

The Hidden Cost of Dissent, A Case Study

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Abstract

The internal disturbance in Kashmir valley, which has dragged on for three decades, has had a deleterious impact on the masses of the region in terms of livelihood, progress and dignified living. This silent disaster has been generally played down by the mainstream media. High unemployment, collapsed public education system, excesses by the security forces, pressures from mutually antagonistic powers, explosive growth in trauma cases, disappearance of youngsters, anxiety related deaths, increased cases of rapes and widening distrust with the security forces, disruption of privacy, disruption of the otherwise rhythmic life of the fringe communities of nomads etc. have deeply affected the collective psyche of the valley. A case study was carried out in the hamlets south of Qasigund on the Khider River to gauge the impact of the disturbances.

Keywords: Qasigund, Trauma, Firen, Gujjars, Hubris

Introduction

Kashmir region, which accounts for 15.73% of area of the northern most state of Jammu and Kashmir, 55% of the population with 6888475¹ people as per the latest census of which 96.4% are Muslims, is by far a political question worth a few agitated moments in the somber academic circles. Truth has many facets and the human facet of the whole gory story generally goes obfuscated in the ongoing battle of nerves. In the high profile geopolitical cross fire, the collateral damage in terms of human capital turns out to be mere statistic of passing interest to the multinational players and the multi dimensional vested interests.

The psychosomatic impact of the armed struggle which began in 1989 as a resultant expression of a jumble of sociopolitical convulsions, with alleged cross border patronage, has dragged a long and bloody trail, indelibly impacting the collective psyche of an ancient nation in more ways than one. From the basic and elemental human perspective, the matters at stake are dignity, integrity and self esteem. Familial autonomy and clannish hubris are the basic ingredients for societal advancement. When those pillars are shattered, the society will face a grave existential crisis. The larger questions of power, borders and sovereignty are not the immediate concern of the common man, whereas a dignified existence in a hopeful environment indeed is.

The fall of Kashmir from being a self reliant and dynamic social entity to utter gloom has been stunning and even staggering. It is indeed one of the oldest inhabited parts of the world. Neolithic sites as old as 3000 B.C. have been unearthed in the region. Till the 8th century A.D., Kashmir had been the intellectual and cultural capital of larger India. Shaivism evolved here into a concrete shape rooted on a robust philosophical foundation, leading the rest of the subcontinent. Also Kashmir had been the vibrant launching pad of Buddhism to Tibet, China and Central Asia. During the period of Asoka both Hinduism and Buddhism flourished in the valley with equal vigor. Buddhist councils convened by Kanishka in Kashmir had, like the council of Nicaea in the Christendom, defined the socio-spiritual kinetics of the newly fanged missionary religion. Though Islam spread like wild fire from the Arabian peninsula in 622 A.D. in all directions, it took several centuries for the monotheistic religion to feel its way to the valley. Sufi mystics from Persia had silently been winning over the masses through their piety, honesty and mystic charm. But Islam became the official religion when Rinchen, a Tibetan Buddhist of royal blood who had come to the valley as a refugee, maneuvered himself to the throne in the 14th century, as destiny would have it. To follow the religion of the ruled, he chose to embrace Hinduism, but being casteless, the Hindu clerics refused to induct him into the ruling class of Kshatriya fold. Thus he was driven to Islam under the

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How to cite this article: Paikada A. The hidden cost of dissent, A case study. *J Adv Res Humani Social Sci* 2018; 5(1): 25-30.

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tutelage of a Sufi ascetic of substance and grit, Shah Mir.

The stoic suffering of ordinary Kashmiri dates back to the distant centuries. When the Mogul rule in Kashmir eclipsed into extinction in 1753, Abdul Khan Isk Aquasi, invaded Kashmir and established Durrani Empire of Afghanistan. Afghan rule in Kashmir was extremely cruel and oppressive. Locals were extorted from, captured and forced into slavery during this period. In 1819 the empire perished and the conquering armies of the Sikhs under Ranjit Singh took over. As the people had suffered much under Afghan rule, they welcomed the invader. However, the new ruling class proved to be more oppressive, even suppressing the religious freedom. In the aftermath of the Sepoy mutiny of 1857, the Treaty of Amritsar pushed the territory into the hands of the Dogras as a reward for siding with the British in the mutiny. Still the interests of Kashmiri population remained muffled and ignored. Gulab Singh cleverly capitalized on the first Anglo Sikh war of 1845. .

The Persian connection brought prosperity and diversity to the local economy. From a farming community, Kashmir graduated to a powerhouse of action, manufacturing refined goods that catered to the classy and choosy aristocracy of the world. There is a ready market for apples, barley, cherries, corn, millet, oranges, rice, peaches, pears, saffron, sorghum, vegetables, and wheat produced in the farming belt of the valley. Manufactured exports include handicrafts, rugs, and shawls. Mining activities are still at a rudimentary stage. It is believed that precious stones and hydrocarbons could be mined out from the sedimentary rock formations of the region, transmuting the ailing economy. But that is a long way away, under a peaceful and conducive political climate.

Life in the sylvan hinterland of Qasigund

The recent developments have altogether blunted the cherished hopes for a better future. In fact, all cultures and all individuals pull on against the odds propelled by the mirage of scintillating hope. Here is a case study analyzing the on the ground realities and real life situations in the seemingly dreamy villages scattered around Qasigund, one of the eight blocks in Anantnag district, which comprises of 39 villages and 12000 families. Qasigund bears the proud epithet, 'the Gateway to Kashmir' as it is the first urban center in the valley when one crosses the Jawahar Tunnel. The total population of Qasigund block is 95169, with men having a slight upper hand, which is the general pattern in North India. It is interesting that 21891 of them are children aged 0 to six. The way these children are conditioned by the war torn society needs specific attention in this study. Another striking aspect of the prevailing social situation

is that only 27964 of the total population are having a regular income and employment, 67205 people have no engagement and practically no income. In the backdrop of the major infrastructure development activities humdrum under way in the valley, the locals are by far kept out of the activities, primarily due to security reasons. Tens of thousands of laborers from Bihar, UP, Gujarat and other parts of the northern plains are engaged on the work sites. This standoff assumes a heinous political dimension when the locals commonly observe that those roads, bridges and railroad are not for them, they are for the army, for those who scatter their lives.

Pre designed questions were employed in the interviews to gauge the depth of suffering and desolation among the ordinary men and women, and their experiences were shared. Major local institutions like schools were visited to observe the teaching learning process and the prospective ramifications thereof. The hamlets selected at random were along the river Khider, a major tributary of the Jhelum, close to its origin, a river formed from the melting snow of the Pir Panchal Ranges which gloves in the gentle vernal sun like an enticing icing on the cake on the blue slopes of the towering ramparts, watering the lush lattice work of verdant orchards. (Name of the hamlet studied is withheld for security reasons.)

As it is almost always the case, local micro cultures are developed under the tender care of edaphic, climatic and geographical foster mothers. Food habits, customs, costumes, taboos, folklores, value systems, legends, rituals, god figure, economic activities, social pyramid etc. evolve under the diktats of the above mentioned parameters. This is until after a more powerful horde of invaders pounces on them and imposes a new set of values and so called right practices.

Kashmir is indeed a melting pot of numerous warlike tribes and nations. The local population has been substantially diluted by the Greeks, Persians, Semitic nations and various central Asian invaders over the past 2400 years. Holger Kerston², the German explorer, holds the studied view that Kashmiris are the lost nation of Israel. But genetic analyses do not substantiate that claim; the plausible way by which he builds the case is engrossing though. In any case, the local communities obviously bear the finger print of all the above mentioned socio cultural sub sets. But the most conspicuous feature of the community is domestic autonomy in terms of food security and sustenance. The government and the corridors of power have almost always been beyond their sphere of interest. The potentates of power have never been a benign presence in their midst.



Figure 1. The Pir Panchal, guarding the hamlets and farmlands

The average holding of a local farmer in the village was found to be about one acre, (the society is not a monolith though, in the prevalent social pyramid Mirs and Bhuts are better off being at the apex of the society) from which he raises his cereals for the whole year. With his cattle and domesticated birds his protein requirements are adequately met. Kitchen garden is an integral part of each household. Pumpkins, cumin, potatoes, spinach, radish, chili, beans, carrots, mustard etc. are extensively planted on the backyard farm, replenishing the soil with domestic manure. Though irrigation is rudimentary, ancient methods are still followed to raise local varieties of paddy along the river. Barter system is still prevalent in the community, any perishable excess produce such as vegetables, is shared with the neighbors. Walnuts, almonds, Apricot, apple and other autumnal crops ensure cash reserves to meet the cultural needs of the family. Though infrastructure is poorly developed and in poor repair, the timeless rural life is not much affected by such constraints.

But there is another class, the landless and the people with small holdings. As business opportunities have altogether petered out and unemployment is at its all time peak, they are faced with the chimera of an existential crisis. People just vanish; they wander far and away into the unknown territories down south to eke out a living, abandoning the security offered by the traditional home range. This, it was

found out, is a psychological response to the unpalatable reality. They just flee the scene, in the remote hope of making a better life. Unemployment and limited space for economic progress become a cankerous social disease. They end up in the southern urban underbellies as petty peddlers, salesmen, hotel boys and unskilled laborers. In fact thousands wander away into the unknown, leaving not a trace as there is no hope for the future at home, to carve out a space for themselves in the sooty urban world. The disappearance of thousands of youngsters has resulted in increased anxiety disorders especially among the womenfolk. From the target hamlet alone ten youngsters had vanished sans a trace over the years, leaving behind a handful of moist memories. Some of them may even end up in the extremist cadres. As one of the village elders pointed out, no matter what decisions are made in the ivory towers, the common man suffers.



Figure 2. Apple garden, main cash crop

Traditional craftsmen work patiently to come out with spectacular garish designs on rugs, mats, shawls, curtains, tapestries and other fabrics. Handmade Cricket bats made of Kashmiri willows are another favorite item from the region. They inherited the art from across the centuries by the creative Persian influence and they improvised and fine tuned the art over time. If they could remain insulated from the political tornadoes raging outside of their self reliant little world, the halcyon life would have been serene and

rhythmic attuned to the colorful march of the seasons.

Development and developed societies are a matter of conjecture and interpretation though. Development is the universal aspiration of every community in the world. It is by far a process of emulation. The less fortunate societies try to ape the facilities and comforts enjoyed by the better off societies and communities. Good roads, power supply, water supply, income generation facilities that know no bounds, and high living standards are the moderate aspirations of most of the communities. However, even in the midst of such opulence people need not have to be happy and satisfied. The busy life in the cities fraught with challenges and competition leaves many people sick and sleepless neurotics. Hence development does not necessarily mean replicating Bombay or Bangalore in the pristine rural habitats tucked deep in the Sylvan mansions.

Affluence is not development. Rich people do not always make successful people. Most of the people burdened by impressive academic qualifications do not live a beautiful life. Rich physical paraphernalia, access to all types of comforts and knowledge do not make people happy and pleased with themselves on the broader time scale.

A developed person is the one who does not carry a black hole inside him. He is the one who bears the burden of life lightly and gracefully, the one who shares the light inside him with all around. He is not nagged by wants. He is the person, who is satisfied with what he has and what he is endowed with, receiving the vicissitudes of life with poise and unruffled inner peace. Instead of haggard looking hungry individuals, people should have their inner peace and should share it with the world without.

Hence developed community is the one that provides the physical and cultural environment to bring out the best in each individual and weed out the worst in him. By developing a community, it should be provided with the right political cultural and social climate to help the individuals blossom into creative and developed personalities fearing nothing and caring for all forms of life. It is indeed a long term process in which a great deal of psychological and cultural rehabilitation is needed. The primitive agrarian communities were nearer to that stage well before modernity gate crashed into them. Even within the present physical and psychological constraints, the effort is to design a developmental paradigm in which the right environment and social climate is provided so that each person would blossom into effulgent human beings. Across generations the communities of the valley had worked out a system of sustainable survival, which was fairly insulated from governmental machinations, which was somewhat in the neighborhood of such a developed social paradigm defined within the local environmental imperatives.



Figure 3. Kitchen garden, an integral part of each homestead

Kashmiri society cannot be juxtaposed on other societies on the sub continent. It has a robust system developed over the centuries which ensures adequate emotional and psychological props at home. Kitchen with the housewife presiding over, is the centre piece of the family. Every night the dinner service is preceded by an open session where every member of the family, irrespective of gender and age, assembles around the hearth, vents his spleen speaking it out. They listen, understand and emotionally support each other. Dowry system and the craze for gold are unknown in the valley. The latest developments have seriously eroded this healthy and strong familial bond as the center cannot hold anymore. The traditional invisible boundaries that defined the dos and do nots, have thawed away in the heat of the day. Now the age old equilibrium has been shattered. The greatest disaster zone in the whole context is probably children's education, on which the future of the nation depends. The education polices, infrastructure development, health care, environmental care, capacity building, income generation facilities etc. should have been perceived and designed with this long term objective.

Education cannot be the mechanical process of stuffing the sensorium with information and knowledge. It is obviously the process of carving out perfect and enlightened individuals. Education is the resultant effect of a process by which one's character, approach to the world and attitudes are defined. To make this process prefect and impeccable, the teachers have to chart their own lives with a missionary

zeal. Also a healthy and inspiring academic milieu has to be offered to the students.

It is evident that mainstream education process has altogether collapsed in the valley, eternally blunting the competitive edge of the youngsters on the job market. In the local government school, which was visited, there were seven teachers and seven students as well. On the day of visit even those seven students on record were not present. When the mainstream education left behind a diabolic vacuum, it was occupied by numerous public schools. Such schools function in very claustrophobic ambience and do not have the necessary standards in terms of teacher's qualification and infrastructure. Except for a few renowned schools in the urban areas, almost all the schools are operating in small houses on rent. All of them claim the CBSE affiliation, and yet there is no uniformity of syllabus. In fact, none of the schools meet the basic standards to such a marketable affiliation. Each school follows its own policies regarding text books, religion, civics, and national spirit. This educational pandemonium is bound to inflict long standing harm to the larger interests of the state and the country. This situation should be a matter of great concern as children (0-6 yrs) make more than 20% of the population. Even this education of sorts is for all practical purposes, the preserve of the middle class. The vulnerable sections have to forgo education altogether. It was found that dropout rate in the region ranges from 11 to 14% in the village, which is one of the highest in the country.

For the school going children, teaching learning process has turned out to be a rickety intermittent one. Either the security forces order the indefinite closure of the educational institutions for security reasons or the extremists call for protracted total strike resulting in long term interruption of classes. Smooth continuity of academic process is a thing of the past. Last year one hundred working days were lost like this. During the study week, the schools in the village functioned only for two days owing to a call for *hartal*. The net result is that quality and mission of education have plummeted to abysmal levels in the region and the ramifications thereof will be far-reaching.

Stress related psychological problems and consequent wastage of human resources are an alarming issue as of now. When the prevailing ground realities are too harsh to cope up with, mind reverts to its own version of reality and settles there. More than 50,000 mental illness cases have been registered at Government Psychiatric Diseases Hospital (GPDH), Srinagar, in 2017. The past three years recorded 176996 cases at outpatient department (OPD) while 2650 patients were admitted in the hospital. Studies show that the most affected are the landless and the vulnerable sections that have no economic base to fall back on.

The study, done by the Institute of Mental Health and Neurosciences (IMHANS), Kashmir,³ showed that 11.3 percent of adult population suffers from mental illness in the valley. This figure is much above the national average of 7.3 percent. It is interesting that as far as other health indicators such as child mortality, neo-natal mortality and underweight of the new born are concerned, the region is better off. The atmosphere of panic takes a heavy toll in the form of depression, masochism, suicidal tendencies etc. In fact one of the former extremists was seen on the country roads moving about like a somnambulist, asking everybody what was time. As the living conditions are otherwise pristine and healthy, the people in the study area were physically in a good condition.

Rather than education and human resource development, the prime concern of the parents of the region is safety, security and dignity of the girls. The locals believe that sex starved army and paramilitary forces forcefully take away girls and women for sex abuse. Though no woman came forward to confess such gory experiences, villagers insist that many of their women have been subjected to such atrocities. It was found that at least three women died of dread when the army marched in knocking at their doors. Their angst is not about the fate of the country or the destiny of the line of control. Safety dignity and modesty of the girls matters, nothing else does. Male escort on all sides is assured when girls have to venture out to the town during unavoidable situations. Some of the pubescent girls had to give up studies owing to fears about their safety.

The legendary midnight knock, immortalized in the psychedelic art movies of the west in the sixties, is another living nightmare. Men in uniform knock at the door and demand identity proofs, just like that. One has no sovereignty in one's own home. The locals say that it has to be the other way around; the visitors should show their id proof, before barging in. These unwelcome incursions turn out to be a frontal affront on the self esteem and dignity of the man of the house. Furthermore, the locals are miserably caught between the devil and the sea. If they are lenient to the army, the extremists will target them, if they are soft to the extremists the army will target them. Life is a tricky tight rope walk over a treacherous slough. Houses are bombed and razed down; there is no explanation, no compensation. Individual suffers, the machinery rolls on. People are just killed, leaving behind no explanation. While this study was on the army surrounded a nearby village of Churat and in the shootout three local boys were killed and 14 others were seriously injured. Not single extremist was nabbed or hurt in the incident.

The prospects are still gruesome during the regular combing operations of the army. The villagers are en masse made to assemble at a common place under the grim surveillance of

the men in uniform. Then the troops search and rummage each village dwelling. At least some of the men in uniform avail of this opportunity to pinch off and loot the valuables at home. There is no mechanism to complain or to react. On the basis of tip offs or false information, many houses have been rounded up by the army and destroyed using grenades. There is no compensation, no apology after destroying the house of private individuals based on false information or suspicion. Even closed and deserted houses are targeted and destroyed on the grounds of suspicion. Indeed suspicion is an omnipotent ruse to justify almost anything. Again individuals are abducted and killed, on the grounds of suspicion. When the fundamental human right to live and to live with dignity is stashed under the rug, the impotent question that the villager asks to an unfeeling rampart regularly is this, why should the army be amidst us spying on and spoiling our private life, they should be deployed along the porous borders to arrest to movement of arms, ammunition, contrabands and mercenaries.

Apart from the political middle class and the mute and vulnerable peasantry, the fringe groups such as Gujjars are faced with an enigma, till date they have never been under the radar of the powerful. For thousands of years they have been on the move in tune with the seasons of the year with their kith and kin, with their cattle and sheep. No political borders bothered them, no mundane possessions smothered them. The security forces also had found them to be harmless and often very useful informers. However, cow vigilante groups, bolstered by the right wing political polarization in the country, are pouncing on them,

disrupting an ancient and sustainable mode of life which is altogether apolitical.

The traditional costume of a Kashmiri, *firen*, is designed to fight relentless and ferocious winters. It is a rough oversized woolen cassock which keeps a bundle of warm air inside. And there is an ingenious heating mechanism known as *kangri*, which is a traditional fire pot with a non conducting outer frame of rattan. The people are trained to keep the device inside of the firen without catching fire from the silently smoldering and fulminating charcoal. The self same kangri is now inside of their proud bosoms, with red hot embers, amid the encircling gloom without.

The psychological dichotomy between the rulers and the ruled is already yawning wide. The ongoing atrocities will only contribute to perpetuate this divide. Brute force will not suffice to induce love and trust and nowhere in the history of civilization terror could tether the will of the people.

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Date of Submission: 2018-04-21

Date of Acceptance: 2018-05-14