Child Soldiers in Jammu and Kashmir

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Introduction

Jammu & Kashmir (J&K) has suffered terrorism for more than 30 years. This place of mesmerizing beauty, often referred to as heaven on earth, used to be one single entity before the partition of British India into Pakistan and India in 1947. Today, Jammu & Kashmir is separated into three politically different regions with one administered by Pakistan, one by India and one by China. Initially the struggle to win over the whole region started as a political one, mainly between India and Pakistan, however, the struggle has evolved dramatically over the course of time. Today the 'war' over Jammu & Kashmir is a multifaceted one which consists of political as well as social aspects, with the issue of religion being a major one. While Pakistan continues to ensure that violence in the ongoing low-intensity conflict is maintained at a low level so that it does not lead to a conventional war, that is, it does not cross India's perceived threshold of tolerance, it continues to harbor dreams of bleeding India with a thousand cuts (Hoodbhoy, 2016).

The year 1987 is considered a turning point in Jammu & Kashmir's modern history when the state elections, believed to be rigged in favor of the Congress-National Conference alliance, led to mass alienation. However, the disturbance in Jammu & Kashmir predates the late 1980s. The first phase began with the India-Pakistan War of 1947-48, which was waged by small groups of Pakistan-backed covert operatives (Tribals) along with regulars of the Pakistan Army (Raiders in Kashmir, General Akbar Khan 1992), which the Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru had called an "informal war". The second phase between early 1960s and mid 1960s was led by what was called the "Master Cell". The objective of these proxy actions was to create conditions for a mass rebellion in Jammu & Kashmir. The third phase from the late 1960s to 1971 was led by another group known as Al-Fatah that ended with the end of the 1971 war. The fourth phase following the 1971 war was led by the National Liberation Front with little institutional support from Pakistan whose energy was exhausted after its defeat in the 1971 War. The fifth phase led to the events after 1989-90, leading to the most violent phase of the Jammu & Kashmir conflict, which witnessed widespread terrorist activity, confrontation of locals with the security forces, allegations of human rights violations, and the exodus of the minority Kashmiri Pandit community in large numbers (Swami, 2006). 1989 onwards, from armed insurgency to suicide attacks by fidayeen (suicide bombers) of Pakistani origin, Jammu & Kashmir has witnessed several phases of terrorism so far (Atav, 2002). By the end of 2007-08, Indian security forces had decisively achieved to make the most part of J&K terrorism-free and barring a few terrorists active in Shopian and Tral, the entire south of Kashmir (Valley) was declared terrorism free. The same was true for central Kashmir (Valley) while only the northern part of Kashmir (Valley) had a handful of terrorists hiding in the upper reaches, most of whom were of Pakistani origin.

Pakistan's premier intelligence service, the Inter-Service Intelligence (ISI), however, has a special knack for reinventing its strategy against India and re-igniting the vicious circle of violence (Winchell, 2003). A series of agitational protests were organized by the ISI in cohorts with 'deep assets' in the Srinagar-based separatist organization, Hurriyat Conference. In June 2008, Amarnath land row agitation erupted in various parts of J&K. By September 2008, the situation was brought under control, enabling the government to hold Assembly Elections in November – December 2008, however, peace was short-lived and was vitiated

by a series of well-contrived riots incited by ISI's proxies in Kashmir by exploiting concocted issues. Two Kashmiri women, Asiya Jan and Neelofar, were found dead in a stream in Shopian on May 30 in 2009, leading to allegations that they were raped and murdered by security personnel. The incident sparked protests in Kashmir and brought it to a near standstill for 42 days. Later, the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) took over the probe and found that the two women were never raped or murdered (Mathur, 2016). After a brief period of calmness, a series of agitations and riots were stage-managed by the secessionists which according the National Investigation Agency (NIA) during the investigation of cases pertaining to terrorist financing in Kashmir (Pandya, 2021), were planned and financed entirely by the agencies in Pakistan.

Recruitment of Children as terrorists

In September 2014, the Kashmir region suffered disastrous floods across many of its districts caused by torrential rainfall. The situation was even worse in Pakistan Administered Jammu & Kashmir and hundreds of people had died on both sides of the Line of Control (LOC). By November 2014, while the situation was slowly limping back to normalcy, Pakistan reinvented its policies vis-á-vis the sponsorship of terrorism in Jammu & Kashmir by initiating the recruitment of minor children as terrorists. It is believed that limitations of the Indian criminal justice system to effectively deal with minors involved in criminal activities might have played a foundational role in re-engineering turmoil in Jammu & Kashmir. Several hundred children who had remained at the forefront of the 2008-2012 agitations in Kashmir were arrested by the Police but they could not be detained in custody for too long and many habitual 'stone-pelters' who were below the age of 18 were apprehended by police on multiple occasions were released under the provision of the Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act, 2015 (Agarwal & Kumar, 2016).

The new Pakistani project involved the establishment of ISI-funded cyber units in all three major terrorist outfits viz. Hizbul Mujahideen, Jaish-e-Muhammad and Lashkar-e-Taiba (Batabyal, 2011) and the primary task of these units was to scout for radical youths on social media (primarily Facebook and Instagram) and engage with them in religious discourse. Once a rapport was built, the communication moved to secured and encrypted messengers (like WhatsApp, Telegram, Wickrme, Mediafire, Briar, BChat, Nandbox, Conion, IMO, Element, Second Line and Zangi) wherein these radicalized youth were further indoctrinated and instigated to take up arms in the name of skewed version of Islamic Jihad. Rampant use of social media platforms administering a lethal dose of radical content to young minds gave extremism in Kashmir a methodical progression, where, like parasites, radical ideology, terror groups and their masters survive on the bruised Kashmiri mindset and their social, political and economic vulnerabilities (Bhatt, 2018). Children were remotely radicalized, recruited in terror outfits, trained and then guided through Pakistani terrorists active in J&K to undertake grenade attacks on security forces and targeted killings of people of minority communities (Yousuf, 2022). This caused havoc for the social fabric of Kashmir and produced a large number of teenagers who became alienated, not only against the very idea of India but also against their own cultural heritage and social roots. Charged with defeatist radical religious ideology, children revolted against their own parents with stones in their hands and venomous communal ideology in their minds, and also revolted against the State. In recent years, pistols and grenades have replaced 'stones' in the hands of such indoctrinated children.

Activities of Child Terrorists in J&K

The year 2015 saw a sudden spike in the recruitment of underage boys. This was also the year when pictures of Burhan Wani were made a viral sensation on social media by the Pakistan-based cyber units (Sultan, 2018). At least seven children were recruited by Hizbul Mujahideen and Lashkar-e-Taiba that year: six joined the former and one was recruited by the latter. Of the seven recruits that year, four were killed in various gunbattles and two surrendered to the police (NewsDesk, 2018). In 2016, four children were recruited by Hizbul Mujahideen, of which three were arrested and one surrendered to the police (data from J&K Police). These Jihadi cyber units based in Pakistan, under the patronage of its intelligence agencies, have become more efficient, decentralized and demonic over the years. In 2017, the number of child recruits was eight, seven of them in Hizbul Mujahideen and one in Jaish-e-Mohammad, called Fardeen Khanday. On 31 December 2017, Fardeen, a 16-year-old Iqra English Medium School student in Mandoora, Tral launched a suicide attack with his associates on a Central Reserve Police Force encampment at Lethapora in Pulwama district (migrator, 2018) and it was for the first time that a local suicide bomber got a video message recorded for the Valley's youths before striking his target. Three terrorists, including the fidayeen child terrorist and five CRPF personnel, died. Fardeen's 15-year-old friend Sabzar Ahmad Bhat had already died in another gunbattle with the security forces in May 2017 (Singh & Pandit, 2017).

In the same year, the J&K police managed to prevent eight minor boys from joining terrorist groups; the boys were subsequently returned to their families after counseling. Four of them were intercepted on the LOC as they tried to cross over to Pakistan Administered Jammu & Kashmir for terrorist training (PTI, 2017). In 2018, five children were recruited by terrorist groups; Two of them joined Hizbul Mujahideen and one became part of Ansar Ghazwat-ul-Hind, an AQIS affiliate group operating in J&K. The remaining two - Mudasir Parrey and Saqib Bilal Sheikh - had joined Lashkar-e-Taiba and were killed in a gunbattle with security forces in December 2018. The Ansar Ghazwat-ul-Hind recruit surrendered two months after he took up arms (data from J&K Police). In a gun battle between security forces and terrorists at Hadipora area of south Kashmir's Shopian district on April 10, 2021, three terrorists were killed. One of them was a 14-year-old, tenth class student of National Innovations Public School, Zainapora. Later, it was found that he was radicalized online by a Pakistan based handler. In February 2023, a 40-year-old bank ATM guard Sanjay Sharma was killed at Achan, Pulwama by terrorists and investigation revealed that two minors were involved in the criminal conspiracy and execution of this dastardly killing of an innocent civilian (ibid). Sanjay was the only Kashmiri Pandit in Achan village who had refused to leave the valley when all his neighbors had migrated several years ago and used to teach local children in his free time.

Similar instances have occurred in the Jammu region as well. In 2021, three children were arrested by the security forces in Poonch district while they were trying to infiltrate illegally. These juveniles were imparted arms training at Pakistan Administered Jammu & Kashmir based terrorist camps before being sent to cross the border to undertake terrorist attacks. In April 2023, five soldiers were killed and one injured after terrorists attacked a lone Army truck in the dense forest area of Bhata Dhurian in Jammu and Kashmir's Poonch district. Investigation revealed that one of the terrorists involved in this terrorist strike was a minor named Bilal Bhat, a 17-year-old resident of Poonch (data from J&K Police). Since January 2000, police investigation has found more than 150 children from J&K involved in terrorist related incidents. More than 100 of them hail from the South Kashmir region and

while many had picked up arms and were killed in gun battles with security forces, others were found to be working as hybrid terrorists or over-ground-workers at the time of their arrest (ibid).

Easy and Gullible Targets

Multiple theoretical models that attempt to explain the factors leading to the radicalization of individuals have emerged from the fields of psychology, social and political sciences. The following section will review the already existing literature and look closely at several theories, which examine the origins and development of terrorism, capturing the different stages of indoctrination, radicalization and Jihadization.

For example, Clark McCauley and Sophia Moskalenko, co-director and research fellow at the National Consortium for Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (NC-START), argue that radicalization processes should be divided into three sub-categories based on the factors, which attract individuals. These are Micro-, Meso- and Macro- factors. Micro- factors refer to individual grievances, such as personal victimization, perceived injustice, poverty, unemployment, discrimination and marginalization. Dr. Randy Borum, a forensic psychologist and professor in the Department of Mental Health Law and Policy at the University of South Florida, further elaborates using a four-stage model and explains how some people experience a certain context, where they go through particularly adverse and deleterious events. Then, during the second stage, comparison, their situation is juxtaposed with that of others, and thus deemed unjust. In the third stage, attribution, the individual assigns responsibility for his/her perceived injustice on a target person, group, nation or government. Second and third stages are recognized as the course of indoctrination. Lastly, in the fourth stage, reaction, the agent, on whom the blame has been imposed, is vilified in order for the individual to justify the subsequent aggression. This last stage is considered extremism. With the growing outrage and wrath against the enemy, others might also endorse the violent extremist ideology of the terrorist group. Therefore, by giving them legitimacy, some of those sympathizers would subsequently also engage in terrorist activities.

Meso- factors relate to group grievances and aspects affecting the community identity. People could join a radical group either through self-persuasion or through connection with others (friends, loved ones, family members, like-minded people). Groups often compare themselves with other groups in order to demonstrate injustice and establish a us-versus-them mentality. This further generates strong cohesion, where members only trust each other. In this context, group thinking appears as a very mighty force in leading an individual or a group to commit a terrorist attack. Finally, Macro- factors refer to the major global aspects, which influence a group or an individual's decision-making and affect their performance and strategies. Typical examples are the globalization phenomenon, under which falls the utilization of the Internet and social media platforms. Radical groups take advantage of such communication technologies to further nourish the us-versus-them mentality.

Overall, the term 'radicalization' could be summarized as the series of actions through which a person acquires a system of beliefs, which legitimizes the application of violence in order to bring about a desired political or social change. Minors are gullible and do not figure in the State's security agencies' list of suspects and get easily bailed out, if caught, because of lenient legal provisions for juveniles in India. Another advantage of employing a child terrorist is that if he dies in a gunbattle with Indian security forces, it is very easy to propagate a false narrative of alleged human rights violations by security forces. This false narrative sells in the vicious cycle of further recruitment (Assad, 2022). A veteran police

officer informed that J&K police's figure of 150 children found to be involved in terrorism-related offenses from 2020 onwards, is the tip of the iceberg. The procedural formalities to be followed by law enforcement agencies while dealing with juveniles are so complicated and painstaking that the police avoid arresting juvenile delinquents involved in terrorist activities, whereas arrests are made only when the gravity of the offense is very high or when the juvenile is a repeat offender. Army and paramilitary forces are also quite reluctant and extra cautious while dealing with minor terrorists (NDTV, 2023). While Pakistani agencies are primarily responsible for this grave problem, civil society in J&K also needs to shoulder some responsibility. "It is primarily the responsibility of parents to keep a watch on their children but there is also a need for an introspection at the societal level", Noor Ahmad Baba, former professor and head of the Department of Political Science at the University of Kashmir asserts (Fayyaz, 2021). Psychologists believe that children are more easily indoctrinated and far easier to control, both physically and mentally than adults as they are more inclined to quickly show loyalty to authority figures and are especially susceptible to following the beliefs and behaviors of those they love and respect, an element that is especially relevant when families are involved in the recruitment process (Gates, 2011). The terrorist groups, which strive to ensure their future survival, see the use of children as an "investment in the future generation".

Emerging trends in Kashmir suggest that minor girls are increasingly being used in J&K as over-ground workers (OGWs), for delivering messages and carrying arms and explosives materials. They are also being used for narco-terror as they make reliable carriers of narcotics (Press Trust of India, 2022). The reasons for this are often pragmatic: children have less understanding of the risk they face and therefore display less anxiety. They are also more likely to do as they are ordered, and they generally benefit from the advantage of arousing less suspicion, which can be a crucial asset, for instance in getting closer to targets. Moreover, different push factors and pull factors may apply to girls. A valley-based female sociologist teaching at Kashmir University opines that girls may be induced to "fall in love" with a member of a group through social media or they may seek an escape from structural violence or family pressure at home by getting married to a terrorist fighter.

The LeT has increasingly started using social media channels to attract young disenfranchised men. Through its political arm, Jamaat-ud-Dawah (JuD), and more precisely, its cyber unit called JuD Cyber Team, the group has been organizing numerous online and offline social media workshops, which first provide the individuals with knowledge on how to exploit the online space in order to spread the LeT ideology and its objectives, and second, directly incite youngsters to engage in anti-India protests in the Kashmir Valley (John, 2013; Negi, 2017). Reminiscent of the style of ISIS, on one of its websites, the JuD Cyber Team provided links to a computer game titled "Age of Jihad ", which promoted the organization's objectives (Dilipraj and Chawla, 2018). The group maintains a very strong online presence on Facebook, Twitter, Flickr, Google+, YouTube and WhatsApp. Solely on Twitter it is believed to have more than 65,000 profiles (Negi, 2017).

Interestingly, the group has been highly innovative in the utilization of social media channels, much before the emergence of groups such as ISIS. One prominent example is the opportunistic and perplexed level of technology LeT terrorists were relying on during the Mumbai 2008 attacks. In November 2008, a group of young men from the terrorist organization Lashkar-e-Taiba attacked numerous parts of the city of Mumbai, India. The attacks were considered egregious and unprecedented since the attackers exercised a mixture of various different tactics such as coordinated bomb explosions, open gunfire, hostage taking and arson. The attacks took place between 26 and 29 November 2008, and resulted in the deaths of 164 people and injuring of 308. The terrorists were using Voice over Internet

Protocol (VoIP) phone service to their advantage in order to send and receive information in real time back to their planners in Pakistan. They were further using Global Positioning System (GPS) hand-held devices, satellite phones and satellite imagery to observe how the events were unfolding, make decisions of where and how to conduct their attacks, and whom to kill with precision. The perpetrators were also monitoring the social media activity of civilians, who were tweeting the movements of the police, which in return helped them decrease the effectiveness of the operational plans of law enforcement. Citizens who were hiding were using their social apps in order to inform friends and relatives about their state and to understand what was going on. The terrorists were reviewing these social media applications and if those who were hiding revealed their locations, they were targeted by the attackers. The attack further took place during Thanksgiving in America when TV viewership is particularly high, reaching out and being broadcasted on major international media such as CNN (Fair, 2018), thus portraying the levels of intricacy of the group's pre-planning. As further described by Sharma (2016), the LeT's innovation also comes in the form of designing apps such as Ipotel, which is an encrypted customized VoIP communication application. Thus, the group's creativity clearly stands out, showing their ability to be product developers and not simply technology users, highlighting the levels of security threat that relevant officials and stakeholders should address.

Reasons for Children joining Terrorist Groups

Although the indignation and disgruntlement on behalf of terrorists against the State of India in Jammu & Kashmir is decades old, the proliferation of social media networks appears as a dire new aspect in the fight with terrorism in the region. As a response, in April 2017 the state government of India declared a suspension of social media in the Kashmir Valley. More than 20 social media platforms were shut down, yet youngsters were soon back online using VPNs (virtual private networks), which increase the confidentiality and privacy of the user.

Terrorists in Jammu & Kashmir are further using cyberspace to attract youngsters to join their ranks by playing upon their vulnerabilities. According to Ayesha Siddiqa, a Pakistani military scientist, author, political commentator and Research Associate at the SOAS South Asia Institute, "It's a fight which is now being carried out by the media. What was Burhan Wani actually doing? It wasn't firing his gun. He was basically very vocal: arousing sentiments and encouraging people his age to come out into the street, to pelt stones and completely frustrate the security establishment".

In another example from March 2018, ISIS terrorist from the Balochistan province in Pakistan, Imran alias Saif-ul-Islam, was arrested by the Pakistani Federal Investigation Authority (FIA) in Karachi, after being found grooming young girls through social media platforms, such as Telegram, to preach the ideology of ISIS and join the terrorist organization. The arrested terrorist was the administrator of an Internet page, which was operated from a location somewhere on the Pakistan-Afghanistan border.

While terrorist groups continue to recruit children in J&K according to traditional methods that have been used by armed groups recruiting child soldiers, they have also been increasingly turning to innovative and refined techniques. Pakistan-based online recruitment centers have developed precise propaganda strategies aimed at highlighting the advantages of joining the group or at triggering empathy. Joining a terrorist organization is portrayed as offering status and prestige, smart uniforms and weapons. The experience is shown as an opportunity for power. These cyber units also often focus on 'victimhood', using images that show 'crimes of the enemy', with a view to triggering anger and eliciting empathy with those

injured or killed and creating a desire to carry out revenge. Groups also use communication material to spread their message on social media platforms. Often colourful content is integrated within material that glorifies terrorist acts, including suicide attacks. Children are also indoctrinated and motivated for shahadat (martyrdom) so that they may go to Jannat (Heaven). The use of online communication expands the reach of the terror outfits' message and gets through to potential recruits remotely (Nyamutata, 2020). As active Internet users, children and youngsters are at particular risk. Social media platforms, including email, chat rooms, e-groups, message boards, video recordings and applications are especially popular recruitment tools that can also facilitate tailored approaches. One of the methods, which can be defined as 'grooming', is based on the perpetrator learning about the individual's interests in order to tailor the approach and build up a relationship of trust. A second technique replicates 'targeted advertising'; by tracking the online behavior of Internet users, a group can identify those vulnerable to its propaganda and tailor the narrative to suit its target audience (UNODC).

Indian and International Laws & Conventions

Dr. Asima Hassan, Member Justice Juvenile Board Srinagar believes that as per Section 83 (1) of the Juvenile Justice Act, 2015, any non-State, militant group or outfit that recruits or uses any child for any purpose shall be liable for rigorous imprisonment for a term which may extend to seven years and shall also be liable to pay a fine of Indian Rupees 5 lakh (5,00,000). "The idea of owning a gun and enforcing their will, has somehow taken hold of many young minds in Kashmir and radical groups are taking advantage of it. Radicalization is more effective in south Kashmir, where unlawful organizations like Jamaat-e-Islami have a huge influence", she opined (ibid). In 2007, the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) formulated the Paris Principles - a set of guidelines on children associated with armed forces or armed groups. The reviewed guidelines of 2007 do not limit the term 'child soldiers' to active combatants who take part in direct hostilities; they include "any person below 18 years of age who is or who has been recruited or used by an armed force or armed group in any capacity, including but not limited to children, boys and girls, used as fighters, cooks, porters, messengers, spies or for sexual purposes" (UNICEF , 2007). Recruitment of minors in armed groups is a violation of existing international humanitarian law and conventions and The Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court deems it a 'war crime' to enlist children under the age of 15 in State/non-State armed forces or to use them in hostilities (International Criminal Court, 1998). Moreover, Article 4 of the UNHCR Optional Protocol calls upon States to criminalize the recruitment of any person under the age of 18. It states:

"Armed groups that are distinct from the armed forces of a State should not, under any circumstances, recruit or use in hostilities persons under the age of 18 years. States Parties shall take all feasible measures to prevent such recruitment and use, including the adoption of legal measures necessary to prohibit and criminalize such practices. The application of the present article shall not affect the legal status of any party to an armed conflict (UNHRC, 2000)."

Over 110 countries, including India in 2005, have ratified the Options Protocol (Shah, 2015). The International Labour Organisation Convention on the Worst Forms of Child Labour, which was ratified by 150 countries, also prohibits the use of children in armed

conflicts (Human Rights Watch, 2015). Many countries have now come up with special programmes for children involved in armed conflict. Unfortunately, the recruiters are never caught as they operate from the comforts of their offices or internet kiosks based in Rawalpindi or Lahore as was revealed by the Indian National Investigation Agency in the investigation of a case related to the recruitment by the terrorist outfit, Islamic State Jammu & Kashmir (Quamar, 2021). The US Congressional-mandated 2020 Trafficking in Persons report of the State Department, released by former Secretary of State Mike Pompeo in June 2020 has highlighted that terrorist groups continue to recruit and use children as young as 14 years in direct hostilities in Jammu & Kashmir (US Department of State, n.d.). The reasons for the recruitment of children by Jihadi terrorists are complex and multifaceted, and they may vary depending on the situation (Darden, 2019). It is also evident that children are not merely recruited alongside adults, but are specifically targeted, as the use of children provides various advantages to these groups.

Devastating Effects on Children

While the nature and gravity of violence against these children may vary from case to case, the short- and long-term implications for both children and society as a whole are severe. The consequences of violence can be devastating; above all, it can result in early death, but even those children who survive must cope with terrible physical and emotional scars. Indeed, violence places at risk not only their health but also their ability to learn and grow into adults who can create sound families and communities. Furthermore, those children's association with these groups entails stigmatization and a high risk of becoming victims of violence perpetrated by communities, law enforcement agencies and military and others following the children's return, demobilization or apprehension (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2017). The international community is quite sensitive to this issue owing to the multifarious repercussions this menace has on society.

      • Research and Technology Cooperation: The plan recognized the significance of research, innovation, and technology cooperation for mutual benefit and aimed to facilitate the exchange of research and technology information, as well as collaboration in research and development projects.

      • Loss of Childhood: Child soldiers are robbed of their childhood. They are exposed to violence, forced to carry weapons, and often endure physical and psychological abuse. They are denied access to education, healthcare, and a nurturing environment.

      • Impact on Mental Health: Child soldiers often suffer severe psychological trauma due to their involvement in armed conflicts. They may experience depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and other mental health issues that can persist into adulthood.

      • Physical Harm: Children in armed conflict are exposed to physical dangers, including combat injuries, diseases, and malnutrition. They lack the physical and emotional development to cope with the rigors of warfare.

      • Long-Term Consequences: The effects of being a child soldier can persist long after the conflict ends. Many struggle to reintegrate into society and face stigma and discrimination. They may continue to be involved in violence and criminal activities.

      • Violation of International Law: The use of child soldiers is a clear violation of international human rights standards and international humanitarian law, including the

Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict.

• Global Security Threat: The presence of child soldiers in armed conflicts can exacerbate conflicts and threaten regional and global stability. Armed groups using child soldiers often commit serious human rights abuses and disregard basic principles of humanity.

Role of All Stakeholders in Combating this Menace

The menace of child soldiers in Jammu and Kashmir (Siddiqui & Siddiqui, 2015) is a complex and deeply troubling issue that requires the government to make all efforts to protect the rights and well-being of children caught in mindless Jihadi terrorism (Shah, 2015a). It is essential to work towards a world where no child is forced to join terrorism. Ultimately, it is the State's responsibility to deal with this menace and mitigate its devastating consequences. The government's efforts to address the menace of child soldiers revolve around three main tenets:

• Demobilization and Rehabilitation: Programs aimed at demobilizing child soldiers and providing them with psychological support, education, and vocational training are crucial for their reintegration into society (Derluyn et al., 2017).

• Preventive Measures: Preventing the recruitment of child soldiers through advocacy, education, and economic development is essential to addressing the root causes of the problem. The role of civil society is very crucial in this aspect. Governments need to adopt a multipronged strategy involving all stakeholders including officials from Police, Education and Mental health departments. NGOs, Religious preachers and respectable members of civil society also need to be co-opted in this endeavor.

• Accountability: Perpetrators of child soldier recruitment and use should be held accountable legally for their actions. Since most of the recruiters are based in the safe havens provided by the ISI and its subservient terrorist organizations, there is a need for international organizations like UNODC (Conradi, 2013), FATF and UNICEF to build pressure on the Pakistani State to take necessary action so that this menace is stopped.

The issue of child soldiers in Jammu & Kashmir is a deeply troubling and contentious aspect of Pakistan-sponsored terrorism in Jammu & Kashmir. The press and civil society have tended to put a shroud on the issue of child soldiers by relying on vague terms such as "diaper militants" and "minor militants" to describe this trend (Munshi, n.d.). This misleading narrative created by these trivialized terms coupled with the narrative that glorifies these underage militants results in dire consequences; There is a lack of recognition of the real issue of minors becoming combatants. The role of civil society in preventing the recruitment of child soldiers by terrorists is crucial in addressing this grave issue. Civil society composed of non-governmental organizations (NGOs), community groups, activists, and concerned individuals should work collectively to promote human rights, peace, and social justice. By mobilizing resources, expertise, and advocacy efforts, civil society can play a critical role in preventing the recruitment of child soldiers by terrorists. Their work must complement the efforts of governments, international organizations, and communities in building a safer and more secure future for children affected by conflict. One of the cardinal strategies in preventing radicalization (online) is discrediting the image of terrorist organizations and discouraging individuals who pursue membership and affiliation. Such efforts should expose the treacherous narrative of extremist outfits and impeach their authority in the eyes of those who seek to join their ranks. This could happen by publicly depicting their activities as

inglorious and despicable. The ugly truth of fighting for a lost cause and having an undignified death must be conspicuously manifested in order to dissuade potential supporters.

Civil society organizations should also use social media platforms to reach out disenfranchised young individuals and tackle the grievances, which lead to their subsequent recruitment and exploitation; communication networks should be on the frontlines of any counter-extremism programs. Schools, universities and other educational establishments could play an essential role by developing a curriculum, which would equip children and young people with the necessary skills and tools for dealing critically with extremist propaganda. In order to reduce the appeal of terrorist groups, users' ability to analyze and evaluate online content must be strengthened. By far, efforts at promoting media literacy have been concentrated only on issues related to child abuse and sexual exploitation; therefore, there is a pressing need of broadening the scope of such strategies, since youth radicalization is a progressively growing phenomenon and the internet has emerged as one of the key instruments of religious indoctrination in the terrorist toolbox.

Such educational classes would encourage young people to think critically vis-à-vis extremist messages: to question and compare sources of information; to undertake independent and objective online research; to learn how to detect propaganda, censorship, and bias; and to examine texts, audio and visual information which could be radical and provoking, in order to establish a framework that reaffirms their positive values, strengthen their respect for human rights, social justice, mutual understanding and peace.

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