

Growing Up in the Shadows: Untold Childhood Memories from Kashmir's Years of Conflict

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Abstract

The Kashmir conflict, one of the biggest and most troubled problem in South Asia, has deeply affected many generations, mostly 1990s. Mental, physical, and social health are key parts of life that are closely connected each other. Mental health issues can affect anyone, regardless of where they live, their background, age, gender, or wealth. In areas affected by conflict, depression and anxiety are very common and can seriously impact people's social, economic, and political lives. Many people living in such challenging environments suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder. This paper looks at the experiences of children who grew up since 1990s, focusing on the memories that were often left and ignored. Although a lot of attention has been given to the political, security, and diplomatic aspects of the conflict, the daily lives of children, filled with fear, uncertainty, strength, and early adulthood, have not been widely discussed. The paper, titled "Growing up in the Shadows," aims to bring these hidden voices to light by showing how conflict affected social life, domestic spaces etc. Changing what it meant to be a child. The research uses personal stories, oral histories, articles, and existing studies on mental health to show how constant exposure to violence, military presence, uncertainty, unemployment, mental health and loss affected the normal growth of children. These children learned to deal with danger, salience, and adjust to instability, often taking on adult roles in broken families and communities. At the same time, the study also shows quiet acts of resistance and strength, moments of hope, creativity, and support that continued even in tough times. The paper also looks at the lasting effects of growing up in a conflict area, like trauma, how identity is formed, memory, and how fear and strength can be passed down through generations. By placing these personal memories in the bigger picture of politics and society, the study argues that childhood in war zones isn't just about being a victim, but about creating meaning in very difficult situations. At the last, this research examines value to the fields of conflict studies, childhood studies, and memory studies by showing the importance of recognizing and recording children's experiences. It's not just about understanding history better, it's also about helping with healing, getting along, and making policies that work for children in places that have gone through conflict like Kashmir.

Keywords: Kashmir conflict, childhood memories, trauma and resilience conflict-affected childhood.

1. Introduction

Conflict is usually talked about in terms of politics, borders, and power. Historians, political scientists, and security experts have mostly written about Kashmir, seeing it as a fight over land between India and Pakistan, a place where rebellion happens, and a spot where big world plans are made. These views are important, but they don't always show the real life of regular people, especially childhood and youth. Childhood is usually seen as a time of innocence, safety, and growing up. But in places with conflict, that idea changes. In Kashmir, children didn't just play with toys, any sport activity or learn from books. They also heard gunshots, lived under curfews, where situations are terrible and saw soldiers every day. Their stories, which are often ignored or forgotten, help us understand the life of the region during long years of struggle. The phrase "*Growing Up in the Shadows*" describes this unique childhood.

The "shadows" stand for both real and imagined darkness, the shadow of soldiers at checkpoints, uniformed men at everywhere, the threat from sudden raids, and the unsure future caused by curfews, uneven situations. For many Kashmiri children, growing up meant dealing with fear situation, changing their daily life, and learning how fragile life can be. But even in these dark times, there were moments of strength, hope, and creativity. Children made up new games, told stories of fighting back, and found power in traditions and family. So, the memories of Kashmiri childhood are not just about being hurt but also about showing strength and surviving in entire life.

2. Childhood as a forgotten dimension of conflict

Around the world, studies on conflict and memory have started to focus more on the experiences of children, whether in situations like the Holocaust, the division of India, or wars in Africa and the Middle East. The memories of children are important because they show both the pain and the strength of people living through war. These memories remind us that wars affect not just soldiers and battlefields, but also families, institutions, and everyday places where children grow up. However, in the case of Kashmir, the voices of children are not widely included in either academic discussions or public stories. The media often shows children as victims or participants in protests, but rarely as people with their own thoughts and feelings shaped by years of ongoing conflict. This lack of attention is especially noticeable because the conflict in Kashmir has lasted for many years, meaning that whole generations have been growing up in its shadow. It is important, both morally and academically, to understand the experiences of these children.

3. Historical context of the conflict

To understand how childhood experiences in Kashmir have shaped people's lives, it's important to look at the history of the conflict.

Since India split into two countries in 1947, Kashmir has been a disputed tripoint between India and Pakistan and China. This led to wars, fighting by armed groups, and ongoing military presence. The late 1980s and early 1990s were especially troubled time. Fighting grew stronger, causing large-scale movements of people, especially Kashmiri Pandits, and changing daily life in the region. For children who lived through this time, fear became a normal part of everyday life in the region. Things like bunkers in neighborhoods, sudden curfews, stone pelting and so on. While adults dealt with these problems through politics or work, children experienced them in quieter, more personal ways that stayed with them deeply.

4. The silenced world of Kashmiri children

The memories of Kashmiri children are filled with silence—not just the silence caused by fear, but also the silence of not being heard. In their families, they were often kept away from talks about politics, but they still saw the effects: family members being taken away, or neighbors vanishing. When they asked questions, they sometimes got vague answers, leaving them to try to understand the violence on their own. Also, society and culture made it hard for people, especially children, to talk openly about their pain. Because of this, many of their memories stayed hidden, only showing up in private thoughts, dreams, and broken story pieces that rarely made it to the public.

5. Themes of trauma, displacement, and resilience

Themes of trauma, displacement, and resilience are often seen in the lives of children in Kashmir. Trauma was a common experience, showing up as fear of the dark, worry about being separated from parents, or dreams about raids and explosions. For children who were forced to leave their homes, like the Kashmiri Pandits who had to move in the early 1990s, the trauma was even deeper because they lost their homes, their sense of who they were, and the feeling of belonging. Being displaced became a normal part of their lives, whether they had to move to camps in Jammu or keep moving within the Valley to stay safe from violence. However, even with all this trauma and displacement, there was a strong sense of resilience. Kashmiri children showed amazing strength by adapting in many ways, like studying by candlelight when there were curfews, playing games that reflected the conflict, or finding comfort in stories and traditions. These stories of resilience show that children are not just victims, they are people who deal with tough situations in their own ways.

6. Research methodology

This study uses a qualitative approach to understand and explain the experiences of childhood for people who grew up during the conflict in Kashmir. The main information through detailed, semi-structured interviews with common youth who lived through the conflict in Kashmir, also use oral stories to gain a deeper understanding of their personal views. To provide context, the present study will be descriptive research. Descriptive research aims to better understand a phenomenon. Both primary and secondary data have been consulted. The important primary source based on interviews as well as primary debates, Governments publications have been consulted. Besides books and other secondary sources like research Article, Publications, Journals, newspapers and encyclopedia have been included. In addition, certain Internet websites have been concluded. In addition, existing academic papers, reports on conflict, historical records, and media coverage to connect individual stories with larger political and social situations. Data will be analyzed, using thematic analysis to find common patterns and emotional trends in the participants' memories. Will make sure to follow ethical guidelines, including getting informed consent, ensuring voluntary participation, protecting participants' privacy, and taking care of their emotional health throughout the research.

7. The role of memory

Memory is very important in understanding how Kashmiri children experienced their early years. Official records often ignore or downplay the real feelings and events that children went through. But personal memories keep alive the small, personal moments of life during the conflict. Things like the smell of smoke during curfews, the quiet of empty classrooms, or the fear of hearing footsteps at night are all parts of a deeper record of real life. Memory also connects

different generations. Parents share their struggles with their children, passing on stories of loss and strength. These shared memories help build a sense of identity, reminding people of both the pain and the strength they have. Looking at these personal memories through the lens of memory studies helps us understand how individual stories connect with larger social and political events.

8. The research gap

Even though these stories are important, there hasn't been much scholarly work on children in Kashmir. Most studies focus on things like insurgencies, politics between countries, or human rights issues. Childhood is often ignored or only mentioned briefly. When children are included, they're usually seen as either people harmed by violence or people involved in protests. This doesn't allow for a deeper look at their daily lives or what they feel inside. This research aims to change that by making childhood memories a key part of understanding the Kashmir conflict. Doing so helps challenge the usual stories and opens up new ways to study childhood, conflict, and memory from different angles.

9. Significance of the study

There are three main reasons why studying childhood memories of conflict in Kashmir is important. First, it brings a human side to the conflict by focusing on real-life experiences instead of just big political issues. Second, it shows the long-term effects of violence on people's lives and mental health, which is important for rebuilding after conflict and making better policies. Third, it shows how children show strength and take action, offering valuable lessons about survival and creativity that go beyond Kashmir. By sharing these stories, the study fills a gap in knowledge and helps create a more complete and kinder history.

10. Historical legacies and the growth of Kashmiri children in conflict

In regards this situation, there were many ways that affect the life of children. The story of Kashmiri children over the past three decades has been one of stolen childhoods, broken dreams, and struggles to survive in a region caught in conflict and constant uncertainty. Since the 1990s, the long years of unrest in Jammu and Kashmir have left deep wounds on young minds, forcing many children to grow up in an environment where fear, violence, and uncertainty have replaced the joy of playing and learning. Instead of building dreams of education and a secure future, thousands of Kashmiri children have been pushed to the edges of society, ending up in street life, and in some cases, getting involved in drugs and illegal activities.

During the 1990s and early 2000s, the people of Kashmir lived through one of the most terrifying and uncertain times in their history. Many nights, unknown people would come into homes in the mid nights, breaking the quiet with sudden knocks or forced entries. Families, scared and helpless, didn't know who these men were, whether they from the Indian Army, security forces, or militant groups. This confusion made people feel deeply afraid and distrustful of everyone around them. The situation parents would hide their children, turn off the lights, and pray quietly in the dark. The unknown gunmen often wore masks and carried weapons, taking people away for questioning or punishing those accused of supporting Indian forces or Militants. The other side many never came back, leaving behind sorrow and unanswered questions. For the people, it was hard to tell who was there to protect them and who was causing harm. Both militants and soldiers moved around at nights, and their presence made it hard to know who was safe and who was dangerous. The valley, which was once peaceful and full of life, turned into a place of silence and doubt. The constant fear of being caught between two fighting groups deeply affected every Kashmiri family. This dark period left a lasting mark on the memories of the people. The

fear of being attacked at night, the sounds of crying in the dark, and the uncertainty of staying safe became part of everyday life. Even today, the memory of those terrible nights reminds Kashmiris of a time when fear ruled their hearts and no one could tell who was a friend or an enemy was so tense that even a small sound outside would make people in the house panic. This shadow is remembered of Kashmiri children.

11. In the early 1990s, violent conflict broke out in Kashmir

The 1990s witnessed a darkest time in the history of Kashmir. As the region faced a cycle of violent conflicts that has deeply impacted its society, culture and politics. The unrest began in the late 1980s when political issues grew in response to unacceptable or unfair practices in the election held in 1987. This dissatisfaction eventually turned into a full-blown insurgency against government of India. The people of Kashmir, mainly youth feeling hopeless because of joblessness, limited opportunities, and a sense of being ignored, then joined militant groups that promised to bring justice and independence. At the same time, outsiders especially Pakistan, helped the violence by supplying weapons, training, and safe places for militant groups. By the early 1990s. Local militancy and militant attacks spread quickly all over the region.

The main role of organizations like Hizbul Mujahideen, Lashkar-e-Taiba, and the Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Front gained power and targeted security personnel, political figures, and civilians who opposed them. Thousands of innocent civilians, gang rape and other irresponsible activities happen. The violence became so intense that regular gun battles, bombings, and assassinations were common. This made daily life dangerous for ordinary people, as curfews, checkpoints, and strict military control became part of everyday life. One of the worst effects of the conflict was the mass departure of the Kashmiri pandit community. They left their homes fearing for their safety, facing threats, attacks, and the possibility of being persecuted. This massive movement of people deeply changed the cultural makeup of the valley and left lasting emotional scars on the people living there. At the same time, many Muslim families in Kashmir were also forced to move within the region, caught between fighting groups and the government's counter-insurgency efforts. The Indian government used a large military force to control the violence, sending hundreds of thousands of soldiers into the region. Strict laws, like the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) and the Public Safety Act (PSA), gave security forces broad authority. While these laws were meant to stop the militants. They also led to accusations of human rights abuses, including wrongful arrests, deaths in custody, and people disappearing without explanation. For many Kashmiris, the 1990s were marked by fear, harsh treatment, and the loss of basic freedoms. Globally, the Kashmir situation became a major issue between India and Pakistan, two nuclear-armed countries.

Pakistan claimed the rebellion was a fight for freedom, while India called it terrorism coming from across the border. These different views made the political situation even tenser, with the Kashmiri people caught in the middle of a bigger international dispute. Even after some peace efforts and attempts to improve relations, the violence of the early 1990s left a deep sense of distrust and suffering. Children grew up under constant danger and restrictions, and the psychological effects of this time are still evident today. The conflict not only changed the political landscape of the region but also greatly affected its social structure, causing divisions, forced movement of people, and a lasting presence of fear, the early 1990s were a turning point in Kashmir's history. The start of the violent conflict set off a series of events that continue to shape the region's identity, politics, and future. What began as a political issue turned into a long-lasting armed struggle, leaving behind a lasting reminder of how fragile peace can be in a place caught between different ideas of national pride, religion, and self-identity.

Schools, colleges, universities were often closed because of strikes, curfews, and attacks by illegal groups. Children were left without safe spaces and had to witness bloodshed,

loss, and displacement. This created a situation where education and moral guidance couldn't take root. Parents, struggling to survive day to day, couldn't protect their kids from the harsh realities of street life. Many children were forced to grow up too fast, working as street vendors, beggars, or doing odd jobs, all while silently holding onto the dream of a normal childhood. As the years passed, the problems grew worse. Without steady schooling and emotional support, children drifted away from positive paths. Peer pressure, joblessness, and a lack of safe places to play made their lives even harder. By the 2000s and 2010s, drug use became a serious issue in the Valley. Drugs, both illegal and prescription, started to affect young people who were already hurting and hopeless. For many kids growing up in conflict zones, drugs became a way to escape from pain and trauma.

After 2019, when political changes brought more restrictions and a sense of isolation, more teenagers became frustrated and lost. Without good guidance, they were easy targeted for drug dealers and small-time gangs who took advantage of their weakness. The shift from dreams of becoming doctors, teachers, or engineers to reality of becoming wanderers, addicts, or petty criminals became more apparent presently, the situation shows a dangerous pattern. Children who grew up during the 1990s turmoil are now adults, many still trapped in poverty and instability, leaving their own children in the same difficult conditions. The ongoing trauma is now a family issue. Reports from rehab centers in Kashmir show rising cases of drug addiction among teenagers, showing how a lack of support and awareness makes the problem worse. Still, there is hope. Civil groups, NGOs, and educators are working hard to offer counseling, help, and new job opportunities for children and young people. But unless there will be peace, stability, and real chances for a better life and future. Kashmiri children will continue to live without a normal childhood, stuck in a cycle of stolen dreams and a dangerous adulthood shaped by drugs and crime.

12. The making of silent sufferers: Rising psychological pressure in Kashmiri youth

The young people of Kashmir have spent their lives in a troubled environment marked by instability, uncertainty, and poverty. Their lives have been repeatedly thrown into chaos by political conflict, natural disasters, and global issues. These events have not only stopped them from getting an education or finding jobs but have also left deep emotional wounds. The following events are the main causes of the mental stress that has led to feelings of frustration, hopelessness, and even physical health problems among Kashmiri youth.

12.1 2008 unrest – *The start of a new cycle of fear post 2000*

The 2008 protests over land transfers to the Amarnath Shrine Board caused big demonstrations across the valley. For many months, the streets were filled with protests, shutdowns, and curfews. Schools and colleges remained closed, disrupting the education of students. The constant presence of violence, government restrictions, and political struggle created long-term stress on the young people, who felt trapped in a situation they could not escape.

12.2 2010 unrest – *Violence and lost childhoods*

Just two years later, in 2010, more protests broke out after the killing of civilians. This unrest lasted for months and brought life to a halt once again. Young boys and teenagers were both involved in and affected by the conflict. Instead of planning their future, they faced fear, arrests, and trauma. A deep sense of insecurity took root, adding to their emotional stress.

12.3 2014 floods – Natural disaster and economic crisis

As some sense of normalcy returned, the 2014 floods hit hard, destroying homes, shops, and public buildings. Families lost their savings, businesses collapsed, and many students lost their study materials and homes. The disaster added to the already fragile financial situation of families. Young men, many of whom were already jobless, had to take on new duties to rebuild their families' lives, which increased their mental burden.

12.4 2016 unrest – Education and careers disrupted again

In 2016, the killing of Burhan Wani brought chaos back to Kashmir. Long curfews, protests, and internet shutdowns stopped students from attending classes or taking exams, and job seekers were cut off from employment processes. The feeling of living in a locked-down society led to feelings of hopelessness and despair, worsening the mental health of the youth.

12.5 2019 removal of special status – Identity and future in doubt

On August 5, 2019, the removal of Jammu and Kashmir's special status created widespread confusion and fear. People worried about losing their cultural identity, land rights, and future. The long communication blackout and restrictions made them feel more isolated. Educational institutions and businesses stayed closed with communication system for months, increasing stress and unemployment. The shock of political changes left many young people anxious about what the future held.

12.6 2019 COVID-19 pandemic – Global crisis with local suffering

Just months after the political changes, the pandemic spread across the world. While the entire globe faced lockdowns, Kashmir suffered even more because restrictions were already in place. Youth who were already emotionally drained now faced isolation, financial instability, and health worries. The pandemic erased chances for work and education, pushing many into depression.

13. Underlying cause: Unemployment and economic stagnation

Behind all these events, unemployment has remained a constant source of stress. Every unrest, flood, or global crisis worsened the weak economy, leaving educated youth without job opportunities. Combined with family expectations and societal instability, this created a heavy emotional load.

The mental pressure on Kashmiri youth is not from one event but from a series of repeated shocks, political unrests (2008, 2010, 2016), natural disasters (2014 floods), political changes (2019 abrogation of Article 370), and global crises (the pandemic). These incidents have disrupted education, blocked job opportunities, created fear, and caused hopelessness. These pressures show up not just in mental health issues but also in visible physical signs like early balding in young men. Unless strong policies, economic reforms, and mental health support are provided, these pressures will continue to affect the future of Kashmir's youth.

14. Youth aspirations and broken promises occur in Kashmir

The year 2019 marked a significant change in the political and social environment of Jammu and Kashmir. After many years of conflict, insurgency, and political unrest, the removal of Article 370 and the reorganization of the state into a Union Territory introduced a new direction. This shift brought with it a message of change and the promise of development. For the youth, who had grown up in an environment of curfews, gunfire, fear, and uncertainty, 2019 became a symbol of a hopeful future, perhaps one filled with more peace and prosperity. The central government highlighted areas like employment, education, infrastructure, and investment as the pillars of this new era. This message of hope deeply connected with young people, many of whom saw it as a chance to rebuild their lives and move past the long-lasting effects of conflict. In the early years following 2019, there was a noticeable decrease in street violence compared to the violent 1990s and the unstable 2000s. The youth, who had long been caught between security forces and militant groups, started to dream about a normal life. For many, a government job became the ultimate sign of stability and respect in society. Civil services, the police, the education sector, and other government departments were seen as the main ways to achieve secure employment, financial independence, and a respected position in the community. Coaching centers filled up with hopeful students, parents invested their money in their children's education, and young people stayed up late studying for exams. The new environment made it seem like hard work, merit, and patience would finally pay off. However, the reality did not match the expectations. Although the government promised a fair and transparent process for recruitment, corruption and biased appointments soon became a problem. Instead of following merit-based principles, selection committees were accused of favoring certain people, often based on connections or money. For the sincere and hardworking young aspirants, this was more than just a professional disappointment, it felt like a moral failure. They felt as if their sacrifices over the past few decades had been ignored, and the dream of a new Kashmir was slipping away. As time went on, many recruitment processes were either canceled or faced accusations of unfair practices. Regarding the said issue, the honorable High Court of Jammu & Kashmir cancelled Kashmir recruitment exams like Police Sub-Inspector, Junior Engineer, Accountant Assistant of Finance department and others over Brazen Irregularities (NDTV, Dec 12, 2022). In one of the police sub-inspector recruitment, it was found that 20–30 lacs was paid by some candidates to corrupt officials in order to get selection reported CBI (NDTV, 14 Sep 2022). Being as author, this situation shown the broken dreams of youths in Jammu and Kashmir. The youth were chosen illegal path like drugs etc.

15. Kashmir youth and the impact of exam irregularities

In recent years, the youth of Kashmir had high hopes for government jobs after 2019, thinking that hard work and merit would finally be recognized. But things changed when there were repeated issues with exams, like strange patterns, leaked papers, and fake recruitment processes. These problems broke the trust of many young people. When exams for jobs like Police Sub-Inspector, Junior Engineer, and Finance Accounts Assistant were canceled because of corruption, it showed that being connected rather than talented was more important. For thousands of hopeful young people, this wasn't just losing a job—it was losing belief in a fair system. Disappointment turned into anger, and many youths, unable to handle the repeated letdowns, started moving toward illegal activities.

Drug use has gone up a lot in the valley, with heroin, brown sugar, and even prescription drugs being common among young people who feel abandoned. At the same time, high unemployment and a sense of hopelessness have pushed some towards stealing, smuggling, and other crimes. Instead of using their education and energy to help build the nation, they're stuck in cycles of addiction and wrongdoing. The problems in recruitment not only made

government institutions weaker but also hurt the spirits of an entire generation. Unless there are more honesty and responsibility, the misuse of talent and the rise of social problems will keep threatening the future of Kashmir.

Several government recruitment agencies came under public scrutiny, and investigations were launched into suspected scams. Rather than building trust, these scandals only made people feel more disconnected. Thousands of qualified candidates who had hoped for jobs were left discouraged, while those who got positions through influence only increased the sense of resentment. The repeated interruptions in recruitment processes harmed the credibility of institutions that were meant to rebuild trust in the system. This growing disappointment among Kashmiri youth has had serious social consequences. A generation that had already been denied a carefree childhood due to curfews and militancy are now dealing with another betrayal in adulthood. Many have lost interest in studying or preparing for competitive exams, seeing them as useless in a system that favors the privileged. Others have turned to the private sector, but opportunities remain limited, with industries still struggling to develop.

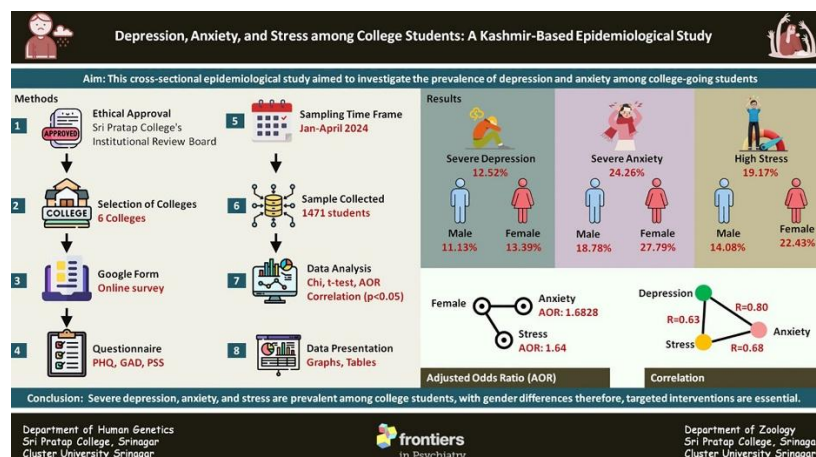
Unemployment rates remain among the highest in India, making the situation even worse. The promise of development, which was meant to be the foundation of a new era after 2019, feels empty to many young people. Beyond the economic issues, there are political and psychological challenges as well. The youth of Kashmir have long struggled with questions of identity, belonging, and representation. A broken recruitment system isn't just about jobs, it's about their place in the larger Indian democratic framework. When selection committees act corruptly or include unqualified people, it reinforces the idea that the system is biased against ordinary people. The erosion of trust in institutions has the potential to fuel renewed anger and a sense of alienation among a generation that had just started to see a brighter future. At the same time, it would be unfair to paint the whole picture as completely bleak. There are still many young achievers in Kashmir who have succeeded in academics, sports, arts, and entrepreneurship despite the challenges. Some have passed national-level exams, started their own businesses, or brought recognition to the region through innovation and hard work. These success stories show the resilience and talent of Kashmiri youth and prove that with the right support, meaningful change is possible. However, for these stories to become the norm rather than the exception, real reforms in governance and recruitment are necessary. A transparent, corruption-free, and accountable system for job recruitment is urgently needed to regain the trust of the youth. Steps like digital exams, third-party monitoring, and strict penalties for misconduct could be the first moves. Beyond jobs, there is also a need to create new industries in areas like tourism, handicrafts, IT, and renewable energy to absorb the energy and talents of educated young people. The youth of Kashmir are not asking for pity; they are looking for fair chances to prove themselves. Their dreams and aspirations are no different from those of young people elsewhere in India, they want security, dignity, and recognition for their hard work. The years after 2019 were supposed to be a time of recovery, rebuilding, and hope for Kashmir. For a while, young people dared to believe that their long struggle was leading to a future of stability and opportunity. However, corruption, favoritism, and biased appointments in government recruitment have shaken their confidence and left them feeling betrayed. If these issues are not addressed with genuine effort, the disillusionment among the youth may worsen, undoing the progress made in peace and stability. On the other hand, if transparent governance and real opportunities are provided, the same youth can become the key drivers of Kashmir's future.

16. Psychological aspect of youth frustration

The frustration felt by the youth in Jammu and Kashmir goes beyond just being a social issue, it's a deep psychological challenge. Having grown up during years of conflict, strict curfews, and uncertain living conditions, they have been living in a mentally fragile environment.

When the situation improved slightly in 2019 with the hope of stability through education and jobs, many young people felt optimistic. However, this hope was quickly broken by repeated problems like unfair exams, leaked papers, and joblessness. This ongoing pattern of hope followed by disappointment has left many young people emotionally exhausted. In this concern beard turned into white in common emotions like worry, sadness, and feeling powerless are now a regular part of life for many. Young people are starting to doubt whether hard work really matters in a system that is often corrupt. Feeling left out of fair chances can lead to a sense of being less valuable, making them compare themselves to others in other parts of the country who have more stable opportunities. This mental strain often shows up as anger, aggression, or a withdrawal from positive activities. The lack of easy access to mental health services in the area makes the problem even worse. Many youths, unable to handle their emotional struggles, turn to drugs as a way to cope. This mental struggle is serious because it can make people less able to cope with life's challenges and may lead them toward hopelessness, addiction, or even radical ideas.

In Kashmir, the youth are often seen as the foundation of society, but many of them are struggling with heavy psychological pressures that show up even in their physical looks. A report given by Ministry of Education (MoE) in which the segment of students reported stressed, unhappy and isolated (The Kashmir graph). A sad and shocking fact is that many young men in the region are experiencing early greying of their beards and hair. This isn't just about genes or getting older it's a clear sign of the intense stress, uncertainty, and lack of jobs that have shaped their lives. The long-lasting conflict in Kashmir, along with poor education systems, limited job opportunities, and a weak economy, has left thousands of educated young people without steady work. Each year, graduates leave universities only to face rejection, corruption, and a job market that doesn't move. For these young men, unemployment isn't just a financial problem it's also a deep emotional injury that erodes their confidence and hope for the future. Living in such conditions, where dreams remain unfulfilled and family responsibilities are heavy, has real physical effects. Medical research often connects chronic anxiety and depression with early greying, hair loss, and other stress-related issues. In Kashmir, this is very common, and the sight of young men with white hair in their beards has become a symbol of lost youth, unfulfilled dreams, and the quiet suffering they face behind their smiles. This early ageing isn't just a personal problem, it reflects the collective pain of a society where instability and lack of opportunities are the norm. The greying beard of Kashmiri youth is not just a physical change, but a quiet message about years of psychological pressure, joblessness, and uncertainty. It is a reminder that without meaningful change, the future of Kashmir's young generation risks being defined by despair. Recently A brief report based on epidemiological study by Frontiers of Psychiatry in which the result shown below.



Source: National Library of Medicine (National Centre for Biotechnology Information)

Image 1.

17. Unemployment in Kashmir: A silent crisis among the youth

Unemployment has become one of the biggest challenges for young people in Jammu and Kashmir. Anxiety, stress and depression are the cause of unemployment (*Mushtaq Ahmad & Dr. J Joshi*). Even though this region is among the most educated in India, with high literacy rates and many students are pursuing higher education, it hasn't been able to offer enough jobs for its youth. This gap between education and available work has caused a lot of frustration, leading to problems in social, economic, and mental health areas. A big reason for rising unemployment is the lack of industries. Unlike other parts of the country, Kashmir doesn't have a strong industrial base or a thriving private sector. Political unrest, frequent curfews, and an uncertain environment have kept investors away. As a result, areas like technology, manufacturing, and business services are not well developed. Government jobs are the main option, but they are limited and hard to get. The process of getting these government jobs is often unfair. Cases of leaked exams, favoritism, and corruption have made many young people lose trust. They spend years preparing for these jobs, only to be disappointed when the system doesn't work properly.

This has made many feel betrayed, adding to the problem of unemployment and making them feel hopeless. Tourism has always been a key part of Kashmir's economy, but it's struggling because of ongoing tensions and security issues. The seasons are not stable, so jobs related to tourism are not reliable or long-term. Similarly, sectors like agriculture and handicrafts, even though they are important to the culture, can't take in all the graduates and skilled workers coming into the job market. The effects of unemployment are deeply felt in Kashmiri society. Many young people, who are talented and well-educated, suffer from stress, anxiety, and depression because of lack of opportunities. Some turn to bad habits like drug use or crime, while others leave the valley in search of work. This leads to brain drain, as the best talents leave the region. Also, joblessness has made many lose faith in the system, which can lead to anger and a sense of being left out. But unemployment isn't an impossible problem to solve. There are several ways to address it. The government can encourage more industries and private investments by making the region safer, offering tax breaks, and setting up special areas for businesses. Supporting entrepreneurship by providing training, funding, and easier access to loans for young people with new ideas can also help. Expanding training in areas like IT, tourism management, horticulture, and handicrafts can create more job opportunities. Encouraging online jobs and digital platforms can also help young people find work from anywhere. In short, unemployment in Kashmir is not just an economic issue but also a social and mental health challenge. It affects the peace and stability of the region. The youth of Kashmir are full of potential, energy, and creativity, but they need opportunities to use these talents in a positive way. By making changes through reforms, investments, and encouraging entrepreneurship, the region can build a better, more stable future. As per the source of Greater Kashmir on 15th Sep 2025, Jobless growth in Kashmir. Kashmir witnessed that unemployment rate alarms nearly 17.4 %. Which is higher than national level. Every year, thousands of educated young men and women finish their university studies. In Kashmir, however, many of them end up joining the growing number of people who are unemployed. The government also shared that 3,700,811 unemployed youth had signed up on the employment website by the end of January 2025 (Greater Kashmir 20th March 2025).

Unemployment has serious consequences for young people. Right away, it affects their mental health, when they can't find a job even though they're qualified, they often feel powerless, worried, and upset. This can lead to depression, a loss of confidence, and more mental health issues (*Mushtaq Ahmad & Dr. J Joshi*). Many young people then start using harmful ways to deal with stress, like using drugs, gambling, or getting into trouble. In places where unemployment is very high, there's often more crime, social problems, and people moving away. Also, the hopes and goals of educated young people don't come true, which creates a whole generation that feels very sad and without hope. Unemployment affects more than just individuals; it hurts society as a whole. A big group of unemployed people puts a strain on the economy because it lowers overall

productivity and hinders growth. Families struggle with money problems, and this can make poverty worse over time. Social issues like increased crime, drug use, and political unrest are often connected to joblessness. Also, when bright young people leave the country for better chances, the nation loses skilled workers who could have helped build the local economy.

18. Conclusion

The significance of the study starts by looking closely at how children in Kashmir have lived during time of conflict. It highlights the importance of hearing voices that are usually ignored and uncovering memories that have been forgotten. People who can tell their own stories. As we go on, the paper taken a good response about issues like pain and hardship, being forced to leave their homes, broken education systems, and the strength to keep going. It would use stories people have told, personal accounts, and research on memory. In the end, the aim is to share the hidden stories of childhood that show the real impact of conflict, while also showing the strength and courage of the people. The look into the memories of childhood during the many years of struggle in Kashmir shows a disturbing reality: the biggest cost of a long-lasting conflict is felt by the youngest and most defenseless. Childhood, which should be a time for play, learning, and innocence, has instead been filled with the sounds of gunfire, strict curfews, and being forced to leave home. The stories told by Kashmiri children show not just tales of loss and fear, but also a strong ability to keep going despite tough conditions. These memories, though broken and often silence are living reminders of the social, cultural, and mental effects of growing up in a place where conflict is constant. By bringing these stories back to life, we see how the daily life of Kashmiri children was changed by military presence, political problems, and the end of normal routines. Schools stayed closed for long times, taking away education and stability; playgrounds became battlefields, and homes became unsafe places. The lack of safety and the ever-present fear left lasting marks on their sense of where they belong and who they are. For many, childhood became about surviving instead of learning and growing. Innocence was lost too early, replaced by awareness of violence and loss. This kind of environment created lasting doubt, which has affected not only the individuals but also the culture and society of Kashmir. Yet, even in this dark time, the strength and endurance of Kashmiri children must be recognized. Their ability to dream, even in small ways, shows they are fighting against being seen only through the lens of conflict. Whether through stories, art, or shared memories, these children tried to find pockets of hope that fought back against the control of violence. These expressions show that even in the darkest time, the human spirit still looks for light. Remembering is not just about telling tales of suffering, but also about taking back dignity and control in a story that has too often been shaped by political and military voices. These hidden memories of childhood are also key to helping the world understand Kashmir beyond facts and policies. They remind us that behind every report of violence is a child who was taken away from the joy of youth. The memories that remain silent, buried in trauma, or shared in shaky voices deserve attention from scholars and those who care for people. These stories are needed to build a full picture of Kashmir's history, one that shows the mental wounds and the lasting pain left on its people. Without these stories, the picture of Kashmir's past and present is still not complete. At the end, "growing up in the shadows" is more than a phrase; it represents a shared experience of fear, survival, and strength. The shadows of conflict will keep affecting people until lasting peace, fairness, and healing are achieved. Only by listening to and giving voice to these hidden childhood memories can communities start to recover and make sure that future generations of Kashmiri children do not inherit the pain of conflict, but instead live in a safer, freer, and better world. This conclusion is both a remembrance of past pain and a push towards imagining a future where Kashmiri children are no longer in the shadows, but in the light of peace and possibility.

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