

## A DAY IN THE LIFE OF A 15-YEAR-OLD IN SRINAGAR MAKING A CALL



## ‘Assalam-u-Alaikum papa, are you okay?’

Amidst a communications clampdown in the Valley, a daughter gets in touch with her father

ADIL AKHZER

**H**ADIYA'S father left home, in Mazhama village near Srinagar, on July 18 for Haj. Less than a month later, came the abrogation of Article 370, stripping J&K of special status, followed by a complete communications clampdown in Kashmir.

He had been speaking to his family almost every day on video call since July 25, telling them to “stay safe” as troops mobilisation in the Valley led to all kinds of rumours. The last call was on August 4, when he promised Hadiya, the youngest of his three children, that he would call her again the next day. Then, the phones went dead.

Mother Yasmeena says as Eid approached, on August 12, Hadiya, a Class 9 student, became more and more quiet, seeking to talk to her father. “She didn’t even celebrate Eid,” says Yasmeena, who said she didn’t want her family to be photographed or her husband named.

On August 19, there was the first ray of hope. A neighbour told them that the government had set up facilities at a police station at Parimpora in Srinagar for people to make calls. But the police station was 13 km away.

Despite restrictions, Yasmeena says, “We didn’t wait a minute... Hadiya took out her Scooty, I sat pillion, and we started for Parimpora. All three of my daughters ride the Scooty but since Hadiya is closest to her father, she went.”

Yasmeena remembers Hadiya’s face shining as they approached the police station and saw the people making phone calls from there. “We waited for some time. But, when we handed over the telephone number to the officials, they apologised saying they can’t make an international call.”

Dejected, the two started back, when a policeman told them they could make an international call from the Deputy Commissioner’s office in Srinagar. “Since it was late, we decided to go back home and return the next day,” Yasmeena says.

The next day, Hadiya and Yasmeena



On Eid, residents crowded around Armymen to make calls. @PIBHomeAffairs Twitter handle; (top) at Dy Commissioner’s office, which has facility for STD/ISD calls. Shuaib Masoodi

started for Srinagar again, on her Scooty. They thought they were early, covering the 13-km distance by 8.30 am. But when they reached the office, there was already a long queue.

“We didn’t know that people would arrive earlier than us. Many had been waiting for more than two hours. We were told our serial number was 253,” Yasmeena says.

For the next seven-and-a-half hours, they waited inside the hall, almost not budging. “But there were more than a hundred people ahead of us. At 4 pm, we left.” They didn’t want to risk returning home in the dark.

At the Deputy Commissioner’s office, the calling facilities consist essentially of a round table kept in a large hall, surrounded by chairs and holding five cellphones. Two have international calling facility and three STD, with six government officials managing them. People are given a serial number and asked to wait their turn. Calls are mostly limited to two-three minutes. Some take the chairs while waiting, but as the numbers swell, the queue spills over to outside.

Inside the centre, there is complete silence. If needed, people talk in whispers, their ears straining to hear the names being called out on the microphone by an official.

Though the centre opens every day at 9 am, people start lining up from 6 am.

“So far, people have made 21,000 incoming and outgoing calls from here,” says Wahid Islam Dar, the in-charge of the centre. “In the initial days, there was a huge rush. Now that landline phones have been restored in some places, around 500 people visit us every day.”

Over the past 16 days, Wahid says, he has “seen it all”. “These are emotional days for us. Recently, there was a case where a person called up to enquire about his relatives who had gone for Haj in Saudi Arabia. He was told one of them had died. He left wailing.”

The official adds that while they work late into the night, till 11 pm, the phones keep ringing till many hours after. “We even receive abuses from people because they want to talk to their family members and don’t get through. At times, we give the number of the local SHOs so that they can call there to talk to their relatives. Once, I myself went to Palpora area after a girl called from Pune and asked for help to talk to her family.”

Hadiya made her third try to talk to her father on August 22, pleading with her mother to come with her. On that day, they left for Srinagar half-an-hour earlier. “This

time our serial number was 375,” recalls Yasmeena. “We waited the whole day but again, our turn didn’t come. We got back home at 9 in the night.”

But Hadiya was determined, and the next morning, the mother and daughter left for Srinagar again, even earlier. However, it being a Friday, there were more restrictions on the road. “It took us more than an hour to reach the Deputy Commissioner’s office. We were stopped at 10 places at least. I had to lie, say I had to go to hospital. Only then did they let us go,” says Yasmeena.

“When we reached the office, Hadiya was crestfallen as there was a long queue again.” As her eyes swelled with tears and the two decided to turn back than spend another day waiting, one of the officials at the centre called out for them. They had recognised the two. “They said since you have been coming for three days and had left late Thursday, we will give you priority today.”

Finally, three hours later, they called out Hadiya and Yasmeena’s names, and an official handed over a simple Android cellphone.

Hadiya says she let her mother talk first. Yasmeena kept it brief, mindful of the limited time. “I asked him how he was, and said we were fine and were calling from the Deputy Commissioner’s Office and could not talk much.” She also managed to ask her husband when he would be coming home.

Hadiya took the phone next. She could only say, “Assalam-u-Alaikum papa, are you okay?”, before breaking down. Her mother patted her back, saying, “Don’t worry, beta, he is coming on August 28.”

The wait of three-and-a-half days had ended in a call of a minute. But Hadiya and her mother don’t mind. “For me, it was enough to hear my father’s voice,” says the 15-year-old. “We could have talked a little longer but we know everybody is waiting. My conscience didn’t allow me.”

On August 23, among those in the queue is Ghulam Nabi, 43, a resident of Chadoora who has been waiting for four hours. “I don’t think I will get a chance to talk to my son in Dubai,” he says. “Why is the government not lifting the blockade? Why are they playing with our emotions?”



Majeed (left) with stepbrother Hussain in Sankari village, Rajouri. Arun Sharma

## ‘My children are there, I’m here...’

This is PoK resident Majeed’s first visit across LoC. In wake of Art 370 tension, he can’t return

ARUN SHARMA

ABDUL MAJEED has not slept for several nights. Stepbrother Altaf Hussain says the 76-year-old keeps calling out for his children and small grandchildren at night.

They live only 50 km away, but in village Khuratta in Kotli district across the Line of Control, in Pakistan Occupied Kashmir. Majeed is living on borrowed time here, at Sankari in Jammu province’s Rajouri district, his return blocked by the cancellation of the Poonch-Rawalakote bus service — one of the two cross-border people-to-people services to fall prey to the rising India-Pakistan tensions since the abrogation of Article 370.

Majeed is among the 28 passengers from PoK stranded on the Indian side after Pakistan, on August 19, declined to allow the bus to cross over through Chakkan Da Bagh. Officials said six Indians from J&K, who had gone across the LoC from Chakkan Da Bagh are similarly stranded there, though the period of stay mentioned in their permits is yet to expire.

People living in PoK and J&K are allowed to travel on the bus, which runs Mondays, to meet relatives on the other side with permits.

It is Majeed’s first trip across the LoC since Partition. He arrived at Sankari on July 15 on a 28-day permit, to meet Hussain, 65. While the permit expired on August 12, he had been trying to leave since August 4, fearing he might get stuck due to holidays on account of Eid, and Indian and Pakistani independence days.

“I first left Rajouri along with my brother Altaf on August 4 for Poonch (87 km away),” Majeed says. But August 4 midnight, clampdown was enforced across J&K before the abrogation of Article 370. “The bus too got suspended due to it.”

They then prepared to board the bus on August 12. “But the authorities asked us to return as Pakistan was refusing to open gates on its side of the LoC.”

Sankari, that has nearly 400 houses, has a large number of people serving in the Army and other security forces. Of Altaf’s three sons, one is in the Army. Majeed has eight children, including five daughters. All except two sons are married. One of his sons works as a barber in Saudi Arabia, while the other two are farmers owning nearly 3.6 acres of land.

Majeed originally hails from Rattal Basai village in PoK. He along with his elder sister Khurshaid shifted to the house of his maternal aunt in Khuratta after their mother Fateh Begum married Abdul Latief, a soldier in the Army assigned to the Pakistan side after Partition, after their father’s death. However, Latief left his job and came to Sankari on the Indian side to be with his family, Altaf says. Altaf was born to Latief and Begum in 1954 at Sankari. Majeed and Khurshaid, 4 and 7 respectively at the time, got left behind.

In 1989, Altaf says, he went over to meet Majeed and Khurshaid. “My mother used to tell me I have a brother and sister. Somehow traced them.” He stayed in PoK for three months. “On return, when I showed their photos to my mother, she looked at them and breathed her last.”

The brothers lost contact again after militancy erupted in the Valley, and the LoC became a hot zone. It was a chance contact four years ago that brought them together again. Majeed and Altaf’s sons, who were both working in Saudi Arabia at the time, got in touch through Facebook.

Until six months ago, respective deputy commissioners, with the consent of the Foreigners’ Regional Registration Office, would extend permits of PoK residents in case they were unable to board the bus on due date. But with some using this provision to overstay, it was scrapped.

At present, five PoK residents, including the son of a former militant, are known to be staying past their permit in Jammu region after a stay order from the high court against their deportation. One of them, an old PoK resident, has appealed to be allowed to die in Poonch and be buried there as he had no one on the other side of LoC.

“We have informed the Ministry of External Affairs about the situation,” a senior official said, talking about the 28 PoK residents stranded in J&K. “It is a humanitarian issue. We can’t force them to leave.”

Pointing out that people from both sides are stuck following the renewal of tension, Ifthikar Hussain, a retired Armyman in Sankari, says, “We want peace. There is no purpose fighting as Pakistan cannot get an inch of J&K, or India of PoK.”

Altaf points out that former prime minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee had opened the cross-LoC routes to enable people divided by history and geography to meet each other. “We want peace so that families can continue to meet, like brothers... After all, if one person dies on our side in Pakistani firing, four get killed on the Pakistan side too when India retaliates.”

Majeed says that boarding the bus in PoK, he had been apprehensive about what awaited him across the LoC. “I found people who were hospitable, and no different from us,” he says, adding that like here, over there too, teachers remained absent in government schools, medicines were in short supply in hospitals, and power and water supply was erratic.

But, with home now seeming further away, Majeed longs for it. Pointing to his brother’s “trembling hands”, Altaf says, “He may die here due to the stress.”

That’s what worries Majeed too. “Of course I worry. I am on this side, and my children on the other,” he says. As some villagers try to pacify him saying this too was his home, the 76-year-old mumbles, “Apna ghar te apna hi hota hai (What can take the place of home).”

## Looking for ‘Raghuvansh’ in Ayodhya

SC said it was “curious” about if one could find Ram’s descendants in the holy town still. From Ram Janmabhoomi Nyas to ordinary residents, all wonder how

AVANEESH MISHRA

**H**EARING the civil dispute in the Ram Janmabhoomi case, the Supreme Court earlier this month said it was “curious” to know whether any descendants of Lord Ram were still living in Ayodhya. The advocate representing Ram Lalla Virajman, K Parasaran, assured the Bench that they would try to find out.

Even Ayodhya is “curious”. To know how. So far, seven people have come forward to claim links to Ram, or to ‘Raghuvansh’. Six of them are from Rajasthan, including members of the royal families of Jaipur and Udaipur, and one from Rae Bareilly. None is from Ayodhya.

But, in this town whose history is now inextricably entwined to the country’s politics, there is no shortage of theories.

Jagatguru Ram Dineshcharyaji Maharaj, the Acharya of ‘Ramanand Sampradaya’ (a

sect considered to be descendants of Ram’s sons), says that as Lord Ram belonged to “Achyut gotra”, the Kshatriya saints of that gotra should be considered Ram’s descendants.

“In *Shrimad Bhagwat Mahapurani* it is mentioned that the last king of Ikshvaku dynasty was Sumitra. The *vansh* of Ram ended in Kaliyug and there is proof of this in the Puranas. Now the thing that connects Lord Ram with the *sant samaj* is Achyut gotra, the gotra of Lord Ram,” says Dineshcharyaji.

He adds, “As no one can prove himself to be a descendant of Ram through scientific methods, our holy texts are the second-best source. And the Puranas confirm that Ram belonged to Achyut gotra.”

In his book *Jain Culture in Ayodhya: Evolution and Development*, Ayodhya resident Dr Ramanand Shukla, a historian, mentions this lineage too, as well as how it was “lost”.

The kingdom of Ayodhya, also referred to

as Saket, Prathampur, Ikshvakubhoomi, and Awadhपुरi at various times, was established by Vaivasvat Manu, he says. “Manu’s elder son was Ikshvaku and the Suryavansh started from here. The sixth king in the dynasty was Prithi and on his name we call this planet Prithvi. His great grandson Shrivasta established Shrivasti. Another king in his dynasty was Bhagirath who is believed to have brought the river Ganga to Earth. Later in this dynasty was king Raghu and on his name we call Ram’s dynasty as Raghuvansh. His son was Aja, and his son was king Dashrath who, according to Ramayana, is the father of Ram,” says Shukla.

He adds, “Other important kings in the Ikshvaku dynasty were Kush’s 28th descendant Brihadbala, who fought in the Mahabharata on the side of the Kauravas. Last in the list is King Sumitra, who was defeated by Mahapadma Nanda, who is known as the founder of the Nanda dynasty. There was no



Ram Ki Paidi in Ayodhya. Vishal Srivastav

Ikshvaku king in Ayodhya after that.”

Mahapadma Nanda is believed to have been the contemporary of Chanakya and Chandragupta Maurya, who lived in the fourth century BC. After that, Ayodhya became part of Magadh, and then Nanda and Maurya. As per popular belief, after Sumitra was forced to leave Ayodhya, he went to Rohtas (in Bihar) and the trail is lost after that, Shukla says.

What is clear is that the present royal family of Ayodhya, still venerated by the town, has nothing to do with Ram. They are said to be ‘Shakdweepiya Brahmins’, from somewhere near present-day Iran. According to popular belief, three ‘Shakdweepiyas’ known for their knowledge of medicines were called to Ayodhya from Shakdweep (near Iran) during the Ramayana period after a royal family member got leprosy. Later, around 250 years ago, their descendants were gifted Ayodhya during Nawab Saadat Ali Khan of Oudh’s time.

Present ‘Ayodhya king’ Yatindra Mohan Mishra, a respected name in the Indian literary world, admits, “Our history in Ayodhya is 250-300 years old and cannot be connected to epics, which are thousands of years old.”

Mishra continues to live in the Rajbhawan, situated less than a kilometre away from the disputed Ram Janmabhoomi site.

Also within the same distance lives Shashank Shekhar. Wondering what purpose a hunt for Ram’s descendants would serve, he says, “If we consider claims that Ram was born in 5114 BC, more than 7,000 years have passed. How can we find a dynasty trail now?”

Ghanshyam, who runs a confectionery shop near the disputed site, feels the Supreme Court query has set off a debate which has no end or meaning. “Now people will randomly

start claiming to be Ram descendants to gain media attention. This is disrespectful.”

Ankit Tiwari, an advocate, agrees. “The stories of Ramayana go back to when there was no other scientifically known civilisation. In that case, isn’t there a possibility that a significant number of people, all over the world, are descendants of Ramayana characters?”

Says Pandit Siya Kishori Sharan, a priest, “What is important is not who shares Ram’s bloodline but who believes in him. The true followers of Ramayana are his true descendants.”

The head of the Ram Janmabhoomi Nyas — a trust set up for construction of the Ram temple at Ayodhya, which owns 42 acres of the acquired land around the Ram Janmabhoomi site — Mahant Nritya Gopal Das also wonders at this search. Saying “every human being is connected to the bloodline of Lord Ram”, he says, “If you want to find a direct descendant, then I can say that the BJP MP from Kaiserganj (130 km away), Brijbhushan Sharan Singh, is a direct descendant.”

The president of the Wrestling Federation of India, Brijbhushan Singh is one of the accused in the Babri Masjid demolition case, listed several cases against him, including attempt to murder, in his 2014 poll affidavit, and was once accused of sheltering members of the Dawood Ibrahim gang.