

Ethnographers Lens Reviews Life in a Conflict Zone Kashmir

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Abstract: *The paper will try to produce a Preliminary understanding of Life that the researcher has assessed during the period of three months field visits to one of the highly militarized zones of the world. The Study was to get an understanding in order to evaluate and understand the conflict, the day to day life of the common people, their sufferings, and so on. It was also to understand the nature of the field, the impediments, the key informers, the respondents, common people, and access to the field, risking one's life, ethicalities and legalities. The study was based on ethnographic paradigm and has employed the two most important tools to ascertain the ground zero situation of a conflict zone i.e. Participant Observation and Interview. The study discussed the universal phenomena of armed conflict and concluded that the effects of conflict go parallel between local and global scenario.*

Key Words: *Kashmir, Conflict, Life, Ethnography, Participant Observation.*

1. INTRODUCTION:

The researcher has spent three months in one of the volatile districts of Kashmir Valley in Pulwama between April and June 2017. The researcher faced a number of challenges which are likely to happen and common to any conflict area. The main problem the researcher faced has been the inaccessibility to the field research locale. The challenges may include the ethical challenges as well for the fact the ethnographic studies are carried out while having a direct contact with the people to be studied or interviewed what Woods (1996, p.32) refers to as the interactionist ethnography.

In their edited book "Research Methods in Conflict Settings: A View from Below" Dyan Mazurana, Karen Jacobsen and Lacey Andrews Gale share their views that the people in a conflict zone have to share their domestic setting with three groups that usually do not have a salient presence in peaceful regions – armed forces and groups, the aid industry, and so-called observers or humanitarian witnesses of the conflict that the local population must accommodate, at times in their actual homes. These are the observers or ethnographers who witness and document what is happening and then communicate their findings back to a variety of audiences. This third group is potentially as important to the people living in conflict zones as the first two groups. These are the message carriers, the solicitors and the translators of the living life in a conflict zone.

A series of voluminous research work has been carried out to draw the situation of valley. There is a severe lack of field- based data from conflict zone as most of the studies are conducted post- conflict' (Shah and Pettigrew 2009: 230). As the fact explains that most of the armed conflict research studies are carried out post-conflict, the day to day life and contemporary nature of research is something served by the participant and ethnographic studies only. These research studies go along with the conflict and try to demonstrate the live ground realities of the conflict zone. This ongoing conflict between security forces and state police from one side and insurgents or militias of varied source and origin from other side has completely stolen the lens focusing the people and their day to day life. Hence the study will try to relocate the researcher's lens on the common people, their lifestyle and the way the conflict has changed the pattern of their life.

District Pulwama has been chosen for the fact the gravity of the conflict has been lingering around these centers since the armed rebellion, insurgency and counter insurgency started in 1989. The researcher during his study has however confined his research locale to a single District Pulwama to give more time to a single place to understand the pros and cons of life. The reasons for such confinement are many like inaccessibility to the field, the security reasons, and the nature of research.

2. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY:

- To analyze and explore the everyday life of Kashmiri people
- To explore people's life experiences in the conflict
- To explore the effect of Conflict on different Social Groups
- To understand Conflict as a Complex Universal Phenomenon

3. ETHNOGRAPHY:

The researcher is employing 'ethnography' as the method of research for data collection. The term 'ethnography' has achieved considerable currency across the social and human sciences.¹ It has effectively become a catch-all term to describe any form of long-term qualitative research based on a triangulation of methods (Mitchell, 2007). Ethnographers generate understandings of culture through representation of what we call an emic perspective, or what might be described as the "insider's point of view." The traditional ethnographic trend has been widely dominated by outsiders to work in a so called alien part of land or with the people unknown to them as most anthropologists today point to Bronislaw Malinowski, author of such landmark ethnographies as *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (first published in 1922), as a kind of founding father to ethnographic fieldwork, that was actually an outsiders job. As of now the new ethnographies evolve, the insiders have continuously been putting their efforts to discern the craft of ethnography. Ethnography is neither subjective not objective but interpretive, mediating two worlds through third (Agar, 1982:783). Ethnography is at its core a process of 'mediating frames of meaning' (Giddens, 1976). So the researcher remains well occupied by the methodologies involved and contains him/herself mediating the frames of meaning and information what may come to him/her.

4. ETHNOGRAPHY AND CONFLICT ZONE:

Although the research topics and approaches vary a lot and ethical issues in conducting field research in violently divided societies are discussed by Bourgois (1990), Gill (2001), Lee (1990), Mitchell (1993), Olujic (1995), Pieke (1995), Scheper-Hughes (1995), Sluka (1995), and Zulaika (1995).² A systematic and all-encompassing review of methodological and ethical problems of conducting research in violent contexts does not exist (Gasser, 2006). The traditional benchmarks validating the field work experience do not apply to a conflict situation (Mathur, 2016). Ethnographic depth also cannot be measured in terms of duration of stay with informants whose very action is subject to military surveillance; the presence of a stranger for any length of time draws extra attention to the house and locality. Nor can ethnographic authority be established through descriptions of the minutiae of location, moment, and action when knowledge of these will almost surely filter through to the military apparatus and endanger informants (ibid).

It cannot be argued that insecure regions need not be studied at all or should be studied only when the conflict stops (Goodhand 2000). However, the complications, pros and cons and risking one's life should be considered when designing the studies. *Field research in conflict zones is challenging for both methodological and ethical reasons* (Wood, 2006). *There may arise some awkward (Pandey, 2008) or life threatening circumstances while on field like when I visited some people including stone pelters, Police Officials or Army men, I would be coming under the radar of threat.*

Further ethnography includes rapport building, spending a vast range of time with respondents, winning over informers, immersion, gaining the faith and so on, but the matter of fact lies in a comparatively different structure of field set. For me I take a few examples to note down here. I was interviewing a stone pelter who reached to me as an anonymous person only after making requests to third party. He was wearing a mask. He kept his name hide, and what not. So there are less chances of winning the faith and all that. But whatever and howsoever he was responding to many queries, I could find him subtle and positively responsive. This is also a fact that stone pelters are accessible easily but the time and space does not allow to meet many. One more example is during the month of June, 2017 I was sitting with a Police Officer, the conversation started positive and cordial, but the moment I was to switch my recorder on, he was like, "Can you please go off-recording". So there are incidents of awkwardness and disbelief working in a conflict zone with different agencies and people.

5. THE RESEARCH PARADIGM:

As for the research paradigm and methodology invited for this study is concerned, it will more aptly rely on multi sited ethnography. Multi-sited Ethnography securely addresses this need by providing a rich set of critical reflections and practical examples for researching social formations spanning numerous localities. By giving prominence to the notion of multi-sited ethnography as it has been developed by the anthropologist George Marcus, the report in its behest will try to provide an analysis and reconstruction of how to go about doing ethnography in a world that is characterized by partial connections. Ethnography is moving from its conventional single-site location to multiple sites of observation and participation that cross-cut dichotomies, biases and one sidedness. The scope of multi-sited ethnography in a conflict setting may prove more fertile for it may carve into the facts to connect the local to the global.

Abandoning the "idea of sited field makes it possible to admit that it never was possible to achieve a complex description of any area or group of people, but in exchange for acknowledging that fields are always

¹ <https://www.easaonline.org/downloads/easa04/ws28.pdf> accessed on 30 July 2017

² Conducting Field research in Contexts of Violent Contexts:

http://www.swisspeace.ch/fileadmin/user_upload/Media/Topics/Statehood_Conflict/Publications/Gasser_Nathalie_2006_Conducting_Field_Research_in_Contexts_of_Violent_Conflict_An_Annotated_Bibliography.pdf accessed on 30 July 2017

constructed out of a too-rich reality, we would gain the freedom to determinate their boundaries explicitly, in relation to our research questions” (Marcus, 1995). This means that “a valid ethnographic field need not correspond to a spatial entity of any kind, and need not be a holistic entity ‘out there’ to be discovered” (ibid). Ethnography is not always about holistic representations. (Presenting it as a totality) Where ethnographers once focused on people in particular places.

6. PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION:

Observations enable the researcher to describe existing situations using the five senses, providing a "written photograph" of the situation under study (Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, & Allen, 1993). DeMunck and Sobo (1998) describe participant observation as the primary method used by anthropologists doing fieldwork. Fine (2003) uses the term "peopled ethnography" to describe text that provides an understanding of the setting and that describes theoretical implications through the use of vignettes, based on field notes from observations, interviews, and products of the group members. The participant observation method, also known as ethnographic research, is when a sociologist actually becomes a part of the group they are studying in order to collect data and understand a social phenomenon or problem.³ There are obvious dangers in conducting participant observation in a violent social context. However, the researcher "not only observes the behavior of the group that she or he is studying, but also participates, as much as possible, in the daily lives of the community members" (Dowler, 1999:195). Like I spent more than two months in my research locale, I have been facing the brunt of conflict and even horror many times.

7. INTERVIEW:

Steinar (2008) explains research interview is based on the conversations regarding the daily life and is a professional conversation. Terming it as inter-view where knowledge is constructed during the inter-action of interviewer and interviewee. Literally interview is *inter view*; inter-change and exchange of ideas and knowledge that takes place between two persons. Furthering his explanation Steinar deduces that inter-view goes beyond the spontaneous exchange of views in everyday conversations, and becomes a careful questioning and listening approach with the purpose of thoroughly tested knowledge.

The main craft and source of the study will rely on the conversations and interviews of varied nature. About eighteen (18) interviews or pieces of individual narratives of varied nature were ascertained from the field. These were more an in-depth interview like. The researcher has visited the field locale so many times to observe the ground realities of conflict zone, to observe the day to day life of people, to understand the sufferings of the people living in a conflict zone.

8. RISKING ONE’S LIFE IN CONFLICT ZONE AND LEGALITIES:

Ethnographic works and narratives were usually written on everyday basis with the result the field notes were directly taken from the people in the natural setting. Field notes are the brick and mortar of an ethnographic edifice (Fetterman 2010: 116). Field notes are the outcome of observation and interviews in combine. Most of the respondents didn’t allow recording their interviews. It is worth to mention here that even the persons from the state establishment like police officials and other officers were reluctant for recording their interviews. Some of the persons even strictly defied to get their voices recorded. This may be one more face of life in a conflict zone where the people continuously live in mistrust, disbelief, fear and doubting the existence of others. In that case the researcher used to write down some important notes to carry out the writing process just after the interview was done there on the field to secure the sanctity and relevance of narratives. Most of the data has come this way. As per the etiquettes of an ethnographer who is supposed to carry a diary always while visiting the field, a diary has always been in the hands of the researcher to note down any relevant information.

9. ETHICALITY IN PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION AND INTERVIEWING:

All the respondents were served the purpose of the interview and spending some time with them that was followed by the informed consent. It was ensured that their inputs and identity will be kept confidential under the provisions of confidentiality and anonymity. They were also served the purpose of the research. The clearances of non-aiding nature were also cleared to some of the respondents as they believed that there may be some relief or aid coming after the study is over.

10. ANALYSIS OF THE DATA:

Some have depicted qualitative analysis as craftsmanship, others as an art, and still others as a process of detective work (Patton, 2002). In fact the analysis of the data starts with observation and writing the field notes. A

³ Understanding Participant Observation Research: can be accessed from <https://www.thoughtco.com/participant-observation-research-3026557> accessed on 30 July 2017

researcher is usually well versed about the very essence of the field content, because it is he/she who has been witnessing it, listening to it, writing it and consistently reading and rereading it. So, the analysis of the ethnographic data is to be done by the researcher him/herself unlike quantitative data analysis. The goal of the analysis is to analytically reduce the data by producing summaries, abstracts, coding, and memos.

Most of the ethnographic and narrative based data are analyzed by employing many relevant tools. To name a few are the *Grounded Theory*, *Iterative-Inductive Analysis*, *Thematic Analysis* and many more. Thematic analysis is one widely used and acknowledged analytical tool used by ethnographers and qualitative data analysts and the study has tries to attempt the same.

The state of Jammu and Kashmir is surviving the armed conflict for three decades. There are innumerable faces of life but a few are only related to the conflict zones which get emerged by it and may include a widow, an orphan, a disappeared, a collaborator, an informer, a renegade, tortured disabled and more. There are groups of people or agencies that may play different roles not pertained to them, so, the role reversal, multi role and role strain are the facts pertained to the people living in conflict. For example a half-widow has to serve as the head of the family and at the same time she is unable to remarry. She is neither married nor does she fall in the category of widows for she could get access to the schemes or aid provided to such categories of people. A few faces and the multidimensionality of life in a conflict zone may be expressed through the following analyzed narrative based themes.

[Note: In consideration with the ethicalities of the research the names of respondents, key informers and the common people have been shown fictitious. This is not to uncover their identity and secrecy.]

10.1 LIFE IN POLLING SEASON

You may have seen a CRPF Cop was being beaten up by those boys during recent elections. Some boys were seen stopping those and requesting them to let the CRPF Jawans go. It is by orders that we are not allowed to fire on mobs or stone pelters but for the security of polling staff, polling booths and EVMs we can fire. I am surprised how the CRPF cop while being beaten up restricted himself and didn't open fire. Being in army is ok but being in Kashmir it is not compromising. We are not informed by our officials when posted in Kashmir. Many leave jobs when posted in Kashmir. Speaking honestly, no one wishes to be here, we pay bribes to get out of here.

(A discussion in a Tea Shop with four CRPF men outside SHO Office, Pulwama)

On 13th of April there was a repoll day and the repolling was conducted in thirty eight (38) booths in Budgam District. The relections were held due to the cancellation of elections by Election Commission that were to be held on last Sunday when eight (8) youth and later the ninth one succumbed. On 15th April the results of the elections were announced. Among 38 polling booths 26 booths registered zero polling. It was a mere 2% turnout in this repoll.

10.2 STONE PELTING: A BIPOLAR PHENOMENA

This place is very dangerous. I think there is not a single day when we do not have experienced stone pelting. Residential houses and other property fall prey to stone pelting. I have seen many times CRPF jawans throw stones on houses. They break window pans and glasses. I would have changed the glasses of windows of my house five or six times.

(Majid)

I was not throwing stones but I received a pellet in my right eye. I am now 70% blind by my right eye.

(Umar)

I am 27, a graduate, a holder of hotel management degree, have worked in Bangalore for quite some time, have travelled and I am mature enough to understand what is happening around. Yes I am of the opinion that all those struggling for freedom or showing resistance to the occupational forces do not or may not come out on streets to throw stones. There are people who resist on different platforms like writing books, doing research, publishing papers, attend resistance gatherings and lectures. Stone pelting is one of the platforms and I have chosen it.

(Zafar)

10.3 SECURITY FORCES IN INSECURITY

The Police are facing more challenges in a conflict zone. My duty is round the clock and I visit my family after months. I may never have faced any security threat but I must say a promising behaviour of a police man gives him safety and I have been one.

(Ahmad)

Our duty here is very tough. The stones thrown at us have (sometimes) no known sources. . I am experiencing this situation for two and half months when I was posted here and sent on election duty and it's lethal. I had no interest in this job but am stuck. We know our families suffer the worst after we get killed. As while on duty we expect possible attacks from militants all time that keeps us on pins.

(A CRPF Cop deployed in main town Pulwama)

Police department is most ill-named department; hence it is susceptible to peoples' attacks. I am here solving disputes of families. With each dispute I solve I create a friend and a foe. So this chair and position adds risk to my life. Yes there is fear among policemen for they too are humans. They too have their families. They too are responsible to their loved ones. And there are often forces from back home to quite the job.

(Masarat)

My mother calls me on phone and deliberates about the incidents of stone pelting going around my native place. Our tin roof has received a stone or two, she explains. Why among all those houses around only my roof gets a stone.

(Iqbal)

10.4 FEARS BACK HOME

I am getting married on 14th of this month which is not a week away from now has added more tension in the family. My would be wife is not less than begging me not to go for election duty.

(Firoz)

My family members are not worried. They cannot even suspect that I am in any harm because I have spent twenty five years of my life here in Kashmir and why should they care. But they know everything happening around. My wife calls me several times on phone during the day. They keep watching news channels and ask me accordingly what has happened there.

(Bipin Kumar)

My family members and my little daughter keep me calling during the day. They countercheck it many times whether I am ok.

(A CRPF Cop deployed in main town Pulwama)

Talking about the family and family concerns, my parents, my wife would call me around ten times a day to enquire about my health and conditions around. Whenever they listen about the eruption of clashes in Pulwama which is a common phenomenon, they would call me. They have repeatedly asked and insisted me to leave this job. My wife would have begged me million times to leave this job.

(Masarat)

10.5 HUMAN SHIELDING

On 13th of April 2017, an incident of some novel kind shook all streams of the land. A young man from Budgam District was tied to a bonnet of an army vehicle for twenty (20) kilometers. The CM of J&K Ms. Mehbooba Mufti said that it was to stop the bloodshed.

Making human shields is a common and age old practice in conflict zones and war like situations. In Vietnam War it was a common practice carried by US military. Even in Kashmir making human shields at encounter sites and crackdowns has been a common practice. But what is new to the practice that the young man is tied on the front of an army van.

The incident invited a huge contradictory commentary from all forms of platforms. On that note Amit Shah said, "Everything is fair in love and war". A retired Indian Army Lt. General Harcharanjit Singh said, "The incident or the image of tying a man with the military vehicle would haunt Indian army and the nation for a long time, as I see parallels between Kashmir and Vietnam".

(My own field experience and the news reports)

10.6 INTERNET GAG

Banning internet facilities has been a common practice in the conflict ridden valley of Kashmir. According to reports it has been now over forty times since 8th July 2016 those different parts of the valley suffer internet blockade. The phenomenon of banning internet has also changed like there used to be internet ban throughout the valley but now only those parts will be experiencing it where there is any sort of unrest or uprising.

The e-commerce was booming in Kashmir for the last few years until it met a dead end in the shape of an internet gag which started on July 08 evening and is still on. "On an average daily, the courier companies which used to deliver products ordered online are witnessing losses of Rupees 30 to 40 lakh due to internet blockade and restrictions,"

(E-newspaper, The Kashmir Monitor, 8th Sep. 2016)

The internet becomes the first casualty whenever the situation in Kashmir turns from restive to volatile. According to data since 2012 provided by internet shutdowns.in, a project by the Software Freedom Law Centre (SFLC), Jammu and Kashmir has recorded 29 instances of internet shutdowns.

(E-newspaper, Hindustan Times, 30th April 2017)

Over 140 youth who had been spreading rumors and even asking people to hit the roads to pelt stones have been detained. "We had started to keep a tab on the use of social networking sites and WhatsApp groups in Pulwama. We found that a number of WhatsApp groups were run by people who wanted to foment trouble. Many of these groups have been blocked. Some have disbanded fearing that they would be dealt with under law,"

(Senior Superintendent of Police (SSP) Pulwama, Rayees Ahmad, 10th April 2017)

11. DISCUSSION:

The study attempts to lay its focus on the totality of living *life* in a conflict zone. It has attempted to circumscribe many dimensions of life including those of common people, students, women, security forces and so on. The armed conflict is a universal phenomenon. Its attributes are to a greater extent similar and universal. Its effects are same. The common characteristics of an armed conflict may include sufferings, human rights violation, killings, injuries, abductions, widowhood, disappearances, and property loss and so on and so forth. These are certain things common to such zones. As the study is based on a multi-sited ethnographic tool which attempts to connect the local to the global attributes of phenomena say conflict.

As the study is confined to a single district of the valley, the Pulwama district is one of the highly volatile places of the valley when it comes to the gravity of armed conflict in Jammu and Kashmir. The concentration of military camps, the thick deployment of military and para-military forces, movement of militants, encounters, the frequent stone pelting incidents, raids, CASOs (Cordon and Search Operations), detentions and the like have been on rise with each passing year. There are people with tragic and traumatic stories and narratives of varied nature from this conflict torn place.

On 14th of May, (Mother's day) 2017, a fourteen year girl from Pulwama was asked what is her dream. She replied, "I want to see my mother once more"

(Ifra from Pulwama)

"....aai Khudayi...! Sakhtii thawtham, magar ezzat thaezem", which means, "Oh God! You put me to severe tests, but keep my Chasity intact"

(A young widow from Pulwama)

You see there, (Pointing towards the graveyard) that martyrs' graveyard is only a few meters away from my window where my husband was laid to rest in summer 2003. I am NOT only this much of distance away from him, these are millions of miles.

(A widow from Pulwama who lost her husband to the conflict)

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