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**Beyond Autonomy and
Accession: Entrenched
Insensitivity towards
People by Political Class
of Jammu and Kashmir**

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Beyond Autonomy and Accession: Entrenched Insensitivity towards People by Political Class of Jammu and Kashmir

Abstract

This paper examines the political evolution of Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) through the lens of entrenched insensitivity by the political class towards the region's population. It argues that three persistent tendencies of ambivalence, brinkmanship, and callousness have shaped political conduct from the accession period to contemporary electoral politics. Leaders across ideological lines have often relied on identity mobilisation, religious symbolism, and constitutional maximalism rather than governance and development. Even after the abrogation of Article 370 and the restoration of electoral politics in 2024, symbolic contestation continues to dominate discourse. Such strategies perpetuate instability, marginalise regional diversity, and divert attention from employment, education, and institutional reform necessary for durable peace and democratic consolidation.

Keywords: Conflict economy, Political Relevance, Accession, Abrogation

Introduction: The Politics of Perpetual Instability is Insensitive Towards People

The political trajectory of Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) has long oscillated between constitutional negotiation, identity mobilisation, and strategic brinkmanship. While territorial dispute between India and Pakistan provides the geopolitical backdrop, the internal politics of the region reveal a more complex and troubling pattern. There is a recurring reliance on emotional mobilisation, religious symbolism, and constitutional maximalism at the expense of governance, reconciliation, and inclusive development. The politician in Jammu and Kashmir is repeatedly pushing political boundaries to extract leverage, preserve relevance, or mobilise identity at the cost of the masses.

The politics of J&K have historically been shaped by strategic ambiguity, brinkmanship, and emotive mobilisation—from the indecisive accession politics of Maharaja Hari Singh to Sheikh Abdullah's oscillating constitutional engagement with India—the region's leadership has frequently employed brinkmanship as a political instrument. Following the abrogation of Article 370 in 2019 and the Supreme Court's 2023 validation of the move (Choudhary, A.A. 2023), the restoration of electoral politics in 2024 presented an opportunity for stabilisation.

This paper argues that there is an entrenched insensitivity towards population by the political class that has followed three intertwined political tendencies viz. ambivalence, brinkmanship, and callousness, to repeatedly undermine peace and stability in Jammu and Kashmir, diverted attention from governance imperatives, and deliberately reinforced cycles of instability. These tendencies are not confined to one party or ideology; they manifest across local, national, and cross-border political arenas. When combined with religious and exclusivist rhetoric, they produce a volatile political ecosystem wherein emotional appeal substitutes for governance and symbolic confrontation displaces structural reform.

Insensitivity in Politics of Jammu and Kashmir is Not Episodic but Structural

The abrogation of Article 370 and the bifurcation of the former state into two Union Territories in August 2019 viz. J&K and Ladakh marked the most consequential constitutional shift in the region since its accession in 1947. Many hoped that this rupture would close a chapter of ambiguity and usher in an era of administrative clarity and developmental integration. Yet, the years that followed have shown that constitutional transformation alone cannot secure peace. Political rhetoric, especially when infused with religious exclusivity or maximalist identity claims, continues to obstruct stabilisation.

The 2024 Assembly elections was widely seen as a restoration of democratic process after a prolonged hiatus. However, early legislative posturing around restoration of special status, symbolic resolutions, and competitive political one-upmanship revived familiar patterns. Rather than foreground employment, fiscal sustainability, infrastructure, or educational reform, the public discourse rapidly returned to questions of status, autonomy, and historical grievance. This continued insensitivity towards the people suggests that brinkmanship is not episodic but structural within the political evolution of Jammu and Kashmir.

Callousness of the political elite in Jammu and Kashmir, particularly in Kashmir, towards the common people is evidenced through pre, during and post accession period till date. Exploiting exclusivist ideas, promoting radical religious thoughts, aligning with anti-national and anti-people elements and even Pakistan, their views shifted based on the geo-political realities and the power games in the political arena.

From Accession to Ambiguity: Setting the Template of Political Duality for Power

The first act of ambiguity occurred at the moment of Partition. Maharaja Hari Singh, ruler of the princely state, sought to delay accession to either India or Pakistan. By pursuing standstill agreements and entertaining the possibility of independence, he attempted to maximise sovereignty in a rapidly fragmenting subcontinent. He took the decision for accession only after the tribal incursion from Pakistan in October 1947. By the time the Maharaja and his ministers pushed for brinkmanship, the Instrument of Accession to India was signed— an entire state was left into jeopardy that resulted in loss of territory and a fragile and violent region forever. The loss of lives of brave soldiers of the State Forces and the territory that continues to remain as Pakistan occupied Jammu and Kashmir (PoJK) including Gilgit and Baltistan were outcomes of this delay. What was intended as strategic delay instead became a diplomatic flexibility and entrenched conflict. While the precedent established that calculated ambiguity could backfire, but it remained a preferred tactic for the State forever.

While the Maharaja's experiment with ambivalence and brinkmanship was 'monarchical', Sheikh Abdullah's was 'ideological and mass-based'. He was the only political figure of Kashmir who was extremely influential. He was seeking power in an emerging geopolitical environment wherein democracy was to replace monarchy. He had envisioned a leading role for himself by balancing religion and socialist ideology for his own power game. He engaged with Muhammad Ali Jinnah politically prior to independence, initially on basis of religion, but eventually postured to reject the communal politics of Pakistan when he was rebuffed. Thereafter, even though Abdullah was an active participant in the process of accession, he used his influence and close alignment with Jawaharlal Nehru to facilitate Article 370's incorporation as a future leverage. He had thought of using the mass popularity to take on power forever.

Abdullah's relationship with New Delhi was marked by fluctuation. His dismissal and arrest in 1953 reflected suspicions that he was stretching constitutional boundaries. His later reconciliation in the 1975 Indira–Sheikh Accord again demonstrated oscillation between resistance and accommodation. This pattern of institutionalised autonomy striding both constitutional arrangement and political instrument became the practised format of engagement by the Kashmiri politicians of all hues with the Centre.

Thereafter, Article 370 and Article 35A was justified as safeguards of identity and demographic protection. This asymmetrical federalism however fostered insularity and elite capture. The National Conference alternated between partnership with national parties and rhetorical assertion of maximal autonomy. This elasticity sustained political relevance but perpetuated constitutional uncertainty. More importantly, these posturing kept the population confused about the status and political direction.

The emergence of the People's Democratic Party (PDP) introduced new idioms and took the idea of ambiguity bordering separatism to a new level. Positioning itself as a bridge between separatist sentiment and constitutional politics, the PDP cultivated a constituency that overlapped socially with networks influenced by Jamaat-e-Islami. Although not a formal alliance, the political space it navigated reflected calibrated engagement with religiously infused sentiment. By the time PDP arrived on the political scene, the religious extremism and polarisation across the world had become prominent. Islam became an inflection point of political exclusivism. This was exploited by PDP through well emulated art of ambivalence and pushing the envelope of brinkmanship to achieve polarisation and political power without crossing the constitutional redlines.

Over decades, regional leaders including smaller parties and individual politicians' cultivated dual narratives—one emphasizing constitutional partnership with India when engaging New Delhi, and another invoking exceptionalism and grievance in local constituencies. This duality generated strategic ambiguity that was politically useful, but institutionally destabilising. In the modern world of social media there were ramifications for the simple populations working or studying across the country. The callousness was such that any response, even single one, was seen as a fuel to be burnt for polarising the polity.

The 1987 elections, widely alleged to have been manipulated, intensified alienation and fed into armed insurgency. In the decades that followed, cycles of militancy, terrorism and counter terrorism created what scholars describe as a “conflict economy”, where political capital and economic incentives became intertwined with instability. Peace, paradoxically, threatened entrenched political relevance.

The Post-2019 Reset: Peace vs Insensitive Politics

The abrogation of Article 370 was presented by the Union government as a decisive correction to decades of political drift. The breaching of nearly eight-decade wall was hailed as historic by majority as that it had eliminated separatist incentives, enabled uniform constitutional application, and unlocked development. However, the political parties, particularly that of Kashmir based, contended that the move, undertaken without consent of an elected state legislature, deepened mistrust and reinforced perceptions of unilateralism.

The Union Territory of Ladakh, administered by a Lieutenant Governor from 2019 to 2024, brought transformational improvements in infrastructure expansion (Ahlawat, D. 2025), grassroots democracy through District Development Councils, and relative reduction in large-scale street violence. However, the politicians left out of the power game highlighted restrictions, detentions, and curbs on political expression.

When elections were finally held in 2024, expectations were high that the political class would recalibrate towards governance. Instead, early Assembly sessions witnessed symbolic contests over resolutions relating to restoration of special status and statehood. These were the issues already constitutionally adjudicated by the Supreme Court of India in December 2023 wherein the abrogation was upheld, and directions for restoration of statehood was given.

Rather than consolidating institutional stability, sections of the political class appeared intent on revisiting settled constitutional ground—a form of brinkmanship that may mobilise segments of the electorate but risks reviving polarising fault lines.

Ambivalence as Political Strategy

Ambivalence in Jammu and Kashmir's politics manifests in at least three ways. *Firstly*, Geographical Dualism wherein different tones and narratives were floated in Delhi, Jammu, and Srinagar. *Secondly*, Constitutional Elasticity in which they accepted constitutional office while rhetorically challenging constitutional outcomes simultaneously. Lastly, Identity Calibration to alternate between secular developmental language and religiously infused symbolism. The problem is not debate because democratic politics thrives on contestation. The concern is strategic ambiguity that prevents long-term trust-building.

Public celebrations in Jammu and Kashmir after 2019, especially outside the Valley, reflected deep dissatisfaction with Valley-centric political dominance. Regions such as Jammu, Poonch, Rajouri, Doda, and Kishtwar, along with communities including Paharis and Gujjars-Bakarwals, who have often expressed marginalisation within the Valley-centric discourse of “Kashmir politics” celebrated.

The irony is that, while Kashmir's leadership historically invoked pluralism and composite culture, internal pluralities within the Union Territory were frequently sidelined. Ladakh's separation into a distinct Union Territory symbolised long-standing grievances against political neglect. New voices from Jammu seeking separation from Kashmir is a consequence of the centrality of politics towards Kashmir. For relevance in political space, each individual politician and parties have exploited ‘ambivalence’ both vertically (towards New Delhi) and horizontally (towards other regions within J&K).

Brinkmanship and Competitive Radicalism

Brinkmanship, has been mastered by Kashmir centric political class—the practice of pushing political positions to the edge of institutional tolerance. Gaming the Centre through brinkmanship and competitive radicalism, has repeatedly characterised Kashmir's political history at cost of population's future. For example, in contemporary politics, brinkmanship takes subtler forms. Introduction of legally untenable resolutions for symbolic capital, competitive declarations over who will restore pre-2019 status and social media rhetoric hinting at constitutional reversal despite judicial closure.

Contemporary Brinkmanship: Media, Parliament, and Identity

Recent rhetoric illustrates how brinkmanship now operates through calibrated media engagement. Several politicians have repeatedly criticised the 2019 decision as not good for democracy, framing it as constitutional regression.

Many have also led protests outside the civil secretariat in Srinagar demanding review of reservation policies, presenting the agitation as defence of “genuine grievances” rather than partisan mobilisation. Such interventions illustrate a broader pattern of rhetorical escalation anchored in identity framing. While constitutionally permissible, such positioning sustains polarisation and reinforces perceptions that symbolic assertion remains politically rewarding.

Even when overt separatism has declined institutionally, rhetorical gestures towards it retains symbolic currency. Across the Line of Control, Pakistan’s establishment continues to frame Kashmir in religious and ideological terms. Statements by Asim Munir, describing militancy as a “legitimate struggle for freedom” exemplifies a narrative that situates the dispute within broader Islamic solidarity (Jha, R.S. 2025). Such framing reinforces securitized responses within India and narrows space for bilateral de-escalation.

When political rhetoric invokes religion, whether as civilizational grievance, sacred duty, or existential defence, compromise becomes betrayal for the divided polity.

Religious Mobilisation and Exclusivist Identity is the Bane of Kashmir Politics

Religion in Kashmir has been made inseparable from history and culture by the politicians based out of Kashmir even though politicized religion alters its function. Instead of serving as a source of ethical restraint and plural belonging, it has become a boundary marker for exploitation.

Exclusivist rhetoric has emerged in multiple registers such as portrayals of the conflict as civilisational, appeals to majoritarian consolidation outside the Valley, selective invocation of minority victimhood within it and cross-border framing of Kashmir as an unfinished religious project of Partition. These are extremely dangerous pathways for the people of Jammu and Kashmir.

In India’s broader political landscape, religious symbolism has gained electoral prominence. Within Kashmir, counter-symbolism often mirrors this pattern, creating a feedback loop. The risk is cumulative polarisation wherein every religiously charged statement, even if electorally expedient, compounds mistrust.

Governance Deficit and the Conflict Economy

Perhaps the most enduring casualty of status-centric insensitive politics is governance. Despite abundant hydroelectric potential, tourism capacity, horticultural strength, and human capital, Jammu and Kashmir struggles with unemployment, fiscal dependency, and limited private investment. Public discourse rarely sustains attention on issues like industrial policy, educational modernisation, fiscal autonomy within Union Territory framework and urban planning and climate resilience. Instead, emotional appeals based on religion and exclusivity by the politicians, dominate headlines.

The concept of a “conflict economy” pervades to ensure instability that creates political rents (Sareen, S. 2019). Leaders secure relevance as negotiators of crisis; peace reduces their indispensability. While this thesis should not be overstated, patterns of post-normalisation and rhetorical escalation have lent partial credibility into the state of affairs in Jammu and Kashmir. Natural corollary is that if political capital derives from grievance, stability becomes a threat.

Security Forces, Sacrifice, and Political Reversal

Security forces have borne heavy costs in containing militancy. Civilian populations, too, have suffered profoundly. Periods of reduced violence often generate cautious optimism. Yet, when normalisation is followed by symbolic escalation in political forums, security stabilisation risks unravelling. Public messaging that questions legitimacy of constitutional frameworks or romanticises resistance complicates counter-insurgency gains.

The cycle becomes familiar. Escalation, security response, political condemnation of security excess, temporary stabilisation, renewed rhetorical provocation etc. are steps in the unending cycle of the political class for relevance at the cost of the present and future of the population.

Breaking this cycle requires political maturity that transcends immediate electoral incentives— that has been absent in the political landscape of Jammu and Kashmir.

Statehood as a Symbol of Deflection

Statehood has now become a symbol of deflection of governance responsibility. Even though the promise of restoring statehood remains politically salient and important and the Supreme Court has directed that it be restored at the earliest feasible time, statehood alone cannot resolve structural deficits. There is a danger that statehood will become a symbolic victory claimed by all— a rhetorical shield against accountability and more dangerously a transitional milestone immediately followed by demands for pre-1953 arrangements.

If governance reform does not accompany institutional restoration, structural grievances will persist at cost of the population’s genuine aspirations for peace and stability.

The Democratic Paradox

The paradox of Kashmir’s politics is that, democratic processes often revive destabilising rhetoric. Elections provide legitimacy but are also exploited as incentives for emotional mobilisation. The 2024 elections were an opportunity for recalibration. Instead, early legislative behaviour indicates that identity politics remains electorally profitable at the cost of responsible governance.

Even though public fatigue towards the old mindset of entrenched political class is evident, there is no change in their direction. The young Kashmiris increasingly prioritise employment, mobility, and global integration as digital connectivity exposes them to aspirations beyond territorial contestation; the politician, particularly in Kashmir, remains insensitive to their ambition. The political class will risk generational irrelevance if it remains anchored in historical grievance rather than future opportunity.

Conclusion: From Symbolism to Substance

Peace in Jammu and Kashmir is not merely the absence of violence; it is the presence of trust, institutional predictability, and inclusive development. The politicians in Jammu and Kashmir, particularly in Kashmir must remember ‘ambivalence erodes trust’, ‘brinkmanship destabilizes institutions’ and ‘callousness alienates citizens’.

Religious and exclusivist rhetoric may mobilise constituencies, but it narrows pathways to compromise. Cross-border ideological framing intensifies securitisation resulting in denial of peace to the polity. The ongoing Valley-centric discourse that marginalises internal diversity needs correction and the status-centric politics that eclipses governance reform must now mature towards people first orientation.

The path forward requires clear, consistent constitutional messaging, inclusive regional balancing with equal voice for Jammu, Kashmir, and peripheral districts and governance prioritisation focused towards Jobs, education and fiscal sustainability.

It is imperative to de-escalate and avoid religious framing at state level and national level with the political class showing institutional maturity by accepting judicial closure to negotiate political space within constitutional bounds.

Jammu and Kashmir stands at crossroads. It can continue rehearsing unresolved history, or it can align with a rapidly modernising India and an interconnected world. Peace will not collapse solely due to external adversaries but will erode if internal insensitive politics continues to privilege symbolism over substance. The sacrifices of civilians and security personnel deserve more than cyclical rhetoric— they require leadership that replaces ambivalence with clarity, brinkmanship with responsibility, and callousness with accountability.

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