POLITICAL VIOLENCE IN KASHMIR: STUDYING CONSEQUENCES ON WOMEN AND THEIR COPING MECHANISM

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Abstract

Violence against women during an armed conflict is an extension of the violence perpetrated against them in peaceful times. They face violence because of their gender and, their association with men who may or may not be a party to conflict. The violence perpetrated against them is a direct consequence of the patriarchal attitudes which become more visible during a conflict situation. Women suffer rapes, molestations, disabilities and even death during conflicts. They also bear the burden of earning livelihoods for families when their earning family members are lost to violence. They are not even a part of the decisions to go to war or conflict but are nonetheless affected by those decisions severely. Violence against women includes the patterns of behaviour characterized by the misuse of power and control by one person over another. Violence against women also encompasses the physical, psychological and sexual violence perpetrated or condoned by the state.

The state of Jammu and Kashmir held a special status in the Indian Constitution under Article 370, which guaranteed Autonomy to the state. This special status was diluted over the years. People of the state were promised Plebiscite, at the time of acceding to India, to confirm their wishes but it was never held, despite intervention by the United Nations (Bose, 2003; Bhattacharjea, 1994). This situation produced increased resentment and discontent among the people of Kashmir. This was coupled with the high unemployment rate among Kashmiri Muslims, corruption, and a lack of political expression which manifested in the form of allegedly rigged polls in 1987. The political atmosphere so produced caused the outbreak of insurgency in Kashmir against the Indian state, allegedly supported by Pakistan (Bose, 2003; Schofield, 1997; Kazi, 2009).

India’s response to the situation was heavy military deployment all across the state, especially Kashmir valley. Militarization of Kashmir also includes enforcement of draconian laws like the Armed Forces Special Powers Act, AFSPA, the Disturbed Areas Act, and Public Safety Act etc. These laws give army personnel a free hand in dealing with the conflict situation. Several militant organisations cropped up in the state and became authoritative with the power of arms. The presence and acts of military and militants resulted in enormous human rights violations. The civilian population became the target of their wrath. Fear and panic gripped the Kashmiri
minds and a situation of chaos and confusion began to prevail. “The State’s response to growing militancy was characteristically myopic with the problem once again being treated as one of “law and order” (Chenoy, 2002: 146). Political conflict in Kashmir changed the political scenario and caused the collapse of state machinery.

Political conflict is openly aimed at altering or maintaining a particular division of public power. “As a collective phenomenon, political conflict stems from the desire to destroy, injure, thwart, or otherwise control opponents, their resources, and the order on which their position depends” (Mack and Snyder, 1957: 218). Under certain conditions conflict can be accompanied by acts of violence and destruction, aimed both at the person or material attributes of political opponents. Violent conflict can be instigated both by occupiers of the state or regime, or by their opponents. Philip Nel defines violent political dissent as the use of coercive and destructive means to express dissatisfaction or resentment toward a regime (as cited in Patman, 2006).

A political conflict provokes government retaliation leading to forms of repression, police measures, legal instruments, such as preventive detention, human rights violations, arrests etc. In extreme, but not infrequent cases, political conflicts have resulted in the collapse of state institutions. The legal system breaks down, extortion and murder take place with impunity and normal operations in the society cease to function. This is the case of state failure. An intense political conflict leads to breaking up of existing social relationships. Families may be divided, friendships are destroyed and local communities are shattered. Socially and psychologically they are more devastating than many interstate wars. In extreme cases political conflicts can also turn into full fledged wars.

The violence associated with a political conflict devastates the fine fabric of society. Political violence comes with intent and the wilful decision to harm. The violence involving combatants is the primary focus while there is a tendency to see the violence purported on non combatants as peripheral. “Violence is about im/possibility, about the human condition and the meaning of survival” (Nordstrom, 2004:59). Political violence starts with physical carnage, but does not stop there. It reconfigures its victims and the social environment that hosts them. It is not a passing phenomenon that momentarily challenges a stable system. It leaves behind scars with

A defining feature of modern politics and an essential feature of the modern state is the attrition of the boundary between civil society and military organisation. Civilian governments and military establishments of the modern nation state collaborate with each other in the pursuit of wars. The concept of militarisation reconstitutes the idea of military conflict and presents it beyond the scope of military. When a state uses its military to achieve political objectives, it is referred to as a militarist state. Military assumes a different connotation when it is employed as device of political repression. In such a case, it assumes extra-legal powers and gets associated with the political and social structure allowing the authoritative regimes to govern. Under such circumstances military acts as an illegitimate instrument of governance and domestic repression, an abuse of its legitimate role of external defence (Kazi, 2009). The concept of militarization has evolved over time. Cynthia Enloe (1983) observes that the distinctive feature of this era is that militarisation is no longer conceived of as a war time anomaly; it is the new normality.

Men and women suffer differently in armed conflicts. They die different deaths and are tortured and abused in different ways. “It is perhaps in brutality to the body that the most marked sex differences occur in wars” notes Cynthia Cockburn (as cited in Giles & Hyndman, 2004: 35). The difference in treatment meted out to men and women arises not only because of the physical differences between sexes but also because of the different meanings culturally ascribed to the male and female body. Kashmiri women have suffered violence directly as well as because of their association with men of opposing ideologies. They have survived the situation by coping with the newly created circumstances.

Coping mechanism is described as survival strategies. These are strategies that people use in order to deal with stresses, pain and changes experienced in life. Coping is described by Lazarus and Folkman (1984) as the changing thoughts and actions that an individual uses to manage the external as well as the internal demands of a specific person-environment transaction that is appraised as stressful. Folkman and Lazarus define coping as, “the cognitive and behavioural efforts made to master, tolerate or reduce, external and internal demands and conflicts among them” (1980: 233). The
coping mechanism emerges in people facing violence itself but requires external help to develop a stronger response by building their ability to explore and exploit their internal as well as external resources.

Various social work perspectives that stress on building and developing a strong coping mechanism in the victims of violence include general systems perspective, ecosystems perspective, strengths perspective, radical perspective and feminist perspective. The aim of these perspectives is on enhancing the social functioning of victims and eradicating the cause of their distress. These social work perspectives shift focus of problems from mal-adjustment of victims to the insecure environment. Personal qualities and strengths are forged during the occurrence of trauma, abuse and oppression and need to be explored to strengthen the victim’s response.

The objectives of this research include knowing the opinions and view of the victims of violence about the political violence in Kashmir, study their experiences with political violence, consequences of this violence on them, and their coping mechanism. This is a qualitative research follows exploratory as well as descriptive research design. It was carried out in the rural areas of the two districts of Anantnag and Pulwama, of Jammu and Kashmir. The sampling unit is a woman between the ages of eighteen years to sixty years and, who has experienced any political violence directly or indirectly since 1989. The respondents were chosen through non-probability snowball sampling and non-probability quota sampling. The tools and techniques of data collection employed for this study include semi-structured interviews of respondents, case studies and non-participant observation.

Most of the literature on the subject of Kashmir, gender and conflict consulted during the conduct of this study involves discussions on external as well as internal dimensions of conflict (Nayeem, 2011; Dabla, 2011; Rashid, 2011; Khan, 2011). Women have been presented as victims of physical violence including sexual violence mainly, however, the social, economic and psychological aspect is rarely touched. Women are generally treated as passive with a limited role to play. Most of the literature available with respect to the subject of women, militarization and conflict presents women as the weak and vulnerable party who have no say usually in the political decisions and their perspective on such decisions is hence missing.
The consequences of conflict on the women of Kashmir are manifold. They suffer in social, economic and psychological terms. Many families have lost their breadwinners making them financially weak. This puts an additional burden, of eking out a living, on the women of the family. Widows and half-widows become socially and psychologically vulnerable. Rapes and disabilities suffered by women stigmatises their lives forever.

Women cope with war by adopting new roles and taking on new responsibilities. This may mean taking active part in the rallies and demonstrations or leaving the private sphere of the home to find employment to take care of their children. The traditional portrayal of women as passive beneficiaries of conflict is disempowering. The assumption of women's vulnerability during conflict hides the plurality of their roles during a conflict and endangers their agency. They show remarkable strength in coping with the challenges of living in war and often adopt new roles and responsibilities to care for their families and take part in community life.

Women who have suffered violence are substantially empowered as they have made independent decisions regarding their work, second marriages, family matters, membership in local groups, non-family friendships etc. The female victims of violence in Kashmir do not claim helpless victim hood. They have converted the 'helpless' victim hood imposed upon them into 'resisting' victim hood. Rita Manchanda (2001) contemplates that women are represented as victims of violence and this victimhood finds place in the contemporary discourses on violence. The conflict situation left these women with fewer choices which they exploited to the full extent and did more than just recover in extraordinary circumstances. They rebuilt their houses, took up informal employments, educated their children, looked after families and became decision makers. They have found the way and means and learnt to handle their situations and most of them have displayed remarkable strength, emotional control, courage and a certain display of insubordination to the conditions imposed on them. They have shown resistance and refused to succumb to sufferings.

The assets and capabilities present in women include their agency, physical skills, mental steadfastness and social capital. The certain degree of empowerment achieved by these women has led to a different model of social development in the community. Even though the conditions of fear and insecurity persist, women have been
constantly engaged in their capacity building. This model of social development includes economic initiatives taken by them as an important factor for development. They were earlier active only in agricultural sector, but are now involved in many low-skill based economic activities. They are educating their children and have become the backbone of their families. Women provide leadership to their families, preventing further exploitation of themselves and their families. This role is not only played at the level of individual households but also on a large scale all across the valley, and combined, makes women emerging community leaders.

Radical and structural social work approaches find a need in conflict ridden areas including Kashmir to help create peaceful environment and prevent future conflicts. These approaches call for social transformation and structural changes, simultaneously providing immediate treatment.

The focus of this study is the consequences of political violence on the women of Kashmir and their coping mechanism in the last two decades. It is an attempt to bring these women out and tell their stories in their own words. The social and economic costs of the violence have been substantial on the women of Kashmir, but through their perseverance they have overcome these difficulties. They have not forgotten the events that changed their lives and are in emotional trouble, but they have managed to survive, and support and hold their families together.