

ECONOMIC REGENERATION IN AREAS OF VIOLENT LONG TERM CONFLICT – THE CASE OF KASHMIR

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Abstract

The objective of this work, which is based on primary research done through fieldwork in Kashmir, was to assess the impact of the conflict on the area of crafts. Kashmiri crafts employ over 500,000 people in the state. The conflict in the region between India and Pakistan has led to over 60,000 dead and more missing since 1989, the count moves up on a daily basis. Personal interviews and meetings with Kashmiri crafts people, bureaucrats, widows, orphans and militants have contributed to this research.

The conflict in the region has led to increase in corruption and an upsurge in spending on defence. Crafts, which provide the highest employment numbers (second only to agriculture) have been affected by the lack of funding for development and shrinking tourist market. The conflict has changed the sex ratio; male deaths mean that increasing numbers of women are now involved in crafts. Being home based crafts are considered safe in this conflict torn region. Yet the shrinking markets push an increasing number of people below the poverty line and into the depths of conflict, where hiring people to shoot and kill is also an optional means of income generation. The symbiotic relationship between development and peace means income generation that combats base level poverty, could bring peace at some level.

This research provides crafts development services to Kashmiri crafts people. Expertise in product design and market research is delivered through workshops. Women and their potential as wage earners and community leaders open a wide range of possibilities for development and reconstruction of the region.

This reconstruction methodology could be applied for sustainable income generation through crafts training for the women in any conflict zone. This case study based research can enable people facing adversity in other areas plan their economic future.

Keywords: Conflict; crafts; income generation; sustainability; reconstruction.

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INTRODUCTION

This paper focuses on the attempts being made to reconstruct Kashmir's society and economy post the 17 year conflict. It proposes that one of the most promising paths for economic regeneration of Kashmir is via crafts with the involvement of the local stakeholders in income generation projects. These are the women of Kashmir.

After a short introduction to the conflict and its impact this paper shall look at the attempts being made to reconstruct the state. The constraints, within which this is being done, shall be looked at, along with a case study. The working premises of this research are highlighted to gain better understanding of the dimensions within which this research has been conducted.

A quote from Ameena in Srinagar, Kashmir:

"Everything has gone; I don't recognize this place anymore. This is not my Kashmir. I have lost my husband, my brothers and two of my brother-in-laws. I don't know what I can do to feed my family. The guns don't go away and neither does the hunger" (Fieldwork, 2003)

The conflict:

Kashmir is divided into 3 international territories. To the west is Pakistan Administered Kashmir, which is also known as *Azad* Kashmir (Free Kashmir). Centrally located is Indian Administered Kashmir, which includes the Kashmir valley and the state capital of Srinagar. To the north east of this region is Aksai Chin which is China Administered Kashmir.

Conflict over Kashmir has its roots in India's colonial history and the British legacy of Partition. In 1947 India gained independence from the British rule and was split into a Muslim nation of Pakistan and the secular nation of India. During the partition princely states of India could choose which nation they wanted to be part of. The state of Kashmir had a majority population of Muslims, however the King was Hindu. The Hindu king signed the instrument of accession to India, thereby joining the Indian nation. Pakistan claims that it was created as a nation for Muslims in 1947, thus an adjoining state that has a majority Muslim population should rightfully have been a part of Pakistan. The issue has been on the United Nations agenda for a long time. The debate continues to the present day with both nations spending more than they can afford on defense budgets for the region. (Chagla, 1965)

The impact:

The human cost of the conflict in Kashmir has been estimated differently by various agencies. The government figures tend to be lower than those calculated by human

rights and civil liberties activists. Definitive figures from Kashmir are hard to come by as the last census in the state was conducted in 1981. (Butalia, 2000)

This is applicable to most statistics in this paper. The figures for people who have died vary. There are reports that up to 30,000 people have died since the struggle against Indian control became militarised 17 years ago (Amnesty International Report, Aug 2000). The Indian army puts the figure at 35243 dead since 1990. These figures don't include the 4636 people (including women) missing and the 16090 injured in the same time period. The total civilians killed in Kashmir are 15611. (www.armyinkashmir.org). There are more than 500 graveyards in Kashmir today and a daily death toll of 20. (Jalil, 2002)

The monetary cost of the conflict has been estimated by a BBC report to be £1 million a day, spent only in defense by the Indian army on the Line of Control. The budget of a project to buy new arms in 1999 was estimated to cost over 100 billion Rupees (\$2.3bn). (Bedi, 1999)

This does not include statistics of loss of revenue from businesses immigrating to outside the valley and/ or the high levels of unemployment and the deteriorating living standards. The United Nations Military Observer Group in India and Pakistan was established in 1949, this peace keeping force cost US\$ 8.37 million (gross) in 2005. (UN, 2005)

The real impact can be seen in the lives of the people who have survived the conflict. Families have been destroyed, communities have been broken up, and people have been displaced and impoverished. There is hostility, intolerance and animosity within communities. The migration of one million Kashmiri Hindus (Pandits) from the valley changed the socio-cultural structure of the valley. They left fearing their lives and moved to the neighboring state of Jammu between 1987 and 1990 (Bhati, 2005). This en-masse movement of highly educated people who were school teachers, University lecturers and Government servants left a gap in the infrastructure of the state, a gap which the people of the valley still acknowledge and regret. This migration created increasing communal tension which was never present in the valley. Kashmiri Pandits resent the fact that they had to flee from their homeland because of their religious beliefs. They faced harsh conditions in Jammu where they lived as refugees. The people of Jammu saw them as a burden on the resources of their city. Unemployment and frustration on their condition was rife in the camps and the new generation of Kashmiri Pandits who have been brought up in these camps nurture strong hatred of the Muslims that their predecessors never had. Thus the conflict has split open a cohesive community and re-ignited a flame of communal hatred.

'More than a decade of conflict has deeply affected people's livelihoods and living environments, their health, their eating habits, their work and their workplaces, their access to education. The impact of these things is felt most sharply in the lives of the

women, and yet, few discussions on Kashmir pay attention to this'. (Butalia, 2002) The women have borne the brunt of the conflict in many ways. This leads us to looking at the working premises of this research.

Premise 1.

Conflict affects women more adversely than other members of society. They are most vulnerable to the direct and indirect affects of conflict.

The Platform for Action adopted by the Fourth World Conference on Women (September 1995) identifies women's development as an area of critical concern. It draws attention to the heavy increase in burden of women stemming from the rapid escalation of female heads of the households and from caring for large numbers of injured people (Date-Bah, 2003). There is a call for greater participation in decision making, conflict resolution and peace building; protection of women in situations of armed conflict; a reduction in human rights abuses; promotion of vocational and other skills training and self reliance of conflict affected women; and the promotion of human rights of women in such contexts.

It is widely accepted now that women rarely create or initiate conflict, they, along with children and the aged, are often the victims and sufferers of the conflict.

'Although consequences of armed conflicts affect all population groups, women appear to bear a disproportionate burden owing to the specific nature of the conflicts today' (Date-Bah, 2003)

In Kashmir the conflict has caused many male deaths and disappearances. Thus there are a large number of widows. There are also a large number of women who are identified as 'half widows', these are women whose husbands are assumed dead but there is no proof to show they actually are. This has a deeper consequence as these women shall not be allowed to remarry till the body of the husband has been found and buried. In Islam declaration of widowhood or permission to re-marry is not granted till the coffin of the deceased husband has been buried. This also complicates issues of inheritance of property, which can not be transferred in the woman's name till there is evidence that the man who owned it has died.

The Kashmiri society had traditionally cocooned and protected its women, more so in the case of the Muslim population, which is a majority in the state. The Kashmiri women though of independent thinking, lead protected lives. Very rarely did they leave the confines of the house unescorted. Domestic male helpers were employed, when affordable, to do household chores which required stepping out of the house. The women of Kashmir were responsible for running the house, looking after the children and the older members of the family. It should be noted here that six months of severe winter involves a lot of planning for cleaning, collecting wood and gathering food for survival through the bitter winter with temperatures hitting -20 degrees Centigrade. The women seldom worked as employees and though educated, had never been the

earnings members of the family. This changed during the conflict as more men were involved in the conflict – as participant militants or innocent bystanders. More men were dead and missing than women and children over the 17 years of conflict in Kashmir. Consequently the sex ratio of the state changed drastically. The young men in the state were often faced with a dilemma, to join the militancy or to flee from the state to save their lives. They were soft targets for militants who recruited people as well as the Indian army, who were highly suspicious of political affiliations of the Kashmiri youth. Thus the male population of the state changed dramatically.

Kashmiri women are now by default the bread winners in their families. A fact that is tough to imagine, for a woman who never moved out of the house except for social meetings and gatherings, had now to go out and earn a living. This accompanied with the fact that they have few 'marketable' skills means finding conventional employment in a shrinking economy would be difficult if not impossible. This increases the pressure on the women to find sustainable sources of income generation. This is important to bear in mind when one considers the constraints faced in reconstruction of this region.

Premise 2

For a society and economy that was heavily reliant on the crafts sector for employment and income generation, revival of crafts might be the first step toward reconstruction. Provision of appropriate training might ensure that crafts activity can provide sustainable income to the Kashmiri women.

The Indian crafts industry employs a sizeable percentage of the population. According to the 10th plan of Handicrafts schemes, published by the Office of the Development Commissioner (Handicrafts), Government of India, Ministry of Textiles, more than Five million craftspeople are dependent on the Handicrafts sector for their livelihood. This report also mentions that the handicrafts sector plays an important role in the country's economy not only because of the direct employment it creates but also the substantial foreign exchange it generates for the country.

Pre 1989, Kashmir, more than any other state, exemplified the potential earnings from crafts because its primary source of income was tourism – which meant that there was a big market for handicrafts. There was a market for handicrafts which were in the form of souvenirs as well as products made for those who understood and appreciated crafts. Parallel to this was a thriving domestic market where in Kashmiri crafts were seen as exquisite pieces from the valley where they were made. Kashmiri crafts were appreciated for their aesthetic value as well as their functionality. The crafts were intertwined with the culture of the state and many hand made products were (and still are) used locally by the people of the state on a daily basis. The locally available raw materials such as wool, wood for manufacture of looms, locally produced dyes, and silk for embroidery grant this activity a level of sustainability, which is one of reasons that crafts have flourished in this region for centuries now.

Crafts are an essential part of the Kashmiri culture, society and economy. No marriages and births are complete without the essential Pashmina shawls being gifted. Any gatherings or social meetings are incomplete without the mandatory cups of Kashmiri tea made in the traditional metallic samovar, and winters are intolerable without the beautifully crafted *Kangri*. Culture in Kashmir is defined by its crafts. Crafts are intertwined with every aspect of life and thus the study of crafts reflects on the cultural development of the state of Kashmir.

Recent research conducted in Kashmir reveals that the trade in cultural (craft made) commodities is continuing, despite the adversities in the political situation. This could be attributed to two major reasons. It is proposed that more people have been involved in the production of crafts as it is mainly done indoors, thus is a relatively safe occupation. The fact that the people are familiar with craftwork makes it easy for them to adapt and learn to work. Another dimension to the involvement of people in crafts is the recent inclusion of women in what was mainly a male dominated sector. In Kashmir crafts previously meant male craft workers, now an increasing number of women are involved in the manufacture of crafts and thus there is a higher dependency on crafts for employment and income generation. Originally people used to work in the crafts sector in the cold winter months only, this too has now changed. Hence more people are now involved in crafts and as a consequence more are dependent on it for survival. Crafts of Kashmir thrived because of the high level of skills and abundantly available raw material. It was also a form of activity that would occupy people indoors during six months of winter, which they spent indoors. Post the conflict situation crafts were also considered safe. For women of Kashmir, staying indoors was sometimes the only way of staying safe and surviving. Thus aid within the crafts development sector would have wider consequences/impact on the lives of the Kashmiri people.

Kashmir does not have any large scale or prominent NGOs. There is a presence of numerous small organisations that work in their local areas with the local community. Thus the stake holders are ordinary people who have suffered from the conflict. There is no presence of organisations like Traidcraft or Oxfam, which sometimes act like parent bodies by providing support and assistance. There are clusters of organisations where women are involved in manufacture of handcrafted goods. Most agencies that work in the area of reconstruction are small groups that run on personal donations of members of a charity and/or Zakat (Islamic taxation system) contributions. They are run by people who don't necessarily have qualifications or experience in running organisations and may also be people who have never worked before.

The women have knowledge about the crafts due to being observers in the background, while the activity was being carried out by the men. They have also been consumers of the goods and thus are aware of the standards of quality and workmanship within craft made goods. Their skill levels are medium to low and this is where the training and development activities focus. They also have limited knowledge of marketing and are

rarely aware of markets outside the Kashmir state. These were some of the limitations that are faced while working in the crafts sector in Kashmir. There are many constraints to working in Kashmir. These were revealed during the course of fieldwork. A look at the case study of a crafts NGO in Kashmir highlights the potential focus of reconstruction and brings forth the constraints that are faced in working in Kashmir.

The Case of Zanana Dastkari Production Markaz (ZDPM), Srinagar, Kashmir

This NGO was contacted during research to understand their interests in the reconstruction of their city in Kashmir. They are the local stake holders in this case and were keen to start rebuilding their lives by earning a sustainable income through manufacture of crafts goods.

ZDPM focuses on assisting low income crafts producers, who are women, through crafts development and marketing. Most women they work with are poor, uneducated and unskilled. Destitute women and widows are involved in manufacturing textile crafts. They have been provided with rudimentary training in embroidery and stitching. They are unaware of concepts of product design or marketing, thus face problems in selling the products they manufacture.

ZDPM gets financial support from its member donors. They have no access to external funding and are unaware of the resources that are available to organisations such as themselves, outside the state. Their limited knowledge and resources have meant cutting of corners at various levels. It also means that reaching out to other government and non government agencies in New Delhi is expensive thus often of low priority. They pay the women approximately 50 Euros a month, provide free training in the area of crafts, assistance with medical bills and education of children, as well as with marriages of their daughters. The raw materials are provided free of cost.

Thus the NGO is providing multi faceted support to the women in Srinagar, Kashmir. They have financial and social restrictions and are desperate to make contact with other people like them, to share learning and resources.

ZDPM had for a brief period of time provided craft made goods to OXFAM, UK and were glad of the marketing that Oxfam provided. However this relationship broke down over a disagreement over pricing, which Oxfam allegedly felt were high. Thus the NGO has the ability to manufacture goods and export them. They are also aware of the larger income that can be generated through exports. Thus they were keen to gain skills in the area of product development and marketing.

The NGO requested assistance in craft development and training in the area of marketing. It was understood that such training would promote enterprise within the NGO and shall lead to an increase in income generation of the women. The aim was

also to provide long term sustainable income generation through skill enhancement. This would provide self sufficiency and decreased dependence

The workshops devised were to provide knowledge of product development and marketing. Initial assessments revealed that basic workshops would be required to prevent intimidation and trepidation amongst the women. It was also noticed that familiarity with the women during the course of assessment was increasing their confidence and they were keen to talk about their experiences during the conflict. Most of them were keen to be educated and felt high levels of financial pressure. During the workshops they worked hard at grasping concepts which were new to them.

The shift from gazing in wonder at new products to volunteering to design and manufacture something independently was a slow one. The feeling of empowerment and rise in confidence levels of the women was visible soon after the workshops were concluded.

Knowledge of markets and concepts of market research were introduced with provision of local examples and built from there. Most have never been outside their own city and thus are unaware that they share their plight with many other women in India and abroad. This brought a sense of empathy and decreased levels of self pity that some women had. It also brought role models and real life stories into their lives.

It was observed that the women were ambitious and keen to change their lives. They were aware that their financial future is linked to their ability to adapt and change and gain skills needed to generate income. Application of learning from other such projects done around the world would help this attempt at reconstruction.

However there are numerous constraints, when put together reveal the reality of the situation in Kashmir and thus helps in defining and devising an approach to working in Kashmir. Constraints can be categorised into three broad areas – economic, social and political.



Image 1 –
Haneefa, Guddi
and Rafeeqa
embroidering
different types
of fabric



Image 2 –
Yasmin
embroiders a
green *Numdah*
rug, using a
traditional hook.



Image 3 –
Chasweeda
embroiders a
Numdah rug

Economic Constraints

A look at the economic constraints reveals barriers at three levels. The Government agencies, the international agencies and the local non government organisations in Kashmir.

The local (State) government.

As in any developing country, widespread corruption and dogmatic bureaucratic procedures form a stumbling block in planning any development work. There is intense

suspicion in Kashmir of anything Governmental. The fact that the Government of the state is part of the Government of India is not appreciated by the pro freedom, pro Pakistan groups that exist in Kashmir. The bureaucracy in Kashmir is mostly male and most have a condescending attitude towards women, which verges on being patronising and sometimes also pitiful.

Planning economic development models is often complex and complicated due to poor data that emerges from Governmental agencies. Census is not conducted regularly and most information that should be made public is kept under wraps.

Access to information about upcoming bids for funding and support frequently come with an unofficial fee for the officer providing such information. Finance schemes for procurement of raw material and enterprise development funds are very highly funded and the application procedures are long winded and complex.

The bureaucrats within the state are regularly transferred and posted from department to department, which leaves a lack of continuity of contact for the people and also a lack of involvement on behalf of the bureaucrats. This complicated bureaucratic set up is shameful as well as disappointing. Counting it as a part of the support infrastructure in the state is impossible.

International Agencies

Many international agencies that work in the area of crafts and/or development steer clear of involvement in Kashmir due to the political sensitivity of the region. They are often unable to send their teams out to the area due to the very real risk of kidnap and death threats that any non Kashmiri could confront due to their appearance.

The Home Office, U.K, clearly defines Kashmir as an area of risk and advises people not to go there. Insurance agencies have high premiums on travel insurance to the state. The Lonely Planet guide also advises against travel to the state of Kashmir.

International agencies like the United Nations and USAID and their various departments and divisions have head offices in New Delhi. Applications for assistance and support often need backing from the Indian bureaucratic. The process of application for funding/assistance is complicated and the time lines between bidding for funding and the funds being transferred to the beneficiary are long. As mentioned before travelling to New Delhi is time consuming and expensive, thus the organisations from Kashmir would have limited access to International Support / Aid agencies.

Monies received, if a bid is won, when converted to the local currency, is a large sum. It is highly lucrative and attracts corruption at the stages of disbursement and rarely reaches the main beneficiaries for whom it was intended.

The policies and opening of bids, as well as advertisement for new projects is conducted in limited networks and thus remain vastly unknown to the Self Help Groups in Kashmir.

Very often International agencies look for partners who are prominent NGOs, with well documented systems of operation and years of experience that has built credibility. Track records of performance, optimal utilisation of funds, and application of best practices that are well documented are appreciated and often surveyed by International Agencies. This effectively negates many local NGOs from applying for assistance, as they have only recently sprung up in response to the crisis.

International agencies often have a 'top down' system that rarely effectively percolates right down to the bottom. This approach needs to be rectified and local stake holders need to be interacted with at the grass root level.

Non Government Organisations/ Agencies in Kashmir

There is very limited networking amongst NGOs that exist in the Kashmir valley. There are various reasons for this –

Kashmiri organisations have varied political affiliations (Pro India/ Pakistan/ Independence) and perhaps even agendas. Groups that do not have similar political affiliations are very often critical and suspicious of each other. People are wary of connections to militants and sources of funding, as well as backgrounds of the people who hold the controlling interests of the NGO. NGOs are often financially supported by local donors. Thus there is no central infrastructure that provides shared space for exchange of learning or sharing of resources. There is also competition for services between NGOs due to limited resources. Thus there is no cohesion amongst groups that exists in Kashmir.

NGOs that exist outside the state of Kashmir and are known for their exceptional work in the field of income generation and crafts development are often reluctant to get involved in Kashmir. During fieldwork a prominent NGO categorically stated that there was enough work to do outside Kashmir and they would not be keen to go to Kashmir to work. They were willing to share learning but not resources. The other states in India which are known for their craft heritage provide a more lucrative base for such NGOs to work as compared to a conflict torn region of Kashmir.

Social Constraints

Kashmiri rarely trust people who are not Kashmiri themselves. Thus the nationality of the field worker is important to any future work in the state.

Women and men have formal relationships thus training of any kind has to be pre-planned to avoid having men training women. While men feel at ease talking to women, a working relationship outside the house is very strained on both sides.

The Kashmiri society, as mentioned before was male dominated and the women were not known to be income generators in the family. Thus the working women in Kashmir are perceived in a different light. Often they are pitied for their need to work and this attitude causes a lot of shame and resentment among the women. They have an inner battle with themselves about needing to leave family (often little children) at home to go and earn, they are poor and can't afford childcare or support. This also leads to feelings of desperation and despair.

Women have low educational qualifications as compared to men and are thus often unable to apply for jobs that pay more money. Lack of education leads to lack of confidence and awareness as well as makes them vulnerable to deception. Lack of education sometimes also reveals the existence of a language barrier with most women speaking only Kashmiri, they might have limited knowledge of Urdu and no knowledge of English in most cases. They often have very limited skills that can be applied towards income generation.

Post Traumatic Stress Disorder is known to be rife in Kashmir with many cases going unreported. Living through a violent conflict has caused widespread depression and mental health problems which often go unacknowledged and unaccepted. Women are expected to cope with such issues and carry on without any support.

There seems to be an increasing desperation to earn money, yet low skills, lack of education, psychological problems make the women of Kashmir an extremely vulnerable group.

Political Constraints

The conflict in Kashmir is not completely over. Like most long term conflicts, the peace that exists is an uneasy one and violence is never very far away. The political future of the state is unknown and negotiations continue in the political arena. The defence budgets are still high, as is the military presence in the state. There is a steady stream of low intensity conflicts from various parts of Kashmir. Thus there is no assurance of safety. During the course of fieldwork, militant groups made their presence felt and made contact to ask questions. The Kashmir and Indian government are guarded about external intervention or interests in Kashmir. Foreign nationals are discouraged from visiting the state.

Thus Kashmir is in the post-conflict phase, yet the legacy of the conflict presents innumerable constraints in the process of reconstruction. Kashmir's political past comes in the way of its economic future at every stage. It is important to bear in mind that this knowledge could be possibly applied to reconstruction of any Muslim region that faces or has faced conflict.

Conclusions

It is understood that women are more vulnerable in conflict areas though they are rarely the initiators of the conflict. In Kashmir, after the conflict, the women struggle to find dignified ways of earning an income by using their current skill set. They are now heads of families and are also in most cases the sole or main wage earners in their families. Thus the Kashmiri women are the local stake holders and should be engaged with for planning reconstruction of the state.

The identity and profile of these women, their aspirations, their challenges, limitations and needs should to be assessed and borne in mind if reconstruction attempts in the state are to be successful. Their potential to become entrepreneurs as well as community leaders should also be acknowledged. It is vital to understand the underpinnings of Kashmiri society and engage with these women for realistic development to take place.

It is important that plans for future economic growth link to the past systems of income generation. Assessment of the economy and the skills available locally points at the existence of a strong crafts tradition being prevalent in Kashmir. This system of income generation has been active and successful for centuries now. Using crafts as a means of generating sustainable income seems to be a logical direction for development and reconstruction of Kashmir.

Thus promotion of crafts as a means of sustainable income generation for the women of Kashmir seems to be a plausible focus area for the reconstruction of Kashmir. Development activities focussing on crafts would promote interests of the local stake holders, making post disaster reconstruction a reality.

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