Kashmir Conflict Beyond Meta Narratives:

An Analysis of Socio-Psychological Implications of Indian Firing in District Poonch of Azad Jammu & Kashmir

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Abstract:

This study focuses on the socio-psychological implications of Indian firing in the Poonch district of Azad Jammu & Kashmir, aiming to move beyond the commonly held Meta narratives surrounding the Kashmir conflict. The Kashmir conflict has been predominantly analyzed through political and historical lenses, often overlooking the complex and deeply rooted socio-psychological consequences on affected populations. By delving into this aspect, this study aims to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the multifaceted nature of the conflict. The research employs an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis approach, drawing on interviews and focus group discussions to explore the lived experiences and psychological effects on individuals and communities affected by Indian firing. The data collected has been analyzed using thematic analysis, allowing for the identification of recurring patterns, emerging themes, and discourses. The study finds that the Indian firing in the Poonch district has far-reaching impacts on individuals, families, and communities, leading to trauma, fear, and displacement. By highlighting these socio-psychological implications, this study seeks to shed light on the subjective experiences of those directly impacted by the firing. In conclusion, this study aims to contribute to the existing literature on the Kashmir conflict by extending the analysis beyond conventional Meta narratives. By exploring the socio-psychological implications of Indian firing in the Poonch district, it seeks to provide a deeper understanding of the multifaceted nature of the conflict and pave the way for more comprehensive approaches to address the human dimensions of the Kashmir conflict.

Key Words: Kashmir conflict, LoC, Displacement, Psychological Implications, Trauma

Introduction:

The health and well-being of the communities are highly affected by the presence of war and prolonged conflict. Along with the disruption of the socio/economic fabric of the nation, it also contributes to the destruction of communities and families(Murthy & Lakshminarayana, 2006). The same is the case with communities and families residing near the Line of Control (LOC) in Pakistani-administered Kashmir. The most discussed human casualties in the form of deaths in firing from across are just the tip of the iceberg. Since the partition of the Sub-Continent into

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Pakistan and India in 1947 (Cohen, 2002), the unresolved dispute over Kashmir between two nuclear-armed neighbours in South Asia –Pakistan and India-has been a cause of constant tension for the people living there (The Carter Center, 2002). The people living in the LOC adjacent areas in Azad Jammu & Kashmir have been subject to the outbreak of firing, shelling and bombing from across the LoC for the last 7 to 8 decades. This prolonged conflict has adversely affected all aspects of their life. The unprovoked, brutal and spontaneous firing from across the LOC on the local communities has caught them in the socio-economic and psychological web.

It is a well-known and well-established fact that the protracted conflicts whenever and wherever happened, not only undermined the socio-economic well-being of the people, but also left a huge toll on the mental health of the people who are the direct victims and sufferers in such violent conflicts, and Kashmir is no exception in this regard. There is no denying the fact that the avenues of socio-economic development for the people living in the areas near LOC have been closed due to on-and-off firing across the LOC. Consequently, it puts them under severe stress, trauma, fear and anxiety-related psychological duress. Almost all aspects of life in Kashmir are linked to direct and indirect consequences of conflict. These experiences of bearing the consequences of conflict have been embedded in the everyday lives of the people residing in areas close to the LOC; however, the complexities and intricacies related to conflict experienced by the people in their daily lives, have been overshadowed by the metanarratives surrounding state, security and sovereignty.

As discussed by Seymour (2003), to thoroughly analyse and get a deeper understanding of the various dimensions of the conflict, it is essential to complement the political dimensions of the conflict with the socio/psychological and economic dimensions. But this aspect in the case of the Kashmir conflict has been missed. Combining socio/psychological dimensions with political aspects of the conflict helps in getting deeper insights with regard to conflict and its management, as well as resolution (Seymour, 2003). The people of Kashmir have often been forgotten in the assessment of conflict as the socio-economic and psychological dimensions of the suffering of the people associated with the conflict have been sidelined, ignored and subordinated by the meta-narratives of state security, border security and sovereignty. As such, this paper intends to focus on micro-narratives of the people of Kashmir, surrounding their everyday lives. The idea behind this paper is driven by a need to fill the literature gap left by an asymmetric focus of most of the literature on Kashmir on issues of high politics such as territorial, geo-political and geo-strategic dimensions, armed struggle, without taking into account the detailed intricacies of the complications of everyday life including socio-economic and psychological sufferings of the people.

Methodology:

The research was an attempt to explore the socio-economic and psychological sufferings and problems of the people living in the areas near LOC who have severely experienced and confronted conflict-related adversities. It is thoroughly based on the lived experiences of the people of these areas and has analyzed their self-narrated life accounts through an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) framework. IPA is the study of experiences and is based on the theoretical influences of phenomenology, ideography and hermeneutics (Brocki & Wearden, 2006). Phenomenological foundations of IPA are concerned with the exploration and capturing

of the lived experiences of the individuals about a specific phenomenon (Gauntlettet al, 2017) with a focus on subjective understanding of how individuals make sense of a particular phenomenon that happened to them, rather than to produce objective findings (Alace, 2017).

The second philosophical foundation of IPA is ideography, rather than making generalizations, lays more emphasis on the distinct and unique experiences that an individual may hold (Smith & Eatough, 2017). Contrary to the knowledge of general laws based on nomothetic studies, the idiographic approach provides knowledge about particular trends, entities and phenomena. It allows the researcher to retain the distinctive perspective of each participant. Convergences and divergences of each participant's experiences and interpretations are taken into consideration during analysis.

Hermeneutics as the art of interpretation (Abu Ali &Abushaikha, 2019)in IPA allows researchers to explore the personal or individual experiences of the participants of their world (Dabengwa et al, 2020). Getting access to the experiences of the participants is not independent of the interpretation and conceptions of the researcher. In order to interpret the experiences of the participants in interpretative phenomenology, the knowledge of the experiences of the participants is used by the researcher (Abu Ali &Abushaikha, 2019). To conduct analysis in IPA, the process of double hermeneutics is involved, in which initially participants attach meaning to their experiences, and then based on the insights provided by the participants, the researcher attempts to interpret and derive meaning from it (Montague et al, 2020).

The IPA approach focuses on the meanings that the subjects attach to any event, experience or phenomenon related to their lives (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012). It assumes that human beings as sense sense-making creatures (Alace, 2017) and self-interpreting beings (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012). Based on this, self-narrated accounts and experiences shared by the participants in this particular study reflect an effort to make sense of their experiences. In this pretext, it is considered the most participant-oriented approach in conducting qualitative research. To investigate and analyze the lived experiences of the individuals who are experiencing the common phenomenon, the IPA approach is considered to be the most appropriate (Tuffour, 2017). Therefore, it is not merely the description but interpretation (Miller & Minton, 2016) of the lived experiences that have a common meaning for all the participants made by the researcher.

This paper is based on a qualitative study, containing both primary and secondary data, which attempts to look beyond the meta-narratives of conflict and brings out micro-narratives of people's lived experiences in a turmoil zone, which is eclipsed in Kashmir. As per the principles of applying IPA as mentioned by Smith and Fieldsend (2021), this phenomenological framework is directed at a smaller sample size because it requires a precise case-by-case approach for analyzing the individual transcripts. Choosing a larger sample will require more time, and it will be hard to identify the understanding and perceptions of the target group. This is also important because, IPA excludes application of the premature and generic claims, instead, its focus must remain on a participant-oriented approach.

To find out the implications of firing on communities residing along LOC adjacent villages, in this particular study, more emphasis has been placed on how the individuals living in these villages make sense of this phenomenon, how they experience various events and incidents

ranging from firing, shelling and damages caused by it in the form of lives and materials and what meaning they attribute to these sufferings. The primary data for conducting this research has been collected in a naturalistic setting from the affected people, wherever they can be reached either at schools or homes. Applying double hermeneutics interpretations of pertinent incidents and their ripple effects both by participants and researcher have been taken into account to reach the conclusions.

The study was based in the district Poonch of Pakistani-administered Kashmir. Hailing from the same area, the author has first-hand experience of the real situation. Overall, 50 people from both genders who have become physically disabled, have lost their parents, children or siblings and have lost access to education and economic activities were involved in the process of collecting information. According to the principles of applying IPA, 10 participants were interviewed to get to know their lived experiences of brutal Indian firing, shelling, and bombing, how it impacted their socio-economic and mental health, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences. Whereas the remaining 40 participants participated in the FGDs to get the findings on the same. Among the interviewees, 5 females and 5 males were involved in semi-structured interviews. Subsequently, 7 female and 33 male participants were involved in conducting FGDs.

The total respondent group comprised 50 participants; 12 females and 38 males. Out of 12 female participants, 4 were widows, 5 lost their children, and 3 lost access to education due to physical disability because of firing by Indian armed forces. Among 38 male participants, 3 were who lost their wives, 2 lost their brothers, 5 lost their children, 6 lost their parents, and 2 lost access to education and economic activities due to physical disability. 3 participants were those who could not bury their mothers or fathers in their native graveyard, and who got martyred by Indian armed forces firing on their homes. The conducted study included 5 participants, who left their native homes and migrated to other cities in order to find out better economic and educational opportunities, confiscated due to Indian firing. The remaining 12 male participants were from those members of the community, who suffered economically and mentally because of Indian firing. To maintain the spirit of homogeneity of the studied group all the participants were chosen from the areas having similar socio-economic and developmental conditions.

Among 5 female interviewees, 2 widows, 2 women who lost their children, and 1 woman who had a physical disability from firing by Indian armed forces and lost access to education were included. Subsequently, 1 male interviewee who lost his wife, 2 men who lost children, 1 who lost his parents, and 1 who lost access to education and economic activities due to physical disability participated in the interviews. Further to this, 1 FGD with 7 females, and 4 FGDs with 8-9 male participants per FGD were conducted.

As semi-structured interviews were chosen as the key method to collect the data, participants were engaged in dialogues and initial questions were modified based on the responses from the participants to probe into the areas that were observed more interesting and significant to the respondents. Written notes of the responses from the participants were taken by the first author; afterwards, the transcript was shared with the second author. Then applying the ideographic and double hermeneutics approaches that are central in IPA, firstly, rather than generalizing, transcripts of all the interviewees were analyzed individually to separately find out each participant's distinct experience and conception of the sufferings associated with firing from Indian armed forces from across the LOC. Subsequently, to describe the sufferings and

implications of Indian firing for participants into various thematic heads, the original transcripts were read several times by both authors.

Based on the similarities and differences identified during the process of reading and re-reading the original transcripts of the interviews, various themes were categorized for interpretation through double hermeneutics and the findings of the study were explored. Acknowledging the fact that not all the participants of the study experienced the phenomenon in the same way during analysis, self-interpretations of the experiences of all participants were emphasized more to avoid broad generalizations. The people being interviewed are a few who have discussed and expressed their lived accounts and experiences, among many, who very often have become the victim of cross-border firing.

Since the FGDs were also conducted to complement the findings on the lived experiences of the participants, the identified themes were revalidated. The FGD participants also belonged the similar socio-economic and developmental conditions as the participants, who were interviewed, these findings helped a lot in cross-verification regarding the impact of Indian firing on communities located near the LOC areas in AJ&K. However, following the IPA framework, the case-by-case analysis of the transcript remained central in the identification of the themes for this paper.

Findings

A number of studies in various conflict-affected areas around the globe have concluded that such conflicts entail stressful experiences for community members. These stressful experiences adversely affect the mental health of the affected people (Lavi & Bar-Tal, 2015). The ripple effects of the Indian firing on community members of LOC areas in the AJ&K area have been expressed by the interviewed people mentioning that this firing from across the LOC has become an inseparable part of their lives. It is causing them various social, economic, psychological and survival consequences, hampering and disturbing their natural flow of a normal life. Since IPA allows researchers to delve deep into the subjective experiences of individuals so, by interviewing and analyzing the narratives of the participants, the underlying emotions and the meanings they attached to their lived experiences have been interpreted and uncovered under the following themes.

Psychological Implications:

The firing has had a significant impact on the emotional well-being and mental health of those directly affected. Many individuals have experienced heightened levels of fear, anxiety, and trauma due to the constant threat of violence and loss of life. The uncertainty and unpredictability of the situation have also caused feelings of helplessness and powerlessness. Additionally, the displacement and disruption of daily life have further contributed to stress and psychological distress. Overall, the psychological toll of the Indian Armed Forces firing and its impact on the mental health and general well-being of the people is very significant. Nervousness, nightmares, easily getting frightened, general tiredness and headache were described as the symptoms of psychological distress by the participants.

Displacement and loss

Owing to abrupt and unannounced firing many people have been forced to leave their beloved homes, properties and business. This displacement and abandonment of homes and businesses have adverse effects on their socio-economic as well as psychological health. Their economic activities have been disrupted affecting their livelihoods and consequently, exacerbating poverty. Agricultural, dairy and livestock activities used at local or household levels to generate livelihoods have been hampered, leading to income loss and reduced economic opportunities. On one hand, it has destroyed their socio-economic fabric, while on the other, it is causing them psychological distress and feelings of insecurity both in terms of traditional and non-traditional concepts of security.

Socio-economic Implications

The effects of the war, however, by participants rather than just a list of psychological or mental health symptoms, were described as a constellation of various socio-economic problems. Along with physical and psychological harm to adults and children, the reduction in material and human capital was also described as the long-term effects of the firing. It was observed that human casualties are considered merely just a tip of the iceberg and other casualties besides deaths have been overlooked. Other than death and destruction of homes and property, displacement and dislocation from their homeland is another dimension that severely affects the lives of the people.

Since the beginning, till date at the macro and micro level, the Kashmir conflict has undergone many transformations, but one thing that is permanent and constant for the people residing near LOC in AJ&K is the unannounced, undeclared and abrupt break out of firing from across the LOC. In fact, for them, guns have never turned silent even after the signing of a cease-fire agreement between Pakistan and India in 2003.

There are multifaceted and multi-dimensional consequences of the spontaneous firing on the lives of the people and communities in these areas including the socio-economic well-being and survival, mental health and overall development of the people.

Disruption in normal life activities

Since they are exposed to the firing, shelling and bombing at all times from the other side of the LOC. It poses them an unavoidable threat making them unable to conduct normal life activities. People have been significantly affected in terms of socio-economic, mental and psychological health. All these types of suffering are directly linked to their exposure to the prevailing violence.

This perpetual violence and continuously persisting threatening environment have left them living helplessly in a miserable way and have ceased the effective ways of performing their routine activities. Socio-economic displacement, family dispersal, loss of social interaction, loss of access to economic and service activities, disruption in schooling, sense of loss of security, fear of losing the near and dear ones, restricted economic activities, limited access to health facilities; especially timely provision of first aid facilities to those who become the victim of Indian firing across the LOC are very common and general impacts of the Indian firing faced by the families and communities living there. All these factors together significantly contribute to the social and economic disability of people in general, and the capacity of learning in children

decreases in specific. Moreover, many people have been suffering from physical disabilities, in addition, insomnia, depression, and nightmares are common in these people. While documenting the lived experiences of the affected people, it was observed and analyzed that these economic and psychological disorders lay severe consequences on their economic and social lives.

Interconnectedness between socioeconomic and psychological implications

The socio-economic, physical, and psychological disorders among the people in this conflict-affected area are so intricately connected that they cannot be studied or understood independently of each other. At times, physical and psychological disorders hinder their socio-economic activities and at some times, the deteriorated socio-economic conditions contribute to their anxiety, dissatisfaction and hopelessness, anger and angst. Henceforth, experiencing the undeclared, abrupt and unpredictable outbreak of firing contributes to anxiety, fear and a sense of insecurity among the people. Witnessing the dead bodies of near and dear ones, the destruction of homes and properties, and socio-economic disability causes severe psychological disorders among the people.

The absence of any well-calibrated coping mechanism and strategy to redress the socio-economic and psychological sufferings and grievances both at the communal and national levels further exacerbates the situation. Therefore, there is a need to develop such strategies to lessen the implications of these adversities.

Conclusion

Although the socio-economic and psychological implications of firing on the communities are less tangible in contrast to the destruction of lives and material, this more often neglected dimension of the conflict has profound impacts on the lives of the communities residing in LOC adjacent areas. The unpredictability and unsure about the de-escalation or resolution of the conflict makes them vulnerable, as they face anxiety attacks that at any time there may occur a ceasefire violation from across the LOC hampering their normal life activities and posing a threat to their lives. The inclusion and incorporation of this decades-long neglected aspect of the conflict into the overly emphasized meta-narratives of the conflict in literature, as well as policy-making are highly imperative. The natural outcomes of the conflict in the form of trauma, anxiety, feelings of insecurity and other associated sufferings need to be addressed on a priority basis in all peace-making initiatives at all levels.

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