Conception of Peace among the Youth of Kashmir: An Exploratory Study

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Abstract- **The Kashmir conflict is characterized by its intricate blend of territorial and ideological dimensions. Territorially, it revolves around the disputed region claimed by both India and Pakistan, each vying for control. Ideologically, Pakistan views Kashmir's integration as pivotal to the fulfillment of the "Two Nation Theory" formulated by Jinnah in 1940, thereby considering it an essential component of its national narrative. This study endeavors to investigate the conceptualization of peace among the youth of Kashmir within this multifaceted context, along with the challenges they encounter. Employing a qualitative methodology, data was gathered through semi-structured interviews with 40 participants. Upon exploring the question of peace in Kashmir, diverse perspectives emerged among participants depending on their interest and identities, position of power. The study came across various conceptions of peace like positive, negative, internal and external. However, the dominant understanding of peace among youth is informed the John Galtung's conception of positive peace.**

Keywords: **Peace, Youth, Kashmir, Conflict, India and Pakistan.**

Introduction

The inception of the Kashmir conflict dates back to 1947, following the conclusion of British colonial rule, resulting in the establishment of independent nations, India and Pakistan. Despite the passage of 76 years, efforts to resolve the conflict have proven futile, leading to three major wars between the two nations in 1947, 1965, and 1999, all of which revolved around the Kashmir region. Presently, India administers approximately 55% of Jammu and Kashmir's territory, Pakistan controls 30%, while China governs 15%, with Pakistan acknowledging China's sovereignty over Aksai Chin and the uninhabited Trans-Karakoram Tract since 1963 (Margolis, 1999).

The Kashmir conflict is characterized by its intricate blend of territorial and ideological dimensions. Territorially, it involves the persistent dispute between India and Pakistan over control of the Kashmir region. Ideologically, Pakistan perceives the integration of Kashmir as integral to fulfilling the "Two Nation Theory" advocated by Jinnah in 1940, thus considering it an unfinished agenda of partition (Krishan, 1998). Additionally, the issue holds significant identity implications for India, contributing positively to its secular image, particularly as Jammu and Kashmir represents the largest Muslim-majority union territory within India. Internally, the Modi government's revocation of the special autonomy granted to the state under Article 370 of the Indian Constitution has exacerbated tensions, endangering the cultural and societal fabric of Jammu and Kashmir, especially in the Kashmir Valley.

Despite numerous international, regional, and bilateral diplomatic efforts, the Kashmir conflict remains unresolved, perpetuating a state of elusive peace for its inhabitants. Initially, the conflict primarily manifested as non-violent resistance; however, the emergence of armed insurgency in the 1980s precipitated a shift towards violence. The state's response has predominantly been militaristic in nature, resulting in widespread victimization across all demographic cohorts, particularly the youth. Casualties from armed insurgency and state countermeasures have surpassed 45,000 individuals (Jacob, 2017). In this context, this study endeavors to investigate the youth's conceptualization of peace, its presence or absence, and the challenges associated with its attainment.

Methodology

The emergence of Peace Research within the realm of social science marks a departure from traditional state-centric positivist methodologies, which often overlooked the nuanced lived experiences of individuals. Instead, Peace Research recognized the potential for transformative change through the empowerment of people informed by their own experiences, thus conceptualizing individuals as key stakeholders in the pursuit of peace. This paradigm shift challenged prevailing epistemologies centered on state actors and advocated for alternative approaches to knowledge production.

In addressing the research problem at hand, which necessitated a comprehensive exploration of youth perceptions and experiences, a qualitative research methodology was deemed appropriate. Qualitative research facilitates detailed

descriptions of the subject matter, emphasizing a deep understanding of the social world through the narratives and perspectives of research participants. As Bryman (2008) suggests, qualitative research endeavors to capture the richness of human experience through thick descriptions.Data collection for this study was conducted using semi-structured In-depth Interview Guides, allowing for flexibility and depth in eliciting participants' insights. Furthermore, the historical method was employed to contextualize the problem within its historical trajectory. In selecting the research field, four districts within the Kashmir division were chosen out of a total of ten. These districts included Baramulla, Shopian, Pulwama, and Kupwara.

Regarding sampling methodology, non-probability sampling was utilized, specifically employing the purposive sampling technique. The deliberate selection of 40 youth aged 15-24 years, with 10 participants from each district, ensured a diverse representation of perspectives. The sample comprised both male and female participants, aiming to capture a cross-sectional view of youth experiences. Of the total sample, 15 participants were female, and 25 were male, representing a range of educational backgrounds, urban and rural residences, employment statuses, and occupational roles, including both the employed and unemployed, as well as daily wage laborers.

Discussion and Analysis

According to the 2011 census conducted by the government of India, approximately 27% of the total population of Jammu and Kashmir falls within the youth demographic, aged between 15 to 29 years old (India, 2016). Ashok Bhan underscores the significance of acknowledging a new social class emerging within protracted conflicts like that in Kashmir – the victims of the conflict. These individuals, primarily comprising the youth, bear the enduring scars of alienation and suffering, which are not easily healed regardless of their causes. Indeed, the youth constitute the primary demographic group most profoundly impacted by the conflict in the Kashmir region, both as instigators and recipients of its violence" (Bhan, 2013, pp. 143-173). Throughout the history of Kashmir's tumultuous conflicts, whether during the insurgency of the 1990s or the street violence following the Amarnath Land row, the youth have consistently been at the forefront. They have played a pivotal role in leading various violent episodes, emerging as the visible representatives of such turmoil (Reshi, 2021). Consequently, akin to other conflict zones globally, young males aged between 15 to 29 in Kashmir assume dual roles as both chief victims and perpetrators of violence.

Understanding of Peace

The concept of peace is subject to contestation, with its interpretations shaped by the interests, relative power, and identities of those defining it. In the domain of Peace and Conflict Studies, various conceptualizations of peace are recognized, encompassing negative peace, positive peace, and both internal and external dimensions (Richmond, 2008). Upon exploring the question of peace in Kashmir, diverse perspectives emerged among participants depending on their interest and identities. Individuals, predominantly comprising daily laborers and college students, largely defined peace in negative terms, equating it solely with the cessation of violence, unrest, and proxy wars. For example, one student from Pulwama, enrolled in Commerce studies, articulated;

"Peace as the cessation of ongoing violence in the region and the mitigation of the looming threat of future conflicts between India and Pakistan"[1].

Similarly, a worker from southern Kashmir associated peace with the absence of violence, expressing a desire to pursue daily livelihood without disruptions caused by frequent shutdowns, search operations and curfews. He lamented the pervasive impact of the conflict on his ability to sustain himself economically. He says;

"Peace is when I would be able to earn my livelihood daily without any trouble. The frequent shutdowns and curfews have adversely impacted my prospects of making both ends meet. In this part of Kashmir, we only get a few normal days. The conflict has destroyed everything"[2].

Conversely, a Master's student of history from the same region linked peace to the cessation of violence and the restoration of normalcy, particularly in the context of academic pursuits. He said:

"Peace for me is when my degree gets completed in its due course of time. Here a degree with two years prescribed time takes two more extra years for its completion, thus destroying our future. When such unfortunate delays and extensions are removed, it will be peace for me"[3].

Therefore this subset of participants has limited understanding of peace, I.e. negative peace. They have more to do with normal everyday life than where should Kashmir politically proceed to.   Conversely, a subset of participants, largely post-graduates, adopted a broader understanding of peace akin to perspectives articulated by figures such as Baruch Spinoza, the Dalai Lama, and Johan Galtung. They viewed peace not merely as the absence of violence but as

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[1]Pulwama town, 29 July, 2021

[2]Shopian town,25 July, 2021

[3]Pulwama, 30 July, 2021

encompassing elements such as human rights, freedom, and justice. For instance, a female university participant engaged in post-graduate studies in history from North Kashmir delineated peace as

"The unfettered freedom to traverse public spaces. Specifically, I envision peace as the ability to stroll through the bustling Lal Chowk of Srinagar at 10 a.m. devoid of any apprehension or anxiety" [4].

On the other hand, another participant hailing from Baramulla, also a university student, emphasized the intrinsic connection between peace and human rights. He underscored that

"The realization of peace hinges upon the unimpeded exercise of fundamental human rights by all inhabitants of the region, without discrimination. I think the unequivocal protection and implementation of these rights for Kashmiris are imperative for fostering genuine peace" [5].

Furthermore, certain participants, particularly those directly impacted by conflict, associated peace with the attainment of justice. Those who had experienced loss or harm due to violence articulated the necessity of impartial accountability and redress for victims as integral to achieving peace. This sentiment was exemplified by a female participant from south Kashmir, who tragically lost her brother in street violence, emphasized the integral relationship between justice and peace. She contended that

"Justice is inseparable from peace and essential for restoring societal harmony. Without addressing the prevailing "Gunda raj" (lawlessness), genuine peace would remain elusive. I assert that justice serves as an essential remedy for the numerous wrongs perpetrated by the state" [6]

Additionally, some participants, including doctoral students, articulated a nuanced understanding of peace linked to the realization of individuals' full potential. They highlighted the need to address systemic repression and empower individuals to fulfill their mental and physical capacities, as opposed to viewing peace solely as the absence of overt violence. One participant from South Kashmir articulated a nuanced understanding of peace, transcending mere cessation of violence. He said:

"Peace, for me, is not a mere end of violence. For me, it means that when every person in Kashmir will not have to face the unintended and slow repression by the oppressive political structures, like AFSAFA and PSA, of the union territory and can realize his/her potential fully"[7].

Theoretically speaking, Galtung associated peace with the comprehensive fulfillment of an individual's mental and physical capabilities, a viewpoint echoed by a minority of participants, notably doctoral students. For such participants, peace entails liberation from the subtle yet enduring repression imposed by oppressive political structures within the union territory, thereby enabling each individual to realize their fullest potential.

In summary, the study revealed a spectrum of understandings of peace, ranging from narrow conceptions focused solely on the absence of violence to broader frameworks encompassing human rights, justice, and the fulfillment of individual potential. These diverse perspectives underscore the complexity of peace discourse and highlight the multifaceted nature of peacebuilding efforts in conflict-affected contexts.

Conclusion

Various understandings of peace, including negative, positive, internal, and external peace exist Peace and Conflict Studies. Johan Vincent Galtung is the primary originator of the field of Peace and Conflict Studies (Brewer, 2010). He has formulated numerous significant theories and concepts in this field, including theories on conflict and conflict resolution, as well as notions such as structural violence, peacebuilding, negative and positive peace, and more. His many works from 1964, 1969, and 1990 were deemed pertinent to the study. Johan Galtung initially introduced the words negative and positive peace in the editorial of the Journal of Peace Research in 1964. During that period, this idea of peace posed a challenge to the prevailing concept of peace research, which characterized peace solely as the lack of war and concentrated on overt violence. He described negative peace as the lack of violence and war, and positive peace as the unification of human society (1964, p. 2). Galtung suggests that peace research should expand its scope to analyze the underlying causes that lead to conflict, rather than only aiming to eliminate or decrease violence. He prioritizes postive peace in his efforts. Both of his conceptions of peace, along with others, have been reflected by study in the understandings youth vis-à-vis peace. Youth's varying perspectives on peace are mostly influenced by their curiosity, influence, and self-perception. They discussed peace as more than merely the absence of violence, incorporating elements such as justice, freedom, equality, and harmony. They described it as the existence of numerous favorable conditions inside society. In short, the study underscores the importance of recognizing the

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[4]Baramulla, 02 August, 2021

[5] Baramulla 03August, 2021

[6] Kupwara, 06 September 2021

[7]Kashmir University, 24 July, 2021

internal and external dimensions of peace and acknowledges the influence of individual interests, relative power dynamics, and identity in shaping understandings of peace among youth.

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