After the fresh killings, Kashmiris are feeling embarrassed yet again. They are being questioned as to how they can allow this to happen in their society and they seem to be having no answers. In fact, there are no easy answers.

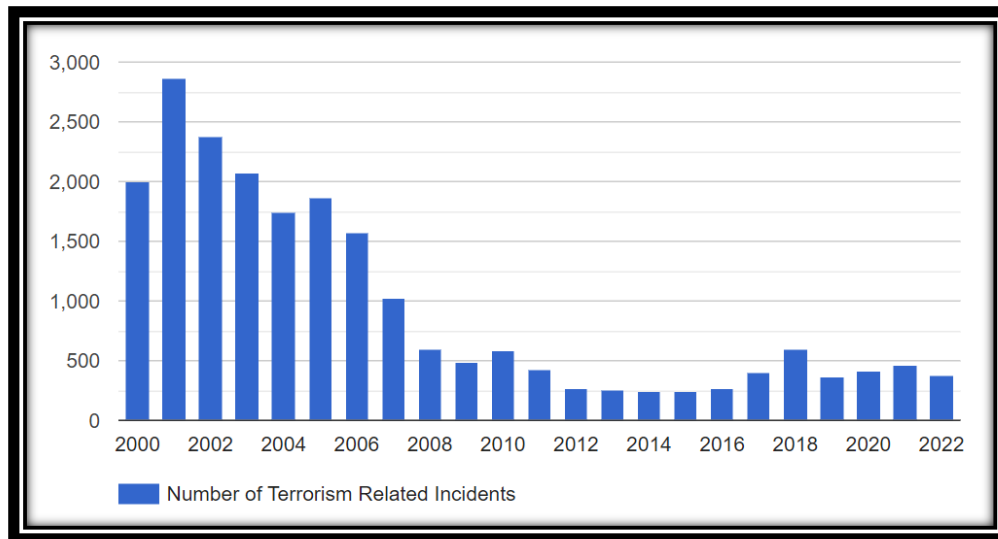
However, the perception at the national level, which is often based on the narrative reflected by the media, seems to depict a consistent silence from Kashmiris on such killings. A lot of individuals are wrongfully caught in the crossfire as a result of this perception, which tends to 'paint every Kashmiri with the same brush'.

Nonetheless, the local and national political leadership has done only a little as far as larger outreach to the Pandit community is concerned. Kashmiri Pandits are feeling betrayed by politicians.¹⁴ In terms of numbers, Kashmiri Pandits comprise a small population and their votes would not make much of a difference to the political parties. Prof. Upender Kaul in his article "*Kashmiri Pandits: Will they ever return to the valley*"¹⁵ highlighted that post the 05 August 2019 decision, it was hoped that things would improve for Pandits. However, the last few months have seen more problems for those who have chosen to be there—targeted killings of innocent people with predominance of Hindus have petrified them.

After the Pandits left the valley in the 1990s and anti-India militancy wracked Kashmir for decades, the Pandit community was largely averse to going back to their native land. Considering how politics and terrorism have changed in the region, their return has been a pretty sluggish process. In an effort to facilitate their return, a comprehensive package was announced by the Government of India in 2008¹⁶, which was revised in 2015.¹⁷ As on 09 July 2022, under this package, so far 5502 Pandits have been employed with the Government of J&K.¹⁸ These employees are funded partly by the UT Government and partly by the Central Government. Transit accommodations, for those who had migrated and wanted to return, had been set. A lump sum amount of 7.5 lakh rupees was provided to every household who returned to the valley to build or buy houses.

It is important to take into account the fact that the package was an outcome of the desire of Kashmiri Pandits to return back to the Valley. The Government was also looking for opportunities to comfort the displaced community. One aspect which is talked about only a little and which provided a backend support to the return process is the India-Pakistan Peace Process (2004 - 2012).¹⁹ With the progression in the peace process, the violence level got down in the Valley.

Figure 2: Number of Terrorism Related Incidents Year Wise in Jammu and Kashmir (2000-2022)



Source: South Asia Terrorism Portal

However, it is to be noted that number of Pandit organisations criticised the 2008 PM's Package on several grounds. The All India Kashmiri Samaj, a Pandit organisation based in Delhi, credited the package to a lawsuit they had filed in the Supreme Court asking for the identification of those responsible for the rise of what they refer to as "Theo-fascism in the Kashmir valley". They argued that the package was brought in to counter this ideology. Another Pandit organisation— Panun Kashmir based in Jammu, criticised the package for covertly attempting to downplay the pandit migrant situation and turning it into a "secular



victimisation scenario in Jammu and Kashmir" in order to preserve the government's claim to being a secular government. Interestingly, one persistent demand, which a cross section of organisations have been making, is the setting up of a Truth and Reconciliation Commission by the Government to examine the whole range of conditions that led to the exodus. Several organisations have been demanding that the government should set up a Court of Inquiry as early as possible to get to the bottom of the truth and deliver justice to the victim community.

The main idea behind the package was to provide economic incentive with the larger aim of providing a template for the otherwise conflict ridden society. The package was intended for eventual integration of Pandits into the society, which did not happen. The packages' economic aspect took centre stage and pushed the social dimension attached to it on the back burner. The concept of 'separate and protected accommodations' widened the gaps and disconnect between the two communities and prevented any kind of fruitful interaction at the individual and a society level. From a sociology point of view, the State can be criticised for having attempted to create an artificial social structure. Society is always created naturally. Contemplating this approach, it seems that the State was being optimistic about the future prospects of its efforts.

Nonetheless, the State's attempt to give 'carrots to the Kashmiri pandits', with the intent to integrate them with larger Kashmiri society, may not be a well-crafted policy design. Even though the intent remains fairly justifiable, even to Kashmiri Muslims—who believes in syncretic culture associations, the policy has wider implications for the agenda of terrorist organisations. Such a policy can only work under a strong state ensuring security of beneficiaries. Whether this intensifies the killings or dampens them, the former, indeed, has the likely prospect. The blame is to be taken collectively, both by Kashmiri Muslims and by the State for their inability to protect Pandits.



John Agnew²⁰ argues that territorialised states act as ‘societal containers’. As political organisations transformed from kinship through empires to the contemporary nation-state, societal processes also evolved. Territorialised forms incorporated some cross-border social connections; nonetheless they mostly acted as a barrier to more organic cultural and syncretic affiliations and interactions. The State's attempt to create society via the use of economic incentives, however, runs counter to the actual, long-term development of society that occurs naturally.

Historically, Kashmiri Muslims and Pandits never lived in separate colonies unlike in Plains. The divide between the two communities is external in its genesis. State must bear in mind the history of cohabitation of communities in Kashmir Valley. However, post 90's both Hindus and Muslims have undergone substantial changes and have witnessed adherence to a more fundamentalist version of their religion, which makes integration difficult. The present young generation of Kashmiris, Hindus and Muslims, have grown in seclusion and anonymity from each other. Meanwhile, they have acquired extreme interpretations of their beliefs. Adherence to fundamentalist attitudes and resultant rigidity makes it difficult to arrive at, once prevalent, common and shared identity. This is reflected in the research of David Devadas²¹ who posed the question about “who are Pandits?” to his respondents in Kashmir. The responses he received, although not surprising, were very diverse justifying the ‘growing in isolation’ argument. This is true for the Kashmiri Pandit's as well.

Civil Society's Role in Tackling Violent Extremism

In such a situation wherein there seems to be a discord between people and the government, the role of civil society became crucial. Of late, many of the Government's initiatives at making peace in J&K have been partially successful. Apart from Government led initiatives there have been several initiatives by private organisations and individuals who have done a good job as far as inter community harmony is concerned. One such organisation is the Centre for Dialogue and Reconciliation (CDR). CDR has been working



consistently in J&K for the past 15 years, contributing to the development of infrastructure for peace.²² The Intra-Regional Dialogue soon transformed into a series of Intra-Kashmir Dialogues in 2004. Common spaces and initiatives were created whereby it became possible for civil society actors and opinion leaders to voice their concerns about the future of the state. In these inter community dialogues, it was deemed necessary to disassociate the return of Pandits from the larger conflict in the region. It was realised that the Kashmiri narrative going out must reflect the desire for the return of Pandits.

Prof. Gul Mohammad Wani²³ argues that, after the killing of Makhan Lal Bindroo followed by Rahul Bhat, the larger society and people are dumbstruck. The members from Muslim community feel somewhat handcuffed and completely neutralised on happenings in Kashmir. There seems to be no societal control as far as checks and balances of such incidents are concerned. The contemporary attitude of people is, to some extent, influenced by the communal tensions in other parts of the country. Feeling of being in line with ideological fire is very pervasive. The perceived narrative, at the national level, causes the majority population in the Valley to rally, citing atrocities against the community elsewhere, hence making the minorities more insecure.

While, the unrelenting violence and terror inflicted against the Kashmiri Pandit community in 1989 cannot be denied, however, this fact cannot be used to 'demonise' the Kashmiri Muslims. Many Pandits feel²⁴ their plight is used for political gains, pandering to the majoritarian forces in the country. The sufferings of Pandits is often used to engage in whataboutery. Though attempts were made by subsequent governments to rehabilitate Pandits, most of those initiatives proved to be short lived. Kashmiri Pandits may have been able to physically return back to the Valley, but they cannot go back in time.

While exploring the role of civil society in conflict, Marchetti and Tocci (2011) coined a new term— "conflict society"²⁵, maintaining the particularity of 'structural conflict contexts'. In conflict societies, they include conflict specialists, activists, religion based groups, funding



organisations, media, research and education specialists, private citizens and business actors. Using this definition of civil society in a conflict like Kashmir, independent Kashmiri writers, academicians, human rights defender groups, orphanages run by trusts and societies, community based organisations, trade unions, self-help groups, dialogue groups, associations and business chambers—all form the Kashmiri civil society.

Greater Kashmir, Kashmir Chamber of Commerce and Industries (KCCI), the Kashmirwala, Jammu and Kashmir Bar Association, Kashmir Press Club and others could be clubbed as the Civil Society of Kashmir. The question remains: where are these organisations? Elections to three prominent civil society bodies viz. Kashmir Press Club, KCCI and Bar Association have not happened in the last 3 years.²⁶

In her book *State and Civil Society*²⁷ Neera Chandoke defines civil society as the 'site of contestations and mediations that take place'; the 'site at which society enters into a relationship with the state'. Civil society, anywhere, is fundamental to the existence and practice of democracy. The function of civil society is to always check and balance state intrusion and protect citizens' civil and political liberties from the 'illiberal tendencies' of the state, even when it is democratic. It insulates citizens from the pervasive state, preferring to discipline varied nationalities into a uniformity; civil society ensures that diversity is maintained, and state must be thought in exclusionary terms. Prof Chandoke argues that the foremost function of civil society is '*criticality*'. It has to create spaces from which all undemocratic monopolies can be challenged. Civil society is not supposed to boast the efforts of the State; rather it is the State's task to advertise its efforts and measures. Criticism from the Civil Society of Kashmir on political matters or otherwise should be taken as an opportunity to reflect and respond to the concerns of the region's people. Such criticism should not become a source for 'enforced muting' of any such organisation.

Civilians do not have a big role to play in stopping targeted killings, however they do have a role in setting the social narrative towards denouncing such killings. Civilians cannot tackle



such violence at an operational level, rather they can generate a sane discourse around the same. In the case of Kashmir, arriving at such a social narrative will take time and is directly associated with people's faith in the State. Giving 'religious colour' to such attacks in haste will be an act which could alienate Kashmiris from the rest of the country. Emanation of interpretations particularly from State led agencies must be based on thorough investigations backed by sociological studies.

There is a growing perception within Kashmiri Muslims that they have 'ceased to be a majority'. In terms of population and other demographic aspects, they may still be in majority but in terms of power and their ability to influence administrative decisions, they stand reduced to minority. Pertinently, apart from demography, it is the power dynamics which is crucial for understanding the position of a community in terms of power at a given point of time.

Understanding the Psyche Behind the Silence

The silence of Kashmiri Muslims, over the targeted killings, often raised questions. Akeel Bilgrami in his paper "Clash Within Civilizations"²⁸, seem to have some arguments to offer in such a scenario. He stated that majority of Muslims worldwide—giving examples of Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Pakistan—are not 'absolutists', it is surprising that these 'non-absolutist voices' are not heard as the representative voices of Islam, wherever it may exist. It is interesting as to how the much smaller absolutist minority seems to dominate the voice and the image. This argument of Bilgrami is supported by research²⁹ carried out by Pew Research Centre suggesting that extremist groups are largely rejected in predominantly Muslim nations.

At the individual level, some people in Kashmir might also suffer from a 'persecution complex' for real or perceived wrongs committed on them or their community at large. This, as pointed out by Akeel Bilgrami, might be one of the reasons for moderate Muslims to not stand up against the radical elements in their society. Moderate Muslims believe that any



criticism of the people, up against the state even when they target moderates, would mean a betrayal to their own society. Majority of moderate Muslims are torn between their abhorrence for fundamentalist interpretations of their religion and societies on one hand, and, on the other, their strong defensive feelings of resentment against forces they perceive to be foreign and hostile.

According to Bilgrami, the issue is slightly different in countries where Muslims are a minority, such as in India and where there are functioning democracies. In these countries, the state, responding to potentially '*disruptive forces*' from an aggressive interest group for political reasons, generally pays far greater attention to absolutist Muslim voices than to the vastly more numerous (but relatively muted) voices of moderates. In this circumstance, 'absolutists' implicitly becomes the voice of the community, and exercises an influence quite disproportionate to their numbers. Bilgrami is highlighting two points here: *First*, he is talking about the 'selective vigilantism' of the state; and, *second*, he is reflecting the fact of '*selective hearing*'. Majority of non-absolutist Muslims of Kashmir are speaking against killings but are unable to garner attention as compared to fringe groups. The media tends to emphasise chiefly on extreme viewpoints, deliberately missing out the vast majority of moderates.

Fear: A Factor Behind Silence

Another very important factor, which needs attention, while we try to answer the question as to why the majority is silent in Kashmir is the '*fear*' created by decades of conflict. If some Kashmiris, at times, tend to stay away, it is precisely because in Kashmir no one really knows 'who is who', 'who is affiliated to which agency'. This also has to do with the early 1990's and 2000's when a number of organisations, State led and otherwise, worked in 'grey zone'. There have been instances of tradeoff between State and extremists, of course with the aim to establish peace. But this created doubt in the minds of people, as to whom they should support, as both sides were 'armed with guns'. The experience from the conflict made them extremely '*suspicious*' of surrounding events— they still believe that for survival



‘no affiliation’ is the best choice. Standing up for the State comes with a lot of risk. Therefore, pressure from the State may not work; rather a belief that things will happen at its own pace is a more viable approach.

Way Forward

Any discussion on the way forward requires an approach that would consider the plight and role of all the different parties. Although targeted killings of civilians have shown an upward spike in recent years, the culture of civil society teaches us to move past our shortcomings, learn from them, and try again. It is necessary to develop a comprehensive, well-thought-out system for initiating a multidimensional process of reconciliation for lasting peace. At the same time, communities must keep all channels of communication open; mutual cooperation and consultation must keep going. A serious political process should be started, elections could be one step towards that process. A generous and genuine outreach to people is essential. Local political parties can use popular influence to counter terrorism. It will be through reassurance, partnership, and dialogue that we will be able to address the peoples’ issues and concerns. The promise of economic development is not enough to overcome historical and perceived wrongs, which also must be sympathetically addressed.³⁰ It also must be ensured that there are no attempts to ‘demonise’ the entire society for the wrongdoings of few.

End Notes

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¹² Kamaljit Kaur Sandhu, “Targeted killings, Hybrid Terrorists Putting Kashmir Back on the Edge?”, *India Today*, 04 June 2022. Available at <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/targeted-killings-hybrid-terrorists-kashmir-edge-kashmiri-pundits-1957925-2022-06-03>. Accessed on 29 August 2022.

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