

Political Conflict and its Impact on Environment – A Study of Kashmir of India

Babu Rangaiah / N. K. Kumaresan Raja

Armed conflicts and degradation of environment have always been inter-related. The experiences of such conflicts in South and Southeast Asia have mostly lead to a common conclusion. As an outcome of the afforestation of north eastern part of Sri Lanka, the clearing of the woods paved way for a significant victory for the Government of Sri Lanka to defeat the LTTE, the armed rebels who were known for their guerilla warfare. There are references from the war of Vietnam that armed conflict has a negative bearing on the maintenance of vegetation and consequently impacting upon the environment of the war zone. In the case of Kashmir, the widely known dispute between the State of India, State of Pakistan and the insurgent armed groups, the political situation remains very tense for the past several decades. It must be also mentioned that the thick forest cover of Kashmir paves a natural asylum of armed rebels. Keeping this in view, a study was conducted on the youth of Kashmir on various aspect of the armed conflict including their assessment and awareness on environment, which has given a never before vision of youth in trauma on environment.

Kashmir's extravagant beauty used to draw millions and millions of people towards its enchanting exquisite that is also known as the *last Shangrila* and *paradise on the earth*. The land of Kashmir lies on the ranges of Himalayan Mountain with its wonderful and marvelous lakes, gardens, white cold deserts. Kashmir unfortunately has become disputed with the partition of India and Pakistan in 1947. The conflict in Kashmir valley has resulted in destruction of the life, living, culture and environment, as both India and Pakistan claims the control of the land that has already seen two wars between India and Pakistan. A part of land has been governed by Pakistan and China in the name of Pakistan Occupied Kash-

mir.¹ Kashmir valley witnesses proxy war and terrorist activities in the name of a Liberation movement that was started by Kashmir militants and has put the life of about eight million people in danger. According to reports about 44,638 people have being killed from 1988 to 2018 including civilians, security forces and militants, and thousands of people being kidnapped and missing.

Kashmir conflict has negative bearing on the common man of the land, who experiences regular traumatic events and its consequences. On the other hand, Kashmir valley has witnessed the degradation of environment over the years, which will have negative impact on the overall aspects of human ecology. The present paper attempts to expound the situation in Kashmir both for human experience and impact on environment as a result of political conflict as on the one hand it affects human capital and on the other it has direct as well as indirect effect on the environment. Armed conflict can have negative impact on both environment and human wellbeing.²

People in Kashmir have been found to experience trauma as a result of exposure to conflict.³ About 46.9 percent youth was exposed to two or three traumatic events; about 28.6 percent found to be exposed to four or more conflict-related events. Most of the people reported that the predominant traumatic incidents have been prolonged curfew, beating or humiliation of a family member, or a friend who goes missing. A small percentage (2.2 percent) of youth reported witnessing fight between militants and security forces.⁴ Studies have also found that people experience mental health issues and psychological distress like depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder that affects daily living of the people as they do not feel safe and they also suffer from socio-economic issues.⁵ The Insti-

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- 1 De Jong, K./Ford, N./Kam, S. (2008a): Conflict in the Indian Kashmir Valley I: Exposure to Violence. In: Conflict and Health 2, 10. DOI: 10.1186/1752-1505-2-10.
 - 2 De Jong, K./Kam, S./Ford, N. (2008b): Conflict in the Indian Kashmir Valley II: Psychosocial Impact. In: Conflict and Health 2, 11. DOI: 10.1186/1752-1505-2-11.
 - 3 Saundry, P. (2008): Environmental and Socioeconomic Impacts of Armed Conflict in Africa. In: Cleveland, Cutler J. (eds.): Encyclopedia of Earth. Washington.
 - 3 Bhat, Rayees Mohammad/Rangaiah, B. (2015): The Impact of Conflict Exposure and Social Support on Posttraumatic Growth among the Young Adults in Kashmir. In: Cogent Psychology 2, 1. DOI: 10.1080/23311908.2014.1000077.
 - 4 Bhat/Rangaiah (2015).
 - 5 De Jong/Ford/Kam (2008a). De Jong/Kam/Ford (2008b).

tute of Mental Health and Neurosciences (IMHANS), has observed increased cases of mental health issues.⁶

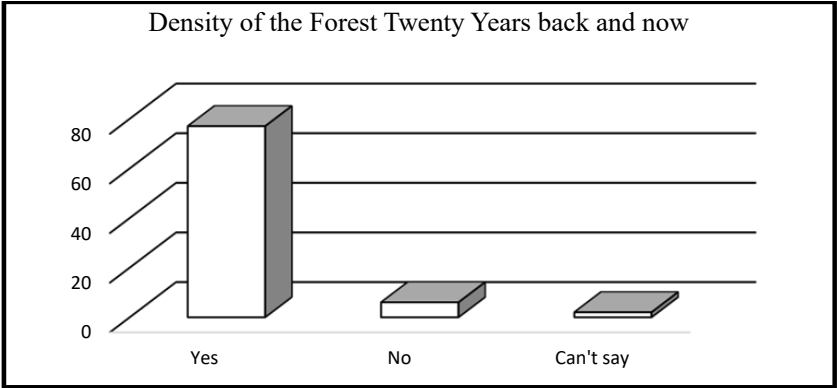
Climate change and environmental degradation is a global phenomenon. Nations are coming together to protect environment. However, sometimes it is not possible to regulate the environment degradation, particularly, when there are armed conflicts. The armed forces and insurgents use and misuse the environment for their own purposes to destroy the other or even to venture peace. For example, in Sri Lanka deforestation was used as the method to end the conflict and to defeat the militants. The history has shown that as a tactic, the devastation of natural environment can destroy the enemy. However, in the modern world, the very presence of armed conflict can destroy the natural environment in some or the other manner. This scenario would best explain the case of Kashmir. The very identify of Kashmir is its scenic beauty and green vegetation. Tourism is the backbone of Kashmir Economy. Tourism and Environment in Kashmir has been complimenting each other. During the course of armed conflict that attained peak during the late 1990's, the environment degradation has been visibly seen. Even today, despite the sporadic peace that enables the operation of Tourism Industry in Kashmir, the consequences of the armed conflict, unplanned and unregulated rent seeking nature of contemporary tourism have only further ravaged the environment in Kashmir. A classic case of the inverse correlation between war and tourism potential could be arrived in the case of Kashmir with scientific identification of the indicators.

The present study used a semi-structured questionnaire to collect the data regarding the deforestation in Kashmir and rehabilitation. For the present study the data was collected from the 85 students of Kashmir studying in masters in universities in southern India. The results are presented in the following sections.

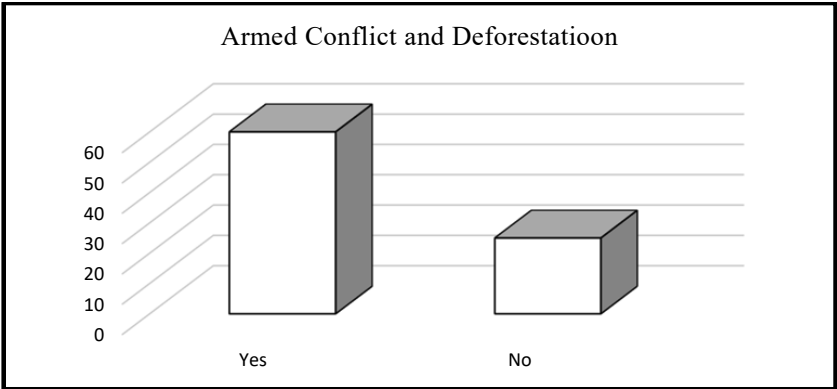
The students were probed to understand the environmental situation in Kashmir. The students were asked whether there was any difference in the density of forest in their dwelling place twenty years back and now. The results are graphically depicted and it shows that clearly there was a huge difference now and prior to twenty years back in the density of the forest area, about 90 percent of the respondents have responded *yes* there is a

6 Hassan, A./Shafi, A. (2012): Attitude Towards Mental Illness in Kashmir. In: International NGO Journal 7, 73–7. DOI: 10.5897/INGOJ12.019.

huge difference and only about 0.07 percent say there is *no* marked difference in the density of the forest. Presently, at most of the places forest looks very thin losing its yesteryears beauty and vigor.

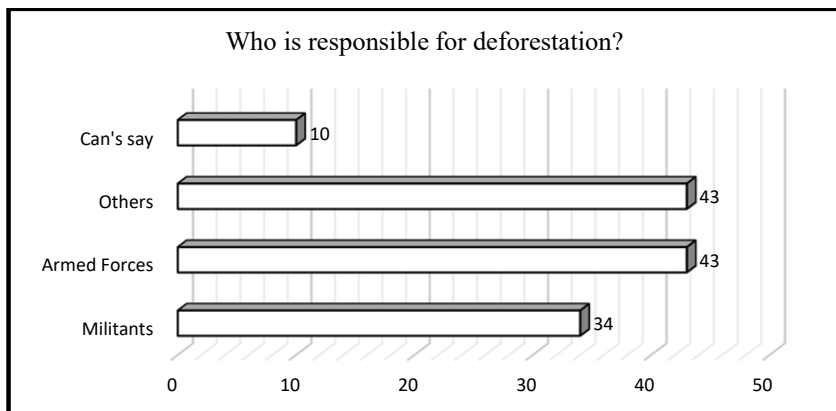


The students were inquired whether they thought that both armed conflict and deforestation has any relationship. And results show that about 71 percent of the respondents said *yes* whereas about 29 percent said *no*. It must be stated that the respondents who answered affirmatively are those who dwell in rural parts, directly dependent on the forest resources who have experienced the impact of the armed conflict over environment.

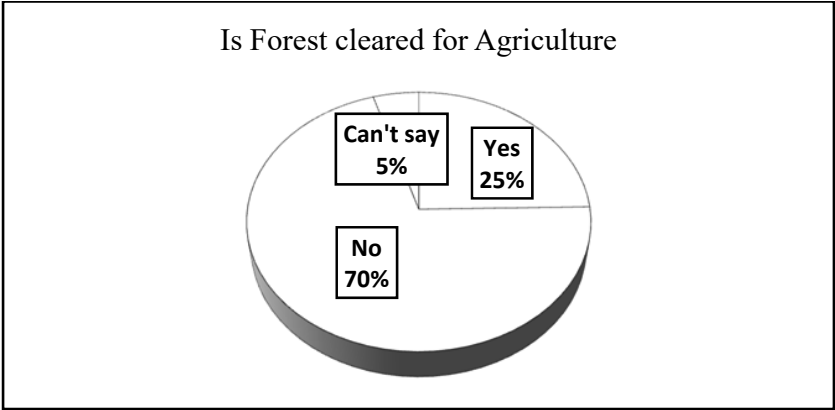


The students were inquired as who they think was responsible for the deforestation. About 40 percent of the respondents opined that militants are

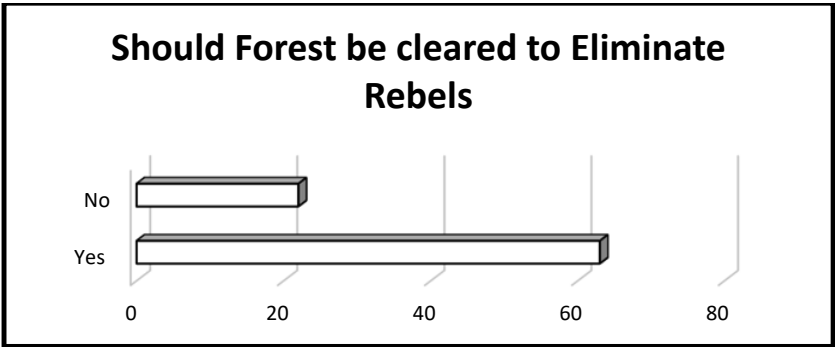
responsible for the deforestation; when 51 percent of the students said it is because of the armed forces and others like due to tourism and other unregulated activities. However, about 11 percent of the students did not have any opinion for this query. The fact remains that deforestation and armed conflicts are correlated, and armed conflicts does have negative impact on environment is validated.



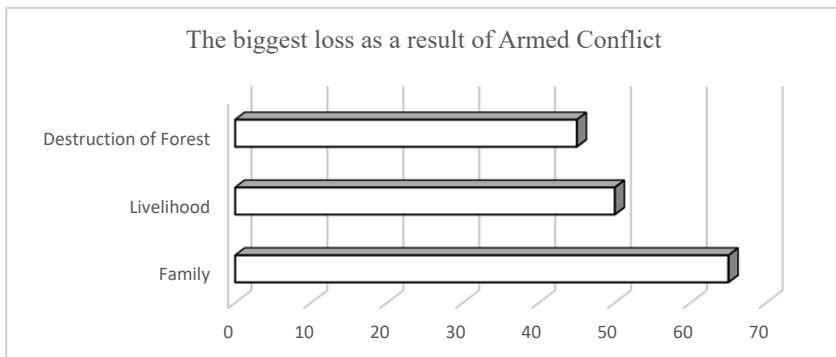
The respondents were questioned whether they agree with forest being cleared for agriculture. Interestingly, about 70 percent youth said *no* whereas 25 percent students said *yes* and 5 percent students were undecided. On a deeper validation of the response, it is found that the students who hail from semi urban areas convey the unplanned urbanisation as the principle factor for the reduction of forest area, yet further investigation on this is outside the scope of this paper. However, it can be understood that the relative degree of impact of armed conflict on the alteration of natural landscape is significantly higher because of urbanisation.



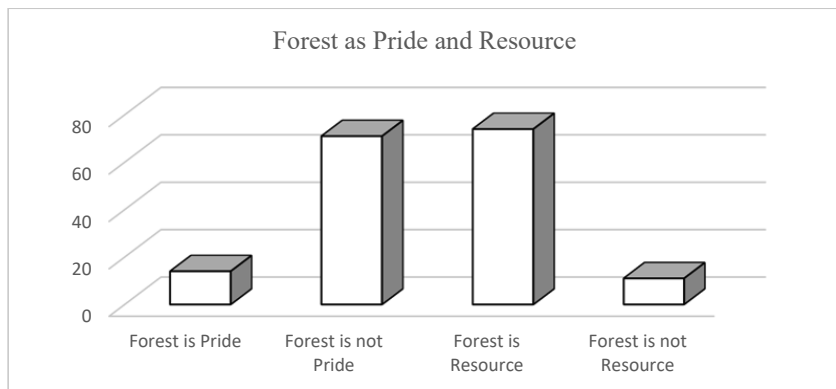
The students were probed to know whether they perceive that the forest be removed to facilitate to eliminate the rebels, around 74 percent of the students said *no* when 26 percent students said *yes*. This again could be stated as the reply was affirmative with the respondents hailing from the bordering districts of the *Line of Actual Control* that demarcates the Indian Administered Kashmir.



The students were explored to know what the biggest loss due to armed conflict was. The majority of the respondents said it is the loss of the family (76 percent), followed by livelihood (59 percent) and destruction of forest (53 percent). Very interestingly the gender of the respondents who perceived the destruction of forests largely is female.



The respondents were asked to know whether forest was their pride or resource. The large number of the respondents said forest was their resource (yes 74 percent; no 11 percent) rather than their pride (yes 16 percent; no 84 percent). Incidentally those who hail from rural parts of Kashmir where they make use of forest resources have replied as their resource. Those from urban areas of Kashmir have disagreed it is a pride. At this point, it is imperative that the socio political context in which urban youth, his mobility within other parts of Kashmir during his process of socialisation matters.



The respondents were probed to know who was responsible to plant trees and majority of the students (70 percent) said it was the duty of the government to plant the trees. However, about 35 percent of the respondents said it was the duty of community and about 23 percent said it was the du-

ty of an individual to plant trees. The reliance on State apparatus by a majority of the respondents indicates the belief the people on the civilian establishment in Kashmir. The initiative of the Social Forestry Department of Jammu and Kashmir since 1982 seems to have positive effects in this regard.⁷ The respective table indicates the details of targets and achievements, however, in the absence of independent verification the data could not be validated by the researchers.



Trauma for humans *per se* has never been the loss of life and property alone but the loss of the ecosystem, which the Vietnam War for the first time depicted to the world. We live in the era where obliteration of the nature and environment has itself developed as a method of war, which in the context of the modern sovereignty gets legitimised. Emerging discourses on non-conventional security and the drive for emergent protection of environment converge on areas of armed conflict. Emerging facets of human security includes the protection of natural environment which is linked to the foundational aspect of our security needs. The living habitat of humans is conventionally understood within the framework of national and political boundary ignoring the natural landscape that pre-existed political formations. Across South Asia the natural disasters like tsunami have reinforced that nature never accepts political boundaries. It is nature that nurtures us humans and other living organisms or species. Hence

7 <http://www.jksocialforestry.nic.in/Plan-Non-plan-2016-17.pdf>.

since nature is solely not humans but the biodiversity that envelops human existence, it is rational that we recognise that every species have a basic right to exist, and humans need to take cognizance of the reality that only that part of environment that could sustainably support human life support system could be harnessed and subjected to anthropogenic consumption. In the name of sovereignty and legitimacy the modern nations cannot justify warfare and military exercises at the cost of environmental destruction. The findings of this paper underscores is, that destruction of nature and natural resources in the name of armed conflict impacts irreversible changes on the inhabitants adversely and thus the opportunity of any form of perpetual peace becomes null and void. It is a well-accepted reality that all wars are not waged aimed at controlling natural resources, but the end result of all wars will be the decimation of natural habitat which inevitably leads to resource depletion and irreversible degradation of environment. This precarious situation could immerse any region into very powerful vicious circle of underdevelopment, poverty, political resentment, political alienation and apathy leading to further escalation of war nerves and lead to further catastrophe.

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