

PELLET INJURIES AMONG YOUTH IN KASHMIR: IMPACT AND WAY FORWARD

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Abstract:

A number of firearms have been used to disperse/ control violent mobs in Kashmir over the last 20 years. These include conventional bullets, rubber bullets and tear gas shells. Pellet Firearms have been introduced as the latest modality for crowd control, assumed to have lower morbidity. The security forces have used it since 2010 to quell the street protests in Kashmir. While the government projects the pellet gun as a Non- Lethal Weapon (NLW) but at least three persons have died while hundreds have been injured. In this context, this study is an attempt to understand the impact of pellets on the pellet-injured youth of Kashmir. The paper also puts forth the suggestions and recommendations aimed at revisiting the use of pellet guns. In-depth, semi-structured interviews were used to collect the information from the participants.

Keywords: Pellet, Youth, Conflict, Kashmir, and Impact

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Introduction

The term conflict is defined as a process which begins when one party (who may be individuals, groups or organizations) perceives that the other has frustrated or is about to frustrate some concern of his or hers (Sehgal, 1991). It is —fight, battle or struggle – that is, a physical confrontation between the parties which may include a —sharp disagreement or opposition, as of interests, ideas etc. (Webster 1983). Conflicts are long lasting aspects of human behavior and social relationships (Mitchell, 1997). definition of conflict is indeed very broad. Generally; the term conflict has been interpreted as the opposite of peace. It can occur between individuals, within families, among community members and between different ethnic groups. In its broader perspective, almost any social processes can be labeled as conflict, since all that must have revealed is a hint of antagonism, psychological hostility, frustration, dissent or any types of severe differences subsumed under this concept. It can also be ascribed as a result of relative deprivation, dissatisfaction of basic needs, and failure of organizational functions, asymmetric power relations and dominant social structure (Gurr, 1970). Simply to put, conflict is a situation where co- operation does not exist or partially exists (Tannam, 2007). Conflict is an inevitable phenomenon and has various causes to erupt among the societies and states. With the alteration of activities in societies the causes and consequences of conflict remains unpredictable but some basic principles remain same (Mitchell, 1997). According to Sehgal the antecedent conditions of conflict include scarcity of resources and policy differences etc., affective states include stress, tension, hostility, anxiety etc. cognitive stress of individuals includes their perception or awareness of conflict-ful situation and the conflictfulbehaviour may range from passive resistance to overt aggression. It is a predictable part of human life because it is related to situation of scarce resources, division of functions, power relations and role differentiation (Mitchell, 1997).

Conflict may be intrapersonal or interpersonal. Intrapersonal conflict can effect individuals, create stresses, sap individual energy and reduce an organization's effectiveness. Interpersonal conflict affects groups, sections, departments, and divisions of an organization and can mar organizational efficiency and effectiveness. Intragroup conflict arises mostly due to an individual's inability to conform to group norms. Intergroup conflict may arise between groups within an organization and if these conflicts are limited to the level of quality and economics of

production they can produce desirable results, whereas if they degenerate into dysfunctional activities intergroup conflicts can threaten the very survival of an organization (Sehgal, 1991). All types of conflict, from the interpersonal to the international, have some elements in common but there are also major differences between them. Different types of conflicts have different frameworks, a general theory is inapplicable thus a special theory for a given kind of conflict can provide greater understanding of the relevant phenomenon (Weber, 1991).

Armed conflict is defined as the use of armed violence to resolve local, national or international disputes between individuals and groups that have a political, economic, cultural or social (as opposed to inter-personal or criminal) origin (Boyden, Berry, & Hart, 2002). Wallensteen and Axell identified armed conflict as situation with over 1,000 casualties. It is a contested incompatibility that concerns government and or territory where the use of armed force between two parties, of which at least one is the government or state, resulting in at least 25 battle-related deaths (UNSCO, 2002). However the nature of armed conflict has undergone radical change due to transformation in tactics of warfare and the rapid advancement of technology over the years. The arms and artillery used in modern wars are more lethal, their use more widespread and their techniques more innovative. Small arms which include hand guns, pistols, sub-machine guns, mortars, landmines, grenades and light missiles and their increasing availability is also believed to be a major factor in increasing the number of conflicts and leading to civilian casualties in modern conflicts. It is estimated that there are around half a billion military small arms around the world and 90 percent of civilian casualties are caused by small arms (Shah, 2006). Armed conflict across and between communities result in massive levels of destruction to the people - physically, psychologically, culturally and economically (Deka, 1999). Armed conflicts have drastic effects on the overall social fabric of the society. It devastates people, families, communities and nations. It not only obliterates the present, but also mutilates the futures (Qayoom, 2014).

Since the outbreak of armed conflict in Kashmir, the security agencies have been using number of firearms to handle and disperse violent protesters. These include conventional bullets, rubber bullets and tear gas shells. However since 2010, security forces have added another firearm to their arsenal that is pellet gun. While the government projects the pellet gun as a Non- Lethal

Weapon (NLW) but at least three persons have died while hundreds have been injured. A single shot from pellet gun fires numerous tiny particles hitting multiple targets in one go. It poses much larger threat than a bullet injury. Comparing the two, doctors report that pellets are deadlier than the bullets. *“A bullet hits one or two organs but a pellet damages multiple organs that too with multiple perforation”* said a surgeon. The problem with such patients is that they apparently do not have any big wounds like that in case of a bullet injury and thus go unnoticed. *“The entry mark is so small that if patient does not complain of pain that wound could be neglected and ultimately proves more lethal. The wound is barely of the size of the mosquito bite but the damage is big”*, said the doctor.

On the basis of the RTI filed by the Abdul Manan Bukhari a prominent citizen, the SMHS Hospital revealed that as many as 127 civilians with pellet injuries have been admitted from March 2010 to October 2013. Out of these 91 have been admitted to Department of Surgery and 36 were admitted to Department of Ophthalmology. However, there were no deaths reported due to use of the pellet gun during the same time period, the RTI query revealed. Dept. of Ophthalmology reveals that in 2010 maximum patients with pellet injuries have been admitted. The applicant however challenges the information provided by SMHS hospital about the total number of persons suffering from pellet injuries. Perhaps this number is just a fraction as many victims do not visit the hospitals for the fear of harassment. The researchers' has personally interacted with many pellet affected people who did not go to the govt. hospital instead went to the private clinics for their treatment. Shahzad (name changed) of Sopore was also hit by pellets at multiple places but he didn't want to take the risk so he went to the private clinic for initial treatment and then later on went to Delhi. *“I was taken to the private clinic because police keep a watch in the government hospitals and arrest the injured people and book them under PSA”*, he said.

Similarly the research paper published in the Turkish Journal of Trauma & Emergency Surgery titled “Pellet gunfire injuries among the agitated mobs in Kashmir” reveals that from June 2010 to September 2010 a total of 634 patients were received in Emergency Reception at SKIMS, Srinagar. Out of these 198 were having pellet injuries highest among the firearm injuries which also include bullet and tear gas shell. The paper also mentions the age group that

was most affected were in range of 16-20 constituting 85 patients accounting for 42.92%. It was followed by 21-25 years group which stands at 59 patients (29.79%) and 26-30 years at 22 patients (11.11%).

Doctors have raised their concern over the areas of the body where pellets are fired at. "Majority of the patients are hit above the waist", said the doctors. This raises serious concerns over the intentions of the security forces while using this gun. It was supposed to be a crowd controlling firearm but the pattern of the injuries shows that it is used for grievously injuring the protesters. The researcher has seen many victims having pellets injuries above the waist. Eyes, Face are more commonly targeted, followed by Chest and other above waist organs. Manzoor (name changed) of Pattan narrates his story as, "*I was coming from school, abruptly protests broke out and police fired tear gas shells and pellets. While walking I was hit by the pellets in my right eye and everything went black. Since then I am not able to see*", he said. The expenditures incurred on the treatment is also large. Surgeries are required to remove the pellets and the post-operative care is also very much.

The State Human Rights Commission (SHRC), watchdog of human rights in J&K taking note of the grievous nature of the Pellet injuries has in 2013 said that the use of pellet guns by the government forces was a serious threat to life. The pellet gun is even discarded for use in hunting considering its harmful impacts. Globally many countries and states have banned the use of pellet guns.

Thus, it has not only resulted in injuries to eyes but several other organs of the body are affected. In addition to physical injuries, pellet injured youth face social, economic, educational and psychological problems, which affect their daily life and seriously hampers their growth and development.

Methodology

In the light of the above discussion it becomes clear that the security forces to control/disperse protesters in the Kashmir valley are using pellet guns frequently. The injuries caused by them have also drastically increased resulting in many socio-economic-psychological consequences. In

order to get a broad and comprehensive understanding of the topic and explore its various dimensions this study was conducted. In-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted to generate narratives, which were recorded properly. Interviews were transcribed and used as the primary source of data. Emergent themes were generated and these are summarized below using the illustrative examples from the interview transcripts. Youth in the age group of 18 to 29 years have been included in this study. The study was conducted in Baramulla, Srinagar and Budgam districts of Kashmir.

Results and Analysis

The interviews with the pellet injured victims led to the following themes, which are discussed below

Theme 1: impact of pellet injuries

Interviews with the pellet-injured victims revealed that the injuries not only resulted in physical pain but also led to many economic, social, educational and psychological consequences, which are presented as below:

1. Physical:

Pellets have grievously injured the victims. Since these are small in size and shot at great velocity it pierces the flesh of the victims and goes deep inside the body causing difficulty in the removal of the same. In our study we came to know that the victims are shot at multiple places thus compounding the problems. Besides we also came to know that the pellets are fired at sensitive parts of the body like eyes, nose, neck, chest thus posing serious problems to the victims. Out of the total victims majority of them had pellets injuries on their eyes. In those cases it was found that the pellets have caused blindness in the victims. Although efforts were made by the doctors in the state as well as outside the state like Chandigarh, Amritsar and Delhi to restore the same but without any success. Repeated surgeries do not yield any results and the patient continues to suffer. At other places like the head, nose, stomach, throat pellets also cause severe problems.

Narrating the severe consequences of the pellet injuries, doctors at the prominent hospital of

the state reports that *“pellet injuries are more problematic than the bullet injuries, a bullet can be easily located and thereafter removed and the impact is on one place but the pellets are scattered, small and thus difficult to remove”*.

The impact of the pellets can also be gauged from the fact that several deaths have also been reported from the injuries caused by the pellets.

2. Economic:

Pellets have not only affected the victims physically but their economy and the overall economic conditions has been adversely affected. Majority of the victims belong to the poor families who have hand to mouth survival. Their parents are labourers' and other daily wage earners and hence do not have sufficient money for the treatment of their children. They meet the treatment expenses by borrowing money from relatives, friends and neighbors'. The treatment cost runs into lakhs which is extremely difficult to manage and some have even discontinued the treatment of their children. The mother of a victim said, *“We have already taken loans from people and we are finding it difficult to repay and hence could not take further loans for his next surgery”*.

Some victims also used to work part time in order to support their families but after the injury they could not even move not to talk of working somewhere. This has seriously dented their hopes of being economically independent besides being dependent on their families for their basic needs. The hopes of the families of seeing their children completing their studies and thereafter earning to support them has been completely ruined. The medicines costs very much which also adds to their problems.

3. Social

Pellet injuries have also affected their social life. This is the age where they like to explore, socialize, and do other activities, but in all the victims, the injury has affected all these domains negatively. Now they don't like to go out and meet people which they earlier used to do with great enthusiasm. They find it difficult to move out of their houses due to fear that restrict their mobility. The victims have left schools due to their inability to study and thus remains

confined to their homes only. *“He rarely ventures out of his house”* said the mother of one victim comparing the transformation in his life after the injury. Overall, a pellet injury often destroys informal social networks for youth and disrupts community structures. It was also seen that such victims often develop insecurity and helplessness. Their motivation level has decreased and they find it difficult to engage themselves in any work and thus hinder their contribution towards development of the society. This has also resulted in the loss of productive human resource of the society.

4. Psychological

The impacts stated above have compounding effects due to which their psychological health takes a toll. In most of the cases anxiety, palpitation, fear and episodes of violence in their dreams are often reported by these pellet-affected youth. The mother of a victim narrating the condition of his child stated *“he often screams in his sleep after he was injured by the pellets”*. The victims have fear of the unknown that is why they prefer to stay indoors. *“Whenever somebody talks aloud outside our house I get frightened and my heart beat increases”*, said one victim. It has caused fear psychosis among the pellet-injured children who are already vulnerable in this conflict society.

Based on our observation youth who have experienced trauma as result of pellet injuries and subsequent harassment has suffered from increased anxiety, experience night mares and troubled sleeping. They have ceased playing and laughing, lost their appetites and withdrew from social contact. They also have difficulty in concentrating towards their books. Elder children and adolescents may become anxious or depressed, feel hopelessness about the future or develop aggressive behavior.

5. Educational

Education is one of the building blocks of human development. It is not just a basic right but a foundation of progress in other areas. These injuries have affected the educational prospects of Youth in a range of different ways. It has a direct effect on the possibility of attending schools in terms of the danger to get there and also the economy that has been drained because of medical expenses incurred, does not allow them to pay for education. The disturbed psyche and

healthalso hinders the education of the affected children. They feel it difficult to concentrate on books and the injury puts strain on their eyes hence reading becomes a difficult task.This study reveals that the education of such victims has been affected to a great extend though the enthusiasm towards it still lies with them.

Theme 2: Way Forward

1. Advocacy with the state government to pass a comprehensive legislation prohibiting the use of Pellet guns

The need of the hour is to make the government realize that this is a ‘deadly weapon’ as it results in grievous injuries. It affects the physical, mental, social facets of life. In the light of the above consequences, a draft proposal prohibiting the use of pellet guns should be presented to the government.

2. Information sharing with the state government that the use of pellet guns is prohibited in many parts of the world including some states of US.

State agencies should be made aware that the use of pellet guns has been banned in many countries of the world including some states of United States of America. Government of Jammu and Kashmir should take a lead and stop using this weapon. This will reflect the state being the champion of human rights

3. Networking with various organizations and stakeholders involved in rehabilitation of the pellet injured victims.

There should be close coordination among various agencies and stakeholders involved in the rehabilitation of pellet victims. The main agencies being Government, Hospitals, Police, Non Governmental organizations, Aid/Funding agencies, Intelligentsia etc.

4. The use of pellet guns should be altogether banned and the violations of the law should be dealt with strict measures providing for both fine and imprisonment.

The use of pellet guns should be altogether banned and its violation should be dealt with strong measures. This would serve as deterrence and hence prevent it use

5. The affected children should be provided with cash assistance to undergo treatment.

Since the treatment of the injury involves huge expenses, they should be provided cash assistance in order to meet those expenses. The aim should be to rehabilitate, the injured youth, in the long run.

6. They should be provided with the counseling facilities to minimize the socio – psychological problems they have undergone as a result of pellet injuries.

The injury not only causes physical pain but also results in social, economic and psychological sufferings. Thus to ‘heal’ them they should be provided counseling in order to overcome their psychological and personal problems.

7. Police should be effectively trained in mass controlling techniques and should be cautioned to exercise maximum restraint while dealing with public protests.

Police should be provided training to properly handle and deal with the agitating and violent crowds. They should exercise maximum restraint in order to avoid casualty and injuries.

8. Police should use other alternative methods to control mass gatherings instead of pellet guns.

In addition to effectively handling crowds and exercising maximum restraint, they should use alternative methods like water cannons, lathi-charge etc. to pacify them. This would ensure no deaths are caused and thus human lives would be saved.

Conclusion

The conflict in Kashmir dates back to many years but the uprisings in 2008 have given it a new direction. The youth have been at the forefront of this transformation and consequently they have also been the major sufferers. These uprisings saw people coming out of their homes in large numbers and protesting against the government, the youth forming the large chunk of this population. Police and other security officials in response used new weapons and employed new strategies to counter these people. Among the major weapons used were pellet guns and the tear gas shells.

Pellets have had multiple effects on the affected individuals thus disturbing their normal functioning. It physically disables them besides affecting their social living. These injuries also

drain them monetarily as huge amount has to be spent on the treatment. Not only this, pellet affected victims face numerous psychological issues like fear, anxiety, depression, sleeplessness, helplessness etc. Thus these are trapped in a vicious cycle of socio-economic and psychological problems that impacts their overall functioning.

The state government believes that this is a non-lethal weapon but the ground reality is completely different. Although, the reports suggest that only few deaths have occurred but the injuries that have resulted as a result of pellet guns are of serious nature and makes the life of these people as 'Living Death'. The pellets have had deadly and fatal consequences on the youth

which negates the government claims.

Besides reports also suggests that pellet guns have been banned for hunting purposes and some states of North America have also prohibited the use, sale of pellet guns and also provides for punishment in case of violations. Thus considering the consequences it is appealed to the government of the day to ban the use of pellet guns on the unarmed protesters in specific and rest of the population in general. By doing so, the state government can certainly set the mark of championing the cause of human rights and democracy. It can also compensate those unarmed youth who have been injured. Other means can be used in case of a requirement like water cannons, light lathi-charge etc. to control the mass gatherings.

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