



## How Women Activists Can Help Jammu and Kashmir Make Progress in Democracy and Peace

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The partially autonomous northern Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir is my homeland, a beautiful part of the world – and also one of three areas of Kashmir divided into areas of control by India, Pakistan, and China and marred by a history of violent political and ethnic struggles. Women in my homeland are gaining new rights and increasingly asserting themselves in politics – and this momentous shift in traditional gender relationships opens up new possibilities for the pursuit of democracy and regional peace. This can happen if women involved both in civic associations and in government lead the way toward a peaceful pluralistic democracy and support international negotiations for a sustainable peace in the Kashmiri region. The process can make a strong start in my own home state within the Indian federation.

### The Next Steps for Democracy in Jammu and Kashmir

The best way to put our state's house in order is by further developing responsive and pluralistic democratic government. All peoples who make their homes in the region – not just Muslims, but also Sikhs, Buddhists, and Hindus, including Dalits – must be fully included in a pluralist democracy. Such a representative government would also be able to devolve significant administrative responsibilities to various districts and villages, empowering their residents in ways that could help to lessen ethnic tensions.

Historical foundations for pluralist democracy in Jammu and Kashmir were established by revolutionary actions during the 1950s. Land was taken from exploitative landlords without compensation and distributed to formerly indentured tillers of the land. This metamorphosis of the agrarian economy had groundbreaking political consequences in a previously feudal economy. With landlord rule abolished and land distributed to peasants who formed cooperative guilds, the economy started working better for all those who cultivated the land and made livings from the forests, orchards, and fish-filled waters. Mineral wealth was reserved for the betterment of the entire populace, while tillers were assured of the right to work on the land without incurring the wrath of creditors and were newly guaranteed rights to basic social and health benefits. These measures signaled the end of the chapter of peasant exploitation and subservience and opened a new chapter of peasant emancipation.

Building on the earlier gains, a pluralistic government can now ensure further economic, social, and educational gains for women and marginalized groups. Here is what the next steps should aim to do:

- Women citizens should be accorded equal rights with men in all fields of national life – economic, cultural, political, and in government services. Women should have the right to work in every line of employment for terms and wages equal to those for men. Women would be assured of equality with men in education, social insurance and job conditions, though the law should also give special

protections to mothers and children.

- Government scholarships for those in need should ensure full access to compulsory primary, secondary, and tertiary education. Instruction should be available in regional languages as well as English.
- The state should regulate the means of production to ensure the fairest distribution of goods, power, and services to its members. State government would further the wellbeing of all citizens, but would not disseminate any particular ideology or doctrine.

## New Forums for Democratic Discussion

In a functioning democracy, however flawed it might be, the will and aspirations of the electorate should guide the actions of politicians. Young people in Jammu and Kashmir should not be ignored as they clamor for democratic rights, efficient governance, a stable infrastructure, and a much less fractious polity. Their demands point the way toward a workable democratic pluralism in the state – where the reigning principal is discussion leading to free elections, not autocratic decision-making.

Obviously, an important challenge is to create new openings for people, including the young, to discuss public issues and become active participants. To that end, the Jammu and Kashmir government needs to revive and reinvigorate civil society institutions that could initiate groups to assemble freely and express shared interests, values, and purposes. As this happens, citizens involved in civil society as well as government officials need to forge strategies for conflict resolution and reconstruction of society. People must learn to work together across ethnic and ideological divides and insist that everyone be included in democratic decision-making and given full access to basic social services. There must be redress for previous violations of human rights for all groups within the state of Jammu and Kashmir. In addition, everyone needs to be open to diplomacy and peaceful negotiations to further the India-Pakistan peace process. The aims of that process should be withdrawal of forces from both sides of the Line of Control dividing Kashmir as well as the decommissioning of militants, the rehabilitation of detained prisoners, and repair of the frayed ethnic fabric in all parts of civil society.

## An Opening for Female Leadership

Not just in Jammu and Kashmir, but in many parts of the world, women can play an important role in establishing a more inclusive democracy and new forums for citizen cooperation. Female leaders can lead the way by offering new ideas, building broad-based political coalitions, and working to bridge organizational divides. As Anuradha Mitra Chenoy and Achin Vanaik have explained, “women have to re-establish their historic links with peace and the peace movement, asserting themselves as the harbingers of a genuine alternative.” Women active in politics must aim not just to improve the position of their particular organizations but also to forge connections between the group’s agendas for conflict resolution and reconstruction of society with the strategies and agendas of other groups in the population, who have also suffered from ongoing conflicts. In this way, women’s groups can thus pave the way for sustainable peace, universal human rights, and security from violent threats of all kinds.

**Read more in Nyla Ali Khan, *The Parchment of Kashmir: History, Society, and Polity* (edited volume) (Palgrave Macmillan, 2012) and *Islam, Women, and Violence in Kashmir: Between India and Pakistan* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).**

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