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Aesthetic Deprivation in Perpetual Conflict

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Abstract

The decades of persistent and protracted conflict amid despair hopes become structural in nature. It permeates into the normal life-course of people making the common masses unaware of its destructive and long-run negative impacts. The survival becomes a priority and people tends to be insensitive towards innate

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feelings associated with the aesthetic sense. Once people are accustomed about the loss of aesthetic sense especially in the stark presence of aestheticism it proves its presence as a structural problem creeping into systems of various kinds. The current essay is a novel attempt to associate the loss of aesthetic sense to continuation of structural conflict. The study is based in the low-intensity conflict region of Jammu and Kashmir, India. The region presents a peculiar case of aesthetic environment called “heaven on earth” amid the infamous “most militarized zone in the world”, and reports some instances of people to support the conflict-aesthetic travesty.

Key-Words

Aesthetic; Kashmir; Peace; Violence

The purpose of human life has been associated with the attainment of what is thought of to be and sought-out by an individual looking at his life-course. The experience with the broadly fulfilled life is loosely associated with a happy childhood, followed by a constructive adulthood, rewarding middle-age and a gratifying old age. The attainability of all these phases of life however demands the basic prerequisite of peace which synonymously resonates with the absence of conflict, violence and fragility. Loosely any avoidable potential or perceived suffering is defined as a form of violence by Galtung (1965). This also violates the basis of the capability approach to life. The modern-day democratic regimes are set with the aim of enhancing the wellness of human beings residing within the national systems. The same is intended to be attained by uplifting and enhancing the human capabilities through multiple and simultaneous policy interventions. However, the 21st century world has come to become a mosaic of political and economic conflicts affecting the development process of human and infrastructural capabilities pan globe in different degrees. The lack of peace across various pockets of the world makes generally increases the resilience of the people and making them insensitive in particular towards the importance of aestheticism towards the attainment of a fulfilling life.

The latest and current academic interest in peace and conflict studies has been towards the understanding of environment-peace nexus processes. This stand of literature sheds important light on the role of environmental integrity in the creation of sustainable peace. The fundamental axiom on which the premise of this branch of literature is based on the need for a durable peace process across the world in order to endeavor upon the capable, progressive, productive and attainable lives of people across the globe (Tirrell et al., 2021). The current study is a novel attempt towards the understanding of a similar aspect by discussing diminishment and loss of aesthetic life due to the normalization of violence and fragility in the daily life of commoners. The essay is focused in the region of Jammu and Kashmir which happens to be one of the most beautiful, aesthetic and scenic places of the world so much so that it is termed as “heaven on earth”. Tragically, this trait is disproved by the fact that, it is also infamously known by the label of “most militarized zone” on the planet, and grounds the most dangerous geo-political conflicts of the modern-day world. Such travesty has blurred the sources of happiness among people living in the region. The essay tracing the roots of the conflict to the ‘Sale deed of Kashmir’ between the colonial British rulers and Maharaja Gulab Singh soon after the collapse of the Sikh empire in 1846 in Sub-continent, culminating into a low-intensity conflict and trading a unique path of lifelong uncertainty.. The fragility has hampered any sort of durable peace process in the region till date. The essay using some instances of ethnographic case studies highlights the case of loss of aesthetic values among humans as occasioned by presence of violence in a place which otherwise is naturally and historically aesthetic and serene. The main reason agreed upon by the historians behind the ‘sale deed of Kashmir’ is economical. The Anglo-Sikh war in British India had drained the Britishers and in an attempt to find some compensation they sold the geographic entity of Kashmir to Maharaja Gulab Singh along with the people residing therein (Bamzai, 1994). This also helped them to keep a direct eye and an indirect control over the strategically important region of J&K. its borders touched profitable Central Asia markets, therefore Russia, and borders of China. During the colonial rule in India the princely state of J&K was classified in the first-class category. However, the region has had the peculiarity of having a Hindu ruler ruling over a Muslim majority subjects. On the eve of independence in 1947, while it was expected of J&K to join Pakistan (as explicitly stated by Menon (1955), the Maharaja given the size, status, prestige and international borders of his territory was hoping for a separate and

independent existence (Rai, 2004). The indecisiveness of Maharaja, popularity of Sheikh Abdullah as the people's leader and the actions taken by the independent nations of India and Pakistan took a course of events: wars, and a line of control was eventually drawn between India and Pakistan. The region of Kashmir got divided into three parts, (i) Pakistani part of Kashmir, (ii) Indian part of Kashmir and (iii) Chinese administered Aksai-Chin region.

Sheikh Abdullah was the leader of secular National Conference party. Soon after drawing the line of control he was made the Prime Minister of J&K (Lamb, 1991). The political map of J&K as is today, has always been disturbed and fragile. A number of events took place and Sheikh Abdullah was removed as the Prime Minister of J&K on the reason of conspiring against the Union of India government. Following a series of unexpected and unfortunate political events, the last nail in the coffin for durable peace of the region was hammered in by the elections of 1987 (Snedden, 2015). The powerful and dominant National conference was competing against the expansive coalition of Muslim United Front (MUF). Sources quote the happening of yet another election rigging at a large scale in favor of National Conference supported by Indian National Congress at the Centre. Some member and workers of MUF group decided to take up arms against the government of J&K and India . It was in 1989 that the outbreak of violence and high intensity conflict took place. Since then the dynamics of conflict, fragility and uncertainty has changed. With time, situation in Kashmir transformed from high intensity militancy years to wide popular uprising to new age guerilla warfare to a situation of relative calm and concord. Based on the sequence of the historic events the region of J&K has been classified as a low intensity conflict zone (LIC). The defining characteristic of a LIC include 25 to 1000 conflict related deaths over the duration of the conflict. A confrontation that in nature is essentially political-military confrontation and one of the parties in the conflict is the state. Most often a LIC is an ideological battle fundamentally political in nature. The Kashmir conflict qualifies for all these characteristics (SATP, 2021; Uppsala 2021). In the political and ideological battle between the two groups the peace of the region and aesthetic values of the locals have been compromised making life difficult.

The social history of J&K bears witness to the mutual co-existence of different communities in the region. Despite the presence of autocratic and tyrannical regimes for centuries in general and conflict, fragility and uncertainty

in last three decades in particular, people at the community level have always shown a high need and regard for peace focusing on the ordinary business of life in a mutually reinforcing way. This foundation of religious tolerance and brotherhood in Kashmir has been laid steadily by Muslim Sufi and Shavaite Hindu saints preaching the basic philosophy of religious and social humanism. This spirit of unity and coexistence has been referred by some as “*Kashmiriyat*” and has a fundamental basis of aestheticism motivating the peaceful coexistence of Kashmiris despite the differing religious affiliations (Rafiqi, 1972). The Sufi tradition in Kashmir has fostered a social system of ethno-religious traditions whereby people predominantly follow the mixed social customs. The people of the region are known to follow and apply the Sufism principles in their ordinary lives basing aestheticism at the core of their belief system.

The aesthetic spirit has further been nurtured by the geographic factors. Living in a valley abound in aesthetic elements like calm mountains, lakes, rivers, fields, dells and passes, the people of the region have always had a close association with nature, drawing inspiration from the same. People of all ages have been visiting different parts of the region with religious and tourism motives both reinforcing their innate link with the nature. There is no Kashmiri who hasn't spent the least of a night in the meadows of Pahalgam and trekked through the cliffs of snow clad Gulmarg. The wish to breathe in the tranquil and peace of the high passes to Ladakh is inborn in every resident of the soil. The basic instinct of every Kashmiri can be associated with closeness to nature and an instinctive desire for durable peace. However, the strategic geographic location and shrewd political systems rampant over time have never allowed for a longevity of durable peace in the region. From exploitative regimes to selfish leaders the region has witnessed the worst of political systems. While the whole world confides in the greater benefits of democratic regimes, the region of J&K has been unfortunate enough to bear the un-payable costs of democratic set-up in the Indian sub-continent. The establishment of democracy in the sub-continent right after 1947 could never usher in durable peace in the fragile region of J&K.

Two generations have been born in fragile situations and raised in uncertain times. People have steadily adjusted to the dogged fragility and uncertainty where more than seventy days per year remained affected by curfews and shutdowns from 1989 to 2016 (Parvaiz, 2017). Shouts of mourning rings the ears in a place surrounded by aesthetic Himalayan mountains and meadows. The

normal lives of the Kashmiris have been defined in terms of a normal that is not consistent with the standard global definition of normal and ordinary. The lack of positive peace, as established by Sharp (2020), in the region which is associated with the presence of unrest and fragility has led to the decreasing association between the people of J&K and the aesthetic nature which has been bestowed to the region by divinity. The disassociation between the two has degraded the aesthetic sense of the locals taking away from them the inspirations for calmness, peace and tranquility. The roots to the degrading aesthetic sense among the locals of J&K can be associated with the economic and social challenges and hardships faced by the people resulting from the perpetual exploitative and corrupt political systems sowing the seed of discontent among the people and laying the foundation of perpetual fragility.

Given the unrest and the chaotic circumstances in J&K, people in the region have forgotten to take a moment and connect with the bountiful aesthetic and objects in their surroundings. The people of mountains who are so well known for having the sense of depth and peace rested in their souls have long forgotten to take a moment to just stare at a mountain perpetually within the radius of their eyes. Instead, 45 percent (1.8 million) suffer from some kind of emotional distress and an adult, on average, has experienced around 8 traumatic events during his life as reported by *Médecins Sans Frontières* (MSF, 2015). People over time have been exposed to this vulnerability while being completely unaware about the same. The mountain perhaps as old as the earth itself which would otherwise influence a Kashmiri to draw the inspiration of perseverance fails to get a bare aesthetic recognition of presence. The back of mind of the locals is so occupied with the meager business of survival and catching the breath every next moment that aesthetics has lost value for quite some time now. The brooks that flow from the windows and lawns of the beautiful houses customarily constructed by the Kashmiris no longer inspire them to accept the bounty brought by the course of time with the best possible surprises. Kashmir over the time have decreased the frequency of going to picnics due to the uncertainty of expected episodes that may take place. They have especially abandoned the venturing out at night due to regular searches at military check posts stationed at every nook and corner of the region.

Case Study. I

As a matter of facts, the brooks flow more often in rural areas over urban areas. Instead of cherishing the meaning of life silently sung by the swaying water, the women in rural Kashmir use it more often to get rid of garbage. Jana, a grandmother in the neighborhood aging approximately 85 years recalls with a number of pauses how the brook much wider in size and cleaner in water with trout fish used to pass through their lawn. The salty-tea prepared in a big copper utensil was the late-noon affair and members from the extended family used to sit by the brook and enjoy the tea, Jana sighs. Their grandfather she says was specific and particular about the use of the water from the brook. He taught every child to respect the water, protect it and decipher the meaning of life and responsibility from it. "Army" she says came and then everything changed, which is her way of referring to the conflict. Jana says with the coming of Army, the tea tradition was gone and the brook ended up becoming nothing but the source of getting rid from the waste!

Case Study.2

Smiling at a framed picture from her teenage days, a middle-aged lady sighs at the magnificence of carelessness back in time. Not the carefreeness of young age but of the social system. She recalls that all the Sundays and holidays were earmarked for picnics and outings. Given the seasonal magnificence of Kashmir no season is off season for leisure and aesthetic purposes! She says that they would enjoy food and tea and watch about tourists; national and international. After the violent turn of Conflict, she recalls spending all Sundays at home. At times not even in the lawns that are a prerequisite to every Kashmiri household. She sighs at the loss of aesthetic sense that anonymized in coping up with fear, death and destruction emanating from conflict! "The feelings of nostalgia become rather a source of regret when they overtake your thought process in the midst of your youth" she says. She recalls how the meaning of her morning view from the window changed and rather neutralized after the outbreak of the conflict towards the end of 1980s. She would wake up to see the rush of tourists, Shikara filled Dal Lake and happy-cheering floating markets. "And then there was no one and it seemed like the Dal-Lake lost the meaning of its existence and the aesthetics associated with it just vanished like that", she sighs!

Case Study.3

The uncle that sells groceries often complains about the current life jokingly! I recently asked for the reason behind his sweet resentment and he tells me that he was a hiking guide. He used to guide locals and tourists to various trecks across Kashmir like Sheshnag, Harmukh and Tarsar-Marsar. He confirms that his elated sense of aesthetic realization has long been lost since the end of 1990s when the violent uprising began in the region. He explains the calling from the mountains and the sense of fulfillment. His current life selling groceries looks nothing more than a breathing exercise to him. Given his age he is not sure if he can return to mountains but on the arrival of durable peace, he wishes that every young person in Kashmir realizes his/her innate calling from the mountains and experience the aesthetic air we are born to breathe in. He laments about the lives of young people who are forced to stay indoors by their parents, of course given the uncertainty and threat of the unknown looming over their heads. "Given the fact that we are Mountain people, our innate calling is associated with a deep connection with the mountains" he says with a strange ecstasy in his eyes going quite ironically with his sorrowful voice. This confused me for a final calling with his hopefulness and hopelessness with the events which quite resonated with the aesthetics associated with his life!

The instances of these events clearly highlight the presence of structural violence and an absence of positive peace in the region of J&K. The petty battle of survival, psychological duress and making the ends meet has robbed the locals of their basic humane value of aestheticism. This combat of survival has decreased the motivation among the people for finding and arriving at an inspirationally peaceful life. The grievances against the state emanated from the conflict has robbed people from demanding any development in general and preserving of environment in particular. The conflict in the region which is essentially political in nature and perpetual in existence has led to the wearing out of the aesthetic elements from the lives of the locals, and diminished their resolute and bargaining power to deliberate a durable peace. The consequences of the perpetuation of the conflict are negative for (a) the people of J&K, (b) the political systems of the parties having stake in this conflict and (c) the durable peace of the South Asian region. As such the conflict can be thought of one of the vital roadblocks towards achieving aesthetic life. This could possibly make people accustomed to such a travesty of life and have a long-run effect. Reestablishment of the aesthetic values/sense among the locals is the need of hour. However,

given the conflict has permeated every sphere of life the road to durable peace cannot be guaranteed yet hoped for.

Conclusion

The current study is a novel attempt to open the grounds for debate and discussion in the nexus between human well-being and aesthetic links. In order to initiate the discourse. The present study opens the debate in retrospect by establishing the channel of losing the aesthetic values in the absence of durable peace. The study is based in the fragile region of Jammu and Kashmir which has witnessed a number of fragility and conflict relates shocks. Despite being an aesthetically appealing region and a world-famous tourist destination the people living in the region have lost touch with their surroundings while coping with the circumstances and developing resilience. A situation of perpetual fragility alters the dynamics of people and societies steadily over time without coming in the direct notice. As such, in fragile regions, the study by analyzing the existing string of literature and some case studies from the ground validate the loss of aesthetic consciousness. The study further opens ground for discussing the importance of aesthetics in a stable and capable life.

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