

A Sociological Account of the Kashmir Conflict and Its Impact on Children

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Abstract:

This research study explores the complex dynamics of the Kashmir conflict, with a particular focus on the experiences of the most vulnerable individuals affected by it: the children, particularly those who have been orphaned. Situated amidst the majestic Himalayan mountain range, the region of Kashmir has been a subject of prolonged dispute, as both India and Pakistan assert their ownership over this captivating yet tumultuous territory. This paper examines the historical beginnings of the conflict in Kashmir and traces its progression over time. Additionally, it explores the lasting repercussions that the conflict has had on the lives of the people residing in the region.

This study examines the health and well-being of children in relation to the specific problems they encounter, with a particular emphasis on the direct and indirect consequences of conflict. The adverse outcomes stemming from acts of violence, injuries, and fatalities have rendered children, especially those who have lost their parents, susceptible to the harsh realities associated with armed conflict. In the meanwhile, the conflict's indirect consequences, resulting from disturbance and disorder, have resulted in substandard living conditions, limited availability of potable water and sanitary facilities, and heightened susceptibility to disease. The upheaval has additionally caused disruptions to healthcare and education systems, leading to restricted availability of medical treatments and diminished educational prospects, thereby further impacting the welfare of children and orphaned individuals.

The experience of witnessing violence and enduring pain can result in significant psychological and emotional harm, which in turn can contribute to the development of mental health conditions such as post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety, and depression. The aforementioned traumas have significantly diminished confidence in both individuals and institutions, hence intensifying the adverse repercussions of the conflict on children and orphaned individuals.

This research highlights the extensive and diverse influence of the Kashmir war, which affects various dimensions of human existence. The battle has resulted in significant ramifications, encompassing the loss of human lives and physical infrastructure, as well as the emergence of communal divisions and grievances. Nevertheless, in the midst of these tumultuous circumstances, the unwavering and unconquerable essence of resilience endures, shedding light on a trajectory towards tranquility and economic success in this awe-inspiring yet perilous region.

INTRODUCTION

The Kashmir Valley stands as one of the world's most captivating locales when observed on a map. It appears secluded, encompassing an expanse of merely ninety miles, nestled among successive Himalayan mountain ranges towering above the plains of the subcontinent. This apparent isolation, however, is deceptive, for the valley is accessible through over twenty passes, rendering it not only a vital crossroads but also a sanctuary. The Rajatarangini, a remarkable historical narrative of Kashmir penned by the poet Kalhana in the 12th century, provides a unique chronicle of the region's history. It delineates how, since antiquity, the rulers of the valley have interacted and conflicted with neighboring regions. The valley has, at various times, functioned as part of expansive empires or stood independently as a kingdom. Throughout its historical trajectory, the valley's inhabitants have retained a profound connection to their Kashmiriyat, their cultural heritage, transcending religious affiliations. Moreover, the Kashmiri language stands distinct from the Hindi or Urdu spoken by the plains' inhabitants (Behera, 2007; Schofield, 2015; Ganguly, 2004).

Kashmir, a land that often beckoned but never truly surrendered, is described eloquently in historical accounts. Kalhana, the historian who extolled Kashmir for its virtues of knowledge, lofty dwellings, saffron, icy waters, and grapes, once wrote in the Rajtarangini: 'Kashmir may yield to the power of spiritual virtue but never to the force of arms.' While the soldiers of the great Emperor Ashoka annexed Kashmir into the Mauryan empire and established its capital in Srinagar, the spiritual influence of the emperor's Buddhist missionaries held a more profound sway. The valley, originally associated with the sage Kashyap, a devoted follower of Lord Shiva, embraced Buddhism. Kanishka, India's first emperor of Turkish lineage, convened the Third Great Council of Buddhism in Kashmir. The land may have witnessed military conquest, but it predominantly bowed to the power of faith. However, there were moments when faith proved insufficient protection, such as when the gods appeared powerless to prevent the advance of Mihirakula, the Hun from Sialkot, an ominous figure akin to Death. Vultures were known to fly ahead of his army, anticipating the corpses that would inevitably litter his path to the throne in Srinagar (Akbar, 2002; Bamzai, 1995).

The region is widely acknowledged as one of the most heavily militarized regions globally. This region has been a contentious territory claimed by two nuclear-armed nations, India and Pakistan, since their gaining independence from British rule in 1947. The conflict began shortly after independence when Pakistani fighters initiated an invasion of Jammu and Kashmir, sparking the first of four wars between the two nations. Since 1988, Kashmir has been the focal point of significant turmoil, witnessing the emergence of new terrorist groups and increased incursions into Pakistan for training in armed movements against the Indian state (Ganguly & Bajpai, 1994 ; Mukherjee, 2014).

Since the partition, the disputed territory of Kashmir has been a constant subject of disagreement between Pakistan and India, with both countries being involved in several armed conflicts of different scales. Scholars like Korbel have elaborated on the psychological impact of this conflict on Kashmiris, including mental health deterioration and substance abuse due to exposure to violence and terrorism. The impact of political instability has mainly been confined to the Kashmir valley, with people feeling more insecure in this region than in the Jammu and Ladakh regions of Jammu and Kashmir. Bhat describes the Kashmir conflict as "one of the most longstanding and intractable conflicts between India and Pakistan, affecting millions of people across political, social, economic, and cultural spheres (Korbel,2015 ; Bhat,2019)."

Maharaja Hari Singh and The Kashmir Conflict

The historical context of Kashmir is intricately connected to the intricacies of the post-independence period of India and Pakistan in the 1940s. During his reign, Maharaja Hari Singh governed a region where the majority of the population adhered to the Islamic faith, as indicated by the 1941 census. This census recorded a population of around 3.1 million Muslims and 809,000 Hindus out of a total population of 4,021,616. As the process of British withdrawal from India unfolded, there was a sense of uncertainty around the prospective position of the princely states. The Cabinet Mission Plan, implemented on May 16, 1946, determined that the British Crown could no longer retain Paramountcy and that it could not be transferred to the emerging government. Consequently, this decision created a condition of uncertainty for the princely states (Bamzai, 1995 ; Behera,2007).

The inception of the Kashmir war occurred during a pivotal period in the historical trajectory of the region, under the governance of Maharaja Hari Singh, who held authority over the princely state of Jammu and Kashmir. The complexity of this scenario arose from the fact that Maharaja Hari Singh, belonging to a Hindu ruling dynasty, was entrusted with the governance of a territory characterized by a mostly Muslim populace. The religious demography posed distinctive obstacles for his administration. The composition of his government primarily consisted of persons who were closely related to the royal family, influential figures in

the court, and those of Hindu descent originating from regions outside the state. This situation further intensified the dissatisfaction among the Muslim community.

Concurrently, the Kashmir question acquired an additional degree of intricacy as Pakistan asserted its territorial claim over the territory, drawing upon religious demographics as a basis for its assertion. The situation witnessed a significant escalation in October 1947, when armed tribesmen originating from Pakistan initiated a military assault on the princely state. In response to the aforementioned threat, Maharaja Hari Singh pursued military support from India, which was provided under the stipulation that Kashmir would accede to India. The battle endured until January 1949 when a cessation of hostilities was ultimately proclaimed. During this period, the United Nations put out a proposition for a plebiscite aimed at ascertaining the destiny of the state. Nevertheless, the plebiscite was ultimately not conducted as a result of profound and enduring differences between India and Pakistan. Consequently, the region underwent a division wherein both nations assumed control over certain territories, resulting in intermittent armed conflicts and persistent strained relations (Snedden, 2015).

Nevertheless, the historical roots of the instability in Kashmir precede the latter half of the 1980s. In his book titled "India, Pakistan and the Secret Jihad: The Covert War in Kashmir, 1947-2004," Praveen Swami provides a comprehensive analysis of the Kashmir conflict, outlining five distinct phases of the ongoing hostilities. The initial phase was launched by small groups of covert agents backed by Pakistan, leading to the India-Pakistan War of 1947-48. In the subsequent decades, a series of phases unfolded, each with distinct objectives and circumstances. These phases ultimately led to a violent period after 1989-90, marked by extensive terrorist activities, confrontations between local inhabitants and security forces, allegations of human rights abuses, and the migration of the minority Kashmiri Pandit community (Swami, 2006).

The transformation of the Kashmir insurgency

The modern history of Kashmir witnessed a significant and pivotal moment in 1987, characterized by the occurrence of state elections that were tainted by accusations of electoral fraud, leading to widespread disillusionment and disaffection among the populace. This particular occurrence had a significant impact on the establishment of the Muslim United Front (MUF) and prompted disillusioned young individuals to reject democratic mechanisms and instead adopt violent resistance.

Kashmir's armed conflict began in 1989 with Indian forces fighting terrorist organizations. At first, the perceived significance of the militant presence appeared to be diminished as a result of their relatively small numerical strength. However, as the battle escalated, more people joined them, disrupting local life (Dabla, 2010). In December 1989, Indian Home Minister Mufti Mohammad Syed's daughter Rubiya Sayeed was

abducted, sparking the conflict. After her release, India deployed many security soldiers to Indian Administered Kashmir, resulting in brutal crackdowns that hurt people (Schofield, 2001). Joshi (2019) reported that 30,000 security soldiers were stationed in major valley cities by 1992. The Kashmir insurgency can be delineated into three discrete phases. The initial period, encompassing the years 1990 to 1996, witnessed a notable intensification of militant activities mostly inside urban regions. During the subsequent phase, spanning from the late 1990s to 2002, there was a notable transition in militant activities towards rural regions and districts within the Jammu area. The onset of the third phase occurred in 2002 and continues to the present time. The rebellion in question was driven by a desire for autonomy and self-governance (Meyerle, 2008). Throughout history, individuals across many age groups, encompassing both males and females, as well as youngsters and the elderly, have experienced the detrimental effects of violence in their quest for autonomy. In addition to the recorded number of 70,000 fatalities since 1990, there exists an estimated count of around 8,000 verified instances of enforced disappearances, alongside a significant number of arrests and detentions carried out under repressive legislations (Geelani,2014).

The Kashmir insurgency, which commenced in 1989 to achieve self-determination, underwent a transformation by the mid-1990s. The mid-1990s witnessed a significant shift in the trajectory of the Kashmir insurgency due to several factors. One factor contributing to the situation is the Indian government's response to the insurgency, characterized by a forceful and aggressive approach, resulting in the occurrence of numerous human rights violations on a large scale. The aforementioned actions resulted in the estrangement of numerous Kashmiri individuals, thereby fostering increased sympathy and backing towards terrorist groups. An additional factor contributing to the transformation of the insurgency is the heightened radicalization of the militants themselves. The alteration in the trajectory of the Kashmir insurgency resulted in several ramifications. The aforementioned factor exacerbated the complexity of resolving the disagreement and resulted in a surge in acts of violence. The incident resulted in strained diplomatic relations between India and Pakistan, with each nation levying accusations against the other regarding their alleged assistance of the militants. The issue of the Kashmir insurgency remains unresolved in the present era. The Kashmir war stands as one of the most protracted disputes globally, inflicting profound hardship upon the populace of the region.

The phenomenon of conflict and its consequential effects on Children

The socio-political landscape of the Kashmir region experienced significant repercussions as a result of the violence and instability that prevailed during the 1990s, thereby profoundly affecting the local populace. The repercussions of the struggle were not limited solely to the loss of human lives and physical infrastructure but also encompassed the exacerbation of community tensions and grievances among diverse ethnic groups. The Kashmir conflict that transpired in the 1990s exerted a profound and enduring influence on the region, encompassing significant repercussions for its infrastructure and socio-economic circumstances. The violence

in Kashmir has had a detrimental impact on various socio-economic aspects, including poverty, unemployment, and economic stagnation (Bamzai, 1995 ; Behera,2007). Local businesses have been significantly affected, and the progress of development projects has been impeded.

The Kashmir war is marked by a multitude of severe transgressions against human rights, which span a wide spectrum of egregious acts such as sexual assault, killings, torture, and enforced disappearances. In 2009, the International Peoples Tribunal on Human Rights and Justice in Indian-Administered Kashmir, a prominent human rights organization, made a significant discovery in North Kashmir. They revealed the existence of numerous unmarked graves, raising concerns about the burial of unidentified victims under questionable circumstances. The occurrence of this violence has led to a significant number of fatalities, including both civilian and non-civilian individuals, with a substantial count of injuries documented alone in the year 2018. Numerous demonstrators have sustained severe physical and psychological injuries, while a substantial number of others have been reported as missing. Throughout this conflict, it has been seen that women have experienced a disproportionate burden of the detrimental outcomes resulting from it (Khan, 2010) .

Ever since the beginning of armed conflict in the territory of Kashmir, there have been significant changes occurring at several scales, ranging from individual to societal, which have had notable consequences for women and children. The ramifications encompass the domains of survival, development, mental health, and the holistic welfare of children and adolescents (Mehraj, Rather, Adil, & Kazmi, 2018). Children residing in the region of Kashmir encounter a diverse range of obstacles and socio-economic issues as a consequence of constrained resources, which are progressively worsening daily.

The state of children in Kashmir, namely those who are orphaned, is significantly impacted by the protracted armed war in the area, rendering it one of the most heavily militarized regions on a global scale. The varied consequences of the conflict are apparent in different dimensions of children's lives, inhibiting their social, psychological, and emotional well-being, thereby obstructing their overall development (Mehraj, Rather, Adil, & Kazmi, 2018). The scope of exposure to conflict extends beyond direct engagement in armed conflict. It encompasses a range of broader consequences, including repression, diminished security, reduced income, disrupted education, displacement, and military harassment. These factors have a significant impact on the lives of both children and their families (Wessells, 1998).

Residing in the most heavily militarized region on a worldwide scale, children face a multitude of challenges that impede their progress and overall well-being. The armed struggle in Kashmir has resulted in the saturation of orphanages, as well as the deterioration and distortion of their functioning. The provision of care and assistance to orphaned individuals has experienced a drop in quality, characterized by factors such as staff members who are overburdened and receive insufficient compensation, inadequate facilities, and a deterioration in the overall physical and mental well-being of the children. According to Mehraj, Rather, Adil, and Kazmi

(2018), several orphanages may have strayed from their initial objectives, instead operating with a profit-oriented approach or serving as platforms for political and religious indoctrination.

The saturation and its subsequent consequences have a substantial impact on the orphan population in Kashmir. Individuals in this context experience instances of neglect, abuse, and exploitation, which subsequently lead to poor physical and emotional well-being. The substandard nature of schooling provided in these orphanages exacerbates the precariousness of their future opportunities. Furthermore, the presence of armed conflict has resulted in significant societal upheaval, limited access to essential services, increased poverty rates, and abuses of civil and political rights. These circumstances have had a profound impact on the duties and responsibilities of children, further worsening their vulnerabilities (Dabla, 2010). The ongoing strife in Kashmir society has resulted in the dispersion of families, leading to the emergence of orphaned children or their assumption of household leadership roles.

The ongoing armed conflict has led to a direct exacerbation of poverty among Kashmiri families, thus placing additional burdens on children, who are compelled to prioritize labor above their education. These consequences include the occurrence of undernourishment and malnutrition, the avoidance of participation in social, cultural, and religious gatherings, and the involvement of children in dangerous forms of labor (Save the Children, 2000). The conflict in Kashmir has led to an increase in the population of orphans, jeopardizing their fundamental human rights and their potential contribution to the future of society (Mehraj, Rather, Adil, & Kazmi, 2018; Ahmad & Rashid, 2019).

As per the definition given by UNICEF, an orphan is characterized as an individual below the age of 18 who has experienced the loss of one or both parents due to any cause resulting in death. The estimated number of orphaned or special children in the region of Kashmir is approximately 100,000, hence emphasizing the significant nature of the circumstances. The absence of assistance from others inside one's social network, including friends, relatives, and members of the community, serves as a motivating factor for numerous orphans to reside within orphanage facilities. Notwithstanding the evident necessity, the government has chosen to remain reticent and has failed to formulate efficacious strategies for the rehabilitation of these individuals (Bhat, 2016; (Ahmad & Rashid, 2019)).

The challenges experienced by orphans in Kashmir encompass a wide range of issues, such as difficulties in finding suitable accommodation, disruptions in education, psychological distress, social disarray, feelings of vulnerability, worsening in health, complete reliance on others, and engagement in deviant behaviors. Orphaned individuals frequently encounter difficulties arising from the lack of parental figures, resulting in heightened susceptibility. The prevalence of armed conflict serves as the principal catalyst for the occurrence of orphanhood, so subjecting young children to a multitude of problems that have a profound impact on their psychological well-being and entire state of being (Dabla, 2010).

The intricate interaction between armed conflict, the prevalence of orphanages, and the subsequent decline and distortion in their operations gives rise to a grave predicament for orphaned individuals in the region of Kashmir. The array of complex obstacles individuals encounter, including aspects such as housing, schooling, mental health, and social disarray, emphasize the pressing necessity for comprehensive assistance and intervention. The predicament faced by orphaned individuals in the region of Kashmir calls for a comprehensive solution that not only caters to their immediate necessities but also tackles the fundamental factors contributing to their vulnerability (Ahmad & Rashid, 2019).

The Impact of Co-occurring Traumatic Experiences and Their Ramifications

Armed wars give rise to a range of traumas that have profound and far-reaching impacts on various segments of society, with children and orphans being particularly affected (Naqshbandi, Mudasir, Sehgal, & Hassan, 2012). The psychological and emotional consequences of living in a conflict zone, observing acts of violence, and enduring other forms of pain are durable and leave lasting imprints. These traumatic experiences have the potential to trigger mental health illnesses, including post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), anxiety, depression, and various other incapacitating psychological conditions. The erosion of confidence in individuals and organizations, together with the disintegration of social support systems, exacerbates the adverse consequences of these traumatic experiences. The compounding impacts of these traumatic experiences gradually diminish the overall state of physical and mental health and the ability to cope with adversity among individuals and communities contending with prolonged armed conflicts. Within this challenging environment, children and orphans encounter distinct vulnerabilities and obstacles that further exacerbate their difficulties.

Conclusion

Amidst the awe-inspiring mountains and tranquil lakes of the Kashmir region, a sorrowful chronicle unravels, depicting a tale of battle, hardship, and fortitude that significantly affects the local youngsters. This story explores the complex terrain of Kashmir's ongoing conflict, delving into topics such as the historical intricacies of Maharaja Hari Singh's governance and the growth of insurgency. The Kashmir war is a protracted and intricate geopolitical dispute that significantly impacts the lives of the most marginalized individuals, including orphaned children. This conflict highlights a striking contrast between the captivating natural beauty of their native region and the brutal challenges they face daily.

The predicament faced by these orphaned individuals serves as a sad testament to the human cost inflicted by the Kashmir conflict. Within the mesmerizing scenery, there exists a stark reality characterized by the disruption of educational pursuits, psychological discomfort, and inadequate living conditions. Orphanages, which are typically conceived as places of refuge, frequently manifest instances of neglect, abuse, and exploitation, thereby embodying a microcosm of profound desolation.

However, within this brutal reality, a ray of hope arises in the form of the perseverance displayed by youngsters in Kashmir. This resilience serves as a beacon, suggesting the possibility of a future where peace and prosperity can coexist harmoniously. The conclusion obtained emphasizes the necessity of prompt and comprehensive interventions, which should not only focus on meeting the immediate needs of orphaned children but also on dismantling the structural factors that contribute to their vulnerability.

In the last examination, surpassing geopolitical complexities and historical accounts, this paper serves as a persuasive appeal—a request for collaborative endeavors to guarantee that the children of Kashmir, who have been left without parents due to the ongoing struggle, are not overlooked and marginalized. The situation they face serves as a poignant reminder that, among the chaos, safeguarding the purity and promise of individuals who are disproportionately affected by an involuntary conflict is a crucial matter that goes beyond geographical limits, necessitating our collective focus.

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