

A potential resource? Ex-militants in Jammu and Kashmir

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This article shares some of the findings of a qualitative study of ex-militants in the Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir. Men who have been involved in militancy were interviewed about their life experience and ideas. A significant theme that emerged through interpretive data analysis was that of an activist identity that evolved over time and life experience. In this regard, they were found to possess personal qualities and convictions that could be seen as valuable resources for social development and peace building.

Keywords: ex-militants, strengths, stresses, activism, altruism

Background

An armed struggle for the liberation of the areas of Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) from the state of India began in 1989. Hundreds of young men crossed the border into Pakistan for arms training, riding the wave of popular sentiment. India maintains that J&K is an integral part of the country since the Hindu ruler of the (erstwhile) princely state acceded to India in 1947. Pakistan's claim on it derives from it being a Muslim majority state. Although both are committed by UN resolution to hold a plebiscite to exercise the right of self-determination in their respective areas of Kashmir, neither has done so. Over time, massive state repression and excesses by Indian counter-insurgent forces, as well as the degeneration of the militant movement with extortion and human rights violations of their own, led to the development of a culture of fear and collective

trauma. This provided fertile ground for a threatened identity polarization around Islam. As a result, there is now an Islamist agenda together with the secular movement for Kashmiri independence. Statistics on the number of people involved in militancy through the years vary depending on the source, but all agree that the numbers are considerable. It is estimated that the number of ex-militants in J&K is at least 30 000.

Methodology

The objective of the study¹ was to apply a psychosocial lens to further the understanding of political violence, gender and traumatic stress. The methodology was qualitative and adopted a phenomenological stance to grasp the experience of ex-militants² from their frame of reference and across their life histories.

The sample consisted of 24 men who had been involved in militancy and are now in civilian life (except for one who later returned to militancy). They range in age from 25 to 42 years; two-thirds have had at least high school education, and three-quarters describe themselves as falling within the middle socioeconomic bracket. Their exit from militancy occurred either through surrender, or through being captured and released after completion of prison terms.

Data were collected through a long semi-structured interview with individual respondents and one focus group discussion with another group of ex-militants. The

interview schedule was framed to cover the following broad areas:

- What factors, personal, familial and social, were related to the shift from the position of bystander in the pre-militant stage?
- What did it mean to be a 'militant'?
- What was the effect of military training, combat experience, imprisonment, and interrogation on subjectivity and identity?
- How could these relate to the potential for continuing violence?
- What are the demands, pressures and stresses of life for ex-militants?
- What is their physical and mental health status?

The content areas of the focus group were: present life circumstances including livelihood and family life, community response to ex-militants, security forces response to them, current social and political involvements, physical and mental wellbeing and coping strategies.

In order to assess traumatic stress response, a quantitative tool was used, namely the Harvard Trauma Questionnaire³ (Croatian Veterans Version). The HTQ has four parts of which Part I and Part IV were used. Part I asks about the presence of 48 traumatic events that reflect the experiences of military survivors of wars. Part IV has items on a four-point rating scale and asks about 16 trauma symptoms, derived from the DSM-IV PTSD criteria, and 24 additional symptoms that assess the impact of trauma on the respondent's ability to function in everyday life.

Most of the respondents were interviewed on two occasions for a total of about 3-4 hours, but several were interviewed more often, over a period of many months. Understandably, there was some reserve and suspicion in the

beginning because the researcher was Indian and a woman. The interviews took place in a variety of settings including a rural health centre, a restaurant, the interviewer's hotel and in the homes of the respondents. All the interviews were conducted during a 17-month period between October 2004 and February 2006.

General findings

Before militancy

Poverty, lack of education and psychopathology were not found to be significant factors in the sample. But the socio-cultural context was important. The years preceding the onset of militancy were characterized by a breakdown of the social and symbolic order, leading to psychological alienation. Later, as state repression and human rights violations by the state and militant forces abounded, a culture of fear and collective trauma prevailed. There was a widespread sense of personal and collective victimization arising from personal experience and from collective narratives of Indian oppression. Feelings of humiliation and helplessness were common.

The consciousness of social identity, that is, of being Kashmiri and Muslim, was intensified in response to perceived threat and victimization. The youth of the respondents when they joined the militancy (more than half were below 19 years of age) made developmental issues around identity, ego ideals and autonomy psychologically salient. These resonated with the collective, socio-political issues that engaged Kashmiri society.

During militancy

The entry into militancy was marked by a replacement of prior dysphoric feelings of helplessness and humiliation by a sense of purpose, meaning, agency and efficacy. Being in the socially idealized role of

the mujahid or holy warrior enhanced self-worth. The world of the militant was marked by an immersion in the preoccupations, morality and discourses of the militant organization to which he/she belonged. This was a secret, suspicious and very narrow world.

Varying degrees of dissociation marked subjective experience, in relation to violence as potential victim and perpetrator. There were troubling feelings of fear, doubt, guilt and loss, as well as an awareness of violence as a mode of power that readily gets out of hand.

After militancy

The respondents faced many stresses and challenges in picking up the threads of a normal work and family life. Physical insecurity and harassment by security forces constituted a major stress, and anxiety was common. Many suffered from the effects of having been interrogated and severely tortured.

Those who were unmarried felt disheartened about ever being able to marry, while those who were married worried about being adequate providers and intimate partners.

Socially, the respondents were in an ambiguous position since they were in neither of the idealized roles of active militant, nor martyr. Feelings of inadequacy, betrayal, frustration, depression and anxiety were common. The psychological distress of some respondents was of a clinically significant proportion. One respondent was clinically depressed and four were suffering, or had suffered, from post traumatic stress disorder.

Commitment to activism

At the time of the study, 10 respondents were actively involved in socio-political causes

and affiliated to such organizations. Their activities encompassed political as well as social service and development. Two other respondents were not affiliated to any organization but were energetic and committed activists in their individual capacity, one as a journalist and the other as a teacher. Two other respondents participated in socio-political campaigns on and off, but personal conflicts and mental distress kept them from sustained involvement. One respondent went underground and rejoined militancy during the course of the study, and two others worked along with Indian security forces in the counter insurgency.

Thus 14 men in the total sample continued to be involved in some form of nonviolent activism. They were of widely varying temperament and personality attributes, bringing diverse strengths to their work.

For instance, Arif's austere seriousness, wide reading and disciplined study make him a respected thinker and writer on behalf of his organization. Kader comes across as impersonal and unemotional, putting a premium on thought and the implementation of ideological beliefs while Ahmed is voluble, warm and down-to-earth. They are practical men, best at hands-on involvement, able to organize and implement plans. Rasheed is a humorous raconteur with a quick wit and the capacity to address unpalatable issues within his group. Rauf's bitter complaining exists alongside a capacity to endure, to be doggedly persistent and resourceful under difficult circumstances. Khalil is numb and mildly depressed but has been a mentor to several young men who were under his command during their militant days. He has also won a reputation in civilian life for being active in cultural activities as well as for taking to task those in the administration that are corrupt and inefficient. Irfan's intelligence, determination and application have won him academic laurels, while his clarity and conviction of purpose have

enabled him to achieve leadership roles in university politics despite initial hostility. Mansoor and Salim are shy, introverted, and tremendously loyal to their comrades. Firoz has an infectious liveliness and the courage to publicly take an unpopular and dangerous political position.

Despite these differences, they evidence a commonality in terms of an activist orientation. They are action oriented doers rather than dreamers. Their impassioned concern for issues larger than their personal self and for social justice gets translated into action. Inevitably this requires them to have the courage of their convictions.

Being energetic and action oriented are qualities noted from their pre militant days. During their student days, several participated enthusiastically in sports and other extracurricular activities such as debating, elocution and writing. Football and cricket were favourite sports. Two of the respondents were national level champions in their chosen sports of judo and skiing. Ironically, several had been active in the National Cadet Corps and became familiar with guns through this involvement. They were also alert to, and interested in, the happenings outside their personal spheres of home and studies. They recall engaging in passionate discussion about social and political issues and attending rallies and speeches by political leaders. Some affiliated themselves with political parties as young students and actively participated in election preparations, demonstrations and protests. More recently, they were in the vanguard of rescue and relief efforts following the earthquake and avalanches that devastated Kashmir in 2005 and 2006. Their teamwork, knowledge of the terrain in remote areas and capacity to endure physical hardship enabled them to render relief before the civil administration in many areas.

A study by Kapur & Sen (1996), also conducted in India, had similar findings. It studied groups of violent and nonviolent protesters'. The latter comprised social, environmental and political activists, whereas the former were militants from the radical left and secessionist regional nationalists. It was found that both groups shared high energy and activity levels. They worked hard for their respective causes and were tireless in finding things to do to further their goals.

Kapur & Sen also found that both groups shared the quality of being angry. This anger was located in their outrage at oppression and social injustice and stemmed from a larger concern for humanity. The respondents in the present study are also angry, this anger being at the core of a strong sense of victimization. In their accounts, personal encounters with violence, humiliation and discrimination, mesh with the collective, cultural narratives of injustice and oppression of their people. Indeed, there is reason to believe that there was pervasive psychological alienation in Kashmir when militancy began. There was widespread disgruntlement at the lack of accountability in the system, the corruption, discrimination, political chicanery and breakdown of all-important democratic institutions.

Current sources of stress and tension

These respondents continue to be activists despite personal insecurities and mental distress, an ambivalent social position, and the harassment and physical danger that dog them. Their existence is darkened by losses, betrayals, regrets and traumas of the past, and haunted by uncertainty and anxiety about the future. Yet they demonstrate considerable commitment, resolve and courage in pursuance of their activist goals.

A significant source of tension is continuing humiliation, intimidation and harassment

at the hands of the security forces. Frequent interrogations that sometimes include torture, periods of custody without charges being framed, and a menacing, intimidating attitude characterize the way that security forces deal with ex-militants. Those who surrender, as opposed to those who are captured and serve prison terms, experience grave physical danger from active militants and have to endure social stigma and suspicion. Ex-militants also experience pressure from the security forces to provide information and help in counter insurgency. This renders them even more at risk and alienates them from society. Surrendered militants are particularly vulnerable because they need physical protection and find themselves having to cooperate.

Another important source of distress is the harm and anguish suffered by their families during the time they were active militants. Their current circumstances add to stress because of the difficulties in fulfilling civilian gender roles as providers and caretakers of their families. Those who are unmarried feel disheartened about ever being able to marry, as families are unwilling to give their daughters in marriage to former militants, and those who are married worry about being adequate providers and intimate partners. The toll on mental wellbeing is considerable. Feelings of inadequacy, frustration, depression and anxiety are common. They describe themselves as having changed – they are now irritable, tense and hard, and prone to anxious and dejected mood states.

Publicly the community holds ex-militants in high esteem. Functions at the martyrs' graveyards attract huge crowds. But privately the respondents feel that society moves on while the soldiers who make the sacrifices get marginalized. There seem to be only two acceptable identities for those involved in militancy – to be an active militant or to

be a martyr (*shaheed*). The category of ex-militant is a discomfiting oddity. On one hand, it is a reminder of society's aspirations for itself. However, when 18 years of armed struggle has not brought them much closer to their goal, those who took up arms find themselves tainted in the eyes of a society that has been collectively traumatized by the violence unleashed upon it.

Development of consciousness

Finally, the life course of several of these respondents illustrates a mellowing of their activism through an evolution of consciousness. Importantly, this evolution has come about through a painful and ongoing process of introspection and integration of the past, specifically of the way that violence shaped subjectivity and action. They try to make sense of the brutal internecine fighting that took place between rival militant groups, a fight in which they lost many comrades, lost credibility and damaged the movement. They often mention their awareness of violence as a force that can get out of hand, of the gun as a mode of power that is easily abused. Thus, most of the respondents are now committed to nonviolent activism, even as they ruefully acknowledge the attraction of violent action at times when frustrations mount and *'heat returns'*.

Conclusions: an altruistic potential

This evolution resonates broadly with the findings of a study on the consciousness development of peace activists (Adams, 1987). The study delineates six cumulative stages, each having its own pitfalls. The stages are anger versus fear and pessimism, acquisition of values and purpose versus alienation, activism versus armchair theorizing, affiliation versus individualism and anarchism, personal integrity versus burn-out, and

world-historical consciousness versus sectarianism.

It is pertinent to note from the study that anger against injustice is found to be an inevitable starting point. While not all anger is useful for consciousness development, it can also be constructively channelled. Secondly, action is a central step in consciousness development. It marks the crossing of a certain threshold while also constituting the experience that impels further evolution. Thirdly, affiliating with others sharing a similar vision and goals equips one with the skills of emotional intelligence – patience, willingness to compromise and accept group discipline, overcome negative habits, cooperate, work in a team – that are essential to realize goals.

In conclusion, it is often not recognized that ex-combatants have personal attributes, skills and capacities that are valuable resources. In fact, the very qualities that drove them to take up militant action makes them well suited for developmental and peacebuilding activities. The authors (van der Merwe & Smith, 2006) of a refreshing review summed up below, point out that the passionate commitment to social justice that motivates people to join armed groups can also drive efforts to promote peaceful social change. Their military experience is likely to have equipped them in positive ways: good leadership qualities including planning, organizing and motivational skills; team work and the capacity to combine collaboration with competition; discipline and respect for a clear system of authority; and training skills. Their intimate experience of violence gives them insight into its dangers and impact on people's lives that is stark and real. Those who have confronted personal trauma and engaged with the process of reconciling with erstwhile enemies have first-hand experience of a process that the rest of society does not fully understand.

In various parts of the world, ex-combatants have contributed to the meaningful rebuilding of their societies. In Sierra Leone, it is ex-combatants who have organized themselves for collective efforts aimed at socioeconomic development. In Angola, ex-combatants play an important role in drawing attention to the social welfare needs of child soldiers and those disabled or destitute as a result of war. In Mozambique, the ex-combatant organization ProPaz conducts a range of activities: local conflict resolution of disputes related to land, labour, personal and domestic problems; interventions directed at the antisocial behaviour of youth including substance abuse; health related activities; de-mining projects and the prevention of circulation of small arms (van der Merwe & Smith, 2006). Ex-combatants in South Africa have embarked on a project to further reconciliation between offenders and victims through a restorative justice project where they are trained to serve as mediators (Greenbaum, 2006). War veterans in former Yugoslavia engage with their society's problem of a violent and traumatic past by participating in a public forum to tell their stories and discuss how to reach sustainable peace (Wils, 2004).

In the present study too, the involvement of many respondents in socio-political and welfare activism suggests an abiding commitment to social justice and an altruistic potential that are valuable resources for social reconstruction and community wellbeing.

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- ² The terms ‘militant’ and ‘ex-militants’ are used in this study since these are the terms that the respondents use to refer to themselves and also the terms used for them in their society.
- ³ www.hprrt-cambridge.org.
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- ¹ Shobna Sonpar, *Violent Activism: A Psychosocial Study of Ex-Militants in Jammu and Kashmir*