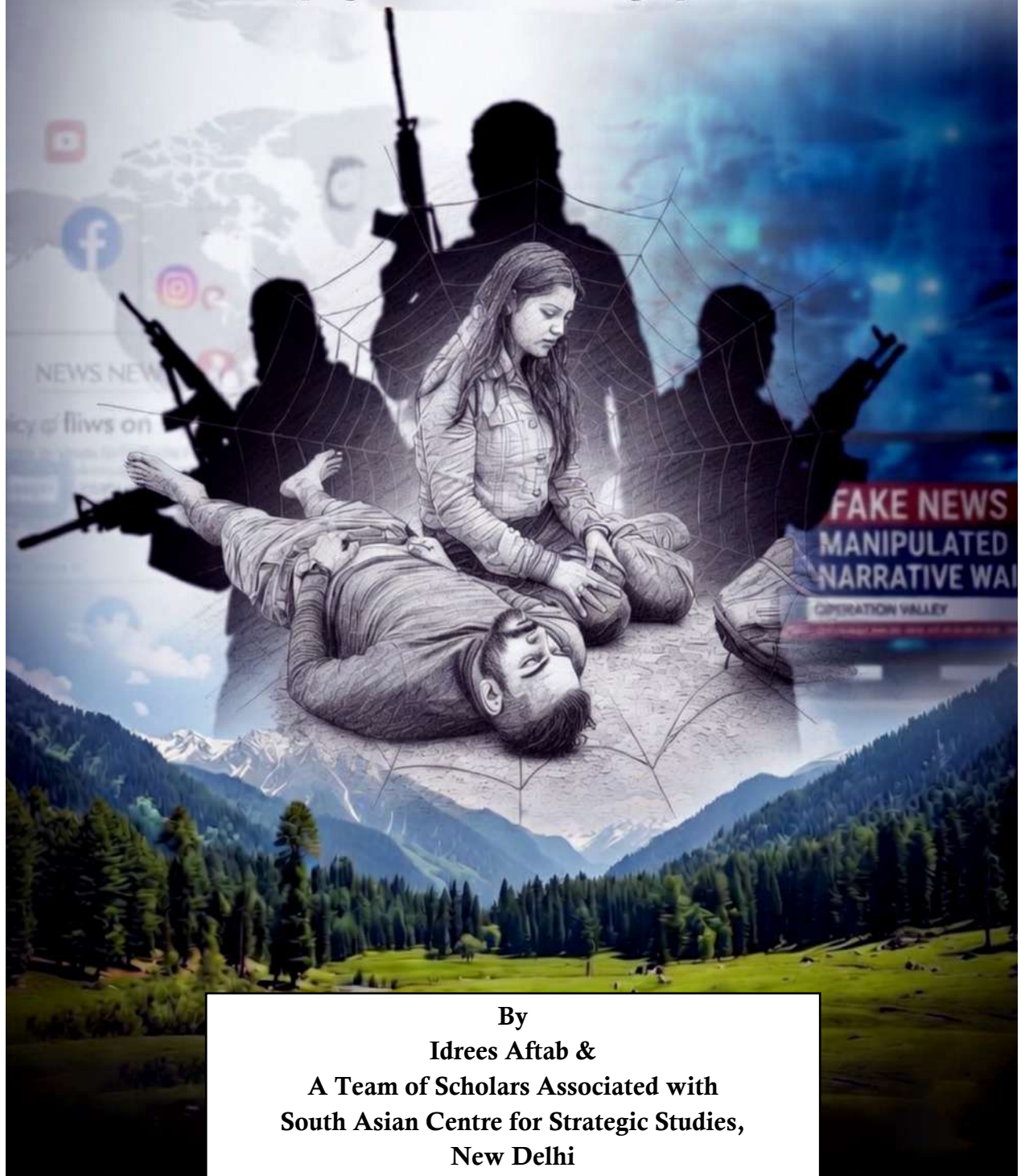


WEB OF LIES

Pakistan's Propaganda Push During Operation Sindoor



By
Idrees Aftab &
A Team of Scholars Associated with
South Asian Centre for Strategic Studies,
New Delhi

**Web of Lies:
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And A Team of Scholars

Associated with

South Asian Centre for Strategic Studies (SACSS)



New Delhi, India

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List of Abbreviations

AI	Artificial Intelligence
AK-47	Avtomat Kalashnikova 1947
APA	American Psychological Association
CCS	Cabinet Committee on Security
CHPM	Centre for Military History and Perspective Studies
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency
CRPF	Central Reserve Police Force
CST	Chhatrapati Shivaji Terminus
ESAM	Ekonomik ve Sosyal Arařtırmalar Merkezi (Economic and Social Research Centre)
FARA	Foreign Agents Registration Act
FATF	Financial Action Task Force
FDD	Foundation for Defence of Democracies
ICCT	International Centre for Counter-Terrorism
IEEE	Instituto Espaol de Estudios Estratgicos
ISI	Inter-Services Intelligence
ISPR	Inter-Services Public Relations
JeM	Jaish-e-Mohammad
JKLF	Jammu Kashmir Liberation Front
LeT	Lashkar-e-Taiba
LLP	Limited Liability Partnership
LoC	Line of Control
MI	Military Intelligence
MDM	Misinformation, Disinformation, and Malformation
MSS	Ministry of State Security
NIA	National Investigation Agency
NSD	National Security Division
OGW	Over-Ground Worker
OGWs	Over-Ground Workers
OIC	Organisation of Islamic Cooperation
ORF	Observer Research Foundation

PAF	Pakistan Air Force
PEMRA	Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority
PIB	Press Information Bureau
PMA	Pakistan Military Academy
POJK	Pakistan-Occupied Jammu and Kashmir
RAW	Research and Analysis Wing
SEATO	Southeast Asia Treaty Organization
TRF	The Resistance Front
U.N. / UN	United Nations
US	United States
VOA	Voice of America

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Chapter 1

Prologue

Web of Lies: Pakistan's Propaganda Push During Operation Sindoor

Some truths do not fade with time; they merely evolve in form. Over two millennia ago, the Chinese military strategist Sun Tzu, in his *The Art of War*, observed that “All warfare is based on deception.” This enduring maxim has acquired renewed relevance in the contemporary era, extending far beyond the confines of conventional battlefields. In the evolving landscape of modern warfare, this ancient wisdom transcends its military context, finding expression within cyberspace and the broader information domain. The character of warfare has undergone a significant evolution, broadening its scope from the traditional domains of land, sea, and air to encompass the cognitive domain and informational domains, where perceptions are carefully moulded, narratives are contested, and the very fabrication of reality itself emerges as a battleground for strategic rivalry. In such a milieu, truth is no longer an objective constant but rather a contested construct which is shaped and reshaped by competing actors.

The locus of power no longer resides solely in military forces or arsenals. Its contours have evolved and increasingly lie in the ability of states to control information, to shape and manipulate narratives, to cloud judgment through information fog, and to exert influence without necessarily going to war. In this reconfigured paradigm, power is exercised not merely through coercion but through persuasion, misrepresentation, and strategic ambiguity. In this intricately interconnected world, cyberspace has evolved from a mere backdrop to conflict into a central theatre in which both state and non-state actors engage in continuous competition to dominate informational narratives. It has thus emerged as a pivotal arena of twenty-first-century warfare, where the velocity of information often outpaces the verification of truth, and perception frequently precedes reality.

The Case of Pakistan

It was within this shifting strategic landscape in which kinetic means alone no longer define warfare that India launched its ‘Operation Sindoor’ on 7 May 2025, over two weeks, after a religiously motivated heinous terrorist attack in Jammu and Kashmir’s Pahalgam killed 26 people, all Hindu tourists barring a local guide. The India-Pakistan military engagement was not confined to the mere application of physical force; rather, it constituted a struggle over images, language, and perception in the digital domain. According to the American Psychological Association (APA), the distinction between misinformation and disinformation is often tenuous, and in critical moments, that distinction can become a powerful weapon. While misinformation can lead one astray, disinformation intentionally seeks to do precisely that; together, they create an epistemic

fog that obscures accountability and distorts public understanding. Consequently, the battle was waged as fiercely within the cognitive domain of human perception as on the physical battlefield, rendering victory contingent not only on territorial or tactical gains but also on the ability to shape belief, interpretation, and memory.

The reliance of Pakistan on militancy as an instrument of statecraft did not emerge abruptly, nor was it merely a tactical reaction to any singular conflict. Rather, it has gradually evolved into a central pillar of national security strategy since the very inception of the state in 1947. This trajectory reflects not an episodic deviation but a patterned strategic choice embedded within Pakistan's security imagination. Various scholars have articulated Pakistan's approach in their own lexicon; for instance, Timothy D. Hoyt (2001) has characterised this methodology as "strategic myopia",¹ while others contend that it exemplifies a deliberate and sustained form of asymmetric warfare. Taken together, these interpretations underscore a persistent preference for indirect confrontation, wherein non-state actors are leveraged to offset conventional asymmetries.

Over the course of successive decades, reliance on proxy groups evolved from ad hoc tribal militias into institutionalised and hierarchically structured terrorist organisations, becoming a central feature of Pakistan's strategic calculus. This transformation was neither accidental nor purely reactive; it was facilitated by state patronage, organisational learning, and the gradual professionalisation of irregular warfare. Yet, this approach has engendered inherent contradictions. As Pakistani American historian Ayesha Jalal notes, "the most striking fact about Pakistan is how it failed to satisfy the interests of the very Muslims who are supposed to have demanded its creation"². Likewise, Lawrence Ziring observes that in the aftermath of the Bangladesh conflict, Kashmir morphed into "a fetish of national identity," with Pakistan's *raison d'être* increasingly "intertwined with the jihad to liberate it"³. Such formulations reveal how strategic choices become deeply entangled with questions of identity, legitimacy, and state purpose. These insights are corroborated by a broader scholarly discourse,⁴ which collectively accentuates how militancy, once embraced as a strategic instrument, evolved into a defining, albeit ultimately destabilising, characteristic of Pakistan's security doctrine. In this sense, strategy and ideology became mutually reinforcing, locking the state into a cycle that proved difficult to recalibrate.

The enduring characteristics of Pakistan's strategic doctrine are manifest in a cyclical pattern of confrontations that have repeatedly obstructed the establishment of stable, cooperative relations with India since 1947. The bilateral relationship has been repeatedly shaped and reshaped by a succession of conflicts, crises, and persistent low-intensity covert operations, mostly in Jammu and Kashmir, a part of which Pakistan has illegally occupied in clear disregard of international law. What emerges, therefore, is not a linear history of conflict but a recursive pattern in which each episode reinforces entrenched threat perceptions and strategic postures.

The first conflict of 1947–48 featured the incursion of Pakistan-supported tribal militias into Jammu and Kashmir, which was ultimately repelled as Indian forces successfully secured Srinagar and consolidated control over the Valley. This episode established an early precedent for the use of irregular forces as instruments of state policy. In the subsequent conflict of 1965, India occupied a strategically advantageous position by executing extensive military operations across the Punjab plains and Himalayan sectors, effectively counteracting Pakistan's offensives. The war demonstrated both the limits of

covert escalation and the risks of miscalculation inherent in proxy-led strategies. The conflict of 1971 represented a pivotal juncture, culminating in a rapid and coordinated tri-service campaign that resulted in the establishment of Bangladesh, thereby underscoring India's conventional military pre-eminence. It also marked a profound psychological and political rupture within Pakistan, reshaping its strategic outlook in the decades that followed.

In 1984, India's pre-emptive occupation of strategic elevations in the Siachen Glacier guaranteed dominance over this critical high-altitude region and decisively thwarted Pakistan's attempts at incremental territorial encroachment. The episode illustrated the growing salience of geography and pre-emption in high-altitude warfare. This trend was further exemplified during the Kargil conflict of 1999, wherein Pakistan's deliberate incursions across the Line of Control were met with a resolute Indian response, effectively repelling intruders through sustained high-altitude operations and restoring the integrity of the Line of Control. Kargil, in particular, exposed the inherent instability of limited-war doctrines pursued under the nuclear shadow, where tactical adventurism risked strategic escalation.

The military standoff of 2001-02, instigated by brazen terrorist attacks by groups backed by Pakistani agencies, resulted in extensive military mobilisation along the international boundary, bringing the two nuclear-armed states to the brink of open conflict while simultaneously merging a coercive military posture with calibrated diplomatic engagement to normalise the situation. The 2008 Mumbai attacks further demonstrated the escalating challenge of cross-border terrorism, revealing deep-seated vulnerabilities within internal security frameworks. In 2016, subsequent to the Uri attack, India executed surgical strikes against terrorist launch pads across the Line of Control, which signalled a doctrinal shift toward limited yet calibrated cross-border retaliation. This strategic approach was reinforced in 2019, when the Pulwama suicide bombing precipitated Indian air strikes near Balakot, followed by a brief but intense phase of aerial confrontations between the two nations, which marked a rare instance of airpower deployment under a nuclear overhang.

With these conventional and sub-conventional confrontations, Pakistan's strategy has increasingly depended on deniable and covert proxy warfare strategies. Before 1989, such operations in Jammu and Kashmir exhibited relatively limited covert elements; however, this initial reliance established the structural and ideological groundwork for the subsequent evolution of proxy warfare. Over time, these tactics have expanded in both scale and sophistication, fusing kinetic actions with psychological operations through information dissemination and narrative framing strategies, often depicting and disguising such activities as indigenous resistance movements. This dual strategy of violence on the ground and persuasion in the information domain has enabled a degree of strategic ambiguity that complicates attribution and response. By 2025, the initiation of 'Operation Sindoor' signifies the latest phase in this trajectory, reflecting both continuity and adaptation within a prolonged and contested strategic rivalry. It represents not merely an isolated episode but the culmination of an evolving doctrine that integrates military action with informational contestation.

Over almost last two and half decades, a salient pattern has been discernible—one defined by recurring confrontations, strategic adaptations, and escalations meticulously calibrated

to remain below the threshold of a full-scale war under the nuclear overhang. The essence of warfare itself has undergone a profound transformation, shifting from predominantly conventional confrontations to complex hybrid conflicts. This dynamic has seen proxy forces, information operations, and the manipulation of perception assume greater significance, comparable with, and at times exceeding, that of conventional military capabilities. Such a transformation demands a more sophisticated, nuanced analytical framework that moves beyond traditional military metrics to incorporate the cognitive, informational, and psychological dimensions of conflict.

Sumit Ganguly argues in *Deadly Impasse: Indo-Pakistani Relations at the Dawn of a New Century* (2016)⁵ that the protracted India–Pakistan conflict is best understood not through the prism of the security dilemma, but through a deterrence model shaped by fundamentally asymmetric motivations. He dismisses the assertion that Pakistan's conduct is motivated by legitimate security concerns, arguing instead that it epitomises a form of revisionist or “greedy” state behaviour, anchored in its enduring irredentist claim over Jammu and Kashmir. In this formulation, Pakistan emerges as a state driven less by defensive anxieties and more by an expansionist strategic imagination that resists accommodation within the status quo. In juxtaposition, India is depicted as a status quo power, largely eschewing aspirations of territorial revisionism and instead seeking to preserve existing boundaries. This fundamental divergence elucidates the reasons behind the repeated failures of rapprochement, signalling, and diplomatic initiatives, as these strategies are inherently predicated on assumptions of mutual security rather than unilateral revisionism or what can be called asymmetrical intent. Consequently, Ganguly identifies the crux of the impasse in Pakistan's non-unitary, fragmented state structure, with particular emphasis on the dominance of its military establishment, which systematically constrains or overrides any civilian-led initiative for normalisation, thereby perpetuating a cycle of strategic stagnation (status quo) and intermittent crisis.

As Carl von Clausewitz had observed, war is the realm of uncertainty, enveloped in a “fog” that obscures clarity of action and intent. In the contemporary milieu, however, this fog is no longer merely an incidental by-product of conflict phenomenon, which is increasingly engineered, amplified, and weaponised. State and non-state actors actively manufacture ambiguity by systematically deploying misinformation and disinformation that transforms such uncertainty into a deliberate instrument of strategy rather than an unavoidable condition of war.

The terrorist attack in Pahalgam on 22 April 2025, which resulted in the death of 26 innocent civilian tourists, marked a significant escalation in the trajectory of cross-border terrorism in Jammu and Kashmir. The deliberate targeting of civilians, based on their religion, at a prominent tourist destination highlighted both the symbolic and psychological dimensions of the attack, aimed at instilling fear and undermining normalcy in the region. The attack was initially claimed by The Resistance Front (TRF), which the security analysts widely believe is linked to the Pakistan-based Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT), thereby reinforcing longstanding concerns regarding the use of proxy actors by Pakistan. The massacre triggered widespread domestic outrage in India and reinvigorated intensified scrutiny of Pakistan's purported role in perpetuating terror organisational networks. In reaction, the Indian government underscored the “cross-border linkages” associated with the assault, and indicated an impending and calibrated retaliatory military action. That Pakistan went to the town with its offer of joint investigation flies in the face of its similar

offers in case of many other attacks (Mumbai, Pathankot, Uri etc.) where it used its state machinery and judiciary to make a mockery of the justice system. The Pakistani perpetrators of terrorism in India have enjoyed privileges not granted to even political prisoners even when they have been kept in prison in response to international concerns over state patronage of terror elements inside the country. In one infamous case, a mastermind of Mumbai attacks was even allowed to father a child while in prison!

In the face of blatant state sponsorship of terror in Pahalgam and denial of state involvement in such terror as well as zero state action against an outfit, which claimed the attack and was known to be enjoying long-time support of the intelligence agencies, on 7 May 2025, India launched 'Operation Sindoor', comprising a series of coordinated drone, missile, and aerial strikes aimed at what its localised human and technical intelligence identified as credible terrorist infrastructure situated within Pakistan and Pakistan-Occupied Jammu and Kashmir (POJK). India undertook this as a punitive and pre-emptive operation to eradicate terror networks, impair their operational capacities, and deter prospective attacks. The operation represented a synthesis of technological precision and strategic signalling, which reflected the maturation of India's evolving counter-terror doctrine. The magnitude and ambit of this military campaign surpassed any previous responses undertaken by Indian armed forces within this matrix of keeping kinetic and non-kinetic actions within both nuclear and conventional war thresholds, including the 2016 surgical strikes and the 2019 Balakot airstrike. It also demonstrated an expansion of both the geographical scope and strategic ambition of India's retaliatory framework. At the doctrinal level, the operation conveyed an unambiguous message: India would treat any future acts of terrorism originating from Pakistani territory as "acts of war", with retaliatory measures no longer constrained by the imperatives of immediate international legitimacy or diplomatic restraint.

The operational ramifications of the strikes primarily focused on the degradation of terror infrastructure and those perpetrating terror. According to official Indian assessments, an estimated 100 militants were killed during the operations conducted during the intervening night of 6–7 May, which included several high-value operatives associated with major attacks within India. Notably, Maulana Masood Azhar, the founder of the Jaish-e-Muhammad terrorist group, which was prominently involved in the 2001 Parliament attack, besides the 2019 Pulwama suicide blast, acknowledged the loss of ten family members, including his nephew and brother-in-law, who are believed to have played a role in running his terror franchise. Such an acknowledgement drew attention to the reach and precision of military strikes conducted by India. Furthermore, independent assessments, including satellite imagery, indicated significant damage to various facilities, including the LeT complex at Muridke, long perceived as a pivotal centre for training and ideological indoctrination, and JeM's Bahawalpur headquarters. Several of the targeted locations, such as Sawai Nala, Syedna Bilal, and Barnala, were believed to be directly linked to both past and recent terrorist attacks in India originating from Pakistan, having served as hubs for training, explosives management, and operational preparedness. These strikes, therefore, were not merely tactical actions but formed part of a broader attempt to dismantle the infrastructural ecosystem sustaining militancy as a tool of Pakistan's continuing asymmetric war against India.

At this critical juncture, the conflict extends beyond the physical domain, evolving into an intensified competition over narrative and public perception. The struggle is no longer

confined to territory or firepower; it is equally a contest over meaning, legitimacy, and global opinion. The contemporary nature of this rivalry cannot be comprehensively understood solely through its kinetic dimensions; rather, it inherently extends to and unfolds within a parallel and less visible domain of battlespace, which is the information battlespace. Within this arena, Pakistan has actively sought to shape, distort, and contest narratives through the systematic utilisation of 'misinformation, disinformation, and malformation' (MDM), particularly in the aftermath of the Pahalgam incident. In doing so, it has attempted to obscure attribution, dilute accountability, and reframe the conflict in terms more favourable to its strategic interests, thereby reinforcing the centrality of perception as both a target and a tool of modern warfare.

Pakistan's denial of involvement, coupled with the promotion of alternative narratives, exemplified a comprehensive strategy of ambiguity and plausible deniability aimed at obscuring attribution and mitigating scrutiny. Crucially, these efforts were not aimed at constructing a singularly coherent alternative counter-narrative, but they were designed to cultivate ambiguity by fragmenting consensus and undermining the legitimacy of retaliatory measures. In this discursive environment, the absence of clarity itself becomes strategic, enabling multiple audiences to selectively interpret events in ways that align with pre-existing biases. The narratives, amplified through digital platforms and transnational media networks, therefore played a dual role in shaping domestic discourse while simultaneously influencing international perception and diplomatic positioning.

Pakistan's information warfare strategy exemplifies a highly institutionalised, layered, and adaptable approach to contemporary conflict. The effort, anchored by organisations such as the Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR) and the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), integrates traditional propaganda with digitally synchronised disinformation campaigns. During crises, including the Pahalgam attack and Operation Sindoor, this apparatus rapidly propagated narratives intended to deny involvement, deflect culpability, and recontextualise events through the use of hashtags, bot amplification, and emerging technologies such as AI-generated content, including deepfake videos. The primary objective is not necessarily to forge a credible alternative narrative but to manufacture factory-level epistemic ambiguity in order to fragment and undermine any emergent international consensus around the legitimacy or the reasons driving Indian responses to terrorist attacks. This strategy reflects a broader shift from persuasion to disruption, where the aim is less to convince and more to confuse.

Simultaneously, these campaigns serve a domestic purpose by diverting attention from internal socio-economic issues and reaffirming the central role of the military within Pakistan's political framework. In this sense, information warfare operates as both an external instrument of statecraft and an internal mechanism of regime consolidation. This engenders a structural asymmetry, whereby Pakistan implements information warfare as a proactive, continuous, and doctrine-driven strategy, in contrast to India's response, which remains relatively episodic, reactive and institutionally fragmented. Such asymmetry has significant implications for narrative dominance, as sustained engagement often outweighs reactive communication in shaping long-term perceptions.

As noted in the *Centre for Military History and Perspective Studies (CHPM) Exploratory Note No. 1*, military historian Adrien Fontanellaz highlights that a key lesson from Operation Sindoor was the growing importance of visual evidence in shaping strategic

narratives⁶. In contemporary conflict, visibility has become synonymous with credibility; what can be seen, verified, and disseminated often outweighs what is merely asserted. In stark contrast to the 2019 Balakot strikes, during which the lack of visual documentation undermined India's assertions, allowing competing narratives to proliferate and contest New Delhi's claims, the Indian military in 2025 diligently substantiated its claims with aerial and open-source imagery, thereby significantly augmenting its credibility.

In contrast, Pakistan struggled to substantiate its claims with verifiable visual proof, despite demonstrating significant agility in communication tactics. The Pakistan Air Force (PAF) sought to bolster its narrative through the use of radar data, intercepted communications, and engagement with Western media; however, its failure to furnish corroborative imagery, along with perceived evasiveness regarding damage assessments, ultimately constrained the credibility of its claims within the information domain. This divergence underscores a critical dynamic of modern information warfare: narrative effectiveness is increasingly contingent upon the ability to align claims with verifiable, shareable, and persuasive visual evidence, without which even well-crafted narratives risk erosion in the face of scrutiny.

In this framework, the information domain emerges as a parallel arena of conflict, wherein the mastery of perception is as strategically consequential as, and at times even more decisive than, tangible battlefield outcomes. The conflict thereby demonstrated the structural inadequacies of reactive communication strategies and emphasised the necessity for sustained, proactive, anticipatory and institutionalised approaches to narrative management and strategic communication. As such, in an era defined by instantaneous information flows, the capacity to pre-empt, rather than merely respond, increasingly determines narrative dominance. The strategic use of narrative and deception in modern warfare also finds resonance in classical traditions of statecraft, particularly as articulated in the writings of Kautilya. In his famous treatise *Arthashastra*, Kautilya articulates a dual understanding of warfare, *dharmayuddha* (righteous warfare) and *kutayuddha* (devious warfare), the latter explicitly endorsing espionage, subversion, and psychological manipulation as legitimate instruments of statecraft. This conceptualisation underscores a pragmatic, if unsentimental, view of power, wherein ethical considerations are often subordinated to strategic necessity. This rationale exhibits notable continuity with contemporary practices of information warfare, where shaping perception and deliberate cultivation of ambiguity serve as force multipliers. Thus, what appears novel in technological form is, in essence, rooted in enduring strategic logic.

As scholars of military thought have noted, classical texts such as Sun Tzu's *The Art of War* have frequently been appropriated not as subjects of rigorous analysis, but as tools for rhetorical validation. Just as these texts are selectively interpreted to legitimise preconceived doctrines, contemporary conflicts are increasingly recast through partial truths, selective disclosures, and deliberately constructed narratives. In the instance of the Pahalgam attack, this entailed efforts to obfuscate causality, reassign accountability, and project grievance, thereby illustrating that the contest over meaning is no longer ancillary but has become inextricably linked to the conduct of conflict itself. Narrative, in this sense, does not merely accompany warfare; it constitutes one of its principal theatres.

A pivotal factor contributing to Pakistan's efficacy within the domain is attributed to the centralised function of institutions like the Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR), which

operates as a cohesive entity orchestrating military, political, and digital communications. Such uniformity facilitates the dissemination of coherent, strategically aligned, and emotionally resonant narratives across diverse audiences, although it accounts for ethnic assertion at the margins because of Pakistan's dysfunctional system of democracy. This divergence reflects a broader tension between dysfunctional democratic systems versus centralised information ecosystems that they generate.

The resolution of this disparity does not necessitate centralised oversight; instead, it calls for targeted, networked and decentralised strategies. India is now compelled to establish a comprehensive information warfare framework that harmonises military, diplomatic, and technological capacities, integrating them into a unified yet flexible architecture of strategic communication. This is being bolstered by real-time data analytics, artificial intelligence-driven monitoring, and anticipatory narrative strategies capable of pre-empting adversarial disinformation campaigns. Concurrently, its intrinsic advantages, such as its diaspora, along with its linguistic and cultural heterogeneity, are being harnessed to create credible, context-sensitive, and locally resonant counter-narratives. In doing so, India is transforming its diversity from a perceived communicative limitation into a strategic asset within the global information battlespace.

The adaptation to technological advancements is of critical and enduring importance. The emergence of artificial intelligence (AI), deepfake technologies, and algorithmic amplification has fundamentally altered the velocity, scale, and credibility of information flows, which demands advanced detection architectures, real-time verification mechanisms, and predictive analytical instruments to combat disinformation before it attains strategic significance. In this rapidly evolving ecosystem, the temporal dimension is decisive: delayed responses often cede the narrative space to adversarial actors irreversibly. Similarly, societal resilience must be strengthened through enhanced media literacy and the proactive engagement of civil society and veteran groups, thereby creating a distributed, participatory defence against informational manipulation.

Thus, the challenge at hand transcends mere defensiveness. India has to shift from a reactive posture to a proactive, anticipatory actor capable of shaping the information environment through clarity of messaging, speed of response, and institutional coherence. This transformation necessitates not only technological investment but also doctrinal innovation and inter-agency coordination, ensuring that strategic communication is treated as an integral component of national security rather than an auxiliary function.

The trajectory of this conflict indicates that forthcoming confrontations will increasingly manifest across interlinked, mutually reinforcing kinetic and cognitive arenas, where perception and legitimacy may prove as critical as battlefield outcomes. In such a paradigm, victories are not measured solely by territorial gains or tactical successes, but by the ability to construct enduring narratives that command both domestic confidence and international acceptance. Sole reliance on military preparedness will no longer be adequate; effective deterrence will equally hinge upon the capacity to shape narratives in real time, thereby influencing how actions are interpreted, contested, and remembered.

As the subsequent chapters will elucidate, the evolution of warfare in the twenty-first century pertains as much to the influence on minds as it does to the control of territory. The battles of the future will be fought simultaneously in physical spaces and within the

cognitive landscapes of societies, where information, belief, and perception intersect. In the conflicts of the future, triumph will not solely belong to those who possess land, but rather to those who exercise sustained command over perception, narrative, and meaning itself.

Chapter 2

Introduction

The Pahalgam Attack: Anatomy of An Act of War

“Hatred of the other is not born - it is taught, and it is funded” — Elie Wiesel

“Hatred is the cowards' revenge for being intimidated.” — George Bernard Shaw

It was a typical Kashmir springtime, with pleasant weather and the smell of intermittent rains watering the length and breadth of the Valley, making it green once again after shedding the stillness of winter. It was also a time when its schools usually settled into the academic calendar, farmers started preparing for the upcoming Kharif season, and, yes, tourist arrivals started picking up. And it was during this time that, on the afternoon of 22 April 2025, at roughly 14.45 hrs, nearly half a dozen armed men emerged from the pine forests surrounding Baisaran Meadow, up in the mountains of Pahalgam in Jammu and Kashmir. They advanced with calculated precision, deliberately and methodically, equipped with helmet-mounted cameras strapped to their heads that aimed to transform their impending acts of violence into a recorded spectacle, and began sorting human beings by religion before executing them. They asked grown men to recite Islamic verses. They checked for circumcision. They shot fathers in front of their daughters. They killed husbands in front of wives and, in at least one documented instance, told a widow to carry a message directly to India's Prime Minister. The violence was not merely physical; it was performative, designed to terrorise, humiliate, and communicate. Twenty-six people died that afternoon, of whom twenty-five were Hindu males. The French Foreign Ministry later described the terror attack as “the deadliest civilian attack in India since the 2008 Mumbai attacks,”⁷ thereby situating it within a grim continuum of mass-casualty terrorism directed at civilians.

This was not any spontaneous act of terror. It was rather a meticulously orchestrated operation which had been planned for weeks and months; guided by handlers in both Pakistan-occupied Jammu and Kashmir and Pakistani Punjab, executed by a team that included at least two former Pakistani soldiers, and set in motion by inflammatory ideological rhetoric that emanated from the top echelons of Pakistan's military leadership in the days preceding the attack. The convergence of planning, training, and ideological signalling suggests a layered architecture of intent rather than an isolated incident of violence.

In order to understand the extent of brutality and the way it was unleashed by terrorists on that day at Pahalgam, one has to sift through the fog of disinformation that Pakistan unleashed in its aftermath and following India's Operation Sindoor. To achieve that, one has to begin at the very source: the blood spilt on Indian soil, and the chain of networks that directed and facilitated the tragedy, and from which its narrative construction began. Only by tracing this nexus can one fully comprehend the event as well as the strategic logic that underpinned it.

I. The Reconstruction: How the Pahalgam Attack Was Planned and Executed

The Ideological Countdown

That the Pahalgam attack of 22 April 2025 was a one-day one-off incident is far from reality. At the latest, its ideological fuse was ignited on 16 April 2025, when Chief of the Pakistan Army, General Asim Munir—a figure often noted for his deep religious orientation and personal piety—addressed the First Annual Convention of Overseas Pakistanis in Islamabad, where Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif was in attendance. The setting of diaspora engagement itself underlined the transnational audience to whom the message was directed. And what he said was as unambiguous as any messaging could be:

“Our forefathers believed that we were different from Hindus in every possible aspect of life. Our religion is different. Our customs are different. Our traditions are different. Our thoughts are different. Our ambitions are different. That was the foundation of the Two-Nation Theory. It was laid on the belief that we are two nations, not one.

This articulation was not merely a historical reflection; it constituted an explicit reaffirmation of ideological separation, framed in absolutist and civilisational terms.

Asim Munir then turned to Kashmir:

“Our stance is absolutely clear. Kashmir was our jugular vein; it will be our jugular vein. We will not forget it. We will not leave our Kashmiri brothers alone in their struggle.”⁸

In doing so, he exhorted overseas Pakistanis to transmit and entrench these convictions within their children, to ensure that the coming generation would never forget the “stark differences” between Muslims and Hindus. Declaring that “*the foundation of Pakistan was laid upon the Kalima,*” he invoked a religio-political idiom that fused faith with strategic purpose. Such rhetoric went beyond merely reiterating state positions as it sought to socialise identity in ways that legitimised enduring confrontation. His words soon found a chilling and violent echo in Pahalgam, where the soil was painted red with the blood of innocent Hindu tourists. It became a grim manifestation of Pakistan’s extremist dogma, repeatedly sanctioned by the state and deployed by its military establishment, that had moved from rhetoric to action and reflected the convergence of ideology, mobilisation, and violence.

The timing was not lost on Indian intelligence either. It was publicly noted that “Pakistani Army Chief Gen Asim Munir spewed venom against India and Hindus just weeks before what happened in Pahalgam.”⁹ Media reporting, including by *India Today*, indicated that intelligence agencies had initiated inquiries into potential linkages between Munir’s 16 April remarks and the subsequent attack.¹⁰

Though less than a week separated Munir’s speech from the Pahalgam attack, he repeated it merely three days after the attack on 25 April, during the passing-out parade of cadets at the Pakistan Military Academy (PMA) in Kakul:

“The two-nation theory was based on the fundamental belief that Muslims and Hindus are two separate nations, not one. Muslims are distinct from Hindus in all aspects of life including religion, customs, traditions, thinking and aspirations.”¹¹

The repetition of this narrative, particularly in a military training environment, highlighted its institutional reinforcement and the embedding of ideological constructs within the officer corps from the very outset. The Spanish Ministry of Defence, in a rare analytical document on what it termed “The Munir Model,” assessed that Pakistan Army chief’s rhetoric was “often forceful, religiously charged and quite aggressive,” which represented a broader consolidation of military-ideological control over Pakistan’s strategic direction.¹² Such assessments only suggested that the rhetoric was not incidental but reflected a deeper doctrinal orientation, in which identity, religion, and security were being tightly interwoven.

The Operational Architecture

Like the attack not being an unscripted incident, its location, up in the inaccessible Baisaran Meadow of Pahalgam, was not arbitrary either. According to the findings released by India’s anti-terror agency, National Investigation Agency (NIA), a group of terrorists arrived in the Pahalgam region as early as 15 April 2025 and systematically surveyed four potential target sites, including Baisaran Valley, Aru Valley, Betaab Valley, and a local amusement park.¹³ This level of methodical reconnaissance demonstrates a level of premeditation that transcends any kind of opportunistic violence. It instead points to a structured operational planning by the terrorist planners who ultimately zeroed in on Baisaran valley to unleash their brutality. The meadow offers tactical advantages of its own, including its nearly 6.5 kilometres from the main Pahalgam town and accessibility only by foot or pony along a challenging trail characterised by streams, muddy paths, and dense forest.¹⁴ This inaccessible topography would ensure that a state security response and reinforcements would be delayed, thereby prolonging the operational window for terrorists by at least an hour.

According to the eyewitness accounts, the assault team consisted of five to six terrorists¹⁵ wearing a mix of military uniforms and local attire, including the traditional *pheran*, which allowed them to both conceal weapons and blend as locals¹⁶. Beyond carrying their military gear consisting of M4 Carbines and AK-47 assault rifles along with advanced communications devices, the terrorists, as the eyewitnesses recalled, wore helmets mounted with cameras, which indicated the prior preparation to film the horror that they intended to unleash for propaganda purposes.¹⁷ This kind of technological integration reflected the convergence of kinetic violence with psychological and informational warfare, wherein the act of violence was simultaneously staged as a message, driven by ideological motivation and performative brutality.

The attack that broke the silence of the mountains, known for quietly embracing people seeking to run away from the mundanity of their everyday lives, lasted almost ten minutes. The terrorists deployed a strategy of multi-point targeting in three key areas of the meadow in quick succession to create confusion among the civilians and ensure a high casualty count. The videos of the incident that subsequently emerged showed people confused and running for their lives. Eyewitness accounts recounted that many of the victims who had managed to survive the initial terrorist onslaught lost their battles due to blood loss before help could arrive. This lethal interplay between violence and the topographical characteristics of the meadow reinforced why the terror planners chose Baisaran for this bloodbath that day, as the rough terrain slowed rescue efforts. It was not for any symbolism, but for the relative isolation of the place, which offered tactical advantages for unleashing violence and retreating to the woods before security forces arrive.

Two key points emerge from this analysis. Firstly, terrorists weaponised the topography of Baisaran to inflict maximum damage before any meaningful intervention could take place.

Secondly, the confluence of reconnaissance, terrain exploitation, tactical execution, and media documentation revealed a level of operational sophistication that situates the Pahalgam attack within the broader evolution of hybrid warfare, where physical violence and narrative construction are inextricably intertwined.

The Operational Cell

The investigation swiftly narrowed down to four key suspects, among whom a Pakistani national, Hashim Musa, also known as Suleman, was identified as the tactical mastermind of the terrorist attack. Interrogations of fifteen over-ground workers (OGWs) revealed that Musa, a former para-commando with Pakistan's Special Service Group¹⁸, had been "loaned" to Lashkar-e-Taiba to reinforce¹⁹ its Kashmir operations. This revelation is particularly significant, as it points toward a systematic nexus between state-trained Pakistan military personnel and non-state terrorist actors. A senior intelligence official, quoted by the *Economic Times*, confirmed that Musa's verified military background strongly indicated institutional linkages and, by extension, suggested the involvement of the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) in facilitating the Pahalgam assault.²⁰ This kind of alliance between the military and terrorists highlighted how Pakistan establishment blurred boundaries between state and proxy actors by continuing its 1980s policy of terrorism as a state policy.

Security agencies tracking the movement of terrorists in the region revealed that Musa had infiltrated into Kashmir from Pakistan-occupied Jammu and Kashmir sometime in September 2023. Before his role flagged in the Pahalgam investigation, he was already linked to at least three previous terrorist attacks against non-locals, including the Gagangir terrorist attack of 10 October 2024 in Ganderbal district, where six migrant labourers and a doctor, working on a road project, were killed²¹. These earlier attacks reveal a pattern of selective targeting on a communal basis to generate fear among non-Muslim and non-local populations while simultaneously demonstrating the operational continuity of terrorist organisations as the efforts of security forces depleted the local terrorist ecosystem.

The investigation revealed another Pakistani national as part of the assault team— Ali Bhai, also known as Talha Bhai²². He had also operated in Kashmir for nearly two years, having infiltrated alongside Musa, with training in high-altitude warfare and forest survival tactics that closely aligned with the geographical and environmental demands of the Pahalgam region. Ali Bhai's presence reflected a high degree of planning by the conspirators, as they minutely matched the operational expertise of the executors to terrain-specific requirements.

But the success of cross-border terrorist operations of such scale often relies as much on the operational tactics of the assault as on the local facilitation networks, which serve as critical nodes in providing logistical support, gathering intelligence, and assisting with local navigation in unfamiliar terrain. In the case of the Pahalgam attack, the investigation revealed that Musaled terror plotters relied on a critically indispensable local support from Adil Hussain Thoker, a local affiliate of The Resistance Front (TRF) from Guri village in Anantnag.

Yet, above this on-the-ground pyramid stood Sheikh Sajjad Gul, the fifty-year-old chief of TRF, reportedly operating from Rawalpindi under the protection of Lashkar-e-Toiba²³. A designated terrorist since 2022 with a ten-lakh bounty, Gul has been implicated in orchestrating multiple targeted killings and is believed to have coordinated and routed the Pahalgam assault through his established communications network²⁴. His role reflects a hierarchical command structure in

which strategic direction, operational planning, and field execution are distributed and yet interconnected.

As such, when these facts and factors are analysed together, the composition of this Pahalgam terror attack operational cell reveals a multilayered setup which integrated foreign-trained militants, local facilitators, and a transnational command structure. It demonstrated how the nature of contemporary terrorist networks was gradually hybridising.

II. Religious Profiling as Ideological Manifesto

A Three-Point Faith Test

Jammu and Kashmir has witnessed terrorist violence since the onset of proxy armed insurgency instigated by state and non-state actors from across the Line of Control (LoC) in the late 1980s. As the counterinsurgency grid of the state strengthened gradually, the terrorist activities were qualitatively brought down by security forces through sustained anti-terror campaigns. Yet, there have been dozens of violent attacks conducted by terrorist groups in Kashmir and rest of India, including in 1996 (Lajpat Nagar, Delhi), 2000 (Red Fort attack by LeT), 2001 (J&K Legislative Assembly attack followed by Parliament attack), 2002 (Raghunath Temple, Jammu), 2003 (Nandimarg massacre) 2005 (Delhi bombings), 2006 (Ahmedabad) 2007 (Rampur, Uttar Pradesh), 2008 (Mumbai attacks), 2015 (Pathankot), 2016 (Uri), and 2019 (Pulwama), among others, wherein hundreds of lives have been lost over the last three and a half decades.

But what set the Pahalgam attack apart from any previous mass-casualty attacks²⁵ in the region was the brazen and yet systematic, calculated, and religious profiling of the victims before their execution by the terrorists. While earlier attacks primarily sought to maximise casualties to make a statement, this assault embedded a doctrinal logic into the very act of killing, which transformed violence into a performative assertion of ideological identity. Survivors and eyewitnesses recounted that the terrorists deployed a kind of three-stage process of selection rooted explicitly in religious markers to determine who would live and die.

In the first stage, the attackers demanded that victims recite *Kalima Shahada*, the Islamic declaration of faith: *La ilaha illallah, Muhammadur rasulullah* (There is no god but Allah, and Muhammad is His messenger)²⁶. Those who could recite it fluently were spared, while those who could not were killed. This initial test functioned not merely as a linguistic exercise but as a symbolic filter, reducing identity to immediate performative compliance. The experience of Debasish Bhattacharyya, Associate Professor of Bengali at Assam University, offers direct testimony of this process²⁷. A Hindu by faith, Bhattacharyya was hiding beneath a tree with his family when a masked gunman approached and shot the person beside him. Hearing others recite the *Kalima*, he instinctively joined in. "He looked straight at me and asked, 'Kya kar rahe ho?' I recited the Kalima even louder. I don't know what made me do it. For some reason, he turned away and walked off," Bhattacharyya later told NDTV. Though his reflexive imitation of Muslim prayer spared his life, this kind of survival, which became contingent upon an improvised act of ersatz, revealed the chilling arbitrariness embedded within a seemingly rigid ideological framework, where life and death hinged upon momentary performance rather than enduring identity.

In the second stage, the attackers demanded identification documents such as Aadhaar cards or driving licences, which in the Indian context often function as proxies for religious and regional identity²⁸. "They asked my father to come forward and accused us of supporting Prime Minister

Modi," testified Asavari Jagdale, 26, whose father, Santosh Jagdale, a Pune businessman, was dragged from a tent by the gunmen²⁹, despite his attempt to comply. He was ordered to recite the Kalima. When he could not, the assailants shot him three times. It illustrates how the terrorists fused religious profiling with political signalling by not only identifying victims through faith but also implicitly associating them with the Indian state and the political leadership of the country.

The third stage was the most disturbing. Forensic examinations of the victims' bodies revealed that the lower garments of approximately twenty male victims had been forcibly displaced, exposing their private parts. Investigators confirmed that the attackers had subjected male tourists to circumcision checks as a final form of religious verification³⁰, killing those who were not circumcised. This act represents an extreme form of corporeal scrutiny, in which the human body itself becomes the final site of ideological authentication. A subsequent report by the Pacific Forum also highlighted how the perpetrators were Islamist extremists determined to segregate their victims based on whether an individual could recite Islamic verses, executing those who failed the test at point-blank range. As such, these three-tiered tests of choosing victims based on verbal recitation, documentary verification, and physical confirmation constituted a chillingly systematic process of theological sorting, which transformed identity into a fatal criterion and violence into an instrument of ideological purification.

The Ideological Genealogy

The three-stage identification protocol, comprising *Kalima* recitation, identity documentation, and circumcision examination, was not an improvised tactic by local militants. It reflected a structured, doctrinally informed, and historically embedded theological and ideological framework, one that draws upon long-standing currents of communal antagonism and exclusionary identity formation. Reactivated in the contemporary moment, this framework was operationalised as a battlefield sorting mechanism and disseminated through militant networks and facilitated by transnational organisational linkages rooted in Pakistani terrorist infrastructure into the valleys of Jammu and Kashmir.

Suhag Shukla, the Executive Director of the *Hindu American Foundation*, offered one of the most analytically rigorous responses to the incident, describing the process with precision and nuance³¹. She stated that the tactic of a kind of three-tier test by terrorists to identify and execute Hindu victims while sparing women and children was to ensure the psychological and symbolic message of violence would be transmitted beyond the immediate site of the attack. It, she argues, was meant to transform survivors into inadvertent carriers of messages of terror from the mountains of Pahalgam to mainland India. Shukla further observed that the intent was unmistakable and historically continuous: to target, kill, and terrorise Hindus in pursuit of a clearly articulated ideological objective grounded in exclusion and religious absolutism.

The ideological connection to General Asim Munir's speech of 16 April had a direct and inescapable imprint on what transpired in the mountains of Pahalgam a week later, on 22 April. In that address, Munir invoked the *Kalima* as the founding principle of Pakistan, declaring that "the basis of Pakistan was laid on the *Kalima*." Days later, terrorists affiliated with the Pakistan-based LeT group, which has a history of state patronisation in that country, invoked the same declaration as a tool of execution, killing those unable to recite it. This convergence between rhetoric and violence illustrates the translation of abstract ideological assertion into concrete operational practice.

The continuity between Rawalpindi's military leadership proclaiming the Kalima as the essence of national identity and the assailants at Baisaran Meadow employing it as a determinant of life and death is neither incidental nor coincidental; rather, it reflects a patterned alignment between discourse and action. In this alignment lies the deeper significance of the attack: it represents not merely the execution of violence, but the enactment of an ideological script. It embodies the operational manifestation of the worldview articulated at the highest levels of Pakistan's military establishment—one that posits Muslims and Hindus are irreconcilably distinct civilisational entities, and that Kashmir is intrinsic to Pakistan's Islamic identity. In this context, the Pahalgam attack was not merely an act of terrorism but a deliberate ideological demonstration of inscribing belief onto bodies and territory through violence.

III. “Go Tell This to Modi”: The Deliberate Political Messaging

The Widow as Messenger

Among the survivors of the Pahalgam Attack, none carries the psychological brutality of the attack as starkly as that of Pallavi Rao, a resident of Shivamogga, Karnataka³². She arrived in Kashmir on 19 April with her husband, Manjunath Rao, and teenage son, Abhijay. When the sudden gunfire broke the silence of Baisaran Meadows, Manjunath, who had long cherished a wish of visiting Kashmir, was shot dead before their eyes. In the immediate aftermath of this unfolding trauma and tragedy, Pallavi reportedly begged the terrorists to kill her as well. Instead, as she recounted later, the gunman replied with chilling deliberation: *“I won't kill you. Go back and tell Modi.”* Her son, too, begged to be killed, but was spared³³.

Pallavi was not the only survivor recounting how the terrorists explicitly took the name of Prime Minister Modi while executing victims. It included Pune's Santosh Jagdale, as highlighted above, who was accused of supporting Modi before being executed for failing the Kalima test. Such repeated invocations were neither incidental nor rhetorical excess and constituted a deliberate embedding of political messaging within the act of violence itself. The pattern made it clear that the attack was not any random terrorist attack that rattled Kashmir earlier, but it was a calibrated communicative act which was intended to directly challenge the authority and legitimacy of the Indian state in the region.

The Symbolism and Its Precedent

The decision to spare Pallavi as a widow and her son Abhijay as an orphan as messengers of grief was far beyond psychological intimidation and carried symbolism. It aimed at transforming individual suffering into a channel of political transmission by converting trauma into testimony and violence into narrative. This type of tactic belongs to a familiar class of political theatre historically associated with Pakistan-backed terrorism against India.

Remember when Jaish-e-Muhammad (JeM) terrorists targeted the Indian Parliament in December 2001. It was not any simple act of terrorism but an unmistakable assault on the sovereignty and institutional authority of the Indian state by striking at the very nucleus of Indian democracy³⁴. Likewise, the 2008 attack in Mumbai, India's financial capital, by Lashkar-e-Toiba terrorists also sought to deliver a multilayered message by simultaneously targeting multiple sites in a coordinated manner, including the Taj Mahal Palace, Oberoi Trident Hotel, CST Railway Station, Leopold Café, Cama Hospital, Nariman House (Chabad House), and Metro Cinema & St. Xavier's. Among the 166 people killed by terrorists were nationals from as many as 22 countries, besides a Jewish religious site at Nariman House.

Testimony from Pakistani American LeT affiliate David Coleman Headley, born as Dawood Sayed Gilani, who was arrested in 2009 in Chicago, and has been sentenced to 35 years in prison, in US court proceedings, confirmed that the ISI had guided the target selection. The lone terrorist, Ajmal Kasab, who was captured alive, also revealed that instructions were issued in real time from Karachi³⁵. The attackers carried Hindu identities and symbols, intended to support Pakistan's subsequent narrative of "Hindu terror". This deliberate fusion of violence with disinformation established a template that reappears, in modified form, in later attacks, including the Pahalgam attack.

The message directed at Prime Minister Modi served several interlocking strategic purposes. First, it transformed the attack into a targeted act of political communication rather than random violence, signalling an ongoing confrontation between a Pakistan-backed entity and the Indian State. Second, it amplified psychological impact by ensuring that the nation's leader would become an intended recipient of grief, mediated through the testimony of a bereaved widow, a story designed to resonate across public consciousness and intensify collective anger. Third, it sought to recast the conflict as a reaction to perceived Hindu majoritarianism in order to obscure its underlying character as a state-sponsored sectarian act of brutal violence. In this sense, the attack operated simultaneously on physical, emotional, and narrative registers.

The naming of 'Operation Sindoor' revealed how this message was both confronted and symbolically reversed. The Indian administration's prudent decision to invoke *sindoor*, the sacred vermilion worn by married Hindu women, was not merely a cultural reference but a deliberate act of a symbolic reclamation. It stood as a gesture of tribute to those whose husbands had been murdered at Pahalgam and showed defiance to the objectives of the merchants of terrorism by reasserting agency in the narrative domain. Through this act of naming, the state sought to transform victimhood into resolve and grief into a marker of collective identity and response.

IV. Forensic and Eyewitness Evidence: The Fingerprint of Pakistan

The NIA's Preliminary Findings

Within five days of taking charge of the investigation on 27 April, 2025, the National Investigation Agency (NIA) produced a preliminary report that laid bare the cross-border linkages of the attack³⁶. The findings rested on three intertwined pillars of evidence, each reinforcing the conclusion that external direction, coordination, and facilitation were integral to the attack.

The first pillar was the institutional nexus that linked the Pakistan Army, its intelligence agency ISI, and Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT). Through intercept analysis and interrogation, the NIA established that the conspiracy was conceptualised, developed, and formalised by LeT at its *Markaze Taiba* headquarters at Muridke in Pakistan's Punjab Province under directives issued by senior ISI operatives³⁷. This synergy indicated a level of organisational coherence inconsistent with the notion of autonomous militant activity. Moreover, interrogations of detained overground workers (OGWs) of terrorist groups in Kashmir revealed that the Pakistani attackers maintained constant communication with handlers across the border, receiving precise instructions about timing, logistics, and execution³⁸. Such real-time coordination underscores a command-and-control structure that extends beyond the immediate theatre of operations.

The second finding was the most incriminating and structurally significant. The NIA uncovered Hashim Musa's previous association with the Pakistan Army, which establishes a direct link

between the Pakistani state and the horror that was unleashed at Pahalgam³⁹. It revealed that Musa was not some random Lashkar operative sent across the LoC by his handlers; rather, he had served as a para-commando in the Special Service Group of the Pakistan Army – an elite unit which specialises in unconventional warfare, reconnaissance, and direct-action missions. Indian officials assessed that he had been “loaned” to Lashkar to strengthen its operational capability in Kashmir at a time when the graph of terrorism was drastically going down due to sustained counterterrorism efforts by the Indian security forces. As such, this did not make it any tenuous or circumstantial link; rather, it placed a formally trained soldier of the Pakistan Army at the operational core of a terrorist attack on civilians in a remote corner of Indian soil, where people usually escape to unwind from their everyday mundane life. Its implications were profound, as the boundary between state and non-state actors was not merely blurred but operationally integrated.

The third finding of NIA revealed the digital forensics trail that provided independent, technologically verifiable corroboration of cross-border coordination before, during and after the attack. While the intelligence intercepts confirmed live communication between the attackers and operatives in Pakistan, the technical surveillance traced digital footprints to safe houses in Muzaffarabad, Pakistan-Occupied Jammu and Kashmir (POJK), and Karachi, Pakistan. A banned Huawei satellite phone, which has been flagged as a preferred mode of communication used by terrorists in Kashmir, was detected as active in the Pahalgam region at the time of the attack⁴⁰. These discoveries collectively established a technologically mediated network of coordination that transcends geographical boundaries and consequently exposes the role of handlers operating from across the LoC.

The NIA also carried out a detailed three-dimensional reconstruction of the attack site, during which it recovered over forty cartridges for ballistic and chemical analysis, extracted mobile-tower dump data from across the Valley, and reviewed CCTV footage from key transit points to map the movement of attackers in the days before the attack happened. This multilayered forensic reconstruction reflected the increasing sophistication of counterterrorism investigations, in which physical, digital, and spatial evidence converge to produce a comprehensive account of events and, by exposing the whole trail of events, constitute irrefutable evidence.

On 15 December 2025, NIA officially released a report announcing the filing of a chargesheet in connection with the Pahalgam terror attack⁴¹. The agency charge-sheeted seven accused, including the Pakistan-based proscribed terrorist organisation Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) / The Resistance Front (TRF), which marked a significant step to charge the group as a legal entity for planning, facilitating, and executing the attack. The 1,597-page chargesheet was filed before a Special NIA Court at Jammu, naming Pakistani handler Sajid Jatt as a key accused, along with three Pakistani terrorists, including Faisal Jatt, Yasir Jibrán, and Hamza Afghani, as co-accused⁴². Indian security forces killed the three terrorists during Operation Mahadev in the Dachigam forest range of the capital Srinagar in July 2025.

The Over-Ground Worker (OGW) Network

A quieter but equally critical dimension of the attack was the local facilitator network, part of the local terrorist ecosystem. These facilitators, who live normally as part of the social setup, function as the primary logistics link, called Over-Ground Workers (OGWs). It is the role of these OGWs which becomes critical to the success of any such terrorist attack by facilitating the movement of terrorists, initial reconnaissance, and surveillance. The role of Lashkar/TRF

OGWs was confirmed by the NIA chargesheet as the “biggest” enabler of the Pahalgam attack, even as investigators mapped an extensive network of their contacts across Jammu and Kashmir.

According to NIA, at least 14 OGWs were involved in coordinating the logistics associated with the attack, which included providing accommodation to the Pakistani terrorists’ attack team, undertaking initial reconnaissance of the Baisaran Meadow and its surrounding area, facilitating the discreet movement of weapons, and eventually guiding the terrorist team through the tough topographical terrain of the Pahalgam region. The extensive and nuanced involvement of locals in the attack highlights how such an embedded support system was crucial to establishing a vital link between the plan conceived across the border and its implementation in the inaccessible mountains of Kashmir. Two residents, Nisar Ahmed and Mushtaq Ahmad, who had previously been arrested for aiding terrorist attacks in 2023, were again identified as persons of interest.

Investigators also reported that several Lashkar camps in Pakistan-occupied Jammu and Kashmir had been quietly relocated days before the attack. This kind of development strongly suggests the foreknowledge among handlers in Pakistan and a calculated effort to pre-empt retaliatory targeting by India in the aftermath of such a horror. Such anticipatory movement further reinforces the argument of coordinated planning at higher organisational levels.

The TRF’s Claim, Denial, and What It Reveals

Born in the aftermath of abrogation of Article 370 in October 2019 vide a constitutional amendment, *The Resistance Front (TRF)* officially projected itself as a secular, indigenous Kashmiri resistance movement. However, the group was in reality a carefully engineered rebrand and a front organisation for Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT), Pakistan’s most formidable jihadist proxy, which received intense international scrutiny after the country was grey-listed by Paris-based Financial Action Task Force (FATF) in 2018.⁴³ Lashkar’s rechristening was carried out with surgical precision to provide Islamabad and the Pakistan Army with plausible deniability at a moment of acute international pressure from FATF. As such, the TRF retained LeT’s leadership, cadre, and operational doctrine under a neutral façade, enabling it to continue proxy operations without direct attribution to Lashkar and, by extension, implicating Pakistan.⁴⁴

It is this strategy of continued proxy terrorism under a rechristened old doctrine which showed its head in Pahalgam on 22 April 2025. Investigations linked the attack to LeT commanders, with Pakistani nationals among the perpetrators.⁴⁵ TRF’s brief claim and subsequent retraction of responsibility highlighted its role in creating ambiguity. In July 2025, the United States designated the TRF as a “Foreign Terrorist Organisation”, with Secretary of State Marco Rubio affirming it as a proxy of Lashkar-e-Taiba.⁴⁶

The behaviour of TRF after the attack, though, became a forensic trail of considerable analytical value itself. The group initially claimed responsibility on Telegram, asserting that the strike was directed against “demographic engineering” being conducted by the Indian state to change the religious and ethnic balance of Jammu and Kashmir. But within days, the narrative shifted dramatically.

As protests swept through Kashmir, with shops shuttered, schools closed in solidarity, and residents expressing rare public anger toward Pakistan, TRF abruptly retracted its claim. It attributed its earlier acknowledgement to a “cyber intrusion” allegedly orchestrated by Indian intelligence agencies. Indian security officials saw this retraction as a clear reflection of external

pressure, likely emanating from the Pakistani establishment that was rattled by the scale of both domestic anger in Kashmir and across India, alongside global condemnation.⁴⁷

Take, for instance, how the analysts at the *International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation* at King's College London noted that the reversal of claim by TRF, by itself, was telling. It stated, “*Considering the outrage by Kashmiris and international condemnation, TRF could have been pressured by Pakistan to deny the attack.*”⁴⁸ From an analytical standpoint, though, such behaviour deviates from the established patterns of non-state armed groups, which typically seek to consolidate legitimacy by taking credit for high-profile operations. For any narrative that the TRF portrayed of so-called demographic engineering by the Indian state, no genuine resistance group would have reversed their claims for such an attack and then blame the state for a false flag, particularly after the entire Kashmir rose in outrage against the horror, its perpetrators and their patronisers. The denial was, in effect, an admission of guilt, as in this context it functioned less as a rebuttal and more as an inadvertent acknowledgement of the extent to which narrative control was externally influenced and strategically managed.

V. Domestic and International Reactions: A World United in Condemnation

Domestic Response in India

India's response to the Pahalgam attack was swift, coordinated and politically unified. It marked an unprecedented moment of national solidarity in the post-Article 370 era. Prime Minister Narendra Modi, who had departed on a pre-scheduled official visit to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia hours before the terrorists struck in Pahalgam on 22 April, shortened his trip and returned to India the next day. The prime minister convened an emergency meeting at the airport in the capital, New Delhi, with External Affairs Minister Subrahmanyam Jaishankar, National Security Advisor Ajit Doval, and Foreign Secretary Vikram Misri to take stock of the situation.⁴⁹ Likewise, Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman cut short her official overseas visit to United States and Peru and flew back home⁵⁰, while Defence Minister Rajnath Singh asserted that those behind the attack, both perpetrators and planners, would face a decisive and proportionate response from India⁵¹.

A day after the attack, Prime Minister Narendra Modi convened an emergency meeting of the Cabinet Committee on Security (CCS)⁵², which is the country's highest decision-making body on national security and defence matters. The CCS announced five landmark measures to counter the menace of terrorism and its patrons. These measures have since fundamentally reshaped India–Pakistan ties and included suspending the 1960 Indus Waters Treaty (IWT), closing the Attari check post, expelling Pakistani military attachés from its New Delhi High Commission, cancelling SAARC visa exemptions for Pakistani nationals, and reducing diplomatic staff on both sides to 30 within one week by 1 May. India further indicated its comprehensive diplomatic and strategic disengagement with Pakistan by sealing its land border and revoking existing visas for Pakistani citizens.⁵³

On the domestic political front, the aftermath of the Pahalgam terrorist attack saw India—a country known for its diversity—demonstrate national solidarity and a resolve against Pakistan's state-sponsored terrorism. The all-party meeting convened by the prime minister on 24 April saw political leadership from across the spectrum demonstrate unanimity – a hallmark of Indian democracy, as political actors from the ideological spectrum stand behind the tricolour in times of such national contingencies. Indian National Congress (INC) President Mallikarjun

Kharge, leader of opposition (LOP) in Lok Sabha Rahul Gandhi, Samajwadi Party's Ram Gopal Yadav, and All India Muslim Ittehadul Muslimeen (AIMIM) President Asaduddin Owaisi extended full support for the government to tackle the menace of terrorism once and for all. Rahul Gandhi reaffirmed bipartisan backing for any response, including pursuing them within and beyond the national borders, while Owaisi highlighted Pakistan's repeated violation of the United Nation's resolutions against terror financing. Significantly, the government for the first time acknowledged security lapses, which is an uncommon admission in moments of crisis and yet simultaneously gained unanimous parliamentary endorsement for a decisive military cum diplomatic blitzkrieg against terrorists, their handlers and their patrons.⁵⁴

At the popular level, India saw nationwide protests with people seeking an end to the menace of terrorism in the country. The popular grief saw significant expression in Kashmir itself, where residents, in whose name the TRF terrorists had claimed responsibility, voluntarily shut down shops and educational institutions to condemn the actions of the terrorists and their sponsors from across the border in Pakistan.⁵⁵ It is this spontaneous and massive internal mobilisation which underlined a critical shift in local sentiment within Kashmir, with people expressing both grief over the incident and defiance against terrorist dictates.

The Global Response – United against Terror

The international reaction towards the Pahalgam incident was unprecedented, both in terms of its scope and speed, given the unanimous opinion across the world against such acts of terrorism.

The US government responded instantly, with President Donald Trump stating on his Truth Social page that America will stand by India against the terror threat and pray for the victims⁵⁶. Vice President JD Vance, who was at that time visiting India, expressed his condolences as well, while Secretary of State Marco Rubio described the attack as a heinous act devoid of any justification whatsoever⁵⁷.

The President of Russia, Vladimir Putin, offered his condolences to President Draupadi Murmu and Prime Minister Narendra Modi and called the incident a cruel act of terror while reaffirming Moscow's commitment to cooperate in the fight against terrorism.⁵⁸

In Europe, the President of France Emmanuel Macron described the incident as 'a vile act' and sympathised with the bereaved families of the victims⁵⁹, whereas the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom Keir Starmer called it "appalling" and sympathised with India⁶⁰. The Chancellor of Germany, Olaf Scholz, also denounced the brutal act in no uncertain terms,⁶¹ while Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni offered her condolences and solidarity to India.⁶²

Prime Minister of Israel, Benjamin Netanyahu, termed the attack as "barbaric" and reaffirmed support for India's fight against terrorism⁶³, whereas his Foreign Minister Gideon Sa'ar went further by labelling it an Islamic terrorist attack – a characterisation that most Western governments avoided.⁶⁴

China's Ambassador Xu Feihong issued a restrained statement expressing deep shock and condolences⁶⁵, without referring to Pakistan or cross-border involvement⁶⁶.

At the multilateral level, UN Secretary-General António Guterres condemned the attack and extended sympathy to the families of victims⁶⁷. Likewise, the President of the European Union, Ursula von der Leyen, denounced the attack on India while appreciating its resilience⁶⁸.

However, analysts noted that the EU's response demonstrated strategic caution in the sense that it conveniently overlooked the role of Pakistan's cross-border terror network and hence omitted any reference to the country in their calls for de-escalation – a stance that drew criticism within Indian strategic circles⁶⁹.

Nevertheless, despite Pakistan's disinformation fog to characterise the attack as some kind of internal false flag operation, even the Muslim world saw through this and adopted a notably firm stand in support of India. Countries such as Qatar, Iraq, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) strongly condemned the attack, reaffirming their rejection of terrorism and violence in all forms. The Arab League Mission in New Delhi also issued a statement denouncing the violence, with its Secretary General Ahmed Aboulgheit expressing "solidarity with the "friendly nation" of India as it mourns the loss of lives of innocent civilians"

⁷⁰

India's immediate neighbours, including Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bhutan, Maldives, and Afghanistan, expressed solidarity against cross-border terrorism, with Kathmandu's condemnation highlighting the killing of a Nepali citizen among the victims. Within forty-eight hours, Prime Minister Modi received condolence calls from sixteen foreign leaders, which illustrated the scale of international engagement and concern.

As such, it is evident that the Pahalgam attack of 22 April 2025 was not any spontaneous act of terror or a false flag operation as Pakistan later claimed. It was a deliberate, ideologically driven mass casualty attack enabled through a complex architecture of cross-border facilitation network with patronisation linkages pointing to direct involvement of organs of the Pakistani state; planned in corridors of Rawalpindi, executed by Pakistani nationals through a local network, and inspired by a religious doctrine recently revived by Pakistan's Army leadership under General Asim Munir. Forensic evidence, eyewitness accounts, NIA findings, digital trails, and the killing of the mastermind in Operation Mahadev collectively indicated a pattern of coordination that extends beyond isolated military activities.

It is on this contested yet deeply consequential evidentiary foundation that Pakistan launched a multilayered disinformation campaign with the objective of obscuring attribution, fragmenting international consensus, and reshaping the narrative surrounding the Pahalgam attack. This joint informational and diplomatic contestation that unfolded during and after Operation Sindoor forms the central focus of this book, which has been examined with academic rigour.

Chapter 3

History of Pakistan's Information and Propaganda Warfare

"The propagandist's purpose is to make one set of people forget that certain other sets of people are human." — Aldous Huxley

This chapter looks at how Pakistan's strategic use of information and propaganda warfare has changed over time. This is because Pakistan has never been able to win decisively in traditional military battles against India. It contends that structural military asymmetry, exacerbated by nuclear deterrence limitations, has compelled Pakistan to emphasise the cognitive dimension of conflict. Pakistan tries to change how people see reality, both at home and abroad, by using a mix of false information, psychological operations, and storytelling. They often project symbolic or perceived victories that don't match what really happens on the battlefield. The chapter places this methodology within a comprehensive historical framework, delineating the evolution of Pakistan's information warfare infrastructure from initial radio propaganda and ideological communication to the formal functions of the ISI and ISPR. It shows how narrative control has become a part of state structures, such as education systems, media regulation, and ways of remembering, so that state-approved views of history will continue to exist. These efforts have grown over time to include outreach across national borders, engagement with diaspora communities, and the strategic use of religion and identity to maintain long-term influence and legitimacy. Pakistan's current information warfare strategy is defined by its incorporation of digital technologies and social media ecosystems, facilitating swift, extensive distribution of coordinated narratives. The chapter emphasises that modern conflicts, like those surrounding 'Operation Sindoor', show how important it is to manage perceptions through propagation of controlled and manufactured information. In such exigent situations, changing how people think is deemed as important as winning a battle. In the end, the chapter shows that Pakistan's information warfare is a flexible playbook that is meant to make up for its traditional weaknesses and show strategic importance at a time when information is of paramount significance.

Background

The history of propaganda warfare by Pakistan is backed by a targeted and evolving strategy of information operations designed to offset conventional military asymmetries with India. It is aimed at constructing and sustaining a unifying national identity rooted in the two-nation theory, legitimising Pakistan military's praetorian role, and advancing its irredentist objectives, particularly regarding Kashmir. From its origins in the traumatic Partition of 1947 through successive wars, Islamisation, proxy-wars, and into the digital-hybrid era, Pakistan's approach has blended overt state messaging, covert psychological operations, educational indoctrination, diplomatic lobbying, and proxy-enabled narratives. Such operations, coordinated primarily through the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) and the Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR), have evolved in response to technological advancements, shifting geopolitics, and domestic legitimacy needs while maintaining core continuities: framing India as an existential Hindu-majoritarian threat,

portraying Pakistan as the beleaguered defender of Muslim interests, and employing plausible deniability for asymmetric actions.

Founding Phase: Narrative Construction Amid Partition and the 1947-48 Kashmir War (1940s–1950s)

Pakistan's propaganda machinery arose from the imperative of nation-building in a fragile, geographically divided state born amid massive communal violence and demographic upheaval. The two-nation theory served as the ideological cornerstone, positing Hindus and Muslims as distinct civilisations incapable of coexistence, with India depicted as inherently hostile to Muslim self-determination. Nascent institutions like Radio Pakistan broadcast narratives emphasising Muslim victimhood during Partition riots, selectively amplifying atrocities against Muslims while minimising or externalising parallel violence on the Pakistani side. Official historiography and early textbooks reinforced this selective memory, fostering a siege mentality that helped consolidate diverse ethnic groups under an overarching Islamic identity.

The 1947-48 Kashmir conflict provided the first major test and template. Pakistan supported tribal raiders—framed euphemistically as “volunteers” or freedom fighters—infiltrating the princely state. State media portrayed the operation as a spontaneous indigenous Muslim uprising against “Dogra oppression” and Indian “aggression,” downplaying direct military coordination and any excesses by the raiders. The newly established ISI (1948) quickly assumed a dual role in intelligence gathering and information shaping, pioneering “plausible deniability” by attributing actions to non-state actors. This tactic allowed Pakistan to internationalise the dispute at the United Nations while avoiding full accountability.

Deeper analysis reveals structural drivers: Pakistan's smaller population base, economic vulnerabilities, and truncated geography (especially before the eventual loss of East Pakistan) necessitated psychological compensation through narrative superiority. Early exposure to Western psychological operations via alliances like SEATO and CENTO provided rudimentary training, but the focus remained resolutely India-centric. Education became a quiet but potent vector, embedding anti-India tropes that would compound over generations.

Maturation Through Conventional Conflicts: The 1965 and 1971 Wars

Operation Gibraltar in 1965 exemplified integrated propaganda and irregular warfare. Pakistan infiltrated thousands of regular soldiers and mujahideen into Indian Kashmir, equipped with leaflets urging locals to rise against India and what they term as “**Indian occupation.**” When the anticipated popular revolt failed to materialise—many infiltrators were reportedly turned in by wary Kashmiris—state-controlled Radio Pakistan and newspapers pivoted seamlessly. They depicted events as an organic “freedom struggle” while denying official involvement. India's subsequent crossing of the international border was branded unprovoked aggression. Despite battlefield setbacks and the eventual stalemate codified in the Tashkent Agreement, Pakistan cultivated the “myth of 1965 victory” through exaggerated battlefield accounts (Lahore's defence, Chawinda tank battles). This domestic narrative success bolstered Field Marshal Ayub Khan's regime and shielded it from scrutiny, illustrating propaganda's utility in maintaining military prestige.

Retired Pakistani officers, including Air Marshal Nur Khan, later critiqued this as self-deception that encouraged strategic overconfidence. The episode highlighted a recurring pattern: tactical or operational shortfalls compensated by narrative dominance.

The 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War revealed the strategy's brutal contradictions and international vulnerabilities. Facing Bengali nationalist demands, the Yahya Khan regime launched Operation Searchlight, resulting in mass killings, targeted atrocities against intellectuals and Hindus, and millions displaced. Pakistani media imposed strict censorship, labelling the Awami League and *Mukti Bahini* as "Indian agents" and "miscreants" orchestrating a "Hindu conspiracy" to fragment the Islamic state. Atrocities were denied, minimised, or justified as essential for national integrity; foreign correspondents faced expulsion or tight control. West Pakistani audiences received a steady diet of betrayal narratives, externalising ethnic grievances onto India.

The catastrophic surrender of approximately 93,000 troops in Dhaka was initially downplayed or framed as part of a larger conspiracy. Post-defeat propaganda shifted blame entirely outward— "Indian dismemberment"—while suppressing internal reckoning (the Hamoodur Rahman Commission report remained classified for years). Textbooks were revised to erase or marginalise Bengali contributions, reinforcing a sanitised West Pakistan-centric Islamic unity. Deeper scrutiny shows 1971 as a pivotal trauma: the loss of half the country intensified the military's grip on narrative control, embedding the army as the indispensable guardian against existential threats. It also exposed limits—global opinion shifted due to independent reporting—prompting future refinements toward more deniable, proxy-heavy approaches. Societally, it entrenched a victimhood complex that justified perpetual militarisation.

Zia-ul-Haq Era: Ideological Deepening and Jihad Doctrine (1977–1988)

General Zia-ul-Haq's military coup and aggressive Islamisation program marked the most profound fusion of propaganda with state ideology. Legitimacy-challenged after ousting Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, Zia weaponised religion, presenting his regime as a mission to "Islamise" Pakistan. Textbooks underwent wholesale revision: history curricula glorified jihad and martyrdom, projected Hindus as perennial villains and oppressors, depicted India as an expansionist conspirator bent on Pakistan's destruction, and promoted a rigid Sunni-oriented national identity intolerant toward Ahmadis, Shias, Christians, and Hindus. Compulsory religious education and revised Pakistan Studies courses embedded these perspectives from early schooling.

Scholarly reviews and reports document how this fostered intolerance, militarism, and a paranoid worldview, making youth more susceptible to radical ideologies. The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan (1979) offered a strategic windfall: the ISI, collaborating with the CIA and Gulf donors, managed mujahideen support while framing the conflict as a pan-Islamic jihad against atheism. This honed proxy warfare expertise, propaganda dissemination through exile networks, and narrative management—skills redeployed to Kashmir in the late 1980s. Alleged concepts like "Operation Topac" outlined sustained subversion, infiltration, and psychological operations against India.

Analytically, Zia's era institutionalised the military-mullah nexus, equating regime criticism with anti-Islam or pro-India stances. Long-term consequences included societal radicalisation, sectarian strife, and blowback from empowered jihadist groups. Textbooks normalised militarism, contributing to distorted threat perceptions that persist today.

Post-Cold War Proxy Era and Kargil: Refinement of Hybrid Tactics (1990s–2000s)

The Kashmir insurgency of the 1990s perfected proxy-supported information warfare. While denying direct involvement, the ISI funnelled training, arms, and funds to groups evolving from JKLF to more Islamist outfits like Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) and Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM). State diplomacy and media internationalised the issue via the UN, OIC, and Western platforms as a “human rights crisis” and self-determination struggle, spotlighting Indian actions while contextualising or downplaying terrorist attacks on civilians (including the Kashmiri Pandit exodus). Videos and literature produced by agencies during this period romanticised jihad.

The 1999 Kargil incursion refined deniability: infiltrators (including Northern Light Infantry regulars) were presented as autonomous “Kashmiri mujahideen.” Domestic media trumpeted early gains; withdrawal under international pressure was spun as a diplomatic triumph that globalised Kashmir. Post-Kargil, narratives blamed civilian leadership for concessions, reinforcing military supremacy. The post-9/11 period introduced dual messaging—cooperation with the US against al-Qaeda alongside selective proxy sustenance—requiring nuanced propaganda balancing “moderate” international optics with domestic anti-imperialist, anti-India fervour.

Digital Transformation and Full-Spectrum Hybrid Warfare (2010s–Present)

The advent of social media transformed scale, speed, and deniability. The ISPR evolved into a centralised, proactive narrative engine coordinating with the ISI to shape real-time discourse. During the 2019 Pulwama-Balakot crisis, Pakistani networks amplified claims of downed Indian jets, managed pilot capture imagery, and denied state links to JeM through coordinated bots, trolls, memes, and hashtags. Similar patterns appeared in responses to revocation of Article 370 by the Indian parliament and later episodes, including 2025 tensions around Pahalgam and reported Indian operations like ‘Operation Sindoor’, featuring recycled footage, AI-generated content, doctored images, exaggerated claims (e.g., civilian targeting or jet shoot-downs), and rapid ISPR briefings accusing India of false flags.

Pakistani military literature, including the Green Book series, frames this within “fifth-generation warfare” (5GW)—non-kinetic, narrative-centric conflict targeting identity, morale, economy, and cohesion. Doctrine advocates offensive information operations as part of “full-spectrum deterrence,” integrating proxies, cyber tools, and perception management.

Internally, similar tactics counter Baloch, Pashtun, or dissident movements, often labelling activism as terrorism-linked. Challenges include blowback and credibility gaps when claims unravel. Societally, sustained indoctrination via education creates fertile ground for state narratives but risks entrenching intolerance and hindering critical thinking.

Drivers, Impacts, and Strategic Trade-offs

Key drivers include institutional incentives (military dominance requires perpetual threats to justify resources and autonomy), ideological continuity (two-nation theory sustains othering despite the lessons of 1971), technological opportunism, and geopolitical asymmetry. Impacts encompass systematic radicalisation (textbooks and madrassas fostering polarised worldviews), fear-induced cohesion at the cost of pluralism, and a self-reinforcing security dilemma that perpetuates tension. Strategically, while tactically agile

in internationalising Kashmir and managing domestic opinion, the approach incurs costs: international scrutiny (e.g., FATF episodes), uncontrollable proxies leading to domestic terrorism, economic isolation, and missed cooperation opportunities. It prioritises narrative control over governance reforms, potentially weakening long-term resilience.

Failure in Conventional Warfare and a Strategic Shift to Information and Propaganda Warfare

Historically, Pakistan has never achieved success in conventional warfare against India. While it has struggled in kinetic military engagements, it has leveraged narrative warfare with notable success. A blend of information and propaganda warfare has allowed Pakistan to project victories that were never truly realised. This wasn't just a coincidence or a reaction; it was a deep-seated change in Pakistan's strategic culture caused by structural imbalances, geopolitical limitations, and ideological needs. Over time, information and propaganda warfare have gone from being secondary tools to being central parts of statecraft. This has allowed Pakistan to make up for its shortcomings on the battlefield by changing perceptions, stories, and, in the end, the political meaning of conflict outcomes. The core of this change is Pakistan's ongoing failure to achieve decisive or strategically advantageous outcomes through traditional military operations. The wars of 1947–48, 1965, 1971, and the small conflict at Kargil in 1999 all show this pattern. Pakistan has repeatedly failed to turn military action into long-term political gains, even though there have been times when it has taken the lead in tactics.

During Operation Sindoor, Pakistan strategically manipulated information to influence international media, show India in bad light, and gain an advantage. It protected its own narrative on aircraft losses, spread disinformation to project "air superiority," and disrupted global access to accurate on-ground assessments. Pakistan circulated fabricated videos of dead soldiers and loss of critical equipment and infrastructure, shaping a narrative of early victory and portraying its actions as retaliation, even though India's initial operations were specifically targeting terror groups. Pakistan launched a coordinated information campaign to change how people in Pakistan and around the world saw things. This campaign had many parts, including hiding bad information, making up good results, and quickly spreading content that made people feel strongly. Claims of aerial superiority, reports of significant enemy losses, and the spread of false visual evidence were not random events; they were all part of a larger story. The goal was not just to counter India's messaging, but to stop it and make it too much to handle. This would create a dominant way of understanding things before independent verification could happen. These tactics exemplify how information warfare and psychological warfare are closely intertwined.

With the advent of the Internet age and the rise of 24/7 media, Pakistan shifted its focus towards shaping both domestic and international opinion. It sought to hide its explicit defence of terror groups by projecting to the world that it was a victim of Indian aggression which it defended with all its might through initiatives like Operation Bunyan-un-Marsoos. By the end of its conflict with India in May 2025, Pakistan had ensured that the illusion of victory would be accepted as fact in a post-truth era.

However, it does not mean that traditional mediums have been left out. After the May 2025 conflict, Pakistan quickly revised its textbooks and projected itself as a victor. Unproven claims like downing of "four Rafale jets" were presented as fact and the drone

strikes originating from the country were portrayed as impactful having hit several “Indian military installations.”⁷¹

Following India's 2019 Balakot airstrikes in retaliation for the Pulwama attack, Pakistan has elevated information warfare (IW) as a core element of statecraft, integrating it into its Diplomacy, Information, Military, and Economic (DIME) strategy. The ISPR and ISI lead long-term perception management campaigns using social media, disinformation, and psychological operations. In contrast, India has historically treated IW reactively. Since 1947, Pakistan has adapted IW from traditional media to digital platforms, creating a strategic imbalance. Pakistan's operations focus on high-frequency, emotionally charged narratives aimed at undermining India's legitimacy, utilising media manipulation, bot armies, and global engagement through the diaspora and influencers.⁷² The growing importance of information warfare shows how modern conflicts are changing. The capacity to mould narratives, sway perceptions, and regulate the dissemination of information has emerged as a pivotal element of strategic power. Pakistan's experience shows how countries with normal limits can adapt by focusing on these areas and using them to gain power that they might not be able to get through normal means.

Kinetic Reality that forced Pakistan into the Information Warfare Domain

To understand why Pakistan fought so desperately on the digital battlefield, one must first understand the dimensions of its strategic desperation on the physical one.

The Asymmetry

If we are to strip away the Pakistani rhetoric, the numbers tell a clear story. India's 2025–26 defence budget was about \$78.7 billion, nearly nine times Pakistan's roughly \$9 billion, even after a notable increase of approx. 21% over the previous year. A large share of India's spending went into acquiring new military capabilities and acquisitions, widening the gap further.⁷³

That imbalance was made apparent during Operation Sindoor. The Indian Air Force, flying Rafale jets armed with SCALP missiles and AASM Hammer bombs, were able to disrupt and penetrate Pakistan's Chinese-supplied air defence systems. Loitering munitions like the Israeli IAI Harop and Polish Warmate drones were used to probe and weaken HQ-9BE and HQ-16FE systems before follow-on strikes, allowing India to gain the upper hand in key parts of the airspace.

This was merely a reminder of the kinetic reality that Pakistan's military establishment had known for decades. This made the war of narratives and information even more crucial. The asymmetry was especially destabilising because it wasn't just the difference in total spending; it was also the difference in the way capabilities were developed. India's investments have focused more and more on precision strike, network-centric warfare, and integrated theatre commands. Pakistan's modernisation, on the other hand, has been limited by budget constraints and a reliance on outside suppliers. This made it possible for even small conventional battles to quickly turn into big problems for Pakistan on the battlefield. Also, India's ability to quickly turn financial superiority into operational dominance shortened the time Pakistan had to make decisions. In this kind of situation, traditional deterrence signalling through normal means became less believable. This made Pakistan look for other areas where time, scale, and cost problems could be lessened.

The Doctrine of Asymmetric Compensation

Pakistan's deep state, led by the army, coordinated through the ISI, and shaped by a tightly controlled media-industrial complex, has long adopted asymmetric warfare as its core strategy. State-sponsored terrorism, psychological operations, cyber warfare, and narrative manipulation are fundamental components of Pakistan's strategic culture. This reliance on asymmetric tactics is "both a product of its military insecurity and ideological obsession with India." The nuclear umbrella, as per Pakistani consideration, would prevent full-scale war and gives rise to a welcome paradox that Pakistan cannot possibly be conventionally defeated without risking nuclear escalation and it cannot win conventionally ever. This leaves Pakistan with the option of operating in the sub-threshold domain, where proxy violence, cognitive warfare, and disinformation inflict costs on India without triggering a military response. Op Sindoor tested this balance. India struck anyway, and Pakistan, unable to respond militarily, turned to the information battlefield, where it believed the asymmetry could be reversed.

This idea of asymmetric compensation is not ad hoc; it is built into the system. For decades, Pakistan has built up special skills in its military and intelligence services for fighting in irregular and hybrid ways. These are things like proxy networks, digital influence cells, and coordinated media amplification structures that all work together during times of crisis. The goal is not to win the battle outright, but to make the enemy's strategic clarity and political unity weaker. Asymmetrical compensation is also important for the home front. The state maintains internal legitimacy despite material disadvantages by framing conflicts through narratives of resistance and parity. Information warfare, then, serves as both an external instrument of coercion and an internal apparatus for regime stabilisation.

The Logic of Narrative Compensation

The decision to go for asymmetric compensation has not been merely pragmatic but doctrinal. Pakistan's military has, over decades, developed a sophisticated understanding of "cognitive warfare": the deliberate manipulation of an adversary's perception of reality to achieve strategic outcomes without kinetic engagement. It was later acknowledged that approximately 15 percent of India's operational time during Operation Sindoor had been devoted to countering fake narratives and disinformation.⁷⁴ This was an unprecedented allocation of military resources to information hygiene, and it testified to the sheer volume and sophistication of what Pakistan had unleashed.

Narrative compensation works by changing not only the facts but also the ways that people understand those facts. An actor can lessen the impact of verifiable events by flooding the information ecosystem with false claims, selective evidence, and content that stirs up emotions. In this kind of environment, perception becomes fragmented, and the results of strategies are no longer based only on what happens on the battlefield. Instead, they depend on which story gets the most attention from people in the US and around the world. Also, information campaigns can be quickly set up, spread through decentralised networks, and dropped if needed. This enables a state such as Pakistan to engage in continuous contestation without exceeding limits that would provoke conventional retaliation, thereby effectively expanding the battlespace into the cognitive domain where traditional indicators of victory are significantly less distinct.

Historical pattern of conventional failures compensated by Narrative dominance

Since 1947, Pakistan has used propaganda to frame Jammu and Kashmir as the “unfinished business of Partition,” launching Radio Pakistan to promote Urdu, Islamic identity, and religious rhetoric that fuelled unrest in Kashmir. This expanded with Radio Azad Kashmir and other stations along the Line of Control, broadcasting emotionally charged content in local languages to connect with Muslim communities. During the 1947–49 Kashmir conflict, Radio Pakistan had also served as a covert military tool, sending coded messages to militants. In 1948, Pakistan established the ISI and, in 1949, the ISPR under ISI's control, with a Colonel as its Director-General. Under General Zia-ul-Haq (1977–1988), propaganda efforts escalated with Operation Topac, promoting slogans like “Islam is our goal; Quran is our Constitution” to legitimise religious militancy and challenge India. In 1992, Pakistan's Star TV aired distorted footage of alleged Indian atrocities, plagiarised from the BBC.⁷⁵

For over fifty years, the ISPR used the “Islam in danger” narrative to deflect criticism after Pakistan's defeats in wars with India (1948, 1965, 1971, 1999). Its real effectiveness in Information Warfare became clear after the 1999 Kargil conflict. Since the 1990s, Pakistan has marked 5 February as ‘Kashmir Solidarity Day’ to promote a distorted global narrative and rally domestic support. At least 15 stations, including those in Pakistan-occupied Kashmir like Radio Buraq, spread anti-India propaganda, while the Pakistani Army's Signal Corps has violated breached Article 45 of the International Telecommunication Union protocols to communicate with militants along the LoC. The Pakistani High Commission in New Delhi uses social media influencers, and the state's propaganda reaches diaspora communities in the UK and Middle East. Stations often use “bait and switch” tactics, blending religious messaging with Bollywood content to attract Indian listeners and subtly normalise Pakistani narratives.⁷⁶

Between 2010 and 2020, the ISPR built a 4,000-strong network of Information Warfare specialists, with a budget of 600 crore Pakistani rupees. Through an internship programme, it recruited scholars and influencers, using social media to create divides in India and indoctrinate Kashmiri youth into extremism. Interns were given access to strategic military sites and top Pakistani leadership.⁷⁷

Pakistan has also resorted to tight control over educational institutions to ensure that only the state narrative prevails over any kind of reporting so that internal pacification is ensured.

For decades, Pakistan has commemorated 6 September as ‘Defence Day’, celebrating a supposed victory in the 1965 war against India. The official narrative, taught in schools and reinforced annually through media, glorifies Pakistan's defence and the courage of its military, portraying India as the aggressor. This version omits critical events, such as Pakistan's failed ‘Operation Gibraltar’ and ‘Operation Grand Slam’, which preceded the Indian attacks, and selectively highlights successes while ignoring setbacks. As a result, most Pakistanis, especially younger generations who weren't alive during the war, have little knowledge of these omissions. This distorted history has become entrenched in national consciousness. A comprehensive study, which can be seen as an indictment of Pakistan's performance in the 1965 war, was compiled by Lt Gen Mahmud Ahmed and the staff and students of the Command and Staff College, Quetta, originally titled ‘Illusion of Victory’ but later renamed ‘History of the Indo-Pakistan War of 1965’ under pressure.⁷⁸

In his account, General Muhammad Musa Khan, who was the Commander-in-Chief at the time, detailed the plan for a rebellion in Kashmir but this rebellion never materialised. Musa's narrative described the hope of sparking an uprising by infiltrating Kashmir with irregular forces and distributing arms to the locals but the locals alerted Indian authorities, leading to a swift Indian crackdown. This failure was omitted or downplayed in official narratives, which instead highlighted the military's supposed triumphs. The Pakistani military succeeded in crafting a victorious propaganda narrative, shielding the Ayub regime from criticism, and securing a lasting myth of success in the mind of the lay public.⁷⁹

Since the end of the Soviet-Afghan war in 1989, Pakistan has used 'Wahhabi version of Islam', traditionally funded by Saudi Arabia, to further its geopolitical goals. The ISI saw promotion of Islamic militancy as a means to create jihadist proxies in Afghanistan, Bangladesh, and Jammu and Kashmir, where Sufi practices dominate social ethos. In Bangladesh, those radicalised in Wahhabi-funded mosques have joined the fundamentalist groups like Hefazat-e-Islam and given rise to radical Islamist sentiments.⁸⁰ It is also widely believed that ISI is deeply involved in terrorism in Kashmir and spreading anti-India sentiment in Bangladesh. Given Pakistan's military weakness, direct conflict over Kashmir is unlikely, but the military seeks to avenge its 1971 defeat and support militancy in Kashmir.

After the May 2025 India-Pakistan conflict, senior Pakistan Army officials visited at least 12 universities and 8 colleges in Punjab and Sindh to promote the notion of a Pakistani 'victory' in Kashmir, while the government suppressed independent media from countering this narrative. The Pakistan Army's media wing launched the Hilal Talks 2025 programme to 'educate' 1,950 teachers from across the country about the tactics and agendas of "anti-state elements" on social media. Organised under the ISPR, the programme aimed to raise awareness about alleged 'disinformation' after attacks in May. Participants were given insight into the structure and operations of the Pakistan Army.⁸¹

Other than use of radio, propaganda, religious indoctrination, and strict control over education system, Pakistani military has tightened its hold over the affairs of private media houses. It incentivises those who stick to the narrative and it punishes those who endorse independent reporting and criticism. It is like a "carrot and stick" methodology.

Pakistan also uses its television channels to peddle its narratives in the wake of conflicts with India. In the mid-2000s, at least three English-language news channels were started amid heightened tensions but the unprofitable initiatives prematurely ended. It took the same initiative after its 2025 conflict India with the relaunch of Pakistan TV and debut of Asia One, made up predominantly of foreigner news presenters with better command on English for international representation. Additionally, at least three Pakistani media executives told *The New York Times* that they had been approached by Sharjeel Inam Memon, a provincial information minister to start a new media venture but they declined. A Pakistani official involved in the state's efforts said that journalists had been invited by the security agencies to devise the new ventures' editorial strategy. The official wasn't sure how the new channels would operate after the initial round of funding. Bilal Gilani, the executive director of Gallup Pakistan, remarked that the government believed it could fund television channels and utilise them as mouthpieces.⁸²

The organisations that do not fall in line are often punished in direct or indirect ways. For over 13 months, the *Dawn* Newspaper was subject to an unannounced ban on government

ads when, in the December of 2025, the ban was extended to the group's TV and radio outlets. The Council of Newspaper Editors stated that the advertising ban was tantamount to "financially crippling the organisation," while the All-Pakistan Newspapers Society (APNS) claimed that the move was aimed at "forcing the media group to alter its editorial policy." Later, the article titled "Gagging the media" was published and it was claimed that the ban might have had something to do with the 2016 Dawn leaks that focused on how former Army chief Raheel Sharif tried to secure a term extension from the PM Nawaz Sharif.⁸³

The coverups and properly curated and military controlled media tours are also part of the programme. In 2019, after India's Balakot airstrike that very likely killed at least 35 terrorists (although numbers could be much higher), Pakistan military spent over 43 days cleaning up evidence of a successful strike. After well over a month, multiple independent journalists and diplomats were flown close to strike site from where they trekked to the targeted madrassa. The stated purpose of organising the trip was to fortify Pakistan's claim that Indians failed to destroy any structure or kill anyone.⁸⁴

And finally, the last but not the least, social media has become the primary tool for propaganda and information warfare for the Pakistani military apparatus in the 21st century. When Taha Siddiqui, a Pakistani journalist, pointed out the Pakistani military's false glorification of the 1965 war on social media, he was told by a military official not to disrupt their media campaign. In January 2018, armed men tried to kidnap him in Islamabad and he was forced to relocate to France. He has opined that the military is portrayed as a saviour to avoid accountability.⁸⁵

Distortion of history or fake retelling of events too extends to social media. With explosion in electronic and web media, YouTube has been exploited for propaganda purposes too. In 2013, a series of videos titled "Pakistan Army War History" surfaced on YouTube, featuring individuals claiming to be Pakistani soldiers, either retired or serving, who allegedly participated in the Kargil War. These soldiers, dressed in civilian attire, recounted their supposed experiences of bravery and heroism, with a self-important host amplifying their tales. The narrative was consistently framed to depict Pakistani soldiers as paragons of courage, while Indian troops were derogatorily portrayed as cowardly. One video featured Havildar Feroze Khan boasting of having killed "hundreds of Indian soldiers," while another showed Naik Gul-e-Khandaan claiming the killing of Captain Saurabh Kalia and his colleagues on 13 May 1999. The accounts were delivered in front of an enthusiastic, well-educated audience that applauded the denigration of Indian soldiers and the exaggerated feats of the Pakistani military.⁸⁶

Then in 2019, when ISPR tried to downplay the impact of Indian airstrikes on Balakot, Major Gen. Asif Gafoor unleashed the agenda much before an organised visit to the JeM camp for journalists and diplomats. Gafoor's network of 20,000-30,000 fake ISPR social media accounts rapidly spread a flood of disinformation after the IAF's 26 February strikes, distorting the narrative and muddying the perspectives of neutral observers. This deliberate misinformation campaign was designed to create a divisive atmosphere, promoting falsehoods and intensifying the rhetoric. Subsequently, the ISPR leveraged expert geospatial analysis to further spin the narrative, attempting to downplay the impact of the strikes and reinforce the false narrative of a failed attack.⁸⁷ It is also crucial to note that at that time, Pakistani military spokesperson had 3.9 million followers, 15% of which were fake.⁸⁸

Be it YouTube or Twitter, ISPR clearly understands that controlling the narrative on the internet is just as important as controlling it on traditional media platforms like radio or TV. The growth of digital ecosystems in the last few years has allowed Pakistan's information system to move from reactive propaganda to proactive narrative engineering. The use of algorithmic amplification, coordinated bot networks, and micro-targeted messaging has given state-linked actors the power to shape conversation not just in South Asia, but on platforms all over the world. These campaigns are meant to get around the usual ways that journalism keeps people from seeing news. They do this by using popular hashtags, viral content formats, and emotionally charged visual storytelling. The goal is not just to offer a different point of view, but to fill the information space so much that it becomes harder for people in the US and abroad to tell the difference between fact and fiction. This strategic ambiguity often helps the person spreading it, since confusion can be used as a tool of influence.

Another important aspect is the systematic interaction with diaspora communities, especially in the Middle East, North America, and the UK. These communities amplify state-created stories, often through cultural organisations, student unions, and advocacy groups. Diaspora networks help make the Kashmir issue more international by sending out coordinated messages, selectively sharing stories about human rights, and organising protests in places where Pakistan's official diplomatic reach may be limited. Social media has made this connection even stronger by allowing domestic messaging and diaspora activism to happen at the same time. This has created a transnational echo chamber that supports certain views of events. New technologies like AI and synthetic media are being used more and more in information warfare strategies. Deepfakes, altered audio-visual content, and AI-generated text can all be used to quickly make large amounts of convincing but false information. Attribution is still hard to pin down, but the overall trend shows a move toward more advanced types of cognitive warfare, where managing perceptions is more important than getting the facts right. These kinds of tools can be used to make up events, lie about military actions, or discredit other stories, making it harder to check facts and keeping people in the dark during crises.

In Pakistan, the ongoing focus on narrative control has had a huge impact on society as a whole. The constant reinforcement of biased historical accounts and perceptions of external threats has led to a national identity that is focused on security, where people who disagree are often seen as being disloyal. This environment makes it hard to ask tough questions and limits public debate, especially about military policy and regional conflicts. Over time, this has created a feedback loop in which public opinion shapes and strengthens state narratives. This makes it harder to introduce new points of view without a lot of pushbacks. Pakistan's approach also shows a bigger idea that information warfare is used as a force multiplier to make up for the differences between regular armies. The state wants to stay strategically important in the Kashmir dispute even though it hasn't had much success on the battlefield by keeping up a constant story of victimhood and resistance. This long-term investment in managing perceptions shows that people know that modern conflicts are just as much about controlling stories as they are about controlling land. Because of this, Pakistan's strategic position in the region is likely to continue to focus on propaganda, media influence, and psychological operations for the foreseeable future.

The Playbook

Pakistan's military apparatus is launching an information warfare on multiple fronts. Due to failure on the battlefield, most of the focus has been on saving face and disproving

Indian assertions, employing a host of methods— *from simple propaganda on the streets and radio frequencies to tight control over media activity and narrative, from control over the education system and indoctrination through religious schools to proper execution of toolkits and dissemination on social media*. Intimidation and censorship are additional methods applied to ensure that truth and facts do not filter through. This playbook has changed over time, just like technology and the world around it have. In the past, the focus was on state-controlled broadcasting and getting stories out to the public through print media and public messaging. But the digital revolution has made these efforts much bigger and more powerful.

Today, coordinated online campaigns, bot networks, and algorithm-driven amplification make it easy to spread carefully chosen stories quickly and widely. This often makes it hard to tell the difference between true and false information. This change is part of a larger move away from centralised propaganda and toward decentralised, but strategically directed, influence operations. Another important part of this playbook is how it uses plausible deniability in a smart way. When the state hires non-state actors, influencers, or platforms that seem to be independent to build narratives, it can shape the conversation without having to take direct responsibility. This indirect method makes it harder to figure out who sent the message and makes it more believable to the people who are supposed to get it. In this kind of ecosystem, false information is often mixed with bits of truth, which makes it harder to check and more convincing to people who already agree with a certain point of view.

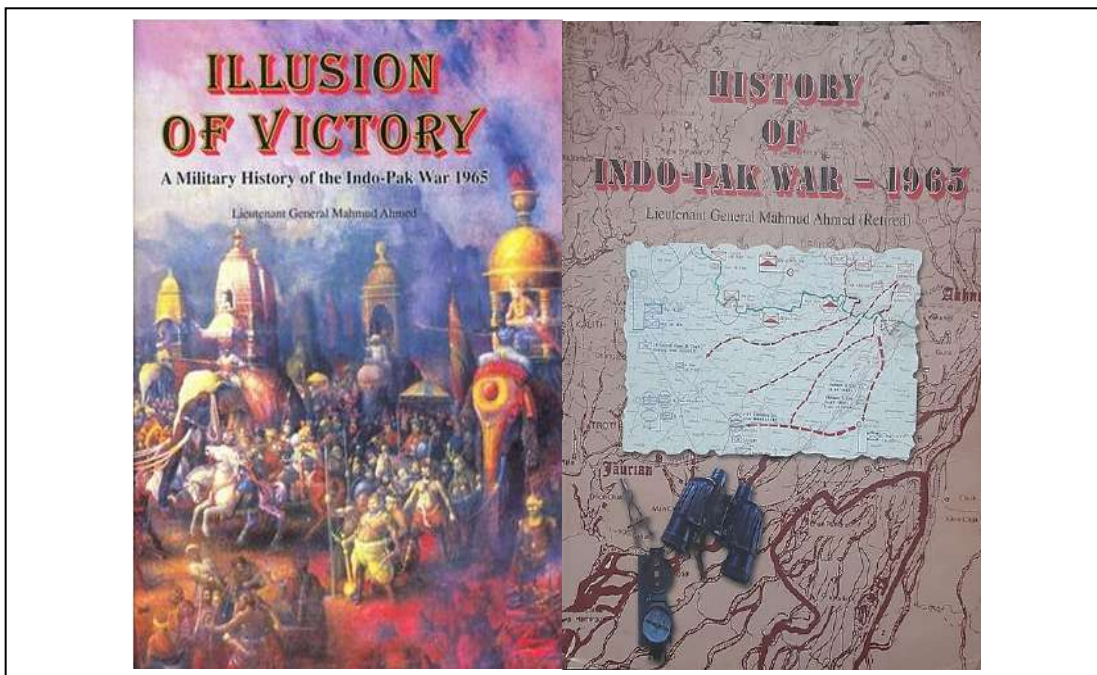


Fig 1: Lt Gen Mahmud Ahmed's book *Illusion of Victory* (left), the title of which was changed to *History of Indo-Pak War – 1965* (right) under pressure.

The psychological dimension of information warfare has gained significant prominence. Efforts are not just meant to fight outside stories; they are also meant to strengthen unity at home and keep dissent in check. The state guarantees long-term narrative stability by establishing a coherent ideological framework via educational, media, and religious institutions. Recent years have seen crises and conflicts rise to the level of testing this playbook. During times when the whole world is paying attention, rapid response

mechanisms like real-time narrative framing and digital counter-offensives are used to change people's minds. These moments show how information strategies are getting more advanced and ready, where timing, coordination, and consistency of the story are just as important as the content itself. The overall effect is a long-lasting, flexible framework that is meant to change how people see things, control legitimacy, and keep strategic ambiguity across many areas.

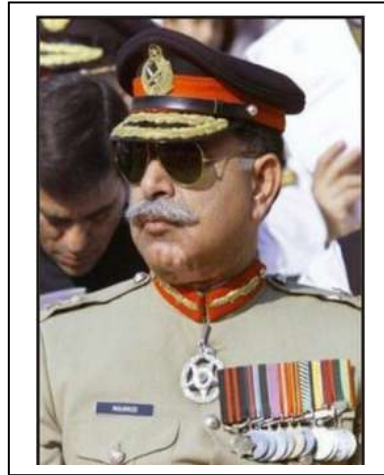


Fig 2: Lt Gen Mahmud Ahmed who penned the book Illusion of Victory



Fig 3: Pakistani Children celebrate 6 September as “Defence Day” and remember the fictionalised “victory” against India.

Conclusion

Pakistan relies heavily on information and propaganda warfare as a key part of its strategy. Ongoing challenges in traditional military battles, along with significant differences compared to India, have pushed the country to focus more on the cognitive side of conflict.

Over the years, this method has changed from basic radio broadcasts and ideological messaging into a complex system that combines government agencies, digital tools, and global networks. The outcome is a well-established system for shaping narratives that aims to redefine battlefield truths, create perceptions of equality or success, and ensure both domestic support and international importance. At the centre of this strategy is the idea of asymmetric and narrative compensation. Unable to achieve clear victories on the battlefield, Pakistan has consistently worked to shape perceptions to counter its material weaknesses.

This effort includes organising disinformation campaigns, strategically using religion and identity, manipulating education and media, and employing new technologies like social media and synthetic content. These actions are not just occasional; they are built into the system, allowing for quick responses during crises and ongoing influence in peacetime. As a result, the line between war and peace becomes less clear, as the conflict area expands beyond physical territory into perception, psychology, and information control.

This chapter demonstrates that modern conflict extends far beyond traditional military strength, increasingly focussing on the ability to shape narratives and influence global perception. While regional actors continuously attempt to leverage information warfare to offset their geopolitical challenges, these dynamics underscore a critical strategic imperative for India. It is also true that in this information warfare domain reactive responses to external narrative campaigns creates unnecessary vulnerabilities. As digital and communication systems rapidly evolve, maintaining a clear advantage in the struggle for truth, legitimacy, and perception remains vital for ensuring regional stability. Consequently, it is essential to cultivate robust, proactive, and highly coordinated information strategies designed to effectively neutralise complex cognitive warfare tactics.

Chapter 4

The Invisible Front: Pakistan's Information Warfare & Propaganda Factory

Victory is in the mind. If you ask a Pakistani whether you lost or won, he'd say, my chief has become field marshal, we must have won only, that's why he has become field marshal.
— General Upendra Dwivedi, Chief of Army Staff, India

There are wars fought with missiles. And then there are wars fought with pixels.

When India launched Operation Sindoor in the early hours of 7 May 2025, a surgical strike campaign targeting nine terrorist infrastructure sites across Pakistan and Pakistan-Occupied Jammu and Kashmir (POJK), the kinetic battle lasted precisely twenty-five minutes. The missiles ceased. The aircraft returned. The rubble of the Jaish-e-Mohammed and Lashkar-e-Taiba launchpads lay smouldering, including key facilities in Bahawalpur and Muridke, as well as camps across Muzaffarabad and Kotli, struck with high precision through intelligence-driven targeting. By any conventional metric, the Indian military operations were decisive, swift, and asymmetrically in India's favour⁸⁹.

But another war had already begun. One that required no jets, no missiles, and no soldiers on the ground. One that would last not twenty-five minutes, but weeks and, in its echoes, months. It was a war fought through doctored videos and deep-fake audio, through WhatsApp forwards and coordinated hashtag storms, through lobbyists on K Street and proxies in New York, through state television in Ankara and bot networks traced to servers in Shanghai. It was the war for narrative supremacy. Pakistan had long anticipated this confrontation and prepared for it with calculated deliberation, acutely aware that on a conventional battlefield, it could not match India's overwhelming military superiority.

This chapter maps that invisible front in exhaustive detail: the infrastructure Pakistan built, the operations it executed, the actors it deployed, and the money it spent to turn its military defeat into a contested story.

I. The Architecture of Deception: Pakistan's Information Warfare Infrastructure

Pakistan's capacity for coordinated disinformation did not emerge overnight. It had been built, layer by layer, over years. Institutionalised within the military, embedded in media, nurtured through state-funded think tanks, and extended through overseas networks. By the time Operation Sindoor began, Pakistan possessed a mature and multi-tiered information warfare apparatus that could be activated within minutes.

The Foundation: ISPR's Media-Industrial Complex

The Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR) Directorate, established in 1949, is formally the media and public relations wing of the Pakistani Armed Forces. However, in practice,

far more than a press office. It is the nerve centre of Pakistan's military narrative machine, a sophisticated propaganda apparatus that has evolved from a bulletin board into a full-spectrum information operations command⁹⁰.

Rooted in earlier forms of state-led communication—from Radio Pakistan's ideological broadcasting in the post-Partition period to today's digitally synchronised campaigns—its evolution reflects a long-term institutional commitment to perception management. Within this trajectory, information warfare has increasingly been institutionalised as an element of state policy, with the ISPR operating in close coordination with the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) to execute sustained perception campaigns targeting both domestic and international audiences.

Managed by a combined team of military personnel and civilian officials operating under the Joint Chiefs of Staff Secretariat, the ISPR's organisational architecture reveals the depth of its ambition. The working apparatus ISPR, is divided into specialised wings with granular mandates: a Media Management and Public Affairs Wing handling interactions with domestic and international media; a Production and Content Creation Division generating documentaries, dramas, songs, and other cultural products to embed military narratives in Pakistani society; a Monitoring and Analysis Wing tracking information flows and public sentiment in real time; and, critically, a Social Media Management sub-unit dedicated to curating and weaponising the military's digital presence.⁹¹

The Social Media Management sub-unit is of particular significance within this structure. It serves as the operational bridge between ISPR's formal media work and the covert digital campaigns that flooded platforms during Operation Sindoor. The ISPR had long understood and strategically leveraged the fact that social media algorithms reward emotionally charged, shareable content, regardless of its veracity. The Monitoring and Analysis Wing provides continuous feedback on emerging narrative traction, while the Social Media Management unit amplifies selected narratives through coordinated engagement patterns, hashtag mobilisation, and networked amplification channels. The Production and Content Creation Division functions as the operation's dark engine, supplying the raw material, including manipulated footage, deepfake audio, and doctored images, each engineered with deliberate precision.⁹² When these departments converge, their synergised effort is seamless. False narratives no longer stand naked; they wear the veneer of credibility.

The Secret Army: The Army Agahi Network

Beneath the formal ISPR apparatus, a more clandestine structure, one that investigative reporting had only partially illuminated before Operation Sindoor, revealed its full operational scope. In August 2024, Drop Site News had published a landmark investigation revealing the existence of the Army Agahi Network (AAN), or Army Awareness Network⁹³. It was a classified programme that mandated thousands of serving Pakistani Army officers to create fake social media accounts and proliferate pro-military messages, targeting critics of the military and political opponents.

The AAN's operations, according to the investigation, were coordinated directly by the ISPR. Officers received approved messages from superiors and disseminated them on social media under various pseudonyms, describing themselves as “freelance writers,” “social media bloggers,” or “investigative researchers”⁹⁴. These accounts did not merely

post but formed interconnected amplification networks by following each other, retweeting each other's content, and engaging in coordinated online attacks against designated targets. The Pakistan military had, in effect, conscripted its own officer corps as digital soldiers, blurring the line between formal military service and covert information operations.

The AAN had not been built for war. It was first deployed inward, targeting judges, civil society activists, and supporters of former Prime Minister Imran Khan. Domestic dissent was its original mandate⁹⁵. But the infrastructure was never truly bounded. The personnel were adaptable. The playbook was transferable.

When Operation Sindoor began, the network did not pause. It pivoted. The same architecture engineered to suppress internal opposition now trained its sights on an external target. The accounts multiplied overnight. The messaging shifted in tone and direction. Yet beneath the surface, the coordinated behaviour patterns remained identical. Only the enemy had changed⁹⁶.

The Digital Armory: APT Groups and Cyber Capabilities

The digital frontline came alive alongside the social manipulation campaigns. When Operation Sindoor began, the Indian agencies, revealed that seven Advanced Persistent Threat (APT) groups were activated within hours. On 7 May alone, India faced more than 1.5 million cyberattacks, while the National Stock Exchange endured nearly 30 million intrusion attempts⁹⁷.

Behind the barrage was Pakistan's cyber espionage ecosystem, long anchored by APT36, also known as Transparent Tribe, a group known for deploying Crimson RAT against Indian defence systems. After Sindoor, new operations surfaced. Zscaler ThreatLabz identified two campaigns, Gopher Strike and Sheet Attack, linked to Pakistan based actors operating in coordination with APT36⁹⁸. Using Google services, Golang malware, and GitHub hosted infrastructure, they penetrated Indian networks to steal authentic data for the disinformation machinery⁹⁹.

Beneath these operations flowed Chinese expertise. Pakistan's evolving information warfare owed much to Beijing's technological partnership. RUSI assessments traced the infusion of AI driven tools, deep-fake capabilities, and botnet networks from China's Ministry of State Security, assets that lifted Pakistan's reach far beyond what its domestic capabilities could achieve¹⁰⁰.

As noted in an ORF assessment on China–Pakistan collusive grey-zone dynamics, the relationship operates through “a pattern of convergence in which capabilities, technologies, and strategic practices reinforce each other across military and informational domains,” rather than through formalised joint command structures¹⁰¹.

II. Timing and Triggers: The Disinformation Campaign Unfolds

The architecture was ready. What remains is to uncover the exact timeline of how Pakistan's information warfare machine came alive. Each step follows not the rhythm of spontaneous reaction, but the pulse of deliberate, premeditated execution.

Pre-Conflict Groundwork: The 1 May Psy-Op

Even before India had launched a single missile, Pakistan's information apparatus was already in motion. On 1 May 2025, six days before Operation Sindoor began, Pakistan's ISPR quietly initiated a calculated disinformation campaign. It circulated online what appeared to be classified RAW documents, supposedly exposing Indian operations¹⁰². Within hours, these files spread across social media and were echoed by coordinated accounts and sympathetic media networks. The documents, once examined, collapsed under scrutiny. They were complete fabrications, engineered not to inform but to deceive¹⁰³.

What made this operation far more sinister was the discovery of its architects. The campaign was traced to a joint psychological operation involving the Pakistan Strategic Forum, a think tank closely aligned with the ISPR, and The Resistance Front (TRF), the terrorist organisation behind the Pahalgam attack¹⁰⁴. The partnership revealed a chilling level of coordination between a state-linked entity and a UN-proscribed terrorist group. It exposed an ecosystem where official propaganda and militant violence no longer operated in separate spheres but functioned as extensions of one another.

This pre-conflict information strike was not random mischief; it was a deliberate move to shape perception long before the first shot was fired. It aimed to cripple India's credibility, to cast its intelligence agencies in doubt even before they could act. At the same time, it planted a poisonous narrative, that the Pahalgam attack was not a terrorist strike at all but a staged Indian operation—a "false flag" allegation. As the crisis escalated, that narrative was amplified relentlessly, circulating through newsrooms, digital campaigns, and diplomatic chatter, and finding selective traction in segments of sympathetic international media ecosystems¹⁰⁵.

By the time the real conflict began, the battlefield had already been prepared, not on the ground, but in the minds of millions.

D-Day: The Digital Assault of 7 May

When Indian missiles struck their targets in the early hours of 7 May 2025, Pakistan's information warfare machine set into motion. The Pakistan government had previously imposed restrictions on X (Formally known as Twitter), which were lifted shortly before the escalation, allowing renewed platform activity. It subsequently became a significant channel for propaganda, misinformation, and disinformation during the crisis period. Within hours, social media was engulfed in chaos. X became a battlefield of its own, the hashtag #IndiaPakistanWar surging beyond 215,000 posts by morning¹⁰⁶. Cyber analysts found that nearly forty percent of these came from accounts with no prior activity, dormant bots that had been waiting for this very moment. In response, India initiated counter-

disinformation measures, blocking over 1,400 URLs under Section 69A of the Information Technology Act¹⁰⁷.

The narratives were launched with precision and intent. Inside Pakistan, the messaging celebrated military glory and victory. Abroad, it portrayed India as the aggressor, striking civilians without restraint. And within India itself, it spread confusion, panic, and doubt. Fact-checker Uzair Rizvi of AltNews would later remark that an entire month's worth of disinformation had been unleashed in mere hours¹⁰⁸.

One lie from Pakistan, stood above the rest. It claimed that Pakistan's Air Force had shot down five Indian fighter jets, including a Rafale. The story spread with frightening speed. ISPR officially amplified it, and Pakistan's Defence Minister, Khawaja Asif, repeated it live on CNN. That interview became the defining image of the disinformation war.

When CNN anchor Becky Anderson asked for evidence, Asif's answer stunned viewers. "It is all over social media," he said calmly. "On Indian platforms, not just ours. The debris fell into Kashmir." There was no debris. No coordinates. No proof. Only a rumour, boldly declared before a global audience by the defence minister of a nuclear-armed nation¹⁰⁹.

The claim was further undermined internationally when the French Navy issued a formal clarification rejecting a Geo TV report titled "French commander confirms Pakistan air superiority in May 2025 combat with India." The Navy stated that the article contained "extensive misinformation and disinformation," and confirmed that no French naval officer had made the statements attributed to him regarding Rafale losses or Pakistani air superiority¹¹⁰.

The Escalating Cascade: 8-11 May

The disinformation campaign did not diminish after the first day. It intensified, with each subsequent twenty-four hours producing new fabrications, each building on the previous day's false foundations.

On 8 May, DG ISPR Lieutenant General Ahmed Sharif Chaudhry made what the DisinfoLab and multiple fact-checkers identified as the "first official blatant lie" of the conflict: the categorical claim that Pakistan had not attacked civilian areas in Amritsar¹¹¹. The following day, even before the memory of the denial had faded, Pakistani media and official channels were openly celebrating Pakistan's attack in Amritsar, making the denial and the celebration exist simultaneously in the information space, exposing the cognitive dissonance and Pakistan's lack of credibility

Also on 9 May, the DG ISPR addressed the media and played what was subsequently confirmed to be a doctored video clip of a woman officer from defence forces. The clip appeared to show that officer "admitting" that Pakistan's strikes had caused damage only to military, not civilian, targets inside India. What ISPR had done was surgically extrapolate the portion of the original video in which an officer from defence forces was explaining how Pakistan had targeted civilian areas; thus, weaponising the very evidence of Pakistan's aggression to construct the opposite narrative¹¹².

On 11 May, four days after Operation Sindoor, the Director General of Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR) showcased what was presented as contemporary imagery depicting the operational readiness of the Pakistan Navy¹¹³. Subsequent digital forensic analysis, however, revealed that the image had, in fact, been captured in 2023, two years prior. This incident reflected a recurring pattern marked by the reuse of archival visuals, meticulously altered footage, and fabricated audio material, all disseminated and endorsed by Pakistan's official military spokesperson. Simultaneously, a surge of fabricated claims flooded social media, their timing too precise to be organic. False reports declared that Pakistani hackers had crippled seventy percent of India's power grid. Footage from the video game ArMA 3 resurfaced fabricated as real frontline combat¹¹⁴.

For analysts watching the streams, the pattern was unmistakable. Over two thousand accounts posted near-identical messages within minutes. The pattern revealed its true nature. It was not chaos but coordination. It was a deliberate planned operation.

Beyond these, a wider ecosystem of misinformation emerged, including fake "captured pilot" and soldier narratives, false claims of strikes on Indian airbases and ports, fabricated reports of nationwide shutdowns such as airport closures and ATM disruptions, and broader waves of coordinated amplification across digital platforms¹¹⁵.

III. The Architects of Deception: A Comprehensive Map

Pakistan's information warfare during Operation Sindoor was not the product of any single actor. It was a multi-layered ecosystem in which state institutions, intelligence agencies, government ministers, think tanks, media houses, overseas lobbies, bot farms, and funded influencers each played distinct but interlocking roles. Mapping this ecosystem in full reveals the organisational sophistication of what India's Foreign Secretary Vikram Misri rightly characterised as a "malicious misinformation campaign".

Layer 1: DG ISPR — The Public Face of the Lie Factory

Lieutenant General Ahmed Sharif Chaudhry, the Director General of ISPR during Operation Sindoor, served as the primary institutional amplifier and official legitimiser of Pakistan's disinformation campaign.

Chaudhry's personal history added a darker dimension to his role. His father, Sultan Bashiruddin Mahmood, had been a prominent nuclear scientist in Pakistan, later linked to disturbing associations with al-Qaeda. Reports confirmed his meetings with Osama bin Laden and discussions related to nuclear technology¹¹⁶. These revelations cast a long shadow over Ahmed Chaudhry's credibility.

During Operation Sindoor, his manipulation of information became a defining feature of Pakistan's dis-information campaign. The exhaustive list of lies presented and endorsed by him are as follows:

- Manipulated clips of former Jammu & Kashmir Governor Satya Pal Malik and opposition leader Rahul Gandhi were edited and broadcast to suggest political and military disarray within India¹¹⁷.
- Lt Gen Ahmad Sharif Chaudhry, DG-ISPR stated India struck only six sites, but the Indian Ministry of Defence (MoD) officially confirmed nine terror

infrastructure targets. Later it was independently verified by OSINT experts, establishing the full extent of the strikes¹¹⁸.

- He alleged India fired missiles at its own installations in Amritsar as a false flag, but the Indian Foreign Secretary, Vikram Misri dismissed the claim as “ludicrous”. Moreover, Pakistan offered no credible evidence, no radar data, flight paths, or intercepted communications to substantiate its claim¹¹⁹.
- He presented satellite imagery alleging destruction of Indian airbases in Jammu and Udhampur by Pakistan, but independent analyst Damien Symon confirmed the visuals were manipulated and pre-dated the alleged strikes¹²⁰.
- He claimed that Pakistani JF-17 jets destroyed the BrahMos missile storage facility in Punjab. A claim that was dismissed by Indian agencies with evidence citing Google Earth imagery dated 15 May 2025 showing the facility intact and undamaged¹²¹.
- DG-ISPR presented a clipped segment from Aaj Tak TV suggesting widespread panic over Indian airbases being under attack, but the full report featuring Aaj Tak Senior Editor, Jitendra Bahadur Singh showed the opposite context, explaining India's strikes on Pakistan's launch pads and military assets, confirming the clip was taken out of context¹²².
- DG-ISPR alleged that Pakistani Air Force destroyed Indian S-400 missile system at a Northern Base. The claim was dismissed by Indian defence forces during an official briefing. Independent imagery analysis by Damien Symon (X handle @detresfa) found no evidence of damage at Bhuj or Adampur¹²³.

In each case, the DG-ISPR used the institutional authority of Pakistan's military spokesperson role to launder fabrications into the media ecosystem with the veneer of official validation.

The ISPR's social media arm operated with unnerving precision. Thousands of posts flooded social media platforms every hour. It was later found by Indian agencies that over 100,000 videos, spawned from just 43 coordinated threads. In the four months following the conflict, Indian analytical units identified two hundred and seventeen AI-generated deep fake videos targeting the Army Chief, the Chief of Defence Staff, and other Service Chiefs¹²⁴.

The objective was systematic and clear, to erode public confidence in Indian military leadership and to distort perceptions of truth itself. For international observers, it represented a turning point in the conduct of modern warfare. The battle for perception had replaced the battle for territory.

Layer 2: ISI — The Shadow Architect

The ISI operated as the unseen architect behind the visible campaign, steering the operation with calculated precision and strategic menace. From the shadows, it provided the critical components the ISPR's public-facing machinery required consisting of strategic direction, human intelligence, and covert cyber capabilities that turned narratives into weapons. With a long track record of manipulating perceptions during the 2016 surgical

strikes and the 2019 Balakot airstrike, the ISI entered this new phase of psychological warfare during Operation Sindoor¹²⁵.

During Operation Sindoor, its fingerprints became unmistakable. ISI-linked social media handles emerged as the core drivers of an especially malicious category of disinformation: personal attacks on named senior Indian military leaders. A wave of false claims flooded the information space revealing an unnerving pattern and relentless monitoring of India's Military ecosystem by ISI.

The campaign extended beyond high-level character assassination. Fake accounts masquerading as defence personnel infiltrated X, seeding false stories of collapsing morale and internal dissent within the armed forces. Cybersecurity firm FireEye traced sixty percent of these accounts to MSS-linked IP addresses in Shanghai, confirming disturbing evidence of an operational China-ISI nexus. What had once been a regional propaganda effort had now evolved into a transnational psy-ops architecture¹²⁶.

Even more alarming was the weaponisation of sound itself. The ISI deployed advanced AI-driven audio mimicry to replicate voices, crossing into a new frontier of deception. This was no longer about doctored videos or recycled imagery; it was the forging of synthetic commands capable of triggering chaos within ranks. It marked a dangerous shift, where disinformation was no longer just seen or read, but heard, believed, and potentially acted upon.

Layer 3: Government Ministers and Political Spokespersons

Pakistan's civilian leadership did not remain on the sidelines during the disinformation offensive; it became an active participant, lending political legitimacy and international reach to the campaign.

Defence Minister Khawaja Muhammad Asif's appearance on CNN was emblematic of this strategy¹²⁷. His confident assertion that five Indian jets had been shot down was not an impulsive exaggeration but a calculated move within a coordinated narrative crafted by the ISPR, magnified by Pakistani media, and elevated to global visibility through ministerial endorsement. When Asif was later forced to concede that the evidence for his claim came solely from social media, the damage had already been done¹²⁸. The misinformation had travelled across international airwaves in real time, while the correction, as always, remained confined to a far smaller audience.

The Pakistan Foreign Office complemented these theatrics with official statements denouncing India's military successes as baseless assertions and accusing New Delhi of distorting facts and glorifying conflict.

Pakistan's Federal Minister for Information and Broadcasting, Attaullah Tarar's televised attempt to promote Pakistan's position only deepened the dissonance. Confronted with questions about Pakistan's links to terror groups, he resorted to blanket denials directly contradicted by Defence Minister Asif's earlier viral confession that Pakistan had done this dirty work for the United States for three decades, and has nurtured Terror outfits as a part of its State policy¹²⁹.

What emerged was not mere disinformation campaign but a state-orchestrated information war that fused civil and military propaganda, calibrated to deceive, deny, and dominate the global narrative.

Layer 4: Think Tanks and Policy Fronts

Pakistan's information warfare ecosystem extended far beyond the military's formal communication arms. It encompassed a sophisticated network of think-tanks and policy institutions that offered intellectual cover and global reach to narratives crafted within Rawalpindi's strategic circles. Among these, the Pakistan Strategic Forum emerged as a central pillar. Investigations by DisinfoLab and multiple independent analysts have documented its role as an ISPR-linked influence network that conducts coordinated propaganda operations under the façade of independent strategic commentary¹³⁰. Its joint operation with the The Resistance Front (TRF) on 1 May built around fabricated R&AW documents, was its most audacious action during the Sindoor campaign. Yet, it fit neatly into an established pattern. The forum's digital network had previously launched orchestrated attacks falsely accusing India of involvement in the Israel-Iran conflict, executing the campaign in a phased manner laced with fabricated news, false narratives, impersonated identities, and cross-platform amplification¹³¹.

Alongside it stood the Islamabad Policy Research Institute, the diplomatic front of Pakistan's influence apparatus. Officially affiliated with the National Security Division, the institute expanded the reach of military narratives into foreign policy circuits. Records under the Foreign Agents Registration Act revealed that IPRI spent nine hundred thousand dollars on lobbying and policy outreach in the United States during the tense months of Operation Sindoor. It contracted Hyperfocal Communications LLC, a firm registered in October 2024 as a subcontractor to Team Eagle Consulting, to spearhead outreach aimed at improving US-Pakistan relations. In reality, this represented the direct use of think tank resources to shape international perception during an active crisis¹³².

What appeared to be research and dialogue was, in truth, a carefully engineered extension of state-sponsored information warfare. The blending of military coordination, policy institutions, and foreign lobbying power illustrated how Pakistan's disinformation architecture had evolved into a global apparatus.

Layer 5: Pakistani Media Houses

Pakistan's domestic media landscape, long dominated by the military-media complex built by ISPR, became an uncritical amplifier of disinformation during Operation Sindoor. Years of military control had eroded journalistic independence, turning major outlets into vehicles for narrative warfare¹³³.

State broadcaster PTV and private networks including ARY News, Geo News, and Dunya TV aired fabricated reports and recycled visuals from unrelated conflicts. Footage from Iranian missile strikes on Israel in 2024 was passed off as evidence of Pakistani military success against India, while unverified claims of Indian aircraft losses circulated unchecked¹³⁴.

Beyond Pakistan's borders, the information offensive continued. Through friendly journalists positioned in Western media organisations like CNN, Reuters, Bloomberg, and

The New York Times, Pakistan exported its propaganda with an air of legitimacy¹³⁵. Analysts noted that these stories, often citing unnamed military sources and lacking evidence, spread baseless anti-India claims globally. Reuters' report asserting that Pakistan had downed three Indian jets carried no corroboration, yet its publication by a trusted wire service gave the false story extraordinary reach¹³⁶.

This diffusion was further facilitated by editorial biases and established narrative predispositions within segments of international media coverage towards India, which made it comparatively easier for Pakistani claims to gain visibility and traction in global information ecosystems¹³⁷. This diffusion was further amplified across outlets such as *Al Jazeera*, *TRT World*, *Anadolu Agency*, and Chinese state-linked media outlets such as *Global Times* and *Xinhua*, as well as through broader geopolitical information environments shaped by varying regional alignments and differing strategic relations with India, which influenced how such narratives were framed and received. The combination of these ecosystems, supported by large global audiences, made it easier for such narratives to circulate widely and gain international visibility¹³⁸.

In a telling twist, Defence Minister Asif later pointed to CNN's reporter, based on Pakistani sources, as "proof" of India's losses, creating a loop where the same false claim kept repeating until it seemed true.

Indian administration struck back, blocking X accounts of China's *Global Times* and *Xinhua*¹³⁹, which had amplified the hoax, along with Turkey's *TRT World*. The latter's messaging mirrored ISPR's talking points so precisely that it was assessed as working in coordination with Pakistan's information apparatus¹⁴⁰.

Layer 6: Overseas Lobbies and Diaspora Proxies

The network ran deeper than anyone imagined. Pakistan's information warfare had extended beyond borders, threading through the diaspora and into Western political infrastructure. Lobbying firms, separatist fronts, and digital masquerades worked in concert to mould perception inside Washington's power circles.

Details came in the form of filings under the Foreign Agents Registration Act (FARA), a US law requiring mention of anyone lobbying or conducting political work in the US on behalf of foreign governments¹⁴¹. The filings disclosed that during Operation Sindoor, Islamabad had poured nearly \$5 million into lobbying, an astonishing sum for a nation under IMF surveillance and clinging to a \$7 billion bailout. Six firms took the contracts.

The choice of firms was interesting. Javelin Advisors, led by former Trump executives George Sorial and Keith Schiller, carried access few could rival¹⁴². On 7 May the day Operation Sindoor began, they arranged a call between Pakistan's ambassador and Congressman Brian Mast, a conversation meant to stall India's advance through political pressure. Squire Patton Boggs, an International Law Firm, targeted both parties in Congress consisting of the offices of Senator John Thune, Chuck Schumer, Steve Scalise, and Hakeem Jeffries. Other lobbyists courted reporters at the Wall Street Journal and New York Times, seeding narratives for Pakistan's case.

As Islamabad pleaded victimhood, its alliance with Khalistani figures added a darker edge. Gurpatwant Singh Pannun, head of the banned Sikhs for Justice, echoed ISPR's false

claims almost instantly¹⁴³. It echoed well with ISPR's strategy of sowing internal fracture within India.

Layer 7: Bot Farms, Troll Armies, and Funded Influencers

Pakistan's digital information war was carried out with precision. Beneath the noise of trending hashtags and viral outrage ran a calculated network of bots, trolls, and paid influencers, all moving in quiet synchronisation to create the illusion of public consensus. *Blackbird.AI*'s independent analysis tracked over 180,000 posts birthing more than three million engagements during Operation Sindoor¹⁴⁴. The patterns were unmistakable. Nearly a third of all Pakistan-affiliated narratives showed abnormal activity, a proof of coordination rather than conversation. Even the hashtag #PakistanIsATerrorState, seemingly pro-India, was largely synthetic, its ninety-three percent anomaly rate revealing manipulation designed to provoke rather than persuade.

Indian cyber units later pieced together how the Army Agahi Network had been recast for psychological warfare. High-profile celebrities and public figures joined the chorus, amplifying forged narratives with the credibility their fame afforded. Their involvement gave propaganda a human face, cleansing it of suspicion and carrying it to audiences who trusted the messenger more than the message. The tactic was subtle, almost elegant, suggesting a clean laundering of state fiction through cultural familiarity.

Outside the formal structure, Pakistan built an outer ring of commercially funded influencers, scattered across diaspora communities in London, New York, Toronto, and Dubai. These creators dressed military talking points in the language of commentary and conscience. Their words felt genuine, their outrage believable, yet beneath it flowed a familiar rhythm of state direction. They traded trust for reach, emotion for control.

This influencer ecosystem did not operate only through narrative commentary but extended into a deeper layer of visual persuasion. Social media influencers increasingly advanced these narratives through symbolic and aesthetic representation rather than direct messaging. Maps, stylised military graphics, edited battlefield visuals, and curated propaganda imagery functioned as tools of influence, designed to circulate easily across platforms while avoiding overt political framing. In some instances, militarised clothing aesthetics and symbolic references were used to project credibility, authority, and authenticity, blurring the boundary between analysis and performance¹⁴⁵.

Alongside this ecosystem, an additional layer of coordinated digital engagement operated through a large-scale social media amplification network. Rather than focusing only on posting content, this network was heavily active in comment sections of social media posts, where organised accounts systematically challenged, drowned out, or discredited opposing viewpoints¹⁴⁶. These coordinated comment-driven interventions were used to shape perception, suppress dissenting narratives, and create the appearance of overwhelming consensus. Analysts have described this as a form of engagement warfare, where influence is exerted not only through content creation but through aggressive interaction, harassment, and narrative policing across platforms, extending from regional discourse in places like Kashmir to wider international conversations.

IV. The Financial Trail: Following the Money

The most difficult dimension of Pakistan's information warfare to document is also the most revealing: the question of how it was financed. Money, ultimately, gets everything moving. The financial flows associated with Pakistan's Operation Sindoor disinformation campaign tells a story of calculated investment by a state that was simultaneously pleading economic distress.

The Official Defence Budget and Its Shadows

Pakistan's official defence budget for the fiscal year 2025–26, announced in the aftermath of Operation Sindoor, stood at 2.55 trillion rupees (PKR), roughly equivalent to nine billion dollars, marking an increase of more than twenty percent over the previous year¹⁴⁷. Within this figure, 704 billion rupees were allocated for operating expenses, while 663 billion rupees were designated for the procurement of arms, ammunition, and military equipment.

What the official ledger did not disclose and what Islamabad has persistently withheld, is the separate budget line reserved for the ISI and Military Intelligence (MI). It is from these hidden, unregulated accounts that Pakistan's most discreet operations are sustained. Information warfare, by its very nature, draws life from these opaque and unaccountable streams of funding and it is beyond audit, beyond oversight, and far from public scrutiny.

Washington: The \$5 Million Lobbying Blitz

The most forensically documented financial trail in Pakistan's Operation Sindoor information warfare led directly to Washington DC. FARA filings, submitted to the US Department of Justice as legally required disclosures of foreign government lobbying activity, provided an unusually transparent window into Pakistan's crisis-period spending¹⁴⁸.

The total lobbying expenditure documented in these filings reached approximately \$5 million in a compressed period during and immediately after Operation Sindoor¹⁴⁹. This figure encompassed six lobbying firms: Squire Patton Boggs, Javelin Advisors (\$50,000 per month), Seiden Law LLP, Sidley Law LLP, Team Eagle Consulting LLC, and associated subcontractors. The Islamabad Policy Research Institute a National Security Division (NSD)-affiliated think tank, contributed an additional \$900,000 in documented lobbying and public policy outreach¹⁵⁰.

The financial flows were not merely large in absolute terms. They were extraordinary in context. Pakistan, at the time of Operation Sindoor, was under its twenty-fourth IMF programme, a \$7 billion emergency bailout designed to prevent financial default. Its economy was stagnant, its fiscal deficit in structural crisis, and its population enduring severe inflation. Yet the military establishment without any institutional friction poured in millions of rupees to deploy on American lobbying firms within days of the conflict beginning. This capacity for rapid, large-scale financial mobilisation for information warfare purposes, even under conditions of economic duress, is itself evidence of the priority the Pakistani military assigns to the information domain and its sheer neglect for welfare of its people.

Notably, these filings also revealed that Pakistan turned to the United States for support during Indian airstrikes on its airbases and terror-linked infrastructure. Between late April and early May 2025, at the height of Operation Sindoor, Pakistani diplomats and defence officials engaged in nearly 40 high-level meetings and outreach efforts with US lawmakers, Pentagon officials, and media representatives—highlighting how financial outlays were directly translated into rapid diplomatic mobilisation¹⁵¹.

China's Financial Shadow and Propaganda Warfare

The most significant yet the least transparent financial dimension of Pakistan's information warfare during Operation Sindoor was the Chinese contribution, especially by its Ministry of State Security (MSS)—the principal civilian intelligence, security, and secret police agency of the People's Republic of China. Operating out of the Yidongyuan compound in Beijing's Haidian District, responsible for foreign intelligence, counterintelligence, covert action, and the political security of the Chinese Communist Party. The MSS-ISI nexus described by cybersecurity researchers involved not merely technical assistance but operational funding for AI-driven botnet infrastructure, deep-fake production capabilities, and cross-platform coordination tools that Pakistan could not have developed or sustained independently. China's state-controlled media outlets, Global Times and Xinhua, provided free amplification of Pakistani narratives¹⁵².

The broader pattern was consistent with the MSS's documented use of AI-powered botnets during regional conflicts: a 2024 Microsoft Threat Analysis Center report identified MSS-linked bot-nets generating 70 percent of disinformation traffic during Asian regional conflicts¹⁵³.

During Operation Sindoor, several such digital tools were reused and redeployed for online campaigns. One widely circulated fake video falsely claiming that India's Rafale jet was shot down near Bahawalpur, was later traced by cybersecurity firm Recorded Future to a server based in Beijing. China's financial backing for Pakistan's information warfare isn't officially recorded or invoiced; it functions as a hidden strategic subsidy. Through this arrangement, Beijing helps shape Pakistan's digital and military narrative while already funding about 82 percent of Pakistan's imported weapons.

This pattern extended beyond tactical information manipulation into a broader strategic effort. A report by the US-China Economic and Security Review Commission further noted that, following the May 2025 India–Pakistan border crisis, China initiated a coordinated disinformation campaign aimed at undermining the export credibility of the Rafale platform. According to the report, Chinese-linked networks disseminated AI-generated images depicting fabricated “debris” allegedly destroyed by Chinese-origin systems, while simultaneously promoting their own next-generation platforms such as the Shenyang J-35. Notably, elements of this campaign appeared to intensify soon after the April 22 Pahalgam attack, raising questions about the timing and strategic intent of the move¹⁵⁴.

Likewise, French military and intelligence agencies concluded that China ran a “vast disinformation campaign” targeting the Rafale fighter jet after the India–Pakistan conflict. According to French intelligence, China used embassies and defence attachés to spread doubts about Rafale's performance globally, especially among potential buyers. The campaign was aimed to damage France's defence exports and credibility, and not just

India's wartime narrative. French assessments also indicate that the Rafale was not randomly chosen but "specifically targeted" because it represents a strategic French export platform, not randomly chosen. China combined digital disinformation (AI images, fake debris) with diplomatic pressure through embassies—a hybrid strategy. Importantly, both US and French findings converge, with the US report itself citing French intelligence in concluding that China used fake accounts and AI-generated "debris" imagery to undermine Rafale sales¹⁵⁵.

Beyond undermining a specific military equipment, the campaign also reflected a broader strategic objective of weakening India's technological edge and geopolitical standing during the conflict. By reinforcing Pakistani narratives and amplifying doubt around India's capabilities and operational effectiveness, China's support functioned as part of a wider effort to shape the informational balance of the crisis in Pakistan's favour, while simultaneously challenging India's credibility as a rising regional military power.

V. The Reckoning: What the Invisible War Reveals

The disinformation campaign launched by Pakistan during Operation Sindoor ultimately failed in its primary objective of reversing, or even seriously contesting, the narrative of the conflict's outcome. Pakistan's Defence Minister's statement on CNN that his evidence for five downed Indian jets was "all over social media" became a global symbol of the campaign's epistemological bankruptcy. Even Donald Trump, while commenting on these claims, at times stated that five aircraft had been shot down, and at other times suggested figures of six, seven, or even eleven, thereby indirectly undermining these claims by repeating inconsistent versions. India's Press Information Bureau (PIB) fact-checking unit issued 18 or more individual fact-checks, the Indian agencies identified 217 deepfakes within four months, and India's Chief of Defence Staff acknowledged publicly the enormous resources devoted to countering disinformation, an acknowledgement that was itself a form of strategic transparency Pakistan could not match.

Indian Chief of Army Staff, General Upendra Dwivedi's observation about the power of narrative over reality, that a Pakistani citizen would reason, "my chief has become field marshal, we must have won" was not contempt but honest analysis. Pakistan had built, maintained, and deployed a sophisticated disinformation infrastructure in South Asia. It had done so with state funding, military command, institutional architecture, overseas financial networks, and foreign technical support. It had activated that infrastructure with precision and speed at the moment of strategic crisis. This phenomenon stems from Pakistan's own realisation of the fact that it can never defeat India in Kinetic Warfare, hence, quite strategically it has attempted to change the very definition of victory. A shift from battlefield heroics to Internet sensationalism.

The invisible front does not cease when the missiles stop. It runs twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, funded from opaque budget lines and cryptocurrency wallets, managed by military officers posing as freelance writers, amplified by state media in Beijing and Ankara, and extended through lobbyists in Washington and terrorists in New York. Understanding it, mapping it, naming it, and funding the institutions to counter it is not merely an intelligence priority. In the conflicts of the twenty-first century, it is the condition of truth's survival.

India's Strategic Imperative

Given the evolving nature of warfare, India must recognise that no modern conflict is complete unless it is contested and won in the cognitive domain. Pakistan has, since its inception, consistently employed propaganda and psychological operations as instruments of statecraft against India. This effort has been reinforced by external amplification networks, including segments of foreign state-linked media ecosystems in China and Turkey, as well as selective international reportage in outlets such as Al Jazeera, BBC, and Deutsche Welle that, at times, reflects structural biases in framing regional developments, favourable to Pakistan and prejudicial to India in their reporting.

Despite facing internal challenges—including political instability, economic distress, and institutional strain—Pakistan has demonstrated a notable ability to maintain internal cohesion and external relevance. A significant part of this resilience can be attributed to its long-standing investment in narrative construction and perception management. This is evident in contemporary developments, where even the imprisonment of a widely popular political figure such as Imran Khan has not translated into systemic destabilisation, indicating the depth of narrative conditioning and the state's capacity to shape public perception. Through sustained messaging, it has shaped both domestic opinion and international discourse.

For India, engagement in narrative warfare and psychological operations is no longer optional—it is imperative. Indian think tanks, academic institutions and strategic communities must move beyond passive analysis to active participation in global discourse countering Pakistani disinformation. They must articulate India's perspective with clarity, confidence and intellectual rigour across international platforms. A defensive posture in the information domain cedes space to adversarial narratives; what is required instead is a calibrated, assertive and evidence-based communication strategy.

Pakistan has, in many ways, sustained its strategic relevance through narrative projection. India, while possessing far greater material and institutional capacity, must ensure that its voice is equally present, persuasive, and persistent in the global information order. In contemporary conflict, power is not only measured in terms of military capability, but also in terms of the ability to define the reality itself.

Chapter 5

The Terror Playbook

The battlefield of the 21st century is no longer confined to mountains, borders, or skies. It pulses through timelines, trends, and televised narratives. In the case of Operation Sindoor, the conflict unfolded as much in the digital domain as in the physical one. What emerged was a layered, deliberate and adaptive information warfare strategy—one designed not merely to respond, but to shape perception before facts could take root.

This chapter examines how modern conflict extends beyond physical battlefields into the domain of information and perception. Using Operation Sindoor as a case study, it highlights how digital platforms, media narratives, and real-time communication channels have become central to contemporary warfare. The chapter argues that in such conflicts, shaping public understanding can be as strategically significant as achieving military objectives, with actors seeking to influence how events are interpreted even before verified facts emerge. It further analyses the structured use of narratives as a core tool of information warfare. By exploring recurring themes such as victimhood, false flag allegations and portrayals of state aggression, the chapter demonstrates how messaging is crafted to evoke emotional responses, deflect accountability and reframe complex situations.

These narratives are not deployed randomly but are layered and reinforced through techniques like hashtag manipulation, synthetic media and selective information leaks, creating an environment where ambiguity and repetition often outweigh accuracy. Finally, the chapter emphasises the importance of audience targeting and psychological operations in amplifying these efforts. It shows how messaging is tailored differently for domestic populations, diaspora communities and international policymakers, reflecting a nuanced understanding of influence dynamics. Beneath these visible strategies, psychological tactics such as timing, emotional priming, and the deliberate creation of confusion—play a critical role in shaping perceptions. Overall, the chapter presents information warfare as a deliberate and evolving strategy aimed at controlling narratives, influencing opinion, and redefining the nature of modern conflict.

I. The Architecture of Narrative

At the heart of Pakistan's information operations lies a *triad of narrative patterns* which is simple, repeatable, and emotionally charged.

- (a) The first is **victimhood**. This narrative casts Pakistan as a beleaguered state, perpetually on the defensive against a more powerful adversary. Alleged Civilian casualties, against admissions by terror elements about their losses, are consistently brought to the forefront. Visuals, often stripped of context or taken from unrelated incidents, circulate rapidly and are paired with captions that emphasise suffering, loss, and injustice¹⁵⁶.

Alongside these, recurring claims of impending aggression are projected, with narratives suggesting that India is planning future attacks, orchestrating conspiracies to destabilise Pakistan, or seeking to undermine its internal cohesion and development¹⁵⁷. The objective is not limited to generating sympathy but extends to a deeper moral inversion, where the accused is repositioned as the aggrieved party in the eyes of the audience.

Drawing upon established principles in political communication and cognitive psychology, Pakistan's approach reflects an awareness that in contemporary conflicts, the battle for perception often precedes—and at times outweighs—the battle on the ground. By shaping interpretive cues in advance, these narratives reduce cognitive ambiguity for target audiences, offering simplified, emotionally resonant explanations that can be readily internalised and disseminated within fast-moving digital ecosystems¹⁵⁸. A central feature of this narrative strategy is the systematic use of selective framing. Particular elements of the conflict—especially those involving civilian suffering or alleged humanitarian concerns—are consistently foregrounded, while other contextual dimensions are minimised or omitted. This process of emphasis and exclusion enables the construction of a morally charged account in which Pakistan is positioned as a defensive actor responding to external aggression. The repeated circulation of visual content plays a crucial role in reinforcing this framing. Images and videos, frequently detached from their original context or temporal specificity, are deployed as affective instruments capable of eliciting immediate emotional responses¹⁵⁹.

Such de-contextualisation allowed disparate incidents to be subsumed into a broader narrative of victimhood, thereby creating continuity in perception even where factual continuity was limited or contested.

For instance, a key extension of this narrative of victimhood is the repeated invocation of losses by Pakistan in the “war on terror,” with figures exceeding 90,000 casualties frequently cited at international forums¹⁶⁰. Notably, this framing is often deployed most forcefully when Pakistan faces direct criticism or is confronted with allegations of sponsoring or enabling terrorist networks. In such moments, the narrative of suffering is strategically foregrounded to shift the focus from accountability to victimhood. This statistic thus functions as a moral shield, allowing Islamabad to deflect scrutiny and recast itself as a frontline victim rather than a *structural contributor to terrorism*. However, this framing is widely contested. These terrorist infrastructures were historically embedded within Pakistan's strategic calculus, sustained through seminary-based networks and sanctuaries that have now, to some extent, evolved beyond state control. This environment was shaped by the use of non-state actors for external strategic objectives, alongside recruitment structures within segments of the seminary ecosystem and logistical sanctuaries in border and semi-governed regions. Over time, these elements consolidated into what is widely described in strategic literature as a multi-layered terrorist ecosystem comprising organisations, support structures, financing channels, and ideological recruitment pathways that has proven difficult to dismantle¹⁶¹.

This critique is captured in Hillary Clinton's warning during her 2011 visit to Islamabad: “You can't keep snakes in your backyard and expect them only to bite your neighbours¹⁶². Eventually, those snakes are going to turn on whoever has them in the

backyard.” The same logic is echoed in various strategic assessments. Kamran Bokhari, a Washington-based foreign policy analyst and Senior Director at the New Lines Institute for Strategy and Policy, describes this dynamic as “blowback, big time,” arguing that support for terror proxies inevitably reaches a point where “it is only a matter of time before they turn their guns on you.” The broader implication is that such actors, once instrumentalised for external objectives, can acquire ideological and operational autonomy, ultimately redirecting violence inward¹⁶³.

This victimhood framing is also strategically deployed in multilateral diplomacy, particularly at platforms such as the United Nations. In these settings, when addressing such forums, Pakistan often begins by foregrounding its own victimhood in terrorism and its sacrifices in counterterrorism efforts, which are introduced at the outset of discussions on terrorism, thereby shaping the narrative space before external criticisms are raised¹⁶⁴. This approach enables a pre-emptive reframing of discourse, establishing moral credibility while simultaneously diluting scrutiny over complicity in sustaining terror ecosystems.

At the same time, this framing tends to overlook persistent international criticism that Pakistan have historically supported terror groups operating from its soil, including organisations such as Jaish e Mohammed, The Resistance Front, Lashkar e Taiba and Al Qaeda. By not addressing these concerns, the narrative shifts attention away from questions of accountability. This selective presentation enables Pakistan to deflect scrutiny while reinforcing a carefully constructed image of innocence, while simultaneously portraying external responses as unprovoked aggression rather than actions linked to underlying security concerns.



Fig 4 Pakistan Army officers who attended funeral of Jaish e Muhammad and Lashkar e Taiba terrorists killed in Operation Sindoor

(b) The second is the **use of “false flag”** narrative. Here, any adverse event is pre-emptively framed as a staged operation by India. Adverse events, including acts of violence or

escalation, are frequently framed as being orchestrated by India, thereby introducing an alternative explanatory framework before competing accounts can gain traction¹⁶⁵. This approach aligns with the concept of pre-bunking, wherein audiences are exposed to a particular interpretation in advance, reducing their susceptibility to contradictory evidence. By embedding scepticism toward opposing narratives at an early stage, Pakistan's information strategy seeks to inoculate both domestic and sympathetic audiences against external claims, while simultaneously generating uncertainty among neutral observers¹⁶⁶. In such an environment, the proliferation of competing interpretations does not necessarily clarify understanding but instead contributes to a state of epistemic ambiguity in which definitive conclusions become difficult to establish.

This tactic serves two purposes. It inoculates domestic and sympathetic audiences against contrary evidence, and it introduces doubt in neutral observers. In an environment saturated with conflicting claims, uncertainty itself becomes a weapon. This pattern has been particularly evident in the aftermath of major terrorist incidents in India, where attacks are frequently attributed to internal orchestration by Indian agencies rather than external actors.

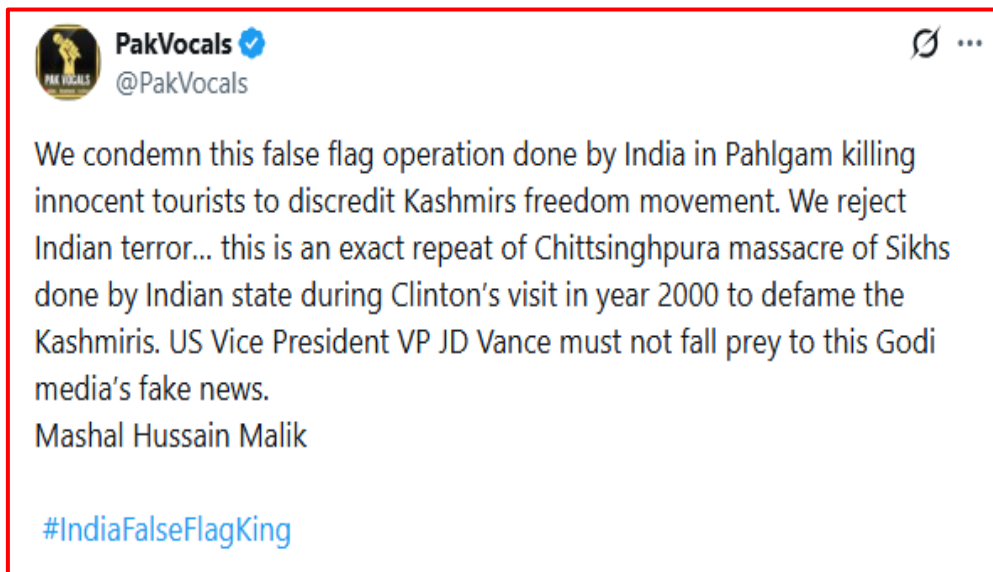


Fig 5 In the early hours of 23rd Apr 2025, Pakistani handles started trending #IndiaFalseFlagKing to circulate the narrative that Pahalgam Terror Attack was an inside Indian job

For instance, following the Pahalgam attack in the Baisaran Valley of Jammu and Kashmir, a brutal terror attack in which more than 26 innocent tourists were massacred, sections of Pakistani narratives immediately characterised it as a false flag operation allegedly staged for political or electoral gains¹⁶⁷. A similar framing emerged after the Pulwama attack, in which 40 Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) personnel were killed, reflecting a broader strategic game plan against India, where it was suggested that the incident was engineered by India to implicate Pakistan. This narrative has been repeatedly echoed by elements of the Pakistani leadership after major terror incidents in India. For instance, Foreign Minister Khawaja Asif referred to the Pahalgam terror attack as a "false flag operation¹⁶⁸." In this broader pattern, terrorist attacks in India are frequently accompanied by claims attributing responsibility to Indian state agencies,

thereby attempting to deflect blame and reshape attribution narratives. Subsequently, when India responds militarily or diplomatically, such responses are often framed as acts of aggression, reinforcing a cycle of contested claims and counter-claims¹⁶⁹. These narratives are then carried to the global stage through international media, where they are sometimes amplified by countries that maintain a hostile or adversarial stance towards India, thereby extending their circulation and reinforcing alternative interpretations of events.

- (c) The third pattern is the framing of Indian action as “**state-sponsored aggression.**” This narrative elevates incidents into patterns, suggesting a systematic policy rather than isolated actions. By invoking the language of international law, human rights, and humanitarian norms, it seeks to draw in global institutions and policy circles, reframing regional tensions as matters of international concern.

At international forums, particularly within the United Nations system and associated advocacy spaces, this discourse is extended through sustained references to alleged human rights violations in Jammu and Kashmir and claims of discrimination against minority communities, particularly Muslims in India. Pakistan often strategically comments on India's Muslim minority and allegations of rights violations in India, with sections of its leadership frequently raising concerns about Indian Muslims¹⁷⁰. In this framing, Pakistan positions itself—directly or indirectly—as a moral voice or regional custodian of Muslim interests in South Asia, thereby projecting a broader sense of normative responsibility¹⁷¹. This, in turn, facilitates the projection of moral authority, which is leveraged to advance propaganda narratives and shape perceptions, and ultimately to support broader radicalisation narratives directed against India. In this context that Pakistan's information strategy seeks not merely to criticise specific policies, but to construct a sustained and morally charged narrative portraying India as a systematically aggressive and oppressive state.

This broader moral framing is further reinforced through the selective use of international references and institutional discourse. Such arguments often rely on selective interpretations of international reporting and UN expert communications that are presented as raising concerns regarding civil liberties and security-related measures in India. Within this framing, themes of freedom, civil rights, and humanitarian protection are foregrounded to internationalise bilateral issues and position India's domestic policies within a global accountability discourse¹⁷².

A further illustration of this approach is “Kashmir Solidarity Day,” observed annually by Pakistan on 5th February, which is used to internationalise the Kashmir issue and reinforce allegations of human rights concerns in the region. For instance, this year, it was marked through coordinated nationwide observances, including public rallies, seminars, human chains, and extensive media programming, and officially declared a public holiday. On this occasion, political and diplomatic leadership issued statements and conducted outreach through international platforms, including the United Nations, highlighting what it describes as the situation in Jammu and Kashmir and calling for global attention to its concerns and related UN resolutions¹⁷³. Pakistani diplomatic missions abroad also organised commemorative events and engagements with foreign audiences and diaspora communities to reinforce this narrative. This observance is also marked by coordinated diplomatic messaging and engagement through Pakistan's

missions abroad, contributing to sustained visibility of the issue in international discourse. Such recurring platforms function not only as advocacy tools but also as instruments of narrative reinforcement, enabling the continued projection of the issue within global diplomatic and media agendas¹⁷⁴.

An additional and increasingly assertive dimension of this narrative involves framing. This is not incidental rhetoric—it is a calculated attempt to embed the Kashmir issue within globally resonant discourses of colonial domination and protracted humanitarian crisis. By deploying terms such as “demographic change,” “settler colonialism,” and “turning it into Gaza,” the narrative seeks to delegitimise governance measures, development initiatives, and administrative decisions by recasting them as instruments of coercive transformation¹⁷⁵.

What is particularly concerning, however, is that such framing is not confined to external actors. In certain cases, development assistance, financial support, and institutional initiatives extended by the central government have also been portrayed through this same lens¹⁷⁶.

By aligning with globally emotive constructs such as colonialism and humanitarian crisis, these narratives gain traction far beyond their original context, contributing to a distorted and adversarial portrayal of India on the global stage. The cumulative impact is the systematic construction of an image of India as an aggressive and coercive state—an outcome that is not merely incidental but actively pursued through coordinated narrative engineering¹⁷⁷.



Fig 6 Pakistani handles accusing India of backing terrorism within Pakistan as part of a broader blame-shifting narrative and to showcase Indian sponsored aggression.

It is within this broader context that these narrative patterns must be understood. They are not deployed randomly but are structured, calibrated, and mutually reinforcing. Operating in a sequenced and layered manner, they often overlap across diplomatic messaging, digital amplification, and synthetic media ecosystems. This convergence generates a dense

narrative environment in which clarity is deliberately obscured and competing claims proliferate, creating a form of informational fog where truth itself becomes increasingly contested and negotiable within the information space.

II. Amplification in the Age of Algorithms

Narratives alone are inert without amplification. During Operation Sindoor, amplification was neither organic nor accidental, it was engineered.

Hashtag hijacking became a primary tool. Trending tags originating from Indian discourse were swiftly co-opted, flooded with counter-narratives, and redirected. The objective was visibility and dilution. By overwhelming a tag with conflicting content, the original message loses relevance, and casual observers encounter a fractured, contested story rather than a unified one¹⁷⁸.

Indian-origin hashtags like #OperationSindoor and #IndiaStrikesBack were rapidly diluted within hours, with posts accusing India of human rights violations, shifting the narrative from operational success to alleged misconduct¹⁷⁹.

Similarly, hashtags such as #IndianMuslimsUnderAttack, #IndianMuslimGenocideAlert, and #StopIndianAtrocities were deployed as part of broader narrative campaigns aimed at recasting the conflict within a human rights framework¹⁸⁰. These tags functioned as framing devices, linking specific incidents to larger, emotionally charged themes related to minority persecution and state violence. In doing so, they expanded the scope of the discourse beyond immediate events, embedding them within enduring global concerns around rights and justice, thereby increasing their resonance with international audiences.

Campaigns around UN meetings, G20 events, and Kashmir observance days have also seen coordinated hashtag activity aimed at international audiences, often combining political messaging with human rights framing. Investigations and OSINT reports indicate that many such hashtags tend to trend rapidly within hours of incidents, are amplified by clusters of coordinated accounts, and often originate outside India while targeting Indian events. Such patterns suggest that these are not purely organic expressions of digital activism, but rather structured efforts to manipulate visibility, influence algorithmic prioritisation, and shape perception at scale. In this sense, hashtag hijacking operates as a form of networked information warfare, where control over narrative visibility becomes as important as control over narrative content¹⁸¹.

This pattern was also evident during India's G20 presidency, when coordinated campaigns sought to undermine its global image and dilute the diplomatic significance of its leadership role¹⁸². Similarly, during the COVID-19 pandemic, disinformation efforts intensified, including the circulation of AI-generated and misleading visual content portraying dead bodies floating in Indian rivers such as the Ganges, accompanied by narratives suggesting state failure and governance collapse¹⁸³. These efforts were widely interpreted as attempts to damage India's international reputation by amplifying distressing imagery and framing it within a broader discourse of institutional inadequacy.

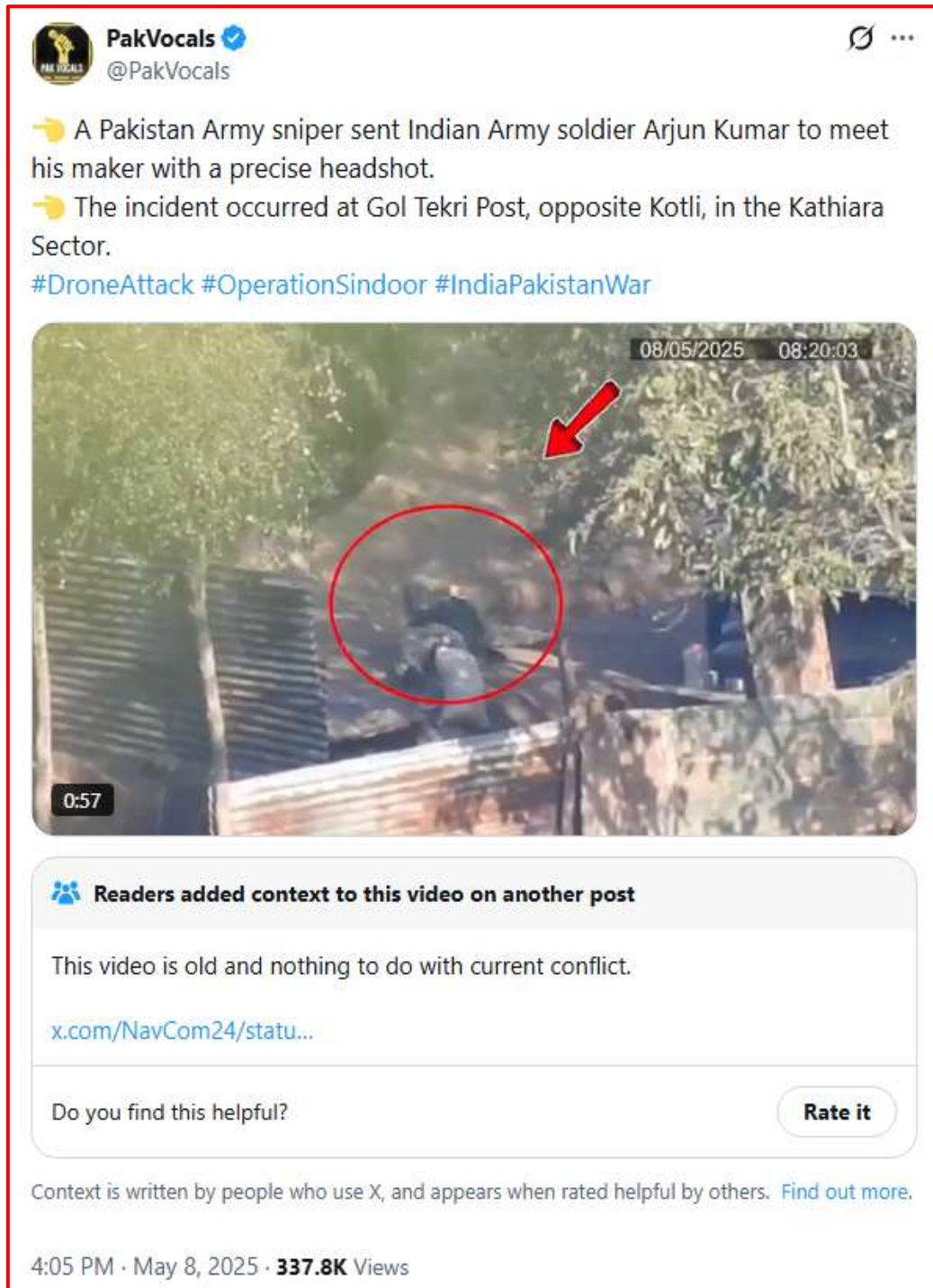


Fig 7 Pakistani accounts hijacking the hashtag #OperationSindoor and circulating outdated videos to push an anti-India narrative using India's own trending hashtag

Deepfakes and synthetic media marked a more sophisticated evolution. Audio clips, altered videos, and fabricated statements surfaced at critical moments. For instance, in the context of Operation Sindoor-related narratives, multiple AI-generated deepfake videos of senior military officials circulated online, falsely making them appear to admit heavy Indian losses (such as “250 soldiers killed”), claim technological inferiority, or make fabricated operational and political statements¹⁸⁴. Fact-check agencies and official clarifications by Indian Press Information Bureau (PIB) confirmed that these were digitally

manipulated AI-generated clips and not real statements. Investigations further indicated that such manipulated videos were amplified through coordinated propaganda accounts, linked to Pakistan's disinformation campaigns, with the intent of creating psychological impact, confusion, and narrative reversal during active crisis periods¹⁸⁵.

On “voice change” and synthetic audio specifically, some versions of these deepfakes used AI voice-cloning techniques to alter speech patterns and tone, making it appear as though the officials from defence forces were speaking differently or delivering statements, they never made¹⁸⁶. These manipulations combined video editing with synthetic audio overlays, reflecting a more advanced phase of deepfake-based information warfare. Even when debunked, their initial impact lingered. In the information domain, retraction rarely travels as far or as fast as the original claim.



Fig 8 Pakistani social media handles were seen spreading a deep fake video by BBC news reporting on the shooting down of the Indian Rafael Aircraft.

Selective leaks added a veneer of credibility. Documents were partial, decontextualised, or unverifiable, and were circulated through sympathetic channels. These leaks were framed as insider revelations, lending apparent authenticity to pre-existing narratives. The strategy is consistent with documented “hack-and-leak” and information manipulation techniques, where selectively released material—whether real, altered, or mixed—is used to shape perception rather than establish factual clarity. In such operations, even genuine fragments of information are often stripped of context to maximise interpretive ambiguity and narrative impact¹⁸⁷. These techniques aim less at proving specific claims and more at reinforcing suspicion, suggesting alternative interpretations, and sustaining uncertainty in contested information environments. The strategy was subtle: not to prove, but to suggest; not to confirm, but to imply.

This pattern also included the circulation of old crash footage and unrelated military visuals falsely linked to the operation, along with social media networks disseminating fake official notices, including defence-related alerts and institutional announcements claiming escalation or cancellations¹⁸⁸. AI-generated videos and altered visuals were also used to falsely portray battlefield outcomes and leadership statements, including fabricated admissions of losses and misleading operational claims. In addition, videos from unrelated conflict zones, particularly Middle East war environments, were misrepresented as imagery from the India–Pakistan escalation context¹⁸⁹. These materials were often amplified through coordinated clusters of accounts engaging in synchronised posting and rapid amplification, particularly during peak crisis windows, further accelerating narrative diffusion before verification mechanisms could respond.

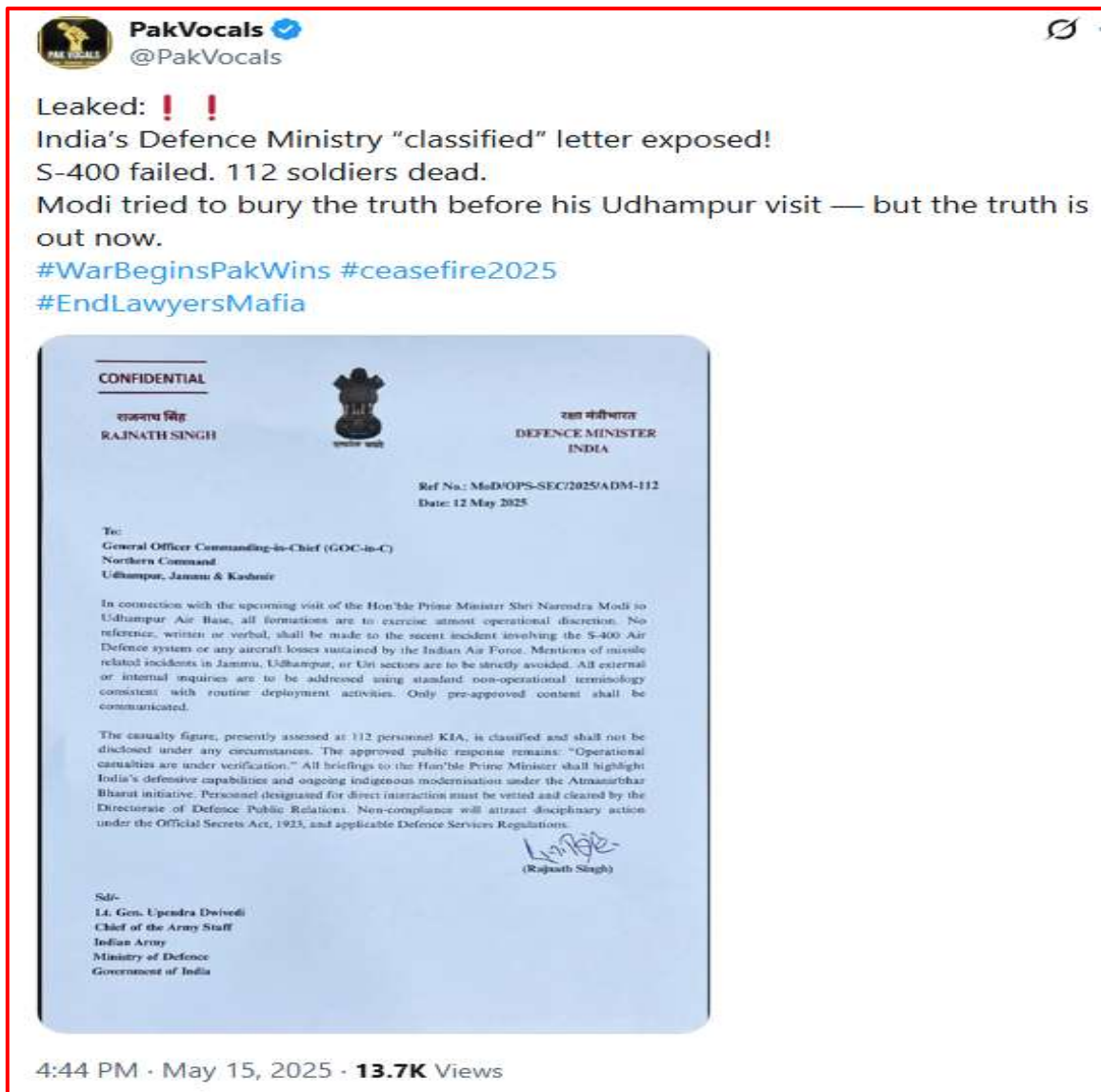


Fig 9 Pakistani social media handles were seen spreading a fake letter claiming the S-400 was exposed and 112 soldiers were dead

Together, these techniques created an ecosystem where speed trumped accuracy, and repetition substituted evidence.

III. Mapping the Audience

No information campaign is complete without a clear understanding of its target audience. Pakistan's approach during Operation Sindoor demonstrated a segmented targeting strategy.

For the **domestic audience**, the messaging reinforced unity and resilience. State-aligned media and social platforms consistently echoed a tightly controlled set of themes—victimhood, external threat, and national resolve—creating a unified narrative environment with little room for alternative interpretations¹⁹⁰. This repetition across television, print, and digital spaces ensured message saturation, normalising a singular understanding of the conflict. Dissenting voices were marginalised, and ambiguity was minimised. The goal was cohesion, not debate. Complex developments were simplified into binary frames of “us versus them,” enabling easier public mobilisation and emotional alignment with the state's position.

This also entailed an incremental strengthening of military control through narratives of power. Following Operation Sindoor, Asim Munir leveraged this consolidation to his advantage and became Field Marshal, which symbolically reinforced the authority and centrality of the military establishment within the political structure, further tightening its influence over society¹⁹¹. These narratives were also used to strengthen institutional dominance and to further control and undermine whatever limited democratic space exists.

The diaspora represented a more complex target. Spread across multiple countries, with varying degrees of political engagement, this group became both amplifier and validator. Tailored content, often in English and localised idioms, was disseminated to encourage advocacy, protests, and digital campaigning¹⁹². Diaspora voices, perceived as independent, carried disproportionate weight in international discourse. By amplifying and legitimising specific frames within media and public discourse abroad, diaspora actors indirectly influenced the agendas and perceptions of more formal centres of power.

The most strategic target, however, was international policy circles. Here, the language shifted. Emotional appeals gave way to legalistic framing, with terms such as “escalation,” “human rights violations,” and “regional stability” dominating the discourse. Think tanks, journalists, and policymakers were engaged through op-eds, policy briefings, conference interventions, and curated information releases, particularly in the aftermath of Operation Sindoor, where competing narratives were simultaneously projected into international media and strategic studies platforms. The aim was not mass persuasion, but elite influence, shaping the interpretive frameworks through which the conflict was understood, debated, and assessed within global policy environments¹⁹³.

IV. Psychological Operations: The Quiet Undercurrent

Beneath the visible layers of narrative and amplification lay the muted domain of psychological operations; psyops.

These were not always overt. Sometimes they manifested as contradictory information streams, designed to induce confusion and fatigue. At other times, they took the form of exaggerated claims of capability or retaliation, aimed at shaping perceptions of strength and deterrence.

A key psyops tactic was **temporal manipulation**, releasing information at moments calculated to maximise uncertainty. Late-night drops, weekend surges, or timed leaks during diplomatic engagements ensured that responses were delayed, fragmented, or reactive¹⁹⁴. Such timing strategies align with broader documented patterns in information warfare, where rapid dissemination during low-monitoring windows is used to amplify reach before fact-checking mechanisms can respond effectively.

Another dimension was **emotional priming**. Content was crafted not just to inform, but to provoke—anger, fear, indignation. In such a state, audiences are less likely to scrutinise and more likely to share. Virality, in this sense, becomes a psychological reflex¹⁹⁵. This strategy leverages what communication scholars identify as the “high-arousal advantage” in information diffusion. Research on digital misinformation ecosystems consistently demonstrates that emotionally charged content—particularly that which evokes anger or fear—travels faster, reaches wider audiences, and generates higher engagement than neutral or purely informational material¹⁹⁶. Such content not only captures attention more effectively but also encourages rapid, unverified dissemination, thereby amplifying its impact across networked platforms.

Moreover, emotional priming contributes to the formation of echo chambers and affective polarisation. As users engage with emotionally congruent content, algorithmic systems further reinforce these preferences by curating similar material, deepening cognitive biases and limiting exposure to countervailing perspectives¹⁹⁷. Over time, this creates self-reinforcing feedback loops in which emotionally resonant narratives gain disproportionate visibility and legitimacy, regardless of their factual accuracy.

This is precisely the pattern of psychological shaping that Pakistan employed during Operation Sindoor to influence and alter the narrative in its favour¹⁹⁸.

Counter-Narratives and Defensive Information Strategies

While proactive narrative construction often dominates discussions of information warfare, the defensive dimension—centred on counter-narratives—is where the long-term contest over meaning is ultimately decided. Counter-narratives are not simply reactive corrections to misinformation; they are structured, strategic efforts to challenge interpretive dominance, restore informational balance, and reassert credibility within environments deliberately shaped to obscure clarity.

In the context of Operation Sindoor, where narratives were rapidly constructed, amplified, and emotionally embedded, defensive information strategies played a crucial role in contesting not only specific claims but also the broader conditions that enabled those claims to gain traction¹⁹⁹. At a structural level, counter-narratives operate under conditions of inherent disadvantage. The architecture of modern communication ecosystems favours speed, emotional intensity, and repetition—factors that enable adversarial narratives to spread quickly and widely. Defensive responses, by contrast, are constrained by the need for verification, consistency, and credibility. This creates a temporal and cognitive asymmetry: initial narratives establish early interpretive dominance, while counter-narratives must work against already-formed perceptions. The challenge is not simply to present alternative information but to reshape the framework through which audiences interpret that information.

Cognitive psychology helps explain why this is so difficult. Once individuals internalise an initial narrative, it becomes embedded within their mental framework, influencing how

subsequent information is processed. This anchoring effect is reinforced by confirmation bias, where individuals favour information that aligns with their existing beliefs, and by motivated reasoning, where contradictory evidence is discounted or reinterpreted²⁰⁰. As a result, counter-narratives must engage in a process of cognitive restructuring—gradually introducing alternative interpretations while addressing the underlying assumptions that sustain the original narrative.

One of the most effective tools in this process is reframing²⁰¹. Rather than directly confronting adversarial claims on their own terms, reframing shifts the context in which those claims are understood. This may involve introducing broader historical or geopolitical context, highlighting omitted information, or altering the perceived significance of specific events. By changing the interpretive lens, reframing reduces the influence of the original narrative without necessarily amplifying it through direct confrontation. In practice, this allows defensive strategies to redirect attention and reshape understanding in a more sustainable way. Closely related to reframing is the concept of narrative replacement. Instead of attempting to dismantle an adversarial narrative piece by piece, defensive strategies may introduce a more coherent and compelling alternative explanation.

This approach recognises that people are more likely to adopt a new narrative when it provides a complete and satisfying account, rather than a series of isolated corrections. Narrative replacement therefore combines factual accuracy with persuasive structure, offering audiences a clear and consistent framework that can compete with—and potentially displace—the original narrative²⁰². Another critical dimension of defensive strategy is credibility management. In fragmented and polarised information environments, the acceptance of a message often depends more on the perceived reliability of the source than on the content itself²⁰³. This makes credibility a central strategic resource. Institutional actors such as governments, established media organisations, and independent verification bodies play an important role, but their influence may be limited in contexts where trust in institutions is low or contested.

To address this, effective counter-narratives often rely on a distributed model of credibility, incorporating voices from independent experts, analysts, and community figures who can engage different audience segments more effectively. Transparency is essential in building and sustaining this credibility. Providing verifiable evidence, clearly distinguishing between confirmed information and preliminary assessments, and acknowledging uncertainty where it exists all contribute to trust. While such practices may reduce the immediacy or emotional intensity of messaging, they strengthen long-term legitimacy²⁰⁴. Over time, consistent transparency helps establish a reputation for reliability that can counterbalance the short-term appeal of more assertive but less substantiated narratives. Timing also plays a decisive role. In high-speed information environments, the window for effective intervention is often extremely narrow. Counter-narratives that are delayed risk becoming irrelevant, as initial impressions may already be firmly established. This underscores the importance of rapid response systems that can monitor emerging narratives in real time and deploy verified information quickly. However, speed must be balanced with accuracy. Premature or incorrect responses can damage credibility and inadvertently reinforce adversarial narratives.

Beyond reactive measures, preemptive strategies—often referred to as pre-bunking—offer a proactive approach to defence. By anticipating likely narratives and addressing them before they fully emerge, pre-bunking reduces their potential impact. This approach is

based on the principle of cognitive inoculation, where early exposure to misleading arguments, combined with explanation and refutation, strengthens resistance to future persuasion. Pre-bunking is particularly effective when it includes education about common techniques of manipulation, such as selective framing, emotional appeals, and the use of misleading visual content²⁰⁵.

The role of network dynamics is another key factor in the effectiveness of counter-narratives. Information spreads through complex networks of users, influencers, and communities, each with its own patterns of interaction and trust. Defensive strategies must therefore engage with these networks strategically, identifying influential nodes and leveraging their reach to disseminate corrective information. In some cases, indirect engagement—through individuals who can bridge different communities—may be more effective than direct confrontation within highly polarised spaces²⁰⁶. Technological tools have significantly enhanced the capacity for defensive information strategies. Data analytics, machine learning, and real-time monitoring systems enable the early detection of emerging narratives, the identification of coordinated campaigns, and the assessment of audience engagement. These tools allow for more precise targeting and timing of counter-narratives, increasing their effectiveness²⁰⁷. However, they also introduce challenges related to accuracy, bias, and ethical use, requiring careful oversight and governance.

Platform-level interventions also shape the defensive landscape. Social media platforms influence information visibility through algorithms, moderation policies, and content labelling practices. These mechanisms can limit the spread of misinformation and support the dissemination of verified information. However, they also raise concerns about transparency, consistency, and potential bias. The effectiveness of such interventions depends on their perceived fairness and their alignment with broader principles of accountability²⁰⁸. A particularly complex challenge arises from narratives that rely on implication, selective emphasis, or omission rather than explicit falsehoods. These forms of narrative manipulation are difficult to counter through traditional fact-checking because they do not make clearly verifiable claims. Defensive strategies must therefore focus on contextualisation—providing additional information that clarifies and expands the narrative frame. By restoring missing context and highlighting inconsistencies, such approaches help audiences develop a more comprehensive understanding of events. Institutional coordination is essential for maintaining coherence in defensive efforts. Fragmented or inconsistent messaging can undermine credibility and create opportunities for adversarial narratives to exploit perceived contradictions. Effective coordination involves aligning communication strategies across different actors while preserving the flexibility needed to respond to rapidly changing conditions. This balance between consistency and adaptability is a defining feature of successful defensive information strategies.

The emotional dimension of narrative competition must also be addressed. Adversarial narratives often gain traction by appealing to strong emotions such as fear, anger, or moral outrage. Counter-narratives that rely solely on factual correction may struggle to achieve similar reach or engagement. Effective defensive strategies therefore incorporate emotional awareness, presenting information in ways that resonate with audience values and concerns without resorting to manipulation. This approach enhances engagement while maintaining credibility. Over the long term, the goal of counter-narratives extends beyond immediate correction to the development of informational resilience. This refers

to the capacity of individuals, institutions, and societies to withstand and adapt to information-based challenges. Resilience is built through a combination of factors, including media literacy, institutional trust, technological capability, and social cohesion. Counter-narratives contribute to this process by reinforcing norms of accuracy, accountability, and critical evaluation. However, resilience is not static. As adversarial strategies evolve, defensive approaches must also adapt. This requires continuous monitoring, learning, and refinement. Information warfare is inherently iterative, with each side adjusting its tactics in response to the other.

Counter-narratives must therefore be flexible, data-informed, and responsive to changing conditions. Ultimately, counter-narratives and defensive information strategies are not simply tools for correcting misinformation; they are central components of the broader struggle over perception and meaning. Their effectiveness lies not only in their ability to challenge specific claims but in their capacity to shape the informational environment in which those claims are interpreted. In the context of Operation Sindoor, they illustrate how defensive communication can influence the trajectory of narrative competition, reinforcing the idea that in modern conflict, the management of information is as critical as its creation.

Chapter 6

The Case Study

This chapter will analyse anti-India hashtag campaign run by Pakistan during the aftermath of the Pahalgam terror incident, with a focus on how a single false narrative was engineered, amplified, and projected globally.

Following the Pahalgam terror attack, an aggressive online campaign emerged almost immediately. Instead of focusing on the attack itself, a parallel narrative ecosystem attempted to shift blame onto India. We will analyse the influence network from Pakistan engaged in coordinated inauthentic behaviour to defame India.

Right after the Pahalgam Terror Attack hundreds of social media accounts began pushing slogans and hashtags like “**#IndianFalseFlag**,” “**#PahalgamDramaExposed**,” “**#ModiExposed**,” etc., accusing India of staging the carnage. Thousands of posts from Pakistan-affiliated accounts flooded social media platforms with memes, doctored videos, and inflammatory claims. This campaign was *massively amplified* by automated and coordinated networks.

For example, the hashtag **#IndianFalseFlag** alone generated **over 14,000 posts in 16 hours** from only a few thousand users²⁰⁹. In total, at least **23,000+ posts** promoting the false-flag narrative were identified from 22 April to 6 May 2025²¹⁰.

These posts often used a small cluster of tags including; **#IndianFalseFlag**, **#IndianFalseFlagExposed**, **#BJPBehindPahalgam**, **#ModiBehindPahalgam**, **#ModiExposed**, **#PahalgamDramaExposed** and **#IndianMediaExposed**, saturating feeds and trending lists to draw attention²¹¹.

The observed rapidity, broad dissemination, and consistent nature of the messaging are indicative of a deliberate digital strategy, rather than an emergent public discourse. Evidence such as the synchronised release of posts, the recurrent deployment of identical narratives, and the concurrent promotion of specific hashtags strongly suggest the involvement of organised networks. These networks appear to leverage a combination of human operatives and automated systems to amplify the reach and visibility of their communications. Such patterns resonate with characteristics of influence operations, which are typically designed to shape public perception, particularly amidst sensitive geopolitical contexts. Moreover, this campaign exhibited features consistent with information warfare tactics. These involved the systematic deployment of emotionally resonant triggers, misinformative content, and visual propaganda, all strategically utilised to capitalise on the confusion that typically arises immediately following an attack. By saturating digital platforms with misleading information, the perpetrators sought to undermine the veracity of factual reporting and intentionally foster ambiguity surrounding the event. This approach was clearly intended to sway both domestic and international audiences. This particular case therefore underscores the expanding influence of digital

ecosystems in constructing and disseminating narratives during periods of crisis. It thus highlights a pressing requirement for the development of resilient mechanisms capable of identifying, analysing, and effectively counteracting coordinated inauthentic behaviours. Furthermore, it reinforces the critical importance of fostering media literacy and ensuring prompt fact-checking initiatives to diminish the adverse effects of such disinformation campaigns on both public opinion and national security.

The Central Falsehood: A Narrative Engineered for Maximum Damage.

At the heart of this campaign was a single, powerful claim:

“The Pahalgam terror attack was not carried out by terrorists, but was a “false flag operation” orchestrated by India itself.”

This claim was supported by **#IndianFalseFlag** & **#IndiaFalseFlagKing** and was particularly powerful because it struck at the very foundation of how people interpret the event. By labelling the Pahalgam attack as a “false flag operation,” it directly questioned the legitimacy of India’s counter-terror response under Operation Sindoor. If the attack itself is portrayed as staged, then any military or strategic action that follows can be framed not as self-defence, but as pre-planned aggression. This creates doubt not only about the operation, but also about the intent behind it. At the same time, the narrative attempted to delegitimise the victims by implying that their suffering was either exaggerated, manipulated, or part of a larger script. Such framing strips the incident of its human reality and reduces it to a tool in a supposed political agenda.

Most significantly, the narrative worked towards flipping the roles entirely; transforming India from a victim of terrorism into the alleged architect of the attack. In doing so, it positioned India simultaneously as the aggressor and the manipulator, while diverting attention away from the question of cross-border terror involvement. In simple terms, instead of Pakistan being scrutinised for sponsoring or supporting terrorism, the narrative inverted the storyline to portray India as the perpetrator of its own tragedy. This kind of role reversal is highly effective in information warfare because it introduces confusion, fuels mistrust, and forces audiences to question even well-established facts.

The campaign featured **AI-generated memes, videos and posters** to discredit Indian victims, leaders and media. Accounts called for mass hashtags and “digital protests,” with known pro-Pakistan or state-affiliated handles coordinating posts. These posts ramped up anti-India tags **#IndiaEmptyThreats** and **#PAFReadyToRespond** (15,000+ combined posts) to mock India’s warnings.

A central aspect of this deceptive claim was its foundation in perceived plausibility rather than empirical evidence. The narrative did not necessitate the presentation of concrete evidence; rather, it strategically integrated isolated visual fragments, de-contextualised statements, and unsubstantiated conjecture to fabricate a seemingly cohesive account. This approach enabled the assertion to gain credence among susceptible audiences, while simultaneously impeding its timely and definitive refutation. Furthermore, the narrative capitalised on extant political and social cleavages to achieve broader dissemination. By leveraging pre-existing skepticism toward governmental actions and media institutions, the campaign exacerbated public distrust, thereby prompting segments of the audience to adopt the false flag theory without stringent verification. This illustrates a common mechanism by which disinformation campaigns often attain efficacy: not through the

instantiation of novel beliefs, but through the amplification and exploitation of pre-existing cognitive biases. A further salient characteristic involved the deliberate amalgamation of satirical content, propagandistic elements, and factual misrepresentations. Humorous images and ironic commentaries were interspersed with graver assertions, intentionally fostering ambiguity regarding the veracity versus the rhetorical intent of the claims. Such a hybrid content strategy complicated the processes for both platform administrators and individual users to accurately categorise and respond to the disseminated information, consequently prolonging the persistence and amplification of the erroneous narrative.

34 minutes ago	1 hour ago	2 hours ago
1 #IndiaFalseFlagKing	1 #IndiaFalseFlagKing	1 #IndianFalseFlag 11K
2 #Pahalgam 896K	2 #Pahalgam 852K	2 #Pahalgam 803K
3 Kashmir 854K	3 Kashmir 810K	3 #بہنوں_کی_ملاقات_کرواؤ 197K
4 #بہنوں_کی_ملاقات_کرواؤ 207K	4 #بہنوں_کی_ملاقات_کرواؤ 201K	4 Kashmir 767K
5 Modi 335K	5 Modi 326K	5 Modi 315K
6 #pti_neglected_kp	6 #pti_neglected_kp	6 #MSvLQ
7 #نہیں_پر_سیاست_بند_کرو 207K	7 Pakistan 386K	7 #pti_neglected_kp
8 Ubaid Shah	8 #نہیں_پر_سیاست_بند_کرو 207K	8 Ubaid Shah

Fig 10 List of hashtags being pushed by Pakistan based handles

Timeline of Propaganda.

On April 22, 2025, at approximately **20:43 (Karachi time)**, a coordinated wave of posts from Pakistani social media accounts began promoting the hashtag **#indianfalseflag**. These initial posts sought to challenge narratives from Indian media attributing the attacks to Pakistan. The messaging drew parallels with the 14 February 2019 Pulwama attack, asserting that both incidents were staged operations, characterised by what was described as a “similar script, timing, and underlying agenda.”²¹² Former Pakistani diplomats and media personalities seeded the denial narrative on livestreams. On 22 April (same day as the attack), ex-diplomat **Abdul Basit** claimed “**Kashmiri mujahideen never target civilians**,”²¹³ implicitly blaming India.

By April 23-24, pro-Pak media and bots had fully launched the hashtag campaign largely fabricated by coordinated accounts.

On April 25, Pakistani social media accounts further amplified images claiming that The Resistance Front (TRF) had denied responsibility for the Pahalgam attacks. The statement, reportedly circulated via a Telegram channel attributed to TRF, rejected any involvement in the incident and alleged that earlier claims were the result of a “cyber intrusion” carried out by “Indian cyber-intelligence operatives.”



Fig 11 Statement of denial by TRF amplified by Pakistan

On April 25, Pakistani social media accounts initiated a coordinated campaign targeting Ajit Doval, using the hashtag #sackajitdoval. The posts framed the Pahalgam attacks as an “intelligence failure” for India and asserted that there were growing demands for Doval and his associates to resign²¹⁴.



Fig 12 Pakistan-originating handles impersonating as Indian and pushing the narrative against India's NSA Ajit Doval, calling for his removal

Beginning 28 April 2025, Pakistani social media accounts circulated and amplified purportedly leaked documents attributed to India's military headquarters²¹⁵, which allegedly indicated declining morale within defence forces and a rise in reported desertion rates.

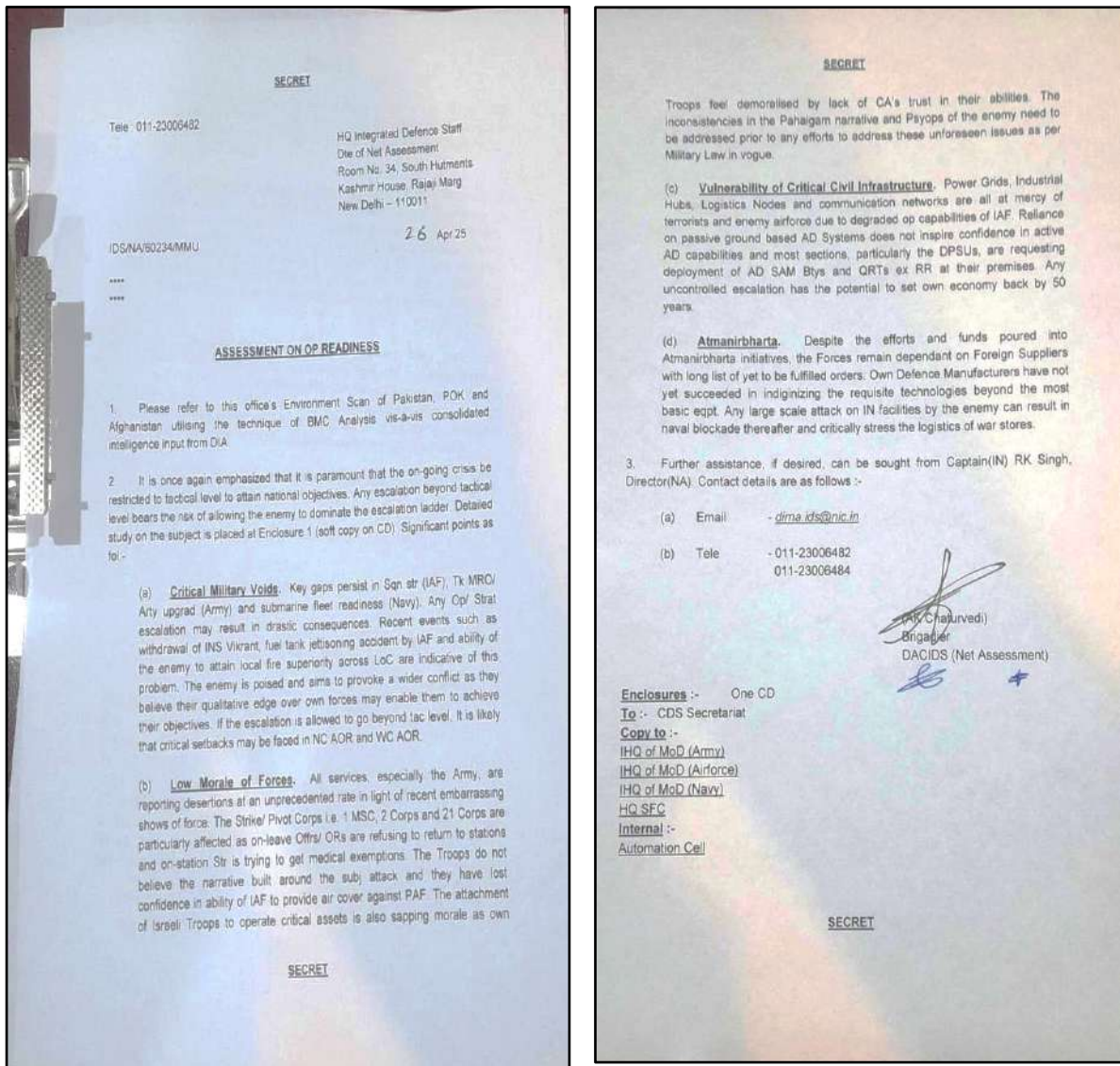


Fig 13 Images claiming to depict a leaked Indian defence document, amplified by Pakistan

On 5 May 2025, Pakistani social media accounts amplified purportedly leaked documents attributed to India's Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO)²¹⁶, specifically its Armament Research and Development Establishment. These materials allegedly questioned the "operational efficacy" of the 881 Missile Regiment's BrahMos cruise missiles, citing serious lapses in storage conditions.

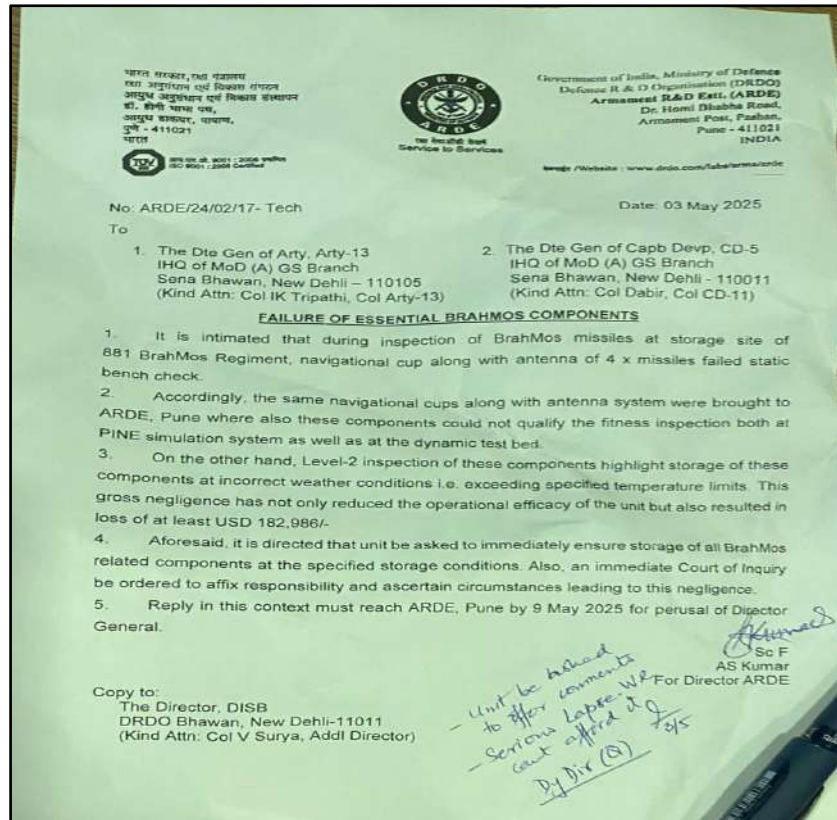


Fig 14 Fake letter claiming to depict a leaked Indian defence document, amplified by Pakistan

Both the documents are assessed to be inauthentic and contains fake claims.

As the timeline unfolds, a discernible pattern of narrative evolution becomes apparent, progressing through distinct phases. This commenced with immediate denial, subsequently moved to deflection, and ultimately culminated in ad hominem attacks and the undermining of institutional credibility. This sequential escalation suggests a deliberate communication strategy, designed to maintain public engagement and to introduce novel dimensions, thereby extending the narrative's relevance across successive news cycles. A further salient characteristic of the timeline is the observed synchronisation in messaging among disparate actor categories, encompassing political commentators, established media entities, and unverified social media profiles. The expeditious and uniform propagation of specific claims across these diverse platforms strongly implies a coordinated dissemination mechanism, rather than a series of independent responses. This congruence substantiates the hypothesis of a centrally orchestrated information campaign. The incorporation of fabricated 'leaks' and manipulated documents represents a pivotal transition from mere narrative construction to the fabrication of ostensible evidence. The presentation of these falsified materials as authentic insider intelligence sought to imbue the campaign's assertions with credibility, leveraging the public's propensity to credit information from purportedly leaked or confidential origins, even when lacking independent corroboration. Collectively, the observed sequence of events illustrates that contemporary propaganda campaigns are not static entities but rather possess an inherent adaptability, consistently adjusting their content and tactical approaches in response to audience reception and emergent counter-narratives. Such a dynamic methodology

augments their efficacy, rendering them more resistant to detection and considerably more challenging to counteract expeditiously.

Origin of Propaganda

The earliest identifiable source of these documents appears to be an anonymous pro-Pakistani social media account (@War_Analysts), which shared at least one of the documents prior to their wider dissemination by coordinated Pakistani bot networks. The same account had also circulated other likely inauthentic materials, including a purported diplomatic complaint from the Israeli Embassy in New Delhi.²¹⁷, as well as documents claiming shortages of critical arms and ammunitions²¹⁸. The observed activity patterns associated with this account suggest its function as an initial dissemination point, or “seed account,” within the broader architecture of disinformation. Such early-stage introduction of fabricated or misleading content facilitates its rapid dissemination by subsequent networks, which often include automated bots and coordinated amplification efforts, thereby effectively obscuring the content’s initial provenance. This layered propagation structure not only complicates efforts at source attribution but also contributes to an elevated perception of content authenticity.

A consistent thematic thread, evident across the disseminated materials—encompassing topics from purported diplomatic tensions to alleged military deficiencies—suggests a deliberate strategy aimed at constructing a narrative depicting systemic vulnerabilities within India’s defence and strategic framework. These elements are not presented as isolated assertions; rather, they collectively contribute to a cohesive storyline intended to undermine public confidence in institutional credibility. The integration of references to international actors, specifically Israel and Russia, similarly appears to constitute a strategic component. This approach, which embeds the narrative within a broader global context, aims to enhance its plausibility and resonate with international audiences. Concurrently, it serves to reposition the issue beyond a confined bilateral India-Pakistan dynamic. Such a tactic consequently amplifies both the perceived scope and the gravity of the presented allegations. Crucially, the observed reliance on anonymous or pseudonymous accounts underscores a fundamental characteristic of contemporary information warfare: the cultivation of plausible deniability. The absence of verifiable identities or mechanisms for accountability allows these actors to persistently generate and disseminate misleading content with significantly reduced risk, thereby enabling the propagation of state-aligned narratives without requiring direct official endorsement.

Hashtag Originator

The hashtag #IndiaFalseFlagKing was first identified in a post on 23 **April 2025, at 12:44 AM by Haider Naqvi**, an X (formerly Twitter)²¹⁹ user associated with Pakistan and linked to the **Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority (PEMRA)**. The timing and origin of this post are notable, as they suggest that the narrative accusing India of orchestrating the Pahalgam attack as a “false flag” began circulating at a very early stage.



Fig 15 Hashtag Creation Details



Fig 16 X Profile of Hashtag Originator

The involvement of an individual connected to a regulatory body such as **PEMRA** raises concerns about the potential role of state-linked actors in shaping and amplifying this narrative. This pattern, when viewed alongside the broader coordinated dissemination of similar messaging across Pakistani social media networks, indicates a possible effort to construct and promote a counter-narrative aimed at deflecting responsibility and influencing public perception.

Such developments point toward a structured information campaign by Pakistan's Govt, wherein unverified claims are rapidly propagated to establish doubt and shift attribution. The consistency, timing, and amplification of these narratives lend weight to

the assessment that elements within Pakistan's information ecosystem may have played a role in initiating and sustaining messaging that portrays the Pahalgam incident as a staged operation by India.

The early emergence of this hashtag highlights the importance of origin tracking in understanding disinformation campaigns. Identifying the first instances of a narrative provides critical insight into how messaging is seeded, who the initial amplifiers are, and how quickly it transitions from isolated posts into a coordinated trend. In this case, the rapid uptake of the hashtag following its initial appearance suggests a pre-existing network prepared to amplify the message. Moreover, the linkage between individual actors and institutional affiliations introduces an additional layer of complexity in attribution. Even indirect associations with regulatory or media bodies can lend perceived legitimacy to otherwise unverified claims, making the narrative more persuasive to broader audiences. This blending of personal and institutional credibility is a common tactic in influence operations. The structured amplification that followed the hashtag's introduction further reinforces the likelihood of premeditation. Rather than emerging organically, the narrative appears to have been strategically positioned for virality, with coordinated accounts ensuring sustained visibility through repeated usage, synchronised posting patterns, and engagement manipulation. Overall, the case of #IndiaFalseFlagKing demonstrates how a single, strategically introduced hashtag can evolve into a central pillar of a wider disinformation campaign, shaping discourse and influencing perceptions across digital platforms in a short span of time.

Propagation Path

The disinformation narrative which originated from Pakistan's media ecosystem, including state-affiliated outlets, partisan platforms, and coordinated "patriotic" social media accounts, before expanding onto international platforms. Pakistani journalists and officials played a key role in amplifying these claims across X (formerly Twitter), Facebook, as well as traditional broadcast channels such as radio and television, thereby reinforcing and legitimising the messaging within domestic and regional audiences.

A critical phase in the dissemination involved the uptake of these narratives by Western influencers, which significantly extended their reach and credibility. Notably, US-based commentator Jackson Hinkle hosted an interview with Abdul Basit on 22 April, during which the "false flag" narrative was actively promoted to a global audience. The livestream reportedly attracted over one million views, and a subsequent follow-up broadcast on 6 May further amplified the messaging²²⁰. These interventions contributed to the international trending of hashtags such as #FalseFlagOperation and #ModiExposed, effectively exporting the narrative beyond South Asia.

Additionally, diaspora-linked networks in Europe and North America played a supportive role by disseminating targeted memes and hashtags; including #FromLOctoLOL, #IndiaDefeated, and #IndianStateTerrorism framing India as a state sponsor of terrorism. This multi-layered amplification strategy enabled the narrative to proliferate across linguistic and geographic boundaries, appearing in Persian, Arabic, Urdu, and English content streams.

Overall, the pattern reflects a coordinated and sustained information operation, wherein domestically seeded narratives were systematically amplified through official, semi-official, and transnational channels. The involvement of media figures, influencers, and

diaspora networks suggests a deliberate attempt to “launder” unverified claims into broader international discourse, thereby shaping perceptions and undermining India’s position on the global stage. A key observation in this phase is the transformation of the narrative from a localised information campaign into a transnational discourse. Once picked up by international influencers and diaspora networks, the messaging underwent subtle reframing to align with global political sentiments, thereby increasing its resonance with non-regional audiences. This adaptability is a hallmark of sophisticated information operations. The role of influencers in this process is particularly significant, as they act as credibility bridges between niche narratives and mainstream global audiences. By hosting discussions, interviews, and commentary around these claims, such figures inadvertently or deliberately provide a platform that normalises and legitimises otherwise unverified information. Furthermore, the multilingual dissemination of content ensured that the narrative penetrated diverse information ecosystems simultaneously. By tailoring messaging across different languages and cultural contexts, the campaign maximised its reach and reduced the effectiveness of localised countermeasures such as fact-checking or regional media rebuttals. This stage of amplification also illustrates how digital narratives can be “laundered” through layers of repetition and endorsement, gradually shedding their origins and appearing as independently validated viewpoints. Over time, this process can blur the line between fact and misinformation, making it increasingly challenging for audiences to distinguish between verified information and coordinated propaganda.

Forensic Indicators and Lessons

This case demonstrates multiple hallmarks of a coordinated disinformation campaign. Key indicators include highly synchronised timing, with hashtags emerging within hours of the incident and peaking in alignment with related developments; repetitive posting patterns driven by a limited set of accounts, often sharing identical or near-identical content; and a heavy reliance on emotionally charged hashtags and visuals; such as AI-manipulated videos and replicated memes optimised for rapid virality. Additionally, there was a noticeable surge in activity from newly created or previously inactive accounts that became highly active in a short span. The leveraging of Western conspiracy-oriented platforms as amplification channels; an approach observed in other geopolitical contexts further underscores the structured nature of the operation. These patterns suggest that future detection efforts should prioritise signals such as sudden hashtag spikes with low user diversity, synthetic or AI-generated media, and coordinated calls for mass sharing.

In summary, the “false flag” narrative surrounding the Pahalgam attack appears to have been part of a deliberately orchestrated information campaign by Pakistan govt. It was initially seeded by voices aligned with Pakistan’s media and information ecosystem, subsequently amplified through coordinated networks, and later extended to global audiences via sympathetic influencers. While the apparent objective was to create confusion and shape international perception against India, the episode illustrates the growing significance of information warfare in modern conflicts. It also highlights the need for sustained vigilance, including critical consumption of online content, improved media literacy, and timely fact-checking mechanisms to counter similar disinformation efforts in the future. A deeper analysis of these indicators reveals that such campaigns are increasingly data-driven, leveraging real-time analytics to monitor engagement and adjust strategies accordingly. This allows operators to identify which narratives gain traction and rapidly reinforce them, while discarding less effective messaging. The iterative nature of this approach enhances both efficiency and impact. Another critical takeaway is the

blurring of boundaries between organic and inorganic activity. By interspersing genuine user engagement with coordinated amplification, these campaigns create a hybrid ecosystem where manipulation is difficult to detect without advanced analytical tools. This hybridisation significantly complicates attribution and response efforts. The case also underscores the importance of cross-platform monitoring in identifying coordinated behaviour. Since narratives often migrate seamlessly between platforms, isolated analysis of a single platform may fail to capture the full scope of the operation. Integrated, multi-platform analysis is therefore essential for early detection and mitigation. Finally, this episode highlights the urgent need for institutional preparedness, including stronger collaboration between governments, technology platforms, and independent researchers. Proactive information-sharing frameworks and rapid response mechanisms can play a crucial role in limiting the spread and impact of such disinformation campaigns in future crisis scenarios.

Conclusion

The case study of the Pahalgam terror incident demonstrates how rapidly evolving digital ecosystems can be exploited to construct, amplify, and globalise a single false narrative with significant geopolitical implications. The coordinated propagation of the “false flag” claim illustrates that contemporary information warfare is not incidental but strategically engineered, combining speed, scale, and synchronisation. From the immediate seeding of hashtags to the deployment of fabricated documents and AI-generated media, the campaign reflects a structured attempt to manipulate perception, distort accountability, and erode trust in verified information. The convergence of state-linked voices, anonymous seed accounts, and automated amplification networks underscores the complexity and intentionality behind such operations. Furthermore, the progression of the narrative—from denial and deflection to the fabrication of evidence and targeting of institutions—reveals a dynamic and adaptive strategy designed to sustain engagement over time.

The integration of international influencers and diaspora networks transformed a regionally confined claim into a transnational discourse, thereby magnifying its reach and perceived legitimacy. This multi-layered dissemination highlights how disinformation can be “laundered” across platforms and audiences, gradually obscuring its origins while reinforcing its impact. The case thus exemplifies how hybrid ecosystems of organic and coordinated activity can blur the distinction between genuine public opinion and orchestrated propaganda. Ultimately, this episode underscores the urgent need for robust countermeasures against coordinated inauthentic behaviour. Strengthening media literacy, enhancing real-time fact-checking capabilities, and developing advanced analytical tools for cross-platform monitoring are essential to mitigate the influence of such campaigns. Equally important is the need for institutional collaboration between governments, technology platforms, and independent researchers to ensure timely identification and response. As information warfare continues to evolve alongside technological advancements, building resilience against disinformation is no longer optional but a critical component of national security and informed public discourse.

Chapter 7

The Global Echo Chamber: Pakistan's External Narrative Construction

I. Introduction

Pakistan's public diplomacy during Operation Sindoor aggressively courted global opinion by building new media platforms and enlisting diaspora networks to push an anti-India narrative, particularly projecting India as an aggressor and Pakistan as a victim. Official statements and media releases stressed civilian casualties, sovereignty and human-rights norms, while omitting Pakistan's own harbouring of terror networks like Jaish-e-Mohammad (JeM) and The Resistance Front (TRF), and others. This narrative was actively pushed through global channels; high-profile delegations, new media outlets, diaspora networks and lobbying firms, especially in Washington, London, Brussels and at the UN. For example, Pakistani officials condemned India's strikes as "illegal acts" and "heinous" violations of international law²²¹, and a foreign ministry release claimed "the martyrdom of innocent men, women, and children" during Indian strikes²²². These messages were amplified by think-tanks and media sympathetic to Pakistan, often using doctored imagery and mis-captioned videos as "evidence". Fact-checkers later debunked dozens of viral fakes (CNN graphics, video-game clips, old conflict footage, etc.), but the corrections arrived days after the peaks of misinformation²²³. Consequently, Pakistan's version, at times echoed by EU and UN calls for 'restraint on both sides', found a receptive international echo chamber²²⁴. This chapter examines how Pakistan packaged disinformation for each capital, identifies diaspora/influencer amplification and specific false artifacts, and traces how India's factual counter-evidence was marginalised.

II. Pakistan's Global Influence Campaign Post-Sindoor

Pakistan's government and military launched a systematic propaganda warfare and misinformation campaign against India during Operation Sindoor. This effort extended across official statements, media briefings, and diplomatic engagements, and became particularly visible in multilateral forums. The campaign was not limited to post-incident narrative management but appeared to begin from the outset of the terror attack, shaping how the event was framed internationally. Even after The Resistance Front (TRF) claimed responsibility for the Pahalgam terror attack, Pakistan publicly rejected the group's involvement, insisting that such an organisation did not exist or was not responsible for the attack²²⁵. However, reflecting its complicity in this terror attack, it then leveraged its position at the United Nations Security Council to ensure that references to the group were removed from the Council's official statement²²⁶. Such diplomatic maneuvering—especially in a consensus-based body—highlights a pattern of strategic obfuscation, reinforcing perceptions of double standards, wherein Pakistan publicly distances itself from terrorism while simultaneously shielding these terror groups linked to it from international attribution and accountability. This broader strategy also extended into institutional narrative-building efforts. In November 2025, Punjab's governor created the

Himalayan Institute of Research & Policy Studies (HIRPS) in Lahore, staffed by academics with pronounced anti-India views and headed by Dr. Hussain Mohi-ud-Din Qadri, as part of an attempt to formalise and amplify Pakistan's external messaging architecture.

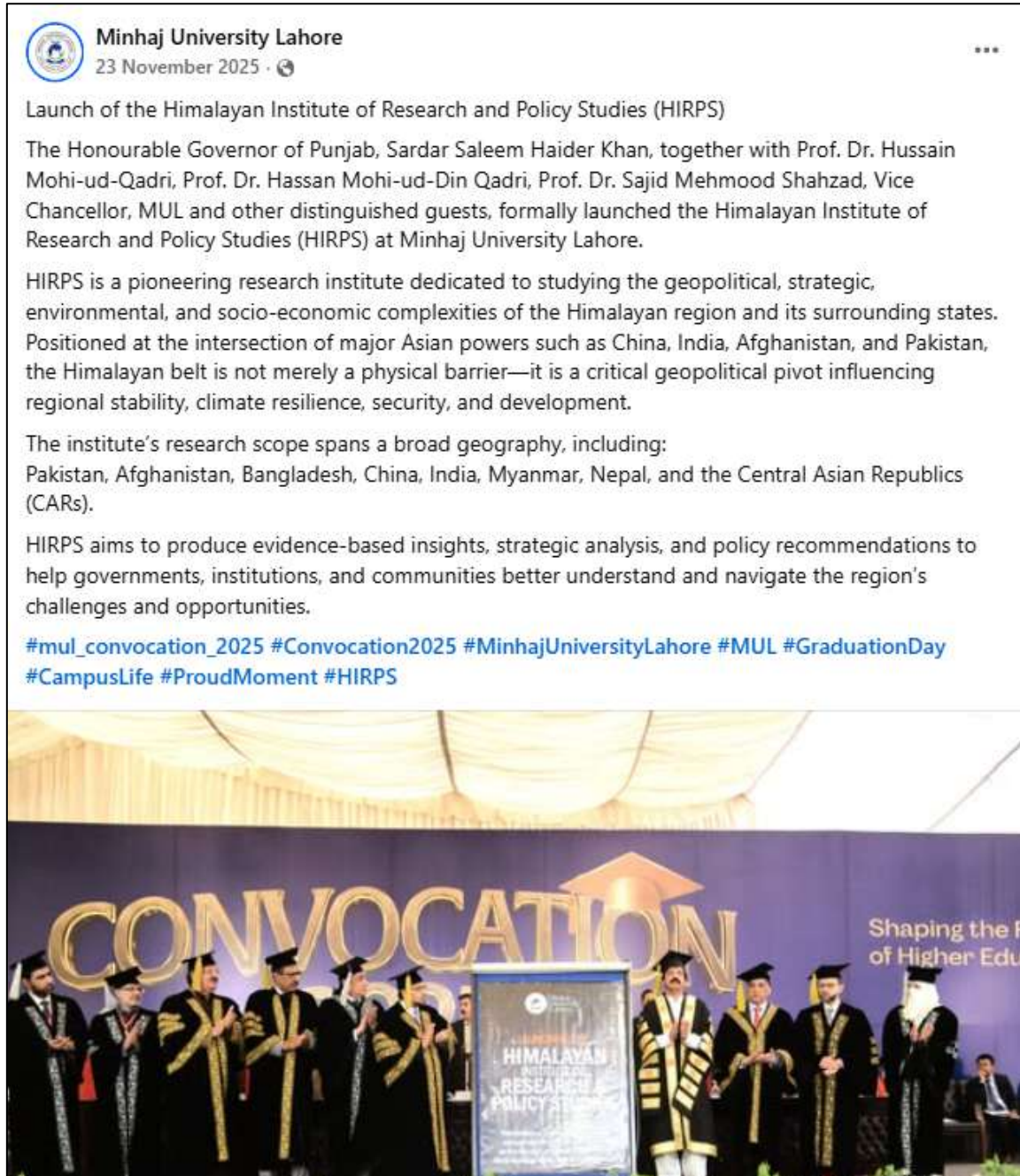


Fig 17 A Minhaj University Lahore social media post announcing the launch of Himalayan Institute of Research and Policy Studies (HIRPS) during its convocation on 23 November 2025



Fig 18 HIRPS is led by Dr. Hussain Mohi-ud-Din Qadri (center) while its advisory board is stacked with Pakistan-backed anti-India academics.

Under the “**STRATCOM 2025**” plan, Islamabad funded new English news outlets to target international audiences. Notable projects included Karachi-based *AsiaOne News*, *Pakistan TV Digital*, and *DM News English*. Each was staffed to appear global: AsiaOne hired anchors from Australia, Nigeria, Turkey, UK, though editorial control remained Pakistani. These platforms explicitly push Islamabad’s line.

Platform Name	Launch Date	Founder
AsiaOne News	28 Jul 2025	Pakistan365 Media Group
Pakistan TV Digital	18 Sep 2025	Govt. of Pakistan
DM News English	29 Sep 2025	Liaqat Malik

AsiaOne’s leadership underscores the setup. The channel is owned by 365 Digital Media (founded by ex-TRT World journalist Naveed Qamar Baloch).

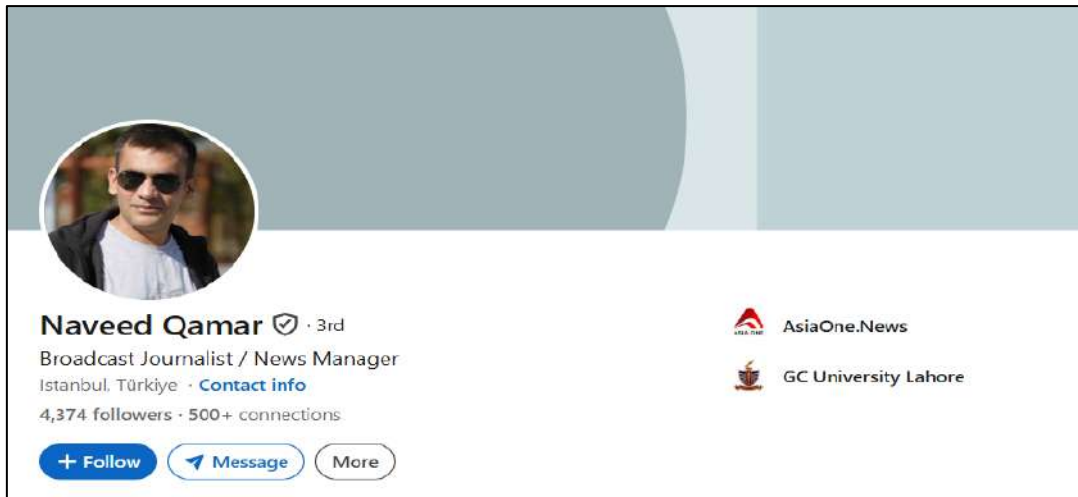


Fig 19 LinkedIn profile of Naveed Qamar Baloch, AsiaOne's founder

Asia One's Project Director, Mansoor Waheed Malik, previously headed media ops at Pakistan's Fauji Foundation (ISI-funded).

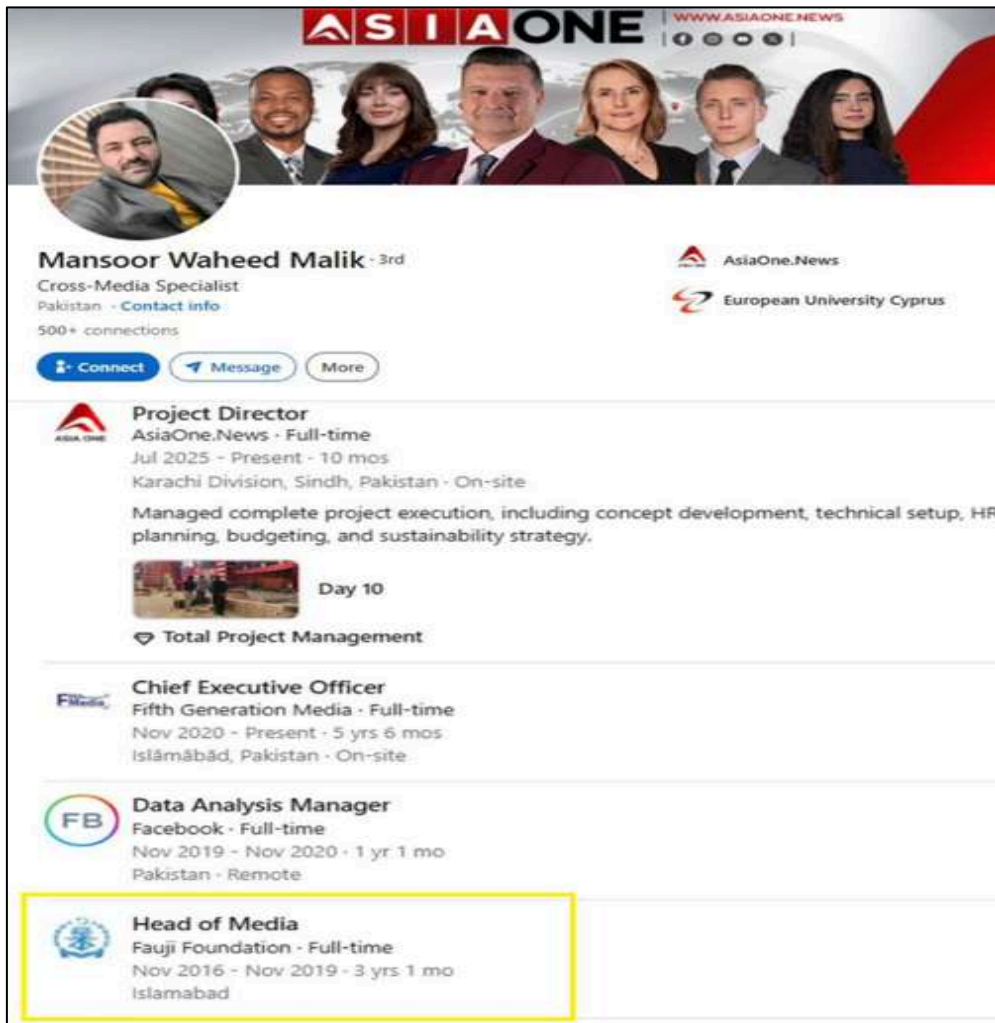


Fig 20 LinkedIn profile of Mansoor Waheed Malik, AsiaOne's project director

Its lead anchor, Rabea Khalid, is a former adviser at Pakistan's UN mission and ISSI researcher.



Fig 21 LinkedIn profile of Rabea Khalid, AsiaOne's lead anchor

These figures bridge Pakistani state networks and Western media ecosystems.

Global Pakistani communities and internet influencers played a key role in reinforcing the narratives, significantly strengthening its reach, visibility, and persistence across international digital spaces. With social media further strengthening this role, becoming a key channel through which diaspora influencers amplify nationalist or state-aligned narratives during periods of heightened conflict²²⁷. Academic and policy research describes this as part of a broader “hybrid information ecosystem,” where state messaging, influencers, and diaspora voices overlap in networked forms of amplification rather than through centralised coordination. At the same time, Pakistan has experienced a significant shift toward digital-first news consumption, supported by a rapidly expanding internet base and mobile news audiences, which has encouraged the growth of English-language outlets, diaspora-targeted platforms, and social media-native news pages. Diaspora engagement on issues such as Kashmir and broader regional security issues reinforced these narratives, as social media platforms enabled rapid, wide-scale reproduction of aligned viewpoints across borders²²⁸. In this context, diaspora-run outlets like DM News English (UK) and Pakistan TV Digital (International) were launched in 2025 to propagate Pakistan's viewpoint abroad, serving as additional external-facing channels that reinforced and extended the same narrative architecture within global media and diaspora communication networks.

III. Diplomatic and Media Complicity

Following the Pahalgam terror attack, Pakistan began using its reach in Western media to amplify anti-India propaganda. Pakistani journalists associated with outlets such as *CNN*, *Reuters*, *Bloomberg*, *BBC*, *Deutsche Welle (DW)*, and *The New York Times* published narratives critical of India, often based on unsubstantiated claims and lacking credible evidence.

For example, Reuters published an article by Pakistani writers Saeed Shah and Idrees Ali, titled “Exclusive: Pakistan’s Chinese-made jet brought down two Indian fighter aircraft, US officials say” At a time when the situation was still unfolding and without verified evidence, the headline itself reflects a propagandistic framing²²⁹.

Similarly, Pakistani writer Kamran Haider’s article in Bloomberg titled:

“India, Pakistan Move Closer to Full War After Bases Targeted” implicitly suggests parity in escalation, as if India had initiated the attack and Pakistan was merely retaliating²³⁰.

This pattern was further amplified in sections of Western media, often reflecting structural biases and long-standing geopolitical alignments dating back to the Cold War. These narratives are frequently presented under the banner of liberalism and press freedom, without acknowledging bias towards Pakistan or prejudice against India, and with limited reflection on underlying assumptions and selective framing.

Consider, for instance, the article: “How Pakistan’s Drone Army Won the War Against India,” on 13 May 2025, by Brandon J. Weichert, published in *The National Interest*, a reputed foreign policy magazine²³¹. The headline presents a highly assertive claim without corresponding verifiable evidence within the article itself.

Similarly, *The New York Times* used the headline: “At Least 24 Tourists Gunned Down by Militants in Kashmir,” while *The Washington Post* echoed a comparable framing: “Gunmen Launch Rare Attack on Tourists in Indian-Administered Kashmir.” *Deutsche Welle (DW)* and *Euronews* followed similar formulations, often avoiding the explicit use of the term “terrorists,” who brutally massacred innocent tourists based on their Hindu religious identity²³².

Al Jazeera, consistent with its broader editorial pattern, also framed the Pahalgam terror attack in a manner that subtly aligned with Pakistan’s narrative.

Perhaps the most controversial coverage came from the BBC, which reported: “Pakistan Suspends Visas for Indians After Deadly Kashmir Attack on Tourists.” The framing of this report risked distorting the sequence of events and creating a misleading impression internationally, as if India had carried out an attack on Pakistani soil, prompting Islamabad’s response. Such instances are not merely editorial oversights; they reflect recurring concerns about framing and narrative bias in sensitive geopolitical reporting²³³.

Journalist Name	News Portal	Nationality
Saeed Shah	WSJ, Reuters	Pakistani
Kamran Haider	Bloomberg, UK	Pakistani
Idrees Ali	Reuters	Pakistani
Asif Shahzad	Reuters	Pakistani
Zia Ur Rehman	New York Times	Pakistani
Sakman Masood	New York Times	Pakistani
Sophia Saifi	CNN	Pakistani
Adnan Aamir	Nikkei Asia	Pakistani

briefing, in which she clearly stated that Pakistan had also targeted civilian areas, including critical infrastructure such as medical facilities. By removing these segments and selectively rearranging parts of her statement, the clip altered the original context and projected a misleading narrative that Pakistan had confined its strikes solely to military targets. This manipulation also falsely suggested that this claim was acknowledged, thereby reinforcing a distorted version of events.



Fig 23 A doctored clip circulated by Pakistan Army's ISPR

While Pakistan deployed a mix of disinformation and misinformation, it was the DGISPR that effectively formalised and amplified the false narrative. On 11 May 2025, it used a two-year-old image from 2023 to misleadingly portray it as evidence of current naval preparedness against India²³⁶.



Fig 24 Pakistan's ISPR circulated a two-year-old image to push the narrative of naval preparedness

V. Pakistan-Turkey Alliance

TRT World (Turkish state media) and Anadolu Agency even “aided Pakistan in setting up anti-India narratives” during the Sindoor conflict, illustrating how foreign media ties were leveraged²³⁷. Turkey fuelled Pakistan’s info war by amplifying false narratives. These include shaping narratives & perceptions using state-funded media & social media propaganda machinery.

These platforms actively echoed Pakistan’s claims during the conflict, including unverified reports about Indian airbase destruction. Their coverage consistently aligned with Pakistan’s framing, often relying on one-sided sources and reproducing DGISPR narratives, effectively acting as external amplifiers of Pakistan’s official messaging. This reflected a clear synchronisation between Turkish state media and Pakistan’s military communication apparatus, extending from traditional broadcasting into the digital domain²³⁸.

State-backed media ecosystems, along with coordinated social media networks, were simultaneously used to shape global perceptions in Pakistan’s favour. The scale of this information campaign was significant enough that India blocked TRT World’s X (Twitter) account for spreading misleading and unverified content during Operation Sindoor²³⁹.

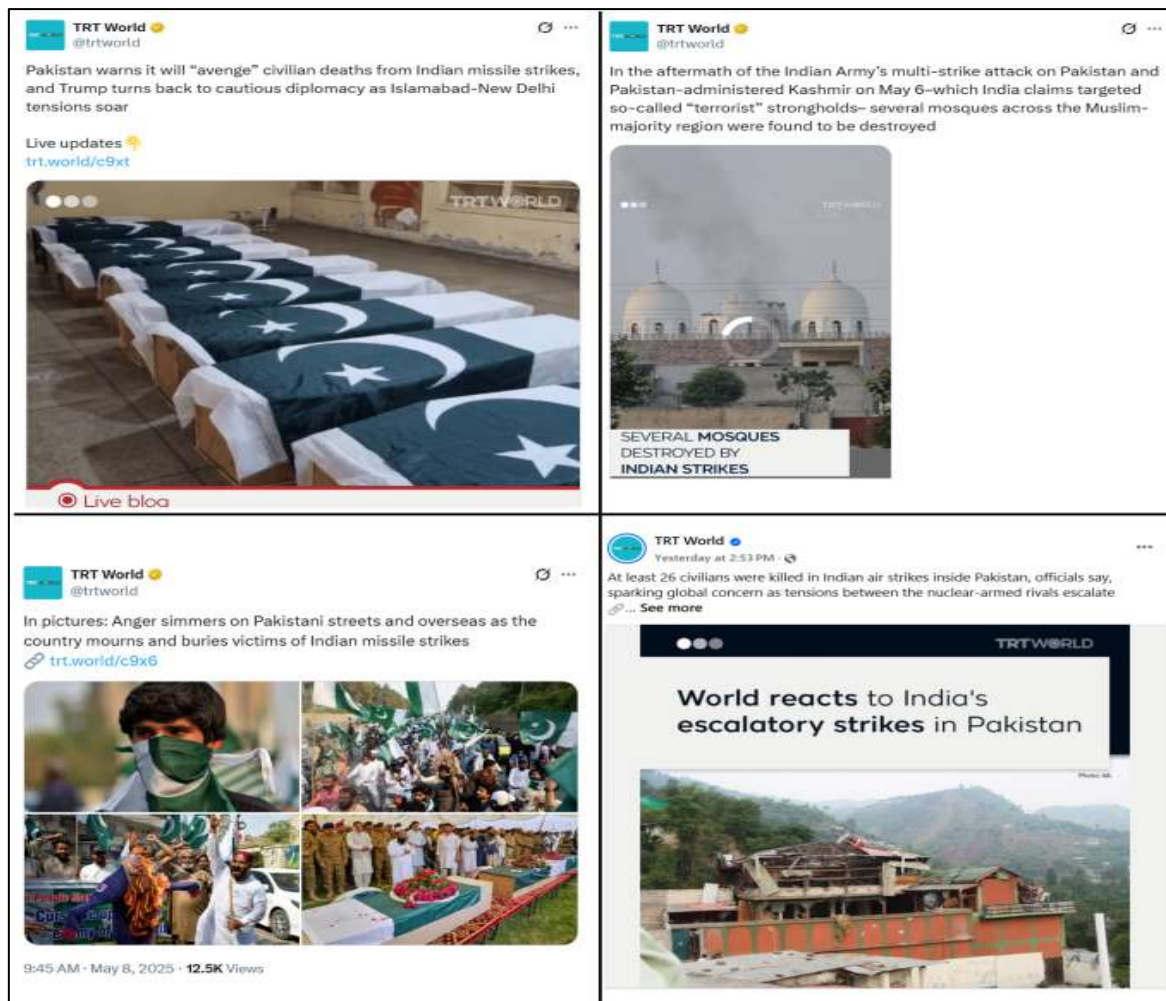


Fig 25 TRT World & Anadolu Agency ran Pakistani narrative laced with biased reporting & unverified claims aimed at explicitly towing the Pakistani narrative.

TRT gave platform to Nasir Qadri, a Pak national & head of Legal Forum for Kashmir (LFOVK), who pushed Israel-India alliance narrative during India-Pak 2025 conflict. Qadri accused India of adopting Israel's settler-colonial tactics, concocted by transnational alliance of Muslim Brotherhood, Pak, & Jamaat-e-Islami.

Beyond media amplification, Ankara appears to be pursuing a more structured and coordinated narrative campaign against India by leveraging civil society platforms, academic institutions, and diaspora networks. Turkey has identified narrative gaps in Europe and the Muslim world and is actively exploiting them to advance positions aligned with Pakistan. Civil society organisations and think tanks have played a central role in this effort. The Economic and Social Research Center (ESAM – Ekonomik ve Sosyal Araştırmalar Merkezi), an Ankara-based institution, has consistently supported Kashmir-focused initiatives by organising “Kashmir Solidarity Day” events in collaboration with Pakistani entities and framing the issue as an unresolved human rights concern. During a meeting held on 18–19 November 2025, ESAM reiterated its position by criticising India's policies and expressing solidarity with Kashmiris. The organisation has also hosted delegations from Kashmir, reinforcing separatist narratives and aligning its discourse closely with that of Pakistani diplomatic and civil society actors²⁴⁰.



Fig 26 Turkey's TRT World pushing anti-India narrative by platforming pro-Pakistan activists

It consistently frames India's actions in Kashmir as demographic engineering, often drawing parallels with Gaza and portraying them as "settler-colonial" policies. It further links the conflict to broader ideological narratives involving Islamist networks, reinforcing a Pakistan-aligned interpretation of events.

Academic institutions in Turkey have similarly emerged as important platforms for narrative projection. Universities such as Istanbul University have hosted international conferences on Kashmir, where participants have called for UN-mediated resolutions and raised allegations against India, including claims of demographic engineering and human rights violations²⁴¹. A virtual conference held in June 2020, for instance, concluded with demands for a "just and durable resolution" in line with UN Security Council resolutions. Such academic forums provide intellectual legitimacy to Pakistan-aligned narratives while extending their reach to global audiences.

This trend is not limited to a single institution. Ankara Yıldırım Beyazıt University, the İLKE Foundation (İlim Kültür Eğitim Vakfı), and the Institute of Strategic Thinking (SDE) have organised seminars framing Kashmir as an international dispute and linking it to broader issues within the Muslim world. State-funded universities, including Selçuk University and Necmettin Erbakan University, have also hosted events that reinforce similar positions. Notably, the International ILEM Summer School (IISS), organised by the Association of Scientific Studies (ILEM) in collaboration with the Presidency for Turks Abroad and Related Communities (YTB), has listed participants from "India," "Pakistan," and "Kashmir" as separate national categories—implicitly treating Kashmir as distinct from India²⁴².

Diaspora networks further amplify these narratives in Europe. Organisations such as ATİK, based in the Netherlands and historically associated with leftist movements, have issued statements portraying Indian counter-insurgency operations as large-scale atrocities. Such messaging demonstrates how diaspora platforms can mobilise transnational solidarity and influence public discourse on sensitive geopolitical issues. Overall, these efforts reflect a broader and long-term strategy by Ankara, combining Islamist, nationalist, and leftist elements within its outreach to reinforce and legitimise Pakistan-aligned narratives in international spaces.

VI. Washington: Lobbying and Think-Tank Outreach

In Washington, Pakistan waged a concerted and highly coordinated influence campaign. US Foreign Agents Registration Act (FARA) filings reveal that Islamabad hired multiple lobbying firms and engaged think tanks to push its narrative immediately after Operation Sindoor. This was not an ad hoc response but a pre-planned effort, with agreements signed as early as late April 2025 following the Pahalgam attack, including a contract on 24 April with Javelin Advisors LLC. Pakistan spent nearly \$5 million (\approx ₹45 crore) on lobbying efforts in 2025, engaging around six Washington-based firms. **NDTV** reported that **Javelin Advisors alone was paid \$50,000 per month to "communicate Pakistan's positions"** on Kashmir and bilateral issues to Congress, the executive branch, and the media, while the Islamabad Policy Research Institute disclosed a \$900,000 outreach programme targeting US policymakers²⁴³.

The campaign intensified sharply during the peak phase of Operation Sindoor between 7 May and 10 May 2025, when Pakistani diplomats and lobbyists conducted over 60 engagements within just a few days. While publicly projecting confidence during the

conflict, Pakistan privately displayed urgency, reaching out to the United States for mediation and investing heavily to engage across the US political, security, and media landscape²⁴⁴. These included meetings, phone calls, emails, and in-person briefings with members of the US Congress and their staff, officials from the Pentagon and State Department, representatives linked to the White House system, and major media outlets such as *The Wall Street Journal* and *The New York Times*. The outreach reflected a whole-of-government strategy, targeting key institutions across the US political, security, and media landscape rather than limited or symbolic engagement.

Lobbying firms such as Squire Patton Boggs and Javelin Advisors facilitated direct engagement with policymakers, organised media briefings, and circulated policy documents and talking points presenting Pakistan's version of events. These interactions were issue-specific, focusing on the Kashmir issue, framing India's actions as escalatory, and seeking US intervention to halt Operation Sindoor²⁴⁵. FARA disclosures indicate that the objective was not merely narrative projection but also diplomatic pressure, with efforts explicitly aimed at influencing US decision-making and encouraging mediation or ceasefire intervention.

The outreach continued beyond the initial crisis window, evolving into a sustained campaign throughout May 2025 and its immediate aftermath. Pakistani envoys and parliamentary delegations complemented lobbying efforts on the ground; notably, a team led by Bilawal Bhutto visited Washington, D.C., and New York in early June to engage with UN and US officials, projecting Pakistan's perspective on the conflict.

The scale of spending, intensity of engagement, and breadth of institutional targeting underscore that Pakistan's effort in Washington was a structured, multi-layered influence operation designed to shape international perception and policy responses during and after Operation Sindoor.

VII. London: Diaspora Protests and Public Diplomacy

In UK, Pakistan leveraged its large expatriate community, media outlets, and sympathetic politicians. Pakistani news channels in Britain (and even new UK-registered "Pakistani" outlets like *DM News English* in Manchester)²⁴⁶ amplified Islamabad's line. On the streets, this translated into widespread and sustained mobilisation, not limited to isolated incidents. Protests erupted across multiple cities—including London, Manchester, Edinburgh, and Belfast—indicating a broader, coordinated diaspora response. In London, demonstrations were held at Parliament Square and outside both the Indian and Pakistani High Commissions, where Pakistani and Indian diaspora groups staged competing protests. The scale of mobilisation was significant enough that the UK government publicly urged calm, warning that the India–Pakistan conflict could spill over into unrest within Britain's large South Asian communities. These rallies often featured slogans against India and in favour of ceasefire. For example, *The Guardian*²⁴⁷ covered a May 2025 London demonstration, noting one protester's placard "Diaspora say no to war!" and quotes from Pakistani-British attendees²⁴⁸. Seventy-four-year-old Nasreen Rehman, a UK resident of Kashmiri origin, publicly protested India's suspension of the Indus Waters Treaty, asking "At the end of the day, we are human beings... threats of stopping water? What does that mean?". Such imagery and interviews were widely picked up by British media, reinforcing a victimhood frame aligned with Pakistan's narrative while receiving disproportionate visibility in coverage.

Diplomatically, Pakistan sent envoys to London for briefings. A high-profile Pakistani delegation led by Bilawal Bhutto visited London (and Brussels)²⁴⁹ in early June, meeting MPs and think-tank panels. The delegation arrived in London around 8 June 2025 after earlier engagements in the United States, as part of a broader diplomatic campaign aimed at engaging international policymakers and opinion-makers.

In London, the delegation undertook a series of formal institutional engagements, including briefings to the All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on Pakistan and the APPG on Jammu & Kashmir at Westminster, a formal interaction with the Speaker of the House of Commons, Sir Lindsay Hoyle, meetings with UK parliamentarians across party lines, and engagement with officials at the UK Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO). These meetings were used to present Pakistan's position on the post-escalation India–Pakistan security environment, including allegations of unprovoked military aggression and strikes.

A central focus of the delegation's diplomatic messaging was the Indus Waters Treaty, with Pakistan expressing concerns over what it described as its suspension or being placed in abeyance by India. The delegation urged the restoration and full implementation of the treaty, framing it as essential for regional stability and legal continuity in bilateral relations. According to Pakistani press accounts, the delegation shared Pakistan's "firm perspective on India's aggression" and emphasised the need for sustained international engagement to prevent further escalation and to support dialogue-based conflict resolution.

VIII. United Nations: High-Level Lobbying & Disarmament Forum

At the UN (NY and Geneva), Pakistan launched a full-court press. In New York, Pakistan's UN Ambassador briefed ambassadors and arranged side events focusing on civilian harm. Notably, in late May Pakistan's mission to the Conference on Disarmament in Geneva delivered a sweeping speech. It claimed Indian strikes had killed "40 civilians, including women and children," and accused Indian media of a "coordinated disinformation assault" to stoke Islamophobia²⁵⁰. The statement boasted that Pakistan "*acted responsibly*", avoiding civilian targets, and blamed India alone for violating the UN Charter²⁵¹.

Crucially, the speech labelled Operation Sindoor an expression of India's "aggressive strategic posture," warning that India was preparing to project power "far beyond South Asia"²⁵². This high-profile UN address was circulated to diplomats worldwide, framing Pakistan as peace-seeking and India as the warmonger. In parallel, Pakistan's PM and Foreign Minister sought UN sympathy, for instance, Pakistan's PM Sharif told Pakistani media he had "categorically rejected" Indian claims in front of foreign journalists.

However, this narrative stands in sharp contrast to developments on the ground. From the outset, India consistently maintained that Operation Sindoor was a focused, measured, and non-escalatory response, aimed specifically at terror infrastructure rather than civilian or conventional military targets²⁵³. In contrast, Pakistan's response involved large-scale cross-border shelling that directly impacted civilian areas. Within the first phase itself, Pakistani artillery and mortar fire killed at least 12–15 civilians in a single day (7 May 2025), including women and children, and injured over 40–59 others, with Poonch district bearing the brunt of the attacks²⁵⁴. As the escalation continued, the overall civilian toll rose to more than 20 deaths, with at least 21 Indian civilians reported killed, the majority due to Pakistani shelling in populated areas of Jammu and Kashmir.

Crucially, these strikes were not limited to incidental damage but hit clearly civilian and non-military locations, including residential homes, a school complex, and a gurdwara in Poonch, where at least three people were killed and others injured. Reports also confirm that children were among the casualties, further underscoring the civilian nature of those affected²⁵⁵. In multiple instances, shelling resulted in 13 or more deaths and up to 57 injuries across affected areas, reflecting both the scale and intensity of the attacks.

These facts fundamentally contradict Pakistan's claims at the UN that it "acted responsibly" and avoided civilian targets. Instead, the scale, location, and nature of the casualties indicate that civilian areas bore the brunt of Pakistan's response, exposing a clear disconnect between its diplomatic narrative and its actions on the ground.

At the same time, Pakistan has repeatedly weaponised the Islamophobia narrative in international forums as a deliberate political tool to delegitimise India's counter-terrorism actions, deflect attention from its support ecosystem for terror groups, and distort the discourse in identity-based terms. It constantly uses this "Islamophobia" card against India strategically to justify and shield terror-related activities against India and to manage its international image across forums.

IX. Pakistan-China Alliance

China emerged to be another key proponent of Pak military. Fulfilling its duties as Pak's "iron brother", China provided missile systems like HQ-9 & HQ-16, and missiles PL-15 used by Pakistan during the conflict. These systems are not symbolic transfers but operationally integrated platforms within Pakistan's broader military architecture, enhancing long-range interception, multi-target tracking, and beyond-visual-range engagement capacity. But China's support for Pak extended to even cyberspace²⁵⁶.



Fig 27 Snapshot of a news report detailing Chinese involvement in pushing misinformation on the Pahalgam attack

Chinese social media accounts circulated a wide range of fake news, misleading visuals, and fabricated images and videos as part of coordinated campaigns aimed at portraying India negatively and isolating it within the global social media landscape²⁵⁷. These narratives included fabricated reports of Indian aircraft losses, selectively edited battlefield footage, and the reuse of outdated imagery presented as real-time developments. In multiple instances, visuals originating from unrelated past incidents were recirculated and falsely linked to ongoing events, a pattern repeatedly flagged by official fact-checking bodies.

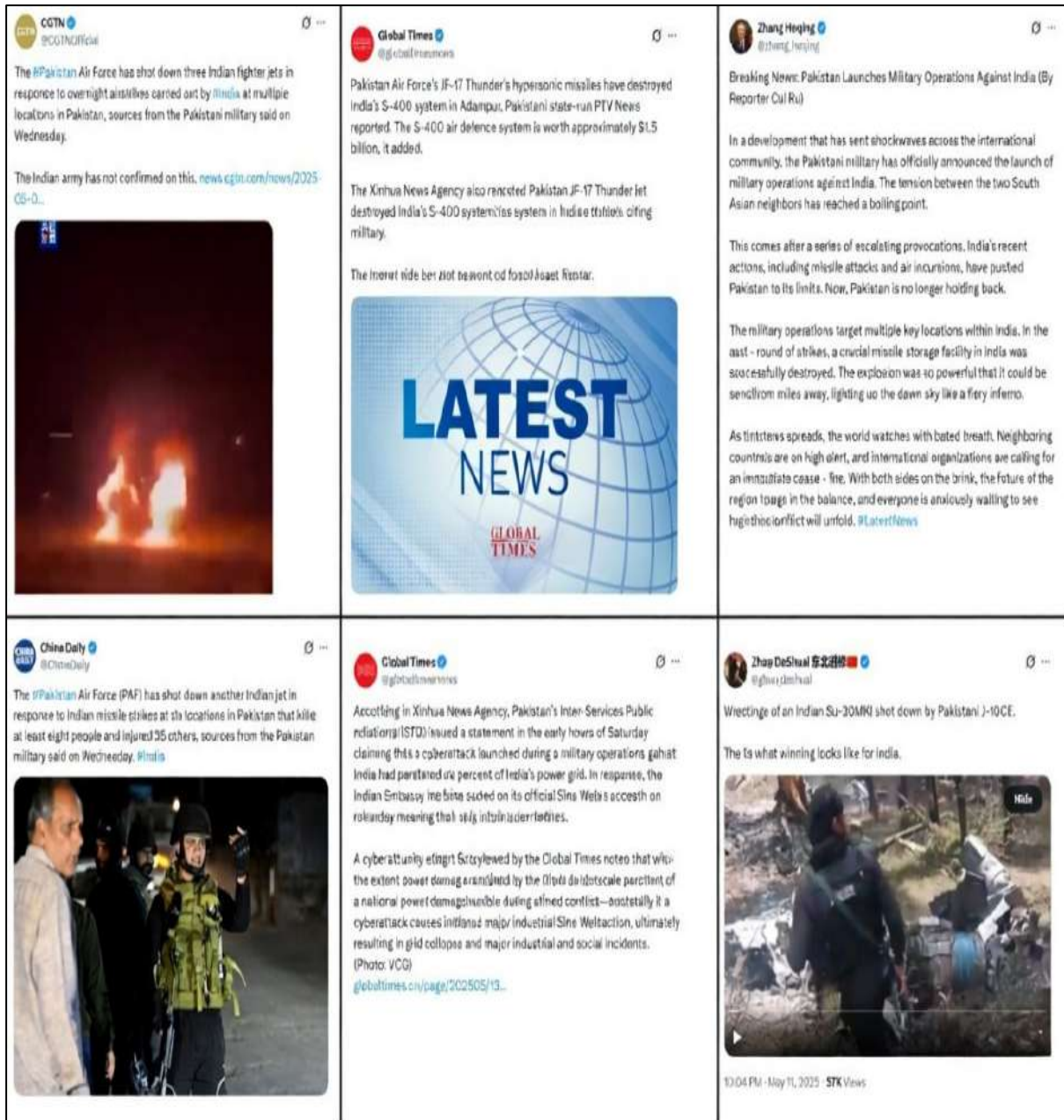


Fig 28 India's Press Information Bureau (PIB) Fact Check unit specifically debunked several such claims.

China's state-run outlet *China Daily* incorrectly claimed that "at least three Indian jets crashed in Jammu and Kashmir" amid recent tensions with Pakistan. However, PIB Fact Check clarified that this was false, noting that the images used were from a 2019 incident and had no connection to the current situation. PIB Fact Check also debunked multiple Chinese media viral claims alleging large-scale destruction of Indian airbases, loss of advanced systems such as S-400 air defence units, and the capture or downing of Indian pilots, confirming that these assertions were entirely false and not supported by any operational evidence²⁵⁸.



Fig 29 Accounts aligned with the CCP circulated false and unverified claims about Indian aircraft allegedly involved in military confrontations with Pakistan.

These narratives also need to be understood within China's broader strategic and geopolitical context. First, apart from its strategic rivalry and military support to Pakistan during Operation Sindoor, China also had a strong interest in advancing its defence export agenda. During the conflict, Pakistan's deployment of Chinese-origin systems such as the JF-17 fighter aircraft, HQ-9 air defence system, and PL-15 missile system provided Beijing with a rare opportunity to project a live combat showcase of its military technology. China actively sought to capitalise on this operational visibility by forcefully amplifying claims regarding the battlefield effectiveness and superiority of its weapons systems. Although India struck precision strikes on nine targets inside Pakistan, achieving 100 percent pinpoint accuracy, and China's weapon system failed to stop India's strikes, through propaganda, coordinated state media narratives, and tightly managed strategic communication channels, Beijing aggressively projected these engagements as evidence of

the reliability, modernity, and combat readiness of Chinese defence platforms. This



amounted to a deliberate and sustained information campaign aimed at shaping international perceptions of Chinese military hardware, reinforcing export credibility, and embedding its narrative within the broader informational space aligned with Pakistan's messaging²⁵⁹.

Fig 30 Snapshot of western accounts amplifying anti-India narrative from Pakistani government and allied propaganda sources

But in this there was also another dimension: sections of Western media also amplified Chinese-origin narratives, partly because India was using a mix of Russian-origin, Western-origin, and indigenously developed defence equipment, while Western countries had their own strategic and commercial interests in questioning or undermining the effectiveness of the some of these systems²⁶⁰. For instance, in the context of the Russia–Ukraine war, many Western countries directly support Ukraine; therefore, media narratives in Western outlets frequently highlighted the limitations, failures, or battlefield losses of Russian-origin military equipment. At the same time, India's long-standing defence relationship with Russia meant that several Indian platforms and systems are based on similar Russian-origin technology. As a result, broader critiques of Russian military hardware in the Ukraine war were indirectly extended or generalised into

discussions about the performance of Russian-origin systems in other theatres, including South Asia.

This convergence, even if indirect, contributed to the amplification of similar claims in both Chinese and Western media ecosystems against Indian defence platforms during Operation Sindoor. As a result, a number of reports emerged suggesting Indian fighter jet losses, often relying on vague attributions such as “officials say,” without presenting verifiable evidence or independent confirmation.

In addition, these narratives were also shaped by underlying commercial competition in the global arms industry. Major defence exporters such as the United States and France, among others, often compete in overlapping markets, particularly in India²⁶¹. In such a competitive environment, perceptions of battlefield performance and system effectiveness can indirectly influence procurement decisions and defence partnerships. This commercial dimension, while rarely stated explicitly in media reporting, adds another layer to the framing of military performance debates, particularly when legacy systems of one supplier are contrasted with platforms offered by rival exporters.

X. Counter Evidence Suppressed: How India's Facts Were Side-lined

Pakistani narratives gained additional mileage through sympathetic networks outside Pakistan. Social media influencers and diaspora journalists in Western countries rapidly echoed Islamabad's themes. Although systematic data is scant, examples abound of diaspora-linked platforms using India's own hashtags to inject pro-Pakistan content. For instance, after **#OperationSindoor** began trending, trolls hijacked the tag with anti-India memes. Pakistan-based media personalities even posed as Indian officials: fact-checkers flagged Pakistani propaganda accounts pretending to be officers from defence forces²⁶². Outside the subcontinent, reporters in Turkey and China, often influenced by their governments, amplified false claims as noted. Think-tank panels and op-eds in global cities also featured Pakistani-aligned voices. State-run TRT World (Turkey) invited Pakistani officials to repeat unverified claims, and China's Global Times/CGTN gave space to them as well²⁶³.

At the same time, sections of Western media, including Reuters, BBC, DW, and others, are often perceived as exhibiting a degree of bias towards Pakistan and a prejudicial approach towards India. While these outlets frame their reporting under liberal journalistic standards, critics argue that they do not give equal weight to Indian perspectives and tend to underrepresent them in key geopolitical narratives. These perceptions of bias are frequently attributed to broader historical and structural factors rather than isolated editorial decisions.

These biases are also often traced to Cold War alignments, when Pakistan was part of Western security architectures and India a non-aligned country with a greater tilt towards the Soviet Union. As a result, there is a perception that a residual soft corner persists in parts of Western policy and media ecosystems towards Pakistan due to these long-standing geopolitical and historical linkages, even though this is rarely explicitly acknowledged²⁶⁴.

This perceived imbalance is also reflected in international publishing and opinion spaces. Pakistani authors writing for Western outlets often find relatively easier acceptance, particularly when their narratives align with established editorial assumptions or prevailing geopolitical framings. In contrast, Indian submissions are sometimes viewed as challenging dominant assumptions and are therefore perceived to face greater scrutiny or

rejection. This contributes to the impression that Pakistani writers are more visible in global media platforms compared to Indian authors.

There are also additional structural explanations. Despite concerns about bias, many Indian journalists, scholars, and experts prefer to publish in domestic media ecosystems rather than international platforms. As a result, Pakistan, along with other aligned or sympathetic actors who are hostile towards India, has been consistently active in occupying this informational space, often in a coordinated manner that amplifies narratives critical of India. Consequently, in the West, when issues between India and Pakistan are discussed, audiences often encounter the Pakistani perspective on these issues. There is also a tendency within Indian academic and policy communities to prioritise analytical objectivity and the search for empirical interpretation over actively projecting India's voices in global media spaces.

In contrast, Pakistani actors have, since their creation in 1947, invested more systematically in external narrative construction, including through coordinated information structures such as the Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR), (propaganda apparatus of Pakistan), which functions as a central institutional mechanism for strategic communication and messaging²⁶⁵. They are often seen as more deliberate and consistent in presenting a cohesive external narrative, making strategic use of writers and commentators across international platforms. This difference in approach further contributes to the visibility gap in global discourse, where Pakistani narratives appear more frequently represented compared to Indian perspectives.

Against this backdrop, India, as a rising power operating in a complex and often contested neighbourhood with multiple actors whose interests frequently intersect across political, informational, and strategic domains, faces a growing imperative to strengthen its external narrative architecture. There is, therefore, a clear need for India to project its perspective more consistently, proactively, and coherently at the global level, ensuring that its strategic positions are communicated with greater continuity and visibility in international information environments.

Chapter 8

Breaking Free: India's Counter-Offensive, Human Cost, and the Road Ahead

This chapter examines how India transitioned from a reactive stance during earlier phases of conflict to a more structured and assertive counter-offensive during Operation Sindoor, particularly in the digital domain. It highlights the emergence of the “digital frontline,” where India coordinated efforts across government agencies, fact-checking bodies such as the Press Information Bureau, media organisations, and independent actors to counter misinformation, disinformation campaigns, psychological operations, and narrative warfare originating from Pakistan and its allied networks. The focus is on how information warfare became central to modern conflict, with speed, credibility, and visibility determining the effectiveness of competing narratives.

A major portion of the chapter analyses the platform-by-platform response, detailing how India adapted its strategy across social media ecosystems such as Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok, as well as encrypted platforms like WhatsApp and Telegram. It explores how real-time fact-checking, content moderation, short-form video strategies, and digital awareness campaigns were used to counter Pakistan's propaganda networks. The chapter also evaluates measurable outcomes such as engagement, reach, and shifts in online discourse, showing how coordinated digital action can influence public perception. Finally, the chapter situates this information battle within its broader human and strategic context. It underscores the real-world impact of conflict on civilians and the ethical challenges of using human suffering within narrative frameworks. Looking ahead, it emphasises the importance of building resilient information systems, improving digital literacy, and fostering collaboration between governments and technology platforms. Overall, the chapter argues that future conflicts will increasingly be defined by control over narratives, making strategic communication as critical as military capability.

The Digital Frontline – India's Counter

During Operation Sindoor, conflict was no longer confined to physical borders or conventional military operations; it unfolded simultaneously across digital platforms, global media networks, and diplomatic channels. In this environment, control over information flows and narrative framing emerged as a critical dimension of the conflict, alongside developments on the ground, with information and propaganda being actively deployed to shape narratives and undermine India's image in the international arena²⁶⁶. This was reflected in the circulation of misleading and fabricated claims, including distorted accounts of military developments, exaggerated battlefield outcomes, and the use of manipulated or AI-generated content, all of which contributed to a broader

disinformation environment aimed at influencing global opinion and obscuring on-ground realities²⁶⁷.



Fig 31 A joint press conference by Air Marshal A.K. Bharti (centre), Lieutenant General Rajiv Ghai and Vice Admiral A.N. Pramod in New Delhi on 12 May 2025

India thus faced a complex information landscape shaped by rapid dissemination, fragmented audiences, and competing narratives. Pakistan's strategic communication networks—comprising state institutions, media platforms, and digital ecosystems—had already demonstrated their capacity to influence global discourse. This capability is not recent but rooted in a long-standing institutional framework, particularly the establishment of the Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR) in 1949, which serves as the media and public relations wing of the Pakistani military and has historically played a central role in information management, strategic communication, and narrative projection²⁶⁸. Over time, its role has expanded beyond conventional public relations to include shaping domestic and international perceptions through coordinated influence operations and messaging across traditional and digital platforms. The challenge was further intensified by the scale of coordinated propaganda efforts during this crisis, as a significant volume of misleading content emerged from networks of fake and coordinated accounts, reportedly originating not only in Pakistan but also in countries such as China, Turkey, and allied information ecosystems²⁶⁹.



Fig 32 The internal newsroom operations of Geo News, a major Pakistani television network.

Notably, despite having previously restricted access to platforms such as X (formerly Twitter), Pakistan lifted these limitations during Operation Sindoor, a move that coincided with the intensification of the broader “narrative war” and enabled a rapid expansion of information flows and propaganda, facilitating the large-scale circulation and amplification of competing narratives across digital platforms²⁷⁰.

In response to the surge in propaganda, Indian agencies acted in a coordinated and timely manner. Working closely with multiple government bodies and digital platforms, they initiated rapid fact-checking processes and took proactive steps to counter misinformation. Fact-checking initiatives, supported by institutions such as the Press Information Bureau, played a central role in this effort. Operating in a round-the-clock capacity and supported by a centralised coordination mechanism, these initiatives systematically verified claims, countered deepfakes and manipulated content, and provided documented evidence to build confidence among both domestic and international audiences. Thousands of fact-checks were issued during this period, reflecting the scale and intensity of the response. Content identified as false or misleading was systematically flagged, verified, and escalated to social media companies for removal²⁷¹. This coordinated effort, undertaken within the legal framework of Section 69A of the Information Technology Act, yielded tangible results, with over 1,400 URLs—including posts, accounts, and other digital content—being blocked in a short span of time, thereby limiting the spread and impact of disinformation.



Fig 33 A representative figure of cyber experts on job debunking the mis- and dis-information

This communication strategy assumed particular significance because, in the Pahalgam terror attack, 26 civilians were killed on the basis of their Hindu religious identity, and there was a broader game plan to incite communal violence in the whole country. As Indian parliamentarian Shashi Tharoor noted, the attack was a “calculated attempt to provoke communal tensions,” underscoring its broader objective of disrupting social cohesion²⁷². In response, official communication adopted a calibrated, inclusive, and

strategic approach, reflected in the regular, structured briefings delivered by senior officials such as Foreign Secretary Vikram Misri, alongside officers from defence forces. The composition of the briefing team, representing institutional diversity, conveyed broader messages of unity and cohesion, reinforcing the emphasis on restraint and national solidarity²⁷³. This regular dissemination of credible information played an important role in reducing the scope for misinformation and limiting the escalation of divisive narratives.

Moreover, India adapted its messaging to suit platform-specific formats, incorporating visual elements, concise explanations, and shareable content designed for digital consumption. This shift not only increased the accessibility of information but also enhanced its potential for amplification. The integration of technology into communication strategies further strengthened India's ability to respond effectively. Digital monitoring tools, including emerging AI-enabled systems, were employed to track trending topics, identify emerging narratives, and detect misinformation campaigns in real time, including challenges such as deepfakes and manipulated content. Operating in a continuous monitoring mode, these systems enabled authorities to respond with speed and precision²⁷⁴. This data-driven approach facilitated targeted interventions, ensuring that responses were not only timely but also aligned with the evolving dynamics of the information landscape.



Fig 34 Representative picture of cyber experts at work



Fig 35 A Representative of fake news and social media channels



Fig 36 The work station of Indian fact-checking BOOM Live organisation in Mumbai

War on Social Media – Countering Pakistan Propaganda

The social media environment during Operation Sindoor evolved into one of the most dynamic and contested arenas of the conflict. Pakistan's established networks—comprising state-linked accounts, aligned media voices, and coordinated digital communities—continued to push a steady stream of content designed to influence

perception. India's counter-effort therefore required not only speed but also scale, coordination, and sustained engagement across multiple layers of the digital ecosystem. Centralised coordination and control mechanisms formed a key component of this response, with the establishment of a 24/7 central control structure that brought together armed forces representatives, media units, and fact-checking agencies, enabling real-time monitoring, verification, and dissemination of accurate information across platforms²⁷⁵.



Fig 37 Data Traffic Representation

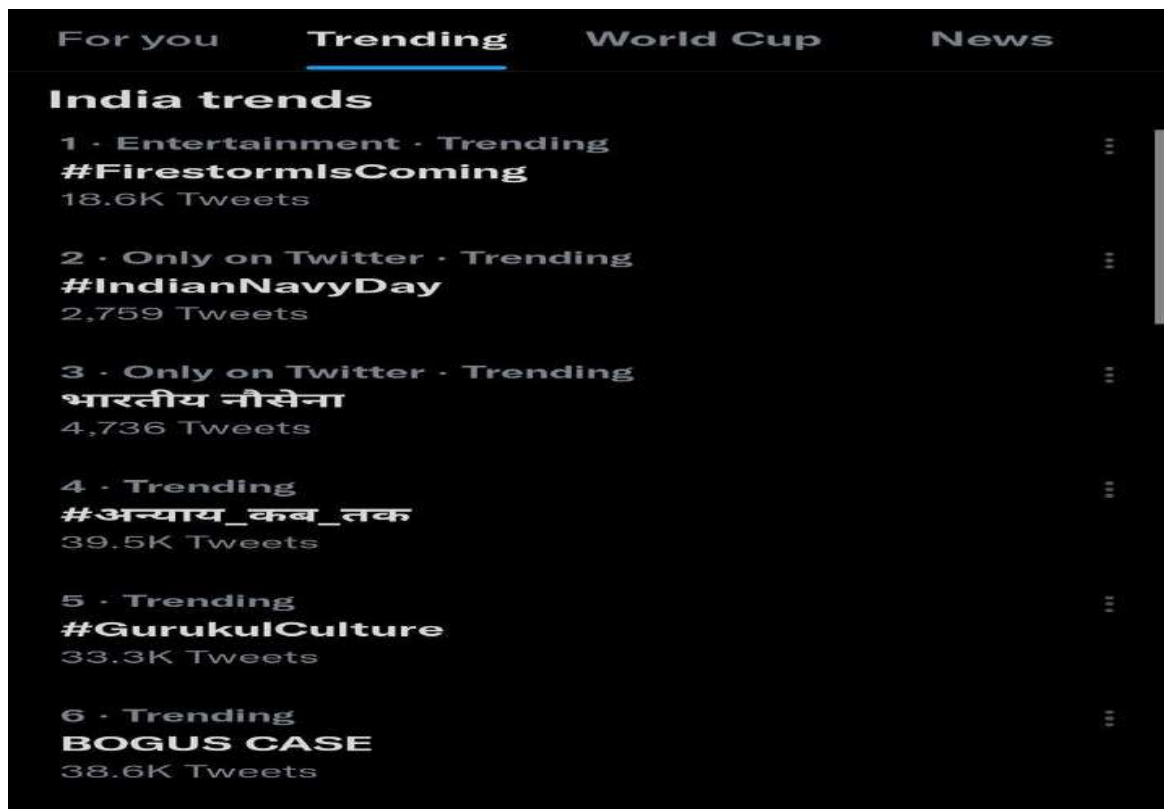


Fig 38 Social media X trends in India

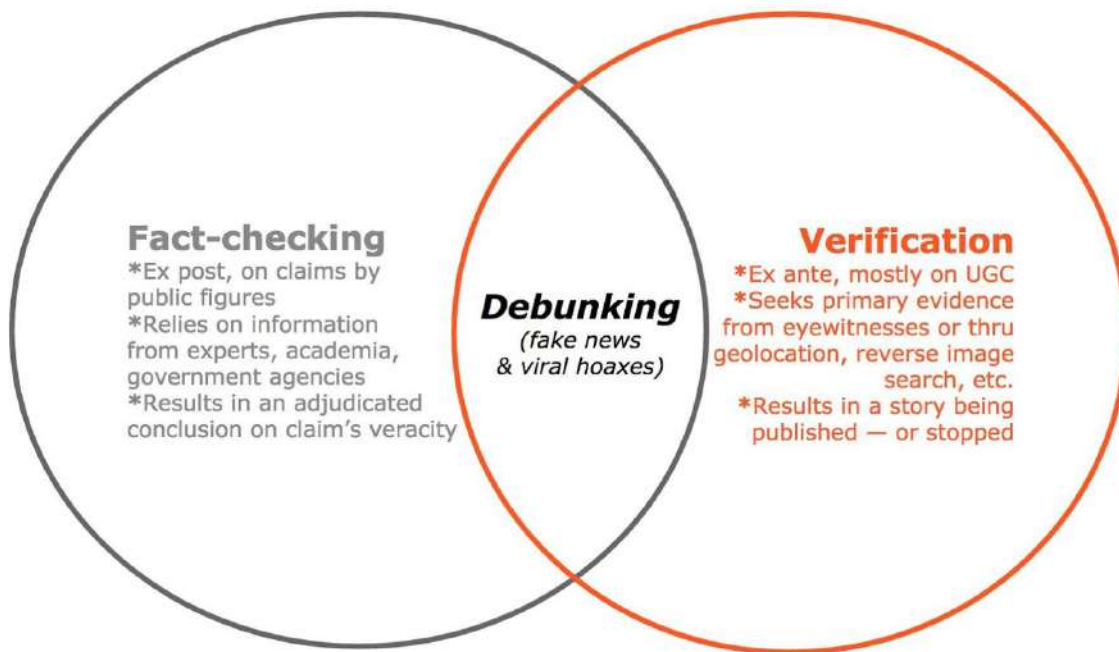


Fig 39 Venn diagram illustrating distinct but overlapping roles of fact-checking, verification in debunking fake news

A defining feature of this “war on social media” was the contest over narrative framing. Pakistan’s messaging frequently relied on emotionally resonant themes—civilian harm, humanitarian concerns, and legal arguments—presented in a manner designed for rapid sharing²⁷⁶. These narratives were often accompanied by visuals, short clips, or simplified claims that could easily circulate across platforms. India’s response focused on challenging these frames directly by introducing verified information, contextual explanations, and evidence-based rebuttals. Rather than allowing misleading claims to stand unchallenged, Indian communicators increasingly adopted a strategy of immediate engagement, addressing inaccuracies as they appeared. The role of fact-checking was particularly significant in this environment. Institutions such as the Press Information Bureau, along with independent verification groups, worked to identify misleading claims and provide clear, documented corrections²⁷⁷. Operating in a continuous, round-the-clock capacity, these efforts systematically verified claims, countered deepfakes and manipulated content, and ensured that corrections were presented in formats optimised for social media—such as side-by-side comparisons, annotated images, and short explanatory videos—making them easier to understand and share. By focusing on clarity and accessibility, these efforts sought to bridge the gap between detailed analysis and mass audience consumption.

The contest also extended to the use of hashtags and trending mechanisms. Social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook prioritise content that generates high engagement, making trending topics a critical battleground. Pakistan-aligned networks often sought to dominate these spaces by coordinating posts and amplifying specific tags. In response, India’s strategy included the production of high-quality visual materials that explained events, clarified timelines, and highlighted inconsistencies in misleading claims²⁷⁸. This was complemented by proactive information dissemination through regular official briefings supported by visuals, geospatial references, and operational explanations, ensuring a continuous flow of credible information and reducing space for rumours and speculation.

Another critical dimension of the social media war was the exposure of coordinated behaviour. By analysing patterns of posting, identifying clusters of accounts, and tracing the origin of specific claims, Indian analysts were able to highlight instances of organised amplification. Publicly revealing these patterns served two purposes: it reduced the credibility of the content being circulated and increased awareness among audiences about the existence of coordinated campaigns²⁷⁹. This transparency contributed to a more informed and cautious approach to information consumption.

The role of diaspora communities and international audiences added further complexity to the social media landscape. Content generated in one region could quickly reach global audiences, influencing perceptions far beyond the immediate area of conflict. India's counter-strategy, therefore, included efforts to engage international viewers, providing context and clarification in formats suitable for global consumption²⁸⁰. At the same time, platform regulation and content moderation formed an important pillar of the response, with legal and institutional mechanisms used to flag misinformation and coordinate with social media companies, thereby limiting the reach of coordinated disinformation campaigns. In addition, a counter-narrative strategy was employed, focusing not only on reacting but also on providing contextual explanations, using verified data and documentation, and exposing fabricated claims such as AI-generated videos, recycled footage, and false reports, thereby shifting the narrative from emotion-driven propaganda to evidence-based communication²⁸¹.

Despite these efforts, significant challenges remained. The speed and volume of information meant that even brief delays could allow misleading narratives to gain traction. The decentralised nature of social media made it difficult to achieve complete coverage, as new accounts and content could emerge continuously. Encrypted and semi-private channels further limited visibility, creating pockets of information exchange that were harder to monitor and influence. These factors required a flexible and adaptive approach, capable of responding to changing conditions in real time.

Platform-by-Platform Dissection of India's Response

India's counter-offensive demonstrated that no single platform could determine the outcome of an information conflict. Each digital environment operates under different rules—distinct algorithms, audience behaviours, content formats, and moderation policies. Recognising this, India adopted a platform-specific strategy rather than a one-size-fits-all approach²⁸². This section provides a detailed breakdown of how India calibrated its response across major platforms, adapting its messaging, tools, and engagement methods to maximise effectiveness within each digital ecosystem.

1. X (Twitter): Real-Time Information Control and Narrative Speed

On Twitter, speed and immediacy defined the information environment. The platform functioned as a primary space for the rapid circulation of breaking updates, official statements, and responses to emerging narratives²⁸³. Communication patterns during this period reflected a clear emphasis on the timely dissemination of verified information, often appearing soon after competing claims began to circulate.



Fig 40 Representative image of social media command centre



Fig 41 Representative image of fact-checking in action

A notable feature of this approach was the use of structured, sequential posts to explain complex developments step by step, making them more accessible to a broad audience. These posts frequently incorporated visual elements, including images, maps, and short clips, enhancing both clarity and shareability²⁸⁴.

2. Meta Platforms (Facebook and Instagram): Community Reach and Moderation Dynamics

On platforms operated by Meta Platforms, including Facebook and Instagram, the focus shifted toward community engagement and information curation. These platforms host diverse audiences and support a wide range of content types, from long-form posts to short visual media. Alongside these efforts, platform-level enforcement actions on X resulted in over 8,000 accounts being blocked or withheld in India for disseminating misleading or

provocative content during Operation Sindoor. This reflected a coordinated response within the digital ecosystem, where platform policies and user reporting mechanisms played a key role in limiting the spread of disinformation²⁸⁵.

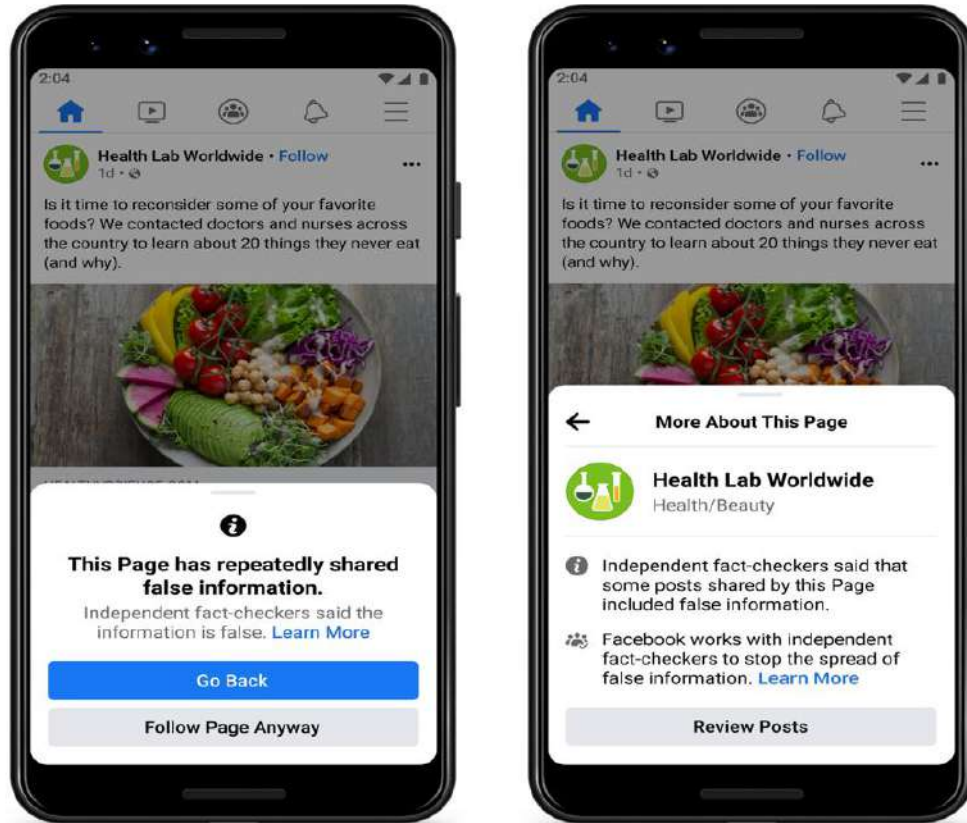


Fig 42 Representative of fact-checking in practice

India's approach involved both proactive and responsive measures. Proactively, official pages and verified accounts shared detailed posts, infographics, and video explainers to provide context and clarity. At the same time, systematic efforts were made to identify, flag, and counter misleading content, as reflected in multiple instances where fabricated narratives were publicly debunked. For example, the Press Information Bureau (PIB) exposed a fake infographic falsely attributed to CNN that highlighted Indian losses, officially classifying it as part of a propaganda campaign. Similarly, gaming footage was circulated as real combat visuals but was subsequently identified and corrected²⁸⁶. False WhatsApp messages and fake government advisories were also debunked to prevent panic and misinformation, while a viral video claiming a drone attack was verified to be a farm fire through timestamp analysis and local administrative confirmation²⁸⁷. These interventions were accompanied by coordination with platform mechanisms to limit the spread of such content. Instagram, in particular, became a key space for visual storytelling. Short videos and graphic posts were used to simplify complex issues, making them more accessible to younger audiences. This visual-first approach helped bridge the gap between detailed analysis and mass consumption.

3. YouTube and TikTok: The Battle for Visual Narratives

Video platforms such as YouTube and TikTok introduced a different set of dynamics, where engagement is driven by visual appeal, storytelling, and algorithmic recommendations.

Storytelling in Social Media.

Each social platform offers unique storytelling opportunities that can enhance your digital narrative and audience engagement.



Instagram Stories.

Perfect for visual narratives with 24-hour timeframes. Use features like polls, questions, and highlights to create interactive, episodic content that builds anticipation and encourages daily engagement.



TikTok Trends.

Leverage short-form video storytelling through challenges, transitions, and sound-driven narratives. Create authentic, relatable content that aligns with current trends while maintaining your brand voice.



Twitter Threads.

Master the art of micro-storytelling through connected tweets. Build suspense and engagement by breaking complex narratives into digestible parts, using a mix of text, images, and user interaction.

Fig 43 Representative of how social media platforms allow users to post content



Fig 44 Representative of India's ban of various Pakistani Youtube channels

India's strategy on these platforms focused on producing high-quality video content, all evidence-based, that could compete with viral clips. Explainer videos, expert interviews, and animated breakdowns were used to provide context and counter misleading claims. Short-form videos, in particular, proved effective in reaching large audiences quickly, as

they aligned with platform algorithms that prioritise concise and engaging content²⁸⁸. A key strength of India's approach was the integration of efforts across platforms.

Despite these measures, several challenges persisted. The speed of content creation and dissemination meant that new narratives could emerge faster than they could be addressed. Platform algorithms, which prioritise engagement, sometimes amplified misleading content over verified information. Additionally, the decentralised nature of digital communication made it difficult to achieve comprehensive coverage. The presence of coordinated networks further complicated the landscape. These networks could amplify specific narratives across multiple platforms simultaneously, creating the appearance of widespread consensus. Countering such efforts required sustained coordination and continuous monitoring.

Metrics of Success: Reach, Engagement, and Narrative Shift

Assessing the effectiveness of India's counter-offensive during Operation Sindoor requires a detailed examination of measurable indicators across the digital ecosystem. In modern information environments, success is not determined solely by the accuracy of content, but by its visibility, interaction, persistence, and ability to influence perception over time. India's strategy therefore incorporated a data-driven framework that evaluated performance across multiple dimensions—reach, engagement, and narrative movement—while continuously refining tactics based on real-time feedback²⁸⁹.

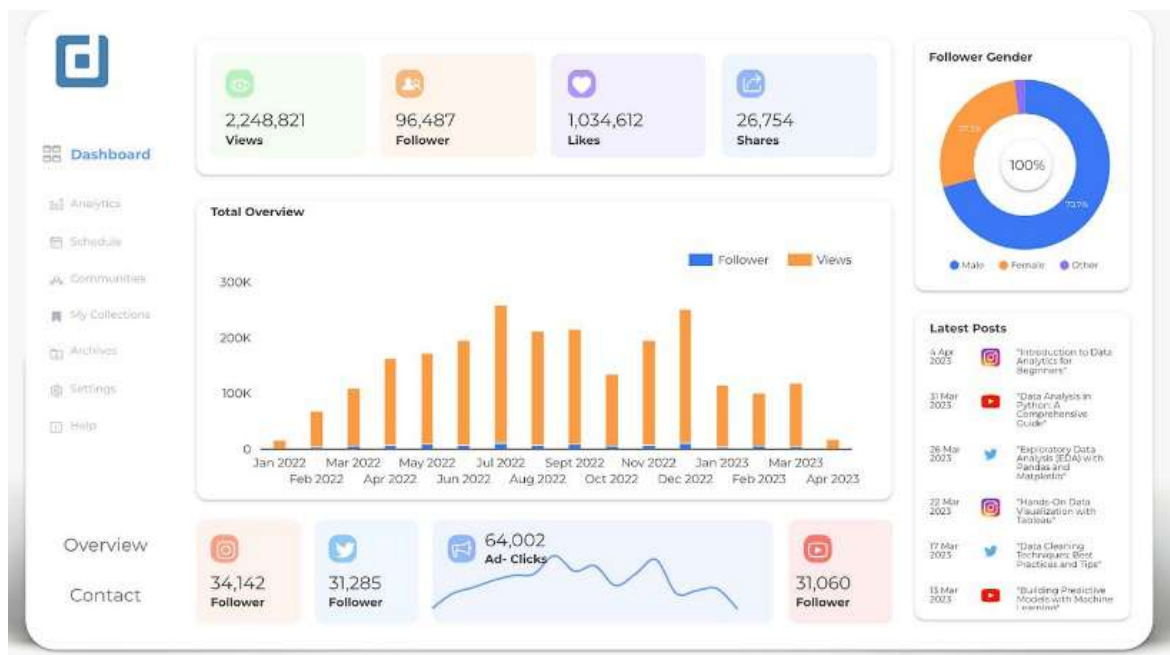


Fig 45 Social media analytics dashboard

A more complex but crucial metric was narrative shift, which refers to changes in the dominant themes and perspectives within public discourse²⁹⁰. This was particularly evident when verified information was consistently reinforced across multiple platforms and by diverse sources. Tracking narrative shift involved monitoring keyword trends, hashtag usage, and the relative prominence of competing viewpoints. On platforms such as Facebook and Instagram, the transition from unverified claims to evidence-based discussions could be observed through changes in post content and user interactions. Over

time, the repetition of verified information contributed to the stabilisation of certain narratives, reducing the influence of earlier misleading content.

Another important dimension of success was content longevity. In fast-moving digital environments, content often has a short lifespan, with new posts quickly replacing older ones. India's strategy sought to extend the relevance of verified information by maintaining continuous engagement and updating content as new developments emerged. This ensured that accurate narratives remained visible and accessible, countering the tendency for misinformation to reappear in different forms. Cross-platform consistency also played a significant role in shaping outcomes. When the same core message was presented across multiple platforms—adapted to different formats but consistent in substance—it reinforced credibility and increased the likelihood of audience acceptance. This consistency reduced confusion and helped establish a coherent narrative framework, making it more difficult for conflicting claims to gain traction. The use of data analytics and feedback loops further enhanced the effectiveness of India's approach. Communication teams regularly analysed performance metrics to identify which types of content achieved the highest reach and engagement. These insights informed decisions on content design, timing, and distribution²⁹¹. For example, if short-form videos demonstrated higher engagement on a particular platform, resources could be allocated to produce more of that format. This iterative process allowed for continuous improvement and adaptation to changing conditions.

India's evolving strategy during Operation Sindoor demonstrated increasing resilience, as evidenced by improved response times, greater coordination, and more effective use of digital tools²⁹². Briefly, the metrics of reach, engagement, and narrative shift provide a comprehensive framework for evaluating India's counter-offensive in the digital domain. By combining quantitative indicators with qualitative insights, India was able to assess the effectiveness of its strategies and refine its approach in real time. While challenges remain, the experience highlights the importance of data-driven decision-making, cross-platform coordination, and sustained engagement in shaping outcomes within modern information environments.

Human Cost: Beyond the Digital Battlefield

The material impact on civilian infrastructure further intensified the strain on affected populations. While India maintained a limited and calibrated response, confined to targeting identified terror sanctuaries, Pakistan's actions crossed established thresholds through indiscriminate shelling that directly impacted civilian areas²⁹³. Reports from official briefings, media accounts, and open-source assessments indicated damage to residential structures, community facilities, and essential services in several areas along the Line of Control during the escalation, particularly between 7 and 10 May 2025. Heavy indiscriminate cross-border shelling by Pakistan led to significant civilian displacement and infrastructure damage in Jammu & Kashmir, particularly in Poonch, Rajouri, Uri, and Kupwara. Civilian casualties were reported in multiple waves, with at least 13–16 civilians killed in the early phases of shelling and dozens more injured, with some reports indicating over 100 injuries depending on location and timeframe²⁹⁴. Cross-border shelling and drone activity were affected civilian settlements, especially in districts such as Poonch, where residential areas bore the brunt of the escalation. Available data indicates that between 12 and 16 civilians were killed in Poonch during this period, with dozens more injured, while broader assessments suggest over 20 civilian deaths occurred on the Indian side as a result of indiscriminate shelling²⁹⁵.

Notably, civilian areas were directly targeted, with artillery shells striking homes, schools, and religious sites. A Gurdwara in Poonch was damaged during shelling on or around 7 May 2025, along with other community and educational institutions, and that women and children were among the casualties, highlighting the indiscriminate nature of the attacks²⁹⁶. Even limited structural damage had disproportionate consequences in rural and semi-urban settings, where recovery resources are often constrained.

Humanitarian response efforts were mobilised to address immediate needs, with local authorities, emergency services, and community networks working to provide shelter, food, and medical assistance. Large-scale evacuation operations were initiated, with authorities relocating civilians from vulnerable border villages to safer zones across the Line of Control belt. Relief and humanitarian assistance included the establishment of temporary shelters and relief camps in Poonch and adjoining districts, along with the distribution of food, medicines, and essential supplies²⁹⁷. Coordinated efforts ensured sustained logistical support, including the deployment of Army and civil administration teams for door-to-door assistance in affected villages.

Relief camps were established to accommodate displaced populations, and security forces assisted in evacuation and logistical support, facilitating the movement of civilians to safer locations²⁹⁸. Medical and logistical support was further intensified, with the Army organising free medical camps, providing emergency treatment to injured civilians, and assisting chronic patients whose care was disrupted due to mobility constraints. Community participation played a crucial role, with volunteers contributing to relief distribution and support services. Civil society and political organisations also contributed by setting up community kitchens and relief distribution camps to support displaced families, thereby complementing official relief mechanisms and strengthening on-ground humanitarian outreach.

The Road Ahead: Building Resilient Information Systems

As Operation Sindoor demonstrated, information management and strategic communication have become core components of national security and strategic influence rather than a supplementary function. The experience highlighted both the strengths and limitations of India's response, underscoring that long-term resilience in the information domain depends on sustained investment, stronger institutional coordination, and continuous adaptation²⁹⁹. Building resilient information systems is therefore not a one-time exercise but an ongoing process that must evolve in response to technological advancements, changing audience behaviour, and increasingly sophisticated forms of misinformation.



Fig 46 A centralized hub where cybersecurity teams monitor and defend an organization's IT infrastructure



Fig 47 The process of validating AI outputs

A foundational requirement for resilience is the establishment of integrated institutional frameworks. While coordination between government agencies, fact-checking bodies, and media organisations has improved over time, further consolidation remains necessary³⁰⁰. The creation of permanent, well-resourced communication units with clearly defined mandates can help ensure faster response times and more consistent messaging. Institutions such as the Press Information Bureau can be further strengthened through enhanced technical capacity, dedicated monitoring teams, and closer collaboration with independent verification networks. In addition, a more unified coordination mechanism for information response would help reduce fragmentation and improve overall efficiency in addressing emerging narratives.

This institutional requirement becomes more significant in light of the broader strategic environment in which information flows operate. This challenge is amplified by the fact that India's adversaries, including Pakistan and China, along with other aligned actors, have long been active in the domain of narrative warfare and psychological operations aimed at shaping perceptions about India, and damaging its global image through sustained disinformation and coordinated influence campaigns. These efforts are not confined to periods of conflict but extend across crises and major global events. For instance, during the COVID-19 pandemic, AI-generated and manipulated visual content circulated through certain Chinese-linked accounts depicted misleading scenes intended to damage India's global image, including fabricated visuals such as bodies floating in the Ganga River, thereby seeking to project governance failure and tarnish its international standing³⁰¹. Similarly, during India's G20 presidency, coordinated disinformation campaigns sought to undermine India's image and question its administrative capacity and international credibility and attempting to portray the event as a failure.

In addition, there is a growing need for India to invest in developing indigenous social media and digital communication platforms³⁰². Such platforms could enhance data sovereignty, reduce dependence on external algorithms, and provide greater control over information flows during crises. From a strategic perspective, the development of domestic

platforms would also strengthen national resilience in the information domain by ensuring that critical communication infrastructure remains within sovereign oversight while still operating within global standards of transparency and interoperability. Given India's large economy, technological talent base, and growing global digital influence, this should be a feasible objective; however, it has not received sufficient policy focus or sustained strategic prioritisation so far.

Technology will play a decisive role in shaping future resilience. Advanced data analytics, artificial intelligence, and machine learning systems can be deployed to detect patterns of misinformation, identify coordinated campaigns, and predict potential narrative trends before they fully emerge. Real-time dashboards that track engagement, sentiment, and content across platforms can provide actionable insights for decision-makers. However, the effectiveness of these tools depends on the quality of data and the ability to interpret it accurately. Investment in skilled personnel—analysts, data scientists, and communication specialists—is therefore as important as the technology itself.

Moreover, collaboration between official institutions and independent actors should be encouraged, creating a networked approach to information verification and dissemination. Resilience also requires adaptability to emerging technologies and platforms. The rapid evolution of digital communication means that new channels—ranging from encrypted messaging services to decentralised networks—will continue to shape how information is shared. Anticipating these changes and developing strategies to engage with them is essential. This includes creating official communication channels on emerging platforms, monitoring new forms of content such as synthetic media, and developing tools to detect and counter advanced manipulation techniques.

Another important aspect is the development of strategic communication capabilities that go beyond reactive responses. Proactive narrative building—presenting clear, consistent, and evidence-based information before misinformation can take hold—can significantly reduce the impact of misleading claims. This involves not only responding to events but also shaping the broader context in which those events are understood. Misinformation campaigns often operate across borders, making unilateral responses less effective. Moreover, resilience is not only about defence but also about recovery and continuity. The ability to maintain consistent communication under pressure is a key indicator of system strength. By investing in these areas, India can strengthen its capacity to manage information effectively, protect the integrity of public discourse, and navigate the complexities of an increasingly interconnected digital landscape.

There is a growing recognition that India must strengthen its capacity to project its perspective at the global level³⁰³. Despite its rising geopolitical profile, India has often been less effective in shaping international narratives compared to its strategic and economic weight. Addressing this gap requires sustained institutional investment, including the recruitment and institutionalisation of specialised communication professionals and research personnel. It also necessitates the creation and strengthening of dedicated research ecosystems, supported by adequate funding and long-term institutional backing to enable rigorous analysis, monitoring, and strategic communication outputs. A key priority in this regard is attracting and retaining the best minds in the field, ensuring that highly skilled researchers, analysts, and communication experts are systematically integrated into these frameworks. Countering misinformation and articulating India's perspective globally is increasingly integral to national security. In contemporary geopolitics, battlefield success and narrative dominance are deeply interconnected, and

the psychological and informational dimensions of conflict cannot be separated from conventional security outcomes.

Conclusion

Operation Sindoor underscores a fundamental transformation in the nature of contemporary conflict, where information, perception, and strategic communication operate alongside conventional military and diplomatic instruments. The experience demonstrates that modern security environments are increasingly defined by hybrid contestation, in which narrative dominance, digital influence, and psychological operations shape international outcomes as significantly as developments on the ground. In this context, the management of information is no longer a subsidiary function but an integral pillar of national power. The chapter highlights that India's response evolved through a combination of institutional coordination, technological adaptation, and multi-platform communication strategies. While notable progress was achieved in countering misinformation and strengthening real-time response mechanisms, the experience also exposed structural limitations, particularly in speed, integration, and global narrative projection. These gaps point to the need for more consolidated institutional frameworks, deeper investment in analytical and communication capabilities, and sustained collaboration between state, academic, and technological actors.

Looking forward, the information domain will become even more complex, shaped by artificial intelligence, synthetic media, decentralised platforms, and increasingly sophisticated influence operations. Future conflicts are likely to be defined not only by physical escalation but by continuous narrative competition across global digital ecosystems. In such a scenario, resilience will depend on anticipatory capabilities, indigenous technological development, and the institutionalisation of strategic communication as a core element of national security planning. India's long-term strategic imperative lies in building a robust, adaptive, and globally credible information architecture that not only defends against disinformation but also proactively shapes international understanding of its interests, actions, and perspectives. Strengthening narrative capacity, investing in human expertise, and integrating technological innovation will be essential to ensuring that India is not merely responding to global discourse but actively shaping it. In the emerging geopolitical order, sustained influence will depend on the ability to align battlefield outcomes with narrative authority, making strategic communication a defining feature of 21st-century statecraft.

Chapter 9

The Human Cost: Lives Lost, Grief Amplified

Introduction: Return to Blood and Memory

The book primarily attempts to document the narrative battlefields, such as the digital fronts where truth was contested, distorted, and weaponised. It has traced the rapid spread of propaganda, the deliberate manufacture of doubt, and the calculated attempt to reshape public perception during and after Operation Sindoor. But the statistics, timelines, and information flows, no matter how precise, do not and cannot highlight the cost of violence that was unleashed in the otherwise serene meadows of Pahalgam. This chapter as such returns to where every conflict ultimately begins and ends: the human body, the shattered family, and the enduring memory of loss.

Propaganda has a peculiar power to abstract suffering by reducing individuals to numbers, convert lives into talking points, and erase, obfuscate and bury identities beneath ideological labels. In the days following the Pahalgam attack, there were a concerted efforts by disinformation brigades from across the Line of Control (LoC) which sought to inundate the digital ecosystem with false narratives such as the attack being a false flag operation and that the victims were not innocent tourists but agents, conspirators, or symbols of larger political machinery which sought to 'engineer the demographic change in Jammu and Kashmir'. Such fabrications aimed at both distorting the public understanding of the events and deepening the private grief of families whose loved ones were killed in cold blood after being segregated based on religion.

This chapter attempts to reverse that abstraction by recentring people's lives and restoring names around whom propaganda sought to create anonymity. It revisits their stories to restore human dignity, and that any discussion on Operation Sindoor does not overlook the human cost of the daylight massacre in the mountains of Jammu and Kashmir, which triggered India's military response. As this chapter reveals, the victims of the Pahalgam attack were not any statistics but as people – parents, grandparents, professionals, neighbours, and friends. There were travellers seeking peace in the mountains and breaking the everyday mundanity of their lives, families celebrating milestones, newlyweds seeking to create memories for a lifetime, and individuals fulfilling long-postponed dreams of visiting Kashmir's landscapes. But what bound their fates was that their journeys ended abruptly when Baisaran Valley, a place known for its natural beauty, became synonymous with terror.

The profiles of the victims in this chapter draw upon survivor testimonies, eyewitness accounts, and the recollections of families left behind which capture not only the moment of violence but also the quiet and long corridors of grief that stretch far beyond the day of the attack. It also acknowledges a less visible dimension of the tragedy that is the enduring psychological trauma experienced by survivors. Those who escaped the gunfire carried

with them memories that refused to fade – the sound of shots, the confusion of flight, the sight of loved ones falling.

As such, the purpose of this chapter is both commemorative and corrective. It commemorates the lives silenced in the mountains of Pahalgam by telling their stories with dignity and restraint while correcting the distortions that followed their killing by presenting evidence grounded in memory and testimony. These accounts reveal that information warfare is never bloodless, as behind every viral message and fabricated claim stands a human consequence – an individual whose suffering cannot be dismissed as collateral damage in narrative conflict. It also stands as a reminder that the cost of violence is beyond any measurable statistics, reflected in memories altered, families fractured, and futures erased. Accordingly, this chapter and its stories aim to ensure that the victims of Pahalgam are more than mere names in a list: people who are honoured, remembered, and mourned, and whose lives testify that even in the age of digital warfare, the deepest wounds are still human.

Victim No 1: Bharat Bhushan — A Life Interrupted, A Family Forever Changed

There are people who live simple lives. But in their own worlds, they build safety and stability nets for others by anchoring families and creating futures without any spectacle. Bharat Bhushan was one such person who was considered measured, dependable, and deeply rooted in family. His killing in the Pahalgam attack ended something beyond ending an innocent life; it ruptured the fragile architecture of ordinary happiness that he had spent decades building. And for those who loved him, life now exists in two parts: before 22 April 2025 and after.

The 41-year-old MBA graduate, Bharat Bhushan, was originally from Ranebennur in Haveri district of Karnataka, but had built a life of his own in Sundarnagar near Mathikere in Bengaluru through sheer discipline and responsibility. A former software professional with more than a decade in the technology sector, he had worked at Infosys for years before leaving the corporate sector to help his wife, Dr Sujata, build their shared future. It was a decision that reflected both courage and devotion to family. The couple had been working toward establishing a diagnostic centre alongside her medical practice – a step that symbolised partnership as much as ambition.

At home, he was remembered not for loud gestures but for steadiness. “Bharat was calm, quiet, and clear about what he wanted.”³⁰⁴ This calmness shaped every part of his life. His wife, Dr. Sujatha, a paediatrician, described their relationship in a way that revealed not only affection but also balance. “He knew the world. I knew my patients. We balanced each other,” she said.³⁰⁵ In her memory, he was not merely a husband but an emotional compass—a steady presence who handled the complexities of daily life so she could devote herself to caring for children and families. “Now, I don’t have my emotional pillar,” she added.³⁰⁶

Bharat and Sujatha had been married for about five years. Their young son, who was barely three years old at the time of the Pahalgam attack, was the centre of their daily rhythm. While Sundays were family days and workweeks were full, the home was steady.

He was not only a father and a husband, but also a son deeply tied to his parents. His father, Chennaveerappa, a retired Deputy Director of Public Instruction, remembered their last conversation with painful clarity. Just hours before the attack, Bharat had called from Kashmir in what would be their final exchange to show them the beauty of the valley

that was soon to turn red with his blood only. “He showed me the beautiful views and told me they were heading to Pahalgam. I told him to stay safe. Then we ended the call, and I went back to my chores.”³⁰⁷

Chennaveerappa had named him deliberately, drawing inspiration from both cultural memory and national identity. “I named him after the yesteryear Hindi actor Bharat Bhushan and King Bharat, who gave this land the name Bharat.”³⁰⁸ While it was a name given with pride. It would later become a tragic detail in the narrative of his death.

For Bharat, though, Kashmir was more than a tourist destination. It was a dream long held. When he finally planned the journey, it was meant to mark celebration and renewal. The family travelled to Kashmir on 18 April 2025, shortly after his birthday. It was a rare pause between professional commitments and new beginnings. As his brother Preetham says, “He knew he wanted to go to Kashmir one day.”³⁰⁹



Fig 48 Bharat Bhushan, his wife, and son in Kashmir during their holiday. Photo Credit: X³¹⁰

Yet even before departure, anxiety lingered. His mother sensed unease and urged caution, even asking him, “Why can’t you go anywhere else? Somewhere, where it is safe.”³¹¹ But Bharat dismissed her fears gently, saying, “Why go to Switzerland when we have our own?”³¹² Those words would later echo in family memory, yet not as enthusiasm but heartbreak.

The trip unfolded as expected in its early days, which were filled with photographs, small adventures, and the wonder of alpine landscapes. Bharat sent selfies to relatives and shared his excitement with friends. Pahalgam was meant to be the final stop on their itinerary. On 22 April, the family arrived at the Baisaran Valley, known for its sweeping meadows and panoramic views. For a few hours, life felt expansive and uncomplicated. But then came the gunfire around 2:30 pm when armed men emerged from the nearby forest and began firing into the open meadow. As tourists ran in panic, the landscape offered little protection, with Bharat, his wife, and their 3-year-old child seeking cover behind a tent.

What followed, unfolding in seconds, left a permanent mark on every survivor. According to family accounts, Bharat was carrying his child when the armed men confronted them. “Bhushan was carrying his son, while Sujatha stood nearby. The terrorists asked him to hand over the child to her. Then they asked him his name. When he said ‘Bharath Bhushan’, they asked if he was Hindu or Muslim. When my son replied ‘Hindu’, they shot him,” his father recounted Chennaveerappa said.³¹³

Dr Sujata, his wife, later recalled Bhushan pleading with the gunmen, pointing to their child, but that did not stop the violence. For her, the memory remained inseparable from the presence of their child. “He saw his father being shot. We were both splattered with blood,” she recalled.³¹⁴ The child, too young to understand death, responded in the only language he knew: “Papa is hurt, here’s so much blood.”³¹⁵ Those words became one of the most enduring memories of that afternoon.



Fig 49 Bharat Bhushan, his wife Sujatha, and their 3-yr-old son in Pahalgam on the afternoon of 22 April 2025, hours before the attack. Photo Credit: The Print³¹⁶

For the Bhushan family, the grief unfolded slowly – layered with disbelief, ritual, and endurance. As his brother Preetham says, “None of us cries. We can’t afford to break down. We know we are fragile, and we pretend to have a normal life. Life feels artificial. We have learnt to take it one day at a time. Life has to move on. We have to take care of each other.”³¹⁷



Fig 50 Bharat Bhushan with his son in snow-capped Kashmir. Photo Credit: The Print³¹⁸

For Dr. Sujata, daily life became structured around survival and responsibility. Work offered a distraction from memory. “If I’m idle, my thoughts drift back to that scene,” she admitted.³¹⁹ Her routine changed to meet the needs of her son. “I consciously kept Sundays free. He needs me.”³²⁰ Even time itself changed meaning. April, once associated with birthdays and celebration, became a reminder of irreversible loss. “This month is something I can never forget,” she said.³²¹

In the months that followed, Bharat Bhushan did not fade into anonymity. His presence remained visible in photographs, routines, and memory. For his father, brother, wife, and child, he continues to exist not only as a victim of violence but as a man defined by the life he had lived before it—a calm professional, a careful father, a devoted son, and a husband who chose partnership over personal ambition. His words, “Why go to Switzerland when we have our own,” were never intended as defiance or ideology. They reflected faith in belonging and belief in the ordinary promise of safety. That belief ended in the meadow at Baisaran, but the life behind those words remains remembered through grief, dignity, and love.

Statistics may record that twenty-six people died in the Pahalgam attack, but numbers cannot capture the image of a father placing his child safely aside before facing gunfire. They cannot measure the silence that settled into a home once filled with routine or the memory of a child who watched his father fall. Those truths endure only in memory. And in that memory, Bharat Bhushan remains not as a casualty, but as a life interrupted—a

reminder that the true human cost of violence is counted not in numbers, but in futures that were never allowed to unfold.

Victim No 2: Santosh Jagdale — A Father, A Craftsman, A Life Taken Before His Daughter's Eyes

Santosh Jagdale was many things at the same time. To his clients, he was a builder of spaces; to his friends, an ardent music enthusiast; but to his family, his presence shaped the emotional centre of their everyday mundanity. Those who knew Santosh remembered a man of quiet talent and dependable warmth who crafted beauty with his hands and brought security with his presence. His life, like many others lost in the Pahalgam massacre, was not defined by conflict or politics but by family, work, friendships, and the ordinary hopes that make a life meaningful.

Santosh lived in Karve Nagar in Pune, Maharashtra, where he worked as an interior decorator and insurance agent while managing a small business. These roles required patience, imagination, and personal trust – qualities which reflected in every aspect of both his professional and personal life. As a close friend Pravin Tarde, Actor, filmmaker and screenwriter, later remembered him, “Santosh was a gifted interior designer – he was brilliant at whatever he put his mind to.”³²²



Fig 51 Santosh Jagdale taking a picture holding a lamb in Pahalgam, alongside wife Pragati Jagdale and Asavari Jagdale in Pahalgam before the attack. Photo Credit: The Print³²³

He was also a musician who had learned to play the harmonium, which speaks to a quieter dimension of the character of a man who valued expression and rhythm while balancing work with creativity. For his daughter, Asavari, though, Santosh was more than a provider; he was her guide in understanding the world. When she was nine years old, she sat beside him in their Pune home, watching news coverage of the 2008 Mumbai terror attacks. As smoke billowed from the Taj Mahal Hotel, which filled the television screen, it was Santosh who explained to her what terrorism meant.³²⁴ At the time, terrorism felt abstract, distant, but tragic. But 15 years later, that abstraction would collapse into personal horror in the mountains of Pahalgam.

In April 2025, Santosh planned a long-awaited family holiday to Kashmir. It was not a spontaneous decision but a carefully discussed trip planned nearly a month in advance with his close friend, Kaustubh Ganbote, a snack store owner who had been Santosh's companion since childhood. The group included Santosh's wife, Pragati, daughter Asavari, Kaustubh, and his wife, Sangeeta. They packed their bags and snacks, anticipating laughter, photographs, and scenic landscapes. The trip carried special significance, as it marked a transition in Asavari's life just before she began a new phase of her career.³²⁵

For the group, Kashmir lived up to its promise. As sunlight washed over the meadows of Pahalgam, the two families found themselves surrounded by landscapes they had previously seen only in photographs. Santosh and Kaustubh paused in the meadow simply to take in the view, absorbing the beauty that had drawn travellers for generations.

Like so many families gathered that day, they were there to create memories and not to become part of history. But the attack came suddenly, as Asavari later described the chaos: "Armed gunmen entered from all sides. People ran in all directions. Some fell down, got up, and held their family members close to them. Men, women, kids, everybody was crying. We couldn't make sense of anything."³²⁶

At first, confusion blurred the boundary between noise and threat. Some locals suggested that the gunfire might be meant to scare animals. But the truth became undeniable as people began collapsing around them. Within minutes, a gunman approached Santosh directly and demanded to know the religion of their victims and ordered some to recite Islamic verses. "They asked my father if he was Hindu or Muslim. They forced him to recite the Kalma. Within seconds, they shot my father dead. The man I have always looked up to. The man who played the most important role in my life... was dead... and I could not do anything..." Asavari recalled the moment with clarity.³²⁷



Fig 52 Santosh Jagdale with his family during their Kashmir trip. Photo Credit: The Print³²⁸

Three bullets struck Santosh with one to the head, another through the ear, and a third lodged in his chest. Nearby, Kaustubh Ganbote was also shot and killed in front of family members. In those moments, the meadow that had symbolised freedom and beauty became a theatre of terror. Amid chaos and gunfire, the surviving women gathered the courage to flee. As they descended from the meadow, Pragati Jagdale sustained leg injuries. Help came from a pony rider who stepped forward to assist them and helped them return safely.³²⁹

In the months following the attack, the Jagdale family faced persistent psychological distress. Asavari described her recurring memories: “Whenever I close my eyes, I see a man holding a rifle. I haven’t been able to sleep. “My body shivers, I can feel the chill, every time I remember what happened, how it happened.”³³⁰



Fig 53 Santosh’s daughter Asavari and wife Pragati holding his photo a year after the attack. Photo Credit: The Indian Express³³¹

A year after the attack, the Jagdale household continued to function, but life had changed permanently. The memory of the incident remained immediate rather than distant. As Pragati Jagdale recalled, “It has been a year, but it still feels like we are stuck in the same Baisaran Valley. I can still hear the screams and cries.”³³²

In official records, Santosh Jagdale became one of twenty-six victims. His name appeared in lists, reports, and commemorations. But behind those records lived a person whose identity extended far beyond the moment of death. He was a father who explained the world to his daughter; a husband whose absence transformed daily routines; a friend who planned journeys and celebrated milestones; a musician who played the harmonium; and a craftsman who designed spaces meant to shelter others.

While these details form the true measure of his life, they also reveal the deeper cost of violence – not just the loss of life, but the collapse of relationships, memories, and futures.

Victim No 3: Kaustubh Ganbote — A Friendship Forged in Work, A Journey Shared in Trust

Kaustubh Ganbote spent much of his life building things that lasted, like his business relationships, friendships, and a family legacy rooted in steady labour. To the customers across Pune, he was the face behind a trusted *farsan* business; to neighbours, he was known for his calm temperament and approachable nature; but to his closest friend Santosh Jagdale, he was something deeper – a companion in both work and life. Their decades-long friendship was built on shared professional collaboration and personal trust, which eventually brought their families together for a long-awaited holiday to Kashmir. However, that journey, which was meant to be a celebration of companionship and rest, instead became the moment in which both men lost their lives within seconds of each other.

The 58-year-old Kaustubh Ganbote was originally from Phaltan in Maharashtra's Satara district, but his family settled in Pune many years earlier. The city became the ground on which his ambitions took shape, beginning modestly by producing *farsan* snacks from a small home-based operation, carrying goods himself to nearby shops and persuading retailers to trust his products. He transformed his modest venture into a recognised Gunbote Farsan local brand, expanding into multiple franchise outlets across Pune, through relentless effort and perseverance.

Kaustubh seldom gave himself moments to take time off from work because he always felt responsible. According to his sister, it was not easy to convince him to go on a trip. "It took some convincing for him to go... We told him to enjoy life a bit, instead of spending too much time with the business."³³³ Those who knew him understood that he had spent decades placing work before leisure to prioritise his family's financial security – a sense of responsibility shaped in his early years after losing his mother, making a mission of himself to provide for everyone in the family.



Fig 54 Kaustubh Ganbote and his wife taking photos in local attire before the attack. Photo Credit: *The Indian Express*³³⁴

However, it would be equally wrong to assume that business was all that defined his life. Rather, his friendships carried equal weight, none more significant than the one he shared with Santosh Jagdale, with whom he shared a close bond through years of professional collaboration and personal association. Santosh often supported Kaustubh's business through marketing and promotional ideas, while Kaustubh valued Santosh's creativity and reliability. Their families became intertwined through years of shared visits, conversations, and celebrations.

By early 2025, Kaustubh's life had entered a new and joyful phase by becoming a grandfather. The thought of celebrating the arrival of a new generation gave him renewed energy and optimism, as reflected in his conversations, which were dominated by plans for a naming ceremony, as his friends and family recalled. And it was during this period of personal celebration that the idea of travelling to Kashmir took shape, planned jointly with Santosh Jagdale and their families. It marked the first time that both households would holiday together outside their routine environments. For Kaustubh, it was not only a rare break from business but an opportunity to strengthen bonds that had developed over years of companionship. For the two families, it symbolised the reward for decades of effort and loyalty to one another.

As fate would have it, they found themselves in Pahalgam's Baisaran meadow on 22 April 2025. The region's breathtaking landscapes seemed to promise peace as they busied themselves taking photographs in local attire, sharing conversations with their laughter carrying across the open grasslands. These were the moments both men had anticipated the trip would take – a shared memory to mark their years of friendship and mutual respect. But the terrorists who emerged from the woods had other plans, who fired without warning and broke the tranquillity of Pahalgam, replacing it with confusion and fear. As the attackers moved through the area targeting individuals with calculated intent, Kaustubh stood near Santosh, his closest companion of years, in those moments of chaos, as if the friendship that had shaped years of shared experiences now placed them side by side in their final moments.

According to eyewitness accounts shared by Santosh Jagdale's daughter, Asavari, the violence unfolded with terrifying speed. "The terrorists asked people to recite the 'kalma' (Islamic verses). Those who could, did. Those who could not, didn't. Despite my father saying they would do as told, the terrorists shot him and my uncle dead. We also came to know that a man was shot in the head when went to buy snacks for his wife and son who were busy with a photoshoot," she later recalled, describing the moment when the illusion of safety collapsed into irreversible tragedy.³³⁵ Within seconds, both men who had planned the journey together lay mortally wounded, and the meadow that had promised serenity became a site of loss that would remain etched into the memories of survivors.

For his son Kunal, the aftermath carried profound implications. The farsan business that Kaustubh had spent more than three decades building now required immediate leadership. The transition forced Kunal to leave his own professional path and assume responsibility for sustaining his father's legacy. Each day thereafter became a continuation of work that had once belonged to another generation. In his own words, the loss reshaped daily life in ways that extended beyond emotion into obligation: "That day drastically changed my life."³³⁶

At home, absence manifested in quiet, persistent ways. The excitement that once surrounded plans for the grandchild's naming ceremony now carried the weight of

remembrance. Conversations about expansion and travel gave way to reflection and resilience. The bond between the Jagdale and Ganbote families, once defined by shared joy, became a connection marked by shared grief. Both households carried the memory of two men who had travelled together in friendship and died together in violence.

The life of Kaustubh Ganbote cannot simply be defined by his last seconds. Kaustubh was an entrepreneur who knew the value of perseverance, a father who dreamed of seeing his grandchildren grow up, and a good friend whose loyalty made him part of the life of his friend for several years. The story of Kaustubh cannot be separated from that of his friend, Santosh Jagdale, since they lived parallel lives until a certain event occurred, turning their lives into one that ended tragically. Indeed, their lives came together in an attempt to enjoy their friendship. However, their last journey in a meadow took away their lives.

The life of Kaustubh Ganbote cannot simply be defined by his final moments. Kaustubh was an entrepreneur who knew the value of perseverance, a father who dreamed of seeing his grandchildren grow up, and a good friend whose loyalty made him part of the life of his friend for several years. The story of Kaustubh cannot be separated from that of his friend, Santosh Jagdale, who lived parallel lives until their last moments in the mountains of Pahalgam.

Victim No 4: Lt Vinay Narwal — A Honeymoon That Became a National Memory

Lieutenant Vinay Narwal was twenty-six years old when his life ended in a meadow that many called “mini-Switzerland.” He had been married for just six days with his wedding clothes still hanging in a cupboard at home. His travel bag, only half unpacked from the celebrations, waited in silence – evidence of a life interrupted before it had properly begun.

For his family in Karnal, Haryana, grief did not arrive gradually. It struck with violent suddenness and has never truly left. His father, Rajesh Narwal, continues to relive the chain of decisions that led to that day. The questions return to him again and again, each one sharpened by hindsight. “It feels like I am living that moment every single day. A father is not meant to carry his son’s loss like this ... but I carry it every day, like a weight that never lifts,” he said.³³⁷

Vinay Narwal grew up surrounded by stories of serving the nation. His grandfather, Hawa Singh, had been a part of the Border Security Force (BSF) before joining the Haryana Police. Military vehicles passing through town fascinated the young boy, drawing questions that revealed an early fascination with uniformed life. He pursued engineering, cleared the demanding Services Selection Board examination, and joined the Indian Navy in 2022. At the time of the Pahalgam attack, he was posted to the Southern Naval Command in Kochi.

On 16 April 2025, Vinay married Himanshi Sharma, a schoolteacher and Ph.D. scholar. Their wedding in Mussoorie was filled with celebration – music, laughter, and rituals that marked the beginning of a shared life. The couple had originally planned a honeymoon in Switzerland, but delays in visa processing led them to change their destination. And so, Kashmir, which has been called by many as the heaven on earth (*firdaus bar-rū-e-zamīn*), became an alternative destination. The decision may have seemed minor at the time, but it would later haunt those who loved him.



Fig 55 Lt Vinay Narwal and Himanshi Sharma during their wedding in Mussoorie, Uttarakhand a week before the Pahalgam attack. Photo Credit: Social Media

A week later on 22 April 2025, when the newlyweds Vinay and Himanshi were in Baisaran Valley, it was supposed to be another quiet afternoon with tourists walking, eating snacks, and taking photographs. Himanshi later described the moment violence shattered their ordinary routine. “I was eating bhel puri with my husband when a man suddenly came and said he’s not Muslim... then shot him.”³³⁸

The attack was swift and brutal. Gunmen moved through the crowd, identifying men and firing at close range. Vinay was shot in the neck, chest, and thigh, collapsing before Himanshi’s eyes. The image that followed became one of the most widely circulated photographs of the tragedy and a national symbol of loss. It showed a stunned young bride sitting beside her husband’s lifeless body, still wearing bridal bangles from a wedding less than a week old.

The photograph of Himanshi sitting beside Vinay’s body spread rapidly across television and social media platforms. For millions, it was the first personal glimpse of the bloodbath unleashed by terrorists in the mountains of Pahalgam and its human cost. But for the family, it was nothing but shock, turning the wedding joy to mourning with a devastating

speed. “We were hoping it wasn’t true. But then their pictures began circulating on social media and news channels. That’s when we knew.”³³⁹



Fig 56 The photo that broke a billion hearts. Himanshi Narwal beside the body of her husband Lt Vinay Narwal in the Baisaran Valley of Pahalgam moments after the attack. Photo Credit: Social Media

Just days earlier, sweets had been distributed to neighbours. Plans were underway for religious gatherings and celebrations. The house had been filled with laughter. Now it is filled with silence. Rajesh Narwal described how the rhythm of life changed after the tragedy. “Till I was around 53 years old, life passed in the blink of an eye. But after that day, every single day feels like a mountain I have to climb. People say time heals, but for a father, time only stretches the silence. Each day feels heavier than the last. You don’t move on from something like this. You just learn how to carry it.”³⁴⁰

Vinay's younger sister, Srishti, shared a bond with him that went beyond routine sibling closeness. They studied together for years, sometimes even skipping classes to remain in the same academic stream. Now, at twenty-six, the same age when Vinay was killed, Srishti carries the memory of her brother's absence. "We were very close. We spoke every day. It was almost like telepathy. I would randomly call him and ask what was wrong, and he would tell me. He used to do the same with me."³⁴¹

But what also stood out was the empathy displayed by Lt. Vinay's wife, Himanshi, when she made a public appeal against forces seeking to exploit the Pahalgam attack to sow the seeds of internal division by communalising the grief. "We don't want people going after Muslims and Kashmiris... we want peace and justice. People who have done wrong with him should be punished," she spoke with restraint.³⁴²

For father Rajesh Narwal, though, the grief is not only emotional but existential with the memory itself becoming a source of pain. "For the first few months, it felt like he would return from duty... But truth is truth; we know it, yet the mind wouldn't accept it. It is very painful because the memories come back, and it's the good memories that trouble you the most," he said, adding, "A father is not meant to carry his son's loss like this ... but I carry it every day."³⁴³



Fig 57 Rajesh Narwal holding a photo of son at his house. Photo Credit: The Print³⁴⁴

Lt Vinay Narwal's death represented more than the loss of a young officer. It symbolised futures undone, plans abandoned, dreams interrupted, families permanently altered. His

wedding sherwani remained hung in the cupboard, his honeymoon journey ended before it truly began, the once promising career remained unfinished.

And in Karnal, his father continues to measure time differently now – not in years, but in memories. “Every single day feels like a mountain,” he recounts.³⁴⁵ In those words lie the enduring truth of the Pahalgam massacre: violence does not end when the gunfire stops. It continues in silence, memory, and absence. As such, Lt. Vinay Narwal’s story reminds us that behind every statistic stands a life once lived fully – one that deserved years, not days, of married life.

Victim No 5: Manjunath Rao — A Celebration That Became a Farewell

For Manjunath Rao, a 47-year-old realtor from Shivamogga, Karnataka, the trip was meant to mark one of the proudest moments of his life as a father. The journey to Kashmir had been planned as a celebration. His son, Abhijeya, had scored an exceptional 98 per cent in his Class 12 examinations, a milestone that symbolised years of discipline and family effort. The success deserved celebration, and the family chose *Jannat-e-Kashmir* – the “paradise on earth” – as the destination where achievement would be honoured with shared joy.



Fig 58 Manjunath Rao at his home. Photo Credit: The Indian Express³⁴⁶

Those knowing Manjunath knew him as steady and committed who measured success not just in property deals but in the progress of his family. As a realtor in Shivamogga, he had built a stable life with his wife, Pallavi, who worked as a bank manager at the Malnad Area Marketing Cooperative Society. For the family of three, the trip was more than tourism and a reward for a disciplined life; it was an affirmation of small successes and gratitude for these joys. The trip to Kashmir was a father’s gesture of quiet pride, affection, and deep personal meaning.

On 19 April, the family left home together: Manjunath, his wife Pallavi, and their son. It was their first trip to Kashmir, a long-anticipated journey that held promise, pride, and quiet family happiness. They were scheduled to return on 24 April. But no one knew that what was meant to be a celebration would end in irreversible loss.



Fig 59 Manjunath and his wife Pallavi in Kashmir before the attack. Photo Credit: Social Media

Before tragedy struck, the family recorded what would become one of their final memories together: a video taken during a shikara ride across the calm waters of Dal Lake in Srinagar, Kashmir. In the video, Manjunath appears relaxed and cheerful, speaking in a tone that reflects simple satisfaction. The video preserved a moment of uncomplicated happiness of a family suspended in joy, unaware that within hours, their lives would fracture. “I am Manjunath from Shivamogga, Karnataka. We have come on a Kashmir trip. Today is the day of our travel,” he says, with his wife Pallavi adding, “Yesterday, we stayed in a boathouse. It was very nice. We are enjoying a shikara ride now. Mohammad Rafiq ji is rowing the shikara. Kajal Thakur of India Travel Store organised our trip.”³⁴⁷

The family reached Baisaran meadow in the afternoon on 22 April. It was an ordinary afternoon. As Abhijay had not eaten that morning, Manjunath stepped away briefly to buy snacks for his son. It was that routine, fatherly and yet unremarkable, small act that became his final gesture of care before the armed men descended from the woods and began firing at tourists. Pallavi later described the moment when Manjunath was shot in the head at the point bank, stating, “My husband died right in front of me. I couldn’t cry or react – I couldn’t even comprehend what had just happened.”³⁴⁸

The attack unfolded with terrifying speed, leaving survivors disoriented and helpless. In the immediate aftermath, grief and shock collapsed into desperation, and as Pallavi stood beside her husband’s body, she confronted one of the terrorists as words emerged not from calculation but from overwhelming grief. “You have killed my husband, kill me as well,”³⁴⁹ she pleaded, with their son echoing the same words even as the gunman did not fire again. Instead, he reportedly responded with chilling indifference: “*Nahin marenge. Tum Modi ko jaake bolo* (“I won’t kill you. Go and tell Modi).”³⁵⁰ The phrase has lingered in Pallavi’s

memory as it was not mercy but an act of calculated sparing that left survivors to live with memory instead of death.



Fig 60 Manjunath and his wife Pallavi enjoying a shikara boat ride in Dal Lake in Srinagar before the Pahalgam attack. Photo Credit: NDTV³⁵¹

Far away at his house named *Manjushree* in Shivamogga, Manjunath's mother, Sumathi, an elderly woman who had already lost her husband two years earlier, remained unaware of her son's death for several hours as relatives avoided telling her immediately. While the television remained switched off, visitors began arriving at the family home, and silence filled the rooms. It was only after hours in the evening that the news of her son's killing was revealed to her, after her daughter arrived from her in-laws' house.³⁵²

When Manjunath's body finally returned to Shivamogga, the journey marked the end of celebration and the beginning of mourning. Though the grief may have moved more quietly inside the home, the memory of the tragedy remains unfaded. For Pallavi and her son, the memory of that afternoon remained immediate and vivid. Not only did they witness the killing of Manjunath and others, but they had also spoken to the gunman and even pleaded for death, but were denied. That sequence of moments formed an enduring psychological imprint as the trauma did not end when the gunfire stopped; it followed them home and embedded itself into ordinary routine.



Fig 61 Manjunath Rao's wife Pallavi and son Abhijay during his funeral in Shivamogga, Karnataka. Photo Credit: The Hindu³⁵³

Manjunath Rao's story did not begin in Kashmir, and it did not end there. It began in Shivamogga in his work, routine, and family responsibilities. It continued through pride in his son's achievements. But it paused, violently, in a meadow far from home, and yet lives on in memory, which is preserved in that last video in the Shikara, testimony, and silence. The statistics of the bloodbath that the terrorists unleashed in Pahalgam may show 26 names, but the numbers do not convey birthdays missed, conversations unfinished, or the celebrations turned into mourning. They do not measure the shock of a wife standing beside her husband's body, nor record the memory of a son who watched his father die. Those truths survive only in stories. And among them stands the story of Manjunath Rao as a father who travelled to celebrate success, and whose life ended in an act of violence that transformed joy into grief, and memory into legacy.

Victim No 6: Bitan Adhikary — A Journey Home That Became a Final Goodbye

For Bitan Adhikary, the April 2025 trip to India was meant to be a celebratory experience for him and his family rather than any routine visit. The 40-year-old engineer, originally from West Bengal, who had moved to the United States in 2019, had built a life across continents while remaining deeply connected to his roots. He arrived in Kolkata on April 8 to celebrate Poila Boishakh, the Bengali New Year, with his wife Sohini, three-and-a-half-year-old son Hridaan, and parents. After days of festivities, the family planned a short eight-day trip to Kashmir with a return to Kolkata, scheduled for 24 April, to celebrate reunion after months of separation.



Fig 62 Bitan Adhikary with wife Sohini. Photo Credit: Social Media

The family arrived at Baisaran meadow on 22 April 2025. As the afternoon unfolded calmly, they sat on the grass, resting after travel, watching other visitors move through the meadow. Nothing suggested approaching danger as the stillness of the surroundings carried the illusion of safety that many families shared that day.

But that illusion ended abruptly as Sohini would later describe the moment when gunmen approached without warning. “We were sitting on the grass at Mini Switzerland when suddenly armed men approached, asking who was Hindu and who was Muslim,” she recalled.³⁵⁴ The question itself introduced fear, but events moved too quickly to allow escape. “They didn’t give us time to move or run. They opened fire indiscriminately,” Sohini added.³⁵⁵

The violence unfolded in seconds with a bullet hitting Bitan in the shoulder, who fell on the ground instantly and transformed an ordinary afternoon into an irreversible loss. Sohini’s memory of the moment remains unadorned: “My husband died on the spot.”³⁵⁶ There was no opportunity for farewell, no final words, and no chance to prepare for separation. The suddenness of the attack replaced routine with silence.

At the centre of the tragedy stood their young son Hridaan. Too young to understand the meaning of violence or identity, he survived alongside his mother. However, the survival did not erase loss as his life became destined to unfold with memories shaped by the absence of a father who would be remembered through photographs, stories, and fragments of recollection rather than lived experience.



Fig 63 Bitan with his wife. Photo Credit: Social Media

In Kolkata, the family struggled to process news that had travelled faster than comprehension could keep pace. Conversations that once carried anticipation became recollections of final words. For two years before the fateful day, his wife and son were living with relatives in south Kolkata while Bitan continued working in Florida. Despite professional success abroad, his personal life remained anchored in responsibility, maintaining close ties to his parents in West Bengal. This April visit was not merely routine travel and was meant to be a reunion.



Fig 64 Bitan with his wife Sohini and son Hridaan. Photo Credit: Social Media

For Bitan's parents, the aftermath extended beyond mourning into uncertainty. Their son had been their principal support, the person responsible for their care and stability. His absence left both emotional and practical voids. His mother's words revealed the reality behind grief: "Who will provide our food and medicines now?"³⁵⁷ The question reflected not only sorrow but fear about survival without the person who had sustained them. For Sohini, memory remained immediate rather than distant. She had witnessed the attack, seen her husband fall, and carried the responsibility of protecting their son. The sequence of moments from sitting on open grass to confronting gunfire remained fixed in her mind.

At forty, Bitan stood in the middle of his life rather than at its end. He had built a career across continents, supported ageing parents, and begun raising a child whose future he intended to guide. Those plans did not disappear entirely, but they shifted into memory. What remained were unfinished intentions were journeys postponed, ambitions paused, and conversations left incomplete.

Statistics record the number of lives lost in the Pahalgam attack, but they cannot measure the silence that follows the return of a body to a home once filled with expectation. They cannot capture the transformation of celebration into mourning or the moment when a child's holiday became a memory of absence. Those truths survive only in recollection. And within that recollection, Bitan Adhikary remains not simply a victim of violence, but a son, husband, and father whose journey home became a final goodbye.

Victim No 7: Sushil Nathaniel — Faith, Courage, and a Family Forever Altered

The life of 58-year-old Sushil Nathaniel was defined by responsibility, discipline, and quiet devotion to his family. Working as a branch manager with the Life Insurance Corporation (LIC) in Alirajpur district, Madhya Pradesh, he spent decades guiding clients through financial uncertainties, offering them the promise of stability and protection. But beyond his professional identity, he was known among relatives and friends as a man who valued connection, who believed that family journeys were as important as daily routines.



Fig 65 Sushil Nathaniel with his family. Photo Credit: Live Hindustan³⁵⁸

For Sushil Nathaniel, the journey to Kashmir had been years in the making. It was swiftened by the region's constitutional rearrangement of Kashmir within the federal structure of the country in 2019, which considerably ebbed the Pakistan-sponsored armed conflict that had somewhat become a feature of its own for over three decades. While the 2019 decision aroused great interest and excitement from across India, for Sushil, however, it carried a personal dimension – a desire and longing to experience the alpine slopes, lakes and meadowed valleys in person and peace. He wanted to see the mountains, breathe the cold air, and share the experience with those closest to him.

A cousin later remembered how persistent that wish had been, recalling that “since Article 370 was abrogated in 2019, Sushil always wanted to be in Kashmir to experience with family the heaven on earth.”

That long-held wish finally took shape in April 2025. The timing of the trip carried special meaning, as it was planned around Easter, which symbolises renewal, faith, and togetherness. Accordingly, Sushil, who lived in Indore's Abhinandan Nagar, travelled with his wife, Jennifer, a teacher, and daughter, Akanksha, along with his son, Austin. Before leaving for Kashmir, Sushil had reached out to relatives with Easter greetings – brief, ordinary, and yet filled with the warmth of festivity. His youngest aunt would later remember that final call with painful clarity, saying, “I last talked to him over the phone on 20 April when he offered me Easter greetings, just a few hours before he left with family on vacation to Kashmir.”³⁵⁹ At the time, it was simply another family conversation, but in hindsight, it became the last.



Fig 66 Sushil Nathaniel before the Pahalgam attack. Photo Credit: Social Media

In Kashmir, Sushil's longing to witness nature's wonders firsthand got fulfilled. When the family, in full vacationing mode, arrived at Pahalgam Baisaran meadow, it instantly matched their expectations with the valley stretched open beneath wide skies, framed by slopes and distant ridgelines. The meadow was brimming with tourists moving casually, taking photographs, sharing laughter, while children played, all unaware of what the stillness of the landscape concealed from them.

That tranquil of the meadows was broken by the terrorists as they emerged from the nearby woods, firing without any warning and moving with deliberate purpose. As people started running for life in confusion, the gunmen, who approached male tourists and demanded religious identification, Sushil's instinct was not to flee alone but to shield those around him. According to family accounts, he pushed Jennifer behind a tree in an effort to protect her from gunfire. That gesture, carried out in seconds, preserved her life. But it also ensured that she would remain alive to witness what followed. As fate would have it, the gunmen made Sushil kneel down, asking him to recite the Islamic declaration of faith. His cousin recalled his wife Jennifer and son Austin recounting how the "terrorists asked for his name and forced him to kneel. They demanded he recite the Kalma, and when he said he could not, they shot him."³⁶⁰

Amidst the chaos and raining gunfire, Sushil's daughter, Akanksha, rushed toward him but was struck in the leg. This movement was instinctive, showing a daughter moving toward danger out of love rather than calculation. The injury became a permanent reminder of the moment when family bonds collided with violence.

Jennifer survived, but survival came with its own burden. When she opened her eyes, the image before her remained fixed in memory. "The first thing I saw was my husband – slumped against a tree, motionless," she said.³⁶¹ The details that followed stayed etched in her mind: "Blood had soaked through his hair and was trailing down his shoulder."³⁶² She wanted to move, to reach him, to hold him one last time. But shock had taken control of her body. "I wanted to scream, run to him, hold him – but I couldn't move. The cold had numbed my limbs and frozen my voice. There was whisper of wind rustling through trees, echo of gunfire still ringing in my ears, and an unbearable cold," Jennifer remembered.³⁶³

For Austin, the aftermath of the attack transformed his life instantly. Before that day, his future had revolved around education and ambition. He had been preparing to pursue an MBA in sports management in the United Kingdom – a plan that represented independence and aspiration. After his father's death, those plans disappeared. He later described the shift with painful clarity, saying, "A father's role is the biggest for a son."³⁶⁴ The loss forced him into responsibilities he had not expected to carry so soon. "That dream is gone. Now, my focus is my family,"³⁶⁵ he explained, acknowledging that his role had changed from student to provider. "Now, I have to handle everything because my mother is not in a position to manage it all."³⁶⁶

Over time, the psychological effects of the attack became increasingly visible within the family. Jennifer's behaviour began to change in ways that reflected unresolved trauma. Austin observed the transformation closely, noting that "she is very child-like now. Her decision-making has reduced and she forgets things."³⁶⁷ These changes revealed how violence does not end when gunfire stops. It lingers in memory, reshaping cognition, confidence, and independence.

To those who knew him, Sushil possessed a natural ability to connect with people. He spoke easily with strangers, treating unfamiliar faces as opportunities for conversation rather than distance. Even during the journey to Kashmir, that quality remained visible. Austin later recalled how his father interacted with their driver, explaining that "he would talk to anyone. Even during our Kashmir trip, he spoke to the Muslim driver about local life, about mosques, about apples. It never felt like he was speaking to a stranger."³⁶⁸

For the media and official records, Sushil Nathaniel may have been one of 26 victims of the Pahalgam massacre, but behind that number lived a man who was a thorough professional, a devoted husband, and a committed father who would plan for festivities, share greetings with relatives, and in the final act pushed his wife to safety before the terrorists killed him in the mountains of Kashmir.

His death did not end with the final gunshot. It continued in the altered lives of those who survived him – in a son who abandoned educational dreams, in a daughter who carried both injury and memory, and in a wife who remained haunted by the image of a body slumped against a tree.

Victim No 8: Shubham Dwivedi — A Newly Begun Life, Ended Before It Could Unfold

The 31-year-old Shubham Dwivedi had been married for barely two months. His 12 February wedding was supposed to mark a new chapter filled with shared plans, dreams, and the promise of building a life together. But what followed instead was a story of sudden loss that permanently altered the course of many lives – most of all that of his young wife, Aishanya.

An MBA graduate, Shubham lived in Kanpur and was known among his friends and family as responsible, disciplined, and deeply attached to his family. As the only son of his parents, Sanjay and Seema Dwivedi, he carried both expectation and trust of the family roles that shaped his daily life. It was with this expectation that he began managing his family's cement business and was preparing to assume full responsibility before fate intervened.



Fig 67 Wedding photo of Shubham and Aishanya. Photo Credit: Social Media

His marriage to Aishanya was a moment of celebration and renewal. The discussions among the young couple often drifted to their future, planning the places they could visit and the things they could do. The tragic trip to Kashmir, their second journey after marriage with a carefully planned itinerary and a return scheduled for 23 April, was meant to be a joint vacation – a celebration of life and new beginnings with their respective families present at one place. Once in Kashmir, the group of eleven from two families visited Sonamarg and Gulmarg before arriving in Pahalgam on 22 April. It was a routine tourism experience for them, involving taking pictures, having meals, and discussing places they had yet to explore. No one imagined that the date marked not a return home, but the final chapter of Shubham's life.

Once in Pahalgam, while the family decided to stay back at the hotel, Shubham and Aishanya stepped out for horse riding around noon, which led them to Baisaran Meadow. His uncle Manoj Dwivedi later recalled the moment with painful clarity, saying that “the couple left their hotel at 1 pm on Tuesday for horse riding while the other members stayed back at the hotel.”³⁶⁹ As they reached Baisaran, the stillness of the valley's landscape began to fracture with gunmen appearing from nowhere and moving toward them. What followed was not chaos alone, but interrogation to reveal the identity before the violence was unleashed. According to family accounts, the attackers questioned them directly, turning identity into a prelude to death. Manoj Dwivedi later described the moment, recalling that “they were cornered by terrorists. The attackers enquired Aishanya about their identity. When she told them that Shubham was her husband, the terrorists shot him dead in front of her.”³⁷⁰



Fig 68 Shubham with his wife Aishanya during their Kashmir trip before the Pahalgam attack of 22 April 2025. Photo Credit: Hindustan Times³⁷¹

What followed compounded the cruelty of the killing. According to his cousin Saurabh, the terrorists turned toward Aishanya and delivered a message meant to travel beyond the valley itself. “After killing him, one of the terrorists reportedly told his wife, “Tell your government what we did to your husband.””³⁷² The statement transformed the act from violence into a declaration and an attempt to convert personal loss into political messaging.

For Aishanya, the trauma of witnessing her husband’s death did not end with the gunfire. It became a constant presence in her life, shaping memory and routine. Reflecting on her loss a year later, she spoke in direct, personal terms. “My anger for Pakistan is very personal; they hit my life at a point where my life has finished. Now it is just an individual who is alive,” she said,³⁷³ describing the emotional emptiness that followed the loss.

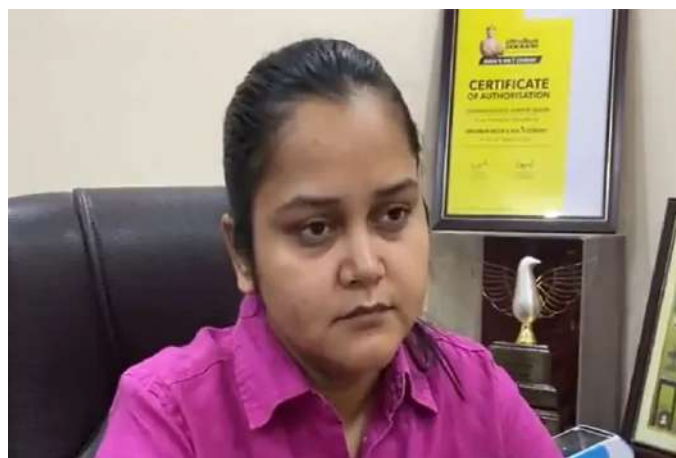


Fig 69 Aishanya Dwivedi a year after the attack. Photo Credit: Social Media.

The memory of that afternoon remains vivid in Aishanya’s mind with that devastating image of Shubham’s killing refusing to fade. “I have seen him dying in front of my eyes.

That image of bloodshed is the biggest trauma I am living with.”³⁷⁴ Ordinary routines became difficult with even digital images triggering emotional paralysis. She describes how unexpected reminders of Kashmir continue to affect her, explaining that “a lot of times when I am scrolling through my social media feed and see pics of Pahalgam, I freeze.”³⁷⁵ Yet she is determined to preserve that memory, however painful it is, saying, “I will still make people remember this incident till my last breath, no matter how much pain it gives me. *Yaad rakhna zaroori hai*. (It is important to remember all this)”³⁷⁶.



Fig 70 Shubham Dwivedi with his mother Seema Dwivedi during the Kashmir trip before the 22 April terrorist attack in Pahalgam killed him. Photo Credit: Hindustan Times³⁷⁷

For Shubham’s parents, Sanjay and Seema Dwivedi, the loss was particularly devastating. As their only son, Shubham represented continuity; the future of the family name and the stability of the household. And his absence since has left silence where certainty once existed.

Shubham's story is not only about death. It is about beginnings that never had time to mature – about marriage interrupted, family continuity broken, and dreams left suspended in memory. And in the words of the woman who witnessed his final moments, remembrance itself became an act of resistance against forgetting: "I will still make people remember this incident till my last breath."³⁷⁸

Victim No 9: Prashant Satpathy — A Dream of "Heaven on Earth" That Ended in Gunfire

Prashant Kumar Satpathy's Kashmir visit was not an impulsive holiday. It was a dream carefully built over months, which was planned with patience, saved for with discipline, and imagined with the quiet joy of a father determined to give his family something unforgettable. At forty-three, he was an accountant working at the Central Institute of Petrochemicals Engineering and Technology (CIPET). Those who knew him remembered a man defined by steadiness – a husband who planned responsibly, a father who saved methodically, and a son whose presence anchored his family's sense of security.



Fig 71 Prashant Kumar Satpathy with his wife and son in a family photo. Photo Credit: Social Media

Prashant came from Remuna block in Odisha's Balasore district, where daily life followed familiar rhythms and aspirations were shaped through careful effort. In that kind of setting, a trip to Kashmir was not a routine; rather, it demanded planning, budgeting, and patience. His elder brother Sushant Satpathy later explained just how deliberate the journey had been. "He saved money for months to afford the trip. He recently availed LTC to visit his dream destination and was so excited," Sushant revealed.

On 19 April, Prashant began the journey with his wife Priyadarshini and their nine-year-old son, Tanuj. For the child, the journey meant adventure. For the father, it represented fulfilment. Like many middle-class Indian families, the Satpathys had worked patiently toward this moment. It promised shared memories of snow, photographs, laughter, and stories that would later be retold at family gatherings. The destination itself carried emotional meaning beyond tourism, as Prashant had spoken of wanting to show his family something extraordinary for years. A relative remembered his words vividly: "He wanted to show snow to his family. He used to keep saying, let them see heaven on earth."³⁷⁹ That

'heaven on earth' phrase was not a poetic exaggeration. It was an aspiration and a promise made quietly to his wife and son.



Fig 72 Prashant Satpathy during his Kashmir trip before terrorist attack at Pahalgam cut his life short. Photo Credit: Social Media.

In Kashmir, their itinerary, like many others on that day, eventually brought them to Baisaran Valley, which was meant to be one of the happiest stops of their journey. The family had just completed a ropeway ride that should have ended in photographs and laughter, and instead ended in violence. Priyadarshini later described the moment with unambiguity. “We were just landing from a ropeway after a joyride when I heard gunshots. I initially presumed it was firecrackers.”³⁸⁰ But the illusion barely lasted seconds as she recounted. “All of a sudden one bullet hit my husband’s head and he fell down. Before I could think of anything, he had died.”³⁸¹ In an instant, a family that had travelled thousands of kilometres in search of joy found itself trapped in terror.

Priyadarshini’s grief surfaced through words that carried immense emotional weight. “My husband died on the spot. I have lost everything.” Her husband had been provider, planner, and emotional centre. Without him, uncertainty extended across every dimension of life, which was reflected in how she struggled to release her husband’s body during the cremation. Even more haunting was her description of their son’s condition. “My son, who studies in Class IV, is in shock.”³⁸²

Relatives continued to remember Prashant as a man defined by care and responsibility. “He was so full of life, always putting others before himself,” one relative recalled. “He had planned this trip for months.”³⁸³ Again and again, memory returned to the same sentence—the promise that defined his journey. “He wanted to show snow to his family... let them see heaven on earth.”³⁸⁴ That dream had been fulfilled, but at an unimaginable cost. He had taken his family to paradise. He did not return from it.



Fig 73 Prashant Satpathy's funeral in Balasore Odisha. Source: Social Media.

Prashant Satpathy's death extended beyond grief into structure. A household lost its provider. A wife entered widowhood without warning. A child entered childhood without paternal guidance. While governmental assistance was announced to support the family, including financial aid and educational provisions for the child, such measures offer stability rather than restoration, as no compensation replaces presence and no policy restores memory. Like other victims of the Pahalgam, his life highlights a central truth about the human cost of violence that the victims are not abstractions: they are fathers who save money for vacations, husbands who plan journeys, and men who speak quietly of dreams.

Victim No 10: Manish Ranjan — The Officer Who Shielded His Family and Never Returned

The 40-year-old Manish Ranjan built his life around discipline and a deeper ambition of serving the nation. He was working as an officer with India's Intelligence Bureau (IB) and was posted in Hyderabad. To outsiders, that designation carried the quiet weight of trust, responsibility, and a life lived in service of national security. But to his family, he was not an officer but a son, a husband, and a father to two young children. He was also the eldest of three brothers, a role that carried responsibility long before professional duty entered his life.

Manish's childhood unfolded in Jhalda town in West Bengal's Purulia district, where his father, Mangalesh Mishra, served as headmaster at the local Hindi High School. In that household, education was not simply encouraged; it was central to identity. Those who studied with him remembered a boy who combined discipline with curiosity. "Always the teachers' delight," recalled Sanjay Gupta, a railway officer who knew him during his school days.³⁸⁵ His abilities extended beyond academic success, as he engaged deeply with the world around him, including on the cricket field, where he was known for his sporting prowess and following the game with passion.



Fig 74 A portrait of Manish Ranjan. Picture Credit: Social Media

His professional journey reflected persistence rather than convenience. After completing his studies, he initially joined a nationalised bank in Ranchi. Though the job offered stability, the stability alone did not satisfy his career ambitions, and he moved to the Customs Department in Chennai in search of a role that aligned more closely with his sense of national duty. It was in 2012 that he joined the Intelligence Bureau under the Ministry of Home Affairs, marking the beginning of a career that would take him across multiple cities, including Ranchi, Delhi, and Hyderabad. He was not merely employed by the state; he had chosen to dedicate himself to it.

Having married in 2010, he built a household defined by affection and responsibility and became the father of a ten-year-old son and a six-year-old daughter. Despite the demands of this job, Manish remained deeply rooted in family life. His father recalled the regularity of his communication, small gestures that carried meaning beyond routine. “Ranjan left for Kashmir with a smile. He would call us every day on the phone and WhatsApp to ask about our health. We even received his call on the fateful day.”³⁸⁶ That memory of daily contact would later become unbearable in its absence.

For the Ranjan family, the Kashmir trip was supposed to be a family reunion. While Manish and his wife and children travelled ahead, his parents and brothers were scheduled to meet them at Jammu railway station, from where they all planned to travel together to the Vaishno Devi shrine in Katra to fulfil a shared spiritual aspiration. His younger brother later described the anticipation that had surrounded their plan. “They were on their way to the Vaishno Devi temple from Kashmir... We too had begun our journey, eager to join them, only to be forced back by this devastating news.”³⁸⁷



Fig 75 The wife of Manish Ranjan and his two children being rescued by local people and local police immediately after his killing in the Pahalgam Attack on 22 April 2025. Picture Credit: Social Media

Before wrapping up his Kashmir visit and catching up with his parents and brothers in Jammu, Manish and his family found themselves in Baisaran Valley on the fateful day of 22 April. As the terrorist broke the silence in the mountains, creating chaos, Manish's response was instinctive. Family members later described his final actions in simple language that conveyed urgency and care. "His last act was to shield his family from harm," they recalled.³⁸⁸ As shots rang out, he instructed his wife and children to move away from danger. "He told his wife and children to flee in the opposite direction. His presence of mind saved their lives, though he himself couldn't escape the gunfire."³⁸⁹ While that decision saved their lives, it cost him his own.

Few losses can be as devastating as those witnessed directly by loved ones. As Manish's younger brother, Vineet detailed, "He was shot dead in front of his shocked wife and children,"³⁹⁰ revealing the extent of trauma embedded in their memories. The children did not merely lose their father; they saw him die before their eyes, an image that would remain fixed in their consciousness long after the immediate shock faded.



Fig 76 Manish Ranjan's aunt Sunita Devi and uncle Alok Kumar Priyadarshi at their house in Sasaram after the Pahalgam attack. Picture Credit: The Hindu³⁹¹

One of the most painful ironies in his story lay in the plans that remained incomplete. After returning from Pahalgam, he had intended to take his parents to the Vaishno Devi shrine. The pilgrimage represented continuity of faith, family, and shared experience. While that was broken before it could be fulfilled, the journey remained unfinished and the reunion unrealised.

Manish Ranjan left behind more than memories. He left two children who would grow up remembering not only his presence but also his final act of protection, amid the feeling of absence. He left his ageing parents, who would long to see the son who had become a central pillar of the family. His final act was not professional but a paternal instinctive decision to protect those closest to him. He succeeded in saving his wife and children. He did not save himself. In that final choice lies the measure of his life—not merely as an Intelligence Bureau officer, but as a father whose last act was to shield his family, even at the cost of his own life.

Victim No 11: N. Ramachandran — A Grandfather's Final Journey, A Daughter's Impossible Courage

The 68-year-old retired expatriate N. Ramachandran from Kochi's Edappally had spent decades working in Qatar before returning to Kerala to enjoy the years he had earned through discipline and sacrifice. A cheerful, active man who remained closely connected to his roots throughout his years in the Gulf, retirement had not slowed him; rather, it had redirected his time toward family, grandchildren, and the routines of a life finally lived without professional urgency.

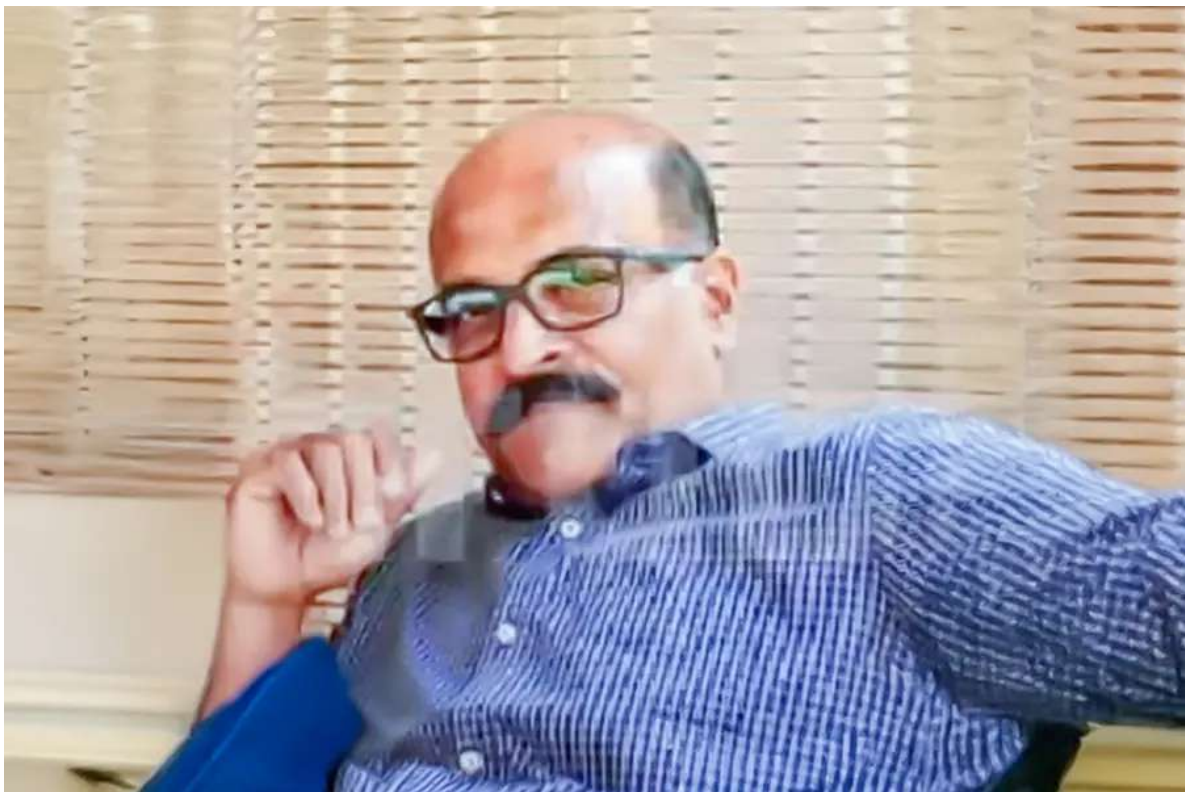


Fig 77 A Portrait of N Ramachandran. Photo Credit: Social Media.

For the Ramachandran family, the Kashmir visit was about family time together, as his daughter, Arathi R. Menon, had travelled from abroad with her twin sons to spend time

with her parents. The family arrived in Srinagar on 21 April before finding themselves traversing the rugged terrain of Pahalgam the next day. Ramachandran walked ahead with his daughter and grandsons through the Baisaran meadow, seeking to experience the valley's breathtaking landscape and create shared memories that would later become part of family stories. His wife, Sheela, remained behind because of her recent angioplasty and was unable to manage the pony ride. That small decision of staying in the car spared her from witnessing what followed, though it did not spare her from the grief that would arrive later as the trip turned into a permanent fracture in their lives. Arathi would later recall how normal the day had seemed before violence entered their lives. "It was a beautiful day. We went on a pony ride to Baisaran. It was only my father, myself and my twin boys. My mother stayed back in the car as she couldn't manage the pony ride."³⁹² The meadow, filled with visitors and families, gave no warning of what was about to unfold.



Fig 78 Ramachandran's daughter Arathi at his home after the tragedy. Picture Credit: The Federal³⁹³

Then came the first sound. "We thought it was fireworks at first," Arathi said. "Then came the second shot—I knew it was a terror attack."³⁹⁴ As panic spread quickly across the meadow and confusion replaced leisure, families like Ramachandran's began running in different directions. Arathi tried to lead her father and children toward safety, but escape routes narrowed rapidly as gunfire continued and the gunmen appeared before them within seconds. She recounted, "A man with the gun came firing in the air and telling everyone to lie down. They started going around, asking people something, but we couldn't make out the words."³⁹⁵ Though this interaction lasted only seconds, it carried irreversible consequences. "One of them came up to us and asked my father something—it sounded like a single word, may be 'kalma'. My father said he didn't understand. Without hesitation, they shot him."³⁹⁶

The violence was immediate and final—no argument, no warning, and no time to react. The shot struck Ramachandran in front of his daughter and grandchildren. "I immediately hugged my father," Arathi said, adding, "The gunman pointed the gun at my head, may be to scare me. My twins started screaming and then he left us."³⁹⁷ Those moments became permanent memories with the images of the moment refusing to fade. She held her father as he lay bleeding, surrounded by sounds of chaos and panic. Yet the cries of her children created a narrow possibility for survival. "He poked the gun to my head but did not shoot

as my sons were crying,” she said afterwards.³⁹⁸ In that moment, survival replaced grief. “I knew then that my father was gone and we fled through the woods.”³⁹⁹

Escape did not unfold with either clarity or direction as it was defined by exhaustion, fear, and instinct. Arathi ran with her children through unfamiliar terrain for nearly an hour, guided only by fragments of memory and observation. “I took his phone and ran with the children into a marshy area,” she recalled, adding, “Guided by the hoofprints of ponies, the trio eventually found their way back.”⁴⁰⁰ Her focus was singular: survival. “As a mother, my immediate response was to protect my children. My father was gone. I couldn’t save him, but I had to save my kids.”⁴⁰¹ When she finally located mobile connectivity, she contacted their taxi driver, seeking assistance in the absence of visible authority. “I called our driver and told him about the terror attack. I said, ‘No one is here to help,’ and asked him to inform the police, the Army, or whoever he could.”⁴⁰²

Help eventually arrived, but the emotional weight of survival continued to grow. Two local men, Musafir and Sameer, provided assistance during the hours that followed, transforming strangers into protectors during crisis. Their actions remained etched in Arathi’s memory as symbols of unexpected solidarity. “My driver Musafir and his friend Samir treated me like their own sister. They didn’t take any money. My jacket was torn, and Musafir gave me his jacket, which I wore through the night.”⁴⁰³ They stayed beside her during the long administrative procedures that accompany violent death—identification, documentation, and waiting outside the mortuary. “They were like my brothers. They stood by me, helped me through the formalities, and stayed with me till 3 AM,” she recounted later, adding “I have two brothers in Kashmir now,” whose presence for Arathi became a source of strength amid the unfolding grief.⁴⁰⁴



Fig 79 The body of N Ramachandran being brought to home in Kerala from Pahalgam. Picture Credit: Social Media

Survival created another burden: shielding her mother from the truth. Sheela’s heart condition made sudden disclosure dangerous, and Arathi chose to delay the moment of revelation. “I told Amma that we ran in different directions and I didn’t know where he was – just to keep her strong until we got back.”⁴⁰⁵ For nearly two days, she carried the truth alone, balancing grief with responsibility. “I had requested the authorities to disconnect the television both at the hotel and in the airport lobby because I didn’t want my mother to find out what had happened.”⁴⁰⁶ Only after their flight landed in Kochi did

reality become unavoidable. Sheela learned that the man she had spent decades beside through migration, work abroad, and retirement would not return alive.

In the months that followed, grief refused to diminish, quietly reshaping into endurance. “It hasn’t been about overcoming our father’s loss, but about learning to live with the pain it left behind,” Arathi said a year after.⁴⁰⁷ For her, remembering her father meant holding together two identities of one defined by love and the other by loss.

Ramachandran’s life had been built on movement from Kerala to the Gulf and back again on work, discipline, and devotion to family. In retirement, he sought something simple: time with loved ones and the joy of shared experiences. The trip to Kashmir represented that desire for togetherness, which, however, became the final chapter of his life. Even now, memory preserves details that statistics cannot hold, be it the walk through the meadow, the sound mistaken for fireworks, the weight of a father’s body in his daughter’s arms, or the cries of children that may have saved their mother’s life. These are not abstractions but lived moments that reveal the enduring human cost of violence. Ramachandran left home as a retiree seeking peace. He returned as a memory carried by those who survived him as a father, a grandfather, and the steady presence that disappeared in a moment of unimaginable fear.

Victim No 12: Dinesh Mirania — An Anniversary That Became a Day of Mourning

For Dinesh Mirania, a businessman from Raipur’s Samta Colony in Odisha, the journey to Jammu and Kashmir carried both familial and spiritual meaning. Having built his life through steady work in the iron trade and having learned to balance the demands of his business with the obligations of family life, it was meant to mark a milestone that became part of shared memory over the years: his wedding anniversary on 22 April.



Fig 80 Dinesh and his wife Neha. Photo Credit: NDTV⁴⁰⁸

But before celebrating his wedding anniversary, Dinesh travelled to Jammu on 17 April, accompanied by his wife, Neha, and their children – Shaurya and Rakshita - to join a Bhagwat Katha event organised by a relative of his from Kolkata. While the event brought

extended family members together in an atmosphere of devotion and reunion, for the Mirania family, it offered a perfect opportunity to blend pilgrimage with leisure, showing how Dinesh balanced different aspects of life, such as faith and family obligations, in parallel.

From Jammu, the family left for Kashmir with a preplanned itinerary to celebrate the anniversary at Pahalgam. It was a yearly occasion that, until then, had symbolised continuity, partnership, and shared endurance, to be marked by photographs, shared meals, and the understated rituals of married life. Instead became the dividing line between what had been and what would follow.



Fig 81 Dinesh Mirania with his wife Neha, daughter Rakshita and son Shaurya. Photo Credit: Punjabi Jagran⁴⁰⁹

The family made it to the Baisaran Valley and settled into the calm of the meadow in the majestic shadow of the Pir Panjal Mountains. But the truce proved short-lived, broken by voluminous gunfire across the open ground, sending panic through the gathered crowds. As the terrorists started segregating the men and women, and then demanding to know the religious identity of the men by subjecting them *kalima* test, Dinesh found himself a bullet away between silence and uttering his name. “He was killed after terrorists asked his name,” Sudhir Agarwal, his relative, recalled.⁴¹⁰

For Neha and the children, the anniversary they had travelled to celebrate became the day they witnessed the collapse of their world. The transformation of meaning was immediate and irreversible. What had begun as a journey of faith and celebration became a memory defined by loss. And back in Raipur, the news spread through Samta Colony, where Mirania’s house stood locked. The shock extended beyond the immediate neighbourhood, where Dinesh was no anonymous figure but a part of the daily rhythm, known to neighbours, traders, and relatives alike.

What makes Dinesh Mirania’s story particularly distressing is the symbolism of time itself. Anniversaries are markers of continuity which measure years of partnership and resilience

and remind families of shared beginnings and shared endurance. But to lose a wheel of that life wheel that forms a marriage can only transform such a day into mourning, as the anniversary ceases to mark marriage and instead becomes a permanent memorial to loss. For Neha and her children, the day would never measure years of togetherness but years since Dinesh's absence.

The Mirania family's journey had not been impulsive. It was rooted in faith, trust, and the belief that normal life would continue uninterrupted. As Amar Bansal, a relative of Dinesh, reflected in the aftermath of the tragedy, expressed, "Nobody imagined it would end in such loss."⁴¹¹ Those words echo across many families affected by the attack – the shared assumption that ordinary plans would remain ordinary.

What remains today are fragments of life interrupted – unfinished conversations, celebrations never completed, and memories now defined by absence. For Dinesh Mirania, the anniversary journey had been an expression of gratitude for life shared with his wife and children. For his family, it became the day that divided existence into before and after: before the promise of celebration, and after the permanence of grief. In that transformation lies the enduring human cost of violence that was unleashed by terrorists at Pahalgam and rewrote family histories and the conversion of joyful dates into lifelong memorials.

Victim No 13: Sameer Guha — A Family Holiday That Became a Lifetime of Trauma

For the 52-year-old Sameer Guha, a Ministry of Statistics employee, the Kashmir trip was meant to be a brief family vacation. A resident of Behala in Kolkata, he, along with his wife, Sarbari Guha, and daughter, Subhangi, arrived in Srinagar on 16 April and right away immersed themselves in the breathtaking beauty of what many consider a 'paradise on earth'. In their itinerary for exploring Kashmir, the family had saved Pahalgam as the final destination, visiting it barely a day before their scheduled return to Kolkata on 23 April.

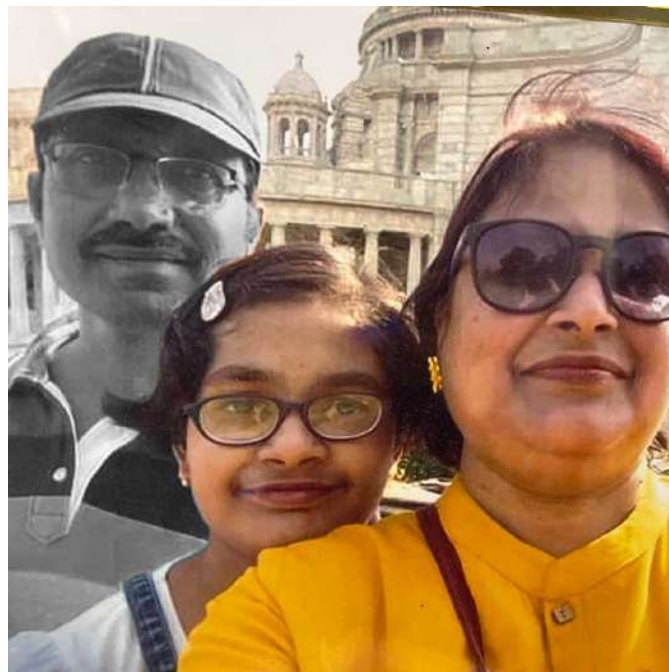


Fig 82 Sameer Guha with his wife Sarbari Guha and daughter Subhangi. Picture Credit: Social Media

Once in Pahalgam, the family made it to Baisaran, like many others, to witness how nature treats its visitors, painting the landscape into breathtaking portraits. As the family settled into the peace of the meadow, or the illusion of it, no one had any inkling of what was to follow. And what followed was a bloodbath which caught the visitors without warning. For the Guhas, what was supposed to be a short, peaceful getaway to Kashmir ended in a tragedy that they are yet to fully comprehend. According to the family testimonies, the attackers instructed people to lie down before opening fire on selected victims. Like the other two dozen men, Sameer was also subjected to a religious identity parade before being executed point-blank and in cold blood, leaving behind a grieving wife and daughter who witnessed the horror firsthand. While his killing robbed his household of its primary support, it also disrupted the aspirations of his daughter, who had been preparing for her school board examinations at the time.

Yet in this chaos, confusion, terror and trauma, the mother-daughter duo found some courage and compassion from their local Kashmiri driver, Mohammad Iqbal, whose quick response, as the family later recounted, provided a semblance of safety as the events unfolded. Recounting the events, Subrata Ghosh, the brother-in-law of Sameer, stated, “She [Sabari] just told me that their driver Md Iqbal helped them a lot. He took them to his home, where his family stays. They stayed there overnight.”⁴¹²



Fig 83 Subhangi Guha after her father was killed in the Pahalgam attack. Picture Credit: Social Media

Amid the mourning and overwhelming grief, the story of Sameer’s daughter, Subhangi, emerged as a powerful narrative of resilience. Notwithstanding the emotional trauma that she endured, the 17-year-old appeared for her ISC board examinations and scored 87 per cent just days after witnessing the killing of her father.

The Guha family continues to live with the enduring consequences of that day even as their grief remains interwoven with the determination to move forward, particularly through Subhangi’s academic ambitions. Her resolve to pursue higher education in

psychology reflects an attempt to rebuild purpose from tragedy and an effort to honour her father's support and aspirations for her future.



Fig 84 Sarbari Guha during the funeral of Sameer Guha after his killing in the 22 April 2025 Pahalgam Attack. Picture Credit: Hindustan Times⁴¹³

Sameer Guha is remembered not only as a government employee but as a devoted husband and father whose life was defined by responsibility and care. His family's testimony reveals the lasting human cost of terrorism, which is not measured in numbers but in shattered routines, interrupted dreams, and the lifelong trauma carried by survivors.

Victims 14 & 15: Yatish Parmar and Sumit Parmar — A Father and Son Lost in the Same Moment

One of the most heartbreaking pieces of news to come from the mountains of Pahalgam was the story of a father-son duo, Yatish Parmar and his 17-year-old son, Sumit Parmar, residents of Bhavnagar in Gujarat. Their journey to Jammu and Kashmir was meant to be spiritual, having arrived in the state, as part of the 20-member group of devotees, including their other family members, to attend the 955th Ram Katha event organised by spiritual leader Morari Bapu between 19 and 27 April in Srinagar. However, the journey that was rooted in faith and family bonding saw a devastating end in the Baisaran meadows on 22 April 2025.

After the family, including Yatish, his wife Kajalben and son Sumit, a class 12th student, attended the Ram Katha in Srinagar, they decided to combine the pilgrimage with leisure and left to explore various destinations in Kashmir. It was a hard-earned opportunity for Yatish Parmar, who worked at his salon back home, to finally take his family on a vacation to Kashmir. Like many other tourists visiting Kashmir during that period, the family found themselves in Pahalgam that day and took a horseback ride to the Baisaran meadows. As

the gunfire broke the silence of the valley, the world of Kajalben came crashing within seconds to be never the same again, as terrorists killed her husband and son point-blank in cold blood before her eyes after subjecting the father-son duo to a religious verification test.



Fig 85 Yatish Parmar with his wife Kajalben and son Sumit during their Kashmir trip before the father-son duo was killed by terrorists in the Pahalgam attack on 22 April 2025. Picture Credit: Social Media

For Kajalben Parmar, who emerged as the sole survivor out of the trio from her family that had travelled to Kashmir on that fateful day, the ordeal is far from over, despite the passage of time, given the emotional and physical consequences of the Pahalgam massacre. “I have lost my husband and my son... Even today, I cannot reconcile myself to it,” she adds, in an expression of grief that has since changed the course of her life.

In the aftermath of the tragedy, the only thing that gets her out of bed every morning is her elder son, Abhishek Parmar, who had stayed back home during the family’s devotion-turned-ordeal trip to Kashmir, given his studies to become a laboratory technician. Her struggle reflects the deep and lasting consequences of terrorism, as reflected by both the immediate loss of lives as well as the enduring disruption of families and futures.

Yatish Parmar was as devoted a husband as a father and equally invested in securing the future of his sons and the family by steadily yet tirelessly running his salon business. The younger Parmar’s life had barely begun when it was cut short by the forces of evil, who use the ruse of religion to unleash violence. Their story stands as a testament to the deep

personal cost of terrorism, in the loss of family bonds, dreams unfulfilled, and lives cut short that had barely begun, which is something that cannot be measured in numbers.

Victim No 16: Shailesh Kalathiya — A Journey of Faith That Ended in Irreversible Loss

The 44-year-old banking professional, Shailesh Kalathiya, a Mumbai resident, was originally from Surat in Gujarat. Before making Mumbai his family's abode, where he was transferred a few years ago, he had served in different cities across India, including Jodhpur in Rajasthan. The Kashmir trip was supposed to be a family getaway to spend time with his wife, Sheetalben, daughter, Niti, and 10-year-old son, Naksh, as well as to celebrate his 44th birthday on 23 April. But that life was cut short a day before he could add another year to his age column, far away from home in the mountains of Kashmir.

For Shailesh, having just concluded the gruelling period of work, as they usually are towards the end of the financial year (March), the beginning of the new cycle meant it was time to sneak some days to escape the mundane of Mumbai, both social and professional, and reconnect with nature. Having arrived in Kashmir and explored its different parts, as fate would have it, the family found itself ascending the mountains of Pahalgam on horseback on 22 April, which brought them to Baisaran. The speed with which the events unfolded left everyone confused and terrorised, including the Kalathiya family. Before they could understand anything, the terrorists emerged before them and started segregating men on religious grounds. They killed Shailesh within a second of confirming his identity, shattering their small world into pieces in an instant. As his wife, Sheetalben, recounted, "A terrorist first came close to us and then shot my husband after learning that he is a Hindu. Just like my husband, other Hindu men were shot in front of their children. The terrorist was laughing after shooting my husband and did not leave the place till he died."⁴¹⁴ Her testimony revealed not only the violence of the act but also the emotional trauma inflicted on surviving family members.



Fig 86 Shailesh Kalathiya. Picture Credit: Social Media

The trauma has been so deep on the young impressionable mind of their 10-year-old son Naksh, witnessing his father being killed right before his eyes, that the sequence of events

of the day has refused to fade, remaining as fresh as it could get. “As soon as we heard gunshots, all the tourists started running in search of cover at Pahalgam. Two terrorists eventually found us and asked all of us to identify our religion. They divided men in two groups – Hindus and Muslims. Then, they shot dead all the Hindu men, including my father, and ran away,” Naksh recounts.⁴¹⁵ In another testimony, he describes the fear that gripped him during the attack, recalling, “I feared that I would also be killed. After separating Hindus from Muslims, the terrorists asked them to recite ‘*kalima*’. Muslims who recited it were spared. But those who could not recite were gunned down.”⁴¹⁶

Kalathiya’s son also recalled the chaotic environment in Baisaran and the helplessness experienced by the people in their desperate attempts, moments to seek shelter and escape the unfolding violence. “Suddenly, the noise of firing bullets started as everyone started running here and there to save their lives. My mother stayed with my father and asked us to go down,” he said.⁴¹⁷ For the Kalathiy, April was never to be the same again. Earlier, they waited to celebrate the birthday of the man who anchored the family through thick and thin, as both a husband and father. But now, the month brings grief and a reminder of the violence, both emotional and physical, that they endured and which shattered their world forever!

His story stands as another reminder of the human cost of terrorism that extends far beyond statistics that the government and newspaper columns could ever reflect. The continued trauma endured by his wife and children shows how such acts of brazen violence reverberate through families and communities long after the incident itself. Kalathiya’s life, defined by responsibility and care for his family, was cut short in an act that transformed an ordinary vacation into an enduring tragedy.

Victim No 17: Corporal Tage Hailyang — A Soldier by profession but a Son Lost to Terror



Fig 87 A portrait of Corporal Tage Hailyang. Picture Credit: Social Media

The 30-year-old Tage Hailyang was serving as a corporal with the Indian Air Force and was posted at Srinagar airbase. Having dedicated nearly a decade of his life to the nation, his life embodied service, discipline, and quiet courage. On the day when the Baisaran attack happened, he had gone on leave to visit Pahalgam with his wife of barely four months, Charo Kamhua, in what was meant to be a brief getaway for companionship and

rest. But that short journey instead cut short his life, which had been defined by responsibility and promise.

Hailyang was from Tajang village, a remote hill community in Arunachal Pradesh's Lower Subansiri district, where news travels through word of mouth and grief is shared collectively. He was the son of village headman Tage Tade and grew up in a family closely connected to the armed forces. Right after completing his bachelor's degree in humanities, he joined the Indian Air Force in 2017, which, for him, marked the beginning of a career that reflected both ambition and patriotism. Though the job kept him far from home during these years, he managed to retain deep connections with both his family and the village community.



Fig 88 A collage of Tyag Hailyang and his wife Charo Kamhua from their wedding. Picture Credit: Social Media

Hailyang's marriage to Charo Kamhua in December 2024 marked the beginning of a new personal chapter. Though the bride had stayed back in Arunachal Pradesh after marriage, according to family members, the young corporal insisted she visit Kashmir before his tenure in Srinagar concluded. "He had asked his wife to come to Srinagar, saying that before he left, she should at least see Kashmir," recalled his uncle, Rubu Buker,⁴¹⁸ stating that the visit was meant as a gesture of affection before his transfer to a new posting in Dibrugarh, Assam, which would have brought him closer to home and family.

Once in Pahalgam on 22 April, Hailyang booked a horse ride to the Baisaran meadow to show Charo why the inaccessible mountainous valley was dubbed as 'mini-Switzerland', little knowing this hour-long ride through the rugged terrain would be their last joint venture together. Just as the couple was settling into the peace of the meadows, gunmen emerged from the woods firing shots without any warning, thereby breaking the tranquil of the valley. It took merely a few moments for the couple to find themselves part of the group of people being segregated by the terrorists by religion. As the family account and

the testimonies of survivors revealed, Hailyang was killed point-blank right before his wife of barely four months. “They [terrorists] asked him about his religion and then checked his identity card. After seeing his IAF identity card, the terrorists instantly killed him. They spared his wife,” revealed Buker, his family member, while describing the horrifying sequence of bloodbath.⁴¹⁹



Fig 89 Charo Kamhua, wife of Corporal Tyag Hailyang during memorial function. Picture Credit: Social Media

For the Indian Air Force, his death was not merely the loss of a personnel member, but of a colleague whose dedication had defined his professional life. In an official statement, the force expressed collective grief: “All air warriors of the Indian Air Force mourn the loss of Cpl Tage Hailyang in the terror attack at Pahalgam and convey heartfelt condolences to his family in this moment of immense grief.”⁴²⁰



Fig 90 A memorial built by Hailyang's family in his honour in their Tajang village. Picture Credit: Social Media

Back in the village, the grief that followed the killing of Hailyang is yet to dissipate, with his parents, siblings and his wife Charo still learning to cope with his absence. For Charo, the trauma of survival carries its own weight as the bloodbath unfolded right before her eyes; circumstances which thrust her into widowhood, which were too sudden to comprehend. In the months following the tragedy, the family constructed a memorial in their village to honour the young soldier, reflecting both remembrance and resilience. “We

want to keep his memory alive, and the world should know that there was such a person, Tage Hailyang, who lost his life in this way,” his brother stated.⁴²¹

Corporal Tage Hailyang’s life story carried deep symbolism as a soldier, newlywed husband, and a son, beyond the tragic end it endured, which shattered not just a family, but an entire village community. His memorial in Tajang village stands as a quiet but powerful assertion that remembrance itself can be an act of resistance against forgetting.

Victim No 18: Dileep Dasali — A Lifetime of Work Ended in a Moment of Violence

Dileep Dasali was a retired professional from New Panvel near Mumbai. Having spent decades working diligently, raising his family, and nurturing relationships within his community, he and his family were looking forward to his retirement as a long-awaited time of fulfilment, travel, companionship, and quiet joy. He and his wife, Usha Dasali, had booked a ten-day Kashmir trip with Nisarga Paryatan Tours and had travelled as part of a 35-member tourist group to the valley, which had reached Srinagar only a day before. As such, the journey to Kashmir was not merely a holiday but the realisation of a long-cherished dream to travel and experience the beauty of places he had only seen in photographs.



Fig 91 Dileep Dasali with his wife Usha in a family portrait. Picture Credit: Social Media

Yet fate intervened in the most arbitrary way. According to the family accounts, the visiting tourist group was not originally scheduled to visit Pahalgam that day. It was the last-minute logistics-driven change in the trip itinerary—a common occurrence in such group travels—that brought them to Baisaran meadow and would ultimately prove to be the difference between life and death. “[Dasali] and his group were not scheduled to be there but for delays and a mess-up in their schedule,” reports quoted a relative of his after recounting the tragic coincidence that placed him in harm’s way.⁴²²

The travelling group ascended to the meadowed valley from Pahalgam and was revelling in the sweeping views of the valley when terrorists broke the peace of the mountainous valley by firing without warning. Dasali found himself among the groups of visitors being

lined up for the identification parade by the terrorists who went about verifying the religion of the men before executing them in the cruellest way. The journey turned into a nightmare etched permanently into the memory of his wife, Usha, before whom he was killed point-blank.

Dasali's life had been anchored in simplicity and connection, living with his wife Usha in New Panvel while their children, including two daughters and a son, had established lives of their own. His death resonated deeply within the community, particularly his local yoga group – a small but close-knit community of senior citizens who gathered regularly for exercise and companionship. He had been a constant presence there for the last four years and would enthusiastically participate in both yoga sessions and social gatherings.

To those who knew him best, Dasali's greatest aspiration in retirement had been to experience the world beyond his decades-long daily routine. He wanted to travel as much as he could in order to see landscapes that contrasted sharply with the industrial spaces where he had spent much of his career. His family and friends often recounted him speaking about exploring the beauty of India at every opportunity possible. And when his travel agent presented such an opportunity, he could barely resist and decided to join in what would turn out to be his final adventure in life.

For Usha Dasali, survival has carried its own burden of having witnessed the attack and lost her partner of decades in the same moment. If there is one thing that his story underlines, it is the randomness with which violence disrupts ordinary lives like Dasali's, who just wanted to fulfil his personal aspiration to experience the difference between the real and reel beauty of the country. It is a stark reminder of how terror targets not only individuals but the routines and aspirations that define civilian life. A retired professional pursuing a long-awaited dream, a husband travelling with his spouse, a neighbour cherished within his community – these were the identities that defined Dileep Dasali. His decision to travel to Kashmir represented hope for life, but was extinguished in a moment of violence that neither he nor his wife could have ever anticipated.

Victim No 19: Neeraj Udhwani — A Journey Meant for Celebration That Ended in Silence

The 33-year-old Neeraj Udhwani's life was defined by precision of numbers balanced, deadlines met, futures planned with patience and care. Since his early childhood, Dubai had been his home, where he grew up and built a stable career as a chartered accountant. Like many young professionals living abroad, distance never weakened his sense of belonging to India, which remained his emotional anchor, with family ties, festivals, and friendships drawing him back whenever time allowed.

In April 2025, Neeraj arrived in India, accompanied by his wife, Ayushi Harpalani Udhwani, for what was meant to be a joyful reunion of celebration and companionship to attend the wedding ceremony of a close friend in Chandigarh. Once there, the group of friends, including the couple, ended up travelling to Shimla for a short holiday. The spontaneous trip to Kashmir that followed was an additional leg to what was already a happy itinerary before their planned return to Dubai. His uncle, Prakash Udhwani, later reflected on the painful irony of that decision, saying, "He came to attend a wedding function in Chandigarh. The Kashmir trip was suddenly planned. Wish he never had this plan."⁴²³



Fig 92 Neeraj Udhwani. Picture Credit: Social Media

Neeraj was born in Jaipur, but his life story largely unfolded in Dubai, where he moved with his parents at the age of three. His father, Pradeep Udhwani, had established a textile business in the UAE, providing stability that allowed his children to pursue education and professional growth. He lived a typical migrant life in the Gulf emirate, shaped by ambition and sacrifice. After his father's death nearly a decade earlier, Neeraj continued working in Dubai, supporting his family while building his own future. Neeraj married his wife, Ayushi, in Rajasthan in February 2023, thus beginning their journey together, anticipating a bright future and the slow formation of dreams. Though the couple had no children yet, their life together had begun to settle into routine with their respective careers stabilising and possibilities widening.



Fig 93 Neeraj and Ayushi in a candid photo. Picture Credit: Live Hindustan⁴²⁴

Travel, for Neeraj, represented curiosity and discovery, as reflected in the spontaneity of his decision to travel from Shimla to Kashmir before planning his return to Dubai, which eventually brought him to Pahalgam. On the fateful day of 22 April, Neeraj stepped out alone from his hotel around noon time while his wife stayed back.⁴²⁵ Unaware that his

simple decision to step outside would become irreversible, he ended up in Baisaran Valley in his quest to explore parts of Pahalgam. It was merely moments after he arrived in the meadow that the gunfire shattered its calm as a group of terrorists emerged from the nearby woods and lined up the men and religiously profiled them before executing them in cold blood. Neeraj became one of the 26 men to be killed in the bloodbath that turned Pahalgam red that day.

Back in the hotel, Ayushi heard the chaos before understanding its meaning. As panic gripped Pahalgam town, she stepped out of the hotel only to learn from bystanders about a terrorist attack nearby.⁴²⁶ She began her desperate search for her husband, praying that the separation was temporary before he would show up at the hotel. With no contact with Neeraj and no information about him for hours, when the news about him finally arrived, it was one of devastation that shattered Ayushi's world upside down. She had lost her partner forever – a partner with whom she had reorganised her whole life around. The grief that originated in the Baisaran Valley took no time to reach Jaipur and break the peace of the Udhwani household, where his mother, Jyoti, struggled to comprehend the news that had reached her. For her, the tragedy reopened wounds that had already been shaped by the loss of her husband a decade earlier.



Fig 94 Neeraj Udhwani and his wife Ayushi. Picture Credit: *Siasat Daily*⁴²⁷

Neeraj's life had been structured around steady progress. While he thrived professionally as a finance manager in Dubai, he was equally successful at the personal level, being busy in building a marriage rooted in companionship and expectation. Those who knew him remember him as a fun person who connected easily with others, valued relationships as deeply as professional success, and was always ready to travel to explore places.



Fig 95 Aayushi during the funeral of her husband Neeraj Udhwani after his killing by terrorists during the Pahalgam attack on 22 April 2025. Picture Credit: Khaleej Times⁴²⁸

Neeraj Udhwani was more than a mere name recorded among the victims of the Pahalgam terrorist attack. He was a son who did not run from shouldering family responsibilities when his father died at a young age; he was a husband building a shared future with his wife, Ayushi, filled with promises of joy and companionship, and a professional who bridged continents through ambition and care. While his spontaneous journey to Kashmir had been shaped by celebration and curiosity, his killing in the Baisaran meadows transformed that journey into a reminder of how quickly ordinary life can collapse into irreversible loss.

Victim No 20: Madhusudan Somisetty — A Journey Between Cities That Ended in a Permanent Silence

For Madhusudan Somisetty, life revolved around a set pattern of deadlines and systems, enjoying the quiet satisfaction of solving complex technological problems. Originally from Kavali in Andhra Pradesh's Nellore district, he was a senior software architect based in Bengaluru and belonged to India's vast professional class that built futures through discipline, education, and steady effort.⁴²⁹ But beyond code and architecture diagrams, Madhusudan's life was anchored in family. His April 2025 trip to Kashmir was supposed to be a pause from routine and a shared memory in the making – a holiday with his wife Kamakshi Prasanna, seventeen-year-old daughter, Madhu, and thirteen-year-old son, Dattu. However, they had no way of knowing that the memories they created would soon become relics, as it turned out to be the final chapter of his life.

The family's Kashmir trip was carefully planned, with an itinerary that included six days of travel to the region's celebrated leisure destinations, such as Gulmarg, Sonmarg, Doodhpathri, and Pahalgam. By the time they found themselves in Pahalgam's Baisaran valley on 22 April, the Somisetty family had already spent several days exploring Kashmir and absorbing its beauty and quiet rhythms. For them, the day at Baisaran Valley unfolded

like any other tourist destination, with fellow visitors wandering across its lush green meadows, children playing and running around, adults posing for photographs, and dozens of ponies bringing tourists along the narrow trail through Pahalgam's rugged terrain that leads to what is described as Kashmir's 'mini-Switzerland' wonder. After settling into the tranquillity of meadows within the lap of the imposing Pir Panjal mountains, Madhusudan and his wife Kamakshi walked further into the valley to take photographs, whereas their travel companion Stanley Gnanam remained at a food stall with others, sipping tea.



Fig 96 Madhusudhan with his wife Kamakshi and children in a family portrait. Picture Credit: *India Today*⁴³⁰

It was minutes after that that the peace of the meadows was shattered by sudden loud gunshots reverberating wide and far. "But seconds later, continuous firing broke out, and people began screaming and running in panic," recalled Gnanam later.⁴³¹ As gunfire intensified, what followed was chaos with people scattering, voices shouting, children crying, and bodies collapsing into the grass that had moments earlier seemed peaceful. "I grabbed my son and my friend's son and told them to run without looking back. We were in shock—surrounded by the sound of gunfire, the sight of blood and the chaos of people fleeing," Gnanam later recalled those moments of desperate urgency.⁴³²

But when survival became an instinct, it did not come for Madhusudan as in seconds he and his wife found themselves surrounded by terrorists who lined up men verifying their religion and executing those who identified as Hindus, then and there, right before their near and dear ones. The world around Kamakshi shattered then and there, as she would later recall:

"We had just stepped out of the hotel after lunch and were looking at shawls in a shop right outside. Suddenly, we heard gunshots. The shopkeeper initially

reassured us, saying someone was simply celebrating Kashmir's anniversary. But the hotel staff sensed danger and urged us to run. Armed men approached us and began firing indiscriminately. People around us were falling. Everything happened so quickly. My husband instructed our children to run to safety while we both sat down with our heads bowed, holding each other's hands tightly....one of the attackers asked twice, "Hindu or Muslim?"...I looked to my side and saw my husband's face covered in blood. I never expected this to happen."⁴³³



Fig 97 Madhusudhan with his wife Kamakshi in a family portrait. Picture Credit: Social NewsXYZ⁴³⁴

For the Somisetty family, life has never been the same as before, as the absence of Madhusudan took quieter forms at home – an empty chair, a silent phone, and unfinished plans. But for Kamakshi, the grief has to be reserved for the long nights after managing the burden of days, as she has to be father and mother and everything for their teen son and daughter. For the children, their Kashmir trip and those desperate moments of running for life at the Baisaran from where their father returned as one of the 26 victims of the bloodbath, have become a memory in inheritance.

Madhusudan Somisetty was not just a software architect building a stable future for his family and certainly not any other statistic among the twenty-six lives lost that day, because behind every statistic lies a life and behind every life, a family learning to live with absence. His killing fractured not just one life, but many connected lives as he was a husband, a father, a son, a friend, and a colleague.

Victim No 21: Sudeep Neupane — A Son Who Walked Ahead

The 26-year-old Sudeep Neupane, a public health graduate, was the only foreigner among the 26 victims of the Pahalgam terrorists attack of 22 April 2025. A resident of Butwal in Nepal's Rupandehi district, what brought him to Kashmir was his family's spontaneous

decision to take a short vacation to a place they had heard was called the “heaven on earth”, little knowing what awaited them there.

Sudeep lived with his mother and sister Sushma in Butwal. His family had already endured one rupture after his father divorced his mother, which reshaped their household and turned Sudeep from a mere son into a pillar of stability overnight. By every account, he was deeply devoted to his mother, as reflected in his frequent travel between his home and Kathmandu, where he studied public health to care for her, ensuring she was not alone. His life reflected a pattern of movement not for ambition but for responsibility, having begun to build a path rooted in service. His job took him to Nepal's rural areas to educate communities that often had little access to healthcare.

The journey to Kashmir was spontaneous. After Sudeep returned home to meet his sister and brother-in-law, who had come from Pokhara, the family decided, almost impulsively, to take a short vacation together. It was meant to give his mother relief, who had endured years of hardship, including the emotional strain of divorce. The family left Nepal on April 19 and arrived in Kashmir the same day. A few days later, and as fate would have it, they found themselves in Pahalgam on 22 April, riding to Baisaran Valley and immersing in the beauty of the place. That day, Sudeep, as the later family accounts later recalled, was walking slightly ahead of his mother, sister, and brother-in-law when the peace of the valley was shattered by the gunfire.⁴³⁵



Fig 98 Sudeep Neupane. Picture Credit: Social Media

As the terrorists emerged, they lined Sudeep up with dozens of men demanding to know their religion. The moment unfolded with terrifying speed, and as he replied his religious identity as ‘Hindu’, the terrorists shot him before he could say anything more, perhaps that he was a foreigner. As his sister Sushma, a witness to the violence inflicted on her brother

and many others, recounted, “*Mera bhai Hindu hone ke liye sirf un logon ne maar diya. Hum toh allah bolkar jhuk gaye, lekin mera bhai nahi jhuka. Usne chhaati pe goli khayi. Use 2 goli lagi thi. Usne bola Hindu hu, toh maar diya.* (My brother was killed just for being Hindu. We bowed down and said ‘Allah,’ but my brother did not bow. He was shot in the chest. He was hit by two bullets. He said he was Hindu, and they killed him.)”⁴³⁶



Fig 99 Sudeep Neupane (front left) with his family during the Kashmir trip before he was killed during the Pahalgam Terrorist Attack on 22 April 2025. Photo Credit: Social Media

For Reena, his mother, the loss has been existential as he was the only son she had, the only support she relied on, and the only hope for the days ahead after having endured a divorce years earlier. “He was my only son, he was my world. Who will take responsibility for me now? Who will look after me if I fall ill? My world has been robbed!,” recalled the mother-in-grief, adding, “We had gone there to visit, not to die. What was my son’s fault?... They heard ‘Hindu’ and shot him in the chest... If my son had said Muslim, he might have been saved..... He did not say anything; he said, ‘I am a Nepali, I am a Hindu,

I have not done anything wrong.' He said this again and again... My son did not even try to run away. He could not do anything and was shot... ”⁴³⁷



Fig 100 Suceep's grandfather Khemananda (89) and grandmother Sewakali (82). Photo Credit: Himal Press⁴³⁸

Grief does not end with funerals, as the absence returns in quieter ways. For his mother, daily life became uncertain and the question she voiced – “who will take responsibility for me now? – was not rhetorical but rooted in reality. For his sister, trauma has remained tied to memory with each word spoken and every scene that unfolded during the attack replaying endlessly.

His story is yet another reminder that victims of violence are not abstractions but individuals whose lives ripple outward into many directions: a public health official who walked village roads to improve lives; a son who cared for his mother; and a brother who tied a *rakhi* to his sister to be her lifelong protector. Sudeep remained true to his identity to the last moment – a trait that cost him everything.

Victim No 22: Syed Adil Hussain Shah — A Son of the Valley Who Chose Courage Over Fear

The only local Kashmiri and a Muslim among the victims of the Pahalgam massacre was Syed Adil Hussain Shah from Hapatnar village in Jammu and Kashmir's Anantnag district. A sole breadwinner for his family, he toiled as a daily-wage pony ride operator ferrying tourists on horseback to the Baisaran meadow from Pahalgam town. His story is one of courage, who could have easily escaped unharmed given that the terrorists were profiling victims on religious grounds, but he instead died protecting the Hindu tourist guests.

Adil belonged to a modest household of Hapatnar village, some 30 kilometres from Pahalgam. His family comprised his ageing parents and siblings, who depended almost entirely on his daily earnings, as his mother recalled. “He was the only bread earner of the family... He was the only support we had... There is no one else to provide for us now. We don't know what we will do without him.”⁴³⁹ He worked on daily-wage basis ferrying tourists for his pony owner. “He would go to Baisaran and ferry tourists on a pony. He

didn't have his own pony, and the owner gave him Rs 400-Rs 500 a day for ferrying tourists. Last week, because of the rains, he hadn't been to work for three days," his father Syed Haider Shah recalled.⁴⁴⁰



Fig 101 Parents of Syed Adil Hussain Shah. Picture Credit: The Times of India⁴⁴¹

Eyewitness accounts and survivor testimonies indicated that Adil's final moments were marked by extraordinary courage. Reports suggested that when gunfire erupted in Baisaran meadow, he did not flee despite the chaos around him and instead attempted to intervene and shield tourists from the attackers. "A woman tourist told me he was killed when he confronted the militants... She said the militants then fired at him too," his younger brother, Naushad, said, recounting what survivors told him at the hospital.⁴⁴²



Fig 102 Syed Adil Hussain Shah. Picture Credit: Social Media.

The killing of Adil left the family with more questions and a trauma which has quietly defined the very life of his parents and siblings. “He was an innocent man. Why was he killed? Whoever is responsible must face the consequences,” lamented his father, Syed Haider Shah, adding, “*Sab kuchh mila, lekin bachha chala gaya toh sab chala gaya... I would give it all up to have my son alive with me.*”⁴⁴³



Fig 103 Jammu and Kashmir Chief Minister Omar Abdullah with the father of Adil, Syed Haider Shah, in his funeral after being killed by terrorists during the Pahalgam attack. Picture Credit: The Hindu⁴⁴⁴

Adil’s sacrifice and courage drew public acknowledgement from people wide and far, including political leaders and local authorities. Syed Adil Hussain Shah is today remembered as a young man who, in the face of mortal danger, chose to stand his ground. Jammu and Kashmir Chief Minister Omar Abdullah stated that Adil had tried to resist the attackers and paid with his life. “He tried to stop the attack. He tried to snatch a gun. He was targeted for it,” Abdullah said in his tribute.⁴⁴⁵

Victims 23, 24 & 25: Atul Mone, Sanjay Lakshman Lele, and Hemant Suhas Joshi — Three Friends, One Journey, One Tragedy

For the residents of Dombivli in Maharashtra, the Pahalgam attack did not claim one life. It claimed the lives of three men—Atul Mone, Sanjay Lakshman Lele, and Hemant Suhas Joshi—bound not only by blood but by years of friendship, shared childhood memories, and family ties that stretched across generations. They had known one another since childhood, having played cricket together in open grounds, celebrated festivals together, and grown into adulthood while remaining deeply connected.

When they planned their Kashmir trip in April 2025, it was meant to be a shared holiday of their three families. Instead, the journey, which started on 20 April, ended barely two days later at Baisaran, leaving Dombivli and the nation to mourn the three friends at once. Atul Shrikanth Mone, 44-years-old, worked as a section engineer at the Central Railway workshop in Parel. He lived in Shriram Anchal Cooperative Housing Society in Thakurwadi, Dombivli West.⁴⁴⁶ While the railway work defined his professional life and required discipline, precision, and years of technical dedication, the family and friends defined his emotional world. Having lost both parents, his mother seven years ago and before that his father, he anchored the remaining family structure consisting of his younger

brother Amol and his own small household, including his wife Anushka and daughter Richa.

For Atul, this was his second visit to Kashmir, having travelled there and returned with fond memories of the landscape two years earlier; this time, he wanted to share that experience with his family. It was also meant to be a celebration of his daughter Richa's academic milestone, who had recently completed her Class 10 examination. They were not alone, though. It was a group of nine people, including Atul and his family, along with his cousins and lifelong friends, Hemant Joshi and Sanjay Lele, and their families.



Fig 104 A photo collage of Dombivli cousins, Atul Mone (Left), Sanjay Lele (Middle) and Hemant Joshi (Right), killed in the Pahalgam Terrorist Attack on 22 April 2025. Photo Credit: Social Media

The 50-year-old Sanjay Lakshman Lele lived in Vijayshree Cooperative Housing Society in Vishnunagar, Dombivli West, not far from his cousins and lifelong companions. He was a businessman, managing a modest but steady enterprise, and was known in his circle for his cheerful disposition and readiness to help neighbours. He was travelling with his wife Kavita and their twenty-year-old son Harshal.⁴⁴⁷

The third cousin Hemant Suhas Joshi lived in Savitri Cooperative Housing Society near Baghshala Maidan in Dombivli. The 45-year-old worked as a senior executive at Transglobal Shipping and Logistics Pvt. Ltd in Andheri and was known among his friends and colleagues for a disciplined routine and calm temperament. Hemant joined the Kashmir trip with his wife, Monika, and their 16-year-old son, Dhruv. Like Ruchi's first academic milestone, Dhruv had also recently completed his SSC examinations, making it a reason for his family to join the trip and celebrate together with the other two families.⁴⁴⁸

After arriving in Srinagar on 20 April, the group travelled to Pahalgam to explore its famed valleys like Aru, Betaab and Baisaran. On the fateful afternoon of the attack, the three friends and their families were absorbing the serenity of Baisaran when the gunfire broke the calm, sending people running for their lives. It was moments later that the group would find themselves being paraded by the terrorists, ascertaining their religious identity before executing those identifying as 'Hindus'.



Fig 105 The last group photo of the visiting group at Pahalgam resort uploaded as WhatsApp status by Hemant Joshi. Picture Credit: Free Press Journal⁴⁴⁹

Sanjay was the first among the three cousins to be killed by terrorists. His niece and Atul's daughter recounted how when the terrorists started asking about their religion, Sanjay was the first to raise his hand to identify as Hindu. "They [terrorists] asked everyone who was Hindu and who was Muslim. When Sanjay Uncle raised his hands, he was shot first," she said.⁴⁵⁰ Seeing Sanjay being shot, Hemant dared to confront the terrorist, asking why he shot his cousin, he was also killed instantly, making the sequence of violence unfold with chilling inevitability.



Fig 106 Atul Mone's daughter Richa Mone and wife Anushka Mone. Picture Credit: The Indian Express⁴⁵¹

In the chaos that followed, Atul was the last among the three cousins to be killed after attempting to reason with the attackers. “My father told the terrorists that we were not doing anything and pleaded not to harm us, but they did not listen, and he was also shot. My father was shot dead in front of me, and I could not do anything,” recalled Richa.⁴⁵² After the gunfire subsided, as survival replaced shock, the terrorised family members stayed still, trying to figure out what had just happened. “We stayed there in fear for 15-20 minutes. We tried to wake up my father, but he did not get up. After this, the locals told us to run away and save our lives. After that, six of us left from there.”⁴⁵³

What made the killing of Atul Mone, Sanjay Lele, and Hemant Joshi particularly devastating was the history they shared. They had known one another since childhood, grown up playing cricket together in Baghshala Maidan, and literally grown into adulthood side by side. Their joint family trip to Kashmir was meant to strengthen those bonds of decades across generations, but instead ended up being their final life journey. Together, they represent more than individual tragedy: decades-long friendships interrupted, families shattered, and futures withheld. For the survivors, though, including their wives, children, and parents, the trauma continues to define their daily routines.

Victim No 26: J. Chandramouli — The Man Who Could Not Run

The 68-year-old J. Chandramouli from Visakhapatnam had spent decades building a life defined by discipline, responsibility, and quiet service. Having retired as a banker, those who knew him described him as dependable, sociable, and deeply invested in the lives of others. In his retirement years, he was enjoying the simple pleasures of life, including travelling, spending time with his wife, and reconnecting with friends.



Fig 107 J. Chandramouli. Picture Credit: Social Media

Chandramouli, accompanied by his wife J. Naga Mani and two other senior citizen couples, travelled to Kashmir as part of a weeklong group tour starting on 19 April 2025.⁴⁵⁴ For these senior citizen couples who had spent years working hard, raising families, and fulfilling responsibilities, this trip was meant to be a reward and an opportunity to experience beauty, peace, and companionship. It was his chase for simple life pleasures that brought him and the group to Pahalgam on the fateful day of 22 April, from where they took a pony ride to Baisaran Valley to immerse themselves in the bounties of nature. When terrorists emerged from the woods, firing guns and descended the meadow into chaos, people started running for their lives in every direction possible. Chandramouli did try to escape like many others around him, but his bid proved insufficient to outrun the danger. "While the others managed to flee, Mouli, who had a heart problem, could not run fast. He was chased and shot dead by the attackers," recounted Kumar Raja, his family member.⁴⁵⁵

Among those who survived the attack was Chandramouli's close friend, P. Appanna, who had travelled with him and later described the terrifying moments that unfolded during the attack. "The horror was indescribable. We saw life and death in front of our eyes. The first firing took place very close to us and we ran without looking back," he recounted, adding, "The same person aimed at Chandramouli and me. We ran and hid behind the trees. I escaped death. Chandramouli became the target."⁴⁵⁶ The horror was also witnessed by Appanna's wife, Sasi Kumari, who recounted the helplessness of watching events unfold. "Chandramouli could not run because of his heart problem. I was only ten feet away from him and I saw the terrorist with my own eyes."⁴⁵⁷



Fig 108 Andhra Pradesh Chief Minister at funeral of J. Chandramouli, who was killed in the Pahalgam Terrorist Attack of 22 April 2025. Picture Credit: The New Indian Express⁴⁵⁸

Chandramouli's body remained at the site for hours before it was located. During this time, his wife and fellow travellers, having managed to run and survive the attack, frantically searched the unknown Pahalgam terrain, hoping against hope that Chandramouli may have just been injured and taken to the hospital. Instead, they found his body.

Chandramouli's story highlights the vulnerability of ordinary citizens in moments of targeted violence. He was just a retired banker who had spent his life grinding and providing a better life for his family, importantly giving his two daughters wings to make it in their own lives, which they did, shaping their own careers in the United States. His death demonstrates the indiscriminate nature of terror; targeted not for anything he had done, but simply because he was present.

Conclusion: The Human Cost That Propaganda Tried to Bury

As the stories of the victims of the Pahalgam terrorist attack highlight, its human cost cannot be measured solely by the number of lives lost. Official records and newspaper columns may list twenty-six names, but each of those names represented an entire world of relationships, everyday mundane responsibilities, and aspirations. The violence that unfolded in the Baisaran Valley in the name of religion did not end when the guns of terrorists ceased firing on 22 April 2025. Rather, it extended into homes across India, into classrooms where children waited for grandparents who would never return, into workplaces where colleagues left desks permanently unoccupied, and into families forced to rebuild their lives around absence.

What this chapter has attempted to demonstrate is that terror does not merely destroy bodies; it fractures memory, destabilises communities, and reshapes the emotional landscapes of those left behind. Each profile documented in these pages reflects the deeply personal consequences of a single moment of violence. A daughter shielding her children while whispering instructions to her father to lie down. A wife searching frantically for her husband among the injured. A friend hiding behind trees, later remembering the instant when survival became separation. These were not scenes of battlefield confrontation but moments of civilian vulnerability with ordinary people confronting extraordinary violence without warning or defence.

While the psychological aftermath of such violence lingers long after physical wounds have healed, their suffering was compounded by an additional and deeply insidious force of disinformation which sought to distort, deflect, and dilute the truth of what had occurred. This was not an accidental distortion born of confusion but reflected a systematic effort to overwhelm public discourse with competing narratives originating within networks aligned with the Pakistani state's broader strategic communication apparatus. Over the years, Pakistan's military establishment has cultivated an ecosystem led by its Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR), in which information warfare functions as an extension of conventional conflict, with digital platforms becoming theatres of influence, where truth is treated not as a principle but as an obstacle to be managed. In the aftermath of the Pahalgam attack, that machinery was activated with predictable speed, with false claims to portray the attack as a false flag and that the victims were not ordinary tourists but complicit actors. Terrorism seeks to instil fear through physical destruction, but disinformation seeks to prolong that fear through narrative control. Together, they form a dual strategy of first inflicting visible harm and second obscure its origins and consequences. The narratives, as such, attempted to shift the focus away from the brutality

of the terrorist attack and toward speculation and conspiracy. By doing so, they sought to erode empathy and sow doubt, two essential effects in the success of propaganda campaigns.

The objective of disinformation campaigns by the Pakistani state and its associated networks was to add a layer of ambiguity to the Pahalgam attack, both to confuse audiences and to evade responsibility. Within such a deluge of disinformation, accountability becomes difficult to establish, and outrage becomes diluted by uncertainty, thereby redirecting attention away from the perpetrators and toward peripheral debates. But what these efforts ultimately aimed to bury was the human aspect of the Baisaran bloodbath with images of a newlywed woman in grief beside her dead husband, the testimonies of survivors recounting desperate attempts to escape through Pahalgam's pine forests, and the silent grief of relatives awaiting the return of mortal remains. It was an attempt to turn victims and survivors into abstractions that could weaken the emotional resonance of their suffering as propaganda works at a distance, and distance reduces feelings of empathy.

The stories documented in this chapter resist that erasure by restoring visibility to lives that propaganda sought to obscure. Each narrative documented here functions as a counterweight to distortion, reaffirming that behind every statistic lies a human being whose existence cannot be reduced to speculation or ideological framing. This chapter has argued that information warfare is never bloodless. It leaves behind victims whose suffering extends beyond the moment of attack and into the realm of public perception. When lies circulate faster than truth, they create environments in which empathy becomes contested, and grief becomes politicised. Such environments benefit those who seek to avoid accountability.

The tragedy of Pahalgam, therefore, stands as a reminder of the inseparable relationship between violence and narrative. The bullets fired in Baisaran Valley ended lives, but the narratives that followed attempted to reshape memory itself. Against this dual assault, remembrance becomes a form of resistance, and telling these stories is to assert that truth matters, that dignity matters, and that the lives lost cannot be rewritten into anonymity. These stories reaffirm a simple but essential truth that behind every disinformation campaign lies a human cost, and behind every human cost lies a responsibility to remember.

As such, the greatest rebuttal to propaganda is not merely evidence, but memory, as it is the memory which resists distortion by carrying emotion, experience, and identity. By restoring individuality to those who were lost, this chapter confronts the central illusion of disinformation that truth can be overwhelmed by volume. The lives documented here demonstrate otherwise. They endure not as fragments of narrative conflict, but as enduring reminders that information warfare, like physical violence, leaves behind real wounds. And those wounds, once inflicted, cannot be erased by propaganda.

Chapter 10

The Enablers: Pakistan's Military–Civil Nexus and Coordinated Information Warfare

This chapter examines how Pakistan's civil–military nexus functions as a deeply embedded system that shapes governance, political behaviour, and national narratives. Rather than viewing the military and civilian institutions as separate or competing entities, it presents them as part of an interconnected ecosystem where cooperation, dependency, and mutual incentives sustain a hybrid model of power. The chapter highlights how this arrangement enables continuity in strategic priorities regardless of political change, ensuring that key narratives—especially those related to security and external threats—remain consistent across governments and institutions. It further explores how this nexus extends into the domain of information warfare through coordinated efforts between military bodies like the Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR) and Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), and civilian actors in media, academia, and digital spaces. By blending persuasion with structural influence, the system creates an environment where narratives are amplified, dissent is managed, and public discourse is shaped in alignment with state priorities. The chapter also looks at how proxies—both overt and subtle—operate within media and educational institutions, blurring the line between independent opinion and state-directed messaging. Finally, the chapter addresses the broader dimensions of this ecosystem, including the role of overseas networks, diaspora engagement, and the existence of internal contradictions within the system itself. While the nexus appears cohesive, underlying tensions—between democratic ideals and centralised control, or between narrative framing and socio-economic realities—continue to influence its evolution. By unpacking these layers, the chapter provides a comprehensive understanding of how Pakistan's military–civil collaboration sustains both governance structures and coordinated information campaigns.

Introduction

Pakistan presents a complex and layered political landscape where the boundaries between civilian governance and military authority are neither rigid nor clearly defined.⁴⁵⁹ Since its inception in 1947, the country has navigated a trajectory marked by alternating phases of democratic rule, military intervention, and hybrid governance. Over time, this evolution has produced a distinctive system in which the military is not merely a defence institution but a central pillar of statecraft—deeply embedded in political decision-making, economic planning, and national identity formation. The result is a governance model that operates through a continuous interplay between civilian institutions and the military establishment, rather than through a strict hierarchy of authority. At the heart of this system lies what is often described as a civil–military nexus—a durable and adaptive relationship that binds together political elites, bureaucratic structures, judicial actors, and segments of civil society with the strategic priorities of the military. This nexus does not

function solely through overt control or direct intervention. Instead, it relies on a combination of incentives, institutional alignments, and shared narratives that collectively sustain its influence.⁴⁶⁰ Civilian governments may change, political parties may rise and fall, and public discourse may shift in tone, yet the underlying strategic direction—particularly in areas such as national security and foreign policy—remains remarkably consistent. A defining feature of this nexus is its ability to shape and manage narratives at both domestic and international levels. In contemporary contexts, this extends into the realm of coordinated information warfare, where messaging is carefully constructed, disseminated, and reinforced across multiple platforms. Institutions such as the Inter-Services Public Relations and the Inter-Services Intelligence play central roles in this process, working in tandem with civilian media, digital influencers, academic voices, and policy circles.⁴⁶¹ Together, they create a layered communication environment where certain narratives are amplified while others are constrained, ensuring alignment with broader state objectives.

This introduction sets the stage for understanding how such a system operates not as a series of isolated actions but as a coordinated ecosystem of influence. The civil–military nexus is sustained through both formal mechanisms—such as institutional collaborations and governance frameworks—and informal practices, including patronage networks, professional incentives, and ideological alignment.⁴⁶² It is within this ecosystem that information warfare becomes not just a tactical tool but a structural feature of governance, shaping perceptions, guiding public opinion, and reinforcing legitimacy. Equally important is the recognition that this system extends beyond Pakistan's borders. Diaspora communities, transnational networks, and global information flows all contribute to the amplification and contestation of narratives with Pakistan's strategic posture. The nexus thus operates in a multi-dimensional space, where domestic politics, regional dynamics, and international perceptions intersect.

This global dimension adds both reach and complexity to the system, enabling it to influence conversations far beyond its immediate geographic boundaries. However, the system is not without its tensions and contradictions. The coexistence of democratic institutions with centralised strategic control raises questions about autonomy, accountability, and representation. Similarly, the rapid expansion of digital media has introduced new variables into the information landscape, making it more difficult to fully control narratives while simultaneously increasing the stakes of doing so. These dynamics create a constant process of adaptation, where the nexus evolves in response to internal pressures and external challenges. This chapter, therefore, seeks to provide a comprehensive exploration of the enablers that sustain Pakistan's military–civil nexus and its coordinated information warfare apparatus. By examining the internal ecosystem of complicity, the collaborative mechanisms that drive narrative production, the role of media and academic proxies, the influence of overseas networks, and the inherent contradictions within the system, it aims to unpack the structural foundations of this enduring arrangement. In doing so, it offers a deeper understanding of how power, perception, and policy intersect in shaping Pakistan's contemporary political reality.

An additional dimension worth examining is the role of economic interdependence in reinforcing the civil–military nexus. The military's involvement in commercial enterprises, infrastructure development, and resource management has created overlapping interests between economic stakeholders and strategic institutions. This intertwining of economic and security priorities further consolidates influence, as stability and continuity become

mutually beneficial objectives for both civilian and military actors. Consequently, economic policy cannot be fully understood without acknowledging the institutional frameworks that shape its direction and implementation.

Another critical aspect is the generational evolution of this nexus. As younger political leaders, media professionals, and digital actors enter the landscape, they bring new tools, platforms, and modes of engagement. While this introduces elements of disruption and unpredictability, it also offers the nexus opportunities to recalibrate its strategies. By adapting to emerging technologies and shifting public expectations, the system demonstrates a capacity for renewal that helps sustain its relevance in a rapidly changing socio-political environment. Finally, the future trajectory of this system will likely depend on how effectively it manages internal dissent and external scrutiny. Increasing global interconnectedness, rising public awareness, and the demand for transparency are placing new pressures on established structures of influence. Whether these pressures lead to substantive transformation or are absorbed into existing frameworks will be a defining question for Pakistan's political evolution. In this context, the civil–military nexus remains not only a subject of analysis but a dynamic force that continues to shape the country's institutional and ideological contours.

Internal Ecosystem of Complicity

The internal ecosystem of complicity in Pakistan is not a singular structure imposed from above but a diffused and mutually reinforcing network of institutions and actors that collectively sustain the country's hybrid power arrangement. At its core, this ecosystem is built on the convergence of interests between the military establishment and a wide array of civilian stakeholders, each of whom derives specific benefits—political, economic, or professional—from maintaining alignment with the prevailing order. Rather than relying solely on overt coercion, the system thrives because it creates conditions where compliance becomes rational, advantageous, and, over time, normalised.

The central node of this ecosystem remains the Pakistan Army, whose institutional reach extends far beyond conventional defence functions. Over decades, it has developed parallel capacities in economic management, infrastructure development, and strategic planning. This expansion has enabled it to interact with civilian institutions not merely as a superior authority but as a co-equal or even indispensable partner in governance. The result is a system where civilian actors are not simply subordinated but are often integrated into decision-making processes in ways that reinforce military preferences. Political elites form one of the most visible layers of this ecosystem. Major parties such as the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) and Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) have, at different times, navigated their relationship with the military by adopting strategies of accommodation, negotiation, or selective resistance. However, the structural reality remains that political survival often depends on maintaining a workable relationship with the establishment. This dynamic produces a form of conditional autonomy: elected leaders exercise authority in routine governance but remain constrained in areas deemed strategically sensitive, such as foreign policy, security doctrine, and relations with neighbouring states.

The bureaucracy constitutes another critical pillar of complicity. As the administrative backbone of the state, it ensures continuity across political transitions. Senior civil servants often operate within an environment where career advancement is closely tied to their ability to align with dominant policy directions. Over time, this creates an institutional

culture that prioritises stability and compliance over independent initiative. The bureaucratic apparatus thus becomes a conduit through which strategic directives are translated into administrative action, reinforcing the broader nexus without necessarily requiring explicit directives at every stage.

The judiciary, while constitutionally independent, has also been drawn into this ecosystem through a combination of structural pressures, institutional incentives, and historical precedents. Courts in Pakistan have played pivotal roles during periods of political transition, sometimes validating extra-constitutional measures and at other times asserting independence. This oscillation reflects the complex position of the judiciary within the nexus: it is both a potential site of resistance and a mechanism through which the system can legitimise itself. The result is a pattern where judicial behaviour is often interpreted through the lens of broader power alignments, further embedding it within the ecosystem of complicity.

Economic actors, including business elites and corporate entities, add another dimension to this system. The military's involvement in commercial ventures—ranging from real estate to industrial enterprises—creates interdependencies between economic interests and strategic authority. Private sector actors frequently engage with military-linked institutions for contracts, partnerships, or regulatory facilitation. This relationship fosters a business environment where alignment with the establishment can yield tangible benefits, thereby reinforcing the incentive structure that underpins complicity.

Education and professional training systems also play a subtle yet significant role. Universities, think tanks, and training institutes often operate within frameworks that encourage alignment with national security narratives. While academic freedom exists to varying degrees, research agendas and institutional priorities may be influenced by funding sources, partnerships, and broader political contexts. Over time, this shapes the intellectual environment in which future policymakers, analysts, and professionals are trained, embedding certain assumptions and perspectives into the knowledge production process itself.

Media organisations, though discussed in greater detail in a later section, are integral to this internal ecosystem as well. Journalists, editors, and media owners operate within a landscape where access, credibility, and safety can depend on maintaining certain boundaries. This does not eliminate critical reporting, but it does create a set of informal red lines that shape coverage. The cumulative effect is a media environment that, while diverse on the surface, often converges on key narratives that align with establishment priorities.

At a societal level, public attitudes and perceptions further reinforce the ecosystem. Decades of exposure to consistent narratives around national security, external threats, and institutional roles have contributed to a collective mindset that often views the military as a stabilising force. This perception is not uniform and is subject to change, particularly among younger and more digitally connected populations, but it remains a vital factor in sustaining the system's legitimacy. Importantly, this ecosystem does not function without friction. Instances of political contestation, judicial dissent, media pushback, and public protest periodically challenge the boundaries of complicity. However, the resilience of the system lies in its ability to absorb, adapt, and reconfigure in response to such challenges. Mechanisms of co-optation, negotiation, and selective enforcement allow it to maintain equilibrium without resorting to constant overt intervention. In essence, the internal

ecosystem of complicity in Pakistan is characterised by its distributed nature and adaptive capacity. It is not maintained by a single institution acting unilaterally, but by a network of actors whose interests, incentives, and constraints align in ways that sustain the broader civil–military nexus. Understanding this ecosystem is crucial for analysing how power operates in Pakistan—not as a static hierarchy, but as a dynamic and evolving system of relationships that shapes governance, policy, and public discourse.

A further layer of this ecosystem can be observed in the role of informal networks and interpersonal relationships that cut across institutional boundaries. Retired officials, former military officers, and political intermediaries often act as bridges between formal structures, facilitating communication, negotiation, and consensus-building behind the scenes. These networks operate with a degree of flexibility that formal institutions lack, enabling the system to respond quickly to emerging challenges while maintaining continuity in strategic direction. Their influence, though less visible, is crucial in sustaining cohesion within the broader nexus. Technology and data governance are also becoming increasingly central to the functioning of this internal ecosystem.

The expansion of surveillance capabilities, data analytics, and digital monitoring tools allows for more nuanced assessments of public sentiment and political behaviour. This information can then be used to calibrate responses, manage dissent, and refine narrative strategies. In this sense, the ecosystem is not only reactive but also predictive, leveraging technological advancements to maintain its stability and influence in a rapidly evolving information environment. Another important dimension is the role of legal and regulatory frameworks in institutionalising patterns of complicity. Laws related to national security, media regulation, and public order provide formal justifications for actions that align with broader strategic objectives.

While these frameworks are often presented as necessary for stability and governance, they also create structured pathways through which influence can be exercised. Over time, this legal scaffolding embeds the logic of the nexus into the formal architecture of the state, making it more durable and less susceptible to abrupt change. Ultimately, the sustainability of this ecosystem depends on its capacity to maintain a delicate balance between control and adaptability. Too much rigidity risks provoking resistance and undermining legitimacy, while excessive flexibility can dilute coherence and strategic focus. The system's endurance, therefore, lies in its ability to continuously recalibrate—absorbing new actors, integrating emerging technologies, and redefining its modes of operation while preserving its core alignments. This dynamic equilibrium is what allows the internal ecosystem of complicity to persist as a defining feature of Pakistan's political landscape.

Military–Civil Collaboration Aiding its Information Warfare: Shared Incentives and Operational Integration

The effectiveness of Pakistan's information warfare architecture lies not in isolated institutional efforts but in the systematic collaboration between military structures and civilian ecosystems, producing a synchronised and resilient narrative machinery.



This collaboration is neither incidental nor informal; it is structured through shared incentives, overlapping roles, and an evolving framework of operational integration that spans traditional media, digital platforms, academia, and policy circles. The result is a comprehensive environment in which information is curated, amplified, and defended through a network that blends state authority with civilian reach. At the center of this architecture are organisations such as the Inter-Services Public Relations and the Inter-Services Intelligence, which function as strategic coordinators of narrative production and dissemination. These institutions do not operate in isolation; rather, they engage with civilian actors who act as multipliers of messaging. The collaboration is sustained through a carefully calibrated system in which civilian participants—journalists, analysts, influencers, consultants, and academics—are integrated into broader communication strategies without always being formally embedded within military structures.

A key dimension of this collaboration is the alignment of shared incentives. For civilian actors, participation in this ecosystem can offer access to privileged information, enhanced visibility, professional advancement, and institutional protection. Media professionals who align with dominant narratives often gain prominence, while analysts and

commentators may find increased opportunities for engagement on national platforms. Similarly, academic institutions and think tanks that operate within acceptable parameters can benefit from research funding, policy access, and institutional partnerships. These incentives create a mutually beneficial relationship in which alignment with strategic messaging becomes advantageous rather than burdensome. From the military perspective, this collaboration provides critical advantages.

By leveraging civilian platforms, the establishment achieves plausible deniability while expanding the reach and credibility of its narratives. Messages delivered through independent media voices or academic experts often carry greater legitimacy than those issued directly by official channels. This diffusion of messaging allows the military to influence public discourse indirectly, reducing the visibility of centralised control while maintaining substantive influence over the content and direction of narratives. Operational integration occurs across multiple layers, each reinforcing the other. At the strategic level, overarching themes are developed—such as national security, external threats, internal stability, and institutional integrity. These themes form the backbone of the narrative framework and are consistently reiterated across platforms.

At the operational level, civilian actors translate these themes into accessible content, including television debates, opinion pieces, policy analyses, and digital commentary. At the tactical level, coordinated campaigns—often involving social media trends, targeted messaging, and rapid response strategies—ensure that narratives remain visible and responsive to emerging events. Digital platforms have significantly enhanced the scope and speed of this collaboration. Social media networks allow for real-time engagement with domestic and international audiences, enabling coordinated messaging campaigns that can shape perceptions almost instantaneously. Civilian participants, including independent content creators and online commentators, play a crucial role in this space by acting as distributed nodes of amplification. Their contributions, whether voluntary or incentivised, help sustain a constant flow of aligned narratives across digital ecosystems. Educational and professional training initiatives further strengthen this integration. Programmes associated with institutions like the Inter-Services Public Relations introduce students and early-career professionals to frameworks of strategic communication. These initiatives often emphasise national security perspectives, crisis communication techniques, and media engagement strategies.

Over time, participants internalise these approaches, carrying them into their professional roles in journalism, public relations, corporate communication, and policy analysis. This creates a pipeline of individuals who are predisposed to align with established narratives, ensuring continuity in the information warfare apparatus. Another critical aspect of this collaboration is the management of dissent and counter-narratives. Civilian actors play a dual role in this regard: not only do they amplify preferred messaging, but they also participate in challenging, discrediting, or reframing opposing viewpoints. This can occur through editorial framing, selective emphasis, or direct engagement in public debates. By distributing this function across a wide network of voices, the system avoids the appearance of centralised suppression while effectively containing dissent within manageable limits.

Such integration also extends to crisis situations, where coordinated communication becomes particularly significant. During periods of political instability, security incidents, or international scrutiny, military and civilian actors often converge rapidly to present a unified narrative. Press briefings, media coverage, expert commentary, and digital

messaging are aligned to reinforce specific interpretations of events. This coordinated response helps shape both domestic perception and international understanding, demonstrating the operational readiness of the collaborative framework. Importantly, this system is adaptive. It evolves in response to technological changes, shifts in public sentiment, and external pressures. The rise of independent digital journalism, increased access to global information sources, and growing public scrutiny have introduced new challenges to centralised narrative control. In response, the collaboration has expanded its reach into newer platforms, diversified its messaging strategies, and refined its engagement techniques.

This adaptability ensures that the information warfare apparatus remains effective even in a rapidly changing communication environment. However, the reliance on shared incentives and operational integration also introduces complexities. The boundaries between independent analysis and aligned messaging can become blurred, raising questions about credibility and authenticity. Civilian actors may navigate tensions between professional integrity and institutional alignment, while audiences may become more discerning in evaluating sources of information. These dynamics add layers of nuance to the system, highlighting both its strengths and its union of vulnerability. In sum, military–civilian collaboration in Pakistan's information warfare framework represents a comprehensive and deeply embedded system of coordinated influence. By aligning incentives, integrating operations across sectors, and leveraging both traditional and digital platforms, this collaboration transforms information management into a collective endeavour. It is this fusion of military coordination and civilian participation that enables the system to sustain its narratives, adapt to new challenges, and maintain its control over public discourse at both national and international levels.

An additional dimension of this collaboration lies in the strategic use of segmentation and audience targeting. Different narratives are calibrated for distinct demographic, linguistic, and ideological groups, ensuring that messaging resonates with specific audiences without appearing monolithic. Civilian actors, due to their diverse backgrounds and platforms, play a crucial role in tailoring these narratives to suit regional sensitivities, generational preferences, and professional communities. This granular approach enhances both the reach and effectiveness of information campaigns, allowing the system to operate with precision rather than uniformity. Equally significant is the role of feedback loops within this integrated framework. Information does not simply flow outward from centralised planners to the public; it is continuously monitored, assessed, and recalibrated based on audience response.

Civilian intermediaries—particularly media professionals and digital influencers—serve as conduits for this feedback, providing insights into public sentiment, emerging concerns, and narrative reception. This iterative process allows for rapid adjustment of messaging strategies, ensuring that the system remains responsive and contextually relevant. The internationalisation of civilian participation further amplifies the collaborative model. Diaspora commentators, foreign-based analysts, and international media contributors often engage with narratives that align with Pakistan's strategic messaging, either directly or indirectly. Their geographic and institutional distance can lend an additional layer of credibility, enabling narratives to circulate within global discourse with reduced association to state structures. This outward extension transforms the collaboration into a transnational network, expanding its influence beyond domestic boundaries. Finally, the long-term sustainability of this collaboration depends on its ability to manage credibility

alongside control. As information ecosystems become more decentralised and audiences more critical, maintaining trust becomes as important as maintaining narrative dominance. All these place increasing pressure on both military and civilian actors to balance strategic alignment with perceived authenticity. The evolution of this balance will likely determine how effectively the system continues to operate in an era defined by information abundance and heightened scrutiny.

Media and Academic Proxies: State-Directed versus “Independent” Voices

A central pillar of Pakistan's information environment is the intricate relationship between state-directed messaging and voices that are presented as independent but operate within a structured and often constrained space. This relationship is neither purely coercive nor entirely voluntary; instead, it exists along a continuum where varying degrees of influence, alignment, and self-regulation shape how information is produced, interpreted, and disseminated. Media organisations and academic institutions serve as key intermediaries in this system, functioning as both amplifiers of dominant narratives and as arenas where those narratives are refined and legitimised. In the media sphere, the distinction between state-directed and independent voices is frequently blurred. Television networks, print outlets, and digital platforms present a wide range of opinions, creating an appearance of pluralism.



However, this diversity often operates within implicit boundaries that define what can be said, how it can be framed, and which topics require caution. Journalists and editors

navigate these boundaries through a process of calibrated judgment, balancing professional responsibilities with institutional realities. Access to information, professional advancement, and personal security can all be influenced by how closely a media professional aligns with prevailing narratives. State-directed messaging does not always manifest as explicit directives. Instead, it often takes the form of agenda setting and narrative framing, where certain themes are consistently emphasised across platforms. Topics related to national security, foreign policy, and institutional integrity are particularly sensitive, and coverage in these areas tends to reflect a convergence of perspectives.

This convergence is not necessarily enforced in a visible manner; rather, it emerges through a combination of editorial choices, organisational policies, and broader systemic incentives. At the same time, voices that are described as independent play a crucial role in reinforcing the credibility of the overall information ecosystem. Analysts, commentators, and public intellectuals frequently contribute to discussions through opinion pieces, television appearances, and digital content. While many operate with genuine analytical intent, their perspectives often align with dominant narratives, whether by conviction, professional necessity, or strategic positioning. This alignment allows state-preferred viewpoints to be disseminated through channels that appear autonomous, thereby enhancing their persuasive impact.

Academic institutions add another layer of complexity to this dynamic. Universities, research centres, and policy institutes are key sites of knowledge production, shaping how issues are studied, understood, and debated. In Pakistan, fields such as international relations, media studies, and strategic studies often intersect with national policy concerns. As a result, academic discourse in these areas can reflect prevailing strategic priorities, particularly when research funding, institutional partnerships, and career opportunities are linked to alignment with those priorities. The role of think tanks and policy research organisations is especially significant. These entities frequently act as bridges between academia, media, and policymaking, producing analyses that inform public debate and policy decisions. While many operate with a degree of independence, their proximity to state institutions can influence research agendas and conclusions. Reports, policy briefs, and expert commentary generated by these organisations often contribute to the broader narrative framework, reinforcing key themes and perspectives.

Student organisations and campus-based activities further extend this influence into the formative stages of intellectual development. Through debates, seminars, and organised events, students are introduced to particular interpretations of national and international issues. Over time, these experiences shape their analytical frameworks and professional orientations, creating a cohort of future professionals who are familiar with and often aligned to established narratives. This process ensures that the influence of the information ecosystem is reproduced across generations, maintaining continuity in discourse. Digital media has both expanded and complicated the role of proxies. On one hand, social media platforms have enabled a wider range of voices to participate in public discourse, including independent journalists, bloggers, and content creators. On the other hand, these platforms have also become spaces where coordinated messaging can be amplified rapidly and effectively. Individuals who present themselves as independent commentators may, in some cases, operate within networks that align with broader strategic objectives, contributing to the diffusion of narratives across diverse audiences.

The interaction between state-directed and independent voices also involves the management of credibility. Overtly official messaging can sometimes be met with scepticism, particularly among audiences that are critical of state institutions. By contrast, narratives delivered through independent or semi-independent channels often carry greater persuasive weight. This dynamic underscores the importance of proxies in the information ecosystem: they provide a layer of separation that enhances trust while maintaining alignment with core messaging. However, this system is not without its tensions. Media professionals and academics may face dilemmas when their analytical conclusions diverge from dominant narratives. Balancing intellectual integrity with professional considerations can be challenging, particularly in an environment where the consequences of deviation are uncertain. Instances of investigative reporting, critical scholarship, or dissenting commentary do occur, demonstrating that the system is not monolithic. Yet such instances often exist within spaces and may encounter resistance or pushback. Another important aspect is the gradual evolution of audience awareness. As access to global information sources increases, audiences become more capable of comparing narratives and identifying patterns of alignment. This can lead to greater scrutiny of both state-directed and independent voices, prompting shifts in how information is consumed and evaluated. In response, the information ecosystem adapts by refining its messaging strategies, diversifying its channels, and engaging more actively with emerging platforms. In essence, media and academic proxies in Pakistan operate within a structured yet dynamic environment, where the interplay between state direction and perceived independence shapes the flow of information.

These proxies do not function merely as passive conduits; they actively interpret, contextualise, and disseminate narratives, contributing to their legitimacy and reach. By occupying the space between official authority and public discourse, they enable the information system to maintain both influence and adaptability. Understanding this duality is essential for analysing how narratives are constructed and sustained. The coexistence of state-directed messaging and independent voices does not represent a contradiction but rather a complementary mechanism within a broader system of influence. Together, they form a layered communication structure that balances control with credibility, ensuring that key narratives remain resilient in the face of changing political, technological, and social conditions.

An additional layer within this proxy structure is the role of language and regional media ecosystems. Pakistan's multilingual landscape allows narratives to be adapted and disseminated differently across Urdu, English, and regional language platforms. Each linguistic space caters to distinct audiences with varying socio-political orientations, enabling tailored messaging that resonates more effectively. Civilian intermediaries operating within these linguistic domains serve as crucial translators—not only of language but of context—ensuring that strategic narratives are localised without losing their core intent.

Another significant dimension is the professionalisation of commentary and analysis. The emergence of career analysts, media consultants, and policy commentators has created a semi-formal class of narrative interpreters who occupy recurring spaces in public discourse. Their sustained presence across television panels, opinion columns, and digital platforms lends continuity and authority to specific viewpoints. Over time, this repetition normalises particular frames of interpretation, subtly guiding audience perception while maintaining the appearance of independent expertise.

The influence of international academic collaborations and publishing networks also shapes this ecosystem in nuanced ways. Scholars affiliated with global institutions or contributing to international journals often engage with narratives that intersect with Pakistan's strategic positioning. While these engagements are framed within academic rigor, they can inadvertently reinforce certain perspectives by privileging specific lines of inquiry over others. This global academic interface thus becomes another channel through which aligned narratives gain validation and circulation beyond national boundaries.

Finally, the sustainability of media and academic proxies depends on their ability to maintain a delicate equilibrium between credibility and alignment. As audiences grow more critical and information sources diversify, the effectiveness of proxies increasingly hinges on their perceived authenticity. This compels both media professionals and academics to continuously recalibrate their positions—adapting tone, framing, and emphasis—while remaining within acceptable limits. The durability of this proxy system, therefore, lies not only in structural incentives but also in its capacity to evolve alongside changing expectations of transparency and intellectual independence.

Overseas Funding and Safe Havens

The external dimension of Pakistan's civil–military nexus and its information ecosystem extend far beyond national borders, drawing strength from a wide network of financial flows, diaspora engagement, and transnational spaces that function as both support systems and operational environments. Overseas funding and the availability of safe havens—whether physical, institutional, or digital—play a critical role in sustaining and amplifying narratives, enabling continuity even when domestic conditions fluctuate. This external layer adds depth, resilience, and reach to the broader system, transforming it into a multi-geographical network of influence.



One of the most significant components of this external ecosystem is the Pakistani diaspora. Spread across regions such as the Middle East, Europe, North America, and parts of Asia, overseas communities maintain strong economic and emotional ties with Pakistan. Remittances sent by expatriates constitute a major pillar of the national economy, creating a financial lifeline that reinforces the importance of these communities in national planning. Beyond economics, diaspora groups often participate in political advocacy, public discourse, and media engagement related to Pakistan. Through community organisations, social networks, and public events, they contribute to the circulation and reinforcement of narratives that align with or respond to developments within Pakistan. Financial flows originating from abroad also play a role in sustaining various organisations, initiatives, and communication platforms. These flows can take multiple forms, including formal remittances, charitable contributions, and investments in media or advocacy projects. In some cases, funding channels may support activities that intersect with information dissemination, enabling the production of content, organisation of events, and maintenance of digital platforms. While many of these activities operate within legal and transparent frameworks, the broader system is characterised by its diversity and complexity, making it difficult to draw clear boundaries between different types of financial support.

Safe havens, in this context, should be understood in a broad sense. They include not only physical locations where individuals or organisations can operate with relative autonomy, but also institutional and digital environments that provide protection, anonymity, or freedom from immediate scrutiny. Cities with large diaspora populations often serve as hubs for political discussion, media activity, and advocacy related to Pakistan. Within these spaces, individuals and groups can engage in activities that might be more constrained within domestic settings, including critical commentary, narrative promotion, or strategic communication efforts. Digital platforms have significantly expanded the concept of safe havens.

Online spaces allow actors to operate across borders, reaching global audiences without the limitations of physical geography. Social media networks, video-sharing platforms, and independent websites enable the rapid dissemination of information, opinions, and narratives. These platforms can serve as virtual sanctuaries, where coordinated campaigns are organised, content is produced and shared, and audiences are mobilised. The decentralised nature of digital communication makes it particularly suited for sustaining long-term information efforts, as it reduces reliance on any single location or infrastructure.

The interaction between overseas funding and safe havens creates a feedback loop that strengthens the overall system. Financial resources support the creation and maintenance of communication channels, while safe havens provide the flow in which these channels can operate effectively. Together, they enable a continuous flow of narratives between domestic and international audiences, ensuring that messaging remains consistent and adaptive across different contexts. Diaspora media outlets and independent platforms further contribute to this dynamic.

These outlets often cater to audiences of Pakistan, providing news, analysis, and commentary that reflect both domestic developments and international perspectives. While some maintain editorial independence, others may align more closely with specific

narratives or viewpoints. Regardless of their orientation, they play a crucial role in shaping how Pakistan is perceived abroad, influencing both public opinion and policy discussions in host countries. Another important aspect is the role of advocacy and lobbying efforts conducted by diaspora groups. Through engagement with policymakers, participation in public debates, and organisation of events, these groups can influence international perceptions of Pakistan's policies and priorities. Such activities often intersect with information dissemination, as narratives are crafted to resonate with foreign audiences while maintaining consistency with domestic messaging. This dual orientation enhances the strength of the system to operate effectively across different political and cultural environments. However, the external ecosystem is not without its challenges and complexities. The diversity of diaspora communities means that narratives are not always uniform; different groups may hold varying perspectives based on their experiences, locations, and affiliations. Additionally, increased global scrutiny of financial flows and transnational activities has introduced regulatory constraints that can affect how resources are mobilised and utilised. Digital platforms, while offering opportunities for outreach, also expose narratives to contestation, as alternative viewpoints and independent analyses circulate alongside coordinated messaging.

Despite these challenges, the integration of overseas funding and safe havens into the broader civil–military nexus provides a significant strategic advantage. It allows for the extension of influence beyond national borders, supports the flow of information efforts during periods of domestic upheaval, and enables engagement with global audiences in a manner that complements internal strategies. This external layer does not operate independently; rather, it is closely connected to domestic institutions and actors, forming part of a unified system of narrative production and dissemination. In conclusion, overseas funding and safe havens represent a crucial dimension of Pakistan's information environment. By combining financial resources, transnational networks, and both physical and digital spaces of operation, this system enhances the resilience and reach of coordinated narratives. It underscores the importance of viewing the civil–military nexus not as a purely domestic phenomenon, but as a globally interconnected framework that operates across borders, adapting to changing conditions while maintaining continuity in its core objectives.

An additional element within this external ecosystem is the role of informal financial channels and community-based support systems that operate alongside formal mechanisms. These channels, often rooted in trust-based networks within diaspora communities, enable the rapid mobilisation of resources without extensive bureaucratic processes. While not inherently opaque, their flexibility allows for swift allocation of funds toward media initiatives, advocacy efforts, and digital infrastructure, thereby enhancing the responsiveness of the broader information network. The geographic dispersion of diaspora hubs also creates a form of strategic redundancy within the system. Activities related to narrative production, advocacy, and communication are not concentrated in a single location but distributed across multiple cities and regions. This dispersion reduces vulnerability to localised disruptions—whether political, legal, or technological—and ensures continuity of operations even when specific nodes face constraints. In effect, the system benefits from a decentralised architecture that mirrors the distributed nature of modern information environments.

Another important dimension is the interaction between host-country political climates and diaspora-driven narratives. The regulatory, social, and political contexts of host

nations can shape how narratives are framed and communicated. Diaspora actors often adapt their messaging to align with local sensibilities, legal frameworks, and public discourse trends, thereby increasing their effectiveness in influencing external audiences. This adaptive framing allows narratives to resonate within diverse international settings while still maintaining coherence with broader strategic objectives. Finally, the long-term sustainability of overseas funding and safe havens depends on the system's ability to navigate increasing global oversight and digital transparency. Financial monitoring mechanisms, platform regulations, and evolving norms around information integrity are gradually reshaping the operational landscape. In response, the ecosystem is likely to continue evolving—diversifying funding streams, adopting new communication technologies, and refining its transnational networks—to preserve both its flexibility and its strategic reach in an increasingly scrutinised global environment.

Internal Contradictions (If Any)

Despite its appearance of cohesion and continuity, the civil–military nexus in Pakistan is not a perfectly unified or frictionless system. It is, in reality, a dynamic arrangement marked by internal contradictions, competing interests, and periodic tensions. These contradictions do not necessarily dismantle the system; rather, they shape its evolution, forcing it to adapt, recalibrate, and reassert itself in response to both internal pressures and external challenges. Understanding these internal inconsistencies is essential for a nuanced assessment of how the system operates and sustains itself over time. One of the most prominent contradictions lies in the relationship between democratic form and centralised influence. Pakistan formally operates as a democratic state with elected representatives, parliamentary procedures, and constitutional safeguards. However, the enduring influence of the military establishment in key areas of governance introduces a structural imbalance. Civilian governments are expected to exercise authority, yet their autonomy is often constrained in matters considered strategically sensitive. This creates a persistent tension between the principle of civilian supremacy and the practice of shared or guided authority, leading to cycles of cooperation, friction, and occasional confrontation.

A related contradiction emerges in the realm of legitimacy and perception. The system relies heavily on public trust in institutions, particularly the military, which is often portrayed as a stabilising force. At the same time, visible or perceived interventions in political processes—such as electoral influence or judicial alignments—can generate scepticism among segments of the population. This duality creates a delicate balance: the system must maintain its image as a guardian of national stability while managing the risks associated with overexposure or perceived overreach. As public awareness grows, especially among younger and digitally connected citizens, this tension becomes more pronounced. Another significant contradiction exists between narrative consistency and socio-economic realities. The emphasis on national security and external threats has historically served as a unifying narrative. However, the everyday concerns of citizens—such as economic stability, employment, education, and public services—do not always align with this focus. When economic challenges intensify or governance issues become more visible, the gap between official narratives and lived experiences can widen. This divergence can lead to questions about priorities and resource allocation, introducing strain into the broader narrative framework.

Institutional contradictions are also evident within the state apparatus itself. Civilian institutions, including the executive, legislature, and judiciary, are not monolithic entities; they contain individuals and factions with varying perspectives and interests. At times,

elements within these institutions may seek greater independence or attempt to assert their constitutional roles more forcefully. Such efforts can lead to institutional pushback or recalibration, reflecting the ongoing negotiation of boundaries within the system. The judiciary, in particular, has demonstrated periods of both alignment and resistance, highlighting its complex position within the nexus. The media landscape presents another area of contradiction. While segments of the media align with dominant narratives, there are also instances of investigative reporting, critical analysis, and independent commentary that challenge prevailing perspectives. This coexistence creates a dual environment, where controlled messaging operates alongside pockets of dissent. Managing this balance requires continuous adjustment, as excessive control risks undermining credibility, while excessive openness may allow narratives to diverge in ways that challenge the system's coherence.

Digital transformation has further intensified these contradictions. The rise of social media and independent online platforms has expanded access to information and enabled a wider range of voices to participate in public discourse. This democratisation of communication challenges traditional mechanisms of narrative control, as information can now circulate rapidly and unpredictably. At the same time, digital tools are also used to reinforce coordinated messaging, creating a complex environment where control and contestation coexist simultaneously. The system must therefore navigate a landscape that is both more connected and more fragmented than ever before. Generational shifts add another layer of complexity.

Younger populations, exposed to global information flows and diverse perspectives, may hold different expectations regarding governance, transparency, and accountability. Their engagement with digital platforms allows them to question, reinterpret, or challenge established narratives. This introduces a long-term dynamic that the system must address, as maintaining relevance requires adapting to changing societal attitudes without compromising core strategic priorities. Economic contradictions also play a role. The intersection of military-linked economic activities with broader market dynamics can create tensions related to competition, regulation, and transparency.

While such arrangements may provide stability or efficiency in certain contexts, they can also raise concerns among private sector actors and observers about fairness and accountability. Balancing economic influence with market confidence becomes an ongoing challenge within this framework. Another important contradiction arises from the system's reliance on both coercion and consent. While incentives and alignment encourage cooperation, mechanisms of pressure and enforcement are also part of the equation. The coexistence of these approaches can create uncertainty, as actors must navigate a landscape where the boundaries between voluntary alignment and compelled compliance are not always opposite.

This ambiguity can affect decision-making across institutions, influencing how individuals and organisations position themselves within the ecosystem. External pressures further complicate internal dynamics. International scrutiny, diplomatic considerations, and global narratives about governance and human rights can intersect with domestic priorities in ways that create tension. The need to maintain a favourable external image while managing internal realities adds another dimension to the system's contradictions, requiring careful calibration of both policy and communication strategies. Despite these multiple layers of tension, the civil-military nexus has demonstrated a notable capacity for adaptation and resilience.

Contradictions do not necessarily lead to systemic breakdown; instead, they often trigger processes of adjustment, negotiation, and reconfiguration. The system evolves by incorporating lessons from past challenges, refining its mechanisms, and redistributing roles among its components. In conclusion, the internal contradictions within Pakistan's civil–military nexus are not signs of being alone but indicators of a complex and evolving system. These contradictions reflect the interplay between competing priorities, institutional dynamics, and societal changes. By examining these tensions in detail, one gains a deeper understanding of how the system maintains continuity while navigating the inherent challenges of balancing authority, legitimacy, and adaptability in a rapidly changing environment.

An additional contradiction emerges in the realm of policy continuity versus political turnover. While elected governments change through electoral cycles, the persistence of long-term strategic policies often creates a disconnect between campaign promises and governing realities. Political leaders may enter office with reform-oriented agendas, yet encounter structural constraints that limit their ability to implement significant departures from established directions. This gap between political rhetoric and policy execution can contribute to public disillusionment, while simultaneously reinforcing the stability of the underlying system.

Another layer of tension can be observed in the relationship between central authority and provincial dynamics. Pakistan's federal structure distributes power across provinces with distinct political cultures, economic conditions, and governance challenges. Efforts to maintain a cohesive national narrative may at times overlook or underrepresent regional perspectives, leading to friction between centralised priorities and local realities. This dynamic requires ongoing negotiation, as regional actors seek recognition and autonomy within a framework that emphasises national coherence.

There is also a contradiction between institutional secrecy and the growing demand for transparency. Strategic decision-making processes, particularly in areas related to security and foreign policy, often operate within confidential frameworks. However, the expansion of media access, civil society engagement, and digital information flows has increased expectations for openness and accountability. Balancing the need for confidentiality with the pressures of public disclosure presents a continuing challenge, especially as audiences become more informed and inquisitive.

Finally, the system faces an inherent tension between short-term stability and long-term transformation. Mechanisms that prioritise immediate order and continuity can sometimes delay deeper structural reforms that address underlying governance issues. While this approach may preserve equilibrium in the near term, it can also accumulate unresolved challenges that require more substantial adjustments over time. The ability of the system to navigate this balance—between maintaining control and enabling meaningful change—will remain a defining factor in its future trajectory.

Conclusion

The chapter has examined how Pakistan's military–civil nexus operates as a deeply embedded and adaptive system that extends beyond formal institutions into media, academia, and transnational networks. Rather than functioning through overt control alone, it relies on a complex web of incentives, alignments, and collaborations that sustain a consistent strategic outlook. The integration of civilian actors into information processes

ensures that narratives are not only produced but also legitimised and amplified across multiple platforms, creating a cohesive environment where key themes remain resilient despite political change. At the same time, the chapter has highlighted how this system is reinforced through coordinated information practices that blend state direction with seemingly independent voices. Media outlets, academic institutions, and diaspora networks collectively contribute to shaping public discourse, both domestically and internationally. This layered approach allows for flexibility and adaptability, enabling the system to respond to emerging challenges while maintaining continuity in its messaging. The role of external funding channels and global communication spaces further strengthens this framework, extending its reach and influence beyond national boundaries. However, the analysis also underscores that the nexus is not without internal tensions. Contradictions between democratic structures and centralised influence, between narrative consistency and social realities, and between control and openness continue to shape its evolution. These tensions do not necessarily weaken the system but compel it to adapt and recalibrate over time. In understanding these dynamics, it becomes clear that the civil–military nexus in Pakistan is not static but an evolving architecture of power and perception, sustained through both cooperation and contestation.

Conclusion

Pakistan's Propaganda Warfare and the Battle for Perception in Operation Sindoor

The Pahalgam terrorist attack of 22 April 2025 and India's subsequent military response through Operation Sindoor in May 2025 represent far more than a singular episode in the long history of India-Pakistan confrontation. They epitomise the defining characteristics of contemporary hybrid warfare, where kinetic violence, ideological extremism, and sophisticated information operations converge into a seamless campaign of attrition. At its core, this manuscript demonstrates that Pakistan has institutionalised a dual-track strategy of unrelenting proxy terrorism inside India coupled with an aggressive, multi-layered propaganda apparatus designed to obscure culpability, shape international perceptions, sow domestic discord in India, and sustain its revisionist objectives regarding Kashmir. This "web of lies" is not an ad hoc response to crises but a deeply entrenched doctrine that compensates for conventional military inferiority and nuclear-era constraints by dominating the cognitive battlespace. The events of 2025 starkly illustrate both the brutality of Pakistan-enabled terrorism and the strategic necessity for India to master narrative dominance alongside battlefield superiority.

The manuscript's detailed reconstruction of the Pahalgam attack reveals its premeditated and ideologically saturated nature. Far from a spontaneous local incident, the assault on Baisaran Meadow was the product of weeks of planning, reconnaissance of multiple sites, and careful selection of terrain that maximised tactical advantage while delaying Indian security forces. Terrorists, including Pakistani nationals with military training such as Hashim Musa (a former Special Service Group para-commando) and Ali Bhai, operated with logistical support from local Over-Ground Workers. They employed helmet-mounted cameras to record the violence for propaganda purposes and carried out a chilling three-tier religious profiling process — demanding recitation of the Kalima, checking identification documents, and verifying circumcision — systematically targeting Hindu male tourists while sparing some women and children to carry the trauma and horror of the attack back to Indian society.

The brutality of the killings exposed the deeply inhuman character of the assault. Innocent civilians, many of whom had travelled to Kashmir with their families, seeking peace and leisure, were subjected to terror, humiliation, and immense psychological agony in their final moments. Several victims were shot in front of their wives, children, and parents, leaving traumatised families to witness the brutal killing of their loved ones at point-blank range. Eyewitness accounts describing desperate pleas for mercy, scenes of panic, and family members collapsing in grief underscored the calculated psychological violence embedded within the attack. Explicit references to Prime Minister Modi further highlighted the performative intent behind the massacre: to terrorise, humiliate, provoke, and send a political signal of defiance. The National Investigation Agency's thorough probe, including digital forensics, intercepts, ballistic analysis, and the eventual chargesheet, established irrefutable cross-border command linkages to Lashkar-e-Taiba

and its TRF proxy, with handlers operating from Pakistan and POJK. This was state-enabled terrorism, inspired and facilitated by elements within Pakistan's security establishment.

Ideological conditioning provided the critical foundation. Speeches by Asim Munir shortly before the attack repeatedly invoked the Two-Nation Theory, portraying Hindus and Muslims as fundamentally different in every aspect of life and thereby perpetuating religious hostility. These statements were not merely rhetorical but appeared to find violent expression days later. This continuity between high-level doctrinal articulation and on-ground brutality reveals how Pakistan's strategic culture merges religious identity, irredentism, and proxy warfare into a coherent, self-reinforcing system. The manuscript situates this within a decades-long historical pattern: from the 1947–48 tribal incursions and subsequent wars to high-profile attacks in Mumbai, Uri, Pulwama, and beyond. Each episode features Pakistan's reliance on deniable proxies, followed by vigorous information campaigns to deny involvement and reframe events. Propaganda has consistently served to project moral equivalence or victimhood, cultivate domestic support for the military, and complicate India's responses under the shadow of nuclear deterrence.

Pakistan's information warfare machinery, anchored in the ISPR and ISI, operates with institutional sophistication and adaptability. During and after the Pahalgam attack and Operation Sindoor, it rapidly deployed narratives aimed at creating ambiguity rather than persuasion — questioning attribution, alleging Indian false flags, amplifying selective videos, and using bots and digital platforms for amplification. TRF's initial claim of responsibility followed by abrupt retraction (blaming alleged cyber intrusion) exemplified tactical flexibility under pressure from domestic Kashmiri outrage and global scrutiny. This apparatus serves dual purposes: externally, it seeks to erode the legitimacy of Indian retaliation and prevent unified international action; internally, it diverts attention from Pakistan's socio-economic challenges and reinforces the military's praetorian role. The manuscript contrasts this proactive, centralised, doctrine-driven approach with India's traditionally more episodic and pluralistic communication style, highlighting a structural asymmetry that adversaries exploit.

Operation Sindoor marked an important evolution in India's counter-terror strategy. Precision strikes on terrorist infrastructure in Pakistan and POJK degraded capabilities, eliminated key operatives linked to past attacks, and damaged symbolic hubs like LeT's Muridke complex. By substantiating claims with aerial and satellite imagery — unlike some previous operations — India strengthened its narrative credibility and signalled a doctrinal shift: future terror attacks originating from Pakistani soil would invite direct, calibrated retaliation without excessive deference to immediate diplomatic constraints. The symbolic naming of the operation, invoking *sindoor* as a marker of marital sanctity and resilience, transformed victimhood into resolve and directly countered the terrorists' messaging. Nevertheless, the manuscript emphasises that even successful kinetic actions can be contested in the information domain if not paired with sustained narrative efforts. Pakistan's agility in spreading counter-claims, despite evidentiary weaknesses, demonstrated the persistent challenge.

Broader findings across the manuscript reveal enduring patterns in Pakistan's behaviour. Its strategic doctrine exhibits "strategic myopia," prioritising asymmetric revisionism over stable relations. Scholars cited underscore how the military's dominance constrains

civilian initiatives toward peace, while proxy warfare and propaganda have become normalised instruments of state policy. Education, media, and historical memory have been weaponised to perpetuate anti-India narratives rooted in the Two-Nation Theory. In the digital age, these efforts scale rapidly through social media, AI tools, and diaspora networks, allowing Pakistan to maintain pressure below the threshold of full-scale war while imposing continuous costs on India. The Pahalgam-Sindoor sequence validates the view that modern conflicts are hybrid by nature: victories are measured not only by territory held or militants neutralised but by whose interpretation of events prevails in domestic, regional, and global arenas.

International reactions offered India significant validation, with strong condemnations from the United States, Russia, European nations, Israel, and several Muslim-majority countries. The spontaneous shutdowns and protests within Kashmir against the attackers and their sponsors hinted at eroding support for Pakistan-backed terrorism locally. Yet challenges remain: some international responses urged de-escalation without fully acknowledging state sponsorship, illustrating their insensitivity to such horrendous acts and their unwillingness to identify the real culprits behind such acts. This underscores that evidentiary superiority alone does not automatically translate into narrative dominance; proactive shaping of the information environment is required.

The Road Ahead for India

Confronted with Pakistan's continual virtual war — sustained terror operations intertwined with incessant anti-India propaganda — India cannot afford complacency or purely reactive postures. The manuscript implicitly calls for a transformative approach that treats information warfare as a core strategic pillar equivalent in importance to military modernisation and diplomatic engagement. Several interlocking imperatives emerge.

Institutionally, India must create a dedicated, high-level National Information Command or Strategic Communications Authority with cross-agency authority. This entity should integrate military, intelligence, diplomatic, and technical expertise, operating 24/7 with real-time monitoring capabilities. It would develop pre-crisis narrative frameworks, rapid-response protocols for disinformation surges, and long-term campaigns highlighting Pakistan's sponsorship of terrorism, its domestic repression, and the contrast with India's democratic pluralism. Leveraging artificial intelligence for sentiment analysis, deepfake detection, and predictive modelling will provide decisive advantages in speed and precision.

Technologically and evidentially, India needs to institutionalise the lessons of Operation Sindoor. Routine investment in advanced ISR (intelligence, surveillance, reconnaissance) assets, including persistent satellite coverage and drone swarms, would ensure high-quality, verifiable visual evidence. Secure platforms for rapid declassification and dissemination of such material to global audiences, fact-checking networks, and partnerships with international media and think tanks can amplify reach. Concurrently, societal resilience requires nationwide digital literacy programmes, especially targeting vulnerable demographics, to inoculate against propaganda.

Militarily and operationally, sustained pressure on terrorist ecosystems must continue. This includes proactive disruption of launch pads, financial networks, and handler cells,

alongside calibrated responses that signal resolve without unnecessary escalation. Theatre commands and integrated civil-military coordination should further enhance responsiveness. Intelligence-driven operations targeting Over-Ground Workers and ideological infrastructure remain vital to erode support bases.

Diplomatically, India should pursue an offensive narrative strategy globally. Consistent engagement with partners — through joint intelligence sharing, counter-terror designations, and FATF-style mechanisms — can isolate Pakistan. Bilateral and multilateral forums should repeatedly spotlight evidence of cross-border terrorism. Economic tools, technological export controls, and people-to-people initiatives that highlight India's success story can counter Pakistan's victim narratives. Strengthening ties with the Indian diaspora as informal ambassadors enhances soft power projection.

Internally, winning the battle for Kashmir and other sensitive regions demands a balanced approach: uncompromising security combined with accelerated development, good governance, and political inclusion. Addressing genuine aspirations while maintaining zero tolerance for violence and separatism can further isolate extremists. Educational reforms that promote critical thinking and national integration will yield long-term dividends.

Long-term strategic patience is essential. Pakistan's current trajectory — marked by military dominance, economic fragility, and ideological rigidity — contains internal contradictions that may intensify over time. India's advantage lies in its democratic resilience, economic dynamism, and demographic strengths. By refusing to be drawn into reactive cycles and instead shaping the environment proactively, India can impose cumulative costs on Pakistan's strategy while building credible deterrence across domains.

In conclusion, the central thrust of this book is clear: hybrid threats require hybrid responses. Pakistan's "web of lies" seeks to normalise terrorism as policy and contest every Indian action in the perceptual realm. Countering this demands that India evolve from episodic excellence to institutionalised mastery of the information domain. By aligning kinetic precision with narrative clarity, technological edge with societal cohesion, and national resolve with global engagement, India can neutralise Pakistan's asymmetric playbook. The battles of the future will be won by those who control not only the physical battlespace but the stories told about it — those who shape memory, legitimacy, and the very definition of truth. Operation Sindoor was a significant step; institutionalising its lessons while building comprehensive information capabilities will ensure India's enduring strategic advantage in an era where perception increasingly precedes and determines reality. Only through such holistic adaptation can India secure its borders, protect its citizens, and advance toward a stable and peaceful regional order on terms consistent with its democratic values and national interests.

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