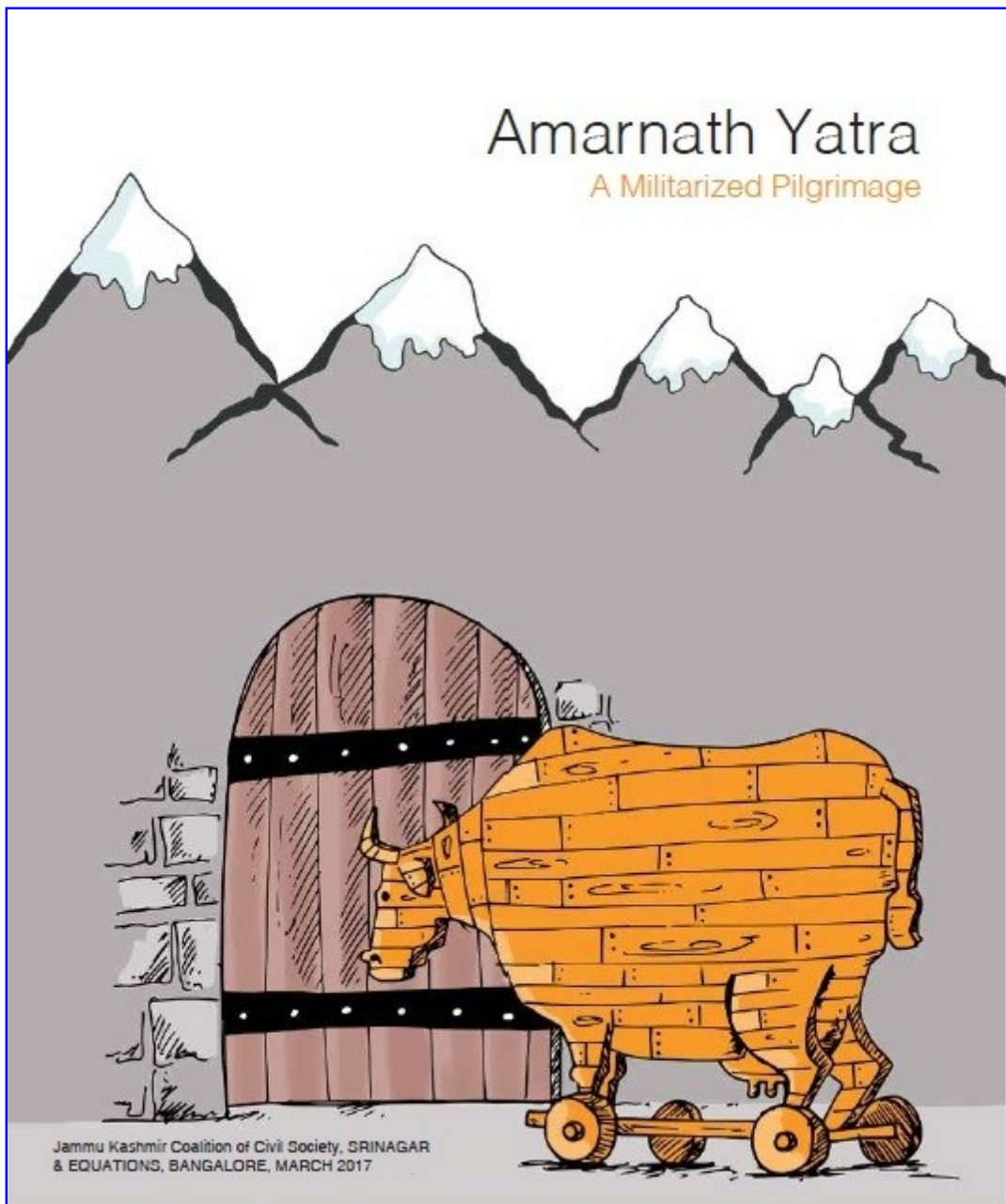


'The report documents how Amarnath Yatra is used as a right-wing nationalist battle cry by the state'

<http://www.wandemag.com/amarnath-yatra-is-used-as-a-right-wing-nationalist-battle-cry-by-the-state/>

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Amarnath Yatra: A Militarized Pilgrimage

I remember as a kid in the month of August a few dozen buses full of *Yatris* would arrive at Kishtwar from Baderwah and Jammu. The *Yatris* would pitch their tents in Chowgan (a big ground/meadow in the centre of the Kishtwar valley) spend their night in Kishtwar and then next morning continue their

journey onwards to Machail (a small village in the tehsil Padder). For us kids, it was an interesting sight. Mid 1990's when only a few of buses used to run from Jammu and Srinagar to Kishtwar, it was fun to see a dozen buses and so many people coming to Kishtwar. We would spend a couple of hours playing at the fair at Chowgan and then go back home. Once home our next game started. Our home is at the foothill of the mountains that surround the Kishtwar valley. We would stand on our small terrace and start counting the number of buses that were going to Machail. This game continued for some years – maybe until early 2000. However, after a point, we had to give up this counting game. The number of buses kept increasing and after a point, it became impossible to count. Very few locals made the Machail *yatra*. Being Shaivites tilted towards indigenous forms and images of Shiva most Hindus from Kishtwar did not find any organic link with the *Yatra*. For example, no one from my family has ever made the *Yatra*. Which does not mean that my family was opposed to the *Yatra*!

Two things grew simultaneously in Kishtwar. The increasing number of buses in the *Yatra* along with the growth and strengthening of Hindu right wing groups. The contemporary condition being that the BJP won across the Chenab valley (except the Inderwal seat). I am not suggesting here that *Yatra* and *Yatris* brought the religious antagonism with them. That will mean giving Kishtwaris an escape from what they have turned Kishtwar into – a hotbed of communal politics played over religious symbols. However, Machail *yatra* along with many small and big *yatras* surely contributed to the growth of religious antagonism not only in Kishtwar or Chenab Valley but also in the whole of Jammu and Kashmir. In this scenario, the report *Amarnath Yatra: A Militarized Pilgrimage* by Jammu Kashmir Coalition of Civil Society (JKCCS) and Equations Bangalore is not only timely but a much-needed intervention.

The report that was initially planned to be a report on the environmental impact of the Amarnath *yatra* on Kashmir turned to be an assessment of the multiple ways – environmental, political and socio-economic - in which *yatra* impacts Kashmir. As the report says, *'Therefore, while the study was initially to focus on the environmental impacts of the Yatra, based on the team's experiences during the Yatra it was decided to engage with a broader and more comprehensive mandate, by including aspects of the history of the Yatra, its general administration, the role of armed forces, the role and attitude of the State, langars and yatris towards the Yatra and the people of Kashmir. The objective changed from merely reflecting on the need for the regulation of the Yatra, but to uncover vested interests of the State, langar organisations and other socio-religious organisations.'*

For a long time now, History in the whole of South Asia has become a battleground for various competing ideologies. Various groups continuously make claims and counter-claims in the name of speaking 'truth'. However, the discourse changes dramatically when the state starts playing an active part in the promotion of a certain history as the only authentic one while

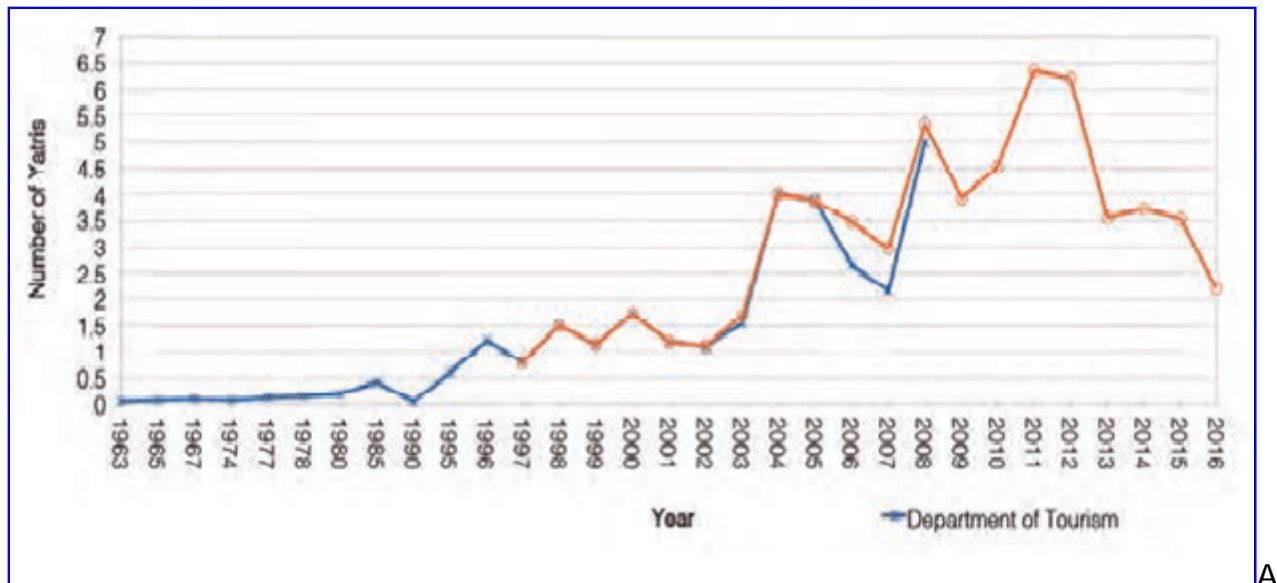
ignoring/silencing the other claims. The myth behind Amarnath *Yatra* has seen many changes over last few decades. The *Yatra*, which started under the patronage of the Dogra rulers, had its own politics. As the report mentions, Dogra rulers in order to consolidate their rule and lay claim to Kashmir – a Muslim majority region – officially started the *Yatra* under their own patronage in 1846. However, Dogra rulers in a well-crafted move ensured that the whole structure was comprised of four different groups - the Maliks of Batkote, Pandits of Martand (Mattan) and Ganeshpora, and the Mahant of the Dashnami Akhara. All the offerings from the *Yatra* were distributed among these four groups. In a way, the Dogra rulers ensured that the *Yatra* got a wider acceptance.

The post-colonial Indian state does not even seem to believe in this pretense. *'At the time of passing the SASB Act, it was decided that the customary rights of the four claimants of the earnings would be settled with a one-time payment which would be decided by a Tribunal set up for this purpose, which seems to have arrived at a decision during the year 2003-04... With this one-time payment, all earnings of the Board are its own, free to be used as they wish'* (pp. 59). By one stroke of a pen, SASB (and by extension the Central government) became the sole guardian, manager of the whole *yatra* without caring about the resentment or the customary rights of the four traditional groups involved. Why waste carrots, when you can wield the stick well!

However, the efforts of the Indian state and the Hindu right wing groups have not stopped here. As the lingam now melts within 45-60 days, various right-wing Hindu groups are now trying to make the Cave as the alternate holy space by emphasizing *'the mythological belief that Shiva narrated the story of immortality to Parvati here. Thus suggesting that the Yatra may be undertaken all through the year'* (pp.59).

The report very well documents how the Indian state has been implicit in turning the Amarnath *Yatra* into a right-wing nationalist battle cry. In all the matters related to the *yatra*, there is continued attempt to keep Kashmiris out of the decision making process and bodies. The Hindu right wing groups right from early 1980's have had a great impact on nature and the course of the *yatra*. The real break though comes in 1996, when as a political reaction to the ban announced by Harkatul Mujaheedin in 1995, 'the Bajrang Dal gave a 'Chalo Amarnath' call all over India and were able to mobilise more than 50,000 people, with 21,000 being youth members of the Bajrang Dal.' Praveen Togadia General Secretary of VHP leaves very less to guess when he claims, *"The Yatra is very much a spirituo – patriotic pilgrimage and mountain adventure. It strengthens national unity and territorial integrity. The two-month long Yatra mobilises people from all nooks & corners of the country thereby strengthening*

national unity." (pp. 96) As one can see from the graph published in the report the number of *yatras* has been continuously increasing since then.



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The Indian state has been hand in glove with the Hindu right wing in pushing the *yatra* to perform the '*spirituo – patriotic pilgrimage*' for the national unity and integrity of the Indian Nation. The most telling example of this attitude of the Indian state is the passing of SASB (Shri Amarnath Shrine Board) Act in 2001. The report very well documents the almost scandalous nature of the way in which the Act was passed by the Jammu and Kashmir state Assembly. Not only were the most important stakeholders of the *yatra* – the Kashmiris – kept out of any discussion, even the media had no idea about the act being passed. There was a complete blackout in media about the passing of the Act. Even the legislators of the Jammu and Kashmir Assembly as the report mentions do not remember any discussion on the bill. The final act of silencing any debate on the legal position of the SASB came in the form of a Supreme Court judgment. The judgment directs that "*the State should leave all matters connected with the Yatra, provision of the infrastructure, performance of the Puja and other welfare matters to the Board and concentrate itself for the security arrangements during the period of yatra and of course to see that public order is not disturbed.*" (pp. 50) The report calling SASB as 'State within the State' is nothing less than a truth established by this judgment.

It is a classic example of how all the three organs of the Indian state – the legislature, the Executive and the Judiciary – can come together if need be and snatch the very basic right, which a Kashmiri ever had. The strength of the report comes from the fact that apart from Amarnath *Yatra* it also tries to focus on several other *yatras* which have mushroomed in many parts of Jammu and Kashmir. As the report clearly shows most of these *yatras*, take place within the Kashmir valley or in the Muslim majority regions of the Jammu region. To look

at the whole thing in a different way and not follow the communal-demographic formulation of the Indian state, one can say that all these *yatras* have emerged strongly in the regions that have seen strong self-determination movement. Right from mid-1980's apart from Kashmir valley, the movement for self-determination has been going on in the Chenab valley as well as the in the twin districts of Rajouri-Poonch. Though the Sindhu Darshan Utsav celebrated, every year in Ladakh seems to be an exception to this rule. But as the report suggests even this Utsav had a religious-nationalist sentiment behind it. The festival got the current shape only after the Kargil war!

The report also opens up the military-industry complex, which has become operational and fully structured because of the *Yatra*. The langar operators who provide free food to the *yatris* right from Jammu until the Amarnath cave have also been instrumental in 'informing people about the *Yatra* and encouraging them to participate.' Langar operators for Amarnath *Yatra* have very well crafted the Gulshan Kumar model of earning millions by producing and disseminating religious music and then spending an amount of the earning to providing free food to the *yatris* in various pilgrim sites. The state government provides langar operators with free water and electricity and they pay no rent for the land they use to pitch their tents and dumping their waste. As the report shows through many examples, during the *Yatra* an atmosphere of competitiveness and then animosity develops between the Langars operators (who are non-Kashmiris) and tent owners, pony walas, *dandies*, porters (who are Kashmiris). Most of the times the *yatris* along with langar operators have a very offensive attitude towards Kashmiris one of the examples of this offensiveness is the separate eating places for the Kashmiris.

This offensive attitude often takes violent turns. In these tense movements, the Indian paramilitary forces find it hard to hide their own contempt for Kashmiris. The situation as the reports suggests quickly escalates from being economic in nature to being communal/nationalist. The overall atmosphere built around the Amarnath from the very start is marred by reports of threats from various militant groups to attack the *Yatra*. The report argues, *'Every year, a few weeks before the Yatra, there are reports in newspapers about intelligence received regarding an impending attack on the Yatra. This is used to increase the number of armed personnel deployed on the Yatra route. Further, any attacks on the armed forces or state machinery, either before or during the Yatra, is seen as directed at the Yatra. The vagueness of the reportage, the aura of mystery surrounding these reports and the timeliness of these incidents vis-a-vis the Yatra, forces one to wonder if these are planted incidents to justify the continued and increasing presence of the armed forces during the Yatra.'*

Apart the already high number of paramilitary personnel posted in Kashmir valley, more and more CRPF, BSF and Army Jawans are sent to Kashmir for

special *Yatra* duty. The report quotes one army officer who suggests that 60 paramilitary personnel guard a 3-5 km stretch (pp.69). All this is happening when after 2002 there has been no attack on the *Yatra*. Interestingly the inquiry reports regarding the three attacks that took place before 2002 were not made public. Indian security agencies have put the blame of attacks on various militant outfits without furnishing any proofs for the same. The report sums up the whole thing by asking, *'A point to ponder in all these 3 instances, is that given that heavy bandobast of the armed forces and wide spread intelligence network, why was the Indian state not able to avert the attacks? In 2000, the government even admitted to have intelligence about an impending attack but were not able to stop it. If the presence of the large numbers of the armed forces could do nothing to stop the 3 attacks that have happened between 2000 – 2016, what is the justification of their presence on the Yatra route? (pp.144)*

In last 70 odd years, Kashmir has suffered in every possible way. From baton, bullets to pellets Kashmiri body has been a site of everyday violence for long. Amarnath *Yatra* with its mega structures adds to this violence. Before going to the environmental impact of Amarnath *Yatra* let me briefly talk about the impact of Amarnath *Yatra* on the condition of informal labour. Capitalism in its contemporary Avatar has successfully fragmented the labour. The 'factory floor' that Marx saw as a site of radicalism and solidarity has been shrinking across the Globe. 'Putting out system' is the mantra for large multinational companies to prevent any labour radicalism. Kashmir in this regard is not an exception. What though is exceptional is the way in which the informal labour sector is exploited during the Amarnath *Yatra*.

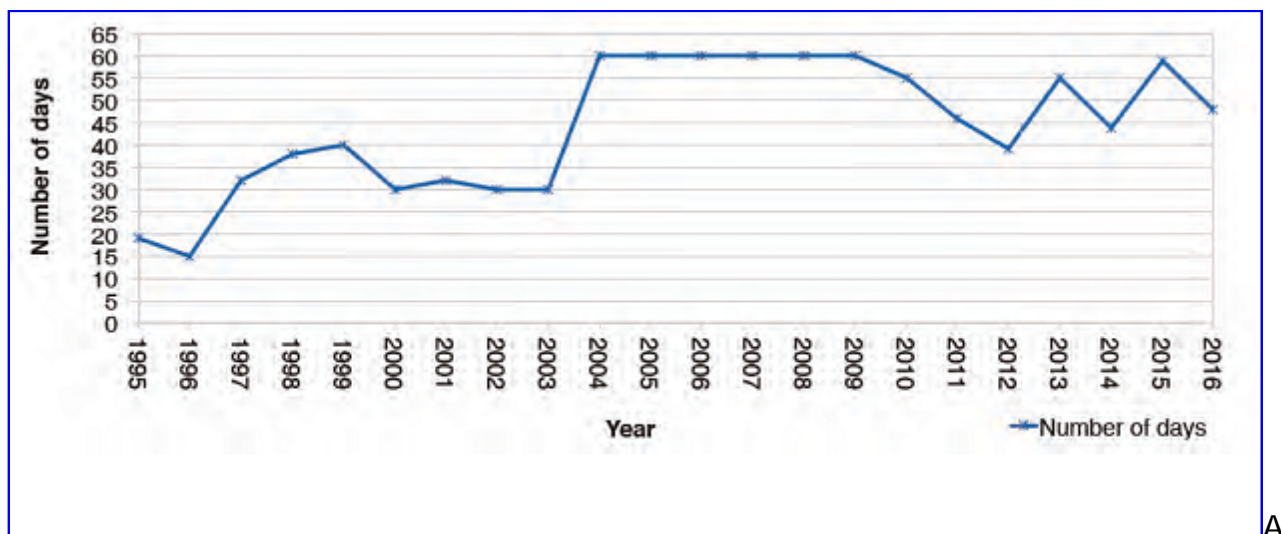


Illustration: Mir Suhail / Amarnath Yatra: A Militarized Pilgrimage

Apart from the poor wages that the report talks about, Kashmiri labourer is also subjected to the inhuman practice of *dandi* – where an Indian *yatri* is carried to the cave by the Kashmiri labourers. I cannot think of any other part of the world where one human is made to carry another – just because the person has money. I am reminded here of the humiliating practice of *begar*, which was prevalent in Jammu and Kashmir during the Dogra rule. Many people might talk about the ‘free will’ of the *dandis* and porters who carry enormous loads and

humans from the base camp all the way to the cave. However, we know the nature of 'free will' under the market rules. It is not free will but a high rate of employment and lack of opportunities that force Kashmiri labourers to perform this hazardous labour. SASB sets up all kinds of infrastructure for the comfort of *Yatris*, but no such structure exists for the Kashmiri working class. As the report suggests, *'Department of Labour has constructed some sheds in the camps in the upper reaches, which were open for use by these three groups. However, for the past few years, the armed forces have occupied these spaces and the horse owners, dandi-walas, and porters are left to their own means to find shelter and food. They often stay in the shops in the camps by paying an amount of Rs. 50 – 60 per night.'*

The *Yatra* that used to be performed for 15-19 days as the graph below suggests is now performed for about 60 days.



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The *Yatra* has to pass through many glaciers and meadows. The SASB along with various administrative departments of central and State government do not hesitate to cut glaciers to make the walkable path for the *Yatris*. Most of the langars pitch their tents in the ecologically fragile environment and most of the solid waste or plastic from these langars find their way either in Lidder River or in dug pits. As the report suggests there has never been a carrying capacity assessment of the Amarnath *Yatra* route. Still, SASB sanctioned that '10,000 *yatris* per day (excluding those travelling by helicopter) would be permitted on the *Yatra* from both the gates. This was later increased to 15000 *yatris* per day the number of people'. Interestingly in many other *yatras* like Mansarovar *Yatra* a *yatri* is not allowed to perform the *Yatra* twice. However, when it comes Amarnath *Yatra* reports suggests many *yatris* boast about the number of times they have performed the Amarnath *Yatra*. This is an example of utter disregard for the safety of the *Yatris*. However, more than *yatris* the locals are the ones who are at the receiving end of this social and environmental onslaught.

The Glaciers and rivers in Kashmir have been shrinking; the pollution levels have gone too high. In addition, the impact of this can be seen on the changing weather of Kashmir. Torrential rains, floods and at times severe droughts have been regular features of the weather in Kashmir. No one is suggesting that all this is because of the *Yatra*. Kashmiris have themselves been responsible for harming their environment largely. Nevertheless, the annual *Yatra* is taking this environment degradation to another level. The result of the polluted water of Lidder is that the people of Pahalgam mostly develop Jaundice and Hepatitis B in the months immediately after the *Yatra* (pp. 119). The Report quotes a study conducted by two scientists with the Department of Earth Sciences, the University of Kashmir that suggests 'that "from June to August 2011, about 83 % (2,231 metric tons) of total annual solid wastes was generated with an average generation of about 24.77 metric tons/day. The per capita generation of solid waste is about 2.40 kg/day." Further they note that, "Currently, one of the visible problems with the Lidder waters is high pollution load contributed by domestic, agricultural, and the tourism sectors. One more threat to the rich water resource of Lidder is the seasonal inflow of Amarnath pilgrims during the period from June to August."

The *Amarnath Yatra: A Militarized Pilgrimage* is the result of intelligent hard work along with really good analysis. The Strength of the report is in the enormous data they have collected to drive their point home. Also a change from many other reports coming from different groups within J&K, enough space has been given to the informal labour, Gujjar and Bakarwals communities. This is a welcome trend and should be followed further. Also, the report doesn't end only by criticizing the government and the *Yatra* but also makes some concrete suggestions in order to avoid pitfalls in the conduct of *Yatra*. This again is a change where even the alternative is being suggested by the report.

Though there are certain areas where the report could have been improved. The report at times seems struggling between being factual and analytic. The result being that the report at times is highly rhetorical. Sloganeering sometimes takes the centre stage than simple, plain analysis. Just to point a few examples. On page no. 37 the report argues, 'Punjab and Haryana (which formed the erstwhile undivided Punjab) has a complex relationship with Kashmir, which was colonised by the kings of Punjab.' This is a trivial argument to say that the population of a whole geographical region behaves in a certain way, just because Kashmir was ruled by Kings who came from the same region. Rather than putting out this comment from nowhere, the report could have gone into the politics of North India (if they had time and tools to do so) and seen why and how North Indians have a deeply antagonistic relation with

Kashmiris. This could have been achieved had the researchers interviewed enough *Yatris* coming from North India (particularly from Punjab and Haryana)

Another big problem with the report is the lack of enough references. At many instances, the report quotes people without any reference. I understand that when it comes to Kashmir, people want to hide their identity, but the identity of those could have been hidden. But the report does not do that. For example on page no. 87 the report quotes somebody saying, '*Our Hindu politicians only want to use us and do not do anything to help the interests of the langars... They have a fixed agenda about what issues need to be raised and when.*' Now we do not go who this person is and thus one ends speculating. The report could have added more interviews with 'common people' directly or indirectly involved with the *Yatra*.

The report nonetheless remains an indispensable document for everyone – for the Government, for researchers and for the people of Jammu and Kashmir to understand the impact of *Yatra* on the fragile ecology and politics of Jammu and Kashmir. Hopefully, more and more people read it and recommendations are followed – which I of course doubt.