

The issue of Kashmir hits close to home

RAYNA SALAM

Ahmad Shafi* sensed the unrest in Kashmir before it happened. An MBBS student in Bangladesh, he was in class at Dhaka's Green Life Medical College when he got the news that India had revoked the status of the semi-autonomous state of Jammu and Kashmir on August 6,

imposing a blanket ban on all forms of communication.

"Something was coming. Everybody knew it. We have been in this environment for so long, we know the possibilities," Shafi says. "We can do the math and come up with the answers ourselves."

Two days before the Bharatiya Janata Party-led government removed Article 370 of India's constitution, guaranteeing their special status, Shafi's cousin called. He warned him of an impending struggle and transferred money to cover his living costs in Dhaka. His cousin feared this was the last time he would be able to send money for the foreseeable future. At the time, India was deploying large numbers of troops to Kashmir—they now number almost a million, turning Kashmir, already one of the world's most densely militarised areas, into a space of siege.

Tens of thousands of Kashmiri students studying abroad were cut off from their families that day. Many depend on their parents to send money once or twice a month to cover their expenses, but with bank and internet access down, their funds are dwindling. Bangladesh was hit particularly hard with the communication blackout—parents in Kashmir have managed to call their children from government officials' numbers if they study in other Indian states, but unauthorised international calls are barred in Kashmir.

Across colleges, across locations, the story is the same, and the atmosphere is growing desperate. Shafi has not been able to contact his parents for over a month. He has no idea where they are.

"For the past few days, I've begun to have these nightmares, started to feel a bit panicky. I was trying to keep calm, but I couldn't," he says.

After a pause, he continues: "You have to be patient. You know, for the past 30 days, I haven't been able to forget my family. And if I'm not patient, then, it's

actually quite depressing ... You have to keep going on."

Omar Rashid*, a student at a Gulshan medical college, also affirmed people came to know August 4.

"It's the same story with me," he says. "They tried to arrange it so we're not on our own. But so many are."

Rashid's only sources of information are international news outlets like BBC and Al Jazeera. He avoids national news coverage because he says they are normalising the situation.

"The whole world is crying for us. Still, nobody is doing anything," he says.

Though there are no exact statistics on how many Kashmiri students are studying in Bangladesh, English daily The Kashmir Monitor estimates around 500 students enroll in Dhaka's medical colleges every year. Dhaka serves as a hub for medical studies in particular due to both the low cost relative to India, making it affordable for middle-class families, and the familiarity of a Muslim-majority country. The actual number of Kashmiri students in Bangladesh is likely higher—Kashmiri students themselves place their numbers in the thousands.

Now, more than a month has passed and these students are strapped for cash, distraught and frustrated. Many have turned to their friends for loans, but this source of money is fast running out. Mohammed Dhar*, a classmate of Rashid's, runs an online platform with him to support Bangladesh's Kashmiri students, though he himself is struggling financially. Created earlier this year, it has taken off in the past month. Holding back tears, he said his rent is expensive, and he has resorted to the last of his pocket money.

"Whatever happens, we'll manage it ourselves," Dhar says. "We've been there, we know the problems. We haven't gotten (help) from Bangladesh, but we have each other."

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