

LAND GRABS, FADING APPLE INDUSTRY AND ECONOMIC FALLOUT: COST OF RAILWAY INFRASTRUCTURE DEVELOPMENT IN IIOJK

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(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do not represent those of ISSI)



Introduction

With its multidimensional nature encompassing a complex interplay of diverse factors including identity, religion, politics, environmental issues, military intervention, socioeconomic realities, human rights abuses, and government repression, the Jammu & Kashmir conflict remains unresolved. The Indian authorities are diminishing the identity and existence of Kashmiris through land acquisitions, demographic changes, and illegal developments. Currently, majority of the local Kashmiris live below the poverty line. Now, new development plans by the Indian railways are challenging the livelihoods of thousands of farmers¹, whose orchards need to be erased for government plans.

A Decade of Misery, Land Grabs in IIOJK

Land acquisition in IIOJK is not a new concern. Evicting Kashmiris off their lands has long been the Indian administration's primary goal of settler colonialism² in the occupied region. The Land plays an

¹ Arjumand Shaheen, "Kashmir's apple orchards, millions of jobs, face threat from rail line," *Al Jazeera*, April 14, 2024, <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2024/4/10/kashmirs-famous-apple-orchards-are-under-attack-from-a-rail>.

² Stand with Kashmir, "Indian railway and infrastructure projects will dispossess Kashmiris of their land, orchards," *Stand With Kashmir*, April 18, 2024, <https://standwithkashmir.org/indian-railway-and-infrastructure-projects-will-dispossess-kashmiris-of-their-land-orchards/>.

integral role in determining the socioeconomic status of farmers and any landowners. The loss of land following the construction of new railway projects poses a detrimental threat to Kashmir's local economy. The proposed rail line development projects claim to connect Kashmir to the rest of India, with proclaimed aims of fostering local businesses, improving transportation, boosting tourism, and facilitating multidimensional connectivity between Kashmir and mainland India. But the forcible purchase of fertile fields, mostly occupying apple orchards, has provoked widespread fear and discontent among Kashmiri farmers.

Voices of the Concerned

Farmers claim that they received no official notice from the authorities, instead they had only been informed of the rail line projects through unofficial WhatsApp messages. Farmers from southern Kashmir have complained their orchards have been measured and fenced for land acquisition by government survey teams escorted by the Indian army without their consent. They reported that the land acquisition also contravenes a 2019 central law implemented in the union territories that ensures equitable compensation, transparency and rehabilitation for individuals impacted by infrastructure projects. They also raised concerns that the authorities' one-time payments will not compensate for their lifetime investments in apple orchards.³

Railway Infrastructure Projects: In A Nutshell

Influenced by the agenda of the National Master Plan, the Indian Railways decided to sanction a total of five rail line projects in the Kashmir valley. These new rail lines include doubling Baramulla-Banihal section (135.5 km), Baramulla-Uri (50 km) Sopore-Kupwara (33.7 km, Awantipora-Shopian (27.6 km), and Anantnag-Bijbehara-Pahalgam (77.5 km).⁴ Rapidly advancing towards this agenda five months ago, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi officially inaugurated the Banihal-Sangaldan section of the railway line, a route aimed at connecting Baramulla in North Kashmir to Udhampur in Jammu. On February 20, 2024, he also flagged off Jammu and Kashmir's first ever electric train connecting routes from Sangaldan to Srinagar and Baramulla. All this is part of the Udhampur-Srinagar-Baramulla Rail Link Projects (USBRL), sanctioned in the mid- 1990's (1994-1995), expected to be completed by August 2024.

³ Ethan Harrison, "Kashmir's Apple Orchards at Risk: Rail Line Threatens Millions of Jobs," *Coco Adocs*, April 10, 2024, <https://cocoadocs.org/2024/04/10/kashmirs-apple-orchards-at-risk-rail-line-threatens-millions-of-jobs/>.

⁴ "Realign Railway Tracks in Shopian: Mehbooba Mufti," *The Tribune India*, March 23, 2024 <https://www.tribuneindia.com/news/j-k/realign-railway-tracks-in-shopian-mehbooba-mufti-603392/amp>

⁵ "Welcome to Northern Railway Construction Organization (USBRL Project), INDIA," February 20, 2020 <https://usbri.org/brief.php>.

A Cause for Concern

For these projects, the government plans to get hold of nearly 278 hectares (5500 Kanals) of fertile land, necessitating the cutting of thousands of apple trees across Kashmir's Apple Bowl (the Shopian district) and other apple-growing regions of Kashmir.⁶ Following strict government orders, the Indian Army is refraining Kashmiris from working on their lands. Apple orchards are Kashmir's sole economic generator. The proposed actions by the Indian authorities would rob them of their productive fields, thereby leaving them financially devastated.

A Mainstay of Kashmir's Economy

Horticulture is the backbone of Jammu and Kashmir's economy. Known to be the valley's largest employment generator, apple farming accounts for sustaining the livelihoods of over 3.5 million farmers, comprising 27 percent of the region's population.⁷ Significantly, the apple industry contributes to approximately 8 percent of the region's GDP.⁸ The entire Indian apple industry is centered in three states of India, namely Himachal Pradesh and Uttarakhand, with a major share of production hailing from IIOJK. Apple orchards in Kashmir contribute to over 75 percent of India's apple production.⁹ The Himalayan region's orchards export two million tons of apples annually, generating around 120 billion INR in revenue¹⁰, directly impacting the livelihoods of farmers who have worked hard for years to build their agricultural land.

Economic Status of Kashmiris Post Abrogation of Article 370 and 35A

The economic repercussions for Kashmiris since the abrogation of special status have been severely devastating. With a complete curfew in the valley, following communication blackout, food and healthcare shortage and rising inflation, the Kashmiri community faced massive losses. Be it in terms of economic, agricultural, horticultural, educational, industrial, trade and tourism, e-commerce, information technology startups, transport and handicrafts, the difficulties suffered by these losses

⁶ Raja Muzaffar Bhat, "New Railway Lines Would Severely Impact Kashmir's Apple Industry," *Kashmir Observer*, March 12, 2024, <https://kashmirobsvr.net/2024/03/12/new-railway-lines-would-severely-impact-kashmirs-apple-industry/>.

⁷ Shaheen, "Kashmir's Apple Orchards, Millions of Jobs, Face Threat from Rail Line."

⁸ "Apple industry in Himachal Pradesh and J&K faces challenges due to climate change," May 28, 2024, <https://www.freshplaza.com/asia/article/9630013/apple-industry-in-himachal-pradesh-and-j-k-faces-challenges-due-to-climate-change/>.

⁹ Moazum Mohammad, "Kashmir's apple woes | Bitter harvest," *India Today*, November 3, 2023, <https://www.indiatoday.in/amp/magazine/nation/story/20231113-kashmirs-apple-woes-bitter-harvest-2457596-2023-11-03>.

¹⁰ By Auqib Javeed, "Why you may not get Kashmir's famed apples easily," December 7, 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-67634680>.

have been huge, with nearly 50 percent loss in earnings from each sector.¹¹ Various analysts, stakeholders, human rights organizations and international news agencies have highlighted this concern. Even though the Indian administration claimed that this constitutional transformation will promote development in the region, the monetary benefits for Kashmiris remain elusive.

Following these constitutional moves, the Kashmir's economy suffered from a massive decline in investments. With a total investment of \$46 million in 2021–2022, the region saw a significant decrease from \$102.8 million in 2017–18.¹² While critics claim that the pandemic was the primary reason for such under-investment, the reality remains complex. Prior to the global COVID pandemic, the year the Indian government revoked special status of the occupied Kashmir, the region saw a sharpest fall in investments, dropping from \$72.3 million in 2018–19 to \$36.3 million in 2019–20.

The total unemployment rate in Jammu and Kashmir stands at 23.09 percent as of March 2023,¹³ which is more than double the current unemployment rate in India, which stands at 9.2 percent as of June 2024.¹⁴ Even though the statistics for IIOJK were disputed by the Indian government officials, they were reflective of the real economic conditions in the disputed territories. A report published by Kashmir Institute of International Relations (KIIR) unfolded that the region's economy has weakened following the loss of over four lac (400,000) employments in 2019.¹⁵ Moreover, a report published by the Kashmir Chamber of Commerce and Industry unveiled disparity in Kashmir's economic prospects, highlighting that the region's business community has suffered a loss of nearly 400 million INR since 2019.¹⁶ With a significant number of domiciles being given to former Indian army personnel (Sainiks) and around 70 percent of the mining projects being given to

¹¹ Niha Dagia, "Perpetual Silence: Kashmir's Economy Slumps Under Lockdown," *The Diplomat*, April 17, 2021, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/08/perpetual-silence-kashmirs-economy-slumps-under-lockdown/>.

¹² Maknoon Wani, "Kashmir is bleeding. So is its economy," *Al Jazeera*, February 4, 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2023/2/4/kashmir-is-bleeding-its-economy>.

¹³ "Jammu & Kashmir Unemployment rate, 2022-2024 - knoema.com," Knoema, April 16, 2023, <https://knoema.com/atlas/India/Jammu-and-Kashmir/Unemployment-rate>.

¹⁴ "Unemployment Rate Rises to 9.2% in June 2024," CMIE, July 1 <https://www.cmie.com/kommon/bin/sr.php?kall=warticle&dt=20240701180501&msec=110>

¹⁵ Ayesha Waheed, "Dissecting Kashmir's Economy - Post Revocation of Article 370 of Indian Constitution," <https://kiir.org.pk//research-Paper/dissecting-kashmirs-economy---post-revocation-of-article-370-of-indian-constitution-8432>, n.d., <https://kiir.org.pk//Research-Paper/Dissecting-Kashmirs-Economy---Post-Revocation-of-Article-370-of-Indian-Constitution-8432>.

¹⁶ "Preliminary Economic Loss Assessment Report," Kashmir Scholars, Kashmir Chamber of Commerce and Industry <https://kashmir-scholars.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/kashmir-chamber-of-commerce-report-january-2020.pdf>.

Indians rather than Kashmiris as a result of unfair online auctions¹⁷, the economic prosperity for the Occupied Kashmir remains obscure.

Conclusion

Considering the aforementioned concerns, the apple industry is not merely a vital economic driver but also a cultural and social anchor for the region. Taking away their only source of income on top of already scarce employment opportunities, the Indian government has left Kashmiris across the Line of Control (LOC) in the face of an existential threat. The proposed railway projects, if implemented without addressing the farmers' grievances, risk becoming a symbol of the economic marginalization of local Kashmiris in their own land.

¹⁷ Nimra Javed, "The Aftermath of Abolishing Article 370 in Jammu and Kashmir," Pakistan Today, August 11, 2023 <https://www.pakistantoday.com.pk/2023/08/11/the-aftermath-of-abolishing-article-370-in-jammu-and-kashmir/>.