Ethics In Crisis: Understanding Moral Dilemma's in Kashmir's Political Landscape

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Abstract: *The relationship between morality and violence has been the subject of contentious debate over the last couple of decades. This debate has become more pressing in recent times, as political violence has come to mark the lives of people worldwide. This paper uses a specific incident of the Pahalgam attack on innocent tourists in Jammu and Kashmir (India) to analyse the moral reactions of the people in the face of colossal loss of lives and how that bears on the dominant moral frames in a political crisis of Kashmir. This paper engages Judith Butler's concept of frames of war to understand the reaction of people in Kashmir in the wake of the Pahalgam attack. It posits that when political unrest leads to a large-scale loss of life, like the Pahalgam attack, our deep moral instincts are awakened. This, in turn, destabilises the interpretive and moral frameworks that usually organise our moral responses in a strife-ridden environment. The more specific argument this paper makes is that this moral reaction is not just a gut feeling but involves an implicit acknowledgement of the value of other people's lives. In what follows, we shall explore how this specific moral reaction to the attack implicates the fundamental question of our status as human beings in a society shaped by enduring political strife, and how the rupture caused by the reaction to this tragic attack in the "frames of war" or moral frameworks can throw up possibilities for retrieving our universal moral sense of the recognition of the value of the other people's lives, thereby opening the pathways for reimagining politics in complex contexts like Kashmir.*

Keywords: Political Violence, Morality, Kashmir, Interpretive Framework, Pahalgam Attack

INTRODUCTION

Protracted Kashmir instability has long been a focal point of academic enquiry. Scholarly engagements have predominantly centred on narratives elucidating the socio-political conditions that precipitated enduring political instability in Jammu and Kashmir. Renowned not only for its syncretic cultural heritage but also eloquently characterised by Nehru as transcending "almost above human desire", the region witnessed instances of convergence in 1947 and 1965, wherein valley residents and the Indian Army collectively repelled incursions by external forces (Pakistan) (Varshney, 1991). However, post-1989 dynamics shifted markedly, with popular responses to violence oscillating between explicit condemnation and silence. Espousing a non-violent position in the context of sustained political upheaval can feel like a daunting challenge. This difficulty springs from the complexities and muddled political situation involving a long-standing unrest. However, is it not true that ethical commitments are always both impossible and necessary at the same time? (Derrida, 1994: xvii). Here, we believe that the impossibility of this commitment is not meant to indicate its absolute infeasibility but to signal the unprecedented difficulty of holding onto that position in the face of an incredible challenge. It is necessary because it must be upheld for what is life without an ethical commitment (Ibid). Here, the inescapable relation between self and morality which always already exists, is merely foregrounded, for to be a self is to engage with moral issues of various sorts (Taylor:1989). It is often the case that when human agents act as a collectivity in an organised violence, this relation is further strained and obfuscated. Of course, absolute positions are not only untenable but also impractical. However, when something as precious as life itself is at stake, it is worth exploring that in the backdrop of an entrenched violent situation if a moral stance on the question of political violence is tenable.

When terrorists attacked innocent tourists in Baisaran Pahalgam, in April 2026, killing at least 26 tourists something unique was noticed. People in general who had previously overtly celebrated or justified acts of violence as a means of political anger in Kashmir were visibly horrified by this incident. News about the number of casualties trickled in many people in Kashmir began expressing anguish and condemned the gruesome attack that resulted in the loss of dozens of tourists. In tea shops, saloons, university campuses, bus stops, and other places of public gatherings, people were heard expressing their horror and commenting on the wrongness of the act by imagining what the families of the victims of this deadly

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attack must be going through. Although this anguish at the deaths of the tourists was by no means felt by all in Kashmir, a marked change could be noticed as ordinary people expressed sympathy with the victims of the terrorist attack.

What followed was a spontaneous, widespread moral response throughout the length and breadth of Kashmir. Protests, candlelight vigils, and shutdowns rippled across towns such as Srinagar, Anantnag, Baramulla, Pulwama, Bandipora, and other districts and towns of Kashmir (Indian Express:2025, Times of India:2025, Greater Kashmir:2025). Ordinary Kashmiris openly came forward to mourn victims and condemned this brutal violence in non-unequivocal terms. Across tea shops, university corridors, and other social spaces in Kashmir, the attack was described as "barbaric", and unacceptable and as "an assault on humanity"expressions that mirrored the public's emotional response to the 2025 terrorist attack at Baisaran, Pahalgam. Beyond the widespread condemnations this attack elicited, what was particularly striking was the response from the quarters that had earlier sought to justify such acts of violence, indicating a clear shift in the moral frameworks that determine and organise our response to any act of violence. Taken together, these condemnations across the board suggest a discernible recalibration of moral sensibilities through which violence is evaluated in contemporary Kashmir society. Against this backdrop, this paper investigates the transformation of the moral compass of many Kashmiris in the aftermath of the Pahalgam attack. It seeks to critically analyse what explains this apparent shift in the reactions of those people. These reactions, we argue, were inextricably underpinned by an implicit moral sense (expressing solidarity, feeling anguished, or horrified at an incident of violence is possible only when our moral sense is evoked).One could ask a legitimate question about this shift which marks a rupture in the template that broadly organises the reactions of people about killings in a fraught situation of political instability: was this grief and expression of solidarity for the lives of the victims, seen by most people as enemies or at least representing the enemy in Kashmir, just utilitarian in nature or does it unravel something deep about those Kashmiris in particular and human beings in general?If this reaction had utilitarian undercurrents to it, that is, such people were anguished only because the number of personnel killed was huge, their concern was more with the number of causalities than with the loss of life per se. On that account, one might be tempted to brush it aside for not meriting much attention or critical analysis. One might argue that this utilitarian tinge attached to condemnations is merely a shallow empathy that usually comes to the fore when the magnitude of the tragedy is immense. But on a sustained examination, if it does say something seminal about our morality even in an unimaginably complex situation, then how can we make sense of it in the throes of a protracted war-like situation of Kashmir?

Utilitarian versus Deontological Moral Concern: Understanding Methodological Orientation

Moral reasoning often entails navigating the tension between rule-based ethics and consequence-driven thinking. Deontological judgments rooted in Kantian ethics uphold moral duties such as the absolute prohibition against killing or lying irrespective of outcomes (Kant 1998:44). Thus, they may reject actions that could save more lives or be beneficial to more people if these actions violate categorical moral principles. In contrast, utilitarian reasoning, based on Bentham's philosophy, takes outcomes into account when evaluating the moral worth of an action; it seeks to maximise overall well-being and, therefore, is consequentialist in orientation (Bentham:1789). In other words, utilitarianism necessitates the optimisation of overall well-being, irrespective of the inherent nature of the action itself (Mill 1998:2). Utilitarianism may require the sacrifice of some persons if it is the sole means of saving several others. It is important to note that these terms are used in a purely descriptive manner and not for analytical scrutiny in this study. The intention is not to suggest that participants' deontological or utilitarian judgments are necessarily driven by their explicit engagement with philosophical considerations.

This paper investigates the transformation of the moral compass of many Kashmiris in the aftermath of the Pahalgam attack. It seeks to critically analysewhat explains this apparent shift in the reactions of those people. These reactions, we argue, were inextricably underpinned by an implicit moral sense (expressing solidarity, feeling anguished, or horrified at an incident of violence is possible only when our moral sense is evoked). One could ask a legitimate question about this shift which marks a rupture in the template that broadly organises the reactions of people about killings in a fraught situation of political unrest: was this grief and expression of solidarity for the lives of the victims, seen by most people as enemies or at least representing the enemy in Kashmir, just utilitarian in nature or does it unravel something deep about those Kashmiris in particular and human beings in general? If this reaction had utilitarian undercurrents to it, that is, such people were anguished only because the number of personnel killed was huge, their concern was more with the number of causalities than with the loss of life per se. On that account, one might be tempted to brush it aside for not meriting much attention or critical analysis. One might argue that this utilitarian tinge attached to condemnations is merely a shallow empathy that usually comes to the fore when the magnitude of the tragedy is immense. But on a sustained examination, if it does say something seminal about our morality even in an unimaginably complex situation, then how can we make sense of it in the throes of a protracted war-like situation of Kashmir? Of course, there is great temptation in resting content with the fact that, despite perilous political circumstances, people are able to summon such reactions and leave it at that. However, we argue that this unusual reaction of an overwhelming number of people in Kashmir does not merely symbolise shallow empathy. This points to a deeper moral consideration on the part of those people.

This paper uses a qualitative interpretive approach to understand moral responses to political violence in Kashmir following the Pahalgam attack. Instead of viewing public reactions through a rigid ideological lens, we foreground lived moral experiences, focusing on two sets of actors: individuals who assisted the injured and individuals who participated in protests condemning the attack. Both groups of participants took part in the semi-structured interviews.

Defining Political Violence

Throughout the vast expanse of global history, violence has been a persistent force (Pinker, 2011). Hegel, with characteristic bleakness, described history as a "slaughter-bench,". Although it is now widely recognised that violence extends beyond its mere physical manifestation and encompasses many forms of harm, Johan Galtung was the first to systematically conceive of violence beyond its mere physical form. He advanced a profoundly incisive conception of violence that transcended its conventional, narrow understanding. Discarding the narrow conception that perceives violence solely in terms of physical harm or somatic incapacitation typically inflicted by an intentional actor. Galtung broadened this definition to cover a broader spectrum of harm. Central to his framework are the twin variables of the potential and actual between which violence operates. He argues that violence occurs whenever there is a remediable gap between an individual's potential and their actual realisation, and when systemic or structural forces actively inhibit the narrowing of that gap (Galtung 2008:39). In this sense, violence is not merely physical harm or blow, but a structural condition insidious, sustained, and often invisible. This structural form of violence that manifests not through immediate physical harm but through a systematic erosion of human potential would later come to be conceived as structural violence. The body becomes an ultimate site of all forms of violence where violence, no matter how abstract and structural, is made apparent. Yet, psychological/structural violence consists of only one register through which violence operates. It has various dimensions, including psychological, physical, structural, and political. This paper deals exclusively with the idea of political violence and its moral dimensions. There is a lack of agreement among political theorists regarding the meaning and nature of political violence. In their examination of political violence, scholars such as Ted Gurr and I. K. Feierabend focus on psychological dimensions as the core explanation. Fanon views violence as a means for colonised individuals to shed their dependent identities and emerge as independent, liberated beings.

Contrary to individualistic perspectives, scholars such as Charles Tilly and Neil Smelser emphasise that political violence is predominantly collective in nature. According to Tilly, political violence seldom occurs in isolation; rather, it typically arises from interactions between opponents vying for power within the political system. As a result, political violence is frequently manifested through organised groups challenging or questioning the legitimacy of the governing regime. In the backdrop of these diverse perspectives, this paper adopts a conception of political violence not merely as an aggregation of individual acts or psychological impulses but as politically motivated collective action, whether carried out by individual actors or by a group. Thus, political violence is seen as a deliberate use or threat of violence by more or less organised actors directed towards political ends.

Destabilizing the dominant Interpretative Frameworks

In all societies, people have some basic moral intuitions; one of the most fundamental among them is respect for the life and well-being of other people, the logical corollary of which involves not killing or harming that other life (Hampshire 2023:42). In one form or another, this seems to be a universal moral principle (Taylor1989). Yet, the boundary around those beings worthy of respect may be drawn parochially. In this sense, they are mediated by particular cultural frameworks (Carrithers& Collins 1985:28). Philosophers such as Peter Singer have argued for the expansion of the circle of moral concern in order to include not only strangers but also non-human animals (Singer 2004:285). However, this expanding arc of moral consciousness calls for transcending deeply ingrained parochial attitudes and views which, more often than not, are propped up by cultural myths and socio-political norms. Thus, it is not a linear path. It is a complex process that involves ethical reasoning, empathy, and often a re-evaluation of what constitutes moral worth. Immanuel Kant's formulation of categorical imperative emphasized the inherent dignity and worth of human life. In his most famous formulation of the categorical imperative, Kant writes:

> *Act in such a way that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, always at the same time as an end, and never merely as a means* (Kant, 1785:38).

The The moral reaction to the Pahalgam attack appears to have been grounded in deeply held moral sensibilities and to correspond with the logic of the categorical imperative of Immanuel Kant.The large number of casualties and the horror associated with it appears to have acted merely as a catalyst to jettison or atleast fracture the dominant moral framework that regulated the moral reactions of most people in Kashmir. Nonetheless, this moral instinct is thoroughly disfigured in any climate of sustained political upheaval in such a way that people respond to the loss of certain lives with coldness and even celebrate it. This mutilation of our moral instincts becomes pervasive and comprehensive in a fragile political atmosphere marked by political instability.

The fact that many Kashmiris mourned the victims of these attacks underscores a categorical moral principle that honours the value of life itself. This deontological moral sense comes to surface in light of the immense loss of life destabilising the frame or horizon within which people generally come to determine which lives are grievable or worthwhile and which are not (Butler, 2004). The occasional disruptions in the moral framework of contested areas illustrate how contingent these interpretative systems can be, particularly in war or crisis scenarios. These occasional fissures in the moral framework in politically unstable situations expose the contingent nature of these interpretative systems, more so the one that people have come to adopt in a war or crisis situation. While it is true that we inescapably operate in one framework or the other (MacIntyre, 2007), the responses to incidents such as Pahalgam reveal the potential to challenge oppressive frameworks for more meaningful alternatives.

Inescapable Frameworks?

What are the implications of this shift/rupture on the governing moral frames that fashion moral and emotional responses in a situation of political violence committed on either side? These frameworks are largely shaped by the mechanisms of power. In other words, these

moral frames are inevitably formed and then somehow foist on the people by the powers that be. Alternatively, people slowly come to imbibe them in the context of any bitter prolonged political unrest. The frames we are talking about are those through which, what Judith Butler says, we apprehend or, indeed, fail to apprehend the lives of others as lost or injured. They determine and govern, Butler argues, our understanding of which lives matter to us and which do not. Thus, which lives, when lost, are grievable and which are not (Butler, 2004, p.13). These frames operate on both sides of the political divide. Thus, making the people who identify with either side see the lives of the other and, more specifically, of its armed combatants as not qualifying as lives to be valued and preserved.

It would be quite naïve to overlook the fact that during any period of unrest, moral disagreements are bound to arise about which lives are valuable and which are not (this disagreement becomes sharper in relation to the armed combatants who are seen as a threat to life on both sides). Therefore, the sense of responsibility for the well-being, protection, and respect of only certain lives which are not seen as a threat or siding with those who represent that threat seems plausible in this situation. Yet, it narrows as wells as fortifies our sense of "we". The general reaction to the tragic incident of Pahalgam, however, shows the possibility of rising above those exclusionary and parochial norms that create these mental frontiers which enable us to differentiate more fiercely between who belongs to "us" and who fall outside of it. The more crucial point is how these norms can be seen as not rooted in some unalterable metaphysical scheme, but contingent and arbitrary constructions of sustained political turmoil. This requires critical consciousness, which understandably is not easy to come by in a political condition which has been saturated with violence for decades. The Pahalgam terrorist attack and the mass condemnation that followed in its wake just offers us a glimpse and an opportunity to recognise the shared condition of our moral indignation at the loss of lives, and also the shared recognition of the intrinsic value of life.

Accounts of rescuers who helped the victims recurrently depicted action preceding deliberation. In response to the query, 'Was it something you thought about, or did you act without thinking?', one participant, speaking to the authors in 2026, recalled that his action was 'spontaneous and without any self-interest' (Wani, 2026). Another rescuer similarly emphasised that he 'didn't hesitate for a second' in deciding to assist, adding that it constituted a moral duty as a human being to provide aid to the injured tourists (Magray, 2026). These testimonies suggest a timeline in which a response emerges prior to any political classification. Participants framed their involvement as a moral imperative to address visible suffering rather than a tactical or doctrinal one. Here, it becomes abundantly clear that the wounded were first approached as bodies in need of care, divested of any political context or subjectivity. A comparable dynamic is visible among those who took part in protest marches and condemned the killings.

Outrage here functions as a public moral speech a response to the corroding away of moral perception in a context where violence has almost tended to become ordinary. In other words, protests become performative acts that assert the humanly intelligible value of a person, breaking the cold, calculated logic of strategic narratives (Butler, 2020). The shock expressed by participants indicates that habituation to violence is never absolute; recognition of precarious life remains latent and resurfaces when suffering becomes immediate. It is within the ambit of such interruptions, where grievability widens, and responsibility and obligation are antecedents to any categorisation, opening the condition for thinking about politics beyond the purely instrumental register. Coming to the rescue of the injured and protesting against such gruesome violence thus emerges as more than a knee-jerk reaction. They underscore moments where human beings confront one another beyond political labels, at the gateway of shared finitude- where ethics precede ideological constructions and where alternative political imaginaries may begin to take form.

In this context, the question that requires a sustained critical examination is how we build on that recognition and create architecture of shared understanding of how we are inevitably dependent on others and the realisation that we cannot harm others without in some unseen ways harming the self at the same time is a challenge for peaceful coexistence (Gandhi: 1908). We suggest that the starting point for such a political project should be the acknowledgement of the contingent nature of dominant interpretative frameworks. Moreover, it would also require the cultivation of the moral imagination of ordinary people so that they can see the ideological obfuscations that are foist upon them by the political leadership of their respective sides. This would require a whole host of institutions like freedom of speech and expression, free press, robust mass liberal arts education, and so on.

CONCLUSION

All human life is marked by precarity, meaning that it is fragile at its core. Precariousness, in other words, is a shared condition of human life (Butler 2004:5). Yet, in a belligerent political environment, the life of ordinary people from either side is increasingly disposed to precarity, violence, and loss. This heightened vulnerability makes the bodies of people the very sites where maximum pain and loss are sought to be inflicted for the respective political agendas. The attack in Pahalgam on tourists threw up some intriguing questions about our moral responses in the face of the loss of precarious lives even when they do not fall in the narrow and exclusionary notion of "us; and consequently, about the challenge of becoming more fully human in a charged political milieu like Kashmir. The general reaction of condemnations in the wake of the Pahalgam attack embodies a profound yearning to break free from the moral degradation that political violence thrusts on individuals, reducing them to mere instruments of political narratives rather than autonomous moral actors. This outcry signals the abiding struggle to reclaim the sense of humanity that violence has perpetually eroded. In other words, it was a sign of the feeble cry for liberation from morally stunted beings that, as Simone Weil observed, violence inescapably shaped us.

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