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Kashmiri youth wage online struggle

By Athar Parvaiz
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SRINAGAR - Rasik Rasheed (not his real name) has been cooped up at home due to curfews and strikes for nearly three months now, but Kashmiri youngsters like him are not busy with their studies - they're working around the clock to wage an online resistance.

They spend hours uploading and watching videos on YouTube that depict life under the Indian government's security regime, sharing their views and slogans on social networking sites like Facebook. At least 65 people, mostly teenage boys and young men in their 20s, have been killed in the latest round of anti-India protests in Srinagar, the summer capital, in the last 11 weeks, according to the Daily Telegraph.

The youths use Facebook to create a weekly routine for the protests, discuss ways to hold Kashmiri leaders to account and share news updates, according to the Associated Press. "I want to contribute to the freedom struggle in my own humble way. How does it matter if I don't go out and engage Indian security forces in the streets?" Rasik said in an interview with Inter Press Service. "I cause them more damage by these videos which depict how ruthlessly they treat Kashmir." Young Kashmiris are uploading video shot secretly from windows showing government troops causing damage to vehicles and property during curfews, says AP.

As for his parents who pay for his Internet fees, "they are happy that I am contributing to the freedom struggle in a different way", explained Rasik.

The [Internet's](#) reach is pushing young people like Rasik to vary the styles of their resistance against Indian rule in Kashmir.

From an armed rebellion in 1989, the opposition to Indian rule in this restive state is morphing into an "ammunition-free" struggle, one where youth make use of both traditional and more sophisticated methods of protest such as Facebook, [YouTube](#) and Twitter.

In the online world, many operate under names like "Dodmut Kashur" (Scalded Kashmiri), "Aam Nafar" (Common Man), "Bleeding Paradise", "Quit Kashmir" and "Exiled Stranger". "Independence Day! Not for us," read one of the posts on [Facebook](#) on India's Independence Day on August 15.

"It [the Internet] is emerging as an alternative media in Kashmir because these youth most often upload videos which depict the suffering of the people, which at times is ignored by the mainstream media, wittingly or unwittingly," said Sheikh Showkat, who teaches human rights in Kashmir University.

Broadband [Internet services](#) were allowed in Kashmir in 2005. "Within no time, these techno-savvy youth figured out how its use can outstrip the traditional media," Showkat added.

"I think it does help in how people visualize and relate to the information they get about Kashmir," said Angana Chatterji, a US-based anthropologist who advocates independence for Kashmir at international forums. "I show these videos to participants at international forums, telling them this is what I have seen in Kashmir. It encourages debate and enables discussion."

Rasik said, "The web teaches you how it can override barriers. The authorities may be the gatekeepers to mainstream media, but not here. Such is the power of the web which we are seeking to use effectively."

Kashmir's troubles date back to 1947, when Britain granted India independence and the Muslim-dominated areas became part of Pakistan. A United Nations resolution, in the meantime, gave Kashmiris the option to join either Hindu-dominated India or Pakistan or to become independent. But Kashmiris had no chance to make a choice as their homeland was claimed by both India and Pakistan.

Roughly a third of modern-day Kashmir is administered by Pakistan while the rest is under India. But it is an arrangement that has not been accepted by many Kashmiris, and some youths living on the Indian side rose up in arms in 1989 in an insurgency that simmers to this day.

In more recent years, many Kashmiri youth have been using other forms of protest as the use of violence has fallen out of favor. In the past two years, there has been more street

protests and pelting of Indian security officers with stones rather than the violent attacks of earlier years.

"Kashmiris have realized the changing dynamics at the global level, violent means of protest not accepted by global policy institutions. That is why they are fashioning their struggle accordingly," said Professor Gul Mohammad Wani, a political commentator who teaches in Kashmir University.

While Rasik is content with what he is doing at home, others combine both protests on the streets and in cyberspace. A youth from uptown Srinagar, who requested anonymity, says he juggles graffiti protests, cyber protests and pelting stones at Indian security forces stationed here.

"I take time for all these activities. The only thing you need is your commitment," he explained. "We want to convey to the world that it is not only the gun which draws attention."

Thus far, there have been no arrests for using cyberspace for political activity in Kashmir and no video-sharing or social networking website has been blocked. More than 50,000 [Internet connections](#) are said to be working in Kashmir.

Still, Kashmiris "e-protesters" say they cannot risks, and the online forums are most likely under Indian surveillance.

"These security agencies do not know about respecting intellectual freedom or freedom of expression. They can pick you up any time if they come to know about your involvement in e-protests," said one young person who asked to be called Burhan.