

**The moral path beyond war: A narrative inquiry into the
experiences that have influenced the moral perspectives
of Kashmiri youth**

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ABSTRACT

Today the world faces varying forms of conflict in every country, in every state, and at different levels – be it ethnic, racial, religious, or political. Living amidst conflict, prolonged exposure to violence, and an unstable education, raise questions about the influence of these lived experiences on the moral perspectives of youth. The context of this study is the Kashmir region in India, which has been in a state of conflict since 1947. Reports on Kashmir have focused on its history, geopolitics, wars, militarisation, insurgency, trauma, and human rights issues, yet very few studies represent the voice of Kashmiri youth. This study addresses this imbalance by researching the lived experiences of eight Kashmiri youth who are living amidst conflict. Drawing on a narrative methodology, their lived experiences are contextualised with reference to the history, culture, education, and the Hindu and Sufi religious-moral philosophy predominant in the region. Indian and Western moral philosophies have been bridged to include literature on non-religious moral concepts. Online interviews were undertaken with participants, to consider their experience and perspective of Kashmir, the conflict, education, and religion. This narrative methodology combined with a case study approach has given prominence to the individual voice of the participants from varying contexts and backgrounds. A thematic analysis of the narratives has indicated the influence of their experiences of marginalisation, fear of consequences, an unstable education, and socio-economic situation, on their moral decision-making. A deep desire for an end to violence, stability, and transformation of Kashmir, motivated all the participants to aspire for a future by remaining in Kashmir. The lived experience and perspective of the Kashmiri youth participants are represented in their voice, to gain a deeper understanding of what influences their moral perspective.

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ATTESTATION OF AUTHORSHIP

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person (except where explicitly defined in the acknowledgements), nor material which to a substantial extent has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning.

9th December 2022

Signature

Date

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“The world we live in is a school, in which observation and experience offer us immense possibilities for self-improvement, nay, the world itself is our Guru or God.” (Swami Ramdas, 2017, p. 24)

To the innumerable individuals I have met throughout my life, and invaluable experiences that I have lived through: “I am because you are” (Eze, 2011, p. 10). And for these, I am eternally grateful. Through the variegated experiences of this PhD journey, I have been made to realise a deeper meaning of life. I wept like a child for the pain and challenges, found strength in the silence, and had profound joy in the steep learning. I know, now, that I have grown through this PhD.

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~

We shall meet again, in Srinagar,
by the gates of the Villa of Peace,
our hands blossoming into fists
till the soldiers return the keys
and disappear. Again we'll enter
our last world, the first that vanished
in our absence from the broken city.

– “A Pastoral” from *The Country Without a Post Office*

By Agha Shahid Ali (2000, p. 23)

~

CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

War, morality, and education are ancient concepts that have been researched extensively and have found new emerging meaning across various contexts in the world today. This study weaves together concepts of conflict, morality and education, the thread being the experiences of the individual, to emerge with a deeper understanding of what influences the moral perspectives of youth living in Kashmir. While research suggests the indelible influence of social factors such as conflict, education, culture, history and religion on morality, Mahatma Gandhi declared that “private judgement and public deliberation are not themselves the standard of moral right and wrong; they are only the means of discovering right and wrong” (Bondurant, 1965, p. 179). Drawing on the descriptions of their lived experiences and the moral perspectives embedded in these experiences, the focus of this study was to understand the process of moral formation of Kashmiri youth. This study considered a phenomenological exploration of the experiences of selected Kashmiri youth, to discover what influenced their morality while living amidst conflict.

Finding resonance in the above verse by Ali (2000), this study, *The Moral Path Beyond War*, was a return to the gates of the ‘Villa of Peace’, Kashmir. For myself, the return to Kashmir was to embrace its history and present, the context and its culture, the people, their stories, their lives, and their truth. It was in their stories and voices that I located this study:

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‘*Morality*’, refers to the moral perspectives of Kashmiri youth; ‘*path*’ metaphorically aligns with everyday life; and ‘*beyond war*’ refers to the lived experience of and beyond the conflict in Kashmir. This study, ‘*The moral path beyond war*’, was based on the narratives of Kashmiri youth who are living amidst conflict. This phenomenological study comprises narrative case study approach and interviews with selected Kashmiri youth. These narratives were examined and represented in their

voice to understand what experiences and aspects of their everyday life help shape their moral perspectives.

Finding Purpose

The Valley of Kashmir, located between India and Pakistan, has been in a state of conflict since Colonial independence in 1947 due to geopolitical tension between the two countries (S. Bose, 2009; Schofield, 2021). The ethnic and religious identity of Kashmir has been central to such long-standing territorial conflict – India’s stronghold as a symbol of its secular policy, and Pakistan’s assertion over it as a Muslim majority region. This study focused specifically on Kashmir region in the erstwhile State of Jammu and Kashmir, that has experienced war, militant insurgency, and social instability since the 1990s.

Kashmir continues to be in a state of turmoil, with stone-pelting and curfews while struggling to overcome the effects of several wars and countless cross-border incursions for half a century (Global Conflict Tracker, 2022; Naseer, 2019). Draconian laws such as the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) enforced in Kashmir to contain the militant insurgency and innumerable conflicts have curbed the civil liberties and personal freedom of the people (Ganguly, 2017). Such coercive measures have led to protests and agitation by local youth advocating for peace. Research by W. Ali and Dar on Kashmiri youth suggests that “if you empower young people and give them a voice, they are less likely to move towards a path of violence as has happened in the past. Engage them constructively, and you get a more stable youth” (W. Ali & Dar, 2016, para. 3). This lack of engagement felt by the younger generation has been expressed in relation to educational initiatives that do not take into consideration their concerns: “[NGOs] end up giving us what they think we need” (UNICEF, 2007, p. 15). Considering the technological challenges in Kashmir with frequent Internet blackouts during the pandemic, there is now an even greater need to gain an understanding on the role of education and learning in Kashmir.

This research provides an understanding of the educational experience and perspective of education, held by the research participants, to enable a potential redesign of the educational initiative for Kashmiri youth.

Phenomenological narrations of their lived experiences shed light on the main research question. They provoke further depth with the sub-questions of this research around the experiences of conflict, education, and everyday life in Kashmir that may have a significant influence on the moral perspectives and decision-making of Kashmiri youth. I drew on the narratives of the participants in this study to understand:

What are the significant experiences that help shape the moral perspectives of Kashmiri youth?

Analysis of the research question led to these sub-questions:

1. What meaning do the selected youth in Kashmir attach to their experience of conflict, and how has this experience influenced their present moral perspective?
2. How do selected youth in Kashmir attribute meaning to their lived experience in Kashmir, and what do they identify as a significant influence on their moral perspective?
3. How does the narrative of selected youth reflect the role of ongoing educational initiatives in Kashmir?

The learning from this study contributes to research on Kashmir and youth in conflict regions around the world. According to Ganguly (2017), the study of Kashmir is significant as it is indicative of the social de-stabilisation and decay that is inevitable in global conflicts, where coercive means are used by political institutions against civilians. While there is extensive research on Kashmir, its history, and the psychological impact of the conflict, the perspectives and voices of the Kashmiri youth are not recognised or granted political representation. According to Macdonald (2018), “[the Kashmir conflict] deserves to be followed up by hard work, nuanced research, and, above all, engagement with younger generations who will determine what happens in Kashmir” (para. 27). This study begins to address this gap in knowledge. Through their voices, I shed light on the lived experiences of selected Kashmiri

youth to understand their perspectives of education, life in Kashmir, and their ideas of living together in a cohesive Kashmir.

While educational interventions have been implemented in Kashmir to counter the impact of conflict, qualitative studies on the influence of education have been neglected. Edwards (2015) reported on the need for research on the role of education in the transformation of young people in conflict. The participants in this study discussed their educational experience, their desire for transformation through education, the present role of education in Kashmir, and its influence on Kashmiri youth. In response to Edwards (2015), this study contributes toward research on alternative forms of educational provision in conflict regions.

Though education is considered to have the potential for transformation of youth in conflict, according to Barbara (2006), prolonged exposure to violence tends to make young people question the meaning of their lives and experiences in their world. Living in conflict zones influences the moral structure and reasoning of young people in more ways than it impacts adults (Barbara, 2006). While several studies have examined the psychological impact of war on young people, insufficient conflict studies have been conducted on “the underlying mechanisms that explain how violence affects moral reasoning and behaviour” (Zucchelli & Ugazio, 2019, p. 2). This inquiry aims to increase understanding of the influence of lived experiences in conflict on the moral perspectives of youth, addressing the gap in moral philosophical knowledge in the South Asian context. Findings from this study may also contribute to research on similar conflict regions in the world.

Past research on the underlying reasons for the thinking and moral perspectives of the Kashmiri youth is considered insufficient due to their overt politicisation (Faheem, 2020; W. Khan & Majumdar, 2017; Z. S. Mir et al., 2016). Studies that highlight the voices of Kashmiris and their lived experiences are considered a significant gap in research on Kashmir (Faheem, 2020). This study contributes towards studies on Kashmir. One of the participants in this study mentioned at the outset

that no one ever asks Kashmiri youth, what they think or about their lives. The conversations that do involve youth appear to focus on conflict or seek to pass judgement on the youth's viewpoint, portraying them, as either marginalised victims or as perpetrators of conflict. My approach to this research has been to focus on the moral perspectives, decision-making or reasoning of the Kashmiri youth with an open mind. Such an approach, (Foot, 1958; Murriss, 2012) intends to provide the participants with a space to share their ideas of morality freely and to hold independent judgements on what they consider moral.

Researcher Positioning

The background to and conceptualisation of this study is fundamental to my positioning in it. I came to this study as a moral education facilitator, as an Indian studying Kashmir, and as a consultant who lived and worked in Kashmir. The start of this thesis was, in essence, an 'aha moment' for me, and a series of 'aha moments' thereafter. Before academia, I was a content developer and facilitator for programmes on moral values and ethics. The interactions I had were with adolescents and youth from various Indian cities. I drew on their life experience to understand their moral decisions and views. It was interesting to see the plurality in moral perspectives rooted in their individual contexts and family background. Moral decisions of young people from slums and rural areas appeared to be grounded on universally accepted norms and values; they could not find relevance for individual values that might be different from society's moral standards. There was a sense of pragmatism in youth from such economically challenging contexts, where individual moral choices were a privilege that did not exist, while urban youth emphasised individual freedom and choice from their moral standpoint. The difference in moral perspectives, each deeply rooted in the young people's social contexts, made me curious about the moral influences on youth in other contexts.

Having grown up in an Indian city, Kashmir region was characterised as an unstable conflict zone. There was, however, nothing reported about Kashmiris or their lives amidst such reporting. I vividly remember a news bulletin describing the increasing number of Kashmiri youths becoming militants in 2014, and a Kashmiri friend who left Kashmir on account of the pressure being put on male youth to become militants. These reports made me question the moral judgment and opinion 'Indians', like me, had for 'Kashmiris', based solely on the news media. The opportunity to work with youth in Government schools across the volatile districts of Kashmir in 2015 gave me an insight into the Kashmiri side of the narrative that I, as an Indian, had missed. Living with a Kashmiri family and having cups of *nun-chai* (salty tea) through hours of conversations with mothers, young girls and teachers in far-flung villages and urban Kashmir, taught me that there were voices in Kashmir that were unheard, marginalised, and perhaps, misunderstood. As Quraishi observed: "The only sane and sensitive way to begin addressing the [Kashmir] situation is by talking to the people of the Valley directly and with sincerity" (Quraishi, 2004, p. ix). Through talk and exchange, I gained an insight into Kashmiri's cultural nuance, social norms, everyday challenges, views about India and Indians, keenness to host people from around the world, and their love for Kashmir. The Kashmiri people I met during my stay wanted to talk but did not have anyone to listen to with an open mind – this was my 'aha' moment! The experience eventually led me to this thesis.

Fernando et al. (2010) emphasised the need for empirical research in conflict studies by researchers connected with ground realities and the local culture. Five months of living in Kashmir and being aware of Kashmiri culture made me well aware of the local realities and culture, as an insider. Being an Indian also made me an insider since Kashmir is geographically a part of India, though Kashmiris considered me an outsider since their Kashmiri identity is dissociated from an Indian identity. My positionality as an insider and an outsider during each stage of the study was dynamic and fluid – there was ease in building rapport and trust with the participants as an insider who had prior experience of living in Kashmir; while, as an Indian studying Kashmir I had an insider-outsider

relationship with the study. As a Hindu talking to Muslim participants, I was an outsider and while talking to Hindu participants I was an insider. As a researcher from New Zealand studying Kashmir, I was an outsider, while from the New Zealander perspective, I was an insider studying Kashmir which was a part of India. The insider/outsider positionality was at times a combination of my gender, religion, ethnicity, age, power as a researcher, global exposure, and views on politics. Agreeing with P. Thomson and Gunterb, I observed: "This provisionality of positioning called up various aspects of [my] own identit[y]" (P. Thomson & Gunterb, 2011, p. 25). Considering the constant shift and change in positionality at different stages and from different perspectives of the research necessitated reflexivity and an awareness of my position and standpoint at each stage. Being reflexively conscious during the study and being aware of the multiplicity of positions provided me with a deeper and more nuanced understanding of the experience (Gadamer, 2004). Acknowledging my own presence and history merely as layers to the study and analysis, enabled me to embrace and analyse the participants' lived experience with a sense of openness, respect and a deeper understanding.

Establishing Boundaries

The focus of this study is on the lived experiences of Kashmiri youth to understand what influences their moral perspectives. These lived experiences included instances of schooling (education), of violence and conflict, everyday life in Kashmir, religion, and society. The participants' narration of their experience also included their perspectives and views on politics and the policies of the Indian Government. A separate study would be required to examine the Kashmiri perspective of politics and Indian governance, considering the complexity, depth and controversial nature of politics in Kashmir. Being a geo-political conflict that has spanned over 70 years, the subject of politics in Kashmir has been extensively examined from a historical, anthropological and sociological standpoint (K. Pandit,

2019). The references to politics made by the participants have, nevertheless, been included and examined. Kashmiri politics has not been examined in depth.

Linked to the subject of politics is Kashmir's historiography, which is vociferously debated in academic institutions, religious discourses and media (Zutshi, 2018). Kashmiri researchers F. A. Dar & Kumar (2015) state: "in areas like Kashmir, this manipulated, and partially dumb and deaf 'history' is...continuously being made and remade to stand as an eyewitness, with historians as the judges and juries of the emergent nations" (p. 42). Kashmir's contested historiography is a field that requires in-depth analysis of Kashmir's geopolitics, ethnography, religion, and various political discourses. In line with the non-judgemental stance of this study, the history of Kashmir outlined in the first chapter represents a "collective memory that transcends official history...it must have...an 'ethical dimension'...and dare to remember the lofty successes as well as the sordid misdeeds of a community" (Saikia, 2011, p. 9). The experiences and moral perspectives of the participants in this study were contextualised on such a 'collective memory that transcends history'. Interpretation of the participants' lived experiences included contested historiographical issues such as Hindu fundamentalist hegemonic rule, glorification of militant groups in the valley and the call for *aazaadi* (freedom). Nevertheless, while this phenomenological study acknowledges the indelible influence of history on the lived experiences of the participants, the subject of Kashmir's contested historiography is vast and requires in depth analysis of discourses that extend beyond the purview of this study.

Similarly, as the impact of Kashmir's longstanding conflict on mental health and wellbeing has been examined extensively, I have only included aspects of trauma or wellbeing that are relevant to this study. Politics and trauma are nevertheless an inherent part of the lived experiences of the Kashmiri youth and are discussed in the context of the participants' experiences. The focus of this study is on the lived experience of Kashmiri youth; therefore, aspects of politics and psychological impact while included are limited to what was highlighted by the participants, and not examined in depth.

Key Terms and Incidents

This study is limited to the context of Kashmir; its cultural nuances and references used colloquially by the participants in their narratives are fundamental to understanding their lived experiences. Gadamer (2004) believed that “a conversation has a spirit of its own, and...the language in which it is conducted bears its own truth within it - i.e., that it allows something to 'emerge' which henceforth exists” (p. 401). The conversations with the participants during the interviews were in Hindi, drawing on my prior experience in Kashmir, as a non-judgemental Indian researcher. Such a rapport allowed the conversations and vulnerabilities to be shared with more comfort and trust, allowing for a deeper understanding of the participants’ perspectives to emerge. An understanding of these terms and references frequently used by participants in the study allows for a better understanding of the lived experiences and findings.

Kashmiriyat – Term used to refer to the “ethos of being Kashmiri” (Aggarwal, 2008, p. 222). According to Tak (2013), the term came to be used first in the 1970s with reference to cultural nationalistic ideologies and the need for revolution to preserve their unique Kashmiri identity. Usage of the term *Kashmiriyat*, however, transformed in the 1990s to characterise the secular identity of Kashmiris (Tak, 2013). Participants in this study used this term to represent their ethnic identity and their Kashmiri-ness, which was unique compared to the Indian people living in other parts of India.

Insurgency and militancy in Kashmir – The proliferation of militants in Kashmir began in 1988 when the Jammu Kashmir Liberation Front (JKLF) began armed retaliation against the Indian military. According to historical studies (Evans, 2000; Rai, 2018), Kashmiris crossed the border into Pakistan-occupied-Kashmir (PoK) for military and arms training. They then became disillusioned, after the elections were manipulated to ensure a Muslim political party would not come to power in Kashmir. The return of the trained JKLF militants in 1988 led to bomb explosions, assassinations, kidnappings,

and the destruction of Government property in Kashmir. In response, the Indian military police opened fire and killed Kashmiri protestors who were marching peacefully against the illegal searches of their houses at night. Over 200 protestors, including children, were shot when they were crossing the Gawakadal bridge and their bodies were thrown into the Jhelum River (Schofield, 2021). This incident is still considered the worst massacre in Kashmir history. Watching the bodies floating in the Jhelum River infuriated the Kashmiris and led to further resentment against the Indian Government and military.

With time, other groups such as Hizbul Mujahadeen, Lashkar-e-Toiba and Harkat-ul-Mujahadeen have funded and organised militant activities in Kashmir (Evans, 2000). According to a more recent study by Rai (2018), the number of militants has now reduced compared to the 1990s. While militant activities have reportedly also reduced, there are ongoing protests in the form of stone-pelting and non-violent demonstrations. Protests today include not just Kashmiri youth, but also young school children, in defiance of the indiscriminate killings and violence of the army – “looking a death in the eye, they hurl stones...at fully armed soldiers engaged in battles with militants” (Rai, 2018, p. 17). Reports (Baweja, 2022; Majid, 2018) suggest that militant activity has however altered since 2016 when Kashmiri militant Burhan Wani (described below) was killed by the army; the new-age militants are technologically-proficient educated youth who fight against the Indian military and Government.

Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) – The AFSPA was conferred on the armed forces positioned in Jammu and Kashmir since 1990 in response to the militant insurgency in 1989 (Rabbani, 2011). The Act (The Armed Forces (Jammu and Kashmir) Special Powers Act, 1990, s 21) empowers the armed forces to “fire upon or otherwise use force, even to the causing of death, against any person who is acting in contravention of any law or order for the time being in force”; “arrest, without warrant, any person who has committed a cognizable offence or against whom a reasonable suspicion exists that he has committed or is about to commit a cognizable offence and may use such force as may be

necessary”; “enter and search, without warrant, any premises”. The armed forces may also seize vehicles, break open locks of homes and inspect personal belongings, or undertake any measures they deem necessary. Additionally, “no prosecution, suit or other legal proceeding shall be instituted... against any person in respect of anything done or purported to be done in exercise of the powers conferred by this Act” (The Armed Forces (Jammu and Kashmir) Special Powers Act, 1990, s 21). Considered to be the most controversial acts empowering all armed forces in Kashmir, incidents of harassment, rapes, torture, forced disappearances, fake encounters (extrajudicial killings), custodial killings and human rights violations have been reported since 1990 (Rabbani, 2011). The armed forces, under the AFSPA, cannot be held accountable for any of these violations since the region has been termed ‘a disturbed region’ by the Government.

Burhan Wani (martyred) – Burhan Wani, commander of the militant group Hizbul Mujahideen, was a 21-year-old Kashmir youth who was considered responsible for popularising insurgency and militant activities among Kashmiri youth. He rose to popularity owing to his background and his motivation for becoming a militant. Though Burhan Wani was a high-achieving student at school, at the age of 15, disturbed by his brother being beaten by the Indian military for no reason, he ran away from home to join Hizbul Mujahideen (Nabeel et al., 2016). While he was not known to be involved in any direct attacks, he actively used social media to spread his message and recruit Kashmiri youth to the movement. His messages, which focused predominantly on the everyday lives and challenges of the Kashmiri people, and not religion, resonated with the adolescents and youth in Kashmir (Bukhari, 2016). “Wani was extremely active on social media, and unlike militants in the past, did not hide his identity behind a mask” (Bukhari, 2016, para. 6). He was killed in a police encounter in Anantnag (district) on 8th July 2016. His funeral drew a crowd of over 200,000 people; he was considered a hero and a martyr (Nabeel et al., 2016). This was followed by protests and violent clashes between the civilians and the military, and an extended period of lockdown across Kashmir. Inspired by Burhan Wani, Zakir Musa, Rafiq Bhat, Manan Wani, Mohammad Younis Lone, Azharuddin Khan and Junaid

Ashraf were among the many other well-qualified and highly educated Kashmiri youth who became militants, angered by instances of military oppression, humiliation, and violence against innocent Kashmiris (Gani Mir, 2019). Gani Mir (2019) adds that since 2016, Kashmir has seen a rise in the number of Kashmiri youths becoming militants, or participating in violence, drawing inspiration from the views and ideology of Burhan Wani.

Pulwama attack – On the 14th of February 2019, a bus carrying Indian soldiers was attacked by a suicide bomber who was driving a vehicle filled with explosives. This attack took place in Pulwama in the Anantnag district and killed 40 soldiers (S. Yasir, 2019). The militant group Jaish-e-Mohammed claimed responsibility for this attack. The suicide bomber was a 22-year-old Kashmiri youth, Adil Ahmad Dar, who had been injured while protesting the killing of Burhan Wani in 2016. He had been beaten by the army several times over a period of two years; which eventually motivated him to leave home and seek training to become a militant in 2018 (Raina, 2019). As a result of the Pulwama attack, Kashmiri students living in other parts of India faced violence, harassment and eviction from their homes (DAWN, 2019; Majid, 2019a). Hundreds of Kashmiri youth studying in the other Indian States were evacuated and had to return to Kashmir for fear of being attacked by radical Indians and affiliated political parties. These reports suggest that such incidents further infuriated Kashmiri youth against the Indian government and motivated them to become militants.

Article 370 (revoked) – Article 370 of the Indian Constitution allowed the State of Jammu and Kashmir to have a separate constitution, a state flag and autonomy of internal administration. This autonomy did not include matters of defence, foreign affairs, and communication. Further addition of Article 35a gave permanent Kashmiri residents exclusive rights and privileges to own property in Kashmir, hold government jobs, avail themselves of benefits for higher education, and contest elections in Jammu and Kashmir (K. A. Bhat, 2017). The article was a temporary and provisional document drafted as a solution to the integration of Jammu and Kashmir with India, until a referendum for the people to decide if they wished to be independent, fully integrate with India, or join Pakistan. This amendment

to the Indian Constitution, in place since 1954, was revoked in August 2019 by the BJP Government (The Gazette of India, 2019a). The privileges and autonomy that the people of Jammu and Kashmir enjoyed, ceased with the revocation of Article 370. The State of Jammu and Kashmir was also reorganised in October 2019 – the Buddhist majority of Ladakh was separated from Jammu and Kashmir; both Ladakh and Jammu and Kashmir were reorganised as Union Territories of India (The Gazette of India, 2019b). The Constitutional rights of Kashmiris were on par with the rest of India. The revoking of the Article, and the approach adopted by the Government before the announcement of the Article being revoked, led to mixed reactions throughout the country. The day before the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) Government “announced its decision to scrap the special status, it put the region under lockdown – mobile phone networks, landlines and Internet were cut off; and regional political leaders were placed under house arrest” (BBC News, 2019b, para. 15). The announcement led to huge student protests, as well as celebrations by right-wing Hindu political parties in different parts of India (The Indian Express, 2019). Within Kashmir, the revocation of the article led to widespread protests, more incidents of stone-pelting, and violence. The unilateral decision of the Government to revoke the article, disregarding the opinion of Kashmiris, has led to further anger and an outpouring of hatred among the Kashmiris against the Indian Government (B. A. Bhat, 2019). According to Connah (2021), Kashmir was in a state of lockdown when the global pandemic hit. Kashmir’s educational institutions were closed from August 2019 along with an Internet blackout for over 18 months (Ellis-Petersen & Nanda, 2021; Outlook, 2022).

Overview of the Study

While the terms and incidents described above lend a context and background for their usage and reference in the thesis, each chapter of this study is a layer that adds a level of insight or grounding for the stories and experiences of the research participants. The chapters begin with a poetic verse to

foreground the essence of the chapter for the reader, locate themselves in the journey of the study and finally find a deeper meaning of the lived experiences and moral perspective of the Kashmiri youth.

The first chapter has set out the rationale for my doctoral study. I have summarised in the introductory chapter what drew me to this study, i.e., the argument, the research question and its significance. I have outlined my story, positionality, and scope of the study, which justifies my approach and background to the study. The description of the key incidents and terms described in this chapter above have enabled a deeper understanding of the contexts and the narratives of the Kashmiri youth. Finally, I have provided a schematic structure of the thesis that summarises the flow of the study.

The second chapter, the literature review, is an overview of the context of Kashmir and the role of education in that region. The focus of this study is on Kashmir, conflict, the role of education, and the underlying moral structures of youth in such an environment. The first section of the literature review concerns the history of Kashmir, a background on the conflict that has spanned over 70 years, and the influence of conflict on the youth in the region. This outlines the backdrop and context of the lived experience of the participants in this study. The second section is a description of the role of education in the context of Kashmir. While education in Kashmir is linked with schooling, this section examines the influence of schooling, education and learning in Kashmir. There is also conceptual mapping of education in the context of a conflict zone, and the role of education for liberation. The literature draws on the work of Paulo Freire and Gert Biesta to gain a deeper understanding on the purpose of education, and its role in the moral decision-making of young people.

The third chapter is a review of literature on the concept of morality. Considering Kashmir as the context of the participants, this section describes the Sufi and Hindu religious-moral concepts of Kashmir, as well as the moral philosophies of Alasdair MacIntyre, Charles Taylor and Paulo Freire. As

non-religious moral studies are in a nascent condition in India, Western and Kashmiri moral philosophies are discussed in an examination of the participants' moral concepts. Further, given the conflict context of Kashmiri youth in this study, moral concepts of humanisation, freedom and transformation through a liberating form of education discoursed by Paulo Freire and Gert Biesta will be examined.

The fourth chapter on methodology examines the conceptual framework and research design. The first section of this chapter outlines the phenomenological approach. Considering the Kashmiri context of the participants, the study is grounded on Sufi and Hindu phenomenological philosophy, as well as the Western approaches of Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger, and Hans-Georg Gadamer. The focus of this study being morality, this chapter examines the intersection of morality and phenomenology to understand the essence of the moral perspectives embedded in the lived experience. The second section of the methodology chapter will consider the use of narrative methodology and case study methodology in this study. An argument is made for the use of narrative methodology for an in-depth examination of the lived experience of the participants, and case study methodology in making a comparison of nuances within and across each individual narrative. This chapter includes an outline of ethical considerations, research methods, rigour, participant recruitment, and the findings of the study with reference to a description of the interview process.

The fifth chapter, the unheard voices of Kashmir, are case synopses that draw on narrative case study methodology. This chapter introduces each participant in the study. It allows the reader to 'know' the participants, at least to some extent, before examining their experiences and perspective. As in narrative methodology, each synopsis is a literary piece that lends insight into each participant's context, family, background, nature, and emotions, and conveys the ambience in which the interviews were conducted.

The sixth chapter is a thematic representation of the findings that emerged after the analysis of the interview transcripts. The chapter highlights aspects of the lived experience and perspectives of the participants, drawn from the interviews. The research findings are divided into three sections that were emphasised and thematically linked to the questions – the participants' identity as Kashmiris, their experiences of conflict and violence, and the role of education in Kashmir. According to the phenomenological approach, each participant is represented in their own voice, adding the nuances and subjectivities that render depth, meaning and fullness to their experience and perspective.

The seventh chapter, titled discussion, is an interpretation of the findings to understand what influences the moral perspective of the Kashmiri youth. The interpretation took into consideration the context and history literature described in chapter two, and the individual subjectivities of the participants. It was found that the experience of being marginalised based on their Kashmiri identity, fear of consequences, lack of sustained education and career opportunities, the 'normality' of everyday violence and oppression, and most significantly, the desire for peace and an end to the state of conflict, significantly influenced their life decisions and moral perspective.

The final concluding chapter answers the research questions and reflects on the challenges and limitations faced during this study. It also considers the contribution of this study to the field of conflict, morality, phenomenology, and Kashmir. The thesis is brought to a close by suggesting future research and my own personal reflection and learning as an emerging researcher.

CHAPTER 2 KASHMIR AND EDUCATION

Kashmir shrinks into my mailbox,
my home a neat four by six inches
I always loved neatness. Now I hold
the half-inch Himalayas in my hand.
This is home. And this is the closest
I'll ever be to home. When I return,
the colours won't be so brilliant,
the Jhelum's waters so clean,
so ultramarine. My love
so overexposed.

– “Postcard from Kashmir” by Agha Shahid Ali (2012, p. 1)

This chapter provides a historical, contextual, and theoretical context of young people in Kashmir, the role of education, and morality. While the layers of the study unfold through the lived experiences examined in chapters five and six, this chapter sets the tone and provides an overview of the essential aspects that will be critically examined in subsequent chapters. Divided into three sections, the first will consider the place, or context of the participants in Kashmir, and the influence of growing up amidst conflict. The second section, drawing on the educational philosophy of Gert Biesta and Paulo Freire, examines the role of education in conflict regions and its purpose in transforming the youth. In the third section, I explore Kashmiri concepts of morality and the Western moral theories of Alasdair MacIntyre and Charles Taylor.

In this first part of the literature review, I describe the history of Kashmir and detail the effect of conflict on the youth of the region. Kashmir is not just a place, it is an experience where discussions about people, religion, culture, politics, perspectives, and education, overlap (N. Kaul, 2018). Kashmiris, often say, “you cannot discuss Kashmir, or the Kashmir conflict, without starting with history” (Kumar, 2018, p. i). To understand the experiences that influence the moral perspective of Kashmiri youth requires an understanding of Kashmir’s past and present.

Story of Kashmir

“Agar firdous baroye zameen ast, hami asto, hami asto, hami ast.”

(If there is paradise on earth, it is here, it is here, it is here)

– Poet Amir Khusro (Seth, 2019, p. 1)

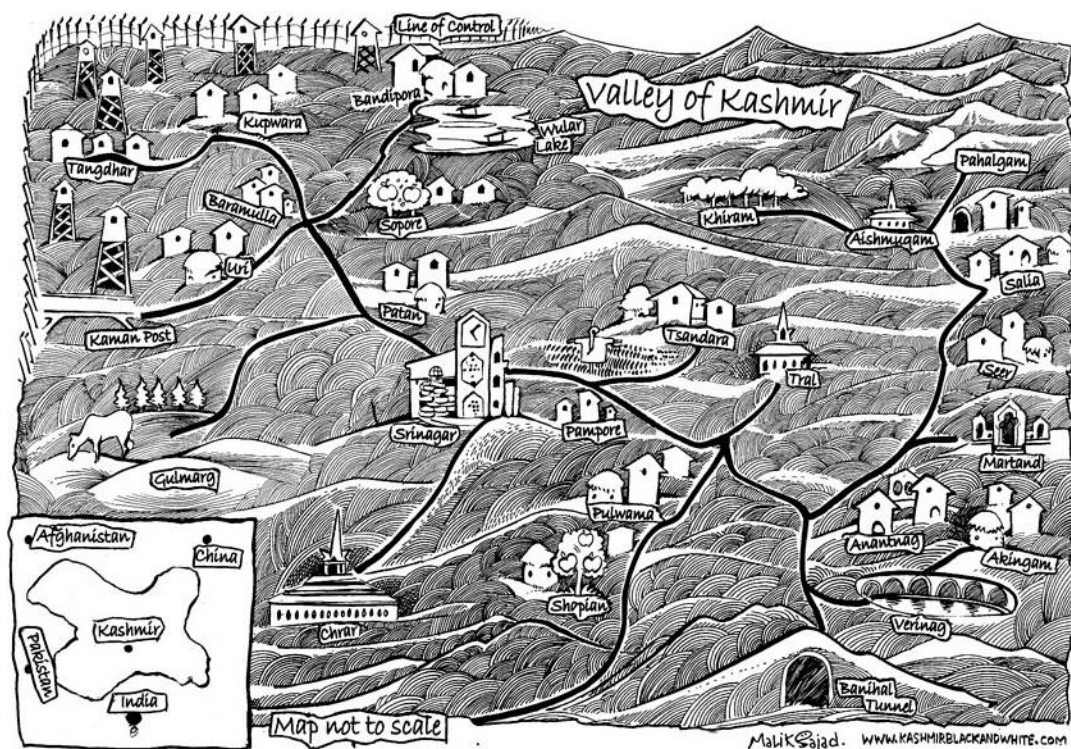


Figure 1 Kashmir region drawn by Kashmiri cartoonist Malik Sajad (2022) reproduced with author permission

Kashmir, the muse of many poets, has been called ‘paradise on earth’ for its spectacular beauty and rich culture (Seth, 2019). A region in the erstwhile State of Jammu and Kashmir (J&K), one of the largest princely States in India before Colonial independence and partition in 1947, Kashmir is home to the great western Himalayan range. It is here, within the vast plain valleys, gushing rivers and alpine forests, that some of the world’s most endangered flora and fauna are found (Kirk & Akhtar, 2019). Kashmir’s geographical position, flanked by Pakistan to the West, China to the East, and India to the

South, until 2019¹, made its demography unique compared to the rest of India. This was a place where Hindus, Sufis and Buddhists lived cohesively side by side. Administratively, the State of J&K was divided based on ethnicity into a triparted State – Jammu with a 67% Hindu majority, Kashmir with 97% Muslims, and Ladakh with 46% Buddhists (Government of Jammu and Kashmir, 2011).

Historically, Kashmir region was the source of sacred Hindu literature and an important centre for Buddhism (Bamzai, 1994). Considered the birthplace of Sufism in India, the beauty of Kashmir made it a coveted prize for invasions by Mughal rulers, Sikh rulers and finally by the British colonists (Bamzai, 1994). During the Mughal rule, which lasted for over five centuries, the Persian language was brought to Kashmir by way of Sufi travellers. This in turn led to the development of the local Kashmiri language. Along with the advent of Islam in the 14th century, craftsmanship, paper mâché, woodcarving, art and weaving were introduced. From weaving the *Cashmere* shawl evolved, being woven from the wool of the Cashmere (Kashmir) sheep (Asimov & Bosworth, 1998). Kashmir also gained popularity under the British as a holiday destination. Archaeologist Sir Aurel Stein (1900), who explored Asia during British colonial rule described Kashmir thus:

Small indeed the country may seem by the side of the great plains that extend in the south, and confined the history of which it was the scene. And yet, just as the natural attractions of the valley have won it fame beyond the frontiers of India, thus too the interest attaching to its history far exceeds the narrow geographical limits. (p. xxiv)

Though rich in its natural landscape, literature, and ancient literature, Kashmir's history has been marred by several Indo-Pakistan wars and conflicts since Colonial independence in 1947. This geopolitical conflict involves long-standing disputes over territory, ethnoreligious ideologies, and opposing political and economic interests (A. A. Wani, 2013).

¹ 2019 – Jammu and Kashmir State bifurcated into two Union Territories (UT) of Jammu and Kashmir, and Ladakh (The Gazette of India, 2019b) – Refer Chapter 1.

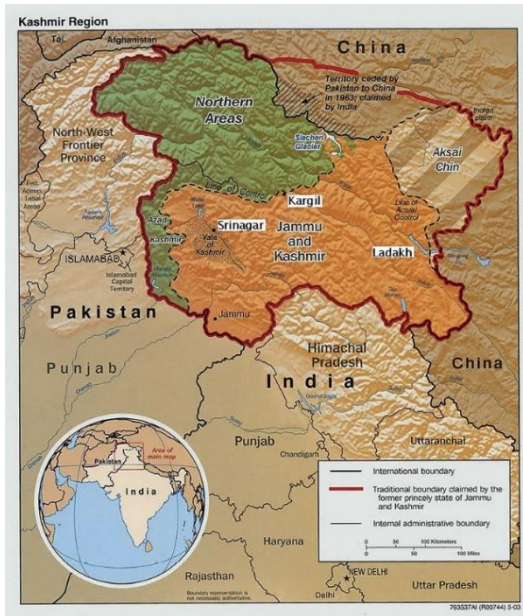


Figure 2 Kashmir region (United States. Central Intelligence Agency, 2003)
(<https://lccn.loc.gov/2003625170>)

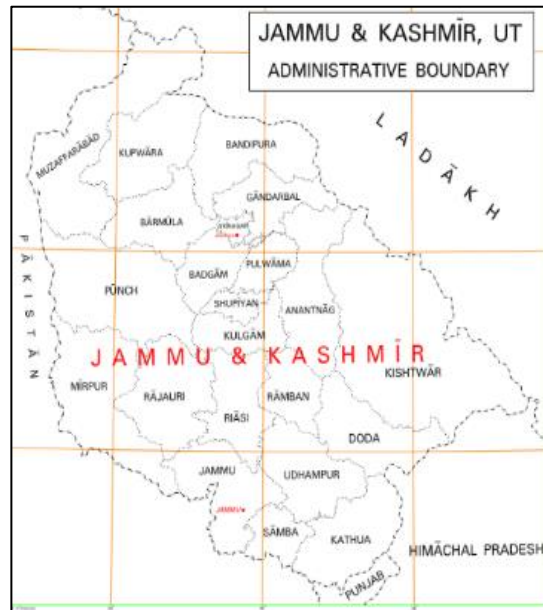


Figure 3 Map of J&K UT (Government of India, 2020)
(<https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1590112>)

CONFLICT

Colonial independence in August 1947 was followed by the partition of India and Pakistan, with Kashmir in the middle of this territorial bifurcation – the crown jewel that both claimed. During partition, the rulers of the princely States were given the right to either join India, or Pakistan or remain independent. Considering its unique ethnic and cultural composition, the king of Kashmir, Hari Singh, envisaged an independent Kashmir at the end of the Colonial rule (Punjabi, 1995). On 22nd October 1947, before the king had decided the fate of Kashmir, Pashtun tribesmen from Pakistan invaded Kashmir. The king sought support from India to fight against Pakistan. In return, he signed the Instrument of Accession (IoA) of Kashmir to India, a Hindu-majority country, on 26th October 1947, without the consent of the Muslim population in the region (Bowers, 2004). The king, however, included a clause in the IoA which empowered Kashmiris with independent rights, administration and

privileges, termed Article 370² of the Indian Constitution (S. Bose, 2009). Accepting the clause in the IoA, India immediately declared the region as the Indian State of Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) and airlifted Indian armed forces to Srinagar in Kashmir on 27th October 1947, to fight against Pakistan (S. N. Prasad & Pal, 1987). This was the first armed war between India and Pakistan.

India approached the United Nations (UN) on the 1st of January 1948, to formally identify Kashmir as a threat to international peace, as outlined under Article 35 of the UN Charter (United Nations, 2022). Since Pakistan contested the autocratic accession of J&K to India, the UN passed a resolution on the 21st of April 1948, which involved three steps to end the dispute between India and Pakistan. The first step was the withdrawal of the Pakistan military and Pashtun tribesmen from *Azad* Kashmir (Free Kashmir), referred to as Pakistan-occupied Kashmir' (PoK) by India. This comprised one-third part of Kashmir that was annexed by Pakistan during the war (Raza, 1996). The second step involved a reduction of the Indian military in Kashmir to a minimum level to maintain law and order. The final step was a democratic plebiscite in J&K, to be monitored by the UN (Korbel, 2015). The resolution stated that after the demilitarisation of both *Azad* Kashmir and the Indian Kashmir region, the future of Kashmir would be finally "decided through the democratic method of a free and impartial plebiscite, considering that the continuation of the dispute is likely to endanger international peace and security" (United Nations, 1948, p. 4). The UN set up the United Nations Commission for India and Pakistan (UNCIP) on 3rd June 1948, to monitor the implementation of the resolution (Wellens, 1990). Following lengthy negotiations, the UN enforced a cease-fire on 13th August 1948, with a Line-of-Control (LoC) dividing the Kashmir region in India and *Azad* Kashmir in PoK. To date, the plebiscite has not been implemented in the Kashmir region.

According to Korbel (2015), the lack of enforcement by the UN and Indian Government towards implementing the plebiscite since 1948, has been the cause of continued instability in the

² Article 370 – Acknowledged special status of Jammu and Kashmir in terms of autonomy and its ability to formulate laws for the state's permanent residents due to the long-standing dispute in the region (Noorani, 2014). (Refer Chapter 1)

Kashmir region in India. Conversely, continued India-Pakistan geopolitical tension, most notably the 1965 Indo-Pakistan war, the 1999 Kargil war, and several other conflicts, according to Bamzai (1994), has made the plebiscite an impossibility. Religious differences became central to the Kashmir conflict in 1989. The Hindu majority in the valley before 1989, had lived in communal harmony with the Sufi Muslims for generations (Tremblay, 1995). In October 1989, however, radical Islamist militant insurgents, in a bid to establish Kashmir as a purely Islamic region, infiltrated the LoC on the western front in large numbers. They then ordered Hindus in the valley to either leave Kashmir, convert to Islam, or die (Essa, 2011). This led to a mass Hindu exodus to Jammu and other parts of India, prompted by fears of the militant insurgents and the widespread communal violence that they threatened. This period reduced the Hindus from a dominant 28% ethnicity in Kashmir to a less than 2% minority group (Sarkaria, 2009). Religion, now combined with politics, has continued to keep Kashmir in a constant state of conflict.

To contain the militant insurgency and innumerable conflicts since the first war, the Indian armed forces deployed in Kashmir, were bolstered by draconian laws³ that curbed civil liberties and personal freedoms (Ganguly, 2017). Kashmir now has an estimated 700,000 Indian armed forces personnel who watch over a population of around 14 million, making it one of the most militarised zones in the world (Ahmed et al., 2019; SBS News, 2019). Though the military presence has contained any insurgency or wars, the oppression and violence of the Indian military have led to ongoing protests and agitation by local youth, seeking peace and political representation (Devadas, 2018). Women have engaged passively in these protests, while the participation of children has been negligible (Parashar, 2009). In recent reports, Kashmiri organisations have identified the disappearance of 8000+ persons, 70,000+ deaths, 6000+ unmarked graves, and countless cases of violence and torture by the armed forces and affiliated militant groups (Ahad et al., 2019; Imroz, 2015). Some accounts claim that over

³ Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) – Refer Chapter One

4000 youth are considered missing, though Government agencies state these persons might have crossed the border to Pakistan for arms training.

To encourage foreign investment, development and progress in the state, the Indian Government revoked Article 370 in October 2019 and declared J&K and Ladakh as two separate Union Territories of India under the Jammu and Kashmir Reorganisation Act⁴ (Times of India, 2019). As a result, the privileges that Kashmiris were entitled to, were withdrawn, and Kashmir's Legislative Assembly was empowered to only pass rules, and laws, with the consent of the Central Government (The Gazette of India, 2019b). News reports (BBC News, 2019b), have documented stone pelting, curfews and conflict between civilians and the Indian army following the ratification of this legislation. There has subsequently been no reduction of military presence in Kashmir; on the contrary additional military personnel have been deployed. As a result, Kashmir continues to be in a state of turmoil, while struggling to overcome the effects of several wars and countless cross-border conflicts for half a century (Global Conflict Tracker, 2022; Naseer, 2019).

The common question, "*Haalaat chhu theek?* (are the conditions okay?)" (Devadas, 2018, p. 2) that Kashmiris ask one another, is a reminder that conditions are not at all 'okay'. Bar-tal and Rosen (2009) see Kashmir's history, societal beliefs, the ethos of conflict, and collective emotional orientation as the dominant factors that have held Kashmir in a state of instability for over 70 years. While the prolonged state of conflict has affected all Kashmiris, according to a local newspaper report, "the most alarming aspect of the [Kashmir] conflict is that prominent victims of violence during the last two decades were the youth" (Hassan, 2015, para. 4). The Kashmir conflict has affected a whole generation of young people who have experienced instability from childhood. As one commentator

⁴ J&K Reorganisation Act – Refer Chapter 1, under Article 370

observed: “All wars, whether just or unjust, disastrous or victorious, are waged against the child” (Founder of Save the Children, Eglantyne Jebb, cited by Kirollos et al., 2018, p. 3).

KASHMIRI YOUTH IN CONFLICT

The period termed ‘youth’ is considered a blurry ambiguous transitional phase between childhood to adulthood, in which the transformation is more of a state of mind than merely a biological progression (Gill, 2003). Though youth are defined as individuals between the ages of 15-24 years (Social Statistics Division, 2017; World Health Organisation, 2020), Bickmore et al. (2017) believe that youth in conflict-affected areas are not just ‘normal youth’ defined by age; they are participative, responsible and mature individuals, with a strong sense of identity and a deeper experience of life. In the words of one youth from a conflict zone highlighted in a UNICEF (2007) Report: “[s]ome of us have been *born in the midst of this violence*. It has become a way of life” (p. 4). Ardila-Rey et al. (2009) add that, while all the population are impacted by the consequences of war, youth in conflict regions, compared to youth from non-conflict regions, tend to be affected far more due to their prolonged exposure to violence.

According to Burton (2016), in regions where youth are exposed to “severe economic deprivation, physical segregation from the mainstream, and high levels of violence, a perceived fore-shortening of life with consequent accelerated developmental trajectories are common, and prime children to “grow up a little faster” (p. 331). Referring to this process as “adultification”, where youth, from an early age, engage in adult responsibilities due to economic or social conditions, Burton (2001) points to youth taking on such responsibilities as taking care of siblings and parents or supporting the family financially.

Youth is an important period of physical, mental and social maturation, where young people are actively forming identities and determining acceptable roles for themselves within their community and society as a whole. They are increasingly capable of abstract thought and decision-making in new ways... Youth are at once targets, perpetrators and survivors of conflict. (Hassan, 2015, para. 2)

Kashmir is considered to be experiencing a youth bulge with over 60% of the population being youth, 10% of whom are in the specific age group of 15-19 years (National Commission On Population, 2019). According to S. Singh (2018) and Devadas (2018), a high percentage of youth in Kashmir, who are in their teenage years, have been involved in protests and stone-pelting. In a study on youth recruitment into militant groups, Sonpar (2016) found that unemployed young people are more easily recruited, with promises made of greatness, and pride in the name of religion. According to Patterson (2013), religion is the primary motivation for the active participation of Kashmiri youth in the conflict. While issues of the earlier generations, who lived through the wars of the 1990s, focused on Kashmiri ethnic identity, and political and economic grievances, the current conflict reflects a far sharper communal divide (Sonpar, 2016). Instead of Kashmir's more peaceful syncretic form of Islam, or Sufism, where Hindus and Muslims live together, the rise of insurgent militant Islamist thinking has influenced some youth to consider the conflict as Hindu versus Muslim, rejecting democracy and the nation-state altogether (Macdonald, 2018). The present Hindu Indian nationalist BJP Government's policies and stance in Kashmir have, moreover, brought religion to the forefront of Kashmir's conflict since the abrogation of Article 370 (Barkey et al., 2021; Yusuf, 2019). According to Maizland (2020), the Government's "Islamophobia" (para. 31), and the encouragement of extreme Hindu radicals terrorising Muslims in different parts of the country, have made Kashmiri youth, who are predominantly Muslim, fight for Islam.

Kashmiri researcher N.U.I Wani (2017), adds that though religious differences instigated by the nationalist BJP Government are a cause of growing dissent among Kashmiri youth, along with the popularisation of the idea of *jihad* (fighting in the name of God), the present generation of Kashmiri youth are not motivated by religion; the evolution of the Kashmir conflict for the youth has less to do with religion and more with the desire for a stable and better future (N. U. I. Wani, 2017). These youth instead consider *jihad* as a fight for the betterment of their lives and Kashmir. The inability to have a stable future even after being highly educated due to State politics, the nationalist Government's

Islamophobia, and the violence of the military, according to N.U.I Wani (2017), are the primary reasons for increased youth participation in violence and militancy.

News reports and social media (Naseem, 2018; Slater, 2019) also suggest that the youth participating in the violence are educated and well-read, from middle-class backgrounds. These reports attribute the increase in youth violence to the glorification of highly educated militants (Ganie, 2021). Dhamija (2017) adds that the rising participation of Kashmiri youth has been inspired by popular Kashmiri militant Burhan Wani⁵ and his eventual martyrdom. According to Nabeel et al. (2016), Burhan Wani repeatedly highlighted through the use of social media that the fight in Kashmir was against the Indian army and the Government, and not against Hindus or the people.

The current generation of youth who have grown up in an unstable environment of violence, corruption, humiliation and oppression, resent the presence of the Indian military, along with the lack of economic and social opportunities (F. A. Dar, 2014). In *The Generation of Rage in Kashmir*, Devadas (2018) believes that it is the politics and governance that prompt local Kashmiri youth to join militant groups or take to the streets and fight for peace.

In a survey by Bradnock (2010), 87% of youth identified unemployment as one of the main problems facing Jammu and Kashmir, while 36% considered conflict as a major issue, 43% human rights abuses, and 45% indicated poor economic development. A recent Government statistical report (Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation (MOSPI), 2021), highlighted Jammu and Kashmir as having one of the highest unemployment rates at 18%. This compares to the national average of 12%, with over 46% of 15–29-year-old Kashmiri youth unemployed as against the national average of 25%. Over 250,000 educated youth remain unemployed, including 150,000 postgraduates (Peer, 2020). Peer's report found victimisation, poverty, frustration, lack of education, specific

⁵ Burhan Wani – aged 21, was a Kashmiri Islamist rebel militant and top commander of Hizbul Mujahideen, killed by the Indian armed forces in 2016. Refer to a full description in Chapter One

personal incidents, and emotional disturbance as significant causes for the rise in youth participation in the conflict. It is interesting to note that though many Kashmiri youth actively participated in the fighting and violence, Kashmiri youth were also the demographic that was most affected by the prolonged violence (F. A. Dar, 2014; Devadas, 2018; Ganie, 2019).

INFLUENCE OF CONFLICT ON YOUTH

[Youth] is a time of opportunities, with greater freedom, developing an understanding of one's own identity and place in the community and society... It is also a time when injustice and its unacceptability are strongly felt. (Brett & Specht, 2004, p. 3)

Though conflict affects society as a whole, the non-combatant civilian population, in general, are most vulnerable to the effects of war, while children suffer the most (Albertyn et al., 2003). According to Levy and Sidel (2008), conflict not only destroys the environment and the infrastructure of the society, but also “leads people to think that violence is the only way to resolve conflicts – a mindset that contributes to domestic violence, street crime, and other kinds of violence... [War] threatens much of the fabric of our civilization” (p. 3). Studies indicate that while conflict has direct consequences, such as the destruction of schools and educational infrastructure, high rates of illiteracy, disease, famine, rise in crime, and drug abuse, there is also an intangible impact on the wellbeing of people that persists in society for years (Krug et al., 2002). According to Zucchelli and Ugazio (2019), the brutality of war has grave consequences and tends to have a lasting psychosocial impact on the decision-making abilities of young people. Further, Barbara (2006) has indicated that prolonged exposure to violence influences the physical development, mental wellbeing, psychology and moral reasoning of children in many more ways than it impacts adults. As stated anonymously by young people from war zones:

We are sometimes haunted by the memories of brutal atrocities committed before our eyes. We are not adults yet, but our childhoods have ended very abruptly... We

sometimes lose hope and wonder why the world fails to understand or accept us.
(UNICEF, 2007, p. 6)

Research in regions such as Sierra Leone, Uganda, El Salvador, Iraq, Sri Lanka and Kashmir that have experienced armed conflicts, use of child soldiers, the disappearance of civilians, ethnic cleansing, rape and exploitation, have indicated that young people often carry the burden of having been directly or indirectly affected by war throughout their adulthood (UNICEF, 2007). Many Kashmiri youth have been forced to witness assaults, torture or killings, which has a traumatic impact on their mental wellbeing (Ahad et al., 2019). There is also a constant sense of fear, flashbacks, depression and resentment felt among youth, due to the curfews, body searches, humiliation, roundups, raids and interrogations that specifically target them. A study (Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) & Institute of Mental Health and Neurosciences (IMHANS), 2016) on the mental health of youth in Kashmir reported conflict-related stress, mental illness, suicide and drug addiction. The study revealed a sense of hopelessness amongst young people with regard to their future in Kashmir. Shah (2012) uncovered the use of drugs and other dependencies to overcome depression and stress, has crept into the youth culture in Kashmir, affecting the culture and their ability to think. Research also suggested that violence had a lasting influence on moral decision-making, inhibitory control, and the cognition of young people (Ardila-Rey et al., 2009; Leavitt & Fox, 1993; Posada & Wainryb, 2008). According to Tavares and Slotiny (2015), living in a state of conflict and violence tends to influence the “moral structures” of youth (p. 12). Faulkner (2001) believes that a society’s moral standards, in general, tend to be influenced by war, and the brutalities of conflict and violence. For those young people who witness such acts, this becomes an inescapable part of their personal experience, history and perspective on life. In the context of Kashmir, Majumdar (2019) has indicated that apart from prolonged exposure to violence, the religious, ethnic and geopolitical nature of the Kashmir conflict has influenced the moral beliefs of youth:

Social identity and moral beliefs, which are often intertwined with ideologies propagated during conflicts, are related to how people develop certain attitudes that

facilitate or inhibit extremist action.... Individuals and groups draw upon cultural and spiritual belief in times of strain as it helps them to maintain hope and continue through difficult times. Yet this resource, which generates resilience and is closely associated with moral beliefs of right and wrong, can be mobilised into amoral and disengaged acts of violence. (Majumdar, 2019, pp. 30–31)

Arguing for the need to change the narrative towards peacebuilding, Friðriksdóttir (2018) and van der Merwe & R. Smith (2006) emphasised that the passionate commitment to social justice motivates youth to join armed groups and cause violence, and also has the potential to promote peaceful social change. Sonpar (2008) and Shah (2012) believe that, while the young people joining militant groups and participating in violence has been an issue in Kashmir, they tend to develop personal attributes, skills and capacities to fight and protest, which if reoriented and counselled, could make the Kashmiri youth well-suited for developmental and peace-building activities. Shah (2012) suggests that though the conflict has motivated the Kashmiri youth to engage in violence and militancy in reaction to the prolonged state of conflict, the desire is for freedom and betterment of Kashmir, and not the propagation of violence.

[The Kashmiri youth] still retain the valley's age-old traditional ethos with them...They have still a great regard for societal norms, values, religious beliefs, ancient heritage, and glory, etc. It is also worth mentioning that conflict has turned every youth of Kashmir [into] a sociologist, a politician and a historian. Irrespective of gender, they are politically and socially conscious, are fond of debates and have learned out of the decades of the turbulence. (Shah, 2012, p. 26)

Kashmiri youth, according to Shah (2012), are keen to be educated, engage in dialogue, and become politicians and policymakers to change the situation in Kashmir. A UNICEF (2007) report indicates that though war affects young people, they are nevertheless eager to share their stories and views on the reality of the conflict, and are enthusiastic to participate in the peace-building process. Kashmiri youth nevertheless affirm that they “do not contact any media or government platform because there is no use of yelling when nobody shows willingness to pay attention to [them]” (Rafique

et al., 2016, p. 383). Local NGOs and educators have emphasised that educational interventions, dialogue, value-based education, self-help strategies, and psychosocial support networks have the potential to be a catalyst for a transformation of the region to create a peaceful future (W. Ali & Dar, 2016; Z. S. Mir et al., 2016). Ali and Dar maintain that: “If you empower young people and give them a voice, they are less likely to move towards a path of violence as has happened in the past. Engage them constructively, and you get a more stable youth” (W. Ali & Dar, 2016, para. 3).

While the above literature recommends linking education, youth engagement, and the underlying moral structure as a means to gaining a deeper understanding of the role of education in the transformation of youth, the following section outlines relevant literature and theories on education, along with the present role of education in Kashmir.

Role of Education

Establishing lasting peace is the work of education. (K. Suri, 2013, p. 40)

A United Nations report on the influence of armed conflict on young people highlights that the maintenance of education services is crucial to overcoming the influence of conflict on young people (Global Education Monitoring Report Team, 2011). According to Lin et al. (2009), education in conflict regions plays a positive role as it is considered a space where young people can communicate freely. Perrier and Nsengiyumva (2003) believe that an inquiry-based educational pedagogy that stimulates critical thinking, motivates young people to develop ideas on effecting change in society. Kashmiri researchers (F. A. Dar, 2014; T. A. Dar & Khaki, 2012; S. A. Khan et al., 2021) acknowledge the potential of educational spaces for youth to move away from ideas of violence, to learn, gain knowledge and transform their lives. Educator Paulo Freire (1972) based his writing on the experience of working with the oppressed in Brazil, finding that when oppressed people are educated, they reach,

... a new awareness of self... [have] a new sense of dignity, and [are] stirred by a new hope... those who have been completely marginalized are so radically transformed... they are more likely to decide to take upon themselves... to change the structures of society, which until now have served to oppress them. (p. 33)

Freire strongly believed that educating the oppressed could raise their consciousness, enable them to think critically, and through a dialogical relationship with the oppressor, be liberated from oppression, to eventually transform society. Similarly, Ferrari and Fernando (2013) suggest that educators and education play a significant role in empowering and transforming the lives of young people living in conflict. "Among the factors consistently identified as important in facilitating positive outcomes for trauma-exposed youth is the availability of schooling and the school environment" (Ferrari & Fernando, 2013, p. 214). International initiatives such as the United Nations (UNESCO, 2016), World Bank (2019) and the Borgen Project (A. Mukherjee, 2021), based on the work across conflict regions globally, have stated that education is a means to empower children to ground their values, attitudes and behaviours in the community, and actively transform their lives, and their societies.

Stern (2009) highlights a similar perspective in the context of Kashmir. Emphasising the crucial role that education plays in transforming Kashmir, he quotes one militant's view that "free secular education for all leading to an increase in the literacy rate is the gravest threat to the survival of the jihadi groups" (p. 230). He indicates that education has the potential to reduce the participation of young people in militancy and violence. Research and news reports on Kashmir (A. Mukherjee, 2021; K. Suri, 2013; Var, 2021) also show that sustained education has the potential to influence the well-being and perspective of young people, transform Kashmir and establish peace in the Valley.

The previous section on Kashmiri history and the present context indicated increased participation of youth who are educated and well-read who are engaged in violence against the military (Naseem, 2018; Slater, 2019). The contrasting statements between studies and news reports

imply some form of influence of education in the moral decision-making of Kashmiri youth. To gain more clarity on such contrasting standpoints, I draw on the educational experience of the participants in this study, to examine the influence of education on their moral decision-making. Before such an examination in chapters five and six, this chapter explores the state of education in Kashmir, its potential, and ideas of liberation in education, and consider this in light of Educators Gert Biesta and Paulo Freire's educational theories.

EDUCATION IN KASHMIR

Education in India is primarily linked with institutional learning or schooling, and ideas of knowledge building to enable students, “to realise their full potential” (Jammu Kashmir Board Of School Education (JKBOSE), 2022, para. 1) and “to achieve a better quality of life” (Ministry of Education, 2021, para. 1). The focus of education in India has been to make education accessible to all, raise literacy rates, and ensure educational provision is inclusive and equitable (UNICEF India, 2022). Formal education in India, according to Narayan (2000), is based on the traditional concept of education where knowledge is transferred from the teacher to the student. This is referred to as the ‘banking concept of education’ by Educator Paulo Freire (Freire, 1972), where knowledge is deposited in the students. The focus of the J&K Education Board has been to teach children relevant curriculum content, and improve assessments, with an emphasis on “skill learning by adding job-oriented and job-linked inputs” (Jammu Kashmir Board Of School Education (JKBOSE), 2022, para. 3). The Kashmir Government has implemented several educational interventions aimed at capacity building, personality development, and skill training for the employment of youth, alongside academic schooling (Government of Jammu and Kashmir, 2020; Ministry of Skill Development and Entrepreneurship, 2016).

Moral education has been mandatory across all schools in Kashmir for the holistic development of children (Outlook Web Bureau, 2018). According to M. A. Khan et al. (2018), psychological counselling and education have helped in relieving trauma and stress for children

affected by the armed conflict in Kashmir. Apart from Government educational interventions, local NGOs too, have implemented various educational interventions for youth in Kashmir. Additionally, INGOs have implemented several initiatives such as the provision of financial aid for economically challenged children, setting-up vocational training centres, remedial education, and educational resources to support and encourage education in Kashmir (Rather & Thanikodi, 2016; A. Suri, 2004).

The constant state of conflict and curfews in Kashmir has, however, adversely impacted the standard of education, access to education for students in rural areas, and opportunity for sustained learning. As a result of the conflict, Kashmir has one of the lowest literacy rates in the country at 68%, compared to the national average of 74%, with rural areas, and those closer to the LoC (border regions) most affected (T. A. Dar & Khaki, 2012). According to F. A. Dar (2014), “the curricula and pedagogical techniques have changed little in 40 years and no longer reflect the present reality and needs of the region” (p. 4). F. A. Dar (2014) has indicated that interventions tend to be developed ‘outside Kashmir’ which are dissociated from the needs of present-day youth. Highlighting such issues, youth emphatically state: “Some [INGOs] come to help us but they never really ask us what we need. They end up giving us what they think we need” (UNICEF, 2007, p. 15). Summerfield (2002) argues that just as culture, normalcy and life are not a global norm, interventions and strategies to address the sociomoral aftermath of war also vary between cultures. T. A. Dar and Khaki (2012) deem the educational initiatives implemented in Kashmir are not cognisant of the challenges and the condition of education in Kashmir. “The everyday experiences of those living amidst violent conflict are not always part of the conflict analysis processes that guide these projects” (Julian et al., 2019, p. 211). These initiatives, designed by external agencies and organisations, typically provide “traditional outsider-expert analyses” and quick overarching recommendations, over the “messy analyses” which include the views of Kashmiri youth. The Kashmir educational curriculum was designed by Indian academics to suit the needs of Indian youth, who have higher academic achievements, global exposure and easier access to resources; it is not relevant to the needs of Kashmiri youth who have fundamental

challenges such as institutional closure, violence, communication blackouts, poverty, and a lack of future job prospects in Kashmir (RK News, 2020).

Gul and Shah (2012) observe that while educational spaces in Kashmir provide young people with the opportunity to connect with their peers and share their grievances and personal experiences, the fear of repercussions for voicing diverse opinions, having military presence in educational institutions, and the frequent restrictions on the movement of people and communication, has stifled the voices of the Kashmiri youth. In addition, the present pandemic has exacerbated the challenges in education for young people (T. A. Dar & Khaki, 2012). During the pandemic, “the ‘digital apartheid’ in the region... marred the educational opportunities for millions of students in the region... which proved quite regressive for e-learning” (Nadaf, 2021, p. 346). While the pandemic has affected the well-being of youth in Kashmir, the lack of online resources and limited access to the Internet during the pandemic has made education and learning inaccessible for many youth. Connah (2021) believes that lockdowns due to the pandemic, over and above the existing lockdowns and curfews due to the conflict, did not allow young people to learn, use their time constructively, or appear for exams to progress academically:

Schools and colleges have remained closed for months during the periodic and extended periods of unrest, which has compromised the quality of education. It is faced with a loss of more than 60% of the total working days in the academic calendar.
(A. S. Wani et al., 2022, p. 1)

This gap in education due to institutional closures has been addressed by smaller grassroots NGOs, according to A. S. Wani et al. (2022), since INGOs and national NGOs have minimal presence in Kashmir due to current instability in the region. Most of the educational interventions have been implemented by local NGOs and self-help groups despite their limited resources (A. Suri, 2004). Traditionally, Kashmir did not feel the need for NGOs as social issues were resolved within the community. For example, in the pre-1989 period before the militant action began, “an orphan... would

immediately be adopted by one of his relatives or neighbours; hence the need for orphanages was never felt... This phenomenon was so widespread that every family in Kashmir could be called an NGO” (A. Suri, 2004, p. 2). Local Kashmiris started NGOs in 1989 to meet the sudden need for support. Since then, the local NGOs are considered to have an important social role in offering alternative avenues for youth to evolve from violence to peace offering counselling, and open conversation that bridges the gap left by the education system.

M. A. Khan et al. (2018) highlight that while education in Kashmir has been unstable, “youth and skills development programmes [by local NGOs] have promoted hope among the youth, while the establishment of community schools have eased accessibility for children to education... who had difficulties reaching government educational institutions in distant areas” (p. 128). A. Wani (2021) states that these informal spaces, called *mohalla* (community) schools, organised by local teachers who voluntarily conduct classes and counsel students at no cost, have ensured that all Kashmiri students have access to constructive spaces for dialogue and learning during institutional closures. Further, M. A. Khan et al. (2018) state that while there are few local NGOs present in Kashmir, Kashmiris consider educational intervention a crucial means to establish peace and build a stable future for Kashmir. Though funding and governance are key issues in the educational initiatives in Kashmir, it has made local communities and youth determined, self-reliant and participative in leading change: “All [the youth] want is real change, so that what we have been through does not happen to the generations to come” (UNICEF, 2007, p. 19).

While education, in general, has been considered to have a positive influence in conflict-affected regions, Novelli and Cardozo (2008) indicate the lack of research on any negative influence education may have on children. The “education system has the potential to either aggravate the conditions that lead to violent conflict or to heal them” (Buckland, 2005, p. xxii). Religion, moreover, is intrinsic not just in the culture, conflict and moral philosophy of Kashmir, but also in education. Widmalm (2020) questions the effectiveness and influence of education in regions like Kashmir, where

religion plays a crucial role in the conflict as well as the implementation of educational interventions. The increasing number of *madrassas* (religious schools) in Kashmir has helped to increase literacy in the last decades (Tikoo, 2007). While this has supported education in Kashmir, there have been reservations with some *maulvis* (religious teachers), who, unlike the softer Sufism, focus on fundamental Islam (Kadian, 2019). Apart from the role of religion in education in Kashmir, the years of militancy have eroded traditional social structures and weakened educational standards. The influence of decades of violence on the educational system has had a lasting effect on the psychological and social health of the young people (W. Khan, 2015): “Education [in Kashmir] has not been able to fulfil or inculcate the collective behaviour or morality” (Shah, 2012, p. 10). The increasing participation of educated youth in violence or militant activity has been linked with young people’s use of social media and Internet. Due to the lack of access to educational institutions, youth rely predominantly on online means for learning, which allows them to read radical and revolutionary material. In a study on Kashmiri youth and their use of technology and online means in education, A. S. Wani et al.(2022) found that:

Given the sensitive (prone to violence) nature of the context, the parents expressed strong concerns with the technology usage among children, which were majorly influenced by the fear of mistakenly visiting or clicking websites or pop-ups related to insurgency or terrorism. According to parents, this fear and mistrust are invoked mainly with social media such as YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, etc. [which are] used for provoking and influencing youth to join militant ranks in Kashmir (p. 11)

It is due to the lack of ‘appropriate’ opportunities that prompt local youth to study at institutions outside Kashmir, where they have the opportunity to engage in formal and informal dialogue and debates on various issues, including the conflict in Kashmir: “These [youth] have asserted that if they, to an extent, can debate and organise peaceful protests about the situation in Kashmir at these institutions, why is it not possible to do that inside ‘their own’ institutions [in Kashmir]?” (F. A. Dar, 2014, p. 4). S. Singh (2018) has emphasised the need for a transformative dialogue in education

directed toward sustained peace, the humanisation of Kashmiris, and an end to the state of conflict. These ideas of dialogue, transformation and humanisation through education are central to the educational theories of Freire and Biesta.

Educators Paulo Freire (1998) and Biesta & Säfström (2011), grounded their educational philosophy on the crucial role of building a relationship of dialogue in education. Based on a commitment to humanisation and social transformation, such dialogue is “not uninterested discourse, or remote communication over sustained distance, or hostile argument. Rather, it is the forging of collective rationality and consciousness through the development of deep relational connections” (Rhodes & Lysaught, 2020, p. 110). Dialogue, is, therefore, a process of purposeful communication of transforming the subject-object or teacher-student relationship of power, into a co-subject relationship which is based on a “profound love for the world and for the people” (Freire, 1972, p. 89).

While Kashmiri youth in a study by F. A. Dar (2014) indicate the need for such dialogue for the liberation of people, and transformation of society, they associate these ideas with schooling and institutional spaces. Ideas of learning and dialogue as a means for transformation and liberation are separated from the educational theories in Kashmir. By drawing on the educational theories of Biesta and Freire, the next section links these concepts of liberation and transformation, with literature on Kashmiri education. Such blending of literature allows for an in-depth examination of the educational experiences narrated by Kashmiri youth in the following chapters.

LIBERATION THROUGH DIALOGUE

Locating the inherent need for a dialectical relationship in education, Freire believed that “this dialogue cannot be reduced to the act of one persons ‘depositing’ ideas in another, nor can it become a simple exchange of ideas to be ‘consumed’ by the discussants” (Freire, 1972, p. 89). Such a ‘banking’ education, according to Freire, was based on inequality where the teachers, as oppressors, regulate and control knowledge of the world that enters the consciousness of the students (Freire, 1972).

Instead, Freire emphasised the need for emancipatory education which dissolved the teacher-student hierarchy and transformed it into a relationship based on love, trust, humility, faith in humanity, and dialogue where teachers and students work together as co-subjects on ideas of liberation (Galloway, 2012). According to Freire, a liberating education requires “the locus of the learning process [to be] shifted from the teacher to the student. And this shift overtly signifies an altered power relationship, not only in the classroom but in the broader social canvas as well” (Aronowitz, 2012, p. 258). Such dissolution of authority and power shows that:

The teacher is no longer merely the-one-who-teaches, but one who is himself taught in dialogue with the students, who in turn while being taught also teach. They become jointly responsible for a process in which all grow. In this process, arguments based on "authority" are no longer valid; in order to function, authority must be on the side of freedom, not against it. Here, no one teaches another, nor is anyone self-taught. (Freire, 1972, p. 80)

Through his own experience as an educator, Freire (1972) demonstrated that an educational approach that empowers learners to think critically as to content related to their own context would aid them in their quest to be ‘more fully human’, and also motivate them to transform society. Such a critical approach to education that focuses on the oppressive structures of the society would pave the way for emancipation (Biesta, 2010). The aim of critically liberating education, therefore, was “to expose the workings of power because explaining how the world really leads to emancipation” (Galloway, 2012, p. 164). Biesta (2010) argues that although the ideology of emancipation is “oriented toward equality, independence, and freedom, it installs *dependency* at the very heart of the act of emancipation. The one to be emancipated is, after all, dependent upon the intervention of the emancipator” (p. 45). Emancipatory education, according to Biesta (2010), is therefore based on inequality; equality is considered the outcome of emancipation, which is also used to justify the interventions of the emancipator. Highlighting the role of dialogue and love in education to overcome

such an underlying sense of inequality and domination in the educator's approach, Freire (1972), clarified that:

The dialogical character of education as the practice of freedom does not begin when the teacher-student meets with the students-teachers in a pedagogical situation, but rather when the former first asks herself or himself what she or he will dialogue with the latter about. And preoccupation with the content of dialogue is really preoccupation with the program content of education. (p. 93)

The dialogical process, according to Freire, included a commitment by the educator and student towards ideas of liberation, being conscious of education as a 'practice of freedom', as opposed to it being a 'practice of domination'. Further, drawing on the work of Jacques Ranciere, Biesta (2010) suggests the need for education to also be self-emancipatory where "emancipation is about using one's intelligence under the assumption of the equality of intelligence" (p. 58). While the role of the teacher is still present, the role of the teacher is not based on a difference in intelligence, but to act as an instigator in a capacity that already exists in the student (Ranciere, 1991). Ranciere felt that though schools and institutional learning spaces cannot fully remove the educator's authority in the classroom, the educator can be considered as only being more knowledgeable on the subject, and not an authority. Acknowledging the impossibility of absolute equality in education, the educational space and the educator's role were seen as providing an environment for self-emancipation: "The only thing that is needed is to remind people that they can see and think for themselves and are not dependent upon others who see and think for them" (Biesta, 2010, p. 55).

To free teaching from learning, Biesta (2019) blends Freire's emphasis on converting education into "a joint process of knowledge generation of student-teachers and teacher-students...[by] doing away with the teacher" (p. 552), and Ranciere's approach of retaining the teacher as an ignorant individual present to "remind students, again and again, that they are subjects, that they have to lead their own lives and cannot shift this responsibility to anyone else" (p. 552). After analysing these critical approaches to education, Biesta (2019) believes that for education to be

emancipatory and liberating, the student has to be the subject and that such a learning environment will pave the way for them to 'arrive' at realising their own subject-ness. This is predicated on a shift for the educator from being the 'sage on the stage' to that of a 'guide on the side' or 'peer at the rear' (Biesta, 2019).

This approach of Biesta (2019) is similar to the ideas of W. Ali & Dar (2016), as described earlier, where they stress the need for educators to provide an open and safe learning environment which focuses on the voice and perspective of youth, and allow them to engage constructively. Education in conflict regions, according to Biesta (2011), needs to extend beyond its psychological and moral implications. Biesta (2011) highlights the need for education to focus on "development of inner faculties or potential, or...[one] that focuses on social change, liberation from oppression and the overcoming of inequality" (p. 541). For such a liberating education to be adopted in Kashmir, Narayan (2000) demands a fundamental shift from the traditional 'banking' approach toward a more dialogical learning environment. This would necessitate a reorientation of the present purpose of education in Kashmir: from providing skill-training, capacity-building and academic learning, to ideas of empowering and liberating students who 'take responsibility' for transforming their lives and Kashmir.

PURPOSE OF EDUCATION

Biesta (2013) believes that education has multidimensional aims – it works on equipping young people with knowledge, skills, and values, referred to as 'qualification'; 'socialisation' through which the individual becomes a part of the existing traditions and ways of living in the society; and, 'subjectification', which involves an interest in the subjectivity or subject-ness of the one being educated. While qualification and socialisation empower the individual to operate within existing social structures, Biesta (2013) emphasises 'subjectification' as a crucial philosophical perspective for educators to adopt, for a liberating form of education. Biesta adds that the student's awareness of their subject-ness is what leads to their emancipation and freedom, and the ability to be responsible

for such freedom. Such subject-ness, unlike socialisation which involves aligning one's being with existing traditions, is about ways of being that are not determined by existing traditions or social order. The focus of education, therefore, is not just "about how we can get the world into our children and student; it is also – and perhaps first of all – about how we can help our children and students to engage with, and thus come into the world" (Biesta, 2013, p. 5). Biesta, however, adds that no pedagogy or curriculum can 'make' someone responsible for their own freedom or become aware of their subject-ness. There is also no guarantee that the school environment, pedagogy, or content can allow for such subject-ness to emerge in their thinking, but it is necessary to ensure that the student's educational experiences or interventions do not block or hamper the possibility of such subjectification to take place. Citing W. B. Yeats, Biesta (2013) notes that "education is not about filling a bucket but about lighting a fire" (p. 1). Education with the intent of freedom *of* and *for* the child leads to a transformation of ideas, emotions and a deeper understanding of what is required for a cohesive society. While approaching education with the openness for such an event that could kindle their subject-ness is considered risky, it is essential "because when we keep education open anything can happen, anything can arrive" (Biesta, 2013, p. 23).

In the context of this study, while Kashmir education appears to be focused largely on qualification, and socialisation to some extent, ideas of subjectification are missing considering the youth's call for dialogue, and lack of space for them to explore and express their own subject-ness, identity and voice. According to Biesta (2013): "we do want our students to become good citizens, skillful professionals, knowledgeable human beings...but that should never be the be-all and end-all of education...[it needs] the intention to bring about goodness...or human flourishing" (p. 133-134). Inclusion of subjectification in the learning environment that could potentially transform their lives and Kashmir, would, however, require Kashmir's education policy and educators to prioritise freedom *for* and *of* the child. As stated earlier by A. S. Wani et al. (2022), the lack of such an educational environment has prompted the youth to explore and express their subject-ness and identity through

the Internet. This medium is considered to be the cause of an increasing number of educated and well-read Kashmiri youth joining militant groups and participating in violence. The lack of subjectification in education in Kashmir could be attributed to the risk of the conflict context that discourages the educators from adopting a more liberating pedagogy.

While ‘good and ‘desirable’ educational pedagogies and philosophies have been suggested by educators, there is always a ‘beautiful risk of education’ (Biesta & Säfström, 2011) owing to the background, contexts and biases of the educator and students, and reliance on dialogue for learning to be embraced, and not considered an issue. According to Biesta and Säfström (2011), embracing such a risk in education and the added challenge of varying contexts, primarily requires educators to “express an interest in freedom and, more specifically, an interest in the freedom of the other: the freedom of the child” (p. 540). Educational pedagogy, space, content, and philosophy, need to be motivated toward liberating young people. Such freedom in education is not about transferring the power within the learning space, as suggested by Freire, but involves a shift in the orientation and intent of the educator: “Educational freedom is not about the absence of authority but about the authority that carries an orientation towards freedom with it” (Biesta & Säfström, 2011, p. 541). It makes young people aware that their learning is fundamentally rooted in history, is open to new possibilities, and is situated within their own subjectivities. The educator needs “to be culturally responsive to their students and to contribute to their cultural formation. This position presupposes an orientation of love and care towards students, and this exhortation draws attention to teaching as an ethical activity” (Benade, 2017, p. 6). Biesta adds that to liberate the student, therefore, requires an educator to have ‘virtuosity’, i.e., a virtue-based approach on all dimensions – qualification, socialisation, and subjectification. For education to be holistic and liberating, the educator has to have virtuous “judgment rather than recipes in order to be able to engage with this openness and do so in an educational way” (Biesta, 2013, p. 137).

In the context of conflict regions, Ghosh et al. (2017) believe that educational spaces, content and pedagogy need to be designed such that they are a means for young people living in conflict regions to think critically, develop resilience and 'life-long values'. They add that "most importantly, students must see the relevance of what they learn, and be able to develop a critical understanding of the world" (Ghosh et al., 2017, p. 120). In one of his speeches, Martin Luther King Jr. spoke about the purpose of education which he considered deeply linked with morality:

Intelligence plus character – that is the goal of true education. A complete education gives one not only power of concentration, but worthy objectives upon which to concentrate. The broad education will, therefore, transmit to one not only the accumulated knowledge of the race but also the accumulated experience of social living. (King Jr., 1992, p. 124)

Freire emphasised the need for individuals to be curious, humble, and with an investigative spirit, a critical frame of mind, and a willingness to listen and learn from others (Roberts, 2008). Along with these, the student needs to nurture values such as love, hope, tolerance, courage, commitment, and respect for others. Freire believed that these virtues were essential as the quest to know, and transformation of the society involves other people in the society: "Freire's philosophy of education provides a way of generating the kinds of critical, alternative communities of practice aimed at the transformation that MacIntyre's virtue ethics seeks to promote" (Rhodes & Lysaught, 2020, p. 110). Similar links between education and morality have been indirectly indicated by W. Ali and Dar (2016) and Stern (2009) stating the potential for Kashmiri youth to move away from ideas of violence and towards ideas of reshaping a cohesive Kashmir, through education.

From Context to Concept

While the above literature indicates that ideas of morality, values, virtuosity and ethics have relevance in educational theories, according to Gert and Gert (2017), attempts to define morality are

nevertheless complicated by its interpretations, usage, and role in religion, politics, society and academia. The literature described in this chapter focused on the context of Kashmir that is essential for the interpretation of the lived experiences and moral perspectives of participants living in Kashmir, as outlined in chapter seven. Along with an in-depth understanding of the history of Kashmir and the protracted state of conflict that Kashmiri youth are living in, this chapter highlighted the role of education in Kashmir, educational theories relevant to the context of Kashmir, and the relevance of education in the moral decision-making of Kashmiri youth.

To understand the role of education and ideas of morality that may be embedded in the lived experiences of Kashmiri youth, the next chapter is a shift from the context of Kashmir to the concepts of morality. While this chapter has provided an insight into the context of the life and experience of Kashmiri youth participants in this study, before interpreting the moral perspective embedded in their voice, the next chapter outlines the religious moral philosophies of Kashmir, and Western moral concepts to understand morality from a non-religious standpoint. Western and Kashmiri moral philosophies have finally been bridged to gain a deeper understanding of the moral perspectives of Kashmiri youth participants in this study.

CHAPTER 3 THE CONCEPTS OF MORALITY

“Out beyond ideas of wrongdoing and right-doing there is a field. I'll meet you there.”

(Rumi, 1999, p. 36)

Divided into two sections that outline Western moral concepts and the moral philosophies in Kashmir, this chapter examines an understanding of moral concepts relevant to the moral structures of Kashmiri youth. References to the concept of morality date back to the creation of the Hindu *Vedas*, Quran, Hebrew Bible, Code of Hammurabi, and the entire history of Western philosophy, where it primarily emphasised being a good person and living a good life (Haidt, 2008). Religion and morality were linked, extending these moral concepts into practice. While the concept of morality in Kashmir is considered to be deeply rooted in Hinduism and Sufism (Heim, 2004), as discussed in chapter two, Kashmiri youth are not currently motivated by religion (Ganie, 2019; N. U. I. Wani, 2017). This chapter includes a description of the religious and non-religious concepts that characterise morality and virtuous living.

Since non-religious studies in moral philosophy are just emerging in India (MacKenzie, 2007), moral precepts of Hinduism and Sufism can be examined alongside Western moral philosophies. As Edel observed: “We only really discover a moral sanction by stripping off what is not definitely religious, or legal, or fear of violent action, and seeing that some-thing is left moving people” (Edel, 1962, p. 57). While Indian moral philosophy, being rooted in religion, makes it challenging to ‘strip-off’ religion from moral decisions, this study aims to understand what is the ‘something-thing’ (influence) that is ‘left moving people’ (moral perspectives). As the study attends to the lived experiences of Kashmiri youth, instead of ‘stripping off’ religion from moral concepts, I shed light on some relevant moral concepts embedded in the religious philosophies of Hinduism and Sufism. In doing so I draw on the Western moral philosophies of Alasdair MacIntyre, Charles Taylor and Paulo Freire to overcome a gap in the literature on non-religious Kashmiri moral philosophy relevant to this study. This chapter therefore examines the Kashmiri moral philosophies of Hinduism and Sufism as

well Western concepts of morality, and draws parallels between these traditions, to understand the moral perspective of Kashmiri youth.

Western Moral Concepts

In his book *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle (2012), describes morality, or ethics, as an individual's character expressed through actions or interactions in society. He explains morality as "those admirable human qualities which fit a man [sic] for life in an organised civic community, which makes him 'a good citizen'" (p. v). Aristotle adds, nevertheless, that such qualities, judgements, and actions in society are subject to unpredictable variation, exceptions, and the practicalities of society. He emphasises that morality and character are subject to the experience of individuals: "Moral experience – the actual possession and exercise of good character – is necessary truly to understand moral principles...and apply them. The mere intellectual apprehension of them is not possible" (p. xi). Though the definitions of morality include "principles concerning the distinction between right and wrong or good and bad behaviour", and "the quality of being in accord with standards of right or good conduct" (Oxford Dictionaries, 2018). These standards or maxims of good and bad, according to MacIntyre, "are neither universalizable nor prescriptive" (Lutz, 2014, para. 42). Morality prescribed as what is right and wrong, good and bad, or through maxims such as "promise-keeping, truth-telling...do not guide us, because we do not need to be guided. We know what to do" (MacIntyre, 1971, p. 106). According to Bayley (2011), while virtues or ethics are considered to be societal standards for being a good citizen, morality is an individual priority, preference or choice:

Life... is inevitably moral, because for each and every one of us, life is about the things that matter most to us. Just carrying on our existence, negotiating important relations with other{s}, doing work that means something to us, and living in some particular local place where others are also passionately engaged in these same existential activities – all this is, by definition, moral experience. (Kleinman, 2006, p. 2)

Though all these terms such as morality, moral development, moral beliefs, moral judgements, ethics, virtues, moral cognition, moral reasoning, and so on are within the moral domain, they have been used interchangeably in research. This has led to the lack of one singular understanding of 'morality' (Garrigan et al., 2018): "Morality, in short, is taken for granted, in the sense that one can invoke it or refer to it at will; but it is not explained, depicted, or analysed... it is assumed that we all know what morality is" (Edel, 1962, p. 56). Acknowledging the multiplicity of moral definitions, the following sections look into moral concepts put forth by MacIntyre and Taylor, that find resonance in the context of this study.

INDIVIDUAL, SOCIETY AND HISTORY

whatever you have to say, leave
the roots on, let them
dangle
And the dirt
Just to make clear
where they come from (Olson, 1987, p. 106)

This verse resonates with Alasdair MacIntyre's moral philosophy which highlights the inseparable nature of an individual from their history, context, background, and community that they are 'rooted' in. MacIntyre believes that moral definitions are dominated by liberal individualism, characterised by the absence of any coherent guidance for those responding to modern problems (Clayton, 2005; Miller, 2014). Rejecting modern moral theories that pretend to free the individual, he sees virtues such as honesty, courage, and justice, only have meaning when practiced in communities with reasoning. He criticises modern liberal individualism and scientific determinism for separating practical reasoning from morality (Lutz, 2014). According to MacIntyre, practical reasoning grounds morality as a free and deliberate action, backed by a rationale or meaning. Without such practical justification, morality would only be a norm to regulate outward human behaviour (Hinchman, 1989). Echoing MacIntyre's moral philosophy, Miller (2014) infers that the individual's choice of moral action

is based on reason, logic and the individual's character: "The question of whether one should choose this or that particular action...has certain logical priority" (Miller, 2014, p. 379). MacIntyre's theory rests on the belief that such morality cannot be learnt or analysed merely by reflection or from another individual; he believes that an individual's morality is influenced by the history and anthropology of a variety of moral practices and beliefs of the individual's context. It is not just the social circumstances that define one's virtues; but also, aspects such as individual perspective, social identity (a child or parent or an uncle), family background, profession, country, expectations, and obligations. MacIntyre highlights an inseparable relationship between moral character and the community: "morality which is no particular society's morality is to be found nowhere" (MacIntyre, 1984, p. 265). Morality, therefore, belongs to each particular society, at a particular point in time, bound within its history:

A moral philosophy...characteristically presupposes a sociology. For every moral philosophy offers explicitly or implicitly at least a partial conceptual analysis of the relationship of an agent to his or her reasons, motives, intentions and actions, and in so doing generally presupposes some claim that these concepts are embodied or at least can be in the real social world. (MacIntyre, 1984, p. 27)

Having critically analysed definitions of virtues and ethics in his book *After Virtue*, MacIntyre (1984) introduced virtues as excellence in human actions, placed within historical contexts and traditions for 'whole human lives', or the 'best life that a human being can lead'. MacIntyre classifies virtues as external good (directed towards personal gain), and internal good (excellence directed towards community), which has meaning only with practice (action). He exemplifies the same with a game of chess, in which the excellence of the player in playing a good game is an internal good, and the pleasure that is derived from the act of playing is an external good. Actions motivated by internal 'goods' are possession of virtues, while external 'goods' are "characteristic objects of human desire" (MacIntyre, 1984, p. 196). Emphasising the integral role that one's action plays in society, he reflects: "if in a particular society the pursuit of external goods were to become dominant, the concept of the virtues might suffer first attrition and then perhaps something near total effacement" (MacIntyre,

1984, p. 196). MacIntyre's moral theory thus underlines the role of society in an individual's identity and morality – the society and its context influence an individual's contribution, and an individual's contribution to society shapes the society. He finally defines virtues in *After Virtue* as:

those dispositions which will not only sustain practices and enable us to achieve the goods internal to practices, but which will sustain us in the relevant kind of quest for the good, by enabling us to overcome the harms, dangers, temptations and distractions which we encounter, and which will furnish us with increasing self-knowledge and increasing knowledge of the good. (MacIntyre, 1984, p. 219)

In his later work, *The MacIntyre Reader*, MacIntyre (1998) clarified that morality is the individual choice of rules and virtues as guidance for living together in a cohesive society. His moral philosophy is thus grounded on the phenomenological tradition that focuses on the individual 'lived experience', which cannot be separated from its culture, tradition, history, practice and rationality (Lutz, 2014). He further considers moral judgments and perspectives as an expression of human desires or "quest" that develops through an individual's lived experience, history and context (MacIntyre, 1959). MacIntyre (1984) proposes that for an individual "to make and to act upon such judgments will depend upon what intellectual and moral virtues and vices compose his or her character" (p. 161). Moral judgments and perspectives, according to MacIntyre, are influenced by lived experiences, background, and an expression of judgments and perspectives, based on individual subjectivity.

MacIntyre's critique highlights his attempt to establish a fine balance between conservatism and liberalism, as the two ends of a philosophical spectrum. Whether such a middle path is possible in practice, is an aspect that MacIntyre has not addressed (Devine, 2013). Moreover, the term 'tradition' that MacIntyre refers to in his moral philosophy, has been central to analysis, discussion and criticism (Angier, 2014). Annas (1989) perceives that while MacIntyre emphasises the need for a middle-way tradition, there is ambiguity in his definition of the concept of tradition, which tends to be vague and indistinguishable from concepts such as culture, theory or practice. MacIntyre believes

that “traditions are defined retrospectively” (MacIntyre, 2009, p. 165) and based on contributions and goals that become apparent over time. Being a self-critic, MacIntyre (1984) also points out the flaw that impedes constructive furthering of studies in morality:

the most striking feature of moral utterance is that so much of it is used to express (moral) disagreements; and the most striking feature of the debates in which these disagreements are expressed is their interminable character...they apparently can find no terminus...There seems to be no rational way of securing moral agreement in our culture. (p. 6)

Acknowledging the challenges and defending his philosophical stance, MacIntyre reiterates the need for rival traditions to share their common features for the advancement of moral philosophy, the need for ‘the best theory so far’ that traditions must strive for, rather than disagree on the impossibility of a middle-way tradition. He suggests linking rationality and tradition since it was possible for “a tradition to fail by its own standards, and thus encounter an incurable epistemological crisis...[and] adherents of such a tradition might discover that some other tradition better solves its problems than the tradition itself can do” (Devine, 2013, p. 112). MacIntyre’s middle way tradition requires openness between traditions – to acknowledge and adapt the characteristics, shortcomings and practices of their rivals, for the betterment of the theories irrespective of the tradition:

If two moral traditions are able to recognize each other as advancing rival contentions on issues of importance, then necessarily they must share some common features. And since some kind of relationship to practices, some particular conception of human goods, some characteristics which arise from the very nature of a tradition will be features of both, this is unsurprising (MacIntyre, 1984, p. 276).

MacIntyre emphasises the need for human nature to be at the centre of any discussion on moral theory (Murphy, 2003). Studies from various traditions, fields and standpoints need to accept human beings and human nature, within their social setting and history. In line with MacIntyre’s standpoint, the next section of the chapter will describe the blending of Indian and Western moral

philosophies to overcome epistemological gaps in the different traditions. MacIntyre believed that traditions ought to find commonality and establish a middle way, he strongly opposed the liberalist belief in the autonomy of morality: “The root mistakes of...the believer in the autonomy of morality attempts to treat...fundamental moral principles as without any basis. They are his because he has chosen them” (MacIntyre, 1959, p. 89). Kent (1996) holds that while MacIntyre’s philosophical ideologies and responses appear open to newer approaches and radical perspectives, his emphatic disinclination towards modern moral traditions contradicts his own standpoint of rival traditions working together.

The dissociation of MacIntyre’s moral theory from politics and governance is also considered a point of critique. According to MacIntyre (2008), modern politics, whether liberal, conservative, radical or socialist, “provides systematic incentives to develop a type of character that has a propensity to injustice” (p. 416). MacIntyre does not include the political system of society in his moral theory, distancing the moral self from the governments of the modern state. He regards politics as irrelevant to his moral theory as it is based on rational superiority relative to its rivals, while historically based morality and moral philosophy fail to acknowledge such superiority (MacIntyre, 1984). Angier (2014) argues that assuming politics as a different tradition causes difficulty in analysing moral phenomena in totality under any singular tradition.

While liberal philosopher Richard Rorty accepts MacIntyre’s discontent with the modern systems of governance, he responds to MacIntyre’s perspective by stating: “we should be more willing than we are to celebrate bourgeois capitalist society as the best polity actualized so far, while regretting that it is irrelevant to most of the problems of most of the population of the planet” (Rorty, 1981, p. 586). Rorty questions MacIntyre’s representation of truth as ‘glassy essences’, which when separated from realities such as politics, lead to dehumanisation if no distinction is drawn between human beings and other pieces of furniture in the universe (Roth, 1989). Rorty endorses the need for pluralism, rationality, and reasoning to be central to moral philosophy, adding that though one’s moral

identity is deep-rooted in the community, contemporary intellectuals live in a culture which is self-conscious without *archai* or a *telos* (Roth, 1989). Morality, according to Rorty (1983), is an individual's adaptive behaviour that may be reflective of the beliefs of different communities that we may associate with. Such moral decision-making is not, however, influenced by the shared beliefs or history of the society or community. Disregarding the role of society and history in moral decision-making, Rorty (1983) considered "the moral self, the embodiment of rationality...as a network of beliefs, desires, and emotions with nothing behind it – no substrate behind the attributes" (p. 585). While MacIntyre agrees that many aspects of contemporary culture need to be rational and real, historical perspectives may vary depending on the perceiver, especially in philosophy: "what postmodern bourgeois liberalism exhibits is not moral argument freed from unwarranted philosophical pretensions, but the decay of moral reasoning" (MacIntyre, 1983, p. 590).

Though MacIntyre and Rorty's positions rest on a particular understanding and perspective of history and different traditions, neither have established nor refuted the other in its entirety. Both have acknowledged the inadequacy of a political vocabulary, lacking in all traditions of philosophy (Roth, 1989). To bridge this gap in traditions and establish a middle-way, Charles Taylor developed a moral philosophy which adopted MacIntyre's moral theory rooted in individual history and contexts, while including modern liberalist perspectives of pluralism.

PLURAL AND UNIVERSAL

Like MacIntyre, Taylor has based his moral theory on the historical antecedents of the present while being critical of modernity and modern pluralism. Although, unlike MacIntyre who resisted modern theories, Taylor considers modernity a useful starting point for moral discussion (Kitchen, 1999). In his book *Ethics of Authenticity*, he believes that the present generation of contemporary research presents a strong argument for values being individualistic and personal which ought to be considered (Taylor, 1992).

Taylor took MacIntyre's idea of "human life as a 'quest'" (Abbey, 2000, p. 44), highlighting that moral identity is interwoven with the pursuit of the good in life. Such 'good' being more than a concept outside the self, it is an ideal of a life lived well. The good is not considered to be a free-floating ideal, but truly something embedded in the human story and community. According to Carkner (2006), Taylor's moral philosophy advances MacIntyre's historicist moral theory with an increased focus on the individual (subjective) and context-independent socially accepted virtues: "All humans have certain moral intuitions, and all make moral judgments, including judgments about the behaviour of others. They all have a qualitative sense of their moral choices and deliberations; moral agency is not reducible to mere choice" (p. 156). Carkner clarifies that though there may be moral pluralities, there are some morals that are universal and endemic to all human beings (objective), irrespective of the culture or the society, such as murder, which is condemned in all societies. His realistic moral theory, therefore, emphasises both objective and subjective aspects of self and morality (Carkner, 2006). In referring to the implicit role of history and knowledge in the pluralist moral decision-making of individuals Taylor adds: "There is no self-understanding without historical understanding...and there is no historical understanding without self-understanding" (Taylor, 1978, p. 24). To understand the individual's moral reasoning requires understanding the history, culture and context; and to understand the context and history of the individual, requires an understanding of individual subjectivities. According to Taylor (as cited by Kitchen, 1999), such realistic moral thinking extends beyond the realm of one's obligations to others in society; it involves thinking about what constitutes a full life.

The individualistic modern approach is considered an inherent moral order beyond traditions, history, society, nature, or the self (Taylor, 1992). According to Taylor (1992), Western definitions of morality are grounded on rationalisation, reason and a natural flow of actions not constrained by religion, social norms or customs, which is considered an "absolute standpoint" (Abbey, 2000, p. 64). Taylor (1999) also states, that such a perspective while misconstrued to be a novel form of moral self-

understanding, could be simply an egoistic illusion. While modernistic liberal ideas of morality may sound glorious, such inherent individualistic ideas can only be entertained against a background sense of one's identity in the world. Taylor (1999) describes this change as merely:

moving us from one dense constellation of background understanding and imaginary to another, both of which place us in relation to others and the good. There is never an atomistic and neutral self-understanding; there is only a constellation (ours) which tends to throw up the myth of this self-understanding as part of its imaginary. (p. 173)

It is seen as impossible to separate the moral situation and action from connectedness with the society and culture – a moral space may transform based on one's culture and age, but cannot be independent of these. For MacIntyre (1984), an individual's moral perspectives "will depend on what virtues are generally possessed and cultivated in our community...man [sic] without culture is a myth" (pp. 160-161). MacIntyre and Taylor's moral theories are deeply rooted in the inseparable role of the community in an individual's moral reasoning and judgment. Their communitarian approach is grounded, since "communities shape... our moral and political judgments and we have a strong obligation to support and nourish the particular communities that provide meaning for our lives, without which we'd be... incapable of informed moral and political judgment" (Bell, 2020, para. 1). Being a social animal, the self inherently prioritises and feels more committed to the societal good over individual moral choice: "On the continuum between freedom and community, communitarians are more inclined to draw the line towards the latter" (Bell, 2020, para. 37). This ontological approach grounds the nature of the self within the context of the particular community, while methodologically, the individual's moral reasoning and judgment are influenced by the collective belief of the society, culture and tradition. Echoing MacIntyre and Taylor's communitarian approach, Bell (2020) shares the view that since ideas and concepts of morality have relevance within particular societies that an individual belongs to, moral reasoning and standards of justice can vary from context to context. Caney also maintains that "It is one of the defining characteristics of 'persons' that their character is moulded by their culture" (Caney, 1993, p. 657). Understanding the moral reasoning and judgments

of individuals involves an examination of the culture and context that individuals find themselves. This study is an examination of the experience and moral perspective of youth living in Kashmir. Considering the context of this study, Indian and Western moral philosophies have been bridged, to gain a nuanced understanding of the moral perspectives of Kashmiri youth.

Bridging Indian-Western Traditions

MacIntyre (1984) and Taylor (1992) emphasised the need for a middle-way tradition where resources and perspectives across traditions are shared for the advancement of moral philosophy. Taylor suggested the need for cross-cultural dialogue to understand nuances, similarities and differences between traditions and cultures, and to learn from “each other’s moral universe” (Bell, 2020, para. 22). Furthering the moral concepts of MacIntyre and Taylor, this study engages in cross-cultural dialogue with Indian moral theories relevant to the context being studied, to understand the ‘moral universe’ of the study participants. This study thus draws on both western and Kashmiri concepts of morality – to develop a middle way, blending learning from Eastern and Western moral traditions, to fill the gaps in a theoretical understanding of morality.

While morality has been an inherent aspect of philosophical studies in Asia since ancient times, ‘moral philosophy’ as discussed in contemporary Western research, is nascent in India (MacKenzie, 2007). The complexity of the contexts, diverse ethnicities, religion, history, and ethos have made studies on morality and ethics challenging in India. As Creel admitted: “That India in the past did not develop a branch of philosophy similar to ethics in the West is, of course, not tantamount to the absence of ethics in India” (Creel, 1977, p. 21). Studies on ethics, morality and virtues in India are discussed in tandem with religion, and not as a tradition or philosophy in itself (Ginges et al., 2011; Hiriyanna, 1993; Majumdar, 2019). Though Indian classical philosophers have concentrated on the nature of the phenomenon and subject matter without necessarily theorising morality or ethics, the

religious philosophies are considered value-laden (R. Prasad, 2008). The following literature draws on MacIntyre and Taylor's emphasis on the need to bridge moral discourse, to strengthen moral theorising and justification. The next section examines the moral philosophy in Kashmir to gain an in-depth understanding of the moral perspectives of Kashmiri youth.

Moral (religious) Philosophies in Kashmir

Heim (2004) states that in South Asian moral philosophy, "moral discussions take place in context wherein religious, social, economic, and political status cannot be easily abstracted from moral thinking" (p. 145). Tarakeshwar et al. (2003) attribute the multiple interpretations of morality in India to philosophy being woven into the specific religious philosophy of the region, its culture and history. In Kashmir, Sufism and Hinduism are the predominant religions, that define the moral philosophy and conduct of the Kashmiri people (Madan, 1972). Both religious philosophies give importance to the moral conduct of the individual in society through the practice of virtues such as charity, forgiveness, moderation, doing good, gratitude, and tolerance. Such normative morality, though similar is represented differently – in Hinduism, in texts such as the *Vedas*, *Gita*, *Upanishads*, *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, highlight *dharma* (moral duty) through *karma* (actions), while Sufism is based on the words of the Prophet enshrined in the *Quran* and *Hadith* in how to lead a good life (Abbas & Jalaluddin, 2016). Since, historically, Sufism blended with the existing Hindu religion in Kashmir, the following section symbolically examines Hindu moral philosophy and then 'introduces' Sufi moral philosophy to exemplify the overlap between the two philosophies.

HINDU MORAL PHILOSOPHY

According to R. Prasad (2008), Hindu moral philosophy is grounded on the ideology of virtuous living. A virtuous life is discussed in conjunction with *karma* i.e. a belief that an individual's everyday actions

influence their future existence – virtuous actions in everyday life accumulate good *karma* and will lead to a good life, bad actions accumulate bad *karma* and will lead to distress in life (Olivelle, 2014). This ideology of *karma* serves as a motivation to lead a moral life. “*Karma*, the law of cause and effect, is based in *dharma*, ethical duty. *Dharma*, in turn, is connected to social order” (Brodd & Sobolewski, 2009, p. 48), so Hindu philosophy can be considered an action-oriented view of morality independent of the researcher’s predilection for normative, descriptive, or applied ethics (R. Prasad, 2008).

Hindu philosophy’s sacred texts direct one to lead a good life to eventually realise the *Brahman* (Self) in everything (Srivastava et al., 2013). *Vedanta*, the culmination of the Hindu scriptures, the *Vedas*, is divided into many texts such as the *Upanishads*, *Bhagavad Gita* and *Brahmastutra*. Of these, the *Bhagavad Gita*, a poetic narration embedded within the Hindu epic *Mahabharata*, is considered the map and guidebook in Hinduism to living a righteous, conscientious and holistic life. The *Gita* is a “metaphor for the perennial war between the forces of light and the forces of darkness in every human heart...offering [its] lofty insights as a manual not of philosophy but of everyday human activity” (Easwaran, 2007, p. 21). Commentaries on the 12th Chapter of the *Gita* by philosopher Easwaran, highlight 40 virtues such as compassion, patience, friendliness, righteousness, faith, harmony, self-control, and selflessness, to lead a good life.

adveṣṭā sarva-bhūtānāṃ maitraḥ karuṇa eva cha

nirmamo nirahankāraḥ sama-duḥkha-sukhaḥ kṣhamī (13)

(Who is incapable of ill-will, is friendly and compassionate, living beyond the reach of I and mine, with equanimity in pleasure and pain)

santuṣṭaḥ satataṃ yogī yatātmā dṛiḍha-niśchayaḥ

mayy arpita-mano-buddhir yo mad-bhaktaḥ sa me priyaḥ (14)

(Patient, contented, self-controlled, firm in faith, with all their heart and mind given to me (Self))

anapekṣhaḥ śhuchir dakṣha udāsīno gata-vyathaḥ

sarvārambha-parityāgī yo mad-bhaktaḥ sa me priyaḥ (16)

(Detached, pure, efficient, impartial, never anxious, selfless in all undertakings)

(Easwaran, 2007, pp. 203–209)

The 700 verses of the *Bhagavad Gita* are divided into 18 chapters forming a poetic narrative exemplifying the perspective to be borne in mind while living in the world: “By providing a basis for a moral life in this world, *karma* and *dharma* permeate the earthly life with spiritual significance” (Brodd & Sobolewski, 2009, p. 47). Hindu morality is therefore a part of an individual’s everyday lived experience. According to Jhingran (1989), every Hindu discourse concerned with religion, philosophy, politics or stories discusses morality and advises moral norms.

Drawing on the moral discourse in the *Upanishads* and other Hindu texts, Sufi saint Khwaja Muinuddin Chishti believed that a human being should have “generosity like that of the ocean, mildness like that of the sun, a modesty like that of the earth” (Currim et al., 2004, p. 54). Sufism, though a form of Islam, flourished in India as a means to connect with the local Hinduism. The Sufis never hesitated to adopt and assimilate spiritual practices from sources other than Islam (Engineer, 2008). The mystic religion revered by Hindus and Muslims in India has been considered parallel to *Vedanta*, an ideology of living a good life with absolute selflessness, to eventually realise the ‘divine’ (Self) (Husain, 2002; Jahangir, 1863).

SUFI MORAL PHILOSOPHY

Kashmiri Sufi philosopher Ibn-al-Arabi (Chittick, 1989) speaks of an individual’s moral traits ‘*aklhaq*’, as a process of eventually imbibing the divine traits ‘*takhalluq*’ such as, *al-karim* (generosity), *al-halim* (forbearance), *al-sabur* (patience), *al-muqsi*’ (justice), *al-shakur* (gratitude) and *al-wadud* (love). Grounding Sufi ethics in ontology, Ibn-al-Arabi explains:

the presence of [these] qualities... is the sign of being human...[such] noble traits are not extraneous qualities that we might acquire if we aspire to become good human beings...On the contrary, they define our mode of existence, since they determine the extent to which we participate in the fullness of the Light of Being...Absolute Being is sheer generosity. (Chittick, 1989, p. 22)

Sufi moral philosophy, which is transcendental and mystical, speaks of outer moral conduct centred on kindness towards all, and inner moral refinement which focuses on absolute selflessness. Heck (2006) highlights that such outer moral conduct is centred on kindness towards all in the community as its fundamental aspect, while inner morality emphasises the need for absolute selflessness i.e., reducing the 'self' to nothing, or rather, in mystical terms, to realise that the self is a part of the unlimited and unbounded. As Heck summarises: "Sufism would wholeheartedly agree that moral action comes about not simply from knowledge of the outer life, but most fully through the refinement of the inner life whereby concern for self is no longer paramount" (Heck, 2006, p. 253). This elimination of the self or *fanaa* is an internal transformation which enables ethical values to be expressed in the community. Kashmiri Sufi saint Shaikh-Noor-ud-din, known as Nund-rishi, wrote extensively on leading one's life grounded in moral values (Hussain, 2018) by using the term 'desires' to denote pride, anger, greed and selfishness, that one needs to eliminate to realise the Truth or divine Self.

Desire is like the knotted wood of the forest,
It cannot be made into planks, beams or cradles.
He who cut and filed it, will burn it into ashes. (Koul, 1929, p. 222)

Rumi, another famous Sufi scholar, emphasised love in his verses. Rumi believed that "love pertains to the experiential dimensions of Sufism, not the theoretical, it must be experienced to be understood" (Chittick, 1984, p. 194). When one experiences love, all outward expressions for all fellow beings cannot be anything but love. To aid this process, Sufism suggests a moral rigour '*adab*', which realises the divine presence (Self) in all actions, speech and behaviour. With a focus on annihilating the self to eventually realise the divine Self in everyone and everything, a Sufi novice or seeker is encouraged to inculcate values such as respect for the master, compassion, kindness, spiritual awareness and meditation, being an open-minded learner, being watchful, and with abundant love in the heart (Huda, 2004). After having met his mentor Shams-e-Tabriz, Rumi realised that the inward

journey of love and realising the Self as love in oneself and every aspect of the creation, is all that Sufism truly is:

He knows a hundred-thousand superfluous matters connected with the sciences,
(But) that unjust man does not know his own soul.
He knows the special properties of every substance,
(But) in elucidating his own substance (essence) he is (as ignorant) as an ass. (Rumi, 2017, p. 293)

Originally, Kashmiri Sufism was aimed at promoting universal love, and taught that people of different faiths, be it Muslims or Hindus, live together without any faith-based conflict: “The people of Kashmir chose not to mislay their distinct spiritual identity which is neither absolutely Hindu nor Muslim...called ‘*Kashmiriyat*’” (European Foundation For South Asian Studies, 2017, p. 10). Bhatt (2012) defines this Kashmiri identity, or *Kashmiriyat*, as an inclusive identity that has been built on the composite culture and syncretic tradition in Kashmir. In turn, Kashmiri Sufism is recognised as the ‘softer’ version of Islam in realising a commonality in all, and not just in Muslims:

The existence of shared beliefs and values between Muslims and Hindus, and of multiple identities, is thus totally denied. Kashmir provides some of the clearest instances of shared religious identities, remnants of which are still to be found, in however attenuated forms, today. (Sadiq, 2013, para. 8)

The cohesive religions of Kashmir changed after the Partition that followed Colonial independence and cross-border militant insurgency. Though the religious philosophies of Kashmir, determine the moral standards of society, emphasising love, compassion, humanity and such ideals of a ‘good life’, it is religion and ethnicity that have ironically been central to the violence and conflict in Kashmir (Boyden et al., 2002; Fox, 2006; James & Özdamar, 2005). The “mystic Sufi sect of Islam [of Kashmir] has come under attack not just by changing social values and conflict but also by the challenge of rising [orthodox] Islam” (Sadiq, 2013, para. 1). The *Pandits* (Kashmiri-Hindus) who till the 1990s shared a pluralistic ethos ‘*Kashmiriyat*’ (Kashmiri identity/ Kashmiri-ness), developed a pseudo-

exotic outlook after their mass-exodus, reducing them from a religious majority to a vulnerable minority (Shah, 2012). *Kashmiriyat* has itself transformed from a term signifying religious unity, into a term used more often in political dialogue to define the unique Kashmiri cultural identity. Presently *Kashmiriyat* is considered a notion “that empowered the people of Kashmir when they are emaciated and impoverished...It represents the revival and protection of the pluralistic space in which no religious community and no ethnic community feels threatened” (Karmakar, 2021, p. 7). *Kashmiriyat* is a nationalistic concept that symbolises democratic rights, preservation of culture, and unique identity; Kashmiris want their *Kashmiriyat* to be acknowledged and respected equally as citizens of India.

Atack (2009) also sees a link between moral perspectives and decisions in conflict regions and ideas of freedom, democracy and change. Politics, governance and nationalistic ideologies tend to be deeply embedded in the moral structures of societies. Drawing on Paulo Freire’s work, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Freire, 1972), S. Singh and Poddar (2021), identify the influence of Indian Government’s oppressive measures on Kashmiri conceptualisation of social transformation, humanisation and freedom. Actions motivated by these ideals, according to Balagopal (1996), tend to be considered moral and justified. These views on the moral structure of Kashmiris, parallel the communitarian standpoint of MacIntyre and Taylor (Bell, 2020; MacIntyre, 1984), on the inseparable role of community in the individual’s moral perspective. Extending such conceptual understanding closer to the context of this study, the next section evaluates selected moral concepts when the individuals live amidst conflict.

Morality in Conflict

According to Ginges and Atran (2013), moral concepts and decisions in conflict regions “are driven by culturally bound sacred values” (p. 274). Sacred values, according to Tetlock (2003), are values that a

community considers transcendental, beyond mortal concepts of right and wrong. These norms and beliefs can be associated with territory and identity. Ginges et al. (2011) add that when these sacred values related to territory, religion and identity are challenged, it can be more difficult to be open to change or compromise, thereby prompting violent action or resistance. Conflict “alters people’s perceptions of right, wrong, power, poverty, risk, and revenge” (Campbell, 2017, p. 92). Ginges and Atran (2013) hold that in regions experiencing political conflict such as Palestine, Iran or Kashmir, morality may be subjective; while ‘sacred values’ are the moral imperatives that determine individual and collective moral structures: “Especially in potentially violent situations of intergroup conflict, sacred values appear to drive collective actions independently, or all out of proportion...because it is the right thing to do, whatever the costs or consequences” (p. 298). Similar to the situation in Kashmir, where Kashmiri youth have joined the armed fight against the Indian military, Gómez et al. (2017) point toward some ‘devoted actors’ who tend to be willing to make ‘costly sacrifices’ or resort to extreme violence if the sacred values of their community are threatened. Though termed ‘sacred values’, this is contrary to the Sufi and Hindu religious-moral philosophies that emphasise non-violence and tolerance in the face of adversity (Easwaran, 2007; Hussain, 2018).

P. Thomas (2021) draws a parallel between Mahatma Gandhi, who fought against the colonial oppressors on the grounds of non-violence ‘*Ahimsa*’, and Paulo Freire who believed that “conscientization was the means to not only become aware and get involved in actions to change the world, it was also the means by which the oppressed learned to both understand the dominant syntax, question it, and transform the world” (p. 210). Though his own work was embedded in Brazil, Freire’s work on education, critical thinking, conscientisation and humanisation, gained popularity and resonance among the marginalised and oppressed communities in India (P. Thomas, 2021). Narayan (2000) for example, finds similar core values in Gandhi and Freire’s moral philosophies in the context of conflict: the emphasis on humanism, the tendency of the oppressed towards fatalism or fear of freedom, the quest for becoming more fully human, and dialogue as a means for freedom. While they

share similarities, P. Thomas (2021) found that unlike Freire, whose approach concerned humanising the oppressed, Gandhi laid emphasis on humanising the oppressors, during India's freedom struggle from Colonialism. Although Gandhi would agree that this approach led to the transformation of some oppressed Indians into an elitist community of oppressive bureaucrats, industrialists and businessmen, after Colonial independence. It is for this reason that Freire stressed the need to humanise the oppressed. Freire believed that:

at a certain point in their existential experience the oppressed feel an irresistible attraction towards the oppressors and their way of life...[and] want at any cost to resemble the oppressors, to imitate them, to follow them. This phenomenon is especially prevalent in the middle-class oppressed, who yearn to be equal to the "eminent" men and women of the upper class. (Freire, 1972, p. 62)

Without humanisation or being aware and critical of oppression, the "sub-oppressors" tend to oppress their own community of the oppressed, to ensure they are a part of the oppressors, similar to the standpoint of Pradip Thomas (2021). According to Freire (1972), "even revolution, which transforms a concrete situation of oppression by establishing the process of liberation, must confront this phenomenon" (p. 46). This is similar to the views of P. Thomas (2021) on the rise of an Indian elitist oppressor community, who were a part of the oppressed community during the colonial era. Freire (1972) believed that "at a certain point in their existential experience the oppressed feel an irresistible attraction towards the oppressors and their way of life... the middle-class oppressed... yearn to be equal to the 'eminent' men and women of the upper class" (p. 62). As a result, the state of oppression continues in society. It is due to this human tendency of the oppressed to become oppressors, that Freire emphasised the need for humanisation and conscientisation of the oppressed.

Freire believed that individuals who have been oppressed, need to be aware that the fight for freedom is to become more fully human (Freire, 1972). He stated that such a struggle and fight for freedom is a constant process until the oppressed are liberated. Such freedom, according to Freire, requires a transformation of the consciousness:

The oppressed, having internalized the image of the oppressor and adopted his guidelines, are fearful of freedom... Freedom is acquired by conquest, not by gift... [Freedom] is rather the indispensable condition for the quest for human completion... They will not gain this liberation by chance but through the praxis of their quest for it, through their recognition of the necessity to fight for it. (Freire, 1972)

Before realising the need to fight for liberation, the oppressed tend to develop characteristics such as self-depreciation, fear of being free, a sense of resignation that their destiny is to be oppressed, or the internalised order of society where their oppression is not perceived, which does not allow them to realise or accept their oppression (Freire, 1972). Insisting on the need to reject such fatalistic ideas, Freire believed the oppressed have to be rebellious “because it affirms [one’s] status as a person who has never given in to the manipulations and strategies designed to reduce the human person to nothing” (Freire, 1998, p. 86). Such rebelliousness is fired by the constant human desire to be more fully human and free from oppression. Similar to the moral philosophy of MacIntyre (1959) centred on the ‘quest for good’, Freire (1972) refers to the humanising process as a “quest for human completion” (p. 47). Humanisation, according to Freire, requires the oppressed to fight against such oppression, to become aware of the oppression they are facing and raise their consciousness. These are the initial steps of liberation and humanisation and “until [the oppressed] concretely ‘discover’ their oppressor and in turn their own consciousness, they nearly always express fatalistic attitudes towards their situation” (Freire, 1972).

Such ‘discovery’ involves action and reflection; and critical liberatory dialogue that presupposes such action and praxis. According to Roberts (1998), “in Freire’s moral philosophy, praxis and dialogue are closely related: genuine dialogue represents a form of humanising praxis” (p. 106). Through dialogue, Freire refers to the interaction between people with the intent of humanisation and transformation in the world. Although the intent of such dialogue, must be grounded on the historical context of the oppressed, and consciously promote their wellbeing: “If it is to be humanizing, [dialogue] must involve a love of the world and of other human beings. This in turn demands a certain

sense of humility" (Roberts, 1998, p. 106). Such a process of humanisation, according to Freire, is a continuous and constant struggle, which requires the oppressed to be hopeful, not fatalistic. Freirean moral philosophy is therefore grounded on the ideal that "the ontological and historical vocation of all human being is... [to become] *more* fully human, never fully human... Given an ever-changing world, humanisation is a continuous, unfinished process, with new problems to be addressed as each epoch unfolds" (Roberts, 1998, pp. 113–114). In *Pedagogy of Hope*, Freire (1992) repeated the need to remain hopeful in the struggle for liberation:

Without a minimum of hope, we cannot so much as start the struggle. But without the struggle, hope, as an ontological need, dissipates, loses its bearings, and turns into hopelessness... Hopelessness paralyzes us, immobilizes us. We succumb to fatalism, and then it becomes impossible to muster the strength we absolutely need for a fierce struggle that will re-create the world. (pp. 2-3)

Freire qualifies that while hope gives strength to fight for freedom, it is not sufficient for humanising the oppressed, liberating them and transforming the world. Hope needs to be anchored in critical reflection and practice (Freire, 1992). Ellsworth (1992) conversely argued that while every society experiences different forms of oppression, Freire universalised the experience of oppression. She adds that Freire did not discuss or include other forms of oppression such as oppression based on gender, religion, or race, that may be prevalent in other cultures and contexts. Further, Blackburn (2000) negates Freire's argument that oppressed individuals tend to be fatalistic and are powerless. Blackburn contends that the oppressed have subtle ways of imposing and expressing their power "in more subtle ways, such as sabotage, non-cooperation, and the secret observance of a distinct culture and identity" (Blackburn, 2000, p. 10). Blackburn emphasised that power, knowledge, and the level of conscientisation across different cultures, contexts, and traditions, vary, which Freire's philosophy did not consider. In an answer to his critics, Freire recognised the need for an evolution of his theories according to the circumstances of the present generation, their context, and culture. Stating that his theories were not absolute discoveries, Freire felt that "the considerations of the bourgeois pedagogy

should be 'eaten', metabolised, incorporated in [one's] own pedagogical practices, because it was on those shoulders, and not on nothing, that we [were] raised" (Perez & Freire, 1993, p. 3).

Freire's work was based on his lived experience of war and conflict in Brazil in the 1960s. Since he developed his work within such a context, there have been concerns (Cortez, 2016) that Freire's references to action and praxis in his educational pedagogy were intended to inspire oppressed young people to adopt violent means for liberation. His theory appeared to be revolutionary, rather than transformative, as he stated in the *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* that violence could be the initial response of the oppressed (Cortez, 2016). These concerns, as highlighted in the previous section on education, are visible in Kashmir where the Kashmiri youth, motivated by humanist ideals published on the Internet by militants and radicals, join militant groups and participate in violence against oppression (A. S. Wani et al., 2022). This can be seen as the lack of a structured liberating educational space for the Kashmiri youth, to raise their consciousness and explore ideas of humanisation (F. A. Dar, 2014).

Freire clarified in his later work *Pedagogy of Freedom*, the need to adopt democratic means through dialogue for attaining liberation (Freire, 1998). He believed that educational reforms and a liberating pedagogy were not meant to provoke the oppressed to adopt violent means, rebel, or cause further disruption in society. True liberating education was to empower the oppressed to gain knowledge and transform society by "working in some given area, be it literacy, health, or evangelization, and doing so as to awake the conscience of each group, in a constructive, critical manner, about the violence and extreme injustice of this concrete situation" (Freire, 1998, p. 75). Biesta (2020, p. 102), however, argues that while liberating education provides young people the potential to critically reflect on their subject-ness, explore "their values, attitudes and ways of doing and being", and constructively engage in ideas of transformation, it includes a risk that "students won't get it or won't get it sufficiently right". Such a 'beautiful risk of education', according to Biesta, nevertheless, is essential for the liberation and humanisation of the child. To be able to educate with

an openness to such risks in education, Biesta (2020) posited the need for educators to prioritise freedom *of and for* the child: “[return] their freedom to them, so to speak, in the hope that they would reconnect with it and make it into their ‘own’ freedom” (p. 89). Biesta and Freire’s moral philosophy is similar to the standpoint of W. Ali & Dar (2016) that with a dialogical liberating education, Kashmiri youth could engage constructively towards a cohesive Kashmir and are ‘less likely’ to engage in violent actions. These ideas indicate the need for humanisation in Kashmir’s education, even if there is a risk.

While Freire’s philosophy and work have been critiqued, the essence of Freire’s philosophy that focuses on the need for a liberating educational pedagogy has inspired contemporary educators, who have adopted and adapted his work across various contexts (Aronowitz, 2012; Diaz, 2018; Roberts, 2000). In his interview with Cortez (2016), Freire emphasised the need for his theory to be adapted and experimented with in similar conflict regions. Liberating education is interconnected with lived experience, historicity and the cultural contexts of the individual, according to Bolin (2017). Freire’s philosophy is grounded on the belief that a liberating education raises the consciousness of the oppressed and allows them to think critically; this ‘conscientisation’ gives them hope and inspiration to fight for freedom. For Freire (1972) the role of critical educational philosophy is to empower the oppressed through a form of education that allows them to, “come to a new awareness of selfhood... look critically at the social situation... [and] take the initiative... to transform the society that has denied them this opportunity of participation” (p. 29). Freire’s emphasis on the need for the oppressed to become aware of the self, conscientisation and critical reflection, indicates the influence of the phenomenological tradition in his philosophy:

We achieve...this critical orientation – in short, our status as beings of relations – through consciousness of the world and of others in the world. In true phenomenological style, Freire isolates *intentionality* or being *conscious of* as the hallmark of consciousness...In an act of reflection – thought – persons become conscious of themselves and their reality...Freire talks of consciousness as intentionality toward the world, for both reflection and self-reflection are the basis of

knowing – of coming to know ourselves and our reality objectively. (Peters & Lankshear, 2002, p. 176)

Freire's phenomenological standpoint is deeply rooted in hermeneutics; he believed that dialogue "is a requirement of human nature" (Freire, 2000, p. 92). This idea of hermeneutics, as appraised in chapter four, resonates with Gadamer's hermeneutic-phenomenological approach (van Manen, 1997), which has been adopted in this study. While Freire's work evidences the underlying phenomenological stance, according to Diaz (2018), Freire's stress on the need to empower the oppressed to "transform the society" and a commitment to the betterment of the community, mirrors communitarian ideas. Freire's hermeneutic-phenomenological approach reaches beyond Gadamer's philosophy into the discovery of knowledge through interpretation, by linking such interpretation to action and promoting revolutionary change through the development of critical consciousness (Peters & Lankshear, 2002; van Manen, 1997). The above discussion forges link not only between moral philosophy and the phenomenological tradition, but also an intersection in the perspectives of MacIntyre, Freire and Gadamer. To gain a deeper comprehension of the relevance of these concepts and their intersectionality, chapter four will elaborate on ideas of moral phenomenology, the use of narrative and case study methodology, followed by a description of the methods used to gain insight into the moral perspective of the Kashmiri youth.

From Concept to Experience

Faheem (2020), a Kashmiri researcher, reminds us that a study based on Kashmir, and its present reality, is deeply rooted in the stories of the Kashmiri people, and not in literature or archival information. He believes that the lived experiences and anecdotes of Kashmiris ought to represent the history of Kashmiris and people living in conflict. Studies on conflict regions (Baron et al., 2019; Finley & Cooper, 2014) suggest the use of phenomenology to enable a deeper understanding of the

experience of violence and life amidst conflict. Phenomenology is considered ideal for this study since the “findings [are] sensitive to the cultural context” (Bragin et al., 2021, p. 16). Bolton (1979) adds that a phenomenological approach for assessing educational experience allows critical reflection on the educational experience. While chapter two provides a review of the context of Kashmir and the role of education, this chapter has outlined the moral concepts that inform an interpretation of the moral structure of Kashmiri youth. The crux of this study lies in examining the relevance of such literature in light of the findings from this study. As Bruner (2004) has observed, “a life as led is inseparable from a life as told—or more bluntly, a life is not ‘how it was’ but how it is interpreted and reinterpreted, told and retold” (p. 31). Chapters four, five and six represent, interpret and reinterpret the voices of the Kashmiri youth participants in this study, within the methodological framework described in the next chapter.

According to van Tongeren (1994), lived experience contains expression or answers to questions about the moral thinking and reasoning of individuals and communities. Interpretation of the texts, or voice describing the experience is required to understand the inherent meaning of the experience “because these texts and happenings in fact appear to be full of meaning, but without that meaning being fully clear. We sense their pretension to meaning, but go on to ask what, precisely, the experience or perception contains” (van Tongeren, 1994, p. 199). The study will draw on the voice of the Kashmiri youth to understand what has influenced their moral perspective. The next chapter describes the conceptual framework of this study: grounded on a phenomenological philosophy and narrative-case study methodology, the framework roots the study in lived experience, voices, and the moral perspective of Kashmiri youth.

CHAPTER 4 METHODOLOGY

“Take my hand. We will walk. We will only walk. We will enjoy our walk without thinking of arriving anywhere.” (Thich Nhat Hanh, 2001, p. 194)

The focus of this chapter is on the methodological approach and research design that was employed in researching the lived experience and moral perspective of Kashmiri youth. The lived experience included everyday activities and encounters that could be taken for granted as reality, rather than as a perception (Oxford Reference, 2020): “If one separates person and world, the wholeness of [the lived] experience escapes” (Buttimer, 1976, p. 283). Grounded within a phenomenological paradigm, this research was attentive to the “nature of experience from the point of view of the person experiencing the phenomenon (known as ‘lived experience’)” (L. M. Connelly, 2010, p. 127). In doing so their narrative was shaped by each participant’s personal history and context (van Manen, 1997).

The social context of Kashmir is central to the lived experience of the participants in this study. As religion is inextricably linked with philosophy in India (Tarakeshwar et al., 2003), it is important to address the phenomenological religious philosophies of *Vedanta* (Hinduism) and Sufism that are prominent in Kashmir, followed by Western phenomenology, that provides insight into their overlap. According to Mehta (1970), bridging Indian and Western philosophies, without disregarding tradition and context, contributes to future historical development. Linking phenomenology to the research subject, this chapter examines moral phenomenology that emphasises the innate role of values and morality in human interaction and lived experiences.

Bringing forth phenomenology in practice, Benner (1994) suggests that lived experiences in phenomenological studies are best expressed in the form of narratives or storytelling: “because when people structure their own narrative accounts, they can tap into their more immediate experiences” (p. 108). Indian philosophers Matilal (1992) and J. N. Mohanty (1997) see parallels in the frequent use

of narratives and epic stories in Indian philosophical discourses on life, consciousness and morality. Further, arguing for the inherent role of narratives in lived experiences, MacIntyre agrees: “we dream in narrative, day-dream in narrative, remember, anticipate, hope, despair, believe, doubt, plan, revise, criticise, construct, gossip, learn, hate and love by narrative” (Hardy, 1968 as cited in MacIntyre, 1984, p. 211). This study employs narrative methodology to examine the life stories and experiences of the participants to understand what influenced their moral perspectives. To gain a holistic and comparative view of the multiple narratives of the phenomena, I adopted a case study approach (Edwards, 1998; Giorgi, 1985). Studying each participant’s narrative provided an account of their lived experience and subjectivity, along with a view of their moral perspective as Kashmiri youth adopting a thematic case study analysis. Thematic case study analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was used to understand the essence of these narratives. According to Denzin and Lincoln (2011), as lived experience is central to this inquiry, the criteria for evaluating the study are premised on ethics of care, personal responsibility, and open dialogue. The ethical considerations and rigour are centred on truthfulness and authenticity ensuring participants’ stories are true and relevant.

This chapter examines the phenomenological framework of this research, the participants recruited for contributing to this research, the relevant method adopted, the ethical considerations borne in mind for this research and a thorough rigour ensured for this qualitative phenomenological research.

Phenomenology

There is no singular definition of phenomenology. It is considered a concept, philosophy, method, or an experience, subject to constant study and revaluation as everything acquires its sense and value only through lived experience (Farina, 2014). According to Gadamer et al. (2002), coupled with historical knowledge, fundamental to a phenomenological conversation, is an awareness of an

individual's context. Such knowledge is necessary for studies where a participant and researcher belong to different cultures making it important to recognise local identity. As phenomenological research is not widespread in non-western culture (Mehta, 1970), this made the application of phenomenology within the context of Kashmir a challenge. As this research focused on Kashmiri youth, the conceptual framework reviews Indian phenomenological philosophy, practiced before and aside from Western philosophy (D. W. Smith, 2018), ensuring the contextual essence of the lived experience.

PHENOMENOLOGY IN KASHMIRI RELIGIOUS PHILOSOPHIES

While the term phenomenology owes its origin to Western philosophy, it has analogous roots in Asia (Sinha, 2002; D. W. Smith, 2018). Western phenomenology was unknown to Indian philosophers due to the lack of English translations of the same till the 1950s, although phenomenology had been slowly gaining considerable interest among contemporary philosophers in Asia (Sinha, 2002). In a pioneering study on phenomenology in Indian traditions, Siderits et. al, (2011) analysed the nature of one's own self and reflexivity as the subject of experience. Indian phenomenologist Mohanty saw that it was possible to understand Western phenomenology in the Asian context as both "thought-worlds... [that] intersect and overlap: they are neither coincident nor mutually exclusive" (J. N. Mohanty, 1988, p. 18). Given the context of Kashmir, the religious-cultural philosophies of *Vedanta* (Hinduism) and Sufism can be aligned with the phenomenological and philosophical underpinning of awareness, reflexivity, reduction, context and experience (Louchakova-Schwartz, 2011).

Vedanta (Hinduism)

Indian philosophy has for centuries been more than a theoretical study or a philosophy, it is a way of life and practice (J. N. Mohanty, 1988). Within the Indian philosophical tradition, the concept of 'witness-consciousness' of *Advaita Vedanta* (non-dual philosophy), as propounded by saint Adi Shankaracharya, parallels Western phenomenology (Maharana, 2009). The *Advaitic* understanding of

the 'Self' or 'witness-consciousness', forms a vantage point for the cross-cultural study of the individual phenomenological 'self'. The central question of *Advaita Vedanta* is that of the nature of one's own Self as the subject of experience. The emphasis is placed on the 'I' of the experience i.e. the 'experiencer' of the experience (Fasching, 2011).

Adi Shankaracharya, the Indian philosopher and theologian, *Advaita Vedanta* discusses the unity of the *Brahman* (eternal Self) and the *Atman* (changing self): "In each one of us there is an individual self (the 'I') and an eternal Self (the witness of this 'I')" (Swami Ranganathananda, 2008). According to the Advaita philosophy, the all-pervading consciousness '*Brahman*' or '*Sakshi*' (witness) is present at all times, including the three states of waking, sleeping and dreaming, as an awareness of the being; it is due to this that though not awake, an individual is unconsciously aware of having slept well, restlessly or having had a dream (Chattopadhyaya et al., 1991). The waking state individual self ('I') is undoubtedly not present in the sleep and dream state, but the witnessing consciousness makes one aware of having slept and dreamt. The pure witness-consciousness (*Sakshi*) remains unchanged and unaffected by the individual experience, state, and perception of the world: "When I see a bright blue sky and hear the wind stirring the leaves, there is awareness of the blue colour and the rattling sound. Is there also the awareness of my seeing the blue and hearing the sound?" (Siderits et al., 2011, p. 1). The individual 'I' is involved in the act of seeing and hearing, subject to perceptions and assumptions of one's ideas of colour, hearing ability, thinking, focus, observation, and opinion. But there is an 'I' who is witnessing this individual 'I's' experience, making the individual aware of the seeing and hearing. In his most prominent work, the *Niravana Shatakam*, Shankaracharya describes the essence of such pure consciousness in the last verse:

Aham Nirvikalpah Niraakaara Rupah
Vibhuh Vyaapya Sarvatra Sarva Indriyaani
Sadaa Me Samatvam Na Mukti Na Bandhah
Chidaananda Rupah Shivo'ham Shivo'ham

(I am unconditional and free from attributes. I am formless. I am all-pervading. I am beyond the organs. I am ever the same. There is neither bondage nor liberation for me. I am supreme auspiciousness in the form of consciousness-bliss. I am auspiciousness.) (Swami Tejomayananda, 2018, p. 52)

The verses refer to pure consciousness not being the senses, body, any bondage, relationships, one's identity, nature, perceptions or desires. An individual tends to identify with the body as the real 'self' due to ignorance or lack of such awareness. When one becomes aware of the changeless and causeless witness-consciousness, knowledge becomes clear and in its absolute. This pure consciousness is the real 'Self'. The practice of *Advaita* requires the individual to:

Be a witness to all movements. Detach yourself from them and become the observer of them; then you will realize that you are the eternal witness and the body is not yourself. The watcher is the real you – the Self Immortal. (Swami Ramdas, 2016, p. 9)

Advaita thus emphasises the need to become aware of the unchanging eternal Self, which is the underlying essence of the individual's dynamic subjectivities. Such awareness allows one to realise the essence of an experience as it was given to consciousness. The philosophy, admits the inherent nature of the self in an experience, and the impossibility of separation (T. B. Ellis, 2012). The mystical Sufism, the other prominent religion in Kashmir, is a similar philosophy of the natural dichotomy of the Self (*Brahman*) and the self, inherent in an experience, as discussed in Hindu scripture (Awn, 1983). According to Nizamie et al. (2013), "the concept of existential unity of Being (*wahdat-ul-wujood*) propounded by the Ibn-al-Arabi in the 13th century bears striking similarity to the *Advaita* philosophy" (p. 3).

Sufism

"I saw my Lord with the eye of the heart I asked, 'Who are You?' He replied, 'You'."

– Sufi poet Mansur al-Hallaj (Muhammed, 2008, p. 3)

The word 'Sufism' or *tasawwuf* (being a Sufi) originates from the word *Suf*, the coarse garments of wool worn by the early Muslim ascetics (Bickett, 2012). Sufism, which springs from the heart of Islam, the Qur'an, has been an integral part of India since the Muslim invasion in the 13th century and is known to have been an indigenous belief system since the inception of Islam itself. The Sufi master Junayd ibn Muḥammad explains: "If the Shariah represents the body of Islam, then Sufism is its soul... Sufism is not composed of practices and sciences, but it is morals" (Al-Banna, 2012, para. 13). Sufism came from a practical and more natural experience of Islam, that could give a direct experience of the divine, rather than a creed rooted in theories and dogma (Gowins, 2010). The Sufi is an experimental or practical mystic engaged in the practice of experiencing the divine.

Sufism is sought in the intense human aspiration for the Supreme Being and truth (Rafiqi, 1972). Like *Advaita*, Sufism begins with a distinction made between the self and the world as a natural dichotomy, a mystical underlying unity between the self (sense of individuality) and the Being or the Self (witness consciousness) (Louchakova-Schwartz, 2011). Awareness of such unity is possible through remembrance (*dhikr*) of the Being. Though the 'quiddity' of the Being is different from corporeal things in the world, the things in themselves are non-existent without the Being. Mulla Sadra (2003) in his book *Elixir of Gnostics*, compares the existence of the Being with the kernel of a fruit. The potency of the kernel always exists right from when it nurtures the seed into a tree, and till the creation of the fruit, where the circle starts again. The kernel (Being) exists in essence but is yet non-existent, and without the Being, the fruit is non-existent (Menzies, 2009).

According to Applebaum (2019), *dhikr* or remembrance of the Being "does not refer to conceptual, propositional knowledge – instead, it refers to the perceiving (witnessing, *mushahada*) of that which is present to the perceiver" (p. 24). *Dhikr* refers to being aware of the most intimate and fundamental divine presence within the individual. It is an awareness of the divine presence that "fully knows what 'their' soul whispers to 'them', and [that which is] closer to 'them' than 'their' jugular vein" (*The Holy Qur'an*, 2020, v. 50:16).

Remembrance is the immersion of the one who is remembering in the witnessing, *shuhūd*, of that which is remembered and then [it is] being consumed in the existence, *wujūd*, of that which is being remembered until no trace, *athar*, remains of the remembering so that it is said “so and so” once was. (Safavi, 2018, p. 82)

Islamic philosopher Chittick (1989) who has studied Ibn al-Arabi extensively, clarifies the term ‘*wujud*’ in Arabic defines Him, the One or the Being. Combined with *adab* (good character) in society, the meditative practice of *dhikr* leads to *fana*, effacement of the ego-sense. The journey from *dhikr*, to an innate awareness (*mushahada*) of the Being, involves the annihilation (*fana*) of the ego or the self; which is similar to phenomenological reduction. *Fana* is not, however, removal, but rather the complete surrender of the human ego to the divine ego (Muhammad, 1986). Conveyed in extensive verses and poetry, Ibn al-Arabi summarises this relationship:

When my Beloved appears, with what eye do I see Him
With His eye, not with mine, for none sees Him except Himself. (Corrigan, 2008, p. 321)

According to Applebaum (2019), “the lived experience of *dhikr* is that not of a practice but of a tectonic shift in the individual’s lived sense of identity, the implications of which are simultaneously ontological and psychological” (p.27). In *fana*, relationships, habits, attributes, all worldly self-subsisting identity, sense of selfhood, including the conviction of being, drop away:

Fana is certainly a human experience. It is man who actually experiences it. But it is not solely a human experience. For when he does experience it, he is no longer himself. In this sense man is not the subject of experience. The subject is rather the metaphysical Reality itself. In other words, the human experience of *fana* is itself the self-actualization of Reality. (Izutsu, 1994, p. 13)

This is followed by *baqa*, remaining in the Oneness, where one integrates into the world, while on the meditative path. Ibn al-Arabi provides clarity between *fana* and *baqa*: *fana* is “the annihilation of him who was not”, and *baqa* is “the subsistence of Him [the Self] who has always been” (Chittick,

2015, p. 84). The individual 'I' returns, but there is a constant awareness of the transitory nature of the being, and the Self inherent in all whilst being involved in worldly actions. One who has mastered the ability to oscillate between living the individual 'I', and awareness of the unity or the divine Self, is called *dhu'l-'aynayn* (possessor of two eyes/I's): "Ontologically, one eye sees the Being and the other perceives nothingness. Through the two eyes working together, [the individual] perceives that he himself and the cosmos are He/not He" (Chittick, 1989, p. 362). Sufi poet Mansur al-Halaj (Seyyedeh, 2019) has rendered the same in this verse:

I wonder at this You and I
You are all there is
And I am all annihilated.
There is an I
No longer exists. (para. 11)

Sufism is considered a mystical approach to life consisting of everyday practices that are directed towards attaining one goal – realising the unity of the self with the divine Self (Manzoor, 2016). According to Ferrarello and Apostolescu (2019), "phenomenological findings are always explicitly or implicitly experiential; therefore, it is a fitting approach to classical Sufi practice as a path of lived verification" (p. 3).

An understanding of Hindu and Sufi phenomenology allows the essence of the participant's lived experience and perspective to be understood in light of their social and cultural context. Similar to bridging Indian and Western moral philosophies in the previous chapters, this study bridges Indian and Western phenomenology to understand the moral perspective and lived experience of the Kashmiri youth in this study, in entirety and with depth. The following section is a shift to the Western phenomenological approach, drawing on the overlap with Indian phenomenology.

BRIDGING INDIAN-WESTERN PHENOMENOLOGY

According to J. N. Mohanty (1988), unlike Western phenomenology which is guided by theory, Asian phenomenology is “theoretical thinking with an eye on practice” (p. 279). As evident in the above section, Indian phenomenological concepts are, however, deeply embedded in religious texts and language. Though the lived experiences of the Kashmiri youth in this study are located within the socio-cultural backdrop of Kashmir, a region deeply entrenched in religion, holistic understanding of their perspectives, thinking and decisions, required phenomenological understanding beyond their religious identity (Puri, 2001). To understand the lived experiences of Kashmiri youth from a non-religious perspective, this study, therefore, also draws on Western phenomenology, bridging such understanding with the phenomenological concepts embedded in Hinduism and Sufism.

According to Siderits et al. (2011), while Hindu and Sufi philosophies initially resemble Western phenomenologist Heidegger’s concept of *Dasein*, which requires individual subjectivities to be removed to understand the pure essence of the experience, Indian philosophies emphasise the impossibility of the removal of the self from the phenomenon. Though there is a similarity with phenomenology as a study of pure consciousness, the critical point of difference, therefore, lies in the concept of intentionality. J. N. Mohanty (1988) adds that a key difference between Indian and Western philosophies is that Indian phenomenological philosophies focus on realising the transcendental Self (origin) in everything, while Western phenomenology is thought of as an epistemological process. Indian philosophy emphasises the need to eventually realise that the witnessing Self as the real Self, which is the one common true Self in everything (Wilberg, 2008): “The foundational consciousness for Indian thought is an evidencing and/or grounding consciousness, but not quite a universal-constituting subjectivity (like Husserlian phenomenology)” (J. N. Mohanty, 1988, p. 280). Such conceptualisation of “the absolute source not only of all individual consciousness, but of all that is – pervading all things, human and non-human”, referred to as “subjectivity without subject” or non-intentional consciousness in Indian philosophy, according to Wilberg (2008, pp. 81–82), is insufficiently

acknowledged in Western philosophical studies. To understand an experience as it was given to the consciousness, requires awareness of this 'absolute source' transcending the subject or self.

For the reduction of subjectivity as such to a property of an individual 'subject' is equivalent to reducing language as such to the private property of an individual speaker rather than...understanding speech as an individualised expression of language, one that shapes and reshapes the speaker's very experience of themselves as an individual self or 'subject'. (Wilberg, 2008, p. 81)

While Western philosophy has extended phenomenological concepts beyond religious texts and language, to overcome the gap on phenomenological consciousness, this study returns to an Indian philosophical grounding of pure awareness. According to J. N. Mohanty (1988), though phenomenology and Indian philosophy share similarities and contrasts, the purpose of phenomenological thinking is not towards developing a comparative philosophy, but rather "for understanding the other's point of view as noematic structure and then to go behind it in order to lay bare the experiential phenomenon that is embodied in this structure" (p. 269). Also, Raghuramaraju (2013) has called for intercultural dialogue between the Eastern and Western philosophical traditions to establish a global philosophical approach. Therefore, instead of drawing comparisons between the phenomenological traditions, this study 'bridges' Indian phenomenology and Western philosophy to gain a deeper understanding of the 'experiential phenomenon' embodied in the narratives of the Kashmiri youth.

WESTERN PHENOMENOLOGY

Derived from the Greek word *phainómenon* meaning 'that which appears', phenomenology aims to grasp the principle of a phenomenon or event, questioning the meaning of life, lived experience, and the living the lived experience (van Manen, 2016). It involves orienting one's worldview toward the fundamental essence, the Being, of the phenomena, through reflection and inquiry into the source of lived experiences in the world:

World, to the phenomenologist is the context within which consciousness is revealed. It is not a mere world of facts and affairs, but... a world of values, a world of goods, a practical world. It is anchored in a past and directed toward a future; it is a shared horizon, though each individual may construe it in a uniquely personal way. Once aware of lifeworld in personal experience, an individual should then aim to grasp the shared world horizons of other people and of society as a whole. (Buttimer, 1976, p. 281)

To understand such lifeworld experience in phenomenological studies, according to Quay (2016), there is the need to leap headlong into the experience; similar to learning to swim – one cannot learn by standing around the edges and analysing the depth of the water – the leap is essential. It includes questioning the phenomena, the questioned and the questioner too: “The questioner is here always also affected by the question” (Heidegger, 2009, p. 36). Thus, the ‘being’ of every aspect of the phenomena is never left behind; a phenomenological viewpoint is present at every stage. This process requires redirecting one’s attention from things per se to the context, the whole, within which things appear. Phenomenology involves thoughtful questioning of “the way of be[-]ing” (Heidegger, 1985, p. 150). Such a process of questioning eventually becomes an experiential journey for the reader of the research.

Reducing the Self

Philosopher Edmund Husserl, the founder of phenomenology (Beyer, 2018), suggested the possibility of an absolute objective study of phenomena not influenced by individual subjectivity. For Husserl, phenomenology is an unprejudiced understanding of the essence of phenomena by the consciousness, through systematic ‘reduction’ (Koch, 1995). Rooted in a systematic epistemological attitude, Husserl’s descriptive phenomenology concentrated on the phenomenon in its (Neubauer et al., 2019). He termed phenomenology as a science of consciousness that flows through a stream of experiences (Husserl, 2014). Consciousness in phenomenology is taken as the space where experience and intuition act out their part. He explained that phenomenology does not deny the existence of the

real world but instead seeks to become aware of this world as it is, and not what it appears to be. This consciousness directed towards phenomena is termed 'intentionality' (D. W. Smith, 2018). External conditions such as cultural context, language, social practice and background can be seen as contextual aspects that help to give experience its intentionality (D. W. Smith, 2018). Phenomenology is consequently about being conscious of this intentionality or being conscious of this consciousness. This awareness of intentionality is directed toward various types of experience such as perception, thought, memory, imagination, emotion, desire, embodied action, and social activity influenced by external contexts (Menon et al., 2013).

To ensure the essence of the phenomena as it was originally given to the consciousness is intact, Husserl's phenomenology necessitates *epoché*, i.e., suspension of judgement and absolute detachment from the phenomena. This systematic grouping of natural human subjectivities; assumptions, inessential aspects, and symbolic meaning leaves consciousness in its purest form. Husserl maintains that the "phenomenological reduction helps... to free [researchers] from prejudices and secure the purity of [researchers'] detachment as observers, so that [researchers] can encounter 'things as they are in themselves' independently of any presuppositions" (Husserl, 1960 as cited in Korab-Karpowicz, 2016, p. 25).

Husserl used the terms *noesis* (mental process inherent to intentionality) and *noema* (meaning of an act or experience) to explain intentionality and reduction (Rassi & Shahabi, 2015). In the *Introduction to Pure Phenomenology* (2014), he exemplified the concept of intentionality and reduction through the analogy of an individual observing the blossoming of a tree. The experience of observing the tree lends the tree characteristics such as charm and beauty motivated by *noetic* intentionality. The tree, *per se*, is subject to degeneration, and aspects of beauty or blooming are subjective. The is in the *perception* of that which cannot degenerate or be subject to individual subjectivities of blossoming or beauty. The pure reduced phenomenological reflexive meaning of this noematic experience of perception is thus what is real and the crux of the phenomena. The

phenomenologically reduced perceptual experience is of “this blossoming apple tree, in this garden” (Husserl, 2014, p. 176). The process of reduction gives the essence of pleasure, a pleasure in what is perceived. Thus, the phenomenological question of ‘what is perceived’ is answered in its pure noematic aspects as ‘pleasure’.

According to Husserl, the phenomenological process of bracketing or reduction helps to see the phenomenon more clearly. Reduction is a conscious process of suspending or bracketing the researcher’s judgement, presuppositions, as well as individual biases (Lavery, 2003). Husserl’s goal in doing this is to see things ‘as they are’ through careful description keeping intact the immanent character of conscious experience. Emphasising the need for a scientific perspective toward phenomenology, the philosophical nature of being and reality is kept intact (Zahavi, 2003). Husserl’s scientific approach to phenomenology was critiqued by his protégé, Martin Heidegger, who prioritised experience to determine the nature of research (Overgaard, 2003).

Acknowledging the Self

Heidegger delineated stated that all human activity whether deliberate or otherwise necessitated background orientation. This orientation consists of continual intentionality that he termed “ontic transcendence” (Heidegger, 1984, p. 153). Though both Husserl and Heidegger were innately interested in human experience, Husserl’s “primary focus was epistemological, [while] Heidegger saw himself as an ontologist, as demonstrated by his desire to uncover and unravel the meaning of being” (McConnell-Henry et al., 2009, p. 10). Additionally, in contrast to Husserl’s intentionality being triggered by an experience, Heidegger claimed that intentionality is possible without a purpose or representation, which Heidegger termed as ‘taken-for-granted’ lived experience (Leonard, 1994). Gurwitsch (1979) echoed Heidegger’s idea that being-in-the-world was not a conscious activity:

what is imposed on us to do is not determined by us as someone standing outside the situation simply looking on at it; what occurs and is imposed are rather prescribed by

the situation and its own structure... We find ourselves in a situation and are interwoven with it, encompassed by it, indeed just absorbed into it. (p. 67)

This is evident in everyday actions of driving, brushing one's teeth, and casual unthinking activities such as rolling in bed, drumming while thinking or gestures while talking. Likewise, philosophical difficulties in Husserl's descriptive phenomenology led Heidegger to revolutionise phenomenology as a hermeneutic philosophy which acknowledged the role of *a priori* structures of the researcher (Wheeler, 2018). These prior structures result from the interaction and mutual influence of individuals, and subjective impressions of shared experience (Ravitch & Riggan, 2016).

Heidegger identified phenomenology with the concept of *Dasein* (Being there) or being aware of the 'Being' as dynamism in a lived experience (Wheeler, 2018). This intense exploration of a phenomenon raises how the experience is experienced by participants who give it meaning, and the structural relations through which meanings are produced (Korab-Karpowicz, 2019). As phenomenology is a study of the Being in beings, Heidegger rejects any difference between ontology and phenomenology as both terms characterise philosophy, its objects and procedures; referring to philosophy as universal phenomenological ontology (Smith, 2019). In the book *Being and Time*, Heidegger derived the etymology of phenomenology from the Greek term 'logos', meaning 'to let something be seen', and 'phenomenon' - 'that which shows itself in itself' (Heidegger et al., 1962, p. 29):

Phenomenology means... to let what shows itself be seen from itself, just as it shows from itself. That is the formal meaning of the type of research that calls itself 'phenomenology'. But expresses nothing other than the maxim formulated above: To the things themselves! (Heidegger et al., 1962, p. 30)

This process takes into account the preconceptions and prior knowledge of something's 'Being' before interpretation (van Manen, 1997). Heidegger did however appoint the researcher to be conscious of such subjectivity. To exemplify the inherent presence of a researcher in the experience,

phenomenologist van Manen (2016) uses the analogy of looking at a clock, to explain the difference between descriptive and interpretive phenomenology. The objectification and 'de-living' of the reading experience could describe the experience using terms such as time, hours, minutes, dial, hands, metal and glass. The description may leave out the rich primordial aspect of the temporality of an experience; the thought-trail, reflections, memories, context and "the clock in its own being, as it shows itself to [oneself] in lived experience, unmediated by conceptual objectifications and abstractions" (van Manen, 2016, p. 91). Heidegger transforms phenomenology from Husserl's epistemological objectification of an experience into fundamental ontology concerned with thematising the lived experience, i.e. allowing the being of Being to show itself (Schacht, 1972).

According to van Manen (1997), phenomenological research includes the researcher: "a phenomenological question must not only be made clear, understood, but also "lived" by the researcher" (p. 44). This takes account of a researcher's preconceptions of some(thing)'s 'being' before approaching it to understand and interpret it. The influence of the researcher's pre-understanding is considered vital to the implied meaning. Similar to Husserl's 'reduction', Heidegger suggests a 'bracketing' of researcher prejudices and subjectivity to understand the phenomena in its true form (LeVasseur, 2003). This involves the researcher addressing presuppositions and personal biases during the process of interpretation to understand the true essence of the phenomenon. While philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer, a student of Heidegger, advanced Heidegger's claim on the universality of hermeneutics, making it central to his philosophy, he emphatically rejects the concept of bracketing in his hermeneutics (van Manen, 2016). Gadamer suggests the impossibility of removing bracketing the researcher's presence and subjectivity in the study; these are significant in understanding the phenomenological essence of the lived experience.

Keeping the Self Intact

According to Gadamer, all experiences and every Being in the world, in essence, is a hermeneutic experience: “Hermeneutics concerns our fundamental mode of being in the world and understanding is thus the basic phenomenon in our existence” (Malpas, 2018, para. 23). According to Gadamer, although researchers may attempt to be objective, their understanding is shaped by their personal history, context, knowledge and experience (Guzys et al., 2015). Bracketing of lived experience inevitably diminishes the essence of the interpretation as researchers are always interpreting through their own experiences and context. Gadamer’s philosophy is grounded on lived experience to be reflected in its entirety. As reiterated by his contemporary Merleau-Ponty (1962, p. xvi), “the world is not what I think, but what I live through”. To study the world as lived-through, is as important as the experience. Gadamer continues:

To try to escape from one's own concepts in interpretation is not only impossible but manifestly absurd. To interpret means precisely to bring one's own preconceptions into play so that the text's meaning can really be made to speak for us. (Gadamer, 2004, p. 398).

While inclusive of the interpreter’s context, this influences the interpretation of the experience. This fore-structure (*Vor-struktur*) is fundamental for understanding the lived experience (Bayo & Roy, 2011). Gadamer sees these prejudices are not something that hinders an interpretation, but are integral to the reality of being, and “are the basis of our being able to understand history at all” (Palmer, 1969, p. 182). Echoing Gadamer’s phenomenological standpoint, in *Gadamer's Century: Essays in Honour of Hans-Georg Gadamer*, MacIntyre (Gadamer et al., 2002) adds that being conscious of intentionality does not imply the possibility of escaping from its influence: “There is no standpoint outside history to which we can move, no way in which we can adopt some presuppositionless stance, exempt from the historical situatedness of all thinking” (Gadamer et al., 2002, p. 158). Gadamer

concedes that such prejudice and presumptions add value to the interpretation, as long as the interpreter is self-reflectively aware. The interpreter's presence in research is indeed unavoidable.

Though German philosopher Jurgen Habermas agrees with the idea of the unavoidability of fore-structures (prejudices) in hermeneutics, he sides with Gadamer's dogmatic belief in the universality of hermeneutics; failing to recognise the ideology-critique that ensures distortion-free understanding (Mendelson, 1979). Gadamer rejects the universal nature of hermeneutics is in itself a dogmatic stance, for in so doing we affirm modernity's deception that the subject can free him/herself from the past (Barthold, 2019). He views hermeneutic phenomenology as a process of understanding the world which involves critical reflection and self-correction. This process is a means to overcome any distortions in understanding, by seeking better expression or dissolving its own rigidity, thus being open to any meaning that can be understood (Grondin, 2019).

Contemporary phenomenologist Paul Ricoeur took Gadamer's ideas on hermeneutics as an interplay of suspicion and affirmation (Kearnery, 2017). Suspicion, or critique, bringing to light any distortions, would enable researchers to unearth a new interpretation that may have been concealed. Extending Gadamer's philosophy, Ricoeur incorporates language as an unconscious system of structure deeper than the intentional subject with his maxim 'to explain more is to understand better' (Kearnery, 2017). He attempted to go beyond the phenomenological philosophy and critically reflect on the deeper essence of the experience through hermeneutic linguistics: "Just as language, by being actualized as discourse, surpasses itself as system and realizes itself as event, so too discourse, by entering the process of understanding, surpasses itself as event and becomes meaning" (Ricoeur et al., 1991, p. 78). Ricoeur was emphatic in advocating for a criticality within the linguistic tradition to seek a deeper meaning beyond discourse.

While phenomenology has been critiqued, discussed, and developed by many philosophers, the challenge has been to extend it to practice. Van Manen (2016) in his book '*Phenomenology of*

Practice', sought to move beyond literature and apply phenomenology so that the reader could immediately and unreflectively connect with the experience. This study aims to understand the essence of the lived experience of the youth in Kashmir (phenomena and context), by examining 'what' they experienced and 'how' they experienced it (Moustakas, 1994). The phenomenological approach provides the Kashmiri youth participants, the space and means, to become conscious of their unthinking perspective in their everyday experiences. Expression of their awareness and realisation of the 'what' and 'how' of the moral perspectives are embedded in their narrative. As the study is an inquiry into the moral perspective of Kashmiri youth, the chapter explores moral phenomenology, bringing theoretical phenomenology into the 'moral' context. This keeps pace with phenomenology that has now branched into various other studies, including morality and values which are considered mediators of reality (Gangas, 2011).

MORAL PHENOMENOLOGY

Values belong in essence to the sphere of the person (and act-being). For neither the person nor acts can ever be given to us as 'objects'. As soon as we tend to 'objectify' a human being in any way, the bearer of moral values disappears of necessity. (Scheler, 1973, p. 86)

German philosopher Max Scheler, whose primary work in phenomenology was concerned with the source of values and feelings, intended to show that values were deeply embedded in the act of living (Being) and cannot be objectified (Scheler, 1973, p. 86). As experience is socially constructed, and values are considered touchstones that enable lived experience and social interaction, not acknowledging the presence of values as a part of the human experience negates the role of the human being in the experience itself. Hobbs (2017), again declared a phenomenological approach enables a better understanding of the role that values play in experience. Phenomenological exploration involves the reduction of the dominance of the self in the experience, resulting in the expansion from individual to oneness with everything in the world (Barnes, 2003). Such expansion

becomes expressive in the form of human values or morality: “The common reference to the being is, indeed, the ‘we’ that keeps the ‘me’ and ‘you’ together” (Totaro, 2007, p. 251). As human beings are an integral part of society, social values and morals become a part of the experience. This aspect of morals, or values, or ethics, has been discussed widely in phenomenology. Boss (1988), a psychotherapist, shared that Heidegger became more inclined to reach out in his studies and method toward the betterment of society. Boss purports that Heidegger’s “thinking would escape the confines of the philosopher’s study and become of benefit to wider circles, in particular to a large number of suffering human beings” (p. 7). Care and concern for society were an important part of the intent of phenomenological studies for Heidegger. This would include the process of understanding the meaning or essence of shared feelings in the world such as sympathy, pleasure, happiness, love, solidarity, care, and distinguishing these from others’ feelings within lived experience (van Manen, 1997), requiring an awareness of the difference between the self and experience. According to Siderits et al. (2011), these phenomenological lived experiences are deeply connected with the world:

To deny that there is a strict boundary between self and world, to concede that self and world cannot be understood independently of each other and that the boundary between the two might be plastic and shifting, is not to question the reality of the difference between the two. To take an everyday example, consider the ever-shifting boundary between the sea and the beach. That the boundary keeps shifting is no reason to deny the difference between the two. (p. 69)

Thus, a phenomenological understanding of ‘moral action’ involves reflection on these experiences connected to the subjective meaningfulness of situations, the individuals and the acts (Drummond & Embree, 2013). According to Mandelbaum (1955), only by undertaking a phenomenological approach to investigating the moral perspectives of different cultures can the question of moral difference and judgements be studied. In a world where there are various cultural traditions and historical contexts, moral consciousness and reflection play an important role in the

consciousness of human experience. For the study of moral phenomenology, ontological intentionality and reflection are critical to understanding the human experience as Totaro (2007) has observed:

Ontological intentionality and moral consciousness, intertwined in solidarity, allow flourishing of human experience. The former gives an idea of fullness without which existence would be void of deep motivations. The latter introduces an idea of measure without which the fullness of meaning would be binding and devastating. Combining together fullness and measure seem, then, the specific task of the 'human mind'. (pp. 251-252)

Everyone undergoes a series of moral experiences and actions each day which are connected with others; be it being generous, mean, compassionate, friendly, evil, petty, just, honest, treacherous, patriotic, hospitable, inhospitable, and so on. According to Kriegel (2008): "moral phenomenology would investigate the experiential dimension of (such) morally pregnant mental states and processes" (p. 6). Kriegel is emphatic that aspects of these phenomenological discussions on morality and values include language, one's personal beliefs, social beliefs, a universal belief, and the experience (phenomena). Within this experience, the last of having lived through that phenomenon, with a specific moral consciousness, in the given context, is considered most important in moral phenomenology. However, as Horgan and Timmons (2005) reflect: "phenomenological description of our moral experiences is not something one can do exclusively from an armchair" (p. 75). Moral experience belongs to the interactions between people in society; they are a part of the 'lived' experience.

The next section applies phenomenology in practice within the Kashmiri context. As explained previously, studies that draw on Indian phenomenological philosophies are nascent (Mehta, 1970; Sinha, 2002). Bridging Indian and Western phenomenology and extending such a blended approach to the field of morality, I intend to contribute to an emergent understanding of Indian moral phenomenology in practice.

PHENOMENOLOGY IN PRACTICE

Frykman and Gilje (2003) report: “philosophy has always been good at asking questions, but cultural and behavioural scientists are then called upon to come up with interesting answers” (p. 8). They note that phenomenology is a theory that concentrates on how experience is set out in action and hence situated in praxis. Gadamer agreed by emphasising that philosophy must not be limited to theory, but should be practical too (Palmer, 2001). In an interview with Grieder (2001) Gadamer explained:

I would say that there has been too much talk about phenomenology, and not enough phenomenological work. One does not always have to insist that what one is doing is phenomenology, but one ought to work phenomenologically, that is, descriptively, creatively – intuitively, and in a concretising manner. Instead of simply applying concepts to all sorts of things, concepts ought to come forward in movements of thoughts springing from the spirit of language and the power of intuition. (p. 113)

In line with the cultural context of this study, Stroud (2004) is concerned that while Western philosophy is largely conceptual, Indian philosophy is “radically different in nature... due to its frequent use of narrative structure” (p. 42). South Asian philosophy has largely depended on storytelling and narratives as the medium, be it the *Mahabharata* stories, Adi Shakaracharya’s poetic *Nirvana Shatakam*, or Sufi songs and poetry. Davidsen (2013) adds that Western phenomenology draws on narratives and language for the interpretation of lived experience. According to Dukes (1984), the purpose and procedure of case studies and narrative methodology are fundamental to phenomenological studies:

The task of a phenomenological researcher is to ‘see’ the logic or meaning of an experience... [It] demands extensive study of a small sample, allowing the subjects to speak for themselves and to reveal the logic of their experience as lived. (Dukes, 1984, p. 197)

Highlighting the use of narrative methods in phenomenology, Lindseth and Norberg (2004) point out that “we can understand moral action when we listen to others’ narratives about the way

they acted in various situations” (p. 148). While in the context of conflict, this allows individuals to share their stories that have been ‘forgotten’ or ‘denied’ (Goodson & Gill, 2014): “Sometimes we simply have to keep our eyes open and look carefully at individual cases – not in the hope of proving anything, but rather in the hope of learning something!” (Eysenck, 1976, p. 9). This entails an open-minded and reflexive approach by the researcher towards the participant narratives. Eysenck (1976) aptly encapsulates the approach of this phenomenological study: a non-judgemental inquiry into what influences the moral perspectives of Kashmiri youth.

To gain a holistic, individualistic and comparative understanding of the narratives, a dual methodology has therefore been adopted in this research design – narrative methodology provides an in-depth examination of individual narratives, and explanatory multiple case study methodology allows comparative investigation of variation between multiple narratives from Kashmir (Mills et al., 2010; Stake, 2006). This chapter examines an insider-outsider position as the researcher, as explained in chapter one, and the ethical concerns are taken into consideration for ‘doing’ this phenomenological study.

Research Design

According to Davidsen (2013): “Heidegger opened up phenomenology to interpretation through language. Through language he anticipated the narrative approach” (p. 324). Dukes (1984) repeats the importance of case studies and narrative methodology for an in-depth understanding of each experience capturing the different layers of the phenomena. Erickson (1977) also contends that “social meaning...embedded in the concrete, particular doings of people – doings that include people's intentions and points of view... [can be discovered by] asking them why they do what they do” (p. 58). He adds that the use of a narrative approach, as outlined by McCurdy et. al. (2004), enables the researcher to understand the underlying meaning of participants’ actions and perspectives, through

phenomenological conversations with them concerning their everyday life experiences. Taylor (Abbey, 2000), concurs that conversations with individuals about their moral life require acknowledgement of the researcher's presence:

it is inappropriate, and even destructive, to try to think about ethics in these disengaged or neutral ways... In order to understand moral life more fully we must, rather than attempting to bracket or negate our ordinary reactions and responses, engage more directly with them. This often involves trying to illuminate elements of our understanding that have fallen into the taken-for-granted background of our awareness. (Abbey, 2000, p. 10)

From the Gadamerian stance, I entered the field with my own subjectivity of Kashmir that was based on my prior experience and interaction with Kashmiris. While this subjectivity is acknowledged and considered in my phenomenological approach, to 'learn something' from the participant narratives in this study, I was required to have an open-minded and reflexive approach. As indicated in the first chapter, studies on Kashmir and the conflict are missing a true representation of Kashmiri youth's voices (F. A. Dar, 2014) and engagement (Macdonald, 2018). Faheem (2020) suggests 'key informant interviews' for gaining authentic knowledge of Kashmiri youth's experiences and perspectives.

To gain a holistic understanding of the narratives, I drew on narrative methodology and case study methodology that provided depth to individual narratives and brought forth contrasts between the narratives (Mills et al., 2010; Stake, 2006). A combination of these methodologies was considered effective and consistent with the research aims. The following section outlines the methodological considerations of this study, namely, the research design, ethical considerations, methods for 'doing' this phenomenological study, and the rigour to ensure valid and credible research.

CASE STUDY METHODOLOGY

Mills et al. (2010) endorse the use of case study methodology in phenomenological studies in terms of the particularities of individual contexts, participants reconstructing their lived experience, and researcher reflexivity: “Case study research is often considered phenomenological in the sense that it is concerned with very detailed descriptions (idiographic) and generalizations concerning those aspects of social reality that can be observed directly” (Mills et al., 2010, p. 674). According to Merriam (2009): “anchored in real-life situations, the [use of] case study results in a rich and holistic account of a phenomenon” (p. 51). She adds that a case study allows investigation of individual cases with multiple important variables of the phenomenon. This methodology is considered effective when “case and context are infinitely complex, and the phenomena are fluid and elusive” (Stake, 1995, p. 33). It ensures dynamic contemporary phenomena are analysed within their complex contexts when the boundaries between these are not evident (Yin, 2003). Moreover, multiple perspectives provide a broader spectrum “in understanding the degree to which certain phenomena are present in a given group or how they vary across cases” (Atkinson & Delamont, 2014, p. 29).

As this research worked on multiple stories in Kashmir, a multiple case study allowed a comparison of the differences and similarities (Gustafsson, 2017). This enabled me to gain multiple perspectives of the participants. While all the participants were from the conflict region of Kashmir, each of them belonged to a different part of Kashmir, had grown up in different familial conditions, and came from different backgrounds, with unique personal experiences. Studying each narrative as an individual case allowed in-depth interpretation of multiple individual perspectives of a phenomenon within the same context – “we know that what appears real to one person will not seem real to another; we want these multiple realities to be recognised” (Stake, 2006, p. 34). Though each experience was construed by different individuals, phenomenological case studies distil individual responses to describe the fundamental essences of the experience itself. The multiple participant narratives were examined as individual case studies, to capture each voice and nuance. Mills et al.

(2010) advocate an intrinsic case study in research that “strives to capture the richness and complexity of the case” (p. 500), enabling a better comprehension of the individual peculiarities to provide thick descriptions, with breadth and depth of the lived experience. Capturing the richness and complexity in intrinsic case studies enables the readers of this study to draw their own interpretations.

Yin (2003) advocates for thick descriptions in intrinsic case studies, or exploratory case studies, as they are often synonymous with narratives for representation. Highlighting the importance of the use of narratives in case studies, G. Thomas (2010) continues: “in a case study you must make sense of the whole by retaining the fibres that bind a whole story together. Those fibres concern time, place, meaning, intention and much more, all interrelating” (p. 184). Rich, emotive and meaningful stories bring alive the experience, life and context of the individual who lived it: “The stories do not belong to an individual; once spoken, they are shared... The interplay between parts and whole is as eternal as phenomena” (Crowther et al., 2017, p. 834). Stories act as a medium to invite the reader to become aware of and understand the nuances of the shared phenomena. The use of narratives in case studies allows readers to “learn vicariously from an encounter with the case through the researcher's narrative description” (Merriam, 2009, p. 51). The methodology can include a narrative methodology to ensure the cases capture and retain the essence of the phenomena, contexts, textures, different layers and the inherent nature of lived experiences.

NARRATIVE METHODOLOGY

The easiest and most reliable way to gain further information [from people] is not to engage in detached theorizing or internal simulation, it is to employ conversational skills and ask the person for an explanation....This doesn't mean that our understanding of others requires an occurrent or explicit narrative storytelling: but it does require the ability to see and frame the other person in a detailed pragmatic or social context, and to understand that context in a narrative way. (Gallagher & Zahavi, 2012, p. 215)

In *Life in Quest of Narrative*, Paul Ricoeur (1991) regarded narrative as the ideal way to understand and interpret stories as it allows stories to retain their inherent nature, rather than being transformed into mere data: “The narration reconstructs actions and context in the most adequate way: it reveals place, time, motivation and the actor's symbolic system of orientations” (Jovchelovitch & Bauer, 2000, p. 57). As Bruner (2004) stated, unlike the laws of logic or induction, human thought and reason are not “reducible to machine computability” (p. 691). When individuals narrate their stories, they tend to relive the experience, find explanations, and weave it into a coherent chain of events:

We can only retell and live by the stories we have read or heard. We live our lives through texts. They may be read, or chanted, or experienced electronically, or come to us, like the murmurings of our mothers, telling us what conventions demand. Whatever their form or medium, these stories have formed us all. (Heilbrun, 1988, p. 37)

According to F. M. Connelly and Clandinin (1990), people's lives are stories in themselves that narrative researchers collect, describe and reconstruct again for sharing. While theories about the nature of human beings and thinking have been studied extensively, the ‘rich and messy’ domain of human interactions requires deeper consideration (Bruner, 1991). Reviewing the innate role of narratives in human interaction, Bruner suggests that “we organize our experience and our memory of human happenings mainly in the form of narrative-stories, excuses, myths, reasons for doing and not doing, and so on” (1991, p. 4). To capture such rich and poignant data, the narrative method accommodates the whole spectrum of representations, techniques and tools depending on the tradition and specific research questions (Flick et al., 2004). A piece of qualitative narrative research can be thought of as “a bricolage, that is, a pieced-together set of representations that are fitted to the specifics of a complex situation” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011, p. 11). Given (2008), values this openness and flexibility of the narrative approach as it enables the layering of complex stories to draw out rich data and create resonance in the voices. The multiple layers of the context, history, culture, participant stories, emotions, pauses, silences and expressions, give life to the lived experience – each aspect

lending its own voice in the research, enabling the reader to imagine, feel and live the lived experience of the participants (Muylaert et al., 2014).

To provide such vivid stories for readers, Stake (1995) recommends the use of vignettes to capture the essence of the story with brief descriptions of the case. Narrative descriptions of cases can provide the reader with “an experiential understanding of the case” (Stake, 1995, p. 40). According to Rosenthal (1993), methodologies involving life stories, biographies and experiences rendered by participants, are best aligned with the use of narrative interviews for depth, richness and meaning. Muylaert et al. (2014) also emphasise the use of narrative interviews to collect personal experiences and stories, which not only reconstruct lived stories but also facilitate a deeper understanding of the context and underlying factors behind the participants’ experiences. Supported by a case study and narrative methodology, narrative interviews, as discussed in this chapter, were ideal in providing contrasting, rich and in-depth insight into the moral perspective of Kashmiri youth. Before a description of the research methods used for gathering the participants’ narratives, the following section gives an overview of the process used for recruiting the participants.

PARTICIPANTS AND RECRUITMENT

In line with the phenomenological philosophy of this research, the Kashmir context and phenomenon were given prominence in the recruitment process to gain a holistic view of Kashmiri youth’s lived experience. The participant recruitment and selection were designed in light of diversity within the region in terms of religion, gender, and levels of conflict across different parts of the region as discussed in the second chapter. As reported by Hycner (1985): “the phenomenon dictates the method (not vice-versa) including even the selection and type of participants” (p. 294). The participants in this research were 16 to 18-year-old female and male youth who have grown up and lived in Kashmir. Additionally, religion being central to the moral philosophy in these regions, the participants were a

mix of Muslim and Hindu youth. The eight participants selected using purposive recruitment, come from rural and urban areas near the Doda, Srinagar and Kupwara regions in Kashmir.

I adopted purposeful sampling for the recruitment of participants for this study. This recruitment method enabled the “identification and selection of information-rich cases related to the phenomenon of interest” (Palinkas et al., 2015, p. 533). I narrowed the recruitment down to certain subgroups according to age, region and ethnic criteria, and facilitated comparisons between the cases. Participants with any clinically diagnosed pre-existing mental health concerns (such as post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety and depression as certified by a mental health institution) were excluded from the study, to avoid any potential increase in distress or trauma, as the study was concerned with lived experiences in a conflict area (Ministry of Health, 2020). The first eight participants who matched the criteria and agreed to participate were accepted. Once the required number of participants was confirmed, the process of recruitment was terminated.

Voices of youth from isolated rural regions of Kashmir, where internet access is limited or scarce were, however, missed, as the interviews required access to technology. Interviews with ex-militants were more sensitive, as they would make them relive their experiences of their surrender and being held by the army in custody. These interviews, as advised by local contacts and J&K Help Foundation, required me to recruit and conduct the interviews in-person. Interviews with youth belonging to police families involved legal permissions that were challenging to obtain remotely with the internet shutdown. Interviews with these ‘hard-to-reach’ participants necessitated in-person interviews (Perera, 2017; Weller, 2017). Those who agreed to participate in the study, therefore, belonged to a demographic who had access to some internet, and were not ‘hard-to-reach’ This suggests that the participants in this study, perhaps, had more opportunities to learn about the world, and to represent their voices. The criteria for participant recruitment, however, ensured the voices were a generic representation of Kashmiri youth population.

As emphasised by the participants in their interviews and by F. A Dar (2014), Kashmiri youth are keen to share their stories, opinions and voices. Such keenness to engage in dialogue and share their perspectives stems from knowledge of the dominant Indian narrative of Kashmir, and the desire to represent their Kashmiri narrative globally (Ganie, 2019). In-depth conversations with Kashmiri youth on their moral perspectives, however, required a free space for them to share their views, and a listener who would not judge them as victims or perpetrators of the conflict. The non-judgmental standpoint of this study, my prior experience, and rapport-building before the interviews ensured the narratives were deeper and brought forth nuances of their lived experiences.

Assistance in the participant recruitment process was provided by J&K Help Foundation (<https://helpfoundation.co/>), a local NGO that works actively in social development and education in Kashmir. Being a local NGO that works actively with youth in social development and education, J&K Help Foundation has a mailing list of youth in different regions of Kashmir. The Flyer and Participant Information Sheet (as attached in Appendix B) were shared via email and WhasApp⁶ with potential participants across Kashmir. Interested participants contacted me directly regarding their queries or interest in participation. The criteria for recruitment were applied and there was intermittent contact with the selected participants until the interviews for initial rapport building. The Consent Form was shared with the participants before the online interviews. The participants consented to participate in the research in principle before the interview. Their consent was verbally recorded at the start of the interview.

Situating the research in the context of Kashmir, a conflict region, and with youth as participants who shared their lived experiences, the research posed some ethical challenges such as the vulnerability of participants, safety, cultural sensitivity, informed consent, confidentiality and my position in the research. The Covid-19 pandemic further compounded the already existing issues of

⁶ WhatsApp Messenger – internet-based, free, instant messaging and video/voice calling application)

the long-standing conflict in Kashmir (Shoib & Arafat, 2020). Measures were therefore taken to mitigate ethical challenges related to the nature of the research and allowance made owing to the Covid-19 pandemic.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Ethics approval to undertake the study was granted by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee (AUTEC) on 10th March 2021 (ref number: 20/317, attached in Appendix A). As a study conducted in Aotearoa New Zealand, the ethical considerations in this study ensured the principles of Te Tiriti o Waitangi⁷ have been honoured. The principles of partnership, participation and protection, as outlined by the Treaty (Archives New Zealand, 2020), were borne in mind while designing the research. The participants and the researcher have a significant role in this research. Apart from contributing to my PhD, the design ensured the participants' voice was given prominence. The participants in this research were fundamental in the formulation of the study, the study itself, and the outcome. The protection of participants was ensured through the research design, the Participant Information Sheet, the Consent Form, the Confidentiality Form, and an open communication channel I established with the participants, facilitated by the use of the application 'WhatsApp' before and after the interviews. The use of this application was made necessary as this study was conducted during the Covid-19 pandemic, thus, data collection was modified from face-to-face interviews to online interviews due to Covid-19 travel restrictions. The ethics process was largely participant-centred considering the focus of this study, the context of the participants, and the overwhelming effect of the Covid-19 pandemic in India during data collection. The restrictions of the pandemic had to be considered, alongside the ethical considerations of conducting interviews with participants from a conflict region.

⁷ Te Tiriti o Waitangi/ the Treaty of Waitangi – Is New Zealand's founding document signed on 6th February 1840. It is an agreement between the British Crown and about 540 Māori rangatira (chiefs). (<https://nzhistory.govt.nz/politics/treaty/the-treaty-in-brief>)

While conflict studies have gained importance in the global context, ethical guidelines specific to conflict environments are still an emerging field due to the subjective nature of each conflict region, issues of access, stress and researcher inexperience (Campbell, 2017). One of the key reasons according to S. Thomson et al. (2012) for insufficient conflict research is that post-war research often involves vulnerable participants which require greater sensitivity, complexity and risk. Cremin et al. (2021) add that as ethical considerations vary, depending on the context of the conflict region studied, the lack of guidelines makes conflict research, challenging. The research design in this study ensured that my prior knowledge of the field, language and context aided the conduct of the research. In line with the phenomenological approach of this study, my position was of a self-aware, reflexive and open-minded researcher seeking to understand what influences the moral perspective of Kashmiri youth. Considering the context of the participants and my position in the research, measures to mitigate ethical issues of vulnerability of participants, safety, cultural sensitivity, informed consent, confidentiality and researcher presence were considered significant for this research.

Considering the potential vulnerability of the participants, I arranged to have a local certified counsellor present during the online interviews, if required or requested by the participants. None of the participants wanted a counsellor to be present for the interviews. The participants were also made aware that they could have access to counselling if they experienced any discomfort after the interviews. Additionally, my previous experience of having interacted with local people enabled me to identify, avoid or manage discussions that could have the potential to cause discomfort. I allowed the participants to take a moment's pause during narration if they requested it. While such prior knowledge posed ethical challenges of an 'insider' perspective (being Indian, and having lived and worked in Kashmir) (Chenail, 2011), it allowed me to manage the cultural sensitivities of the participants such as beginning the conversation with "*as salaam alaykum*" (peace be upon you), asking about the wellbeing of their family (is considered a norm, beyond a mere courtesy), being conscious of their faith, and scheduling interviews conscious of their time for *Namaz* (prayer).

The use of a phenomenological framework accommodated insider-outsider perspectives by prompting me to be reflexive and recognising that it is not possible to have an outsider perspective when the insider perspective (Self) is culturally embedded (Gadamer, 2004 as cited by Crossley et al., 2015). Reflexivity in the research design, mitigated the ethical challenge arising from being a war-zone researcher assuming violence to be a problem and the only way to examine people's lives, termed as the 'conflict' fetish': "There are other aspects to... lives [of people in conflict]... war is not the only point of reference" (Goodhand, 2000, p. 15).

Collecting the lived experience and stories of young people living in a conflict region, included ethical issues of privacy and non-disclosure of identifiable information. To mitigate issues of privacy, pseudonyms were used to de-identify the participants in the transcription. The NGO signed a Confidentiality Form (as attached in Appendix B) to ensure non-disclosure of participants' identities regarding their participation in the study, to third parties. The participants were provided in-depth information, and an opportunity to discuss and ask questions about the research. The Consent Form stating their voluntary agreement to participate in the research was verbally recorded before the interview.

Lobe et al. (2020) draw attention to the ethical challenges such as privacy, technological issues and limited personal connection, posed by qualitative online data collection. These may be deterrents for participants to engage in the interviews. Adams-Hutcheson and Longhurst (2017) emphasise that online studies lead to less engagement during interviews and can reduce the researcher's holistic understanding of the participants' environment. Additionally, Dodds and Hess (2020) question the reading of the personal context of participants in online interviews; such as their body language, their environment, expressions and emotions. Awareness of these challenges before the interviews, allowed me to adapt and design an interview method best suited to the Covid-19, conflict environment, and the Kashmir phenomena. I prioritised participants' preferred mode for the online interviews and drew on an interview method that would be in line with the phenomenological nature

of this study. The participants preferred voice calls using WhatsApp for the interviews. While this did not allow an understanding of their contexts, the limitation was reduced with longer interviews, which allowed for deeper rapport building. The participants could engage in the interviews from the comfort of their homes. The use of narrative interviews as the chosen method in this phenomenological study captured the essence of their lived experience, perspective, emotion, and expression, and included descriptions of their environment in their voice.

NARRATIVE INTERVIEWING

The online interviews for this research were centred on the life stories of young people living in conflict. Collecting narratives from young people living in conflict can be considered a powerful means to reconstruct their reality, and their truth, with the hope of mobilising peace for the new generation (Bar-Tal et al., 2014; Morrill et al., 2000). Narrative interviewing provides detailed and authentic accounts of people's life experiences (Riessman, 1993), especially for those from vulnerable conditions where it may provide emancipatory outcomes for the participants (Holt, 2010): "Narrative data is often produced through open-ended and unstructured interviewing techniques which allow the narrator to produce stories of their lives" (Holt, 2010, p. 113). As Bude (2004) reflects the narrative interviewer is considered a "fellow traveller on a train journey to whom one tells one's entire life-history" (p. 323). My role as the researcher or interviewer was limited to that of an active listener, providing only a singular overarching open-ended question at the start, that invited the participant to share their story. The participants had the freedom to share their narratives in an evocative and emotive manner that came from them. Denzin and Lincoln (2003) similarly perceive narrating stories as an inherent form of expression for all people, and therefore, the intent of the researcher in narrative interviews is to shift the weight of responsibility to the narrator such that it is willingly embraced.

In his account *Against Narrativity*, Strawson (2004) warns that the key challenge of narrative interviews is their heavy reliance on the narrator's ability to provide coherence and accuracy in the story with respect to historical context, temporality, expressions and emotion. In the words of acclaimed novelist Henry James: "stories happen to people who know how to tell them" (Bruner, 2004, p. 691). The narrator is expected to provide a meaningful extempore narration and an accurate representation of the story within the given context of the research, while the researcher is expected to ask the 'right question' to prompt such narration.

Schütze's (1992) structure and Spradley's (1979) questioning style was used for the narrative interviews to ease the pressure on the narrator to provide extempore narrations. The narrative interviewing structure of Schütze (1977), translated by Jovchelovitch and Bauer (Jovchelovitch & Bauer, 2000) explains that the inherent features of narration include: a rich textured narrative with specific detailing, assumed naivety of the listener; a focus on the relevant themes of the research; and, a smooth flow within the story consisting of a beginning, a middle and an end. The initial process of rapport-building, according to Spradley (1979), enables the researcher to overcome the participants' 'apprehension', while 'grand-tour questions' for the interview "encourage an informant to talk about a particular cultural scene" and elicit a "large sample of utterances" (p. 49). The structure and questioning style enabled me to be a reflexive and active listener during the interviews and provide the participants with a comfortable non-judgemental ambience to share their experiences and perspective. Adapting the interview schema of Schütze (1977), with the questioning technique of Spradley (1979), the online narrative interviews were designed within the context of this study, and involved the following stages:

1. Preparation – formulating the field, topic and relevant questions;
2. Initiation – building 'rapport' with the participants (Spradley, 1979) by introducing myself and giving the details of my background, discussing the details of the research and its purpose, gathering consent, and detailing the process of the interview. There was constant communication with the participants before the interview, building rapport and gaining their

trust. I used a personal approach for rapport building considering the vulnerability and context of the Kashmiri youth, who tend to be hesitant, and fearful of sharing their perspective and experience freely, as discussed in the second chapter;

3. Main narration – uninterrupted rendering by the participant triggered by an open-ended ‘grand-tour question’ (Spradley, 1979) focused on understanding their life and background growing up in Kashmir, taking notes for further questions and new dimensions, and jotting down subjectivities of the participants such as expressions, mental presence and emotions audible in their voice, which eventually added texture to the narratives. The participants were also given the option of having a counsellor present for the online interview if they felt the need for it;
4. Questioning – probing further to gain an in-depth understanding of certain aspects of the narration that needed emphasis, or if the narrator failed to touch upon any relevant themes using other questioning styles suggested by Spradley (1979), seeking insight on their perspectives and views. Adapting the questioning technique to the context of this study, I also included questions that involved nuances of the well-being of their family and their environment. These questions created a personal bond with the participants, which made them comfortable to share after rapport building and the main narration. The phenomenological approach and my reflexivity during the interviews ensured they could express their emotions and views with more freedom and without fear of judgment. These responses eventually provided insight into their personal contexts, emotions, and subjectivities that were challenging due to online audio interviews; and,
5. Concluding – discussing the ‘why’ questions which were critical for contextual interpretation of the narratives.

With a specific focus on the context of narratives with individuals from conflicts, Wikan (2000) reminds us all that “people bleed stories [while] academics gather narratives” (p. 217). It was therefore imperative to handle the participants’ stories with sensitivity and understanding. In the context of Kashmir, the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic exacerbated the impact of conflict on the lives of the population (R. Wani, 2020). Apart from the existing restrictions in place due to the instability and conflict, Covid-19 travel restrictions resulted in the interviews being conducted online. While the initial plan for data collection involved face-to-face interviews, this was modified to online interviews (video) via Skype/ Zoom, which would have required the participants to travel to J&K Help Foundation

office, where a counsellor could be present to support the participants. This strategy had to be further modified due to added Covid-19 restrictions imposed in Kashmir, prohibiting non-essential movement. The online interviews were finally modified to online audio or video interviews, using the WhatsApp platform. This solution overcame participants' technological challenges, while the option of including a counsellor in the online interview remained if the participants felt the need for it. As it transpired, none took up this offer.

As indicated by Markham (2009), limitations in the field led to exploring and adapting new platforms and media for data collection. With the increase in the use of online media in qualitative research to access distant participants and subsequent advancements in technological tools, face-to-face interviews are no longer considered "the gold standard against which the performance of computer-mediated interaction is judged" (Hine, 2005, p. 4). Based on the experience of conducting interviews using online media during the pandemic, Howlett (2021) found that while the field-work ensures researchers can connect with the field, context and participants, especially in phenomenological studies, conducting online interviews out of the 'armchair', grants us more time for the interviews, more comfort for participants, convenience, easier rapport-building with participants, and researcher safety in case of conflict research.

Berman (2000), sees other reasons for working with young people as they are considered more willing and capable of sharing their life stories, experiences, violence and trauma without any inhibition: "The reality is that [young people] are quite capable of talking about their experiences, welcome the opportunity to do so, and can teach us a great deal about the dynamics of violence, about coping and survival" (Berman, 2000, p. 122). In my opinion, the use of online interviews enabled the participants to feel more at ease to share their experiences and opinions, due to my 'physical absence' from their personal space (Howlett, 2021). As indicated by Schütze (1992), the use of narrative interviews enabled the participants to share their stories without feeling conscious or

embarrassed – their uninterrupted narration with emotions, silences, pauses, expressions, messiness and such subjectivities added depth and meaning to the stories.

The online interviews with Kashmiri youth were about: their life story growing up in Kashmir; specific notable experiences or incidents; their perspectives about youth and their life in Kashmir; their feelings and thoughts about their family, education, religion, society and peers; and, finally, what they envision for their future in Kashmir. As Patton admitted: “We interview people to find out from them those things we cannot directly observe” (Patton, 2002, p. 340). Before the interviews, there was personal communication with the participants for about two weeks. Since the Kashmiri youth participants were at home during the interviews, they were hesitant to do video interviews being conscious of their living conditions. Two out of the eight interviews conducted were video, while the others were audio. While online interviews provided them with the privacy and comfort of talking to me from their homes, without having to reveal their living conditions, voices in the background and narrations stopping mid-sentence, suggested family members entering the room where the participant was sitting for the interview. In the video calls, I was introduced to the family members. My casual interaction with the family members made the participants more comfortable and gave assurance to the family members that the research was safe for the youth to participate in. The interviews, which were conducted in Hindi to ensure the participants could narrate freely, provided insights that went beyond the literature, and into the participants’ personal experiences. This enabled me to understand what influenced their individual moral perspective, through an analysis of their life decisions, emphasis, opinions, emotions, expressions and language.

To maintain the efficacy of these individual lived experiences, Ross and Charlotte (2011) advocate the use of thematic analysis as it “allows individual units of meaning, primarily words and phrases, expressing thought, ideas, experiences and emotions, to emerge from within the text of the interviews” (p. 113).

DATA ANALYSIS

Narratives of individual cases were audio recorded using the computer's recorder and the phone recorder as separate files to be saved on AUT's OneDrive under pseudonyms. The first step in the process of data analysis was transcription. The process of transcription was undertaken in line with the 'purpose of the study' and the phenomenological approach (Saldana, 2013): "Representation of audible and visual data into written form is an interpretive process which is therefore the first step in analysing data" (Bailey, 2008, p. 127). This was an iterative process which involved reduction, interpretation, and representation for the stories to be readable and meaningful. Transcription was completed immediately after the interviews, to ensure contextual data was included for better interpretation and understanding (Moser & Korstjens, 2018).

Since the interviews were conducted in Hindi, the first transcription from the audio recordings was a transliteration of the interview data in English, which the participants could verify with ease (the participants speak Hindi but cannot read the script). The transliterated transcription was then translated to English. As suggested by Sools (2013), I undertook the transcription process of the narrative interviews and their translation to English from Hindi. Being the interviewer, such a process of transcription ensured that the data remained relatively close to the participants' language use in the interview, with the relevant contexts included. Emphasising the process of transcription which is considered a crucial step in analysis, Kowal and O'Connell (2014) stress the need for a systematic, critical, and reflective approach to remove any researcher bias. Once the transcripts were verified, the audio recordings were deleted from AUT's OneDrive. Excerpts were selected from the transcribed text after the participants verified it. These excerpts were read and analysed several times, highlighting themes that emerged from the narratives. To gain a holistic understanding of the participants' lived experience, the relationship and contrasts between the themes were further analysed using NVivo.

According to Riessman (2008), the mainstay of thematic analysis is the content of the stories and their interpretation, unmediated by the interpreter's theoretical perspective, questioning or personal characteristics. The process of "systematically identifying, organizing, and offering insight into patterns of meaning (themes) across a data set... Focusing on meaning across a data set... allows the researcher to see and make sense of collective or shared meanings and experiences" (Braun & Clarke, 2012). This involves coding and searching for common themes, or commonalities across the interviews. In line with the phenomenological approach of the study, the iterative process of being reflexively aware of my Self was a part of the process of thematic analysis (Dukes, 1984). This ensured that my presence in the research (Self) (subjectivities and bias) was identified and considered:

One has to look carefully, and often one has to look again and again in order to see what is evidently there.... There is always the danger of either seeing what we want to see – rather than what is there to be seen--or falling prey to the contingent facts of a particular case. (Dukes, 1984, p. 200)

The steps as suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006) were adapted for thematic analysis of the cases/individual narratives:

1. Familiarising with the data – Reading the transcripts and listening to the recording several times.
2. Identifying nodes/codes – Highlighting specific features (phrases or a label) for aspects from the narratives that appear interesting. Extracts from the transcript are grouped under relevant codes. Saldana (2013) suggests that the process of "codeweaving" i.e., integration of key codes into a narrative form helps to get further clarity on the links and connections between the codes and further leads to identifying themes.
3. Defining and refining themes – Combining and grouping relevant nodes/codes into overarching themes, defining and detailing the essence of each theme. Each theme is distinct and captures an important aspect concerning the research question. Each theme is described, detailed and analysed. Specific extracts and quotes are used to provide emphasis and for discussion.
4. Reconstructing stories – Writing the extracts, including the compelling details of stories beyond the description, highlighting the themes across all the stories.

The final 'reconstruction' of the narratives included aspects such as silences, pauses, expressions, gestures, emotions, and the off-record details noted for context, texture, richness and depth. The use of this process for thematic analysis ensured a robust and holistic analysis of the phenomenological stories. According to Schütze (1992), the life stories and perspectives of participants from a conflict zone or war, need to be presented with sensitivity and respect. He lay importance on consideration of their stories and voice not just as data for research. Polkinghorne (2013) assents by adding: "in phenomenological research, the researcher has the freedom to express the finding in multiple ways" (p. 56). The reconstruction of the narratives has been first represented as case study synopses of each participant. These synopses include nuances observed during the interviews such as their intonation and emotion evident in the voice to give a holistic view of the lived experience.

According to Fischer and Wertz (2002), case synopses are "presentations of the essential constituents of particular case transcriptions... Case synopses provide readers with concrete examples that reverberate with their own lives, thus intimating the full structure of the phenomenon" (pp. 280, 285). The individual case synopses of the participants included their individual contexts, perspectives, experiences and history. The case synopses were also presented "in first person, present tense for the sake of vividness... [and] preserving individuals' ways of living that structure" (Fischer & Wertz, 2002, pp. 281, 302). This allows the reader to connect with each participant and their lived experience in its entirety. Van Manen (1997), is careful to qualify this process adding that case synopses need to "include only material that illustrates or highlights a theme. And this theme becomes the hermeneutic tool by way of which the phenomenon under study can be meaningfully understood" (p. 170). While the case synopses allow the reader to connect personally with the participants, understand their perspective, and live their experience, for a broader perspective of the phenomena and insight into the research questions, these synopses are followed by an explanation of what was found through thematic analysis of the interviews. The value of qualitative research is determined by not just

readability, but also by its academic rigour, trustworthiness and authenticity (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Pereira, 2012).

RIGOUR

According to Denzin and Lincoln (2011), in studies where lived experience of the participants are central to the study, criteria for evaluation of the research is premised on an ethic of care, personal responsibility, and open dialogue. They propose that phenomenological research based on understanding participants' realities through their narrative reconstructions, should be evaluated in accord with a sense of trustworthiness and authenticity with findings being produced within the specific research context.

The level of trustworthiness in phenomenological research is an indication of its credibility, transferability and dependability (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Mertens and McLaughlin (2004), see trustworthiness as a test of credibility, to check if there is "correspondence between the way the respondents actually perceive social constructs and the way the researcher portrays their viewpoints" (p. 105). Transferability is drawn from the applicability, which provides scope for the research to be applied in similar settings or contexts (Collier-Reed et al., 2009). This requires a thick description of the phenomena, place, time, culture and context of the researched and researcher. Dependability assesses the reliability of the findings, subject to the dynamism of qualitative research verified and documented for the research to be trustworthy (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). The stories of the Kashmiri youth in this research have been presented in their own voice, with thick descriptions, including their background, personal and social contexts and subjectivities. The first verbatim transliterations from Hindi to English were also verified by the participants for accuracy. An executive summary of the thesis will be sent to the participants upon conferment of my degree.

Authenticity, according to Denzin and Lincoln (2011), refers to the fairness and honesty with which the researcher has presented the voices of the participants and the research (Denzin & Lincoln,

2011). For such authenticity in research, Mertens and McLaughlin (2004) cite a clear representation of the worldview, position, beliefs and values of the research and researcher. They suggest an inquiry-based approach that motivates the research, and the ability for the research to be a catalyst for action. This chapter describes the phenomenological framework, the research design, my position and the ethical considerations that were borne in mind for the participant's safety and comfort. In line with the phenomenological approach, the method ensured the phenomenon, and the participants' contexts, are the backdrop to their narratives. The inspiration for this study, as described in the first chapter, was ignited by my spirit of inquiry and curiosity to understand the moral perspective of Kashmiri youth. Motivated by the potential that this study could have, not just for Kashmir, but also for similar conflict regions in the world, I designed and implemented the study driven by the same spirit of inquiry and desire for change.

Though Denzin and Lincoln (2011) have outlined criteria for evaluating such a piece of qualitative research grounded on lived experience, they draw attention to the issue of the multiple voices, i.e., the presence of paralinguistic cues, the researcher's voice and participant's voice altogether in phenomenological texts. While this lends depth to the writing, representation of the multiple layers of the lived experience can also make it hard for the reader to readily identify the participant's voice (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Emphasising the need for a different approach for evaluating the rigour in phenomenological research due to its subjective, changing and personal nature, Crowther et al. (2017) suggest 'truthfulness' as a criterion to evaluate the validity and credibility of phenomenological stories:

A story's truthfulness (or unconcealedness) becomes known to us by how it resonates in felt, shared plausible meaning, and this resonance cannot be reified into proof. When one bears witness to an experience of joy, for example, one can connect with the shared human experience of joyfulness but never measure the joy, categorize its nature, or bring any other sense of "reliable" transfer of facts. (p. 828)

This research provides a true account of lived experience, life stories, views and opinions of Kashmiri youth, as shared by the participants. The research has been designed with the participants, the Kashmiri youth, and their life stories, as central to the study. The trustworthiness and authenticity of this research are reflected in its resonance with the readers and for them to ‘feel’ the stories themselves. The framework has been instrumental in ensuring that this is an authentic and trustworthy study that is true to its purpose. The rigour of this study is exemplified in the methodological approach and representation of the findings in the following chapters.

Drawing from the description of Kashmir and education in the second chapter, and moral concepts in chapter three, this chapter has detailed the study’s methodology and design that enabled a deeper understanding of the moral perspectives of Kashmiri youth. This chapter has included an in-depth explanation of the Indian and Western phenomenological philosophies grounding this study. Phenomenological work was done (Grieder, 2001) through a narrative case-study methodology, to gather participants’ narratives, analyse the essence of their experiences, and represent the findings in their voices. The next chapter is a gradual shift to the heart of this study: an examination of the lived experiences and perspectives of the participants. Before describing the findings of the study, I introduce the participants, their personal contexts, and data that was gathered from the interviews. Titled ‘the unheard voices of paradise’, each description draws on the use of case study synopses or vignettes, in line with the narrative methodology (Stake, 1995). Each synopsis is a literary description that draws on each participant’s subjectivity and personal contexts.

CHAPTER 5 THE UNHEARD VOICES OF PARADISE

There is no such thing as the 'voiceless'.

There are only the deliberately silenced,
or the preferably unheard.

- Roy (2004, p. 1)

Just as the Kashmir valley is a jewel hidden between the great Himalayan mountains, conversations about its beauty, nature, people, and culture fall through the cracks. Kashmiris take great pride in their hospitality and engage in long conversations about Kashmir that can last the whole day; sitting on Kashmiri rugs that adorn their homes, over several pots of *nun chai* (salty tea). They enjoy the company of people and conversations with non-Kashmiris – especially when it is about Kashmir, especially when there is someone to listen to them.

Though there wasn't any *nun chai*, and we were on different continents, talking over an unreliable Internet connection, the narratives of Mehvish, Saqib, Tabiya, Zain, Muskan, Zahid, Kritika and Shreya⁸, the participants of this study, flowed, and emotions were expressed without hesitation. In line with the phenomenological approach and narrative case study methodology of this study, the synopses of the interviews are a reflexive literary representation of the background and personal contexts that were shared by the participants in their voice, with my observations of their subjectivity, voice and nuance jotted down during the interviews.

Mehvish

The muezzin's call for morning prayer is heard in the distance as Mehvish clears her throat to talk. Her brother quietly whispers to her before our conversation begins. There is a pause before she finds

⁸ Pseudonyms used to ensure privacy of the participants' identity

comfort in his lingering presence at home. Her words are measured. “*As-salamu alaykum*” – it is impossible to miss the smile and childlike joy in her voice.

Mehvish is a young 17-year-old budding Urdu poet, who lives with her mother and her two siblings in a village in Kashmir. Having lost her father as a child, his loss, and the troubles that her family went through thereafter, is a memory that she consciously distances from her mind. She says it breaks her down, and she doesn’t want to be weak. So, she chooses to avoid all conversations about him. Her mother has been her strength, her dearest friend and her support. In the silence of her home, her life and dreams find space in Kashmir. She chooses to drown herself in her undying love for Urdu and its poetry. Her greatest joy is in reading her own verses. She says it makes her smile, it makes her laugh, and it makes her forget the reality of Kashmir. Her love for Kashmir makes me fondly nostalgic; but also makes me realise that the beauty of Kashmir is a mirage. Believing that her future is dark due to the violence in Kashmir, Mehvish quietly nurtures her dream of becoming an Urdu professor. It saddens the soul as she mockingly narrates the futility of a young Kashmiri girl having dreams and being educated in Kashmir.

She exclaims that Kashmir’s nature and language are what represents it. *Kashmiriyat*, her identity, is rooted in these: “Our language is the backbone of Kashmir. That is a part of our *Kashmiriyat*.” She haltingly adds that language, however, has been ruined by modernisation. She reminds me of the influence of Hindi in the local parlance. While she is inclined to accept learning new languages, she cannot accept the loss of Urdu. With a quiver in her voice, she laments:

I feel, as told in our *Hadith-sharif* – the country that forgets its own language, it remains humiliated. I feel that a lot of people in Kashmir have forgotten their *Kashmiriyat* – they have forgotten their language. People have forgotten what their identity is here – they have forgotten Kashmir’s identity. They do not appear to be Kashmiris anymore.

Her voice gives away her anger and disappointment at their loss. She is emphatic that freedom is vital for Kashmir. Only then can their language and culture flourish. She proudly proclaims that her dream of teaching Urdu has a greater purpose – it is her way of giving back to Kashmir. She abruptly stops and laughs out loud realising she had let her heart take over her mind. She is laughing at her own self.

There is passion in her voice when she talks about her education and the desire for women to have equal opportunities in Kashmir. Though she is very unhappy with the education system in Kashmir, she holds on to her dream – she wants to be educated, and to educate. She believes education in Kashmir will change if the military presence is reduced and the violence ends: “In Kashmir, each day a mother loses her child...this is the Kashmir of today.” Her voice is raised as she tells me this. She is not afraid to speak her mind but drops her voice when her brother comes in to talk to her. She becomes aware that she cannot speak her mind freely: “Every person here is scared for doing anything – of speaking – lest it becomes a problem with the force⁹.” Though she talks about constant fear and keeps her voice low, her tone is steady, and she fearlessly speaks her mind.

Mehvish cannot hold herself back and grapples with the need to share her experience and opinions. The words finally pour out of her. I sense the pain in her voice, when she talks about the prevalence of suicide among Kashmiri youth due to the lack of opportunities, even after being highly educated. This is her reality. Her young heart doesn’t want to believe it. She is unsure of what to believe: “All this has been fed into our minds – at least some of it must be true.” Her heart goes out to the youth whose idle minds have been stirred up by the endless turmoil. She pours out her agitation with social media that has used religion to agitate the youth. Her maturity shows in her reasoning that young minds become easily influenced by social media, which has been used unfairly by radicals to incite religious conflict in Kashmir. She recollects her own personal incidents of growing up in an

⁹ Force – refers to Indian military and police

unstable Kashmir, where “[a]ll this is very normal for us – these attacks and everything. We have gotten used to it. It is now a part of our life.” She vividly recalls the incident when Burhan Wani was martyred. She says that since that time, the situation in Kashmir has worsened. She quietens and gathers herself. Her voice becomes stronger when she contemplates the spirit of the Kashmiri people to live and love in the face of such continued assaults. She believes that the people have an unwavering desire for *aazaadi*. Holding strong to her views on the need to fight irrespective of adversities Kashmiris may face, there is a humble acceptance of the reality of Kashmir’s hunger and poverty. She knows that they cannot ‘afford’ to keep fighting. She knows... She is a Kashmiri too, and her mother struggles to make ends meet.

Her future might be uncertain, but she hopes for a day when she can make her mother proud. Her mother is all that matters to her. And so, she won’t stop dreaming. Her brother calls out to her again, and she shushes him loudly. She has faith: “Whatever it is, and however, it is... it is my Kashmir after all! The rest depends on what Allah has willed.”

Saqib

Fire in the belly... fearless... filled with the deep desire for a solution... religious... his voice resonates through the room. He says he prefers a video call where he can see me – he is not self-conscious about showing his home, but the video call makes me conscious of my personal space being visible. The initial opening conversations about his well-being allow me to connect deeper with him; I realise being able to see him adds a new layer of understanding to our conversation since I can see his expression. Seventeen-year-old Saqib is passionate about his views. He is headstrong and is not hesitant to be vocal about his stand on life and the situation in Kashmir. Mama’s boy, Saqib is studying to be a doctor to fulfil his mother’s dreams. He transforms into a little boy when he talks about his mother, and his childhood experiences and discusses his faith and religion with maturity.

Saqib grew up in a household with his sister and parents enjoying a relatively comfortable childhood. There is a deep sense of gratitude in his tone when he refers to the support of his parents. His words are loaded, and he is fearless in stating his views and perspectives on growing up in Kashmir. The emotion rises and falls as he talks about his life. The joy is in his dreams and family, though there is desolation when he talks about his education and life in Kashmir, the aggression he describes concerning the youth, and the impossibility of a peaceful solution for Kashmir. He is emphatic when he speaks of life in Kashmir and listens to a narration about Kashmir never being the same. He asserts the authenticity of his perspectives – “you are only listening to all this. I am living in this...” His eyes well up. He knows the situation in Kashmir is hard. He does not understand why the world has not done more to help improve conditions in Kashmir:

We do not have freedom or rights here. Just like there is injustice against the Muslims in Palestine, Kashmiris too are facing injustice and harm. But no one is paying attention to the issues in Kashmir for years now. We are tired of the situation here. It has been too long.

He believes strongly that things will never get better. There is desperation and hopelessness. With humility, he describes the immense support of grassroots-level organisations that have ensured the provision of education, food, and basic facilities for all. They have brought children from all backgrounds to an equal footing. He attempts to hold on to some hope – “people who did not have the same level of access before could not have had dreams – it will change with the support of such organisations.” The hopeful voice fades away very quickly. Reality is harsh, and he is emphatic in his description and view of life.

He is tired with their everyday challenges. But he believes Kashmiris are also to blame for the problems in Kashmir. “People say we want to fight for what is rightfully ours, but on the other hand, they do things that are unacceptable in Islam.” He does not pause to utter this. He is discontent with the degrading local culture and loss of religion. His voice rises as he begins listing the social evils that

according to him are the reasons why the situation in Kashmir will never improve. A proud Kashmiri and Muslim, Saqib's faith hold him firm. He takes great pride in his religious practices and beliefs. He prays five times a day. "People... do not do *namaz*. I do not say that *namaz* is everything, [but] One must have good character. They fight with one another, and their acts are not good." He is devout. His voice is firm, and his perspectives clear. He believes, he has faith that he is right.

He is distraught with the attitude and lifestyle of youth in Kashmir: "The younger generation of Kashmir are mostly addicted to drugs... Some of those addicted are extremely young children – ten to twelve-year-old children – but they don't think of the repercussions." His voice softens when he shares the plight of the youth. He believes this is because of the lack of proper sustained education in Kashmir. Education in Kashmir is also affected by the conflict and armed military presence. There is bitterness in his voice when he mentions the military. He repeats that he does not fear them. He dislikes them, he hates them: "How could we possibly study with all this [violence]?" His voice falters. He is angry. He is agitated.

Saqib wants to talk freely. He wants to be heard: "I want to tell freely what is in my heart, but I don't think that would be ideal." He then outlines explicitly how the conflict has affected his thinking. He is passionate to participate in the fight. He is fired up with the notion of freedom. The martyred militants Burhan Wani, Maqbool Bhat and Manan Wani have inspired him. Saqib explains that he dropped the idea of becoming a militant or participating in the violence, concerned that the military may hurt his family if he became a militant. The conversation makes him upset. He says he thinks a lot about the life of Kashmiris and his own future in Kashmir. He reflects that acute poverty and lack of opportunities have left people with no choice but to adopt any means they may have to provide a safe and comfortable space for their families: "We can't beg! We can't ask people for money!" Without any future in Kashmir, a lot of young people have left Kashmir. Saqib wishes he too could leave Kashmir, but he loses the will to continue. The anger subsides and gives way to hopelessness. With

the last mention of his dream, he adds, “I have given up on the hope of a good education. I wonder what my fate will be...”

Tabiya

She is curious... she questions... Tabiya is not afraid to share her views and perspectives. Living with her mother, she is bold and has chosen to pursue whatever her passion may be, assured by her mother’s constant support. Having grown up as a single child in Kashmir, where large families are the norm, she feels privileged to get the undivided attention of her mother. Her life has been different; and she chooses to be unique, in her own way.

Tabiya draws a deep breath as she shares her life story. “Life has not been easy for me. I am only 19, but I have experienced a lot in life already...” She idolises her mother and believes that life in Kashmir for women is not easy. She is deeply disturbed that the women in Kashmir are treated unfairly in every respect, even in the present generation. She connects with me as a woman who has lived in Kashmir – she asks me to draw on my own experience as a woman in Kupwara. She has found resonance; I remind myself that I am a researcher and surprise myself with my reflexivity. There is a surreal pragmatism in her voice. She talks in a very nonchalant manner about the issues in Kashmir. She is measured in her response and prefers to respond thoughtfully.

Her statement appears to be more of a casual idea when Tabiya adds that she plans to do her Masters after her BA. A possibility. Her voice remains flat and informative. She is very clear that it is pointless planning for a future in Kashmir – being highly educated does not guarantee the possibility of a job. For a moment, her emotions flow; she says that she would prefer to leave Kashmir. There is a momentary pause. She adds that she has not given any serious thought about her future – it is pointless given the constant uncertainty because of the conflict in Kashmir. There is emptiness in her voice when she talks about her future – no emotion, she is merely reporting a fact. As a young woman, in Kashmir, there is no future. Her voice rises with passion and emotion when she speaks about gender

bias in Kashmir. Her mother has inspired a sense of freedom in her – the freedom to speak, study, and dream. She makes it clear that she is unhappy with the differentiation between boys and girls in Kashmir. Her mind is centred on this:

It is not like I want to do something just for myself – I want to do something for others
– what is there to be afraid of? There is no point in studying and then sitting at home
– it is imperative to move forward in life and do something with what you learn.

Her voice is now loud. She knows that the situation in Kashmir is riddled with issues, but she is not afraid. She speaks with a sense of finality: “I want to go outside [Kashmir] to study. But I will come back to Kashmir after that. I want to gain some experience from outside and impact change here in Kashmir.” She has the spirit that makes one know that she will do it. Her voice is charged. Her words leave an impression. She notices the energy and enthusiasm she has. She stops. Reality dawns on her.

Tabiya’s voice is different now. She wonders if these are words without depth. Kashmir is not the same as the rest of the world. She fondly recollects the distant memory of going to college to study. She believes she learned more when she interacted with her teachers. They taught and inspired her to dream of a future. She wants to hold on to the feeling. As a girl in Kashmir, she will not have the same access to education as other parts of the world or as boys. Her achievements will not be celebrated or given credence. An outburst stating the plight of women once again leaves her flustered. She believes that women in Kashmir do not have freedom. While this gender difference is an inherent part of the culture in Kashmir, she holds parents responsible for this mindset and social thought. She recollects her friends mocking her when she tells them that she wants to go outside to study. They tell her to stop dreaming, it can never happen. The emotion rises. She understands the situation in Kashmir is unsuitable for dreamers and a future. The strength in her voice gives way to desolation and sadness. She realises that she lives in uncertainty. She gathers herself. She makes a feeble attempt to explain – “I am not afraid of anything. But there is some sort of threat constantly – we live in fear – anything could happen.” Being alive and moving around freely in their own town, she believes, is a

privilege. She draws her breath and with maturity merely states “it is very hard. And it leaves an impression on you for life.” This is her reality.

She has great pride in Kashmir in her heart. She almost forgets all the emotions that poured out. She is not comfortable showing her emotions – she would rather speak her mind. The factual tone resumes. She says that she wants to be a part of the change in Kashmir – not a Kashmiri youth who speaks about the issues and feels hopeless. She believes that there is a desperate need for change in the mindset of Kashmiri youth for the situation in Kashmir to improve.

Tabiya’s love for the people of Kashmir, their hospitality, and their joy when people come to Kashmir speak volumes. Her voice is upbeat when she describes the people. While Kashmiris have flaws, she does not appreciate the stereotyping of Kashmiris as violent people: “We Kashmiris are human beings, we are people, we are also lovely and kind people. There is humaneness in us too.” She decides that she has nothing more to add and clearly signals that these are her final closing words for the interview and asks if I will share my views about gender bias in Kashmir after the interview. I laugh and proceed to talk about *nun chai*.

Zain

Zain is a 17-year-old, mature and straightforward Kashmiri youth, who prefers to keep his responses to the bare minimum, especially when I ask him about his perspective on life. His maturity is evident in his articulate narration. He narrates with ease, and his words are measured and descriptive. There is warmth in his voice when he talks about his mother and younger brother. As an older brother, he takes great pride in getting his way and making his brother do his chores. He emphatically says that he makes his own decisions. His views are assertive. He is fond of his mother, but he considers himself to be the man of the house. Zain was very young when he lost his father. He remembers very little but has a vivid memory of being laid on his father and seeing blood everywhere. He describes it calmly at first, “my father left home like always for going to his work...Someone had planted a bomb in a car.

When my father was walking down the street with my uncle and aunt, the bomb went off.” It was among the many incidents of violence that took place in those days. For him, it is a hard emotion to swallow. His voice breaks. But he regains his composure and remains stoic. He does not wish to talk about it anymore.

He instead describes the constant state of violence and conflict as a part of their life. It makes him angry. His voice suddenly rises when he talks about how his life has been impacted by the conflict: “I was planning to go outside. But when we go outside, the outsiders consider Kashmiris to be terrorists.” The stereotyping angers him. He believes that India is responsible for creating this impression of Kashmiris and asserts that an independent Kashmir is a way forward toward a better future. There is desperation that he has not been able to go outside to study and nor does he have any hope in Kashmir. He talks about the poor standard of education they have been receiving in Kashmir. Anger gives way to sadness. He does not understand why Kashmiris must go through this. He loves the people and can’t say anything negative about Kashmir: “Until [Indian] people’s thinking changes, nothing here will change, and neither will the violence and injustice stop.”

There is a strong belief in his voice that grassroots organisations are trying to help and improve the lives of Kashmiri youth. He is grateful for their support. But there is bitterness in his voice at the mention of global organisations. Zain states international organisations like the UN have no idea about the reality of Kashmir but publicise to the world that they are impacting change in Kashmir. He says Kashmiris are frustrated with these international organisations, as they have only capitalised on the plight of Kashmiris for publicity and politics, without providing any relief in reality. His distrust in anyone who offers help is evident.

Zain does not believe anything can improve the situation in Kashmir. He was beaten up by the police with *lathis*¹⁰ under the suspicion of being a part of stone-pelting – he was ‘caught’ laughing while shopping for Eid with his family. He happened to be a young boy, happy. And it is etched in his memory. Kashmir doesn’t have a solution, according to him, till the violence ends. With a sense of resignation, he says that he does not want to talk anymore since their voice goes unheard always. “What could we possibly do? No one listens to us, young people.”

Muskan

There is childlike energy in her voice. She is excited... she says that she has been waiting for this moment. Muskan, which translates to smile, is all smiles and giggles. Her joy is infectious and makes me smile too. This is a video call – she says she wants to talk to me freely. With a slow but chirpy voice, she begins. She is 18 years old. As an older sibling, she is protective of her younger brother and sister. Her mother is also young – she does not know her age but feels that her mother looks like an older sister. She takes great pride in this. She has immense love for her mother. Her dream is to make her mother proud of her. She believes and knows, she will.

Muskan’s dream was to be a doctor and help people in need. Her life and aspirations changed after her father’s demise. Her shoulders drop and she looks to the floor. She is too proud to show her emotions: “I did not have a father – so everyone told me to take arts because that has the scope to get a job.” She is not happy with the way Kashmiri society is towards women. She never steps out of her house. There is irritation in her voice when she talks about the way people look at her when she steps out:

The people outside might have male friends. But if we are seen even just talking to boys, people talk all kinds of things – that who knows whom she is talking with. They

¹⁰ Lathis – police batons

create a big issue of it. That is why I don't meet my friends or talk to a lot of people. I simply go to college, come home, and stay indoors.

She doesn't have a father, so she is expected to stay at home – she can go out to study, but nothing more. She says that if she is seen talking to anyone, “God forbid, a boy!”, then she is shamed. She loved going to college because it was an opportunity for her to learn and step outside the house; she could breathe, she could walk, she could laugh, and she could study. But now, she stays at home all day, every day.

There is a yearning to do something. She adjusts her headscarf several times; fidgeting and covering herself well. She is conscious of how she looks. Though she has economic challenges, she is filled with hope and optimism. There is a delight in her tone when she talks about her desire of going outside Kashmir to study someday. She wants to travel and see the world that she has only read about in books and heard about from people. There is a childlike excitement in her voice and a twinkle in her eye as she talks about it. She can't hide it – not when she smiles.

Beneath those layers of joy, she knows the struggles of having a dream. Her voice softens when she adds that her dream is now to ensure the poor children do not miss out on opportunities like she has: “I want to do a lot. Like those who are poor, no one listens to them – I want to do something for them”. She believes it will all change. She has decided to take the IAS (Indian Civil Services) exam. This will make her a policy maker in Kashmir. There is confidence in her voice. She is not affected by people's worry that it is a tough exam. Her head is held high; she knows that she can do it. She believes that her mother will feel proud of her then. Her eyes are moist as she talks about her mother and her family's situation. The three siblings share the one phone that had to be purchased to study online. She manages to attend just one class a day if she is lucky. Her heart softens as she says that her sister's studies are more important this year: “I want to – to make something of my brother and sister, make their future bright, for my mother's sake. That is all my dream is now.”

The confidence soon gives way to the realisation of her reality. As an 18-year-old, without a father, people talk about her being unmarried and daring to step out to get educated in private schools. Being a young woman, she has voiced her desire to be an IAS officer and have dreams: “The thinking of the people here is such – like they say that I am old enough but have not been married still – that maybe I have a problem.” She gets distressed with these thoughts. The issues that she faces being a woman bother her each day. But she does not let people’s perception of women in society deter her from her goals. She says that hope isn’t lost, but reality too cannot be wished away.

She pulls her head scarf close and prays for a moment. She holds her faith close. She strongly believes that faith has made her stronger and gives her peace. But it is misinterpreted and misunderstood in Kashmir. The Kashmir issue is not accidental or something that can’t be fixed – she believes it is all intentional. She says that people in Kashmir cannot but help think those terrible things are about to happen to them. They expect the worst: “Because the situation here is bad, people can’t think right. And their thinking won’t change. Never.” Muskan believes that humanness and change in Kashmir are dependent on the Kashmiri youth. Her eyes are steady, she doesn’t look down. There is a sense of calm and peace in her. That is all that matters for her. She is not restless anymore: “When a person does certain things – he or she automatically knows if it is the right thing to do or not.” And she believes – her heart is in the right place. Her mother enters the room where we are conversing – I am introduced to her briefly and I ask about her wellbeing. I realise Muskan was right – her mother does look quite young but exhausted. Muskan is happy watching me talk to her mother. I see her smile when she sees her mother’s smile. I am invited to stay with them when I visit Kashmir. She smiles – Muskan.

Zahid

There is a different energy in his voice. Zahid was hesitant to talk at first. He opens up and talks freely only after he has questioned me about my life, in-depth. I am unsure when I am asked about my family

background. After a moment's pause, I consciously share these details since these vulnerabilities are not relevant to the study. The primary assurance he needed was whether I had any political inclinations and my religious views. His narration after such clarifications was unstoppable – almost a monologue where he decided to share everything that was on his mind. He is a devout 18-year-old. At the start of the narration, he says that there is not an iota of doubt in his mind that his family is blessed. Having lost his father and his uncle to the ongoing violence in Kashmir, he has never been able to think of a future beyond the conflict in Kashmir. His love for his family and the responsibility of caring for his aged grandparents, his siblings, his mother, and his uncle's family as well, weighs down on him. He had his own dreams and ambitions. He still does. But he is aware of their reality, of his reality. He cannot afford to dream.

He whispers softly, afraid that his uncle's daughters, his sisters, might listen to him talking to someone about their life and the incident of their fathers. He pauses for a moment. There is sadness in his voice when he says: "My uncle had two daughters. He was innocently going to meet his sister. And only after three days we found out that the army had killed him. Every time I see my sisters, I can't stop crying." His personal experiences have left a deep impression on him. His family believes that if he talks about the killing of their fathers, there might be more trouble. They worry for him. He is the man of the house now. He has matured faster and worries about things that a parent might think about – like getting his sisters married. He quietly adds that he dares to not take any drastic measures as he knows it may have implications for his sisters' future.

Zahid steers clear of talking about the incident. He wants his voice heard. This is his window of opportunity. He believes that the lack of proper education and an unstable life in Kashmir have ruined the lives of the youth. Schools and colleges have been practically closed for the last five years: "They will promote us [to the next class] no matter what. They're only concerned about us getting admitted to the college. They don't care about our learning." He goes on to discuss the next issue on his mind. He needs no prompting from me. He says that he does not understand why the loving people

of Kashmir face such grim situations. No one knows if they will live to see the next day. He feels strongly for the young children who have lost their chance at living a normal life because of the pellet guns used by the army to control violence. He is angry looking at the plight of young children blinded by pellet-gun shots. He adds meekly that the hordes of tourists who travel to Kashmir each year do not know the reality of Kashmir. They do not engage with the local people or try to understand their lives. He wants Kashmir's reality to be known. His experiences and perspectives are descriptive and detailed, and he wants to tell everything that is on his mind. The narration shifts as he remembers another aspect to talk about.

The subject changes to religion: "I know that Muslims are not liked by everyone. But not all Muslims are the same. There are good and bad in every religion. Some people decide to highlight the bad... it does not make them right." His innate faith in Allah and his firm belief in His words are evident. He affirms the idea of humaneness enshrined in the Quran and the Prophet's words. His voice is sincere and reverential every time he mentions the teachings. He emphasises that Islam is misunderstood and believes that there is immense love, integrity and humaneness taught in Islam. He bitterly chuckles at people's baseless stereotyping of Islam. He believes that these perceptions contribute to the unending state of conflict in Kashmir, and severe economic challenges: "A lot of families have financial hardships and resort to any means to provide their family with basic needs – even if it means they must pick up arms."

Zahid suggests that education has no purpose in Kashmir. Instances of violence, innocent people dying, infants being killed, people disappearing, and young boys being taken away for no reason, are more pressing issues for him, not education. But he adds that the young people who fight are not doing so because they want to, but because they are angry or for money. They are given money to cause violence and fights. He believes this is a political strategy to keep Kashmir unstable. Zahid believes that whatever he may decide to do, Allah will take care of him and his family. He has faith.

He believes that religion plays a great role in kindling humaneness in the people: “We believe in Islam that we must help people in need. If we help someone with the right character, then we will be benefited from our goodness. It is called *zakat* (charity).” As a proud Kashmiri, he knows he needs to do something. He is young and has the motivation and fire to do something for Kashmir. He wants the world to discuss the Kashmir issue. There is a sense of desperation. He is angry. The young people in Kashmir are lacking any constructive means to vent their frustration and make their voices heard. He believes that without any other alternative means, the youth are picking up guns – some die, while some continue to fight. All that they want is for their voice to be heard. He emphasises that conflict is not what Kashmir is. Kashmir is beauty, Kashmir is the people, Kashmir is nature and Kashmir is love:

It is not necessary that when you write about Kashmir, you highlight the conflict and the violence here. This is a beautiful place. You can write about it too. A book might get filled with such stories, but the stories will never end. My greatest pride is that an Indian is writing these stories.

Kritika

Her first sentence after courtesies was to ask what my questions were. She wanted to get straight to the point. Kritika doesn’t think twice or have any hesitation to share her views and perspective. She has grown up with a sibling and her parents in a quiet village in Doda in Kashmir. Her thoughts are as free as her spirit. She says that if she has something on her mind, she says it out loud. Kritika, the young 16-year-old, unabashedly says that she does what she thinks is the best for her. Though she does at times listen to others’ views and gives them some thought. There is however a sense of maturity when she adds: “in the end, I believe, that we know what is best for us.” Within all those layers of bravado, I feel there is a poised strong woman who believes she can speak her mind without fear.

There is joy in her voice when she starts – she has never spoken about her life and her perspective with anyone – no one ever asked: “this interview is something I will never forget. This is

the first time a foreigner has asked me about my life and has interviewed me.” It is a moment of pride for her. She makes it a point to describe her utmost love for Kashmir. Nature, people and the culture are what matter to her the most:

We have our own language, our own folk songs... we have created our own culture without imitating or emulating anyone else. We are a different culture. And most importantly, the people here are not arrogant or think ill of others. We are very simple people. This is Kashmiri culture. And this is what impresses others.

She takes great pride in being a Kashmiri woman. She modestly adds that while Doda might not be as beautiful as Kashmir, it is nevertheless referred to as a little Kashmir for its natural beauty. It is “not in main Kashmir – we are quite far from it. So, we don’t face as much hardship. We face much less than what they do.” She is fully aware that the situation in Kashmir is not good. She says that when there are issues, “there isn’t as much problem here as Kashmir faces. The situation there is very critical. There is nothing here – it is peaceful.” She dreams of travelling around Kashmir. Someday. For now, she feels more at peace where she is. She says that her life is quite normal, and their schools are usually open. Each time there is an issue in Kashmir, they do face some minor repercussions. She is upset that the constant state of conflict and violence in Kashmir has affected their studies to some extent:

We are presently missing out on a lot of studies. It has been such in Kashmir for a while now... It is because of this terrorism issue, and the clashes between the public and the police. These happen very often. Because of these, schools are often closed. Additionally, now Covid has also led to schools being closed for the last two years.

She is independent. As the only daughter, her parents have given her the freedom to pursue what she wants. She wants to study and make a difference in Kashmir. There is a sense of joy in her tone as she talks about this. But she clarifies that as a sensible Kashmiri girl, though she has great ambitions, she doesn’t plan for her future: “because of the situation in Kashmir, very few can achieve it. I don’t think I can. I have confidence in my abilities, no doubt. I also have a lot of hope.” She has a

very straightforward and honest tone in her voice. She dreams, and she will. But her feet are firmly grounded, and she knows her reality. Given an opportunity, she wants to leave Kashmir and study outside. She is curious about the world and gaining some life experience. But at the end of the day, she wants to come back to help transform Kashmir. This is where her home is:

I want to develop the schools here, which is a big issue. And again, if I get the chance, I will end terrorism. Because all this is happening, these conflicts, people killing one another, violence, and everything, is because of terrorism. So, I want to end this. After all, if things improve here, who will want to leave this place? It is such a beautiful place, and the people are nice. Why will anyone leave 'Kashmir'?

She wants to be a doctor – hopefully a brain specialist. But with the poor state of education and opportunities, she knows her dream cannot be nurtured in Kashmir under the present conditions. She rationally links the effects of the lack of proper education to unemployment and poverty. And with rising unemployment and poverty, the issues of violence, instability and under-development will continue to exist in Kashmir.

Kritika pauses to analyse the cause of the deteriorating economic state of Kashmiris. She rationalises that the outsiders, i.e., people from other parts of India, coming into Kashmir, have added to their economic hardships. The hope is that they may help to overcome some social challenges:

It is good that there will be more job opportunities now. But there will be double competition from outside. That will be difficult. As it is jobs are few here, now it will be harder to get jobs. Now people from outside will come in and better their lives, and Kashmiris will never grow. But on the other hand, social norms such as don't hug one another, don't mingle with some people, and between genders... this will hopefully change. But, with development, there will be pollution. All this will affect Kashmir. They will bring with them a lot more of these issues. This is why we had issues when the article was revoked.

There seems to be deeper thinking there. Kritika tries to weigh the pros and cons of all her perspectives. She stops for a while and allows her trail of thought to keep going. She does not foresee

a possible stable future for Kashmir. While she hopes that the situation improves over time, she does not see any changes. With each passing day, the situation remains the same or gets worse. She clarifies that hope is not lost. Kashmir has hope: “If steps are taken, then education too may improve for the better.” She trails off with this idea. She swings between feeling optimistic and realising the harsh reality she faces. Her words are not emotional, they have kindled her thinking. She too appears to not need prompting and tends to steer her own narration to various aspects.

She strongly believes Kashmiri people are misunderstood and vehemently states the unfortunate impression that people have of Kashmiris are terrorists or propagating terrorism: “Why would people want to put their lives and their homes in danger? For an outsider, a Kashmiri is always in the wrong.” The emotion is now evident in her voice. She feels dejected that the youth raising their voices in disagreement with the Government’s ways in Kashmir are incorrectly portrayed. Their fight for humaneness is misconstrued as terrorism. She insists that it is a fight for their dignity. She has regained the strength in her voice. She tells me that I should ensure their voice is represented truthfully.

Shreya

Shreya is a strong girl of 16 years. There is an innate joy in her voice. She is bubbly and full of enthusiasm. She has given a lot of thought about her life. Her voice and words are unwavering and rational. Her life is her family, and her family her life. Her hopes, dreams and joys are all deeply rooted in her family. She adds shyly that her mother still picks out her clothes at times. She describes with affection how the whole family cooks together and engages in arts and crafts. She says that she is grateful for all the support that her parents have provided for her to be content. She is curious by nature and looks for opportunities to learn. She explains that she ensures she keeps herself busy at home too. On the days she doesn’t have tuition or studies, she fiddles around the house creating

artwork with waste items. Her father is a painter by profession, and she is grateful that the ambience at home is artsy as well.

She loves to study and talk to her best friend. She quietly adds that though they are in Kashmir, Doda, where she lives, is quite normal and peaceful: “There is a lot of difference. I have never gone outside Doda. But we do have a teacher in the school who is from Kashmir who has told us that what we have here is not available there.” She emphasises that though the situation is not as bad as ‘Kashmir’, it is not all good either. She is annoyed with not being able to go to school to study and meet her friends. She loves her school. There is better scope for understanding and learning if she gets to learn face-to-face in a classroom. She has trouble studying online. She is passionate about receiving a holistic form of education. Her passion for better education made her switch schools several times. That was her decision – she says it with pride.

She goes into great detail to describe her issue with the previous school where “teachers were paid very well, but they weren’t concerned with our learning. In the school that I am in now, the teachers do not get paid very well, but they teach the children with a lot of enthusiasm.” She is relieved that her father agreed with her to change schools. She carefully assessed the school she wanted to move to, and she is proud of the move. She adds nevertheless, that though the school is good, the teachers are attentive and inspirational, and her peers are well behaved, the education system in Kashmir is not conducive to learning. She is angry at the education system and the lack of resources. Schools are run with threadbare facilities and insufficient teachers who do not care for the young minds. Given the poor standard of education, she is at a loss wondering what their future might be and yearns for the education system to improve.

Shreya knows that she must look beyond the academic horizon. She says that her future and career cannot be dependent on getting a job. She draws inspiration from her father who did not complete his schooling but learnt to be a painter and began working without waiting around for a job:

“Whoever puts in the effort, can build a good career. If you want to do something worthwhile with your life, you have possibilities – here too.” She adds that her brother is not interested in academic study. But she knows and believes in her heart that he has a bright future. Her voice energizes as she talks about him. Though she is passionate about academic study, she understands that her brother is not like her.

She takes her time. She pauses and launches into what she has wanted to talk about. She has given this great thought. This issue needs to be drawn attention to according to her. She has finally got the opportunity to be heard. Her mind has been troubled by the influx of outsiders [Indians] since Article 370 was revoked:

We used to be able to live and make a life for ourselves. But now a lot of people come from outside and there is not enough work for us here. It is very hard. Many people from Bihar and other States come here. They have ensured the locals don’t get any jobs. There is no employment. There is a lot of unemployment now. The school fees have also increased now – they also need to educate their children with whatever little money they get. Whatever they earn, they have to feed their children and educate them. There have been a lot of problems because of revoking this article.

She also clarifies that the issue with outsiders is not just economic; she strongly believes that they are the reason why there are ethnic and religious issues in Kashmir. She is deeply disturbed by the religious differences that the outsiders are bringing into Kashmir and vents her displeasure with their lack of cohesiveness. She refers to the outsider Hindus as being very different from the Kashmiri Hindus. I note that she too is a Hindu. Her anger is not an emotional outburst. She acknowledges that there might be issues in Kashmir. She maturely adds that when people from different ethnicities live together, there might be differences. But these have never escalated into a conflict according to her. She fears that the religious differences that the outsiders are bringing into Kashmir could potentially instigate Kashmiris to cause more violence in the name of religion. Without an iota of doubt, she forcefully exclaims: “Kashmir is a very nice place. People too here are very nice. But these people

coming from outside – we have a lot of problems because of them.” With a sense of finality in her tone, she says that she has faith – Kashmiris will protect their *Kashmiriyat* at all costs.

Summary

In this chapter, I placed the essence, emotion, attitude, values, beliefs and individual subtleties of the participants in the forefront. These synopses provide background and context of each participant’s experience and voice, before hermeneutic interpretation of the findings in chapter seven. Drawing on the phenomenological approach and case study methodology, these ‘unheard stories’ vividly capture the subjective nuance of each participant’s voice, as suggested by Fischer and Wertz (2002). The themes that emerged from the analysis of the narratives that were emphasised in each synopsis depict the participants’ individual ways of living that allow the phenomenon to be more meaningfully understood (van Manen, 1997). Such representation of the narratives allows the reader to connect with each participant individually, and along with me, become fellow travellers with whom the participants shared their experiences and perspective (Bude, 2004). The findings, in the next chapter, are a thematic representation of aspects from the participants’ lived experience that point toward the underlying structures that influences their moral perspective.

CHAPTER 6 FINDINGS

The city from where no news can come
is now so visible in its curfewed night
that the worst is precise:

From Zero Bridge
a shadow chased by searchlights is running
away to find its body...

- The Country Without a Post Office, Agha Shahid Ali (2000, p. 10)

This chapter reveals the lived experiences of the Kashmiri youth participants as expressed in their voices. As suggested by the thesis title '*The Moral Path Beyond War*', this study has aimed to understand the moral perspectives embedded in the lived experiences of the participants in a conflict phenomenon. The study is an exploration of different aspects of the participants' lived experiences to gain a phenomenological understanding of what influences their moral perspective. To gain insight into the research questions, in this chapter, I examine the participants' narratives about (1) the meaning they attach to their lived experiences and the influence on their moral perspectives; (2) the influence of conflict on their moral perspectives; and (3) the role educational initiatives play to influence the participants' moral perspective.

The findings below highlight the experience and perspectives of the eight participants of this study who each come from different parts of Kashmir. Each section of these findings illustrates an aspect of their lives that has been a significant influence on their moral perspective. MacIntyre (1998) suggests that morality is deeply rooted in the individual's lived experience and cannot be separated from one's culture, tradition, history and context. Following this thought, these findings are seen as thematic representations of the participant's identity and life in Kashmir, their lived experience in conflict, and the role of education. I bring forth the voice of the participants, Mehvish, Saqib, Tabiya, Zain, Muskan, Zahid, Kritika and Shreya, and describe specific narratives that represent the themes mentioned above. The multiple layers of the contexts, emotions and expressions included in these

descriptions invite the reader to relive the participants' lived experiences, to gain insight into the events that have influenced their moral perspective.

Being a Kashmiri – Life and Identity

The first broad theme that emerged from the participants' narratives was an expression of Kashmiri identity, culture, and nature. This section concerns: the experience of being marginalised as Kashmiri; the participants' love for Kashmir's nature and culture; everyday challenges amidst instability and hardship; and instances of gender bias faced by the female participants. These accounts provide an insight into the meaning that Kashmiri youth attach to their lived experience, and the influence this has had on their moral perspective.

REPRESENTATION AND IDENTITY

The brief narration at the start of the interview about my personal life, which included a description of my experience of working in Kashmir, appeared to give participants the confidence to share their own experiences and perspective. The participants accepted me as a researcher, and as a person who had lived in Kashmir, not simply travelling there for tourism. They were keen to participate in research on Kashmir, but people often approached them with fixed stereotypes that they were either violent people or terrorists. They believed that the reality of Kashmir was unfairly represented.

According to Zahid, "the Kashmir issue has been quietened." The lack of awareness globally about the Kashmir issue made him apprehensive to participate in the research when he received the flyer. There was initial disbelief that I would give prominence to the voice of my participants. He posed several queries about me, my work in Kashmir, my ideas, and my perspectives about Kashmiris before we launched into the interview:

I was not keen to participate in your study initially. But when I read about it, I felt that if you are keen on talking to us and studying about what we think, you will not be like

the others. That is why I agreed to talk to you. Every time we have tried to highlight our voices, it has been suppressed. I trust you – that you are doing this for us with good intent. (Zahid)

Zahid lost his uncle in an encounter¹¹ with the Indian military. In another incident, his father was beaten up by the police and died due to a head injury soon afterwards. He was aware that his family constantly feared for him, as he was the only man in the house other than his ageing grandfather. There was fear that if he spoke about his story or his perspectives to anyone, especially an Indian, I might share this with the military. The fear that his perspective might be misused or contorted was deep-seated in his mind and initially influenced his ability to trust an Indian with his story. He realised that this was a common theme across a lot of families in Kashmir. Families who had lost members of their family in an encounter, or had been incapacitated due to stone-pelting, seldom talked to outsiders about the incident as they feared their family might be harmed by the Indian military. Finally, he opened up and spoke freely about his life and the suppression of youth voices, the fear among the Kashmiri youth to freely speak their mind, and his own perspective on participating in the conflict:

The voices of even highly educated people are suppressed here...Because of all these issues [of fear] and not being able to talk about anything, the young people here have started consuming a lot of drugs...Because of this situation people are trying to find their own ways to fix it...If I stay quiet because I have not been affected directly by it, because my own loved one has not been killed, because I have not been asked to show my ID, because I have never been put in prison for no fault of mine...it does not mean that injustice is not happening...I cannot be quiet because the injustice is not happening with me...Someone has to talk about it, someone has to highlight it. If you think only about our own [family] and about ourselves, where is humaneness? (Zahid)

¹¹ Encounter – is a term used in India to describe extrajudicial killings by the police or the armed forces, supposedly in self-defence, when they encounter suspected terrorists

He added that he was happy that a researcher who was not a Kashmiri, and an Indian, was keen to listen to his stories. He repeatedly mentioned my Indian identity in the interviews. He proudly remarked that “a book might get filled with such stories, but the stories will never end... The greatest pride I have is it is an Indian who is writing these stories.”

For Kritika, this was the first time she had spoken to any non-Kashmiri about her life and Kashmir. No one had ever asked her about her experience and perspective. The same opinion was expressed by Tabiya. She believed that Kashmiri youth think a lot before they speak, as their views could easily be misconstrued. Zain believed that the opinions and actions of Kashmiri people were always misunderstood – as Kashmiris were stereotyped as violent people and terrorists. He found it distressing that innocent Kashmiris, who are victims, were labelled terrorists by the military to gain support from India. He spoke of the injustice felt by Kashmiris: “all this violence and injustice must end in Kashmir. And they must stop beating up people for no reason. They beat up and kill a lot of people here. They label us as terrorists after that.” Kritika too was of the strong opinion that:

Kashmiris are perceived wrongly by others. [Indians] are portraying that the wrong means are adopted here – that Kashmir is encouraging terrorism. But it is not so. Why would people want to put their lives and their home in danger? There is no such thing happening there. For an outsider, a Kashmiri is always in the wrong. (Kritika)

Interestingly, all the participants interviewed spoke of this stereotyping. They wanted me to strongly convey to outsiders that Kashmiris are just normal people. Tabiya repeated that she did not understand why Kashmiri people have been stereotyped as violent people. She tried to reason that every society had a mix of different kinds of people; the wrong acts of some not being representative of the whole community:

I am tired of hearing this that if a person is a Kashmiri, [Indians] assume he or she is a terrorist. Not every person is a terrorist. We Kashmiris are human beings, we are people, and we are also lovely and kind people. There is humaneness in us too. (Tabiya)

Most of the participants believed that this misrepresentation of Kashmiri youth had restricted their scope to leave Kashmir for a better education. Tabiya reported that she “was planning to go outside [Kashmir]. But when we go outside, the outsiders consider Kashmiris to be terrorists.” This labelling of Kashmiris as terrorists affected the thinking and life of the youth. Participants accepted that the lack of avenues to vent their frustration had led to an increase in drug use among Kashmiri youth. Saqib went on to suggest that “the younger generation of Kashmir is mostly addicted to drugs. Some of those addicted are extremely young children – 10-12-year-old children – but they don’t think of the repercussions.” He believed that the introduction of drugs in Kashmir was a political move, to curb the active participation of the youth for freedom and to think coherently.

Though the participants described the challenges that Kashmiri youth were facing, not one of them wanted to leave Kashmir; some wanted to travel, while some wanted to leave just for better education and return eventually after they completed their studies. Mehvish however preferred “to stay in Kashmir. Whatever it is; however it is.” Zahid too felt that he would stay in Kashmir and “will definitely do something for Kashmir. There are a lot of people in the world suffering and facing injustice. We too will fight just like them. We will fight for our country. *Inshallah* everything will be alright.” Kritika likened Kashmir to paradise and rhetorically asked: “why would anyone leave? Why would anyone leave *Kashmir*?”

NATURE AND CULTURE

The participants clearly stated in the interviews that, in their view, Kashmir is a symbol of perfection. Kashmir had everything that one could ask for or hope for; it was considered a paradise for them. They loved Kashmir and could not imagine living elsewhere. They all felt that Kashmir’s identity was closely linked with its undeniable spectacular natural beauty and the hospitality of the people:

You would have seen the beauty of Kashmir that can’t be found anywhere in India. Switzerland is possibly a place that has the same beauty. But Kashmir is so much

more...If I had the opportunity to write, I would write about the beauty of Lolab. If there would be some development in Lolab, its fame would be unparalleled just like Switzerland. We have beautiful scenery and roads that are not accessible by vehicles...People hike to reach the village. (Zain)

Looking into the future, Zain felt that given a chance to develop, Kashmir could be one of the top tourist destinations in the world. For Tabiya, Kashmir's highlight was the respect and hospitality of the Kashmiri people. She added that Kashmiris loved to entertain outsiders and show them their culture. She proudly said that their guests were offered the local cuisine and were taken on tours of the local attractions:

We are known for our hospitality. We respect every person who comes here... We are known to be loving people. We are very happy when someone from outside visits us. It gives us great joy that someone from outside is coming, a guest has come. We respect them a lot. (Tabiya)

Mehvish, who loved the Urdu language, emphasised that their language was the backbone of Kashmir. According to her, the Kashmiri dialect united the people and was an inherent part of their Kashmiri identity. She referred in detail to the beauty of the language, the poets and the renowned arts and crafts of Kashmir. Zain on the other hand felt that while Kashmir's natural beauty was unique, the spirit and faith of the Kashmiri people best represented Kashmir. Kritika who lived in Doda, a region in the south of Kashmir closer to the Indian States, added with pride that Doda was often referred to as 'little-Kashmir'. There was a softness in her voice when she described Kashmiri culture and the identity of Kashmir was based on simplicity and immense love in the heart for all:

We have our own language, our own folk songs...we have created our own culture without imitating or emulating anyone else. We are a unique culture. And most importantly, the people here are not arrogant [and do not] think ill of others. We are very simple people. This is Kashmiri culture. And this is what impresses others. (Kritika)

It was however evident in both Kritika and Shreya's narration, that while they lived in Kashmir and identified themselves as Kashmiri youth, youth in other parts of Kashmir were different from them living in quite different circumstances. While Kritika and Shreya lived in Kashmir, they believed Doda was very different from the rest of Kashmir and could not represent the reality of Kashmir. Shreya mentioned that she had "never gone outside Doda. But we do have a teacher...She is from Kashmir and has told us a lot about Kashmir." Kritika and Shreya referred to youth in other parts of Kashmir as "they" while describing the challenges, conflict, and social conditions, but recognised that their language was inclusive. Even though they faced fewer challenges, and their everyday lives were different from Kashmiri youth in the rest of Kashmir, they believed that all Kashmiri youth across different parts of the Valley shared a common belief and identity. Kritika and Shreya shared the same love and pride for Kashmir that the other participants displayed. Shreya proudly added that "Kashmir is a very nice place. People too here are very nice... We all go to each other's homes, celebrate each other's festivals, and respect each other." Zahid too felt that being polite and respectful towards one another was inherently a part of the culture. He added that to feel the same love that they felt for Kashmir, one must visit Kashmir and talk to Kashmiri people:

The big news channels don't tell the reality [of Kashmir]. They change details and falsify information about Kashmir...Even if we do something good for another, they will say that we hurt that person. This tends to confuse the public of India...We love people, and we want them to come here and see for themselves how much we like them. For example, when you came here only then you realized that we are actually nice people. (Zahid)

It was evident that the participants were unhappy that though Kashmir had potential, it remained under-developed. In Zain's opinion, political issues in Kashmir were the primary reason for its under-development. He deplored the current situation, where Kashmir having immense potential, is prevented from development as India did not want Kashmiri culture to gain prominence. He spoke in great detail on the role of Indian politics in Kashmir. He believed the Indian BJP Government

intentionally ensured under-development in Kashmir by not allowing Kashmiri youth to receive a good education, disallowing local representation, and influencing newspapers and media to negatively portray Kashmiris to the rest of India. Saqib on the other hand believed the constant violence and conflict were the cause of Kashmir's under-development: "There is absolutely no development here. If a single piece of stone moves, they impose a curfew. They close Kashmir." There was a lot of discussion and disappointment in the lack of interest in Kashmir's development. This, for them, was one of the key reasons to fight for freedom – they believed if they were free, they could ensure the development of Kashmir.

Zahid told me not to portray the conflict as the main focus of Kashmir, and report on the people, nature, culture and beauty of Kashmir. He then began a detailed description of the impact of the conflict on the lives of youth in Kashmir. It appeared that while the participants loved Kashmir ardently, and acknowledged the beauty of Kashmir and its culture, their lives and experiences were inextricably linked with conflict and its effect. Their narrative description of Kashmir and its beauty was usually followed by a caveat, describing the significance and influence of conflict. But this did not deter the participants from talking about Kashmir and its beauty. The interviews were an opportunity for the participants to share their perspectives and provide a glimpse of Kashmir's reality – as a beautiful place marred by constant conflict. The reason for talking about its beauty and the conflict was to be able to provide a real representation of their lives. According to Zain the Indian tourists who travel to Kashmir for the holidays did not connect with Kashmiris or try to understand the reality of the region: "Tourists come here [Kashmir] for the weekends to have fun with their families. They don't talk to us or have any concern for us or ask about our wellbeing."

INSTABILITY AND HARDSHIP

The participants indicated that economic hardship due to the continued state of conflict and instability had deeply affected many Kashmiris. The opportunities for the youth in Kashmir were limited as

private companies were not present in Kashmir and Government jobs were limited. This resulted in high unemployment and poverty. Kritika believed that continued instability and violence had resulted in Kashmir remaining an undeveloped region. According to Zahid, while violence was a part of their life, the financial situation of Kashmiris worsened when Article 370 was revoked. Kashmir was assured that the revocation would provide them opportunities like India, and would improve living conditions in Kashmir:

The whole atmosphere has worsened. Businesses have collapsed, and people have become bankrupt. Now, the money that is collected from the tourist spots here, goes directly to the central government. The local people here do not get any of it. We wouldn't have a problem with this if at least there was some development happening in return. They could have improved tourism, provided better education or at least jobs. (Zahid)

The participants witnessed the rise in unemployment and poverty as a reason for Kashmiri youth to leave. Saqib felt that the only option for him was to sell his land and home; he did not have a choice since borrowing money in Islam, is frowned upon. Though he wanted to live in Kashmir, the only scope for earning some money was through working abroad, since Kashmiris are stereotyped in India as terrorists:

Our income is reducing day by day. If you come here to buy land, I will sell it – because I need the money and I do not have a good source of income...if I need the money, what could I possibly do otherwise to sustain my family? What if I need the money for food? We can't beg! We can't ask people for money! The situation here is worsening by the day...A lot of people here leave for Dubai and Qatar with some random companies so that they can send money home to their families. That's how a lot of families live here. (Saqib)

Kritika too felt that the living conditions in Kashmir were deteriorating due to the rise in unemployment, which was the cause of poverty and social issues. She explained that Kashmir had relied primarily on tourism, agriculture and unskilled labour for their arts and crafts. Revoking Article

370 had impacted all Kashmiris, but youth were adversely affected the most. She believed that the Kashmir issue now was not just about the violence and militancy:

It is mostly due to unemployment. Most people rely on agriculture. They [people from other parts of Kashmir] bring us fruits here [in Doda] ... they do not have a lot of opportunities there – that they can try something or change something. They have no such opportunity to better their lives. They have remained in an undeveloped state there. (Kritika)

Shreya pointed to the impact of labourers coming from other parts of India to work in Kashmir. Her father, a painter, was affected by the influx of these outsiders. The meagre income that locals would earn through unskilled labour was no longer available:

We used to be able to live and make a life for ourselves. But now a lot of people come from outside and there is not enough work for us here. It is very hard. Many people from Bihar and other States come here. The labourers here don't have enough work because of that. There is no employment. (Shreya)

Due to this, influx incomes had drastically reduced to the point where it was hard to manage the basic needs of the family. Muskan and Zahid agreed with this while noting that Kashmiri youth are promised money in return for their participation in the stone-pelting and protests, which they accept, to buy groceries for their family. Zahid felt that outsiders do not know the reality of their situation in Kashmir. The desperate need for money to make ends meet had led youth and young people to fight:

We don't have anything. Our earnings are barely anything... There are people who do not have money to feed their children, they will do anything for the money. A mother or father can do anything for their child – they can also lie or kill another person if they have to. (Zahid)

Muskan too alleged that poverty was the reason for the active participation of Kashmiri youth in the violence. According to her: “when a person sees the state of their home, they will be ready to do anything for your family.” The rising unemployment and poverty, lack of opportunities and

desperation among youth to resort to any means to provide for their families is a cause of concern for Mehvish: “By Allah, we see that our future is dark.”

GENDER BIAS

While narrating the growing challenges youth had to face, the female participants wanted to help in supporting the household financially, despite the societal expectation that they stay indoors doing household chores, while young men were expected to provide for the financial needs of the family. Tabiya commented critically on the bias Kashmiri females face. She was annoyed that though girls and young women excelled academically, Kashmiri society did not expect or prefer women to have a career or take up employment – managing the family and doing household chores was their responsibility, and were held responsible for any issues that arose in the family:

If anything wrong happens here, a woman is blamed for it. It doesn't matter what the mistake was, a woman is held responsible for it. There are many problems here. There might be problems everywhere, but having lived and grown up in Kashmir, I can only say that it is extremely wrong the way things are here. (Tabiya)

Tabiya believed that young women in Kashmir pursued education with hopes of a career, but opportunities were favoured for men rather than women. She had hoped to travel outside Kashmir to learn about the world but added that when she told her friends that she wanted to go outside to study and return to Kashmir to bring about change, they advised her “to stop dreaming and that it can never happen. Families would never allow it; they fear something might happen to a girl if she goes outside to study.” Like Mehvish, Tabiya understood that the future was uncertain for women in present-day Kashmiri society, although she proudly disclosed that she knew of some women who were breaking the gender stereotype, stepping outside of the households and working alongside men. The familial culture however provided more encouragement to the young men than to young women. The women who made a mark were considered rebellious or privileged.

Kritika believed that there was immense talent and potential in the young women in Kashmir who had not been given prominence due to bias. She knew that the youth in Kashmir is: “bursting with talent. But they do not have the opportunity to present it to the world, especially girls. It just seems impossible here for girls to do anything. They have kept them behind closed doors.” Tabiya saw gender bias in young men often getting their way to do what they want; families not giving the same freedom to young women:

It is known here that boys do whatever they want and don't bother about what their families say or think. Boys have complete freedom here...unlike girls. Girls are told what to do, and what not to do...People here don't give credence to girls if they do anything. It is very hard for girls to pursue their dreams here...parents too insist that if you are a girl, you must behave like one...a girl cannot do what a boy does...[and] must not leave the house. That is a big issue here – what will society say about her...[But] if we have been educated, it is not for sitting at home and cooking food – [girls] may cook, but if they want to do something, let them achieve their dreams. (Tabiya)

Muskan had lost her father when she was young. Her mother had struggled to get her daughters educated in private schools. She was conscious that she faced social stigma since she lost her father, and that there was an expectation that she should marry and did not require an education, certainly not in a private school:

I did not have a father – so everyone told me to take arts, that there was a lot of scope in arts, and that I needed it. I was not happy hearing all that because I wanted to be a doctor, that was my dream. Everyone told me to take arts, so I had to take it... People gossiped a lot that my mother is getting her girls educated. (Muskan)

It angered Muskan that the older women in her village gossiped about her being unmarried at eighteen while for Muskan her dream was to pursue a career in the Indian Administrative Services (IAS). The expectation was that she should earn money doing unskilled work so that her brother could receive a better education and get married:

Since my father passed away, people don't look at me right. They look down on me...This is fate that Allah gave upon us...What is my or my family's fault if my father passed away?... [People] say that I am old enough but have not been married still – that maybe I have a problem...The thinking of these people will never change...when we step outside, people talk about us – that look, their father is not there, and now they roam around...That is why I stay at home. (Muskan)

According to Tabiya, such a mindset was fed into the minds of young children to stay with them as they grew up. She believed that gender bias has become the norm in Kashmiri society and that they accepted this bias as a part of their culture. She hoped that the present generation of youth would change this mindset. She admitted that this would, require a complete reorientation of the social thinking and norms in Kashmir. Such change would be possible only if brothers and male youth in the family supported the women in their families to study and pursue their dreams:

Parents feed young children's minds with these differences, and when they grow up, their ideas become stronger about these differences – that a girl is supposed to stay at home. It is very hard to change a person's mind when it has been imprinted in their mind since childhood...If parents don't support, the girl's brother must come forward and support her – let her know that he is with her and will support her in all her decisions and dreams, instead of telling her to sit at home because you are a girl. That is why it is important that we teach our youth to be open minded. (Tabiya)

Kritika knew from personal experience what young women faced when they interacted with any male in Kashmir unless it was their brother, father or uncle; mingling with the opposite sex was frowned upon and even shamed. But this was not the same for young men who could talk freely to women who weren't family members, such as tourists, or women on social media. Because of such bias, young women in Kashmir, in general, hesitated to share their opinions and voice with unknown people. For the female participants in this research, this was the first time that someone had asked about their perspective and experience of life in Kashmir.

Conflict

The second broad theme in the participants' narratives was the role of the conflict in Kashmir. While the conflict was an underlying aspect of their everyday life, this section includes their specific experience and perspective of living amidst prolonged violence and oppression, their rationale and means to fight for peace and stability in the Valley, as well as their standpoint on religion in this conflict phenomenon. These thematic findings provide insight into the influence of conflict on the moral perspective of Kashmiri youth.

PROLONGED VIOLENCE

Having grown up amid violence and conflict, the idea of being privileged, according to the participants, was to have the freedom to live without fear. Tabiya believed that young people lived constantly with a sense of threat. She added with sadness that it was common for young children to be killed while they were out playing. While Kashmir did have its moments of peace and normality, she found that it could change at any moment. Encounters were common, and there was no certainty of a safe return when stepping outside the house:

No one here knows how long they may live. Anything can happen at any moment. It is not like this in other countries – you can go anywhere you want, do whatever you want, without worry. We don't have such a privileged life. We wonder what kind of a life we are leading – that we don't know if we will live to see the next day. (Tabiya)

While there was a lockdown in other parts of the country due to the pandemic, Muskan believed that the effect of the pandemic was no different from the usual situation in Kashmir: "The situation here is always bad. Places like Delhi are closed because of Covid. But in Kashmir, we always have had a bad situation and are usually closed." Mehvish agreed with this view seeing fear as deep-seated in the mind of her family: "If the situation becomes bad anywhere in Kashmir, I have seen my family telling the boys to hide at home in case the force comes." It was commonly held that while all

youth had been impacted by the conflict, male youth had more direct experiences of violence. Instances of being beaten or taken away by the military for no reason were experienced first-hand by the male participants. Saqib laughed while describing the day he was slapped hard across his face by a military man when he was playing cricket years ago – for no reason. He added that this was normal in Kashmir. Zain shared his own experience:

When I was walking down the street, there was stone pelting. An officer called me over because I was laughing – it was Eid and I was with my family shopping, so obviously I was happy and laughing. I was with my family. They called me over just because I was laughing. They beat me with *lathis* (police batons). They blamed me for laughing when there was stone pelting happening somewhere else – that was their excuse to beat me. (Zain)

Recollecting his uncle's encounter and his father's death to police brutality, Zahid gave an account of the uncertainty that they live in. He mentioned that it was humiliating as Kashmiris were expected to always carry their ID and were often searched by the military who were not Kashmiris. It was more painful for him because the military was responsible for his personal loss. He added that each instance of being asked to show his ID reminded him of his uncle's encounter, which agitated him:

On his way the police stopped him just based on a doubt. They asked him for his ID. It turned out to be alright. But they decided to hold him for a few hours. In the meantime, they heard that there was an infiltration happening somewhere nearby. This was in the 1990s. The army went to the place where they had been told that there were some militants hiding. When the army reached there the militants had fled. To save face they picked up my uncle and took him to the mountains and shot him and framed him. Every person who knows my uncle said out loud that he was the purest, kindest, and most innocent man they ever knew. He could never even hurt a fly. They left his body there in the cold. We did not get his body for three days. His body was dead in the ice all the time. We then brought his body home. (Zahid)

The participants had known or personally been affected by the violence all around them. They talked about it with pain, but also as an inherent part of life in Kashmir. Mehvish said that she had seen the children from villages beaten by the military many times. She added that all this violence was “all normal for us now. Anything can happen in Kashmir – and yet it would all be normal...This has all become a part of our life here.” Mehvish also believed that the violence in Kashmir needs to end. She was saddened that Kashmiris are scared to step outside their homes. Kritika felt that Kashmir had unfortunately reached a point where violence and gunshots had become a part of their lives; they expect the worst to happen at any moment:

In Kashmir, even if a gunshot passes by, we don't seem to take notice or are affected by it. There doesn't seem to be any such fear now. So many wrong things have happened, we have faced so much already in the past years. Everyone now expects that something wrong is going to happen any moment. (Kritika)

FIGHT FOR PEACE

The participants spoke easily about violence in Kashmir and felt that the violence was normal. Zahid conveyed his anxiety by saying: “It is true that guns are fired here every day. You can listen to the sound of the firing in every street here. All this is happening here every day. We do not have any future here.” Tabiya related her own experience:

The youth are deeply affected by this. When the situation is such, be it a child or an older person, they are forced to do something wrong... It is the situation in Kashmir that is prompting some to become terrorists. When they feel threatened for their life, when they do not know if they will live or not... there are many issues here... no other person can feel the way we feel here. Then there are repercussions... People here say that whether we do good or wrong acts, either way we are going to be killed. That is how we think here. (Tabiya)

Living amidst such constant violence, economic hardship, and a lack of opportunity to vent their frustration, Tabiya watched Kashmiri youth participating in the fight for freedom. Mehvish also

believed that Kashmir's prolonged violence was influencing young people. She noticed this during the recent protests in Kashmir: "every child in Kashmir would chant the slogan '*aazaadi*' [freedom]. I thought that was the end of Kashmir. If a small child chants the word '*aazaadi*', then this is the end of Kashmir." The participation of young children in the violence and protests, for her, was an indication that the injustice faced by them was not affecting only youth and adults; it was influencing the mindset of young children too. Young children were motivated to take active participation by youth, who were in turn inspired by militants. Saqib believed that youth like Burhan Wani had inspired him to join the fight for freedom. The solution to the uncertain future and violence of the Indian military, according to him, required male youth to take up arms and join the fight. Burhan Wani made Saqib realise that they had to fight for their rights:

In 2020 I thought I too should pick up the gun... I told my family members too that I am going to pick up arms to fight. If I study as much, I too will finally pick up guns. So, I figured, why not now. With time, this desire will only get stronger. (Saqib)

Zahid was convinced everything in Kashmir worked because of guns. He felt that watching their family being killed in 'fake encounters' (extrajudicial killings) by the army, made them want to challenge the injustices in the system. He too had witnessed young children and innocent people being killed. It had instilled in him distrust that Indian courts would give them justice, as the military were after all a part of the Indian governance:

People here believe that either way they're going to be killed; might as well pick up arms and fight. They are militants because they have experienced injustice. I am fine today, but I too may decide to become a militant. My father died and my uncle died. I have my grandfather right now. But if something happens to him or my sisters, what will I do? I couldn't possibly fight in an Indian court. I can't go to the police. I can't sit quiet obviously...The reason why the young people here have picked up arms is because they might be facing some difficulty – they are left with no choice but to fight. This does not make us bad people; we just don't know what to do. It is

desperation...Not knowing what to do people are picking up guns, some die, some are raising their voices, some are killing others...This is our fight. (Zahid)

Zain, whose father was shot by the Indian military while walking down their street to the market, was tired and unhappy with the increasing level of violence in Kashmir. While he didn't consider picking up arms as a solution to the violence in Kashmir, he was distressed and felt helpless. He wanted all the violence to end: "all this violence and injustice in Kashmir must end. And they [military] must stop beating up people for no reason. They beat up and kill a lot of people here. They label us as terrorists after that."

Kritika and Shreya, who lived on the outskirts of Kashmir and closer to the Indian mainland, experienced stark differences in the levels of violence they were exposed to: "We are not in main Kashmir – we are quite far from it. So, we don't face as much hardship. We face much less than what they do." While violence was still a part of their life, Kritika felt that things had improved in Doda over the years as it was closer to the Indian mainland. The other participants who described the constant violence they were living in, belonged to other parts of Kashmir; the further the region was away from India, the greater the presence of armed forces and instances of violence. Shreya vividly remembered her teacher from Kashmir telling her about the violence there. She realised that her life was privileged compared to youth in Srinagar and other border districts of Kashmir: "She [her teacher] told us that what we have here is not available there. There are conflicts every day there like stone-pelting. There is nothing left for school children." Though Doda was a district of Kashmir, not being a border district had ensured they didn't experience the same level of violence and instability. They led a more secure and safer life in Doda. Mehvish on the other hand had a very different recollection of life since August 2019 when Article 370 was revoked, with curfews, and encounters. The situation had not improved since then according to Mehvish:

That period was such that at one point in time, we did not have anything to eat. We survived on liquids and water. It was very hard for us then... A lot of people died during

those days – of hunger and thirst. One can't even imagine how difficult that period was for everyone and children. We initially think that if we have struggled for 6 months, we have tolerated a lot till now, sacrificed so much, we should not give up till this militancy [referring to the presence of the Indian military] ends – till we get freedom. But people were desperate to get out – to buy food and commodities for their homes. (Mehvish)

The revocation of Article 370 was a painful part of the participants' narration. Kritika recalled: "the situation there [in other parts of Kashmir] was very critical [when Article 370 was revoked]. There was nothing here – it was peaceful." The other participants were extremely unhappy with the way the situation escalated in August 2019 to extreme violence overnight: the Internet was shut down, mobile networks were unavailable, young boys were picked up from their homes by the armed forces, a curfew was imposed, and everything was closed. Today they live in even greater fear of the military and armed forces. Zahid spoke of the Indian military in Kashmir having immense power, without being held accountable for their actions. He mentioned instances of the military "getting into households, picking up the boys, and sometimes these boys never return... there is no sense of justice here. The army can do whatever they want." Zahid was initially worried that his conversation might be traced, and I might be collecting information for the military since I am an Indian. He clarified that Kashmiri youth have grown up with a sense of distrust towards Indians. He added that he contacted me because of my association with J&K Help Foundation, which was a trustworthy and respected local NGO, and since I had lived with a local Kashmiri family in Kupwara which was a border district of Kashmir. He added that Kashmiri youth primarily needed assurance that the research had no political motive or links with the military.

It was interesting to note during their narrations that while they were frustrated with the prevailing conditions in Kashmir, none of the participants had grudges or misgivings about the Indian people – they were unhappy with the military and Government. Not one of them spoke ill of another culture, society or individual. Zahid encapsulated this sentiment by saying: "for all the injustice that

we have been through, we too should also have hatred in our heart. But we don't have these problems. We love [Indian] people.” They also enjoyed watching Indian movies and listening to Bollywood songs. Zahid described that they were extremely happy when Indians visited Kashmir for the holidays. He emphasised that they were most happy when Hindus come to Kashmir on pilgrimages: “We treat the Hindu tourists who come here for their pilgrimage with respect. They too say that they are treated well...We want everyone who comes here to have a wonderful experience. We do not want violence in Kashmir.” The participants clarified that Kashmiris had lived in harmony with the rest of India for centuries. For Zahid, the Kashmir issue was popularised as a religious issue by the Indian Government – it was a misunderstanding propagated by the Government and social media to break the communal harmony and unity of the Hindus and Muslims in Kashmir.

RELIGION – AN OUTSIDER ISSUE

Kashmiri youth appeared to be very much respected and loved people belonging to all religions. Mehvish confirmed that religion was not the cause of the conflict in Kashmir. She believed that videos of radical Hindus talking about Kashmiri Muslims, promoted by the media, were used to instigate youth in Kashmir to retaliate. The videos of Kashmiri youth causing violence were then aired to portray Kashmiris as violent people against people of other religions, without showing the videos of radical Hindus talking about the Kashmiris to instigate violence. Mehvish saw clearly that the media had played a key role in dividing Indian and Kashmiri youth, by portraying the conflict as a religious issue, turning their attention away from the violence caused by the military and Government:

We do have conflicts because of religion. It is mostly because of social media...I recently saw a video – there was a group of young Hindu boys...They were talking about how they can ruin Kashmiris...that the only way to do this was to make Kashmiri girls fall in love with them – this will automatically ruin the religion. Many like me would have seen this video...Our youth (boys) would have also seen this video. There were a lot of negative comments from Kashmiri youth on the video. There were also some who wrote ‘come here. We will show you...’ If a Muslim speaks ill of a Hindu,

then they will not remain silent, will they?... If such videos come to light, if such issues are given prominence, then religious conflict is bound to remain. (Mehvish)

According to Shreya, who was Hindu, religious differences were in the minds of outsiders, not Kashmiri youth. She believed that they brought religious differences evident in India, to Kashmir. She added that Kashmiris celebrated the festivals of the other religions and visited each other's homes irrespective of religion. She felt that while some minor differences existed between people in Kashmir, the media tended to aggravate these differences into a conflict:

The people who come from outside find a lot of differences between Hindu and Muslim. J&K never had this. These differences are there in the other States, and they are bringing it in here...There might be people here who disagree with one another. But it was not as much as these people. People who had some issues in their mind, these people from outside will only make it worse by encouraging these people. These differences will only grow then... As it is there is a lot of conflict here – stone-pelting, and a lot more in Kashmir...This will become another cause for stone-pelting and violence in Kashmir. (Shreya)

Tabiya agreed that people in Kashmir have always lived in harmony though today there were some religious differences. It worried her that these differences were becoming a cause of conflict in Kashmir. She advocated the need for peace and a more harmonious Kashmir as it was before:

Religion and these things do not matter. Every person has their own religion – be it Hinduism or Islam. Each one has its own path and way of thinking. We should not be against one another or find fault – it is all right in its own respect. If we are kind to one another, respect everyone and consider all as our brethren, then the situation in the world and in Kashmir will surely improve... Religion must not be central to our issues and lives. A person is not right or wrong based on their religion. Every person is equal. All these conflicts are happening because we are differentiating everyone based on religion. We must all live with the spirit of brotherhood. This will make all the difference. (Tabiya)

Muskan had a similar perspective as Shreya and Tabiya. She acknowledged that religious differences caused issues in Kashmir. But she specified that these were only differences in religious practices; these should not divide people: “We might read the Quran and do *namaz*. We can’t change that. But we can all have a loving relationship as brothers and sisters.” While the female participants spoke about these issues, they did not discuss their religious perspectives. They instead hoped for a more harmonious Kashmir where religion would not be an issue.

The male participants were more vocal about their religious perspectives and their own practices. They spoke about the role of religion in Kashmir and how it influenced their belief and culture. Saqib, who proudly stated that he did *namaz* five times a day, and went to the mosque for prayers, felt that the youth, in general, were moving away from religion:

People are moving away from religion no doubt. They are doing sinful things. They do not do *namaz*... [Young people] curse during Ramzan, drink alcohol and smoke cigarettes, even though they have no money...People do not realise that they lose their mental abilities when they consume drugs. When they are under its influence, they might even say that there is no God...People say we want to fight for what is rightfully ours, but on the other hand, they do things that are unacceptable in Islam.
(Saqib)

Saqib believed that religion guides a person’s character. He was convinced that conflict and religion did influence his thinking and that he had been influenced by the ideology of Burhan Wani, who made him “realise that we must fight – for our rights...Islam does not condone using guns, it is acceptable.” In Saqib’s opinion violence was not the solution to Kashmir’s problems; but he felt that a person’s character and actions reflected their faith in Allah, and if such actions were committed in His name, they were acceptable.

Zahid too, stated proudly that he prayed every day and believed that Islam was concerned with having a good character. In contrast to what Saqib said, Zahid affirmed that Islam condemned the violence. Though it was considered a sin to fight, Zahid submitted that he would fight if it would

help to improve the situation in Kashmir or for his family. He added that Islam taught people to be humane and loving, and not violent:

We have heard that people are threatened to come here; that we will kill them. Why would we kill them? Killing someone is not a small matter. And this is considered a sin in our religion. Irrespective of whatever religion one belongs to, humaneness is important. And our Prophet has told that we must love everyone. God forbid...we would never kill anyone! We try to live in line with what our religion says. Religion does not permit us to hurt anyone. We do not even curse anyone. Even if someone calls another an idiot, we will say that the person's character is not good. But that is it. We would never even think of hurting or killing another person. And why would we? (Zahid)

He hoped that people would one day have the same respect and reverence for Islam that people have for other religions in the world. He added that the actions of some people belonging to a particular religion did not make the religion bad or the whole culture bad. He implored for a change in people's attitude towards Muslims:

I know that Muslims are not liked by everyone. But not all Muslims are the same...You must be having Christian friends, or friends from Israel or Pakistan. There is secularism in the rest of the world. Just because some people from a particular religion do something wrong, take drugs or lie, doesn't make the religion or everyone belonging to the religion bad. There are good and bad in every religion. And all our religions do match. We're all the same. Now some people decide to highlight the bad...it does not make them right. (Zahid)

The participants wanted to make clear that they felt religion was not a cause of conflict among Kashmiris. They believed that the radical ideologies of Islamist terrorist groups and Kashmir having a Muslim majority region led to Islam being misrepresented by social media and outsiders as being central to the conflict in Kashmir. Their experiences of living amidst conflict within Kashmir, and being marginalised outside Kashmir, along with the lack of opportunities for growth in Kashmir, raised questions on the role of education in Kashmir.

Education

The third broad theme that the participants engaged in was their experience and perspective of an unstable education system that they believed, deprived them of an opportunity to learn and provide them with a future. The narratives touched upon the impact the pandemic had on their education and on the support offered by NGOs to ensure Kashmiri youth were less affected by the disruption in their education. The narratives of the participants on these themes are outlined below to understand the role that education played in influencing the moral perspective of Kashmiri youth.

UNSTABLE LEARNING

In all the interviews, participants acknowledged that they did not recall a single year of uninterrupted schooling. The continued conflict, along with the harsh winters kept schools and colleges closed for most of the year. Every year educational institutions were closed for months. According to Zain: “there has not been a single year when there hasn’t been a lockdown for a few months here. Either there is a curfew or something else. Schools were also closed those days.” Tabiya too stated that she missed the experience of interacting with her peers and learning from her teachers in person:

There have always been lockdowns here – because of the Article or for some other reason. So, I have not spent a lot of time in college. I have gone to college only for a couple of months...It was a good experience going to college...They used to share a lot about life – they encouraged us to think and do something with our lives. They were very nice. (Tabiya)

Muskan felt that education was mostly affected by the social conditions in Kashmir. According to her, education was not a priority in Kashmir: “Whenever anything happens, like a militant gets martyred, or any possible reason, it is only schools and colleges that are closed. Nothing else.” Issues of lockdowns and curfews were ongoing, and hence they did not get access to sustained education. While these lockdowns and curfews restricted access to educational institutions, Saqib added that education in Kashmir was also affected by fear of the military:

Schools are closed, phones don't work – how could we possibly study? If we step out, they pick us up and take us away for no reason. If we take our books to go out and study in another village, the CRPF¹² or the military would be sitting on the outskirts and will take us away – for no reason. (Saqib)

Mehvish too was frustrated by the impact of the conflict on education. She said that every year they spent 3 to 6 months without any form of learning due to militancy, elections, or some other reason. A conceptual understanding was missed, and students ended up taking to rote-memorisation of the curriculum for the exams:

Everywhere in Kashmir, only 25% of the syllabus had been completed – there will either be mass promotion or 50%-30% or however much they had been taught will only be included in the exam... We do not have any basic [education]. My friends and I ask what chance do we have of competing with the children from outside? We do not have any base. We do not have facilities – like a phone, Internet availability, or broadband... What could possibly be our future? Even if we studied day and night, we have missed learning the basics in our education. We didn't learn anything. We couldn't learn... We couldn't... (Mehvish)

Without basic conceptual knowledge or sustained learning from a young age, the participants believed that the disparity in education between Kashmir and the rest of India was increasing. Saqib believed that Kashmiri youth had “the competence to excel in the State, but not with the whole country. The standard of education that children receive in India is much better and higher compared to us. We do not even have sustained education and learning.” Zain thought that during college closures, students were expected to study with much less support from teachers. Online resources were not easily accessible for the students as the Internet in Kashmir was cut off during lockdowns and curfews. According to Zahid, it was impossible to be able to study online in Kashmir:

¹² CRPF – The Central Reserve Police Force is India's largest central armed police force which works under the direct order of the Ministry of Home Affairs (Central Government) to maintain law and order and for counter-insurgency operations

In the second year of my higher secondary, I have gone to school for just five days. We have been studying everything online. And Internet was shut down for the last 16 months. The Internet has improved a little only recently. For studying online, the Internet is essential. (Zahid)

While Kritika and Shreya experienced fewer school closures, since they were not in “main Kashmir”, the standard of education was a concern for them too. Private schools had higher fees and were not viable for all to access due to financial challenges. While the curriculum was common across Kashmir, according to Shreya, the difference was in the quality of teaching and school environment which differed greatly between private and Government schools. She had a very challenging experience in a Government school where the students would use abuse in the presence of the teachers and were unruly. The teachers “were paid very well, but they weren’t concerned with teaching us well or our learning. They didn’t care. They did not have an interest in teaching children... teachers don’t have enough resources...There is nothing left for school children there.” She said that she was fortunate to move to a private school after a year. She believed that the economic hardship and the state of conflict in other parts of Kashmir meant that most students were left with no choice but to study in Government schools within poor learning environments.

EDUCATION IN A PANDEMIC

Muskan felt that while education was previously substandard in Kashmir, it had now become even less of a priority in Kashmir. The few months of college that they had the opportunity to attend had been closed due to the pandemic:

Like now, during COVID, the markets are all open, but schools and colleges are closed. Everyone goes out and drives around in their cars. But schools, colleges and university are closed. The children are the ones that finally are losing out on everything... All three of us have to study with one phone... I have a lot of difficulties in my studies, and there is no one for me here. No one... But my sister is in her 10th [class], so I let her study more... (Muskan)

Kritika stated that schools had been closed for the last two years. Combined with Internet issues, studying online had not been easy. With the Internet shut down for almost a year, they did not have a choice but to go to school to collect some notes and study at home. But this was not possible for the other participants – they could not go to schools and colleges to collect notes. Saqib mentioned that for Kashmiri youth, closures and curfews were something they were used to. The impact on their education due to the pandemic was a continuation of what they had been living with even before the pandemic restrictions were imposed:

It has been such for the past five-six years. The situation has gotten worse since 2016. We have not had proper education since then. And now, we have issues of Covid-19 which has once again led to school closures...Once covid is over, the situation will not return to normalcy here. There will be curfews and strikes. Schools will be closed for months. (Saqib)

Mehvish remarked that while the rest of the world had faced the impact of lockdown and closures due to the pandemic, education in Kashmir worsened before the pandemic when the Internet had been shut down in August 2019. Without the Internet and sustained education, she had no resources or avenues to try to study. Mehvish reflected that since 2019: “schools were closed...We were simply sitting at home. We lost interest in studies. We just went to the exams to qualify. But we couldn’t study or gain any understanding or learning.” The pandemic had been an extension of that period that they had gone through. Students were expected to attend classes online, and most of the study materials were either emailed or shared via social media. Attending classes online was challenging with the unreliable Internet and disparity in access to mobile phones or computers. Muskan said her younger siblings relied on her to teach them instead of their teachers, while she had no support for her own studies. For Mehvish, the only difference now was that there was another issue they had to live with - the pandemic: “It is all about Covid now. We are sitting at home and studying online. We have a lot of trouble due to the lack of Internet here...During lockdown, everyone does not have the same possibilities.” Some support had been provided by non-government

organisations, for Kashmiri students due to the disparity in access to technology for attending classes. Relying on charity and support from organisations was however frowned upon in Kashmir. Therefore, while some non-government organisations were actively trying to help Kashmiri youth who had financial challenges, the youth were embarrassed and hesitant to ask for or accept such support.

ROLE OF ORGANISATIONS

Some of the participants believed that organisations had helped Kashmiri youth to gain a better quality of education. Left without any support, they primarily relied on tuition and resources provided by non-government organisations for their studies. Saqib had personally benefitted from the support that an organisation had given him. While it was a hard decision for him to accept help, he did so because it was based on merit, and the organisation assured him that they would not publish his photo anywhere:

They have helped many children like me. They provide uniforms, books and assist with admissions. They do not charge fees for those who can't afford [to pay]...I hope to be a doctor one day. People who did not have the same level of access before could not have had such dreams – it will change with the support of such organisations. Even if they do not have parental support or economic support, or even if they do not have the same abilities, they can begin to perform better...We all study together irrespective of our background. (Saqib)

He felt that NGOs had helped those like him to receive a good education irrespective of their background or economic status. Some schools and after-school classes run by NGOs provided students with the additional academic support that they needed. Saqib said that this encouraged students with financial challenges, placing everyone on equal standing, and able to compete as it was based on merit. Zahid shared the same perspective as Saqib about the role of non-government organisations in Kashmir. He believed that without the help of these organisations, youth in Kashmir would be lost without the right guidance:

If we did not have organisations and foundations, there would be more young people killed or depressed or committing suicide. They wouldn't have an option. People here are also shy of asking help...The big organisations here are the ones who helped us. They have been doing the work that the government is supposed to be doing. (Zahid)

Zain also agreed that the NGOs were the ones that have helped youth in Kashmir, especially local and grassroots level organisations. He emphasised that global organisations like the United Nations which had visited Kashmir several times had failed to provide support for Kashmiris. He felt that the bigger organisations were unaware of the reality of life in Kashmir:

Like the UN had come here. They wanted to see the situation in Kashmir. There was stone pelting happening those days frequently. But they [the Government] imposed a curfew. The delegates were taken in a car around the empty streets, shown Dal Lake¹³ and taken back to the airport. They did not see what is happening here, and neither did they learn [or talk about] the real story. (Zain)

While the participants trusted local non-government organisations, they were apprehensive about the role of Indian or international non-government organisations in Kashmir as they believed some may be politically motivated. They relied more on the support of family, the community, or at the most, local organisations. The participants like Saqib and Muskan who had received support however never mentioned to anyone that they were recipients of organisational support – they were embarrassed. Local organisations were run by local people who were aware of Kashmiri youth who needed help and often reached out to them directly.

According to Mehvish, while organisations had been instrumental in encouraging Kashmiri youth and providing access to education and skills, the challenge was the lack of opportunities beyond education for Kashmiri youth. She added: “If I see the condition of Kashmir presently, I don’t see myself having a future here; that I might be able to do anything in Kashmir.”

¹³ Dal Lake – popular lake in the capital city Srinagar in Kashmir

FUTURE AND HOPE

Shreya felt that Kashmiri youth did not bother dreaming or planning for a future as it was pointless: “Even if I plan beyond that, things are always closed here...I couldn’t study my 9th and 10th [grade] well to start with...what is the point of planning further?” The social, economic and educational challenges instilled a belief in the participants that they couldn't have a future in Kashmir at present.

Participants shared that their only hope of achieving their dreams or leading a stable life was if they left Kashmir. Mehvish, however, this too was not an option for them anymore, as they faced discrimination outside Kashmir and were stereotyped as terrorists which had led to unfortunate incidents for those who left: “there are many cases where people who have gone out have been killed – the dead body of students is brought back.” Parents forbade the youth from going outside Kashmir. Mehvish expressed her doubt:

Our future has been ruined from the start... It is rooted in our mindset that outside (of Kashmir) is not safe; whatever needs to be achieved, must be in Kashmir. We know that the situation here is not good. If the situation gets better, then there is a 50% possibility that we can do something. If things do not get better, then we know that we will have to sit at home. I see here now PhD scholars who have become shopkeepers; they have opened a small business or shop and are sitting there idly. PhD scholar mam – not a joke! (Mehvish)

Saqib felt that irrespective of the level of education, the youth did not have any hope of earning a good income as they did not have any opportunities in Kashmir. If the families could afford to, they ensured their children studied outside Kashmir from a young age, with the hope that they would eventually find a job outside Kashmir. The youth who did not have the financial means to study outside Kashmir often worked on farms, shops, or took menial jobs to earn an income:

Kashmiri youth who are less than 18 years do not study in Kashmir since they do not receive good foundational knowledge here. There has not been good education since 2016 [when Burhan Wani was martyred]. Due to these school closures, students miss

out on the knowledge they need for the following years to improve...There are many here who do not have phones or access to these online classes...These young people leave education and do odd jobs...[and] any form of unskilled labour like working in shops, or on farms. (Saqib)

Saqib recounted how youth who went outside to study returned to live with their families and support them, not finding any jobs due to the scarce employment opportunities in Kashmir. Zahid added that some of these highly educated youth who did not find any source of income in Kashmir ended up as militants or joined in the active fight for freedom through stone-pelting or such local actions. These militants then inspired a younger generation of youth who believed that they too would end up with the same future after all:

It is common to see highly educated youth sitting along the streets here depressed. After having studied a lot if they have no opportunities, they get depressed. The youth here are frustrated... [Manan Wani] was a PhD scholar. He studied from Aligarh University in Delhi. He wanted to do something for his family here. After he finished his PhD he came to Kashmir. He did not find any jobs for 3-4 months, and saw the state of Kashmir. Five months after he had been living here, we saw a picture of him on social media with Burhan Wani. Manan had done a PhD. Everyone at the university said that he was a very good student and very intelligent. Then why did he pick up arms? Do you think he went mad? (Zahid)

Reminded by the condition of highly educated youth in Kashmir, Tabiya felt that there was little hope for a stable and meaningful future. She emphasised that though young people did not have a future in Kashmir through education, they had to explore other means and opportunities to do something for themselves. That was their only hope;

Kashmir has a lot of educated people. There are many PhD scholars here. But they don't do anything with their lives. They don't get jobs they are entitled to. There are many problems here. This leads to severe depression among the educated youth – because they have studied a lot and are highly educated, but they have no future. There is no future for us in Kashmir – that is what I feel. People must take the initiative

themselves to do something with their lives... I don't see myself having a future here in Kashmir; that I might be able to do anything in Kashmir. (Tabiya)

Muskan felt that as a woman, she had even fewer job opportunities, as a priority would be given to the male youth: "I want to study and become better in life. That is why I want to step outside. It shouldn't be like this. People here are extremely narrow-minded." She was motivated to take the IAS exam – to become a policy maker in Kashmir and change the system. She wanted to stay in Kashmir and make a difference.

All the participants clearly stated that they wanted to live with their family, at home, in Kashmir – whatever the challenges that might arise. And while they mentioned that it was pointless to hope for a stable future in Kashmir, each one of them had dreams – to be doctors, writers, own a business, be a policy maker, become professors or start an NGO focused on uplifting children without means. The participants loved Kashmir, but a Kashmir without conflict and issues. They were all proud to be Kashmiris – though it was tough to live, and the future seemed dark and uncertain, they believed they would find their way.

Chapter Summary

The participants responded at the start of the interviews by saying that they had never had an opportunity to talk about their perspectives or share their experiences with a non-Kashmiri. They were keen on their voice being represented as it was narrated, without judgment. The lived experiences and perspectives of the participants were, therefore, kept intact in the findings. Their narrations primarily focused on the experience of living in conflict, education, Kashmiri society and culture, and Kashmiri youth's identity. It was interesting to observe that these perspectives were not restricted to one theme as they often were interrelated.

Participants believed there was no platform where they could express themselves without fear, or without being judged or scrutinised. They stressed that they felt marginalised and stereotyped by the world as terrorists while portraying themselves as loving and humane people, who were victims of violence and misunderstood by outsiders. It was interesting to note that the participants said that they knew that Indian people were not to be blamed; the issue was with the Indian Government. The constant violence, discrimination and stereotyping of Kashmiris, according to the participants, was politically motivated, which did not provide Kashmiri youth with the opportunity to travel or leave Kashmir for a better education. Though they had grudges against India in these respects, the participants said that they wanted people to visit Kashmir and experience Kashmiri hospitality and its nature. They took great pride in their culture and expressed their keenness in hosting people from all over the world. Oddly, while the participants said that they love Indians, contradicting their own stance, they did say at the start of the interviews that they were hesitant to talk to me as I am an Indian. Also, while they implored Indian tourists to talk to Kashmiris to understand their reality, it is questionable if they would have shared their experience and perspective with the same freedom and openness without my validation by the local NGO, or my prior experience in Kashmir.

The participants were committed to remaining in Kashmir and supporting change in Kashmir in the future. While the participants conceded that the form of change that Kashmir needed could be brought about in Kashmir only by the Kashmiri people, they hoped for and were keen to receive global attention and support. They felt that foregrounding the issues and challenges in Kashmir on global platforms would help to raise awareness of the situation in Kashmir. Their narration reflected rational thinking and fighting spirit.

The participants understood the role of education to help overcome the effects of the conflict and reorient the mindset of Kashmiri youth. They believed education could help improve the situation in Kashmir. While the male participants mentioned the lack of prioritisation for education in Kashmir, the female participants were more enthusiastic and passionate about discussing the state of education

in Kashmir. Education appeared to be the only form of socialising the young women had compared to the young men who had more freedom. The female participants were, therefore, more affected by the institutional closures, as they did not get to meet their friends anymore. They were vocal about the discrimination that they experienced and added that this was an aspect of the Kashmiri mindset that they wanted to change.

Apart from aspects such as issues of representation and education, the conflict played a significant role in the lived experience of the participants. This was evident through statements such as “either way we are going to be killed”, “our future is ruined from the start” and “we wonder what kind of a life we are leading...we don’t know if we will live to see the next day”. They found it impossible to talk about any aspect of Kashmir without talking about the conflict. The emphasis in the narratives of the male participants was centred more on the conflict and their experience of being targeted by the military. They assumed that the military saw that all young men in Kashmir could cause disturbances, participate in the stone-pelting or become militant. While the female participants had been impacted by the actions of the military, there was no mention of intending to participate in the fight for freedom as suggested by their male counterparts. While all the participants in the main part of Kashmir were impacted by the conflict, the two female participants who were from the Doda, which was closer to the Indian mainland, appeared to be less affected. While they were concerned about the presence of the military in Kashmir, the other six participants living in the other parts of Kashmir had greater animosity towards the military. They were unhappy with the Government for not being considerate towards the plight of the Kashmiri people or the situation in Kashmir. Though some male participants asserted that they might pick up arms at the start of the interview to fight for their freedom, having experienced the impact of violence throughout their lives and talked about their experiences, none of the participants believed that violence was the solution in Kashmir. They all wanted peace in the valley.

The Muslim participants felt most peaceful when they prayed. They repeatedly mentioned “*Insha-Allah*” in every statement and talked about their belief in Islam and absolute faith in Allah. The inherent role of religion in their lives was evident. The two female participants from Doda, who were Hindus, did not talk about their own religious perspectives or beliefs in their narratives. They mentioned that they were not the same as the Hindus in India – Kashmiri Hindus have a different way of life compared to the Indian Hindus with respect to their food, mannerisms, language, cultural practices, and standpoint on religion. They also added that religion was not an issue in Kashmir. They believed that Kashmiris lived cohesively without any major animosity between different religions. The Muslim participants clarified that Islam taught them to love all irrespective of the person’s religion.

Apart from the conflict that had impacted society in general, the participants appeared to be burdened by the economic challenges that Kashmir was facing due to rising unemployment and poverty. They felt that outsiders coming to Kashmir after Article 370 was revoked had impacted even more the lives of Kashmir youth. With the influx of outsiders who received a higher standard of education, the participants felt it was unfair and impossible for them to compete for the limited jobs in Kashmir. The pandemic had also exacerbated the already existing challenges they were living with. Though they were keen to be educated, they were now more unsure than ever of what their future could be in Kashmir.

In conclusion, the findings suggest an inextricable link between conflict and the participants’ lived experiences. Each narration had an aspect of the conflict that significantly influenced their perspective, be it when they talked about the role of education or with regards to their Kashmiri identity. They wanted the world to know and acknowledge that they were good human beings, not terrorists or violent people. They exemplified great pride in being Kashmiri when they talked about their desire to stay in Kashmir and help to transform the situation in Kashmir. For such transformation, they wanted more job opportunities for Kashmiri youth. They clearly showed that though the situation in Kashmir was challenging, they would try to bring about change in a peaceful manner.

While this chapter gave voice to the participants, to understand what has influenced the moral perspective of Kashmiri youth, the essential meaning of these experiences needs to be “studied and revealed in the interpretation of text” (Lindseth & Norberg, 2004, p. 147). ‘Working phenomenologically’, as suggested by Gadamer (Grieder, 2001), I will interpret the above findings, in light of the literature discussed in chapter two. This will bring the subjectivity and fore-structures of the above findings “into play so that the text's meaning can really be made to speak for us” (Gadamer, 2004, p. 398). The next chapter brings to prominence, the learning gained from the inquiry, towards understanding what aspects of the participants’ lived experience influences their moral perspective.

CHAPTER 7 DISCUSSION

We are all one, one flesh, nothing but One
Who put the discord of the Two in your heart?...
There is a restlessness in the heart, there is a veil over our dreams
All this is an illusion. When will you wake up?
The heartbroken, the dejected, my friends and well-wishers
How you destroy human hearts in the name of the human?

– Excerpt from '*The stars speak to man*' by Abdul Ahad Azad (Poetrynook, 2022)

Abdul Azad, a 19th-century revolutionary Kashmiri poet who was considered the 'poet of humanity', urged people to be aware of the fundamental Self in all. He proclaimed that the sense of duality was the cause of conflict, and to think and act toward collective human harmony (Gauhar, 1997). This verse begins to unpack the various elements of this study: the geographical and historical context of Kashmir; the phenomenon of conflict; a phenomenological approach toward lived experience; and finally, a narrative inquiry to profile the voice of youth and understand their moral perspective.

The Kashmir valley, once known for its natural beauty and culture, is now known to be one of the most militarised zones in the world (S. A. Bhat, 2019; Brunt & Farooq, 2021). Ganie (2019) is persuaded that the media and Indian Government policy deliberately misrepresent the situation in Kashmir: "very little academic research has attempted to investigate how the new generation of Kashmiris frame the Kashmir conflict and related events" (p. 278). Boyden (2003) highlights that while conflict and morality have individually been researched, "the moral consequences for young people of engagement in combat are touched on very lightly in the literature on conflict... [with] serious oversight given the influence ideational structures, social relations, and institutions play in shaping young people's development" (p. 352). There is a noticeable gap in studies looking at the perspective and lived experience of Kashmiri youth in the context of Kashmir.

To gain a deeper understanding of the moral perspective of youth in Kashmir, I initially reviewed the literature on Kashmir's history, the social context of the participants, and conceptual understanding of morality, and education in chapters two and three. Drawing on phenomenological philosophy and narrative case study methodology outlined in chapter four, I gathered the lived experience of eight Kashmiri youth and represented their voices as narratives through case study synopses and thematic analysis. In conversation with Grieder (2001), Gadamer recommended that by working intuitively, descriptively, creatively, and concretely we come to understand the essence of lived experience. He believed that concepts phenomenologically examined: "come forward in movements of thoughts springing from the spirit of language and the power of intuition" (Grieder, 2001, p. 113). In line with Gadamer, instead of applying moral concepts to understand what influences the moral perspective of participants, moral concepts 'came forward' in participant responses, reactions, and perspectives during the analysis.

As put forward by MacIntyre (1998), morality sheds light on the participants' moral perspective i.e., their view of the virtues and rules that may create a better more cohesive and stable Kashmir. It was found that their perspectives were predominantly influenced by their experience of living in conflict and a strong desire for personal freedom and peace in Kashmir. In addition, the experience of being marginalised and stereotyped by non-Kashmiris, the unstable education that they received in Kashmir, and the uncertainty of their future whilst living in Kashmir, also played an important role in their moral decision-making. They hoped for an end to the constant state of fear and instability and demonstrated that they were keen to contribute toward a progressive and peaceful Kashmir. Accordingly, they wanted to be heard, to receive a better standard of education and career opportunities and, dreamed of a cohesive society where the welfare of the Kashmiri people was central.

In this chapter, I apply a phenomenological interpretation of the findings that 'came forward' in the analysis. Similar to the approach of Lindseth and Norberg (2004), I found that phenomenological

interpretation of the narratives of the selected Kashmiri youth, rendered in their own voice, provided insight and rationale for their moral perspective. Such an interpretation of the phenomenon to understand its essence included the meaning that the participants attached to their narrative, and the structural relations through which those meanings were produced (van Manen, 1997). The structural relations included the historical background, personal context, participant's own subjectivity, and my context and subjectivity. According to van Manen (1997), the use of hermeneutic phenomenology unearths deeper layers of the lived experiences, essence, and its influence on one's moral actions, that the participant may be unconsciously unaware of. Hermeneutic phenomenology "seeks to uncover the meaning and central structures, or essences, of a participant's lived experience with a phenomenon and the contextual forces that shape it" (Bynum & Varpio, 2018, p. 252). This chapter interprets the experience, specific statements, responses and reactions, with reference to the context, events and emotions evident in the language, alongside relevant literature. These have been considered within the participant's personal context and background of living in Kashmir. I return to the research question to highlight the significant experiences that shape the moral perspectives of the selected Kashmiri youth in this study.

Experience of Living in Conflict

Break the pen, spill the ink, burn the paper,
Lock your lips, be silent, shhh...
Say 'I saw nothing' even if you did
Or else have your eyes gouged out
Keep humming eulogies, be silent
It is the season of burying the truth...

– By Bashir Manzar (S. Bose, 2009, p. 5)

Contemporary Kashmiri poet Bashir Mazar captured the fundamental emotion that was evident in the findings – violence and oppression faced by Kashmiri youth. This verse portrays the fear of consequences among Kashmiris if they spoke about their experiences of oppression and the military in Kashmir. Such fear has been an inherent part of life in Kashmir since Colonial independence, and continues to influence the everyday life and decisions of Kashmiris till date (Devadas, 2018).

An interpretation of the experience of fear, violence and oppression in Kashmir is, challenging due to the dearth of studies on the lived experience of Kashmiris. According to F. A. Dar & Kumar (2015), reports on Kashmir are unreliable as the Indian Government has been “manipulating and silencing various histories that do not fit into the larger bourgeois nationalist frameworks” (p. 42). As observed by Freire (1972), repression and curtailing of freedom is a technique used by oppressors to ensure constant and complete control over the oppressed. Zahid, who was the most hesitant initially to participate in the interview for this study, but ended up having the longest interview, believed that “the Kashmir issue has been quietened... our voices have been suppressed” by the Indian Government. While the other participants shared a similar perspective of fear and oppression, there was no fear when they finally talked about their views on life in Kashmir. In this section, I examine the influence of their experience of conflict on the participants’ moral perspectives. These include the influence of military violence, fear of consequences if they spoke about their experience, and the misinterpretation of religion in the conflict.

MILITARY VIOLENCE

A common theme across the narratives and findings was the mention of the Indian military presence in Kashmir. Violence was more frequently mentioned by the participants from border regions of Kashmir in comparison to the experiences of participants who lived closer to the Indian mainland. Though all participants acknowledged that Kashmiri youth had joined in the violence in Kashmir, they associated violence predominantly with the military presence. As mentioned in earlier chapters, while

such a high military presence was meant to safeguard Kashmiris against militant insurgency and cross-border conflict, the ill-treatment of Kashmiri civilians by the military has established a deep-rooted hatred for the Indian military (Ganguly, 2017). Experiences of injustice and indiscriminate use of power have instilled an implicit belief that the military is against the Kashmiris, with no concern for their wellbeing. According to Edling et al. (2020), historical experience influences moral consciousness and plays an important role in decision-making. Considering the deteriorating conditions in Kashmir, Mehvish believed that their “future is dark”. Freire’s (1972) notion of fatalism was evident in statements such as “stop dreaming” by Tabiya, and “what is the point of planning [for a future]?” by Shreya. Years of oppression, prolonged violence and stricter restrictions have led these youth to believe that their fate was to remain oppressed by the Indian Government and military. The findings show that history of oppression and military violence embodied in Kashmir’s ‘social world’ (MacIntyre, 1984) that contributed to such fatalistic notions. Living and growing up with these notions influenced the moral perspectives of the participants.

Tabiya and Muskan also reported that they feared the military rather than being reassured by their presence. This shows that the use of “coercion and brute force by the state can never create conditions for generating confidence and loyalty among the people” (T. Bose et al., 1990, p. 657). Though the Indian Government has reiterated that the military presence is for the protection of the people, the participants believe the presence of the Indian military has perpetuated the conflict in Kashmir. According to Freire (1972), “to glorify democracy [but] to silence the people is a farce; to discourse on humanism [but] to negate people is a lie” (p. 91). The lack of accountability for military violence in Kashmir, and a callous approach towards the injustice faced by Kashmiris has led to a distrust of the Indian judiciary: “I couldn't possibly fight in an Indian court. I can't go to the police as well. What would I do?” (Zahid). According to Kashmiri researcher Nitasha Kaul (2018), when “ad infinitum calls for freedom (*‘Hum Kya Chahte? Azaadi!’* ‘What do we want? Freedom!’)...and stone-pelting...are met with live ammunition or metal pellets, it is clear that [Kashmiris] are not part of any

Indian democratic imagination” (p. 129). The findings from this study suggest that Kashmir has not developed, nor has the military violence reduced. Frustrated with the military violence, Kashmiri youth have instead taken up weapons to fight in retaliation. This was evident in the initial responses of Zahid and Saqib – a discussion on military violence provoked them to believe that an armed response against the Indian Government and army was the solution to the injustice they faced in Kashmir. According to F. A. Dar (2014), along with a collective sense of injustice, Kashmiri youth are motivated to become militants due to their own personal loss or being inspired by the ideologies of martyred militants. The participants referred to militants such as Burhan Wani, as a respected martyrs. They were inspired by the act of being martyred for the sake of Kashmir. Similar to the findings of Ganie (2021) and Dhamija (2017), Zahid and Saqib were both in awe of the militants and their spirit, and spoke of their desire to become militants and take up arms. As suggested by Ginges and Atran (2013), the moral structures here are linked to ideas of territory and identity. The use of violent means to tackle military violence, was justified when it was for Kashmir. For example, “throwing stones was not attributed to social deviance or rogue behaviour [anymore]... Rather it was an action laden with symbolic value seen as representing courage, solidarity, and resistance” (Ganie, 2019, p. 120). The participants’ perspectives indicated that the long-standing military violence clearly has influenced their perception of right, wrong, risk and revenge (Campbell, 2017). According to Greenbaum et al. (2020) morally right and wrong perspectives of youth in war-exposed regions tended to be different from their actions:

Moral concepts of what is just and right are often divorced from what [the youth] expect people, and even themselves to actually do...[the youth stated that they] would actually steal from people and take revenge on people despite acknowledging that doing so would be morally wrong. (Greenbaum et al., 2020, p. 252)

While the participants condemned military violence against innocent civilians, violence by Kashmiri youth in retaliation was considered ‘acceptable’ or even idolised, since it was for the sake of Kashmir, or out of frustration with the conflict. The acceptance of violence by Kashmiris was not a moral choice, but a moral imperative as it was a response to oppression. On the other hand, the

participants believed that military violence was a moral choice on the part of the Indian Government and condemned it. Such an oscillation between ideas of fatalism to 'rebellious' ideas of fighting for freedom and justification of violence by Kashmiri youth, according to Freire's moral philosophy, is indicative of an emerging quest for humanisation and liberation (Freire, 1972). Further, participants' notions of *aazaadi* in the findings, similar to Freire's conceptualisation of freedom, were associated with the desire for humanisation, an end to military oppression, and justice (Freire, 1972).

The participants' standpoints, however, altered once they had vented their frustration; non-violent means to establish peace in Kashmir was the preferred path for all the participants, including Zahid and Saqib. References to taking up weapons or fighting for peace shifted to finding a constructive solution that would help the situation in Kashmir while 'reflecting' on their lived experiences and aspirations. The participants in this study eventually disclosed a stronger preference for opportunities, progress, humaneness, harmony, non-violence and peace in Kashmir while describing the effects of violence and conflict, and their future. This shift in moral perspectives focused on the virtues and rules required for a stable Kashmir as well as their own betterment. These were similar to Taylor's moral philosophy that focuses on ideas of a good life (Kitchen, 1999). Extending the findings of similar studies on conflict regions in the world (Ahad et al., 2019; Majumdar, 2019; Zucchelli & Ugazio, 2019), this study phenomenologically shows that while violence influenced the moral perspectives and decision-making of youth, prolonged exposure to different forms of violence developed an intrinsic pluralistic understanding of what violence meant for them, in their context, history and background (MacIntyre, 1984).

With regards the shift in moral perspectives, it was interesting to note that the space for dialogue, i.e., the interviews for this study, had perhaps provided the participants an opportunity to examine their impulsive response of taking up arms, and to then to alter their choice of virtues for a cohesive Kashmir. Such an exploration of their own subject-ness and critical thinking (Biesta, 2013),

evidences the transformative potential of dialogue and active engagement with Kashmiri youth, as implored by W. Ali & Dar (2016).

The above discussion clearly shows that Kashmiri youth's moral perspectives are influenced by their personal experiences of military violence, and collective knowledge of its effects on the social fabric of Kashmir. Such influence of persistent and prolonged military violence manifested in the form of fear in their everyday life and decisions. They feared for their safety, feared for their family, feared an uncertain future in Kashmir, and feared the consequences if they spoke about Kashmir, or if they left Kashmir for a future in the other Indian States. Zahid recalled that it was not as much the fear of consequences that they themselves might face, but the consequences that could potentially impact their families that was a deep-rooted fear in Kashmiri youth.

FEAR AND OPPRESSION

Constant violence was a part of the participant's everyday life. This was evident through statements such as, "even if a gunshot passes by, we don't seem to take notice or are affected by it" (Kritika), or when Zahid added "it is true that guns are fired here every day. You can listen to the sound of the firing in every street here. All this is happening here every day." While Zahid and Saqib had the urge to fight against such constant violence and oppression they were living in, it was interesting to record the fear they felt of repercussions that their family might face if they joined militants to fight, or even if they spoke ill about the Indian Government.

Studies on Kashmir by Rafique et al. (2016) reported on the oppression and lack of representation for Kashmiri youth, while W. Ali and Dar (2016) found scepticism among the youth towards any possible resolution to their voice being heard. Such scepticism is not unfounded according to Kashmiri novelist Mirza Waheed (Essa, 2016) who believes that it is hard to "tell the difference between the media and state apparatus" (para. 6). The participants in this study were aware of the constant surveillance by the military and Indian Government – especially on any

interviews, social media, reports, or articles published by Kashmiri youth. This fear of talking about their lived experience or perspective could be the reason for insufficient data on this topic. Fear of being apprehended by the military or Government agencies has led to Kashmiri youth being outspoken on the inhuman violence they have endured. While there is bitterness and an urge to fight for peace, there is also fear of the consequences if they express their anger.

In a recent study on the conflict in Kashmir, Faheem (2020) found a similar perspective where “everyday life in a conflict zone like Kashmir is shaped by violence, surveillance and attendant uncertainties of the conflict” (p. 280). While personal recollections of the loss of family members, being beaten by the police, being taken away for questioning at the police station, or being humiliated by the army, as related by Zahid, Saqib and Zain, infuriated and frustrated the youth, their fear of consequences suppressed their anger. Similar to the views of Junaid (2020), the participants in this study cited the violence and oppression that existed outside their homes, noticeable even when they ran small errands, played with friends, visited family, or shopped with their family:

Meandering through urban bazaars, hiking nearby hills, or working in rural orchards evoked fear. Fraught with risk and violence, these practices of ordinary movement, mostly accomplished through walking, were, thus, a matter of existential concern as well as a crucial political problem. (Junaid, 2020, p. 303)

Junaid (2020) adds that curfews were sporadically imposed by the Government and could last for days to several months, unlike any other part of the world, with severe restrictions and an extraordinary system of control imposed on Kashmiris. All services, including essential and emergency services, Internet, and phone services in the region, were often restricted or shut down entirely. The military was known to use pellet guns during these curfews, to shoot people indiscriminately if they broke the curfew, or in response to the stone-pelting protests organised by Kashmiri youth. Young boys were often caught in these fights and could be blinded (Al Jazeera, 2021; BBC News, 2018; Human Rights Watch, 2020). Zahid knew some boys who were shot by military pellet guns: “You should see

the state of some of the boys in the village; they can't see anymore. It is sad to see them like this when not long ago, they used to play happily with us." The oppressive measures of the military have clearly affected not just the youth who were fighting, but also other youth and young children who were not involved in the struggle. Saqib, after being slapped by a police officer for laughing when there was stone-pelting in another street exemplifies this point. The findings showed, as in a study by F. A. Dar (2014), that irrespective of who causes the violence, Kashmiri youth are the demographic who are most affected.

These extreme levels of violence, oppressive measures and military presence were not uniform in Kashmir. The participants from Doda, which is a region closer to the mainland of India and further away from the border regions, reported that they experience relatively fewer forms of oppression. Kritika, from Doda, reiterated that they were "not in main Kashmir – we are quite far from it. We face much less than what they do." They still had a high military presence, but not as much violence. Studies (de Jong et al., 2008; Margoob et al., 2006) and news reports (Chauhan, 2019; Majid, 2019b) suggested the same perspective was held by Shreya and Kritika – that districts closer to the borders were considered more volatile, while districts such as Doda experienced fewer incidents of violence. Shreya also mentioned there had been a reduction in the army's presence in Doda over the years, while the other participants in border regions of Kashmir witnessed an increase in army personnel. Though they did not bear animosity towards the military, the mere presence of the military in Doda, however little, was discomfiting for them. Shreya and Kritika had never personally experienced military violence, nor were they aware of incidents. Knowledge of the military violence and enforcements in the border districts of Kashmir, through experiences shared by their teachers as Kritika mentioned, nevertheless, had a slight influence on their opinion of the military. They did not discuss militancy or Kashmiri youth's participation in violence. Their call for an end to violence, though they weren't experiencing the same levels of violence as the other participants, was based on their sense of connectedness to Kashmiri youth in the border districts. The collective sense of identity as

Kashmiri youth triggered a sense of empathy and inclusion in the participants from Doda, which made them resent the military. Such assertion of their identity, culture and cohesion as *Kashmiris*, and dissociation with the Indian State, was their expression of collective power and resistance against the oppression that their Kashmiri peers in the border regions were facing. Though Kritika and Shreya did not experience the same level of oppression, similar to the moral theorisation of Blackburn (2000), such observance of their Kashmiri identity, *Kashmiriyat*, was a 'subtle way' of fighting for liberation. Their moral choices were less influenced by experiences of military violence and fear of consequences and more by their collective identity as Kashmiris and their love for Kashmir.

Nonetheless, all the participants in the study, including Shreya and Kritika from Doda, had the same perspective of the Indian Government. They believed that the Indian bureaucracy and politics were responsible for the violence and instability in Kashmir. Their perspectives echo the views of K. Mukherjee (2014) that:

Human rights abuses caused by the Indian forces, the poverty, administrative failure and corruption all of which collectively have given rise to the current turmoil...[and] the policies which the Indian government has taken to deal with the ongoing conflict... to a large extent has exacerbated the already strained situation...[The] undemocratic laws like the armed forces special powers act...give Indian security personnel extraordinary powers to maintain law and order in the region...The Indian government, which is predominantly Hindu, is seen as an aggressor and the government's repressive measures in the region have angered Muslims. (pp. 46-47)

News reports (Chauhan, 2019; S. Mir, 2021) showed similar repressive measures adopted by the Indian Government in Kashmir and held the Government responsible for the prolonged state of conflict in Kashmir. Zia (2019) has detailed the oppressive violent means adopted by the present Indian Government against the Kashmiri people to transform Kashmir into a pro-India and pro-Hindu State. Military occupation, use of pellet guns to curb protests by Kashmiri youth, curfews, abolishing Article 370, and the repressive means against the Kashmiri-Muslims living in other parts of India, are

politically motivated with the aim of obliterating the unique *Kashmiriyat* (Zia, 2019). The participants in this study, across all regions, shared a similar perspective. Moreover, instances where Kashmiris speaking against the Indian Government were harmed, have instilled fear in the participants. The initial response of Mehvish that her future was dark, while appearing fatalistic, could also be interpreted as a rational reflection grounded on the fear of the consequences if they raised their voices against the oppression. If years of rebellion and demand for *azaadi* by Kashmiris only worsened the situation, and inaction by Kashmiris led to further oppression, then their future was dark in the “present conditions”. An end to the violence and giving Kashmiri youth a chance to have a normal life like youth in other parts of the world is what they wanted. Similar to the standpoint of Freire (1998), a humanised approach while thinking about their experiences of oppression, enabled the participants to arrive at their moral choices of what was needed for a more cohesive and stable Kashmir. Further, aligned with the pluralistic moral theory proposed by Taylor (1978) on the concept of a full life and realistic moral thinking, their moral thinking went beyond their obligations to Kashmir, and towards what *they* needed for a stable and full life. The idea of ‘stability’ was repeatedly linked with the idea of peace in the findings. Peace, for all the participants, was related to communal harmony, brotherhood, religion, and delinking religion from the conflict: “If we are kind to one another, respect everyone and consider all as our brethren, then the situation... in Kashmir will surely improve... All these conflicts are happening because we are differentiating based on religion” (Tabiya).

DELINKING THE CONFLICT FROM RELIGION

All the Muslim participants accepted the role of their religion and faith in Allah in the context of the conflict, violence, and oppression they were facing. Every statement was followed by “*Insha’Allah*” or a reference to the religious virtues that they abided by – humaneness, harmony, compassion and loving everyone irrespective of their religious background (Heck, 2006). Though stated in different words, this was evident in Zahid and Saqib’s reference to having good character, and in Tabiya,

Muskan and Mehvish's references to humanness and harmony being the essence of Islam, like other religions.

While the Muslim participants discussed the role of faith in the conflict and living by the religious principles of a good moral life, the two female Hindu participants did not mention or refer to their religion or faith in the interviews. Nonetheless, their perspective was that one needs to lead a good life, take care of their parents and help society; which parallels the teachings of *Karma* (righteous action) and *Dharma* (ethical duty to society) in Hinduism (Brodd & Sobolewski, 2009). The Hindu and Muslim female participants, however, believed that Kashmiri culture was grounded on communal harmony. Religion taught them to love and live in harmony, and not to cause conflict. While religion influenced all participants, the findings suggest that religion had a stronger influence on the lived experience and moral perspective of the Muslim participants. In contrast to minimal direct reference to religion by the Hindu participants, the Muslim participants referred to religion as being central to their everyday life and decisions. References to Sufi moral concepts (Chittick, 1989) of *zakat* (charity), *al-karim* (generosity), *al-muqsi'* (justice) and *al-wadud* (love) suggest the influence of religion in their choice of virtues needed for a cohesive Kashmir. They spoke of *namaz* (prayer) as giving them peace of mind amidst the constant violence and oppression they were facing. This experience finds partial resonance in the standpoint of Majumdar (2019), that "cultural and spiritual belief in times of strain ... helps [people in conflict regions] to maintain hope and continue through difficult times... this resource, which generates resilience... can be mobilised into amoral and disengaged acts of violence" (pp. 30-31). Religion, for the participants, was deeply linked with concepts of peace, not violence. Violence was associated with poverty, oppression, lack of opportunity to vent their frustration, and denial for Kashmiri youth to develop themselves personally; the conflict was not religious, it was political according to the Hindu and Muslim participants alike.

The Muslim participants in this study, living amidst violence, shared a similar perspective in their attitude, and decisions on matters of religion. While their moral perspective was influenced by

faith and their religious belief, religion appeared to be associated primarily with peace and harmony, and not with “amoral and disengaged acts of violence” as suggested by Majumdar (2019). S. Mohanty (2018) believed that religion was the motivating factor that drew Kashmir youth to fight first, considering the Government’s “Islamophobia” (Maizland, 2020). S. Mohanty (2018) noticed that with time, religion became less important for Kashmiri youth with greater importance placed on peace and freedom in Kashmir. The participants believed that linking the Kashmir conflict with religion was a perspective propagated by the Indian government – they believed religion had nothing to do with the conflict in Kashmir. The Muslim participants also agreed that they were aware that globally Islam was linked with violence. Drawing attention to a prejudiced view of Islam, Zahid felt that “just because some people from a particular religion do something wrong...doesn't make the religion or everyone belonging to the religion bad. There is good and bad in every religion.” The other participants pointed toward religious tolerance and harmony. The participants’ moral perspectives were in-line with the ideas of the syncretic religion of Kashmir (Bhatt, 2012).

Shreya believed that non-Kashmiris coming to Kashmir created religious differences in Kashmir. Contradicting Macdonald (2018), who was certain that the rise of the insurgent Islamist thinking had influenced Kashmiri youth to fight, the participants saw religion and faith inspired and motivated the participants to adopt a peaceful and non-violent means for peace in Kashmir. What appeared to initially motivate the male Muslim participants in this study to take up weapons was the glorification of militants and the pride of being martyred for Kashmir, not religion. Statements by Saqib that Islam did not entirely condemn the use of violence, as long as it was for the good of the people, and that there was some influence of religion in the violent retaliation of Kashmiri youth. The view that religion had nothing to do with the conflict as suggested by N. U. I. Wani (2017) had only partial resonance in the findings. The participants’ emphasis on the need to delink religion from violence, demonstrated their affinity with their religious ideals and the unique peaceful *Kashmiriyat* that they hoped to preserve. While religion had a deep influence on the moral perspective of the Muslim

participants, the desire to delink religion from the conflict and realise the political nature of the conflict, also influenced their thinking. An interpretation of the Hindu participants' narratives on the other hand showed that although their perspective was similar to Hindu moral philosophical concepts of compassion, harmony and empathy (Easwaran, 2007), they preferred to identify with a Kashmiri cohesive religion, and not as Hindus. Kritika, who was a Hindu, had mentioned that they were not like Hindus in India. Such dissociation as a Hindu, while being a Kashmiri, appeared to be influenced by the '*Islamophobia*' of the Hindu BJP Government, and the ill-treatment and marginalisation of Kashmiris in other parts of India by radicalised Hindus.

Without any alternative avenues, some Kashmiri youth resorted to violence seeking a solution to the prolonged violence and oppression. Retaliation with violence for them was, however, an unthinking reaction to the mention of the military violence and oppression, and not a solution for Kashmir's longstanding conflict. Fear of the consequences of participating in such violence or of talking about their experiences of violence, and a desperate desire for an end to all the violence in Kashmir to be able to live like people in other parts of India, were underlying thoughts in their decision-making. While it can be surmised that the phenomenon of conflict, broadly, has an influence on the moral perspective of Kashmiri youth, their everyday experience of oppression, violence and ill-treatment created a deeper and lasting impression on the moral perspective of Kashmiri youth.

While Kashmiri youth had potential and pathways to fight for peace without resorting to violence, as suggested by A. Kaul (2018), the participants in this study believed that their voices were often unheard due to the inherent bias and marginalisation of Kashmiri youth as terrorists or violent people. This marginalisation not only curbed their potential to fight without violence for change in Kashmir; it appeared to have also impacted their decisions in life, such as the possibility of creating peace in Kashmir education, thinking about the future, career, travelling, or even being considered the same as people in the rest of India. The next section will discuss their experience of being marginalised and stereotyped, which plays a significant role in their moral decision-making.

Experience of Marginalisation and Stereotyping

The positive aspect [is that] despite the prolonged suffering, conflict atmosphere and mental chaos, [Kashmiri youth] are not morally corrupt, they love their roots and culture... Kashmiriyat is their craze and hall mark of identity, and they are not [violent], what has been unfortunately labelled against them. (Shah, 2012, p. 26)

Descriptions of Kashmir and its culture by the participants in this study, suggested that Kashmir was just not a place or their home; their identity as Kashmiris had a deeper meaning for them. Kashmiri writer Nitasha Kaul (2011) could understand how a person who had lived or had visited Kashmir, would cherish the place forever. According to N. Kaul (2011, p. 45), “there are many ways of loving Kashmir”; be it appreciating its natural landscape, people, culture, literature, or the emotion and experience of living in Kashmir. Though the findings in this study were dominated by experiences of violence, oppression, and being overwhelmed by a constant sense of fear, none of the participants wanted to leave Kashmir. As Kritika said, “why will anyone leave *Kashmir*?!”

Some Kashmiri youth have migrated to other parts of India for higher education or better career opportunities. The participants in the study however were aware that these youth who migrated to Indian cities have shared instances of marginalisation, stereotyping, and even violence, just because they are Kashmiris.

DISCRIMINATION BASED ON IDENTITY

Over the last decade, Kashmiri youth have moved to other parts of India and the world in search of better job opportunities or for a better standard of education. While many Kashmiris have left Kashmir to develop careers or escape conflict: “the actual place where they feel they belong is Kashmir” (Pathak, 2021, para. 15). Pathak adds that the purpose of leaving Kashmir was purely for survival. He found that Kashmiri expatriates took great pride in identifying themselves as Kashmiris and often

clustered together to preserve their culture – the reason for creating such clusters being linked to the stereotyping of Kashmiris by Indians. Though the participants in this study saw an increase in stereotyping Kashmiris as terrorists after Burhan Wani was martyred in 2016, according to Pandit (2020), stereotyping and discrimination of Kashmiris living in other parts of India had worsened after the Pulwama attack and revocation of Article 370 in 2019. Kashmiri youth in India were often ejected from their homes by landlords or were denied accommodation in hotels or rentals based solely on their Kashmiri identity: “Here [Delhi] you don’t have to face shootings and you don’t have to show your I.D. all the time, but you never know when an Indian wants to kick you out” (C. Thomas, 2020, p. 70). The marginalisation and stereotyping of Kashmiris made a deep impression on the lives of Kashmiri youth, who were living in Indian cities for education or work; it fuelled their animosity and hatred towards the Indian Government for misrepresenting Kashmiris in India.

According to I. H. Bhat (2019), a lecturer at Delhi University whose parents still live in Kashmir, years of representing Kashmiris as violent people by the Indian media, had reached “a point where a common Indian refuses to look at Kashmir from a rational humanistic perspective” (para. 12). Bhat believes that while violence against Kashmiris is applauded or goes unnoticed in other parts of India, instances where Hindu or army personnel are killed in Kashmir, often results in threats and violence against Kashmiri youth residing in other parts of India. Bhat listed incidents where Kashmiri youth living in Indian cities were targeted and attacked after the Pulwama attack in 2019: “Outside several college dorms where Kashmiri students resided, menacing mobs gathered — in some instances breaking in and beating up a few — calling out ‘shoot the traitors of India’” (I. H. Bhat, 2019, para. 6). The Kashmiri participants in a study by C. Thomas (2020) also reported that while they had been living in Indian cities such as Delhi for several years, fear was the main emotion they felt. Though they did not have to fear military violence in Indian cities and were offered a more stable education with better job prospects, they felt a stronger sense of belonging and safety in Kashmir. This is a similar perspective to the participants in this study who reflected that “the danger to be killed doesn’t impede

the fact that [Kashmir] is home” (C. Thomas, 2020, p. 69). Despite the difficulties they faced the participants added that they preferred to live amidst the violence, oppression, and fear within Kashmir than face the humiliation and marginalisation in Indian cities.

The participants in this study described instances where they knew of other Kashmiri youth who were abused, ill-treated, or denied facilities in Indian cities as they were Kashmiri Muslims – Kashmiri Pandits (Hindus) faced less discrimination. As Tabiya and Mehvish pointed out, fear was deep-rooted in the minds of Kashmiris especially knowing instances where “people who have gone out have been killed – the dead body of students is then brought back”. These incidents instilled fear in the minds of parents, according to Mehvish, who consequently disallow them from leaving Kashmir for education or work. This was made explicit in Mehvish’s statement where she outlined that considering the discrimination they faced as Kashmiri Muslims in other Indian cities, meant that whatever must be achieved, must be in Kashmir. Such instances discouraged them from leaving Kashmir even if it was for their personal growth. All the participants made their preference clear to stay in Kashmir, despite the hardship and constant violence. Kashmir, for Kashmiri youth, was beyond a place: it represented a sense of security, care, respect, comfort and assurance, that could not be extended to any other place (D. M. Smith, 2007). While they placed emphasis on their identity as Kashmiris, place and social contexts played a significant role in the moral structures and choices of Kashmiri youth. Association of rationale, aspirations, experiences, decisions and moral choices, with Kashmir, indicates the influence of geographical locatedness on the moral perspectives of Kashmiri youth.

Tabiya did not condone the violence initiated by Kashmiri youth in Kashmir. While some Kashmiri youth were involved in violent action, she believed that just like other societies and countries, Kashmir too had a mix of different kinds of people, and it was not justified to stereotype the whole culture based on the violent actions of some Kashmiris. Fear of possible violence or discrimination they may experience in Indian cities influenced many of the participants in planning for

their future pathways. The decision not to leave Kashmir was also linked to their preference to stay with their families. Fear of harm to themselves outside Kashmir, or their family while they were away, was inherent in their minds. It was a harsh reality check to see that the participants preferred an unstable life, constant violence, and oppression by the military, over the potential discrimination and injustice they may have faced outside Kashmir. Fear of discrimination away from the family influenced their choice of location. Such fear was specifically mentioned by the Muslim participants. The above reports (I. H. Bhat, 2019; India Today, 2019) reporting on violence and ill-treatment of Kashmiris also gave accounts of discrimination against the Kashmiri Muslims. Kritika, who was a Hindu, had mentioned that people in other parts of India discriminated on the basis of religion, while Muslim participants believed the discrimination was based on their Kashmiri identity. While the participants saw their reasons for not leaving Kashmir to be linked with fear, marginalisation and discrimination, the underlying rationale for their preference to stay in Kashmir could be linked to their moral choice of preserving and protecting their identity and taking care of their family and community. This parallels Blackburn's (2000) perspective that the choice of observance of their distinct culture and identity could be considered an expression of their power. As discussed at the start of this section, Pathak (2021) discerned the difficult choice moral choice faced by Kashmiri expatriates was to preserve their culture and identity, over assimilation or blending with the local culture. There appears a resonance here with the communitarian ideas of MacIntyre and Taylor (Bell, 2020; Caney, 1993) in how the participants' individual character and moral perspective are embedded in their culture and community; which they choose to prioritise over their individual choice in leaving Kashmir.

An interpretation of the findings shows that the participants believed that Indian people were being misled by the Indian Government's representation of Kashmiris as violent people or as terrorists; positive aspects of Kashmiris and the reality were unknown to Indians unless they interacted with Kashmiris themselves. The participants believed that Indian people did not know the reality and hence they trusted whatever was shown to them by Indian media. Though the participants faced

discrimination and violence by Indian people outside Kashmir, they linked it to the influence of the Indian Government and the media affecting the mindset of Indian people. The participants rationally identified the cause of discrimination against them in Indian cities and pointed the blame on the Government, not the people.

MISREPRESENTATION BY GOVERNMENT

The Indian media has been selective in its coverage of Kashmir. It avoids sensitive stories and at times manufactures opinions favourable to the state. TV channels carefully choose individuals who utter statements, wittingly or unwittingly, to suit the program and the 'national interest'. (Nazakat, 2012, p. 72)

The role of the Indian Government and media in misrepresenting the reality of Kashmir's conflict has been documented, not just by the participants of this study, but also by international news agencies and journalists (Devadas, 2016; Pandow, 2021). The story of Kashmir is presented as a one-sided story where Kashmiris are represented as militants or violent people. The actions of the military are not reported as it is not in the 'national interest' to do so (Nazakat, 2012). As suggested by Mehvish, the military and Kashmiri youth are both engaged in violent acts, but the violence of the Kashmiris is presented without any context. Such misrepresentation of their stories out of context, according to T. Singh (1996), alienates Kashmiris and keeps the people in other parts of India ignorant about what was actually happening in Kashmir. It misleads the Indian population, drives a wedge between Kashmiris and the rest of India, marginalises Kashmiris, and perpetuates the "us-versus-them" (Devadas, 2016, para. 10) conflict narrative. The participants in the study shared a similar perspective about the increasing marginalisation due to misrepresentation. They referred to Kashmiris as 'us', and the Indian population as 'them'. While they acknowledged that they were a part of India, they did not consider themselves Indians. The divide had been ingrained in their mind to the extent that Kashmiris did not appear to find any commonality with 'Indians'. An interpretation of their

references to 'us' and 'them' indicates that while Kashmir was geographically a part of India, Kashmiris were not Indians.

Maizland (2020), has seen the deliberate marginalisation of Kashmiris under the Hindu nationalist BJP Government. The Government's policies for the last decade towards Kashmir, the only Muslim majority region in the country, according to Maizland (2020), have been detrimental to Kashmiris and are directed towards the obliteration of the Kashmiri identity. Female participants in this study firmly believed that the violence in Kashmir had taken a religious turn because of radical Hindus and the Government's prejudice against Kashmiris. In a recent study, Karmakar (2021) found that the BJP Government had misrepresented the conflict as being grounded on religion, disregarding the unique and harmonious Kashmiri culture: "The Kashmir issue, historically, has nothing to do with religion. The issue has always been political. The people of J&K... have always had a unique cultural and unique political identity of which official history does not take cognizance" (Karmakar, 2021, p. 9). According to the female participants, the violence in Kashmir was a political conflict that turned into a religious issue to divide Kashmiris from the rest of the country. Shreya, who is a Hindu, indicated that religious differences existed in the minds of people outside Kashmir, which the Government fuelled by provoking Indian people against Kashmiris. The participants felt that some Indians tended to blindly trust the Government's misrepresentation, and distanced themselves from Kashmiris, unaware of the harmony in Kashmir and the reality of the region. As Karmakar (2021) stated, the idea of *Kashmiriyat* is deeply linked with pluralism and religious unity, and was bound to the ideas of preservation of Kashmiri identity and culture. The moral precepts of the Kashmiris, according to S. Singh and Poddar (2021), are centred on social transformation, humanisation and freedom; not on religion.

Maizland (2020) sheds light on the worsening of conditions in Kashmir with the BJP Indian Government's '*Islamophobia*' and oppression of Kashmiris based on their Muslim identity. With Article 370 being revoked and further restrictions imposed with strict curfews, higher military presence, and

extended Internet-blackouts Kashmir has become even more isolated. Ellis (2020) also believes that the local Kashmiris have become more sceptical of the Indian Government since Article 370 was revoked, fearing “Kashmir will lose its identity, we will just be subsumed into a much bigger Hindu India” (para. 10). As reported by BBC News (2019a), the BJP Government has popularised and celebrated the removal of Article 370 as a means to develop and integrate Kashmir with the rest of the country. The participants in this study, however, described worsening conditions with stricter curfews and increased violence and fear in the Valley. They believed the Government had manipulated the Indian people into thinking this was a means to help Kashmir, while deceptively concealing the real motive and impact in Kashmir.

Describing the means used by the Indian Government to falsify and misrepresent Kashmiris in the media, Oberoi (1997), described his experience of being kidnapped by *Ikhwan* (a counterinsurgent group funded by Indian security): “kidnapping was unusual not because of what happened – Government-supported militants seizing members of the press and then walking away unmolested” (Oberoi, 1997, p. 25). Oberoi considered it unusual because he was encouraged by the *Ikhwan* to report it. These incidents tend to be publicised as Kashmiris kidnapping journalists, to give the impression that Kashmiris are aggressive; leaving out the details of the kidnappers being *Ikhwan*, or that the army let them go free with their unlicensed weapons in hand. As a result, people around the world reading such news generalise Kashmiris as militants, which also scares tourists and reporters away from Kashmir. Similar incidents were discussed by the participants who gave examples of violent acts by the military, that were not publicised by the Indian media. The participants in the study were appalled at how the media “change details and falsify information about Kashmir. All that they say is untrue. Even if we do something good for another, they will say that we hurt that person (Zahid)”. According to Mehvish and Shreya, Indian media only portrayed Kashmiri youth as violent people kidnapping or killing people, without discussing the violence caused by the Indian military.

In a collection of verses by various Kashmiri youth, the misrepresentation of Kashmiris has been poignantly captured: “I am drenched and soaked in blood, / Yet they call me a rebel worthy to be punished. / And the one with the weapon that inflicts the pain, / For them, Messiah is he: When last did I cry” (Waseem Raja, 2022, p. 21). The verses display the emotion that while they have been the victims of violence, and have been terrorised by the Indian armed forces, they have been portrayed as terrorists by Indian media. Qasir and Tuz (2013) draw attention to Indian movies, such as *Kashmir Ki Kali*, *Roja*, *Mission Kashmir* and *Haider*, with storylines where Kashmiris are portrayed as rebels and terrorists who harm innocent Indians. This recurring portrayal of Kashmiris as terrorists in all forms of Indian media has led to this misrepresentation of Kashmiri youth. Kritika believes that Indian media has tried to increase the divide between the people of India and Kashmir by describing Kashmiris as ‘dangerous’ people: “They turn Kashmiri youth into some kind of homogenous entity and paint them as the 'other'. [They] also build a hateful stereotype of Kashmiri youth in the rest of India and create an anti-Kashmiri sentiment” (A. Yasir, 2015, para. 3). According to Junaid (2016), the Indian military photographers and media:

have circulated pictures of dead Kashmiri militants that show them dishevelled and bloodied, with torn clothes and limbs out of joint, presenting the figure of the Kashmiri rebel as a wild, hunted felon. The intent has been clear: criminalize their thoughts and bodies and show them as existing beyond the pale of society and humanity. (para. 1)

By isolating Kashmiris and marginalising them, it was easier for the Indian military to use violence in the valley without accountability. Farooq (2020) added that apart from contributing to an escalation of the Kashmir conflict, national media had been instrumental in alienating Kashmiris from the rest of India: “The media should debate on good governance in J&K rather than creating false narratives to portray the common Kashmiris as ‘agents of Pakistan’ or as terrorists” (Farooq, 2020, para. 3). The participants believed that not knowing the reality of Kashmir, Indians trusted the

Government and media blindly. The predominant experiences of Kashmiri youth studying or working in various parts of India, as a result, were being marginalised and stereotyped.

It is, evident in the findings that the participants, through some media reports (Kuchay, 2019; The Indian Express, 2019), were aware that they had support and empathy from their Indian counterparts; this gave Kashmiri youth encouragement and reassurance that not all Indians agreed with the Government's misrepresentation of Kashmir: "We treat the Hindu tourists who come here for their pilgrimage with respect. They too say that they are treated well... We want everyone who comes here to have a wonderful experience. (Zahid)". The understanding and mindset they had towards Indian people resonated with Sufi moral ideals of *al-muqsi'* (justice) and *al-wadud* (love) (Chittick, 1989), and the Hindu moral ideal of *karuṇa* (compassion) to see the light in the darkness (Easwaran, 2007). Though the participants were marginalised by Indian people, they reflected and bore no ill-will – they described love for Indian people. Since *Kashmiriyat* was a culture that was based on religious tolerance and harmony, as MacIntyre (1984) has suggested, moral perspectives were influenced by the virtues "generally possessed and cultivated in our community" (p. 161). It can therefore be surmised that while the Indian Government's approach towards Kashmiris had an influence on the perspectives of Kashmiri youth, sympathy and support from a section of the Indian population had a deeper influence on their opinion of Indians and a moral perspective.

Experiences of being hurt by radical Hindus who believed the Government's misrepresentation influenced the perspectives of the Kashmiri youth, as well as Indians. As a result, the Kashmiri youth were neither able to leave Kashmir for education or better opportunities, nor would Indians interact with the Kashmiris freely because of the fear that media had instilled in their minds. While Indians feared talking to Kashmiris assuming they would be harmed, based on the Government's misrepresentation of Kashmiris, Kashmiri youth were hesitant to interact with Indians fearing they were military informants, Hindu radicals, or would hurt them based on their identity as a Kashmiri.

DISTRUST OF INDIAN PEOPLE

Zain stated that tourists often visited Kashmir but did not interact with the locals to understand their perspectives. Tabiya said that Kashmiris loved interacting with tourists and were happy when they got a chance to have conversations about Kashmir with them. According to her, the Indians were apprehensive about talking to Kashmiris because of the stereotyping of Kashmiris as dangerous or violent people. All the participants emphasised the value of Indians talking to local people to know the reality of Kashmir. Varma (2018) who studied the psychological trauma of Kashmiris, recognised that the disregard and stereotyping by Indians towards the violence, pain and suffering that Kashmiris live through, also encourages Kashmiri distrust of Indian people. The participants in the study were hesitant to participate in this study since I was an Indian. According to Ellard-Gray et al. (2015), vulnerable participants tend to distrust researchers owing to their past experiences where their identity was disclosed or misused. Zahid signalled a hesitancy amongst Kashmiris, in general, to talk to researchers about their lives or perspectives. This hesitancy was based on past experience where the identity of a Kashmiri was disclosed to the Government or military, which had resulted in severe consequences for the Kashmiri family. While the participants' hesitancy to participate in this research was initially based on their distrust of Indian people's prejudices, fear of the consequences appeared to be inherent in their lived experience and moral perspective, including a mundane conversation with an Indian.

The enthusiastic participation throughout the interviews was proof that they wanted to talk to people, and, wanted Indians to know about the reality of Kashmir. Their hesitancy was based on the inherent bias in the minds that some Indians understood Kashmiris as violent. According to Tabiya, Indians too were hesitant to approach and talk to Kashmiris. They seldom got such an opportunity as "[non-Kashmiri Indians] consider Kashmiris to be terrorists" (Tabiya). The underlying sense of fear in their moral perspective and decision-making echoes Gadamer's standpoint that ideas of fear, desire, hope or belief are embedded in the historical consciousness of an individual: "There can be no doubt

that the great horizon of the past, out of which our culture and our present live, influences us in everything we want, hope for, or fear in the future” (Gadamer, 2007, p. 82). Gadamer (2002) and MacIntyre (Lutz, 2014) would add that moral decision-making has an inextricable link with history, prejudice, rationality, tradition and context. These links were evident from the participants’ perspectives. Their distrust of the Indian system of justice, rejection of the view that the Indian military was for their protection, and their hesitancy to talk to Indians was linked to their historical experience of prejudice and marginalisation. They rationalised that oppression was a function of the Indian Government, which influenced Indian people. Though the participants faced marginalisation and injustice by some Indian people, their animosity was directed towards the Indian Government, and not the people. Reiterating MacIntyre’s moral philosophy and the important role of practical reasoning in moral decision-making, Miller (2014) wonders if “the question of whether one should choose this or that particular action...has certain logical priority” (p. 379). While the Kashmiri participants’ lived experience and history contributed to their fundamental ideas of morality, what was best for Kashmir and their own future, their perspective contained logical and rational reasoning when probed further.

The participants' views highlighted injustice, marginalisation and stereotyping of Kashmiris by Indians which appeared to indicate a skewed perspective toward all Indians. Regardless, of their experience and perspective, once the rapport was created, participants were extremely enthusiastic to share their thoughts freely with me, and repeatedly invited me to visit them. Their joy in hosting Indian tourists and pilgrims exhibited the inherent moral structures of Kashmiri youth, that could delink the identity of Indian people from the Government. They held that their animosity was primarily directed at the Indian Government and military presence. As suggested by Freire (1972), discovering the oppressor is the first stage of the quest for humanisation. The participants showed reflective reasoning and practical moral decision-making to identify their oppressors. Their fight for the development and betterment of their conditions in Kashmir was a result of raising their consciousness

and hoping for humanisation. While this involved an end to violence, it was also linked to sustained education, learning opportunities and a tangible future. Their aspirations, be it becoming a professor, policymaker, or doctor, involved sustained and relevant education. Mehvish, however, admitted: “What could be our future possibly? Even if we studied day and night, we have missed learning the basics of our education. We didn’t learn anything. We couldn’t learn... We couldn’t...”

Experience of Education and Self-learning

Any political system plays a crucial role in our education system, but as per the present situations, [Indian] educational processes seem to be full of bluff and errors... There is no set policy for transfers, no set parameters for government-run schools, no practical guidelines for teachers, no grass-root expert who can advise the government on real functioning and making model schools and other intricacies. (U. Wani, 2021, paras. 5, 12).

Education, for the participants in this study, appeared to be closely linked with the conflict in Kashmir. Their perspective and experience of education were predominantly associated with academic learning in schools. While schools provided them with the space to interact with peers and receive guidance from their teachers, the curriculum, according to the male participants, was not relevant to the context of Kashmir. Similar to the observations by S. Singh (2018) and Khan et al. (2018), Kashmiri researcher U. Wani (2021) has pointed out that the education curriculum and policies in Kashmir have always been designed by the Central Government. These are designed by Indian educators, without consideration of the effects of the conflict, and the fundamental challenges that face students. These include a lack of sustained access to education, for over two years, and an inability to access educational resources. Educational institutions across Kashmir, implement the policies and teach the curriculum recommended by the Ministry, given the lack of context-appropriate alternatives. The participants echoed the views of Galloway (2012) that the oppressive Government

denied humanising and critical education, as it could expose the 'workings of power' and might encourage ideas of transformation, liberation and humanisation. The participants believed that the Government had perpetuated the disparity in education between Kashmir and the rest of the country to ensure Kashmiri youth did not have access to relevant education. Similar to the views of A. S. Wani (2022), the participants accepted that the present generation of youth self-learned via the Internet, and expressed their views on social media; which they considered a space to share their views anonymously. The discussion below examines the participants' perspective on the role that education in Kashmir, and what they feel can be achieved through education to create a cohesive Kashmir, in order to understand the influence of education on their moral perspective.

DISPARITY IN EDUCATION

The fear of violence, curfews and institutional closures affected all the participants' access to education. They stated that institutional closures for months, and the lack of resources to suit their contextual challenges, was serious impediment to their learning. Saqib said that apart from the frequent Internet shutdowns, many Kashmiris could not afford laptops and mobiles to access online resources. Mehvish agreed that though there was nothing taught to them, and they did not learn concepts or gain any knowledge, they nevertheless passed their examinations based on rote memorisation. This experience suggests that the role of education in Kashmir was limited to the transfer of information from the teacher to students, similar to the traditional system adopted in India (Narayan, 2000). This has been described by Freire (1972) as the "banking concept of education" (p. 72). Aspects of thinking and cognition, and the ability to explore their own subject-ness, which Biesta (2013) referred to as 'subjectification', were missing from this style of education for the participants. Their perspectives of the educational system in Kashmir question the very role of education and its purpose for the Kashmiri youth.

The system and approach to, education in Kashmir from the perspective of Zain, Tabiya and Muskan was that they “could not learn anything” since schools were closed for the past couple of years. Their view was that while public spaces such as markets tend to be open, educational institutions remained closed: “Everyone goes out and drives around in their cars. But schools, colleges and the university were closed. The children are the ones that finally are losing out on everything” (Muskan). This finds resonance in the standpoint of A. Wani (2021) attributed the lack of priority given to education in Kashmir by the Government, to the rising number of NGO-led educational initiatives such as ‘*mohalla*’ (community) schools to ensure there is some form of learning for the young Kashmiris. Past surveys by educators in Kashmir (F. L. Khan, 2020) also report the disinterest in education and “an increase in school drop-out rates after disruption to education, and...months of curfew almost every other year in the valley” (para. 9). The participants added that being denied access to education resulted in depression and being idle for months. They believed that the discontinuity and lack of priority for learning, eventually left them unfit to be employed or to compete with Indian students.

According to the participants in this study, the standard of education, access to it, and educational policy in Kashmir demonstrated the disparity between Kashmiri education provision and the rest of the country. Saqib complained that “the standard of education that children receive in India is much better and higher compared to us. We do not even have sustained education and learning”. The purpose of education in Kashmir was still limited to completion of the curriculum; not learning or preparation for future growth. Mehvish believed that they “do not have any basic [education]. My friends and I feel that what chance do we have of competing with the children from outside?” The participants believed that education in Kashmir was a low priority for the Government. While students in India had access to online learning, and reliable Internet for learning during the pandemic, since 2019 Kashmir’s “schools were closed...We were simply sitting at home. We lost interest in studies. We just went to take exams to qualify. But we couldn’t study or gain any understanding or learning”

(Mehvish). These perspectives of the study participants exemplify the disparity in education between Kashmir and the rest of India.

The participants' only point of comparison in education was with their Indian peers, who were exposed to the same traditional system (Narayan, 2000). The participants were unaware that there could be critical pedagogies, such as the approaches of Biesta (2013) and Freire (1972), that could be student-centred. The participants found a disparity in the quality of curriculum they received, access to institutional learning, and provision for additional support and resources, in comparison to education in the other Indian States. Echoing the views of Nadaf (2021), while the conflict had deprived Kashmiri youth of sustained education, the pandemic had exacerbated the disparity in education with the Internet being shut down, and there being a lack of alternative resources for the students to learn. The Government's shift to online education throughout the country during the pandemic, including Kashmir, had a profound effect on their academic learning. A key reason being that the Government had failed to consider the technological challenges facing Kashmiri students. The study participants knew that this was another disparity in education within Kashmir. Economically challenged and rural youth within Kashmir, were most affected as they did not own mobile phones or laptops for online learning, in comparison to the students from urban areas of Kashmir who had access to these devices.

As Freire (1972) discovered, denying education is a means of oppression used by the oppressor to ensure the oppressed do not become knowledgeable and fight for liberation. He believed that: "it would be a contradiction in terms if the oppressors not only defended but actually implemented a liberating education" (Freire, 1972, p. 54), which might otherwise encourage critical thinking, learning and dialogue. Freire believed that a liberating education would enable the oppressed to become more conscious of their oppression, which would lead to ideas of transformation and humanisation. Education that can liberate, as suggested by Freire (1972), would involve thought and action towards the liberation of the oppressed. Applying this notion to the participants'

experience of education, it appeared that the Indian Government denied a good standard of sustained education to Kashmiri youth, under the assumption that if they were given a good education, instead of "teaching them subordination, it would render them fractious and refractory...it would enable them to read seditious pamphlets, vicious books and publications" (Niebuhr, 2010, p. 119) against India. Freire's opinion rings true in the case of Kashmir. Unlike previous generations who relied solely on attending school to learn, the present generation of Kashmiri youth relied on the Internet and social media to learn. Though the Internet did not enable them to learn about educational concepts, the participants were knowledgeable about world events. There was mention of the conflict in Syria and Palestine, celebrations and protests in India on the revocation of Article 370, and the educational achievements of youth in other parts of India during the interviews. They were fully aware of the widening disparity in knowledge and education between themselves and the youth in the rest of India. Unaided by a formal liberating education that allowed them to explore their subject-ness (Biesta, 2013; Freire, 1992), the participants showed that they had developed an awareness of their selfhood and identity by critically reflecting on the conflict in Kashmir, and similar conflict regions in the world. Self-learning and informal avenues for gaining knowledge had instead shaped their moral perspectives and their ideas to transform Kashmir's education; the same educational system that denied them of a transformative and liberating education.

The approach of Kashmiri youth to find their ways to learn in the face of institutional closures imposed by the Government, again parallels Blackburn's (2000) findings, that oppressed individuals have subtle ways and means of expressing their power, and upholding their culture and identity. Though the participants were denied access to sustained education, instead of being fatalistic, they found their own ways to learn. They were learning about the world from the Internet, rather than from their academic institutions. Similar to the findings by Pain et al. (2021), Saqib stated that due to the lack of Internet and limited resources, the students helped one another and shared resources if they lived nearby. Some teachers also attempted to provide personalised resources to their students.

The participants believed that the institutions and the Government had not made any attempts to provide any additional assistance to the students. It was their peers, some teachers, and local NGOs who had helped to provide them with some level of education. From the findings of this study and the views of M. A. Khan et al. (2018), it is evident that work undertaken by local NGOs to bridge the gap in the disparity in education in Kashmir had a significant influence on Kashmiri youth.

Saqib, Mehvish, Muskan and Zain were convinced that educational support and initiatives like books, resources and tuition offered by grassroots organisations and local NGOs had made an impact on their lives. There was a sense of gratitude in Saqib's language when he exclaimed: "They have helped many children like me. They provide uniforms, books and assist with admissions... [for] those who can't afford [to pay] ...There will soon be a point where everyone will have the same access to education." Zahid saw that NGOs were providing support beyond education, giving the guidance that Kashmiri youth needed: "If we did not have organisations and foundations, there would be more young people killed or depressed or committing suicide." In Rather and Thanikodi's (2016) opinion, NGOs played the role of educational institutions in Kashmir for decades, by supporting young Kashmiris with educational resources and creating a space to discuss their life perspectives. Other studies on Kashmir (Mahajan & Narayanamurthy, 2021; A. Suri, 2004) have pointed out that since educational institutions have remained closed for most of the year in Kashmir, local NGOs have been instrumental in providing space and opportunity for Kashmiri youth, to receive education through remedial classes, share their moral perspectives on the challenges in Kashmir, and engage with educators for guidance on their life-decisions. As Mehvish perceived, Kashmiri youth had a chance for a better future only if the disparity in education was prioritised by the Government and Education Board, with significant changes implemented in education. From the participants' responses and literature, it is evident that educational initiatives by local NGOs had a significant influence aside from schools and colleges in Kashmir, on the moral perspective of Kashmiri youth.

These findings demonstrate a willingness to learn, a curiosity about the world, and the skill to acquire information if desired. Even if there was disparity, the participants showed a passion and eagerness to be educated and learn as they believed that by being educated, they could change the lives of future generations. It was evident in the findings that the unstable education system and knowledge of the disparity in that system compared unfavourably to other Indian youth, who influenced the moral perspective of Kashmiri youth. Similar to Freire's perspective, being more educated than the previous generation through social media or intermittent schooling, had empowered the youth with the ability to read, reflect and examine the oppression that they were experiencing. Such knowledge was, however, missing critical reflection and constructive dialogue towards emancipation and transformation (Biesta, 2010). Their ability to analyse rationally, and cite experiences to exemplify their perspectives, indicate the influence of informal education and learning on their thinking.

CRITICAL THINKING, WITHOUT DIALOGUE

Education, learning and gaining knowledge about the world, were gained largely through social media and the Internet by Kashmiri youth. Such a process of self-learning, with minimal help from an academic environment, taught them to navigate and examine information that was relevant to them, their community, and Kashmir. The participants demonstrated knowledge of education and life in other Indian cities, conflict in Syria, stereotyping of Muslims in other parts of the world, and what freedom people enjoy in regions without conflict. While such knowledge and ability to rationalise displayed their curiosity, willingness to find means to learn, and the ability to adapt to their contextual challenges, the online experience did not provide opportunities for the participants to think critically, gain conceptual knowledge, or learn about ways of living to explore their own subject-ness (Biesta, 2013; Freire, 1972).

Developing their ideas through Internet sources appeared to be the rationale behind Saqib and Zahid's belief that higher education had prompted martyrs like Manan Wani to become militants. Saqib's perspective that studying further would lead him to take up weapons, drew on articles he had read online, about the ideology and background of educated militants such as Manan Wani. His online learning, without dialogue or critical thinking, about educated Kashmiri youth becoming martyrs, appeared to have led the male participants to assume that education plays a key role in igniting their minds, to think deeper about fighting against oppression. Slater (2019) has noticed that "educated Kashmiris have long been present among the militants. But [with] social media, such examples are gaining new prominence" (para. 18). In his study on educated Kashmiri militants, Gani Mir (2019) found an increasing number of educated youth joining militant groups, attributing this trend to the rising frustration among educated youth due to personal loss, the prolonged state of instability and violence, and the glorification of educated Kashmiri youth who are being martyred for Kashmir's freedom. The education system that is implemented in Kashmir is, however, based on the outmoded banking concept, hence, without dialogue or critical thinking.

As suggested by Freire (1972), education requires critical thinking and dialogue directed toward ideas of transformation of society. Education is a space for the oppressed to realise their naivety about the oppression they have been facing, and to deepen their critical consciousness. This motivates them to realise that instead of relying on revolutionary leadership, "they must fight for their [own] liberation" (p. 67). Such a fight for liberation, however, according to Freire (1998) and Biesta (2010), is directed towards ideas of transformation, contributing towards upliftment of the oppressed, and not violence. Tabiya mentioned that she missed the interaction with her peers and the implicit learning from her teachers "about life – they encouraged us to think and do something with our lives", which was a crucial aspect of dialogue in education, for the liberation of the oppressed. Tabiya's association with her institution as a space where she could talk about life and receive guidance about her decisions from her teachers, shows the potential in an educator's position as a 'guide on the side'

(Biesta, 2019), for humanising Kashmiri youth. Prolonged institutional closures and the inability to communicate with educators outside their institutions, however, limit the possibility for educators to influence the moral perspective of Kashmiri youth.

A glimpse of the potential for humanisation through dialogue was also evidenced in the interviews where the perspective of the male participants shifted from the association of education with becoming a militant to the need for a non-violent transformative fight against oppression. This study's phenomenological approach provided the participants, with a dialogical space where they shared their perspectives with assertions, contradictions and the experience they would share freely with a "fellow traveller on a train journey" (Bude, 2004, p. 323). The shift in perspective and depth of thought reiterates the standpoint of Holt (2010), that narrative interviews in phenomenological studies appear to provide emancipatory outcomes for the participants. There was a movement in thought from ideas of retaliation and fighting for peace and freedom, to narrations that accepted the need for an end to violence, betterment of Kashmir, and involvement of Kashmiri youth in the change.

While the experience of the interviews aligned with the dialogical approach of Biesta & Säfström (2011) and Freire (1998), to raise the consciousness of the oppressed and enable critical thinking, the participants' education did not include 'subjectification'. This could be once again attributed to the banking system of education adopted in Kashmir which is concerned only with 'depositing knowledge'. Drawing on the purpose of education outlined by Biesta (2013), education in Kashmir was solely for 'qualification' with its focus on learning job-oriented skills (Jammu Kashmir Board Of School Education (JKBOSE), 2022). Missing from their educational experience was 'socialisation' and subjectification'. The sole purpose of their education was on 'qualification' where they acquired conceptual knowledge (Biesta, 2013). The learning that was taking place for Kashmiri youth, did not provide them with the opportunity to discuss, deliberate and broaden their perspective due to the lack of peer learning or dialogue. As a result of the institutional closures and the conflict, according to F. A. Dar (2014), "education institutions in Kashmir have struggled to provide such a space

[for dialogue]" (p. 3). The participants said that the only form of interaction they had with their friends was through telephone calls, where they could talk about their moral perspective on what was best for a cohesive Kashmir. Fear of stepping out, and the institutional closures had ceased all forms of in-person interaction with their peers. The possibility of their telephone calls being monitored also instilled fear in freely talking about their perspective or experience. In an interview, Nyla Ali Khan, a Kashmiri researcher, asserted that educators could "create safe spaces where diverse groups can come together, forge dialogue, listen and talk to one another respectfully as well as empathetically" (Karmakar, 2021, p. 8). Zahid, the last participant in the study, who was also hesitant to participate and share freely at the start, eventually agreed that what Kashmiri youth required was a space where they would not be judged or their voices suppressed: "I felt that if you are keen on talking to us and studying about what we think, you will not be like the others...Every time we have tried to highlight our voices, we have been suppressed" (Zahid).

Here, Freire's notion of denying a liberating form of education to perpetuate oppression could be considered as the rationale for the lack of focus on 'subjectification' in education. This could provoke young Kashmiris to examine their own identity and ways of living that may, or may not align with the social order, and thereby think critically about oppression and freedom. While the participants' statements suggest that denial of education and space for dialogue is a political move, to perpetuate oppression, the traditional educational approach across the country, as Narayan (2000) realised, made liberating education for Kashmiri youth, an impossibility. Though Kashmiri youth moved to the next grades, based on rote-memorisation of the curriculum and mass promotions in examinations, they did not have the space to discuss moral deliberations of what was good/not good in relation to real life. Gadamer (2007) believed that while theoretical knowledge and skills are essential, reflection on one's own character, moral reasoning, and role in society was fundamental for a cohesive communal life. These findings underline that while the participants gained qualifications

and, potentially, some knowledge from rote memorisation and self-learning, the lack of space for reflection and subjectification, influenced their moral decision-making.

It was interesting to note that though the participants saw the need for space and dialogue in education and better learning opportunities, the role of education, for them, was mainly a pathway for employment and economic growth. Employment opportunities were, however, largely Government jobs. Due to the lack of alternatives in employment, and rising economic challenges, the participants stated that they did not have a choice but to work in Government offices. Though they believed that the Indian Government was antagonising Kashmiris, they hoped that by working with the Indian Government as policymakers, doctors, or educators, they could rise to positions of power and eventually transform Kashmir. More than their education, the influence of economic challenges and lack of future opportunities appeared to have a greater influence on their moral decision-making.

Experience of Social Instability

Unfortunately, the ability of Kashmiri youth to be engaged in socio-political transformation is often left unexplored because of a dearth of safe spaces amid the constant conflict in the valley... Kashmiri youths can become agents of change. Their inclusion in the peace process is key to building and sustaining peace. Young people also have an important role in deterring and solving conflicts, and are key constituents in ensuring the success of both peacekeeping and peace building efforts... There is need for a new social contract to reintegrate youth in the mainstream of social, economic and political life. (Farooq, 2020, paras. 2–3)

The participants in the study repeatedly highlighted that they were proud of being Kashmiri and would never leave Kashmir. They wanted a future and the opportunity to change their living conditions; they wanted to contribute to peace in Kashmir: "Hope... does not consist in crossing one's arms and waiting. As long as I fight, I am moved by hope; and if I fight with hope, then I can wait"

(Freire, 1972). The findings indicated that Kashmiri youth were faced with the difficult option of taking up weapons or 'crossing their arms' and waiting for change to be implemented by the Government. Though the participants wanted to help change the situation in Kashmir, they appeared to have little hope that the situation in Kashmir would improve without a change in the approach of the Government. Their perspective was based on the prolonged state of instability and conflict in Kashmir. Shreya responded: "what is the point of planning further [about a career]?" Mehvish concurred by adding that she knew of "PhD scholars who have become shopkeepers; they have opened a small business or shop and are sitting there idly".

As a result of missing out on sustained academic education, the participants were aware that many Kashmiri youth lacked the basic skills for work and were therefore unable to compete for the limited opportunities. According to Shreya, the situation had become far worse after the revocation of Article 370. Labourers in Kashmir, who were predominantly unskilled, like her father who painted houses, were most affected, as outsiders could take up employment in Kashmir. Studies by Gupta and Bajjal (2020) followed the drastic rise in unemployment and economic challenges since Article 370 was revoked. Rising unemployment and worsening economic challenges made the participants anxious and uncertain about their future in Kashmir. These challenges, of an unstable life and future in Kashmir significantly influenced their moral decision-making.

UNEMPLOYMENT

Although the participants reported that they wanted to live in Kashmir and work toward developing the region, the Indian Government restricted knowledge and future opportunities for them to achieve this. With a dearth of private companies in Kashmir, Kashmiri youth, without much choice, compete for the limited number of Government jobs in Kashmir (Aslam & Sudan, 2021). As described in MacIntyre's moral philosophy, the moral formation of the participants could be said to be grounded on a 'certain logical priority' (Miller, 2014); specifically, rising unemployment in the face of acute

economic challenges which provoked a rational and logical approach in the moral choices of these Kashmiri participants. They were, however, considered incompetent due to the lack of relevant knowledge or adequate skills required for these posts, and so often remained unemployed, as recounted by the participants. A similar outlook was presented by Wali and Manzoor (2018) who witnessed how Kashmiri youth faced rejection from Government jobs based on their incompetency and lack of adequate skills. Specific training for these skills, on the other hand, was not provided for Kashmiri youth. According to Majid (2020), though incompetency was the reason given by Government agencies for not giving jobs to local Kashmiri youth, the reality was that these jobs were unfairly given to family and friends of bureaucrats and ministers. The Government had encouraged and given incentives for vocational training, but that was irrelevant due to the poor industrial sector in Kashmir (Wali & Manzoor, 2018). An interpretation of the participant's perspective on education and employment revealed that the Indian Government did not provide opportunities for Kashmiri youth to constructively utilise their time, abilities, and energy, resulting in them being unemployed and idle. Yet, on the other hand, the Indian Government labelled them violent when Kashmiri youth raised their voices demanding justice, peace and development in Kashmir.

Saqib believed that the living conditions of Kashmiri youth, with rising poverty, unemployment, and being idle, had increased drug use in Kashmir. In a recent study, Malla (2019) attributed the increased drug use among young people in Kashmir to increasing anxiety, unemployment, stress, depression and lack of sustained education among Kashmiri youth. Saqib believed that drugs and alcohol had been introduced to Kashmir youth by the Indian army to draw them away from their faith; to make them “lose their mental abilities” and become incapacitated to fight against the Indian Government. Saqib’s perspective is in line with the standpoint of Niebuhr (2010): “it has always been the habit of privileged groups to deny the oppressed classes every opportunity for the cultivation of innate capacities and then to accuse them of lacking what they have been denied the right to acquire” (p. 118). Though the participants had accepted that jobs with the

Indian Government were their only option for overcoming economic challenges, and hopefully transforming Kashmir, their experience and perspective suggested that opportunities to gain employment were insufficient and denied. The Government's oppressive means of denying employment, cognisant of the extreme poverty and limited opportunities in Kashmir, furthered their discontent with the Indian Government. The Government's deliberate denial of employment has helped to perpetuate social and economic deterioration in Kashmir, which can be seen to have influenced the moral perspectives of the participants.

ECONOMIC CHALLENGES

The uncertain future and deterioration of economic and social conditions in Kashmir had led Kashmiri youth to resort to any means to provide for their families, according to the participants. Muskan, Mehvish, and Zahid saw this as "desperation" that often motivated the youth to join militant groups. Muskan believed that "when a person sees the state of their home, they will be ready to do anything for your family". Zahid also added that "A mother or father can do anything for their child – they can also lie or kill another person if they have to." It was interesting to note that Stern (2009), believed that such a tendency of Kashmiri youth to move towards violence and militancy could be mitigated by improving the standard of education, the participants in the study felt that the lack of opportunities beyond education led Kashmiri youth to join militant groups or resort to violence.

The participants' perspective was echoed by Gupta and Baijal (2020), who believed that increasing unemployment resulted in many more Kashmiris falling below the poverty line. Shreya was sure that this had become worse after Article 370 was revoked. According to N. Kaul (2018), the only rationale for Kashmiris voting in the 'democratic elections' was with the hope for local representation, development, employment, and for the necessity of "*sadak, bijli, paani* (road, electricity, water)... as a trade-off against aspirations for the resolution of a political dispute" (p. 129). The findings clearly show that economic challenges and rising poverty were persistent issues in Kashmir that prompted

perpetuation of violence by Kashmiri youth. Economic challenges were again a significant factor in achieving aspirations, and everyday decision-making, and seen from the perspective of all the participants in the study.

Acknowledging the lack of job opportunities in Kashmir and the rising economic challenges for all Kashmiris, Zahid argued for the youth to take the initiative, and be enterprising if they did not have opportunities. Kritika, however, felt that even if Kashmiri youth wanted to be creative and enterprising, Kashmiri youth did not “have a lot of opportunities there – that they can try something or change something. They have no such opportunity to better their lives.” The restrictions and the fear of violence deterred them from creating new opportunities for themselves. It was nonetheless interesting to note the difference in the perspective toward employment and a career between the female and male participants. The males were preoccupied with the lack of opportunities in general, while the females drew attention to the lack of opportunities specifically for women in Kashmir.

SIDE-LINING FEMALE YOUTH

All female participants in the study explicitly mentioned gender bias as an issue in Kashmiri society that restricted their potential and hope for a future. According to Wali and Manzoor (2018), in Kashmir, men with minimal qualifications tend to be preferred over well-qualified women. Though the participants in the study were not yet employed, the female participants displayed an equal enthusiasm to work after completing their higher education. They were, however, aware that even if females were equally keen, families restricted women to work or pursue a career after their education. The female youth in this study believed that “it is very hard for girls to pursue their dreams here... If [girls] have been educated, it is not for sitting at home and cooking food – they may cook, but if they want to... let them achieve their dreams” (Tabiya). Muskan repeatedly mentioned her need to find a job to support her mother since she did not have a father and she was the oldest child. It was, nevertheless, very challenging for her to find a job being a woman; she was moreover expected to find

a job that was more suited for women and be closer to her home. The inherent gender bias pushed her to study the arts instead of science so that she could find a job that was suitable for women.

According to Tabiya, such bias is part of the culture and norm in Kashmir as “parents feed young children’s minds with these differences...that a girl is supposed to stay at home.” The effects of a patriarchal society in Kashmir, along with fear for the safety of its women, are evident in the low female literacy rates, and gender bias in employment (Chakraborty, 2021; Ekkanath, 2019; INS Desk, 2018). The female participants in this study were hopeful that they would be policymakers, entrepreneurs, doctors, and professors after they graduated – they wanted to do something, to help people in Kashmir. These ideas resonate with moral philosophies centred on the pursuit of a good life (Taylor, 1992), the ‘quest for good’ (MacIntyre, 1984), and humanisation (Freire, 1972). Moral choices of the female Kashmiri youth indicated the strong influence of ideas of transformation and contributing towards a cohesive Kashmir. Tabiya believed that women could contribute towards a positive change in Kashmir if there was a change in the mindset of the Kashmiri society towards women and their true potential. Such gender bias influenced the decision-making of the female participants and their moral perspectives about Kashmiri society and the people. It was interesting to note that while the participants highlighted the marginalisation of Kashmiris in other parts of India, the female participants, experienced further marginalisation within Kashmir based on their identity as women. It was also evident in the findings that though all the participants drew attention to economic challenges and unemployment in Kashmir, the female participants attributed the need for better education to overcome these challenges. It could be assumed that the young women valued education more and considered it a decisive factor in gaining employment. The added marginalisation and discrimination they faced as Kashmiri women, suggests that the women were more rebellious and impatient for a constructive change and a transformation of Kashmir.

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, I have presented my interpretation of the participant's narratives. This has been undertaken to create an understanding of the significant experiences that have influenced their moral perspective. By drawing on the phenomenological approach of this study, I have interpreted the findings in light of contextual literature on Kashmir and concepts of morality described in chapters two and three, to gain a deeper understanding of the essence of the experiences. The use of narrative methodology has provided a more holistic understanding of the significant experiences that have influenced the moral perspective of Kashmiri youth. The case study methodology provided the opportunity for me to present a more nuanced examination of specific experiences of females, participants from specific parts of Kashmir, and personal contexts, that influence the moral perspective of Kashmiri youth.

The moral perspectives of all participants in this study were influenced by their experiences of marginalisation and stereotyping propagated by the Indian Government. Being denied opportunities and employment with severe economic challenges has influenced their moral reasoning. Their uncertain future in Kashmir in the current circumstances, coupled with their deep desire to stay in Kashmir to achieve change, has influenced their moral decision-making. Violence and fear of the consequences have influenced the moral structures of Kashmiri youth who are living in the Muslim-majority regions closer to the Indo-Pak borders. The male participants in these regions appeared to have been more influenced by violence and oppression by the military, compared to the female participants. The participants closer to the Indian mainland appeared to be less influenced by conflict and violence. The moral perspectives of the female participants, on the other hand, were influenced primarily by the state of education, gender bias, and societal mindset. Religion and faith had a stronger influence and role in the lives of the Muslim youth in this study and a lesser influence on the Hindu youth. Apart from these experiences, a significant influence on the moral perspective of Kashmiri youth in this study was their own identity as Kashmiris – their discontent with the challenges

in Kashmir, yet the unwavering desire to remain in Kashmir, exemplified the influence of their *Kashmiriyat* on their moral perspectives.

Beyond these interpretations, what stood out, however, was the participants' deep desire for peace, an end to the constant violence, freedom from oppression, and a stable future. While their experience of conflict and instability due to conflict influenced the moral perspective of the participants in this study, it was evident, that the desire for peace and freedom appeared to have motivated all their decisions in life and their moral perspectives. This desire gave them a sense of purpose and inspiration to live in Kashmir – to transform and develop Kashmir when and if they could finally get the opportunity to do so in the future.

CHAPTER 8 CONCLUSION

Again I've returned to this country
where a minaret has been entombed.
Someone soaks the wicks of clay lamps
in mustard oil, each night climbs its steps
to read messages scratched on planets.
His fingerprints cancel blank stamps
in that archive for letters with doomed
addresses, each house buried or empty.

– From 'The country without a post office' by Agha Shahid Ali (2000, p. 25)

In this final chapter, I return to the central theme and question of this study, to understand what influences the moral perspective of Kashmiri youth and establish what can be taken from conducting this study. This conclusion is drawn by reflecting on the study from its inception, to framing the structure and design, conducting interviews, analysing the narratives, elucidating my findings, and interpreting the meaning and underlying structures of the participants' experiences. The richness in the narratives and depth of understanding was gained through the phenomenological, non-judgmental standpoint in this study. Participants' moral reasoning, rationale, perspective and decisions, emerged from their narratives. While my position was non-judgemental in each stage of the study, from the phenomenological standpoint of Gadamer (2004), my "own thoughts too have gone into re-awakening the text's meaning" (p. 390). As I draw this study towards closure, I reiterate my answer to the research questions, reflexively consider the contextual and methodological challenge, emphasise the study's potential and significant contribution to the gaps in knowledge, outline the avenues for future research, and finally, share my personal learning as a researcher.

What Helps Shape the Moral Perspective of Kashmiri Youth?

The focus of this study was to gain insight into what influenced the moral perspective of Kashmiri youth. The purpose of this study was not “to describe and explain morals as a social phenomenon, but to understand the experiences of good and bad expressed in the interview texts” (Lindseth & Norberg, 2004, p. 146). Adopting a non-judgemental and open-minded approach that acknowledged the moral pluralities (Foot, 1958; Murris, 2012), in tandem with the narrative and case study methodology, enabled the multiplicity, depth and commonalities in the moral perspective of the participants to emerge. My positionality and prior experience, the phenomenological approach, methodology, participants’ uninhibited narrations, and in-depth analysis, provided the research with key aspects of the participants’ life in Kashmir, and experience of conflict and education that have a significant influence on their moral structure.

Returning to the research question, ‘what helps shape the moral perspectives of Kashmiri youth?’, the study found lived experiences of violence, fear, economic challenges and marginalisation, that were deeply linked with notions of the self and identity as Kashmiris, to be the significant influences on the moral perspectives of the participants. Their experiences of oppression and military violence instilled in them a sense of fear that influenced their everyday life and mundane activities. Marginalisation of Kashmiris in other parts of India and stereotyping Kashmiris influenced their perceptions of Indians and ideas of justice. The Indian Government’s denial of a relevant form of education or opportunities, amidst rising poverty, influenced the participants’ aspirations, priorities and hopes. These influences were deeply rooted in their Kashmiri identity and their love for Kashmir. Though the participants lived amidst these challenges, they did not wish to fight violently and perpetuate the conflict further. The hope for peace and normalcy in Kashmir profoundly influenced their moral choices: of Kashmir’s transformation over rebellion, silence over raising their voices, education over militant groups, and religion that represents peace over the call for *aazaadi*.

I conclude that every aspect of the participants' lived experience involved links to the conflict and violence that is part of their existence in Kashmir. Experiences of conflict were a part of their everyday life; it was 'normal'. While such violence and instability due to the conflict influenced the mindset of the Kashmiri youth, it was the desire for peace, and exhaustion from years of living amidst curfews and indiscriminate military violence, that have played a significant role in their decision-making and overall perspective. Contrary to other published studies (Majumdar, 2019; Patterson, 2013; Sonpar, 2016), the participants associated religion with ideas of peace, and not with violence. Some male youth in their reference to the Indian military violence, however, did mention the desire to fight. While there was a sense of awe and respect for the militants, there was no indication that the participants 'believed' in resorting to violent means for peace.

Similarly, while education had an important part in their reasoning, the role of education was represented in terms of being a means for better future career opportunities, joining positions of power, and providing financial stability for their families. Education, for the youth, was synonymous with institutional learning. Though they had found ways and means to learn about the world, raise their consciousness become aware of their oppression, and fight for liberation, they were unaware that such learning was also a part of education (Biesta, 2010; Freire, 1972). The youth preferred to choose future paths that were safer and ensure financial stability for their families. Their employment opportunities, however, required them to be highly qualified. This is why they wanted to have access to sustained educational, and career opportunities, and the 'free' life that youth in other parts of India and the world live in. They were tired of being marginalised and labelled as terrorists, violent people, and being humiliated and ill-treated in other parts of India. The participants' life decisions were linked with the hope that the situation in Kashmir would improve, that they could live peacefully, have more opportunities, and in time could provide for their families. The study, therefore, found that the participants' experience of fear and anger against the military, marginalisation and stereotyping of

Kashmiris in India, minimal career opportunities, and primarily, their deep desire for stability and normalcy, significantly influenced their moral perspective.

As a phenomenological study, the aim was not to “find a single fundamental truth; the whole truth can never be fully understood. We search for possible meanings in a continuous process” (Lindseth & Norberg, 2004, p. 151). Beyond the findings of this study, the phenomenological approach revealed some subtle nuances of the phenomena embedded in the participants’ narratives. A key insight that emerged from the study was the crucial role of cultural sensitivity and researcher positionality: emotions, personal experiences and depth in the narrations drew on my insider positionality and knowledge of Kashmiri culture. This perhaps shows the need for more emphasis on such contextual knowledge in phenomenological studies on Kashmir, or similar conflict regions.

An insight specific to Kashmir that emerged from the study was on the participants’ knowledge of the law, petitions, statutes, caveats, rights, and political statements. Although the conflict is geopolitical, the depth in knowledge that the youth had of the law and their rights, given the lack of internet or resources, was interesting to note. Their arguments on injustice and oppression in Kashmir was based on such knowledge. Given an opportunity, they were keen to share their views and perspectives on politics. This suggests that apart from the conflict, politics is a matter of interest for Kashmiri youth and an inherent aspect of their lived experiences that requires further study.

Though the participants wanted political representation, they were disinterested in sharing their views on historical facts; they did not talk about history as much as they did about their present. Even though the contested historiography of Kashmir is a political discourse, they were interested in matters of development of Kashmir. When prompted, they dissociated with ideologies of the past and reiterated their perspectives of what was needed to overcome their everyday challenges in Kashmir. Though the participants’ history is an inherent part of their reality, the experience that influences their perspective is associated with their context, subjectivity and background, which are dynamic. Such

dynamism was observed by the participants who perceived newer challenges and experiences due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Their context and experiences were different before the pandemic and during the pandemic; the essence of their lived experience had a new influence. To draw the fundamental essence of their experience, the conclusions and my interpretation underline the lived experience that 'generally' influenced their moral perspective, adding the effect of the pandemic as another layer.

The dynamism and contextual changes due to the pandemic also impacted the study in terms of the methodological challenge that had not been anticipated at the outset in August 2019. Apart from the challenge of the sudden curfews, Internet blackouts and violence within Kashmir that were anticipated, the consequences of the pandemic in Kashmir and New Zealand introduced unexpected turns and a constructive learning opportunity.

Challenges in the Study

The challenge faced in this study was primarily a methodological one due to the onset of the global pandemic. While the technological challenges were considered at the start, this was initially mitigated by arranging for the interviews to be conducted from J&K Help Foundation's office which had better Internet. Restrictions to movement due to the pandemic required the participants to be interviewed from their homes. Along with the challenge that many of them did not own appropriate technological devices for the online interviews, participants' cultural nuances had to be borne in mind during the interview. The cultural nuances included the "emotional intensity... [due to] upheavals experienced by the people" (Faheem, 2020, p. 280), which meant that I drew on my own prior experience of working in Kashmir, to ensure my own Indian identity did not intimidate the participants or impact the free flow of the narration of personal and intimate experiences or perspectives during interviews. My experience of having lived with a Kashmiri family made the participants less self-conscious about participating in the online interviews from their homes. To assuage their fear of my research having

any political motives, or their perspective being judged, I ensured that the participants had sufficient time to build rapport with me so they could trust me with their stories. While this was more time-consuming, personalising the interview and talking about New Zealand, their typical day, their favourite movies, and such casual conversation, along with being vulnerable to them and answering their queries about my background, allowed them to trust me.

Adams-Hutcheson and Longhurst (2017) have commented that online interviews could be challenging with lower engagement levels due to physical distance. In contrast, Dodds and Hess (2020) noticed that participants in online interviews tended to be participatory, as their personal space and privacy were protected. With significant advancements in technology to meet the needs of an increasing number of qualitative studies conducted online, Howlett (2021) found that in-person interaction was no longer the gold standard to ensure rigour. Weller (2017), has indicated that while remote methods can be advantageous, technological issues such as network disruption, restricts the free flow of conversation during these interviews, which discourages participants from sharing deeper nuances of their lived experience. Aspects such as the participant's home, the area they live in, their customs and hospitality, and being physically present with the participants while they share their experiences were considered "valuable contextual material that enriched [the researcher's] understanding of participants' lives" (Weller, 2017, p. 619). Similar challenges were faced in this study wherein the participants had technological challenges such as poor Internet connectivity or the need to share devices with siblings, or even the lack of private space at home to talk freely without disruption by family members. While remote data gathering was the best opportunity to collect the participants' lived experiences and perspectives considering the pandemic situation, thick descriptions of the participant's context and subjectivity were missed. Perera (2017) warns that while remote data collection is considered a way of conducting research with inaccessible populations, it cannot provide a complete understanding of the participants' lives, experiences and circumstances: "researchers should not mistake what can at best be a supplementary form of conflict data as a substitute for

ground truth.” (p. 819). Though conducting remote interviews online posed barriers considering the context, culture and background of the participants, the phenomenological narrative interviews created an environment where the participants were free, open and candid in the narration of their stories, incidents, opinions and perspective.

While the study found the meaning and understanding that was sought in the research questions, based on this experience of using remote methods for conducting qualitative interviews, I would recommend in-person interviews in conflict studies. Similar to the views of Perera (2017) and Weller (2017), the depth and entirety of the lived experience that can be captured by in-person interviews are preferable in conflict studies; it would be challenging to achieve the same outcome utilising online interviews. Nevertheless, this study has demonstrated the value of being creative, adaptable and flexible, methodologically, to suit the conditions of the participants and field. The conclusions from the study are therefore not an end, but a means toward continued research in this field. This was an opportunity for “obeying the space-creating potentiality of the work itself, which has to adapt to what is given as well as to create its own conditions” (Gadamer, 2004, p. 151). Researchers (Douedari et al., 2021) from a recent study focusing on Syria shared similar views and suggested that while face-to-face interviews would be ideal, considering the contemporary challenges, there is a need to adapt to situations such as the pandemic, and design studies based on the context of the participants. This study matched the context by providing an insight into the experience of conducting empirical conflict studies using technology accessible to participants, designing the study with sound assessment of the researcher’s strengths, locating the researcher’s positionality in the study, and being constantly reflexive.

Contributions of this Study

This study adds to the emergent field of remote methods in conflict studies, which has been gaining attention since the start of the global pandemic. While there is background knowledge on qualitative studies conducted online, there are few studies conducted using remote methods that focus on conflict regions, with insufficient studies on Kashmir. There has been a steep learning curve in this study with respect to adapting to the acute technological limitations of participants, contextual challenges of remote recruitment, scheduling, research design and holding interviews while ethical considerations are borne in mind. Considering the depth of knowledge gained in this study, it has made a significant contribution to phenomenological studies conducted in conflict regions using online means.

From my experience in this study, phenomenological studies in India predominantly either draw on Western philosophers or are theoretical, religious or philosophical in nature. While Indian phenomenology is based on religious philosophies, there is a need to extend these philosophical concepts to non-religious studies too. In this study, I located phenomenology in Hinduism and Sufism and extended these concepts to non-religious contemporary conflict studies. By highlighting the similarities between Indian and Western phenomenology, I took steps to overcome the gap in non-religious Indian phenomenological studies. Nonetheless, this study contributes to Indian phenomenology and provides a potential for further research.

Likewise, while qualitative studies conducted on the underlying moral structures of youth in conflict regions are few, there is an even bigger gap in the moral perspectives of youth in Kashmir. Research on Kashmir is primarily concerned with the psychological effects of the conflict such as trauma and mental health issues, human rights, or politics. As outlined in the Introduction (Chapter One), this thesis addresses the need to engage with Kashmiri youth to understand what they think, and more importantly to profile the voices of Kashmiri youth who have been misrepresented in local

Kashmiri newspapers and media for political motives. What is missing is an honest, true and unbiased representation of their voices. This study is a small step towards elevating the views of some Kashmiri youth to a global platform, without any political motive, conflict of interest, or any known bias. On many levels, the study makes a significant contribution towards qualitative studies on Kashmir.

Beyond this Research

Apart from the urgency for more research on Indian phenomenological philosophy in non-religious empirical studies, there is potential to methodologically examine the intersectionality between Indian phenomenological methodology and concepts of morality. This study has more to offer in terms of future research potential in Kashmir. While education in Kashmir has been examined to some extent, the role of NGOs in education in Kashmir is a space that surely requires further study. The participants in this study indicated the minimal understanding that outsiders have of the role of local NGOs in Kashmir. While they did not provide in-depth insight into their own experience and perspective of the NGOs, a study focused on their role in education, holds the potential to help redesign educational initiatives in Kashmir. A study on the role of NGOs in conflict regions, similar to Kashmir, may also examine the pathways for peace and stability with the aid of NGOs. There is also an opportunity to study the moral perspective of ex-militants in Kashmir, to understand what motivated them to fight for peace, and what influenced their decision to give up the armed struggle for peace. This opens up the possibility to develop initiatives focused on the rehabilitation and humanisation of militants. The findings from this study may also be compared against similar conflict regions for cross-learning. This study is relevant and significant not just in the context of Kashmir, but also in similar conflict regions around the world.

Closure

This study has exemplified some significant experiences of life amid a conflict that help shape the moral perspective of youth. Retracing my steps back to where and how this study began, its evolution, and what I have learned, I realise that this has been a humbling and gratifying journey. Doing this study was like an “adventure [that] lets life be felt as a whole, in its breadth and in its strength... and ventures out into the uncertain... [yet] remains related to the return of the everyday life” (Gadamer, 2004, p. 60). This adventure began with a single moment of revelation but transpired to be a whole journey of wonderment, leaving me humbled by the sheer magnitude of how much there is to know about the world and people. Truly, the beginning is in the end.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A Ethics Approval



TE WĀNANGA ARONUI
O TĀMAKI MAKĀU RAU

Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee (AUTEC)

Auckland University of Technology
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E: ethics@aut.ac.nz
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16 June 2021

Leon Benade
Faculty of Culture and Society

Dear Leon

Re: Ethics Application: **20/317 The moral path beyond war: A narrative inquiry into the experiences that may have influenced the moral perspectives of Kashmiri youth who have lived through conflict**

Thank you for your request for approval of amendments to your ethics application and for confirmation of the protocol for the use of WhatsApp.

The amendment to the data collection protocol (all interviews conducted online), changes to the Information Sheet and Consent Form (counselling and option for being named) has been approved.

I remind you of the **Standard Conditions of Approval**.

1. The research is to be undertaken in accordance with the [Auckland University of Technology Code of Conduct for Research](#) and as approved by AUTEC in this application.
2. A progress report is due annually on the anniversary of the approval date, using the EA2 form.
3. A final report is due at the expiration of the approval period, or, upon completion of project, using the EA3 form.
4. Any amendments to the project must be approved by AUTEC prior to being implemented. Amendments can be requested using the EA2 form.
5. Any serious or unexpected adverse events must be reported to AUTEC Secretariat as a matter of priority.
6. Any unforeseen events that might affect continued ethical acceptability of the project should also be reported to the AUTEC Secretariat as a matter of priority.
7. It is your responsibility to ensure that the spelling and grammar of documents being provided to participants or external organisations is of a high standard.

AUTEC grants ethical approval only. You are responsible for obtaining management approval for access for your research from any institution or organisation at which your research is being conducted. When the research is undertaken outside New Zealand, you need to meet all ethical, legal, and locality obligations or requirements for those jurisdictions.


Please quote the application number and title on all future correspondence related to this project.

For any [enquiries](#) please contact ethics@aut.ac.nz. The forms mentioned above are available online through <http://www.aut.ac.nz/research/researchethics>

(This is a computer-generated letter for which no signature is required)

The AUTEC Secretariat
Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee

Cc: aarthie.108@gmail.com; aarthierinivasan@aut.ac.nz; Daniel Couch



TE WĀNANGA ARONUI
O TĀMAKI MAKĀU RAU

Consent Form

Project title: *The moral path beyond war: A narrative inquiry into the experiences that may have influenced the moral perspectives of Kashmiri youth who have lived through conflict*

Project Supervisor: *Associate Prof. Leon Benade, Dr. Daniel Couch*

Researcher: *Ms. Aarthi Srinivasan*

☐ I have read and understood the information provided about this research project in the Information Sheet dated 01 June 2021.

☐ I have had an opportunity to ask questions and to have them answered.

☐ I understand that notes will be taken during the interview, and that the interview will also be audio-taped and transcribed.

☐ I have no diagnosed mental health conditions.

☐ I understand that taking part in this study is voluntary (my choice) and that I may withdraw from the study at any time without being disadvantaged in any way.

☐ I understand that if I withdraw from the study then I will be offered the choice between having any data that is identifiable as belonging to me removed or allowing it to continue to be used. However, once the findings have been produced, removal of my data may not be possible.

☐ I agree to take part in this research.

☐ I wish to receive a copy of (please tick one):

1) Transcript	(Hindi/ English)	Yes <input type="radio"/>	No <input type="radio"/>
2) Summary of findings	(Hindi/ English)	Yes <input type="radio"/>	No <input type="radio"/>
3) Thesis (English only)		Yes <input type="radio"/>	No <input type="radio"/>
4) Academic publications (English only)		Yes <input type="radio"/>	No <input type="radio"/>
5) Non-academic publications (English only)		Yes <input type="radio"/>	No <input type="radio"/>

☐ I wish to have a counsellor present during my interview. Yes ☐ No ☐

☐ I prefer if a pseudonym (fictitious) name is used to represent my story. Yes ☐ No ☐

Participant's signature:

Participant's name:

Participant contact details (kindly include an email address and/or contact number to get in touch with you):

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Date:

Approved by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee on 10/03/2021 AUTEK Reference number 20/317 The moral path beyond war: A narrative inquiry into the experiences that may have influenced the moral perspectives of Kashmiri youth who have lived through conflict

Note: The Participant should retain a copy of this form

April 2018

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This version was last edited in April 2018

Participant Information Sheet

23 March 2021

The moral path beyond war: A narrative inquiry into the experiences that may have influenced the moral perspectives of Kashmiri youth who have lived through conflict

My name is Aarthi Srinivasan. I am a researcher at Auckland University of Technology (AUT), New Zealand. I invite you to participate in this research for the Kashmir youth, and about the Kashmir youth. My aim is understanding how your life experiences have helped form your moral perspectives. Your own life experiences, views and opinions are important for this research. This study is not connected to any political, religious or social organisation. This study is a part of my PhD qualification at AUT.

What is the purpose of this research?

This research examines the moral perspectives of selected youth who have been living in Kashmir. Though the youth have been impacted in several ways by the constant conflicts, there is little understanding of your lives and thinking. I will ask you to share your life story, experiences and opinions so that I can understand what has influenced your moral views.

How do I agree to participate in this research?

You may send an email to me at aarthi.srinivasan@autuni.ac.nz or message/call me on +64 210 242 4038 (WhatsApp only) to inform me of your interest in participating. Once your participation is confirmed, we will stay in touch through email or message. The Consent Form, which is a voluntary acknowledgement of your participation in this research with clear understanding of its details, will be verbally recorded before the online interview.

Your participation in this research is voluntary (it is your choice) and whether or not you choose to participate will neither advantage nor disadvantage you. You are able to withdraw from the study at any time. If you choose to withdraw from the study, then you will be offered the choice between having any data that is identifiable as belonging to you removed or allowing it to continue to be used. However, once the findings have been produced, removal of your data may not be possible.

How will my privacy be protected?

Your name will not be used in this study and there will be no way to link your identity to my research. While some people (such as J&K Help Foundation, the counsellor and your family) may be aware of your participation in the research, no personally identifiable information will be used in the research, future publications and presentations. J&K Help Foundation will ensure complete privacy during the online interview in their office.

What will happen in this research?

There will be one online interview of about two hours. The interview will take place through a computer located in the J&K Help Foundation office (Srinagar and Kupwara). A local counsellor (for support) will be present as a silent observer for the interview at the office. In the first part of the interview, we will take time to know one another, get comfortable, and ask any queries. I will then seek your verbal consent to participate in this research. The second part of the interview will be when you tell your life story, experiences and share your views, without judgement. The interview will be audio recorded. I will also take notes during the interview, mainly listening to your story and opinions. At the end of your narration, I may ask some specific questions to get a better understanding.

What are the benefits?

I hope my study will help in rethinking the present educational programmes in place for the Kashmiri youth. Apart from writing about this study, I will talk about the research in different forums and meetings in India and other countries. This will help to make the voice of Kashmiri youth heard in Kashmir and beyond. Apart from these benefits, this study will support my PhD qualification.

What are the discomforts and risks?

Growing up in conflict, violence and instability can be the cause of anger, distress and frustration. My study does not ask you to share any sensitive information, but some experiences from your life may be uncomfortable to share. While travelling to the interview and at the J&K Help Foundation office, Covid-19 health and safety mandates such as wearing

masks at all times, using a sanitiser, and maintaining social distancing of 2 metres must be maintained. If you are feeling unwell or any symptoms before the interview, kindly inform me, do not travel for the interview, and seek medical assistance immediately.

How will these discomforts and risks be alleviated?

The interview will be conducted in Hindi/ English (as you prefer). You may pause, or choose to stop the interview if you are uncomfortable. There is no rush; so you can take your time. A local certified counsellor will be present for the interview to support you if required. You may also contact the J&K Help Foundation directly for counselling or support after the interview. Counselling will be provided as needed at no additional cost to you. (J&K Help Foundation – H.No. 50, Tulsi Bagh, Behind Amar Singh College, Srinagar; (00 91) 194 2310256, helpfoundation1997@gmail.com)

What are the costs of participating in this research?

There are no financial costs to participate in this research. You are kindly requested to provide your valuable time to share your life story and experiences. You will be compensated for the transport cost you may incur to travel to the J&K Help Foundation office for the interview.

What opportunity do I have to consider this invitation?

You will have 7 to 10 days to respond to this invite.

Will I receive feedback on the results of this research?

You will get a typed version (word document) of your interview. You will also receive a summary of my study later.

What do I do if I have concerns about this research?

Any concerns regarding the nature of this project should be notified in the first instance to the Project Supervisor, Associate Prof. Leon Benade, leon.w.benade@aut.ac.nz, +64 9 921 9999 ext: 7931

Concerns regarding the conduct of the research should be notified to the Executive Secretary of AUTC, ethics@aut.ac.nz, +64 9 921 9999 ext: 6038.

Whom do I contact for further information about this research?

Please keep this Information Sheet and a copy of the Consent Form for your future reference. You are also able to contact the research team as follows:

Researcher Contact Details:

Aarthi Srinivasan, aarthi.srinivasan@aut.ac.nz

Project Supervisor Contact Details:

Primary supervisor: Associate Prof. Leon Benade, leon.w.benade@aut.ac.nz,

Secondary supervisor: Dr. Daniel Couch, daniel.couch@aut.ac.nz

Approved by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee on 10/03/2021, AUTC Reference number 20/317 *The moral path beyond war: A narrative inquiry into the experiences that may have influenced the moral perspectives of Kashmiri youth who have lived through conflict.*

Confidentiality Agreement

For J&K Help Foundation

Project title: *The moral path beyond war: A narrative inquiry into the experiences that may have influenced the moral perspectives of Kashmiri youth who have lived through conflict*

Project Supervisor: Associate Prof. Leon Benade, Dr. Daniel Couch

Researcher: Ms. Aarthi Srinivasan

- ☐ We understand that all the information that we will be asked to provide to the researcher is confidential.
- ☐ We understand that the no personal details of the participants (identified for recruitment) will be held by us.
- ☐ We understand that the details of the interview can only be discussed with the researchers.
- ☐ We will not keep any copies of the information nor allow third parties access to them.

Signature:

Nighat Shafi



Name:

Mrs. Nighat Shafi

Role at J&K Help Foundation:

Chairperson

Contact Details:

Mobile :- 09419008458, 07006777941

Email:- nighatshafi@gmail.com, helpfoundation1997@gmail.com

Office L.line 0194-2310256

Date: 27/03/2021

Project Supervisor's Contact Details:

Associate Prof. Leon Benade, leon.w.benade@aut.ac.nz, + 64 9 921 9999 ext: 7931

Approved by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee on 10/03/2021

AUTEC Reference number 20/317 *The moral path beyond war: A narrative inquiry into the experiences that may have influenced the moral perspectives of Kashmiri youth who have lived through conflict*

Note: J&K Help Foundation should retain a copy of this form.

FOR THE KASHMIR YOUTH. ON THE KASHMIR YOUTH.

Share your experiences and opinions

My name is Aarthi Srinivasan.

I am a researcher at Auckland University of Technology, New Zealand.

Participate in the research on understanding the life experiences and opinions that have helped form your moral perspectives.



The study involves an interview of approximately 2 hours.
There are no financial costs to participate in this research.

The findings of this research will be published in journals
and will be presented in international forums.

For any queries or to participate:

E: aarthi.srinivasan@autuni.ac.nz | Ph: +91 xxxxxxxxxxx

Supported by J&K Help Foundation (<https://helpfoundation.co/>)

Approved by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee on type the date final ethics approval was granted, AUTEK Reference number type the reference number.

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