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• MONDAY | OCTOBER 05, 2026 | RABI' AL-THANI | 22, 1448 AH •

DIGITAL INDIA AND WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT

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Eleven years ago, on July 1, 2015, India introduced the Digital India initiative which aimed to leverage technology for making governance, services and opportunities available to citizens and common people. Reflecting on this journey today, there emerge a lot of success stories but perhaps one of the most prominent among these stories is the story of the changing relations between women and technology.

While the proportion of women owning and using smartphones rose from 12% to 76% between 2015 and 2024 (+533%), their internet access has grown from 15% to 82% (+447%). Online education and digital financial inclusion have increased from 5% to 60% and from 10% to 75% correspondingly, while e-commerce participation has risen from 3% to 50%.

These figures represent nothing short of a major paradigm shift in women's opportunities for obtaining information and education, engaging in e-commerce and utilizing digital technologies in general. Humanly speaking, this means that literally hundreds of millions of women have started gaining more access to devices and services which allow them to reach new horizons which transcend the boundaries of family and community life.

However, the change has not occurred purely technologically. For quite a long time, for many conservative families, the digital divide was a social one too.

For a number of reasons, a woman could get questions as to why she needed to have a smartphone, why she used it in public or had her own device. At the same time, a lot of families-controlled technology and did not allow it to enter.

All this started changing as smartphones became less expensive and digital services became an integral part of daily life. Gov-



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ernmental services, education, banking, applications, certificates, scholarships and welfare delivery started moving online. Families which previously saw no reason why a woman should have a smartphone started seeing that it became an educational, communications and economic resource.

This change is evident in Jammu and Kashmir too. For women living in Kashmir, especially in rural areas, digital access means gradual reduction of the gap between themselves and institutions, information and opportunities.

A girl in a village can take part in an online class, get a scholarship, obtain information about governmental programs, send an application, make payments and interact with the market through a smartphone.

Also, Kashmiri women are using dig-

ital technologies not only as consumers but as creators of their own careers and identities. From teachers, entrepreneurs and students to artists, professionals and content creators women in Kashmir are increasingly turning to digital technologies.

This change is also supported by the overall change of the digital environment in Kashmir.

As the number of shutdowns and internet restrictions is decreasing, it becomes more and more necessary to provide continuity in education, business, communication and other online activities.

For the region which has been historically characterized by connectivity problems and associated limitations of access to opportunities, such digital infrastructure can serve as an important channel.

The impact of digital access for women is especially important because digital technologies can affect empowerment in multiple dimensions at once.

A smartphone can become both a classroom and a bank, a marketplace and governmental service centre.

However, it would be naive to stop here and overlook the gaps that still exist. Issues of connectivity, affordability, digital literacy, online security and certain social restrictions can affect women differently. Therefore, the next phase of Digital India should concentrate not only on connecting women but also on their safe and independent digital engagement.

Our target for 2030 should not simply be to bring every woman online, but to empower every woman to use technology with confidence, awareness and without fear. Digital inclusion must go beyond access to a smartphone or the internet.

It should mean that a woman knows how to use digital services, protect her identity and finances, recognise online fraud, report cybercrime and harassment, and seek



help when she faces a threat online.

We need to strengthen digital literacy among women, particularly those in rural, remote and border areas, so that the digital space becomes an opportunity rather than another source of vulnerability.

As more women come online, we must also strengthen cybersecurity awareness, mechanisms for reporting cybercrime, and systems that protect women from online fraud, abuse, stalking and harassment.

We dream of an India where a girl growing up in a border district like Kupwara, Baramulla has access to the same digital opportunities, learning resources, govern-

ment services and platforms as a girl growing up in Delhi.

Her location should not determine the quality of her digital opportunities.

The real measure of Digital India by 2030 should therefore be how many people are connected, but how confidently, safely and meaningfully women are able to use that connection to learn, work, access services, participate in society and shape their own futures.

The greatest achievement of Digital India may become the one not so much in terms of devices connected as in terms of the impact it produces in people's lives.

Sopore's Turning Point: How Enforcement, Rehabilitation and Community Action Are Confronting the Drug Menace

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Sopore, known traditionally as the "Apple Town of Kashmir," has been witnessing intensified efforts to address drug abuse through enforcement, awareness, treatment and community participation. The response has increasingly moved beyond conventional policing.

A combination of stringent law enforcement, disruption of drug-supply networks, destruction of illicit crops, judicial action, rehabilitation and community participation is creating a broader framework for addressing the crisis.

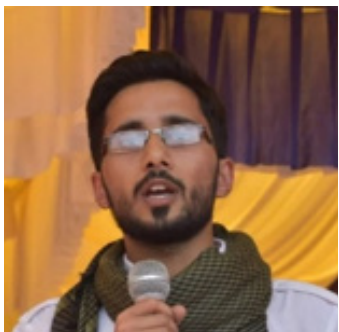
The emerging experience of Sopore demonstrates that tackling narcotics requires action at multiple levels. While police operations attempt to choke the supply of drugs, rehabilitation programmes address dependence and recovery, while civil society, families, religious institutions and ordinary citizens have an important role in prevention and reintegration. One of the most visible components of the anti-drug campaign has been intensified enforcement by the Jammu and Kashmir Police under the broader Nasha Mukht Jammu & Kashmir Abhiyaan.

During a 100-day anti-drug campaign, Sopore Police registered many FIRs under the Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances (NDPS) Act and arrested alleged drug peddlers. Such operations are intended to disrupt the availability of drugs at the local level while simultaneously identifying connections with wider supply networks.

Checkpoint checks, surveillance and targeted searches have also formed part of sustained enforcement efforts. Police operations have resulted in the seizure of substances including prescription opioid capsules and synthetic drugs commonly referred to as "Chittta." The emphasis on identifying suppliers and distributors is significant because restricting availability requires intervention beyond individual users.

The enforcement strategy also extends to the destruction of narcotic-producing plants. Joint operations involving the Revenue, Excise and Police departments have targeted wild cannabis cultivation in different areas of the police district.

The war on drugs is more than merely arrests and seizures. Proper disposal of



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confiscated substances is another important component of enforcement. Under the supervision of the District Drug Disposal Committee and following directions from the Special Court (NDPS), Baramulla, authorities carried out the disposal of seized narcotic substances.

A person suffering from addiction requires medical, psychological and social support. This is where the expansion of rehabilitation infrastructure becomes particularly important. Government data say the number of people treated for drug addiction at centres supported by the Ministry rose from 5,382 in 2021-22 to 46,491 in 2025-26.

The increase should be interpreted carefully. A rise in people entering rehabilitation does not, by itself, prove that drug consumption has declined. It may reflect several factors, including greater awareness, improved availability of treatment, reduced stigma, better identification of people requiring assistance, and increased willingness among families and individuals to seek professional help.

This changing attitude towards treatment is nevertheless significant. For years, addiction could remain hidden because families feared social stigma. When treatment becomes more accessible and socially acceptable, people are more likely to seek

assistance before substance dependence becomes even more severe.

For Sopore, therefore, the expansion of rehabilitation represents an important second front in the anti-drug campaign: enforcement attempts to reduce supply, while treatment addresses dependence and recovery. Technology and citizen participation have also become increasingly important in the fight against narcotics. The MANAS (Madak Padarth Nishedh Asoochna Kendra) initiative provides a national platform through which citizens can report information related to narcotics. The helpline 1933 allows people to share information concerning drug trafficking and related activities. Such mechanisms can help authorities gather information from communities that might be reluctant to interact directly with law-enforcement agencies.

In a town such as Sopore, where community networks are closely knit, citizen reporting could potentially supplement formal policing. Residents may observe suspicious movement, locations of trafficking or patterns of distribution before they become visible to enforcement agencies. A safe reporting mechanism can therefore help turn community awareness into information that can be acted upon.

At the same time, confidentiality and responsible handling of complaints are essential. We must assure citizens that reporting will not expose them to unnecessary risk or social consequences.

The social dimension of addiction makes community participation indispensable. Families are often the first to notice behavioural changes, declining academic or professional performance, financial difficulties or changes in social circles. Yet families also require guidance on how to respond.

If people think of addiction as a moral failure, they may be less likely to seek help. A balanced approach recognises the legal implications of drug trafficking and, at the same time, acknowledges that substance dependence is a condition that may require medical, psychological and social intervention.

Civil society organisations, educators, religious leaders and community representatives can therefore play a role in prevention and recovery. Religious institutions in par-



ticular can help disseminate anti-substance abuse messages, promote responsible behaviour and reduce stigma associated with seeking treatment.

Rehabilitation cannot be restricted to the gates of a de-addiction center either. They may find themselves back in families and communities where they face unemployment, damaged relationships, financial hardship and social exclusion. Without a supportive environment, the risk of relapse may be present. Hence, skill development, employment opportunities, family counselling and continued psychological support are important parts of long-term recovery.

Sopore's response to narcotics illustrates why a comprehensive strategy is needed. Arrests and seizures are useful to disrupt trafficking networks but need a follow-up through the judicial process. While destroying the crop removes local sources of narcotic material, prevention requires constant surveillance. Rehabilitation can help people recover, but family and community support is needed for successful reintegration.

The most important measure of progress

should therefore not be the number of arrests alone. It should include indicators such as treatment completion, relapse rates, employment and social reintegration of recovering individuals, availability of counselling, reduction in drug-related crime and the accessibility of support for vulnerable youth.

Sopore's battle against narcotics is consequently not simply a policing exercise. It is a struggle involving institutions, families, health services, communities and young people themselves. The combination of enforcement, rehabilitation, public awareness and citizen participation provides a framework through which the town can continue confronting the problem.

For Sopore, a truly drug-resilient community will be achieved through sustained commitment and not temporary campaigns. The challenge is great, but the growing institutional response offers hope for a future where law enforcement protects communities, rehabilitation restores lives, and collective responsibility ensures that vulnerable young people are not drawn into the cycle of addiction.

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From individual houses to planned communities

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A shift towards compact, well-planned housing can conserve scarce land while bringing schools, parks, healthcare, transport and community facilities closer to everyday life.

Kashmir's relationship with the house has always been deeply emotional. A house is not merely a structure of brick, concrete and timber. It represents family, security, inheritance and a sense of belonging. For generations, families have aspired to build their own homes, often on individual plots surrounded by walls, gardens and narrow access roads. But as population grows, land becomes increasingly valuable and settlements expand, this traditional pattern of development raises an important question: can Kashmir continue to build one independent house after another without putting unnecessary pressure on its limited land?

The answer may lie in changing the way housing is planned. Instead of treating every family plot as an isolated unit, future housing development could increasingly move towards planned communities and apartment-based settlements — where several families share green spaces, parks, community halls, parking, waste management, security and access to public transport. This does not mean abandoning the idea of a comfortable family home. It means rethinking the amount of land required to provide that comfort.

Official housing data underline the pressures already identified by planners, even if the figures now need updating.

6.5 Average household size (Census 2011); 6.9 in urban areas

2M+ Households recorded across Jammu & Kashmir

54% Of houses in good condition — 42% liveable, ~4% dilapidated

24->27% Rise in urbanisation noted in the Srinagar Master Plan



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The Srinagar Master Plan recorded an urban housing stock of about 4.96 lakh units against 5.17 lakh urban households, and noted that the apparent gap did not fully reflect actual demand — because of dilapidated structures, multi-family housing and single-room accommodation.

The bigger concern is not simply the number of houses. It is the amount of land consumed by scattered construction. A family building on a separate plot needs land for the building, a boundary wall, access, parking and open space. Multiply that by thousands of families and the cumulative impact is substantial: agricultural land and orchards disappear under uncoordinated construction, roads narrow, drainage suffers, and public services grow more expensive to provide. Scattered plots 6 plots · walls, private access roads, no shared land One planned complex shared green space

Same 6 families · one footprint · land left over Same number of families, two ways of using the land beneath them.

The idea is not unfamiliar to government planning. Jammu and Kashmir's building regulations already recognise apartment houses and prescribe requirements for land use, coverage, floor area, setbacks, open spaces and parking. The Housing and Urban Development Department also runs an online building permission system covering urban local bodies and development authorities. The next step is to think beyond individual buildings and plan complete communities. Imagine a housing complex where a child does not have to cross a busy road to reach a playground. A small library or coaching centre within walking distance. A health centre, pharmacy, grocery shops and prayer space built into the settlement. Designated parking instead of vehicles on every roadside. Rainwater management, waste segregation and pedestrian paths planned before families move in.

“

Shared infrastructure can lower the cost of providing roads, drainage, electricity, water and waste collection — a concentrated settlement is simply easier for public authorities to serve than a scattered one”

The national policy framework is already moving this way. PMAY Urban 2.0, launched



in 2024, includes affordable housing in partnership, affordable rental housing and beneficiary-led construction among its four components, with support intended for one crore additional eligible beneficiaries over five years. For Kashmir, the objective should go beyond simply adding units — housing policy must account for landscape, climate, traditional settlement patterns, disaster risk and the protection of productive land.

Compact housing should not mean concrete jungles. Buildings packed too closely, inadequate sunlight, poor ventilation and no open space can make life uncomfortable — density has to be accompanied by thoughtful design.

The model should stay low- and medium-rise where appropriate, climate-responsive and surrounded by adequate greenery. Children need safe places to play, older residents need accessible walking areas, persons with disabilities need to move independently, and emergency vehicles need proper access.

Fire safety, seismic considerations and snow management belong in the design from the start. Jammu and Kashmir's strengthened digital building permission system — with automated scrutiny linked to GIS-based master plans — shows that the technical capacity for a more coordinated approach al-

ready exists, provided planning stays transparent and focused on public need.

There is a social dimension too. A shared park can become a meeting place for children; a community hall can host local programmes; common spaces can encourage interaction while individual apartments keep their privacy. For many, the biggest barrier will be psychological — the sense that an apartment is somehow less of a home than an independent house.

That perception can shift as the quality of apartment living improves. Ownership does not have to mean a plot of land with four walls around it. It can mean a well-designed dwelling within a professionally managed community.

The transition should be gradual and voluntary wherever possible. Existing settlements cannot simply be replaced, and rural villages have different needs from growing urban centres. The goal is for new development, from here on, to be planned intelligently from the start.

Every new residential project should ask a simple question: how much land are we consuming, and what are we creating in return? The house will remain central to Kashmiri life — what needs to change is the way we imagine the space around it.

Border Tourism and Community Engagement Transforming Kashmir's Remote Valleys

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“To travel along the borders of Kashmir is to witness a landscape where mountains whisper stories of resilience and rivers carry the pride of a nation.”

Border tourism in Jammu and Kashmir has gradually emerged as a unique and meaningful form of travel. Unlike conventional tourism that focuses mainly on scenic destinations, border tourism allows visitors to explore the natural beauty of frontier regions while also gaining a deeper understanding of life in areas located close to the nation's borders. Over the past few years, this form of tourism has attracted increasing interest from travelers, policymakers, and local communities who see it as both an opportunity for regional development and a way to strengthen national integration. Border tourism generally refers to travel experiences that take visitors to areas situated near international borders or sensitive frontier zones such as the Line of Control. In these regions, nature, culture, and the presence of security institutions together create an atmosphere that is very different from typical tourist destinations. Travelers not only enjoy the beauty of mountains, rivers, and forests but also gain insights into the lives of people who live in these remote areas and contribute to safeguarding the nation's frontiers. In Jammu and Kashmir, border tourism has gained particular attention in districts and valleys located close to the Line of Control. Many of these areas have remained relatively untouched by mass tourism, preserving their natural charm and cultural traditions. Places such as Uri in Baramulla district, Keran in Kupwara, Tangdhar near the Shamsabari range, and the breathtaking Gurez valley near the high Himalayan passes are slowly gaining recognition among travelers who seek authentic experiences away from crowded tourist centers. These frontier regions offer stunning landscapes of snow-covered mountains, flowing rivers, dense forests, and lush green valleys. The rhythm of life in these areas continues in close harmony with nature, and visitors often describe their journeys to these places as both adventurous and peaceful. For many



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travelers, visiting these border regions also evokes a sense of patriotic pride as they witness firsthand the dedication of the security forces who protect the nation's boundaries. The tourism potential of these areas lies not only in their natural beauty but also in their rich cultural heritage. Communities living in remote mountain villages have preserved traditions that reflect centuries of local history and cultural interaction. Villages in Keran and Tangdhar, for example, are known for their traditional wooden houses, folk music, local festivals, and unique cuisine. These cultural elements give visitors a rare opportunity to experience the authentic lifestyle of mountain communities. Similarly, the Gurez valley offers an atmosphere that feels almost untouched by modern urbanization. Wooden homes, green meadows, and the flowing Kishtang River create a peaceful setting that leaves a lasting impression on visitors. The tranquility of these landscapes, combined with the disciplined presence of the armed forces who safeguard the region, gives travelers a unique perspective on life in these frontier zones.

Recognizing the potential of border tourism, both the Government of Jammu and Kashmir and the central government have taken several steps to promote tourism in these sensitive regions. Efforts have been made to improve infrastructure and ensure that visitors can travel safely while respecting the strategic importance of these areas. One of the most significant improvements has been in road connectivity. In recent years, roads leading to destinations such as Uri, Keran, Tangdhar, and Gurez have been upgraded, making travel easier for tourists and adventure seekers. Earlier, reaching many of these places required long and difficult journeys, but improved roads have made them more accessible. Accommodation facilities have also expanded gradually. Guest houses, tourist huts, and small hotels have been developed in several locations, and many local families have started offering homestay facilities. Homestays provide visitors with the chance to experience the warmth of traditional hospitality while learning about the everyday life of people in these villages. Security arrangements remain an essential part of tourism in border areas. The presence of the army and other security agencies ensures that travelers can explore these regions safely without affecting national security. In some places, viewing points have been developed where tourists can observe the scenic landscapes near the Line of Control. Guided tours organized by local authorities also help visitors understand the geography, history, and strategic importance of these frontier areas. Communication networks, drinking water facilities, health centers, and transport services are gradually improving as tourism develops. However, there is still room for further development to meet the growing expectations of visitors. The role of government institutions and security forces in promoting border tourism has been particularly important. Apart from maintaining safety, these institutions also support initiatives that encourage cultural awareness and com-



munity participation. Tourism festivals, cultural programs, and awareness campaigns have been organized in several border villages to highlight their heritage and traditions. Security forces also participate in community outreach activities, infrastructure development, and humanitarian initiatives, which strengthen the trust between local residents and visitors. These efforts help create a positive atmosphere that supports tourism growth while also promoting peace and development in these sensitive areas. Equally important is the contribution of local communities, who form the backbone of border tourism. Many residents have begun offering homestays, guiding services, handicrafts, and traditional food that enrich the visitor experience. Young people in villages near Uri, Keran, Tangdhar, and Gurez are increasingly working as local guides, sharing their knowledge about trekking routes, local history, and cultural practices. Women also play an important role in this emerging tourism sector. Many produce traditional handicrafts, garments, and homemade food products that attract tourists seeking authentic cultural experiences. Cultural events such as folk music gatherings and village festivals further strengthen the bond between visitors and local communities. The economic impact of border tourism is gradually becoming visible in many frontier villages. Small busi-

nesses, transport services, and hospitality ventures are creating new sources of income for families that previously depended mainly on agriculture or seasonal work. Tourism also encourages improvements in local infrastructure such as roads, schools, communication networks, and healthcare facilities, which benefit both residents and visitors. Interaction between tourists and local communities also promotes mutual understanding and appreciation of cultural diversity. Visitors from different parts of the country get an opportunity to witness the resilience, hospitality, and traditions of people living in remote border areas. Despite these positive developments, several challenges remain. Infrastructure gaps still exist in some remote locations where landslides, heavy snowfall, and harsh weather conditions can disrupt travel. Communication networks are sometimes limited, and accommodation facilities need further expansion to support increasing tourist numbers. The sensitive nature of border regions also requires careful coordination between tourism promotion and security considerations. Development must therefore be planned responsibly to ensure that tourism does not disturb the ecological balance or the cultural identity of local communities. Looking ahead, border tourism in Jammu and Kashmir holds immense promise. With thoughtful planning, improved infrastructure, and responsible tourism practices, these frontier regions can become vibrant destinations that attract travelers from across the country and beyond. Responsible tourism that respects security concerns, protects fragile ecosystems, and empowers local communities can contribute to peace, prosperity, and sustainable development. As travelers explore the valleys of Uri, the peaceful landscapes of Keran, the resilient villages of Tangdhar, and the breathtaking beauty of Gurez, they discover not only the hidden treasures of Kashmir's frontier but also the strength and hospitality of the people who proudly live at the edge of the nation.

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