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## Kashmir Book Ban Raises Free Speech Concerns

August 8, 2025

– Categories: Human Rights



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The Jammu and Kashmir administration has triggered widespread controversy by banning 25 books, citing the presence of “secessionist” themes and content deemed misleading to the public. The list includes works by prominent authors such as Booker Prize winner Arundhati Roy and academic Sumantra Bose.

The government notification did not detail the criteria used for the selection of titles, but it stated that the books contain material likely to promote separatist ideology and could disturb public order. The directive has raised alarms among free speech advocates, scholars, and political observers, who see the move as part of a growing pattern of censorship in the region.

Among the banned titles are Roy's essays critical of Indian state policy in Kashmir and Bose's analytical works on the region's political history. Both authors have long been associated with perspectives that challenge dominant narratives on Kashmir, particularly concerning militarization, civil liberties, and the demand for self-determination.

Civil rights groups have expressed concern that the book ban marks an escalation in efforts to control information and limit critical engagement with Kashmir's political complexities. Some civil rights groups argue that banning critical literature may risk narrowing public discourse, said a member of the People's Union for Civil Liberties.

The move comes in the context of a broader clampdown on dissent since the abrogation of Article 370 in August 2019. In the years following the revocation of Jammu and Kashmir's special constitutional status, the region has seen increased surveillance, detentions under preventive laws, and tighter controls over media and academia.

Prominent voices from the literary and academic communities have also pushed back against the decision. Banning books doesn't erase ideas, it only deepens the crisis of trust between the state and its citizens, said a professor at Delhi University, who called the list politically motivated.

Publishers and booksellers in the Union Territory have been instructed to remove the banned titles from circulation immediately. Legal experts suggest that the ban could face challenges in court, particularly under constitutional protections for freedom of expression and the right to information.

The Jammu and Kashmir administration has not issued a formal response to the backlash but maintains that the action was taken in the interest of maintaining public order and national integrity. Security officials have defended the decision as a preventive measure to avoid the dissemination of provocative material.

However, critics argue that genuine public order concerns must be balanced against the rights of readers to access diverse sources of information, particularly in a conflict-affected region. International human rights organizations have previously flagged concerns about shrinking civic space in Jammu and Kashmir. As debates over censorship, academic freedom, and civil liberties continue to intensify, the ban on these books has emerged as a flashpoint in the ongoing discourse around governance and free expression in India's most militarized territory.