

Living with Loss and Hope: Reflections from a Research with Widows in Kashmir

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Abstract

In the context of intractable conflicts, women face the consequences of deaths and disappearances of their husbands at various levels. However, this may not be known or understood by each of those who share opinions about national safety and security. In the process of forming and propagating our judgments about political conflicts, it is important to reflect upon the extent of one's knowledge about lives of people from conflict zones. This paper, through some of the narratives of women from Kashmir, urges readers to know more about the context of conflict instead of believing in assumptions that may have been promoted through popular media. This paper is based on my research that focused on resilience among women widowed due to conflict in Kashmir.

Keywords: Kashmir Conflict, Widows, National Security, Human Security, Intractable Conflict

Introduction

We live in a country and a region, which is a location of several conflicts. Some of these conflicts are or have been inter-state or between countries, for example, between India and Pakistan. Several conflicts are or have been within states/countries, for example, between the Indian State and people of Kashmir, and between Tamil population and Sri Lankan State, etc. Moreover, some of these conflicts are intractable or protracted or long standing and seem unresolvable in the current scenario.

A person who is an outsider to these conflicts and conflict zones may have some questions in mind, such as the follows: *What is contributing to the conflict? Who all are involved in this conflict? How different are the goals and aspirations of parties/groups involved in the conflict? If the State has been intervening, then why is the conflict*

not resolved? How is the conflict impacting lives of people? Do people in the conflict zone have access to food and nutrition, safe shelter, health services, education, livelihood opportunities, and emotional support? How do people cope with the everyday problems that they face in the conflict zones? Whose rights do we need to worry about? What is the view of international community regarding this conflict? Has there been any intervention from the international community? These and many other questions help us understand what is happening in the course of a conflict and how is it impacting people. Many people use this understanding to work towards conflict mitigation, peace building, and advocacy for human rights. Various processes and methods are used to document and address diverse dimensions of conflict (such as the human rights violations). However, these methods and processes can also commoditise the suffering, reinforce social inequalities or create new ones through selective recognition of stories of suffering, and hence contribute to the 'political economy of trauma' (James, 2010).

As I write this paper based on my PhD research with women widowed due to conflict in Kashmir, I remain cautious to not commoditise their suffering. However, I do think that it is important for people to know some aspects of their life. Many people still seem to remember Kashmir from the lens of the armed uprising for freedom in 1989. However, the scenario in recent years has largely been of civil unrest and protests on issues of autonomy, rights and self-determination (Verma, 2015a). People living outside Kashmir (or any other area impacted by conflict) do need to understand how people of Kashmir have been leading their lives, especially with legislations like Armed Forces Special Powers Act of 1990 (AFSPA), and Public Safety Act, 1978 (PSA).¹

The paper presents a brief overview of the context of Kashmir, followed by a description of the methodology

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¹ These legislations have been used to counter the unrest in Punjab as well as the North Eastern states of India.

followed in my research. Selected narratives of research participants are shared to elaborate on some aspects and experiences of widows in Kashmir. Later, I reflect on few implications of the presented data/narratives for 'Indians' before concluding the paper.

The Context of Kashmir

Kashmir has been a contentious subject in the contemporary history of South Asia resulting in a situation of persistent instability in the region. Conflict is seen to have become central to the lives of people of the region. Killing of 13 youth, reported by authorities to be militants, in Shopian and Anantnag on 1 April 2018 in the counter-terrorism operations followed by a curfew-like situation, mass funeral processions, protests and narrative of vengeance (Ashiq, 2018; 'Limits of Violence' 2018; Masood, 2018) affirms that the situation in Kashmir is in alignment with what Kriesberg describes as features of an 'intractable conflict': protracted (1998, cited in Bartal, 2007), i.e. persistent, involving physical violence, perceived as irresolvable, and requiring extensive investment by both sides to cope.

While there has been a persistent focus on Kashmir conflict for several decades, the issue has drawn greater focus since 1989 due to the outbreak of armed insurgency and consequent counter-insurgency measures by the Government, which resulted in heavy militarisation of the region. The situation had resulted in significant socio-economic difficulties being faced by the people. The end of the 1980s brought drastic changes in the socio-political climate that continued for more than a decade. People faced the impacts of use of power and authority that was imposed through forms of punishments such as prolonged curfews and crackdowns (Kazi, 2009). After this prolonged period of armed conflict and counter-insurgency measures, somewhere towards the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century, a relative sense of 'normalcy' seemed to emerge. However, people in Kashmir had already spent a significant period facing the consequences of conflict. For several years, people in Kashmir lived in fear and they had to prove their identity in order to ensure safety. A culture of silence prevailed about forced disappearances and extra-judicial killings by armed forces (Pelly, 2009).

While there is no accurate data on deaths and disappearances, there are different estimates. Public Commission on Human Rights (n.d.) estimated that around

46,581 persons (including security force personnel) were killed during the period 1999-2004 and more than 500 hundred thousand security force personnel were deployed in the districts of Kashmir Valley.² The data on people who were missing after getting arrested was estimated as 8000 to 10,000 (Pelly, 2009, p. 138).

Relative stability that seemed to be slowly emerging was disrupted by strikes and curfews almost every year since 2008. For example, in 2008, protests followed the order to transfer a part of land to the Shri Amarnathji Shrine Board (SASB) to set up temporary shelters and facilities for the pilgrims who come during the *Amarnath Yatra*. In 2009, rape and murder of two young women in Shopian district led to strong protests. In February 2013, protests erupted after the hanging of Mohammad Afzal Guru who was convicted for his alleged role in the attacks on Indian Parliament in 2001. The authorities executed him without providing any prior information to his family. In 2016, killing of Burhan Wani, a Hizbul Mujahideen Commander, led to protests. In January 2018, rape and murder of a girl belonging to the Muslim Gujjar community led to mass protests for as well as against the police personnel who was accused in this case.

Although Kashmir can no more be seen as a location of intensive armed conflict that require the kind of counter-insurgency operations established 1989 onwards, it however, does remain a site of intractable conflict. Through discussion on narratives of widows in Kashmir, this paper emphasises on the fact that lives of people still need to be understood through the lens of intractable nature of conflict as well as based on an understanding of past experiences of people living in Kashmir.

Methodology

Using the interpretive paradigm and qualitative methodology, the process and patterns of resilience were studied in lives of 50 women widowed due to conflict in Kupwara and Srinagar districts of Kashmir (25 from Kupwara District and 25 from Srinagar District).³ From November 2011 to February 2012 in-depth interviews were conducted using an interview guide. Among 50

² This report was compiled for the period 1990-2005.

³ The paper 'A widow, a victim, a mother: Rethinking resilience and well being within the complexities of women's lives in Kashmir' can be retrieved from: https://www.interventionjournal.com/sites/default/files/A_widow,_a_victim,_a_mother___rethinking.6.pdf

women who participated in this research, 31 reported their husbands to have deceased and 19 reported their husbands to have disappeared. The approach for data analysis involved a combination of two methods of inquiry: constant comparison, and interpretive or hermeneutic phenomenology. Atlas.ti, a software for qualitative data analysis was used in coding transcripts. The details of the research methodology have been presented in Verma (2015b). For the purpose of this paper, narratives of participants have been purposively extracted to elaborate on certain aspects of their lives. Through these, I hope to present a glimpse into past experiences of women in the scenario of intensive counter-insurgency by the Government of India. In order to anonymise the participants, their names have been replaced with codes.

Experiences of Widows in Kashmir: My Reflections

In Kashmir, women have faced the consequences of deaths and disappearances of their husbands at various levels. At the political level, women (as mothers and widows) become symbols of sacrifice, loss, as well as injustice faced by their communities. Hence, their stories may not remain personal while many of their challenges may continue to remain so. At the personal level, they have to deal with everyday life stressors, increased responsibilities, and their personal loss while they continue with their routines and perform their roles as mothers and providers. This was evident in the lives of the women widowed due to conflict in Kashmir as they talked about their perception of loss related to martyrdom, death or disappearance of husbands; their status as a widow; experience of being interviewed (due to their identity as widows) time and again; changes in their life; concerns and practices of women as mothers; a sense of helplessness, dependence and isolation; perception of self to be deserving most support; perception of own problems as unique; as well as their achievements and celebrations.

As women shared about their past experiences related to the intensive phase of conflict, it became apparent that their own sense of safety was constantly under threat at the time when people in other parts of India probably considered themselves unsafe in the presence of Kashmiris (as they were branded as terrorists). For example, one of the women described the period of insurgency and counter-insurgency in the following manner:

“...we used to sit inside and lock our doors in the evening. [We would worry, what] if any party came and killed us, [or] took away our brother...or mother? We would not go out [of our house] out of fear. No one would visit any relative or go to Kupwara or any other place. We, young girls, would not even go to fields out of fear.... [what] if anyone took us away from there or killed us.” (R3, P3:481)

From R3's narrative, it is evident how people, especially women, felt unsafe and had to limit their activities outside home. The threat was perceived to be from both - the armed security personnel (who were agents of the Government) and armed groups engaged in the freedom movement or *tehreek*.

At the time of her interview, R3 was 30 years old and lived in a village in Kupwara District. Her husband had died around 12-15 years ago. Along with her children, she lived with her parents and brother's family. R3 mostly stayed at home and was engaged in household chores, like cooking, washing clothes, and getting children ready for school. She had three children, two sons and a daughter. All three were studying in school. The eldest son was in 9th class, the younger son in 8th class, and daughter (youngest among siblings) in 7th class. While there was no specific year or time period she could specify about her husband's death, she said that he died after seven years of marriage and the youngest child (daughter) was not born at that time. She came back to her natal home 15 years ago after her husband died and in-laws ill-treated her. R3 still had no interaction with her in-laws and they did not come to meet her or her children. She had been married under pressure as her family received threats from her husband and his group (*Mujahids*⁴). R3 did not have assets of her own. Her brother managed most of the household expenses. She also received support from an NGO. At the time of her interview, she did not have access to any pension scheme run by the Government. She had, however, applied for a widow pension scheme few months before her interview.

While R3's husband was a *mujahid*, the same was not true for every man who was arrested or killed. Many were trying to lead their everyday lives normally and in many

⁴ In this paper and in the context of conflict in Kashmir, the term 'Mujahid' is used for those who were engaged in the armed struggle for freedom.

cases, their families did not even get to know immediately about their death or disappearance. R39 was one such woman. R39 was 32 years old and lived with her two children (a son and a daughter) in Srinagar. Her husband died 14 years ago. At the time of her interview, her son was studying in 12th class and daughter was in 9th class. R39 herself had passed 7th class. For an income, she was engaged in handicraft related work at a centre nearby. She mentioned that she was receiving pension through a Government scheme from the Punjab Government. She was also receiving money (7 to 8 thousand per annum) from one of the Government schemes for her children's education. Her son had lived and studied at an NGO-run institution for four to five years. She was receiving an ongoing support from this NGO. R39 did not have a ration card as her husband was from a different district. Hence, her father got ration for her through his ration card. She, however, managed household expenses herself.

R39 shared,

R39 (P20:56): *My son was 3 years old then, he [i.e. my son] did not have slippers. He [husband] said, 'I will go out to buy him slippers.' I said, 'okay fine. Come back soon.' He never came back. Then we found his dead body in Lalbazar⁵. Then those people buried him there only.*

I: When did you get this news?

R39: *After four days.*

Even when one is living in the context of uncertainty about life and death, does anyone hope to lose their family member? Won't you hope or assume to some extent that your life would continue as it is with your family? Imagine how it must have been for her when her husband went out to buy a usual thing like footwear and never came back. Imagine how it must have been for her to not know for four days what had happened to her husband?

Like R39, every woman who lost her husband can describe the day when her husband was taken away or died. R57 too clearly remembered the day her husband got killed. R57 reported her age to be 30-35 years and lived with her 2 daughters in Srinagar. While the elder daughter stayed at home, the younger one was studying. The house in which R57 lived was owned jointly with her in-laws who had shifted out. She used to be engaged in embroidery work

till a year ago, but was not engaged in any paid work for income at the time of her interview. A year ago, her son (who had studied till 8th class) passed away. She herself had studied till 3rd class and had married by choice. Her husband died 21 years ago. Although she had tried to seek redress for her husband's death, she did not receive any benefit/compensation from Government. She lived with her parental family for 10 years after her husband's death. Her brother was supportive and helped in her household expenses. An NGO supported the education of her daughters. Describing the day her husband was killed, R57 shared,

"It was 27 February and the month of Ramadan 1993. I was bed ridden as bullets had hit me. My husband was with me. Suddenly, my sister-in-law came and told her brother that, 'a crackdown⁶ has started.' My husband wore his pheran⁷ and left the room. I felt uneasiness in my heart. My grandfather and grandmother were there. And I was pregnant. Then I came to know, men were being paraded in a garden nearby. My husband's aunt came up to me and asked me if I wanted to have a look at the parade. I said yes. She then placed a chair in front of a window and I was able to see that garden. Suddenly someone shouted that my husband has been arrested from Minister Ali Sagar's house. I wondered how it was possible! Five minutes ago he was with me. But then someone shouted that he was hiding in his own house. After hearing this I felt restless. Military didn't allow us to move. Somebody then shouted that my husband and another man had been martyred. Initially I considered it as a rumour. But then police came and enquired about my husband. They took the bodies to police control room and from there, bodies were carried to Idgah.⁸ There I had a last glimpse of him. Then whole of our locality was mourning as two youths had been martyred. We all assembled at one place and started mourning. I was pregnant and

⁶ Crackdown: a phrase used for checking and identification process followed by armed personnel to capture militants or people under suspicion. This involved restriction of public movement in a specific geographical area, followed by search and identification operation involving each house and family.

⁷ Pheran: A traditional attire of Kashmiris in winter season. It is a long warm outer garment.

⁸ Idgah: a place for public prayers.

⁵ It is a place in Srinagar.

three months later my younger daughter was born. My elder daughter was three years old when she lost her father. I was just 15. I couldn't realise what had happened to me. Soon people left and I began to realise that I had lost something and, that too, forever" (R57, P14:251).

Imagine the moments when she must have been wishing that the one who was found, arrested, or killed was not her husband. Imagine the moment when she saw the last glimpse of her husband. Imagine all that might have been going through her mind when she knew that she was left with the responsibility of her children, as her husband was no more.

R57 also shared her views on life of women who did not know whether their husbands were alive or not, since no information was available about those who had disappeared.

"The one whose husband disappears, her problems will decrease only when her husband is in front of her. The one whose [husband] dies, they know there is no chance of coming back. But for the one who disappears, she [the wife] spends her life in finding him. One of my cousins disappeared... for 18 years, we have not known where he has been. 18 years ago, [one day] he received a call, went outside and disappeared. His Janaza⁹ was offered in his absence some time back." (R57, P14:387).

Does the waiting period of 18 years seem long to you? What choices do you think the family had who waited for so long? Imagine the different thoughts that must have crossed the minds of the family members as they tried to make sense of what might have happened? And loomed ahead was the fact that they had to carry on with their lives.

As women struggle with their lives as single parents, there would inevitably be moments when they miss their partner.

"On Eid, I miss him a lot. If he was here with us, then there would a bit more happiness. Just for son, I have to bring things, the way customs here are. But suddenly my mood is upset. It's not that kind of happiness which should be there. Because one person is

missed. One person from the family is missed. (ghar ke ek bande ki kamee hotee hai)" (R42, P22:213).

R42, 35-36 years old, lived with her son (enrolled in a graduate course) in Srinagar. She had studied till 10th and had a salaried job at the time of her interview. She lived in the same house as her in-laws' family where everyone managed expenses separately. R42 had a good and supportive relationship with her mother-in-law as long as she was alive. Her husband went missing in 1993. R42 was 16 years old when she got married and 17 when her husband disappeared. She had applied for redress but there had been no helpful outcome of this. She was not receiving pension through any of the Government schemes. She also owned a shop which belonged to her husband. The electricity bill was being paid by her brother-in-law who lived in the same house. She had an APL ration card and had applied for a BPL one. Two NGOs were supporting her occasionally in different ways. In past, she had also participated in events organised by one of the NGOs.

There are many people with the kind of experiences that have been shared by participants in my research. They paid a price for national safety and security. They paid a price for living in a zone where groups and the State were at war with each other. Although that phase has gone, people living in several parts of India continue to assume that Kashmiris are terrorists and it is okay for the Government to control them through various means. It is necessary to challenge these assumptions by knowing more about people in Kashmir. But how would the voice of women from Kashmir reach others? R42 shared what follows:

"...we give these interviews because we see a hope that 'something might happen through them'. Through you, our voice (humaaree baat) might reach somewhere. There a hope that one sees that maybe our voice would reach the Govt. Maybe the Govt. would do something for us, would find them [i.e. people who have disappeared]. They [i.e. the Government] would listen to our requests." (R42, P22: 799).

Her narrative reflects her hope that with repetitive focus on concerns of widows, Government may take some action for those families where a person is reported to be missing.

⁹ Janaza: Funeral

These experiences suggest that the readers, especially non-Kashmiris, reflect further on their perceptions and opinions. Some of these are discussed in the next section.

Reflections and Implications for 'Indians'

During the times when we are caught between various dominant definitions of nationalism and patriotism, it is important to understand that who is or has been impacted by these definitions. We must try to know more about people who become victims of processes that are followed for national safety and security. While it is easy to forget or overlook what is happening far away from our homes and families, let us not deny the fact that there are families who have lived (and probably continue to live) in such insecurity and worry and it may be difficult for them to easily trust the 'system' or the State for protection and well-being. We have to challenge the obsession with borders, as suggested by Kazi (2009, p.199) when she states,

"...the 'national' obsession with borders and boundaries being played out in Kashmir must end, an obsession involving not just citizens but also soldiers."

Kazi (2009) also points out how the concept of unitary nation disregards plurality, and how violence seems to have become an integral part of producing a nation. While this violence continues in some parts of India, the details on the same may not be accessible to everyone. And even if the details are provided through media, it is important that we are able to check the credibility of the sources as well as the information. Doing so, however, often becomes a challenge in the post-truth world where fake news is being spread to promote and strengthen certain perspectives. As citizens of a country, we do need to ask ourselves whether and to what extent do we support the national narrative of protecting national security at any cost and disregard the idea of human security? We also need to question the events when outsiders, migrants and refugees are considered as non-entities and unwelcomed in the country. If as human beings, we do not respect the rights of others and do not offer them the safety that they deserve, then on what basis do we expect our own rights to be protected when we need assurance of survival and safety? When we justify violence and oppression on others, then are we saying that it is okay for others also

to oppress us if they think of us as a threat to their ideas and nation?

We cannot deny the fact that the Kashmir conflict and isolation of people of Kashmir is strengthened by the mistrust, ignorance, and hatred that some (or many) 'Indians' show towards the Kashmiri community. The collective memories of 'Indians' (based largely on the movies and news from the 1990s) of Kashmir as a place where Indian army fights terrorists, overlooks the turmoil and changes that the place has gone through. To change the national narrative that justifies killings, we need to perhaps become more open to the other views. It is important to be open to different opinions and challenge what we may think is the 'truth'. When the media shows *'...the carefully chosen, convenient images on TV...'* (Peer 2010, p. 44),¹⁰ we should be questioning that. We should, perhaps, emphasise on the exposure to suppressed aspects (information) if that can help in evolution of *'a new collective memory that is compatible with peace making process'* (Jarymowicz & Bar-Tal 2006, 384). Maybe, we should sometimes defy the ideology of nationalism and think of others as human beings with rights. We need to listen to experiences of people and try to understand how these experiences have impacted lives of so many people that we have not met but only have opinions about. We have to question the fact that if we do believe Kashmiris to be an integral part of India and if they are citizens of this country, then how do we justify the violence, killings and humiliation that they experience?

Conclusion

Experiences of people living in Kashmir as well as other zones of conflict have been documented in diverse ways. These stories, however, are often presented in the manner that aligns with the view or agenda of their writers. This paper, based on my research with widows in Kashmir, aimed to share some reflections, and hence certain implications for people living outside Kashmir. My agenda was to urge the readers to know more and to read more. My agenda, undoubtedly, was also to emphasise on the fact that people living in Kashmir should be perceived as human beings who have rights like anyone else. Therefore, it is necessary that the State considers itself as

¹⁰ The article first appeared in the newspaper- Economic Times, 9 August 2010

a duty bearer towards them and not just as an institution to maintain law and order.

Acknowledgements

This paper is based on my doctoral research that was completed under guidance of Dr. Neelam Sukhramani and Dr. Achal Bhagat. I am grateful to Ms. Iqra and Ms. Zahida for their assistance in this research.

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