Lived Realities Beyond Media Narratives: Examining Violence Against Kashmiri Shawl Sellers in Mainland India

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Abstract: *Seasonal mobility and informal trade constitute significant yet insufficiently examined aspects of India's internal social and economic dynamics. Kashmiri shawl sellers have a unique place in this landscape because they travel every year to towns and cities throughout mainland India. In recent years, there has been more than enough media on incidents involving these traders. The media often paints them as proof that people in Kashmir are hostile to them. This study investigates the disparity between media-driven representations and the actual experiences that shawl sellers from Kashmir face. The study utilises multi-sited ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Himachal Pradesh, Punjab, and Delhi, relying on participant observation, informal group discussions, and in-depth interviews with 60 shawl sellers from various occupational roles. The findings from the study show that daily interactions are mostly routine, collaborative, and rooted in social and economic relationships. Although participants spoke about instances of harassment, these occurrences were rare, unevenly distributed, and mostly ascribed to individual perpetrators rather than to larger communities. Local responses to these types of events often included comfort, reassurance, and support systems, which made it harder to tell a story of widespread hostility. The study differentiates between actual violence and reported violence, illustrating how episodic events are often exaggerated through media reportage and are often disconnected from day-to-day social realities. The findings contribute to debates on nationalism, migration, and belonging by providing an empirically grounded narrative of how insecurity is navigated in practice.*

Keywords: Identity, Kashmir, Media, Migration Shawl Traders,Violence.

INTRODUCTION

Seasonal mobility and informal trade represent significant yet under-researched aspects of India's internal political economy. Kashmiri Shawl sellers are unique among these mobile workers. These traders travel to cities and towns in mainland India annually. They make a living by following traditional crafts, using informal networks, and trading with people they know. However, in the last few years, the media has increasingly framed their presence in stories of suspicion, harassment, and sporadic violence. Prime time news shows and viral social media content often illustrate isolated incidents involving Kashmiri traders as expressions of widespread societal animosity. Therefore, these low-level interactions are converted into representations of national sentiment. It is essential for research on nationalism, migration, and the media to comprehend how these expressions influence perceptions of violence and belonging. The primary issue analysed in this study relates to the disparity between actual violence and perceived violence. This issue is analytically important, as exaggerated representations may incite moral panic and give rise to communal stereotypes. Tackling this issue facilitates a more empirically substantiated and theoretically based comprehension of identity-driven vulnerability in contemporary India.

Anderson (1983) contends that nationalism as a mediated phenomenon, highlights the role of media expressions or interactions in shaping collective national imaginaries. Contemporary scholarship on internal migration and marginalisation illustrates how temporary and transient populations navigate their sense of belonging in contexts where inclusion is not guaranteed (Balibar, 2004; Yuval-Davis, 2011). Studies on moral panic and affect illustrate how singular incidents within communities can be symbolically escalated into crises that have adverse effects on society (Cohen, 1972; Ahmed, 2004). Nevertheless, inadequate focus has been directed towards understanding how Kashmiri mobile traders perceive violence. The focus has also not been given to how they differentiate between day-to-day social interactions and extraordinary hostility and how contemporary media discourses influence their lived experiences.

This research fills this void by positioning Kashmiri shawl vendors at the convergence of mediated nationalism and day-to-day social engagement. Instead of assuming a unified "*mainland hostility*", it analyzes how violence is socially generated, unevenly allocated, and discursively amplified. By prioritising traders'

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interpretations, this study transcends event-centric analyses to examine and interrogate perception, scale, and symbolic power. Consequently, this study is directed by three principal research enquiries:

1) Who harasses or attacks Kashmiri shawl sellers and how do traders group these actors?

2) How do traders who are affected by these events interpret them in light of their mobility, income, and day-to-day interactions?

3) How do mainstream and social media interactions turn small acts into national issues that lead to distorted perceptions of Kashmiri identity?

This paper thus aims to strengthen discussions on nationalism, belonging, and violence driven by the media by providing a grounded informed analysis of the experience and perception of insecurity.

Literature Review: Media, Nationalism, and Internal Othering

This research combines three interconnected domains of academics: (i) media and the social construction of violence; (ii) manufacturing of internal othering; and (iii) mobility, marginality, and daily interactions of belonging and identity. Although each of these studies has separately investigated issues of identity, power, and representation, their intersection concerning mobile Kashmiri traders has yet to be thoroughly examined. This review transitions from overarching theoretical discussions to studies directly pertinent to research questions.

Media, Violence, and the Creation of Moral Panic

Contemporary scholarship on media and sociology has stressed that violence cannot be limited to physical acts only; it is a wide phenomenon whose sociality is created through representation, circulation, and narration (Couldry, 2012). Media organisations actively affect moral boundaries, emotional reactions, and political perceptions, frequently amplifying specific events while carefully suspending others which match their corporate interests. This viewpoint is significant for understanding the reasons for the excessive visibility of episodic violence involving Kashmiri shawl sellers. Stanley Cohen's (1972) notion of '*moral panic*' offers a significant framework for the analysis of such processes. Moral panic occurs when certain groups are portrayed as threats to societal values, resulting in heightened public fear and calls for regulation or exclusion. Subsequent scholars have enhanced this framework by analysing the ways in which sensationalist framing, visual repetition, and emotive language perpetuate moral panics beyond their initial occurrence (Goode & Ben-Yehuda, 2009). These dynamics are exacerbated in modern digital contexts. Studies on affective publics and algorithmic amplification indicate that emotionally charged content disseminates more rapidly and extensively than contextualised analysis (Ahmed, 2004; Papacharissi, 2015). Consequently, isolated incidents involving marginalised groups can swiftly evolve into national spectacles, divorced from local contexts, and day-to-day social relations. An analysis of Indian media studies has shown that Muslims, migrants, and people who do not agree with the government are often portrayed in the same way. Contemporary research on media houses indicates that television debates and social media discussions often depend on dichotomies of loyalty versus threat, often showing polarised perceptions of national identity (Thapar, 2020). While Kashmiri is frequently referenced as a symbolic location in these narratives, there is insufficient empirical examination of the impact of mediated representations on mobile Kashmiri populations residing beyond the region.

Nationalism, Internal Boundaries, and the Formation of the "Internal Other"

Anderson (1983) contends, that the idea of a nation as an imagined community highlights the significance of narrative, symbols, and media in manufacturing national unity. However, postcolonial scholars argue that this imagination is fundamentally exclusionary, generating internal hierarchies of belonging (Chatterjee, 1993). Balibar's (2004) notion of internal borders is particularly pertinent to comprehending the experiences of mobile Kashmiri traders. Internal borders are social, cultural, and symbolic mechanisms. They control who belongs to the nation-state. These borders are brought to light through daily activities such as surveillance, policing, and public discourse, with a very little to zero focus on mobile and visibly marked groups. In markets, public transportation, and homes, Kashmiri shawl sellers often run into these kinds of borders. One can tell and spot who they are by their accent, attire and job. Indian scholarship on '*internal othering*' has explored the positioning of specific communities as conditionally national, legally integrated, yet symbolically dubious (Nigam, 2019). Muslims, migrants from the Northeast, and Kashmiris have been examined as groups whose belonging has been perpetually scrutinised (McDuie-Ra, 2012; Zia, 2019). Nonetheless, a significant portion of this literature is regionally focused, emphasising Kashmir as a conflict zone rather than portraying Kashmiris as mobile individuals traversing life in India. The figure of the Kashmiri trader occupies a symbolic space where national anxieties are condensed; however, this positionality remains insufficiently theorised.

Belonging, Affective Economies, and Daily Social Interactions

Recent sociological research has transitioned its focus from fixed concepts of identity to relational and emotional interpretations of belonging. Yuval-Davis (2011) defined belonging as a complex process that includes emotional attachment, social recognition, and political membership while differentiating between experiential belonging and the politics of belonging. This distinction is essential for examining the experiences of Kashmiri shawl sellers, whose formal citizenship may persist despite challenges to their social legitimacy. Ahmed's (2004) theory of '*affective economies*' elucidates the social circulation of emotions such as fear, suspicion, and anger, which attach unevenly to specific bodies. Kashmiri traders frequently serve as conduits for national anxieties, despite their daily interactions being predominantly pragmatic and non-hostile. Billig (1995) shows that national identity is often passed down through everyday, non-confrontational actions instead of open hostility. Ethnographic research on markets and informal economies also emphasises areas of practical coexistence and negotiated familiarity (Bayat, 2010). This research indicates that economic interdependence often alleviates ideological conflicts. However, these everyday

social realities are mostly missing from media stories, which focus on moments of change instead of continuity.

Contributions and Gaps

Even though there is a lot of good research, three gaps still stand out. First, previous research frequently conflates the incidence of violence with its perceived magnitude, inadequately examining how media cultivates perceptions of societal consensus. Second, mobile Kashmiri labourers and merchants continue to be peripheral in both Kashmiri studies and migration research. Third, the interpretive agency of individuals subjected to violence is seldom emphasised. This research fills these gaps by focusing on the narratives of Kashmiri shawl sellers and analysing the disparity between lived experience and mediated representation.

METHODOLOGY

This study utilised a qualitative ethnographic research design to investigate the daily experiences, perceptions, and interpretations of Kashmiri shawl vendors in mainland India. A qualitative methodology was chosen, as the research demanded meaning-making, lived experiences, and social interactions. Ethnography is particularly appropriate for this kind of investigation, as it facilitates profound interaction with participants in their comfort zones that reflect authentic contexts (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). The fieldwork took place in Himachal Pradesh, Punjab, and Delhi. This study examined shawl sellers in and around Shimla in Himachal Pradesh, traders in and around Amritsar in Punjab, and sellers in Old Delhi. The traders travelled to areas such as Greater Kailash and Vasant Vihar because they are important seasonal markets for Kashmiri shawl sellers. They were divided into four groups based on their jobs: (1) *thekhedars*, who handle buying and selling; (2) independent sellers, who buy and sell on their own; (3) commission-based sellers, who work for *thekhedars*; and (4) wage labourers, who work for *thekhedars*. This classification facilitated a comparative analysis among differing degrees of economic autonomy and instability.

Sampling

The study was purposive sampling-based. We chose participants according to their pertinence to the research question. There were 60 shawl sellers in total, with approximately 20 from each state and 10 from each job category. This is in line with the recommendations for ethnographic sampling (Spradley, 1979; Marcus, 1995). Additionally, more than ten in-depth interviews were conducted with *thekhedars* and related non-Kashmiri individuals. A small number of interviews with customers were also conducted to put sellers' stories in context (Bernard, 2011). This sample surpassed the frequently referenced qualitative saturation thresholds (Guest et al., 2006).

Data Collection

We used three different qualitative methods to collect data: participant observation, informal group discussions, and in-depth interviews. The ethnographer accompanied shawl vendors through markets, neighbourhoods, and settlements, documenting their interactions with customers, landlords, and others in the course of their daily activities. Throughout the process, field notes recorded both verbal exchanges and embodied practices (Emerson et al., 2011). In the evenings, sellers held informal group discussions in the rooms where they stayed. These conversations were purposely not structured so that people could talk freely about their daily lives. We conducted in-depth interviews with some of the people who had been harassed. The selective use of media reports and political speeches also helped the study.

Table 1: Socio-Demographic Profile of Interviewed Kashmiri Migrant Traders

Characteristics	Category	Number
District of Origin	Anantnag	24
	Baramulla	6
	Kupwara	8
	Shopian	7
	Sopore	6
	Kulgam	4
	Pulwama	5
Occupation	Seller	47
	Mahajan	8
	Shop Owner	5
Work Destination	Punjab	17
	Delhi	14
	Himachal Pradesh	29
Types of Abuse	Verbal	41
	Both	11
	Not Available	8

Data Analysis

The data were analysed using an iterative thematic method. Field notes, interview transcripts, and discussion records were encoded utilising open and axial coding methodologies. The initial codes were generated inductively and subsequently organised into more comprehensive analytical categories corresponding to the research questions. Triangulation among methodologies and participant groups augmented analytical validity. All participants provided informed consent before participating. Using pseudonyms and removing identifying information ensured that privacy was protected. Participants were asked that business-sensitive information, such as pricing strategies and trade practices, should not be included. People can choose to participate, and they can leave at any time.

RESULTS

The findings were structured according to principal themes derived from participant observation, group discussions, and interviews, directly aligning with the study's research questions.

Daily Social Interactions and Routine Encounters

Shawl sellers at all three field sites said that they had regular and frequent interactions with local communities that were characterised by familiarity and repeated contact. Many sellers have been going to the same neighbourhoods for many years, from five to more than thirty. Because of these visits, people know their names, are familiar with them, and know where to trade. For instance, sellers in rural Punjab and Himachal Pradesh said that people of all ages knew about them. One seller said, "*Everyone in the village knows me, from kids to older people*", and another said he had learned the local language to make it easier to talk to people. In Delhi, sellers said that they were well known in residential colonies, where residents could recognise them by sight. Participant

observations recorded uniform patterns of hospitality. Most of the time, sellers in Punjab and Himachal Pradesh said that the people they visited offered them tea and food. Water offerings were more common in Delhi.

Long-Term Relationships and Trading Networks

Long-term trading relationships that went beyond just exchanging goods and services were a common theme across sites. Sellers said they were asked to attend family events such as weddings and religious or social gatherings. In some cases, sellers talked about relationships that lasted for generations, where customers first dealt with older family members and then with their children. One seller said that a customer was "*someone I treat like my sister, and she treats me like a brother.*" Extended family members choose items in a home setting. Economic trust also exists in deals that involve credit. Groups of shawl sellers who rented places to stay in Shimla said that local shopkeepers often gave groceries on credit with payment due at the end of the selling season. Both sellers and local residents said that these arrangements were common.

No Hostility in Daily Interactions

Field observations and interviews demonstrated that sellers did not encounter persistent or widespread hostility in their daily interactions. Sellers consistently distinguished between isolated negative interactions and regular social relationships. In most places in Punjab and Himachal Pradesh, sellers said they were "*comfortable*". One local customer said that he felt "*more comfortable with a Kashmiri than with someone from Delhi*", and another said that Kashmiris and locals were "*similar people*" with the same cultural traits. These opinions were voiced in casual discussions noted during fieldwork. In Delhi, interactions were more formal and time-limited, but sellers said that shopkeepers, guards, and residents usually knew they were there, even when they needed permission to enter gated communities.

Types and Nature of Harassment

Everyone who took part said they had been harassed in some way, and they often used the word "*tang*" (meaning "being troubled or bothered"). These experiences were very different from each other in terms of how they occurred and how strong they were. The most common problems were arguments over prices and fights with transportation workers, such as rickshaw drivers. Sellers said that security guards sometimes looked through their bags more closely, especially when carrying heavier bags. People also often talked about guards in gated communities who provided limited access. People said that these encounters happened repeatedly, but they were mostly not violent. There were fewer incidents of verbal abuse that made direct references to the Kashmiri or Muslim identity. For instance, one seller said that while walking with their goods, someone yelled at them using verbal slangs. There have been very few reports of physical violence.

Distribution of Violent Incidents

There have not been many reports of physical or very bad verbal violence. Only a small number of the 60 sellers who were interviewed had direct physical assaults happen to them. Most hostile encounters were said to be short-lived and uncommon. Sellers stressed that these kinds of things did not happen again in the same place and were not linked to specific neighbourhoods or communities. People said that after these kinds of events, they did not often go to the police. Most of the time, they chose to ignore the events.

Identification of the Perpetrators

Sellers always said that people who committed serious harassment or violence were a small, separate group and not members of the wider community. People in Punjab and Delhi said that drug users, petty criminals, or drunk young men were responsible for a number of events. People who were there when the stories were told called the people who did these things "*addicts*" or "*troublemakers*". A clear demographic pattern emerged across accounts: perpetrators of communal or identity-based abuse were consistently described as young men, typically between the ages of 20 and 40. There have been no reports of incidents involving elderly people or women in this category.

How Communities Respond to Events

In some cases, people who lived nearby stepped in or offered help after the harassment. People who sold things said that locals told them to ask for help from community leaders, local politicians, or panchayat members. In Himachal Pradesh and Punjab, sellers said that after the incidents, locals offered protection and help. One seller said that locals told them to find the attacker so that they could step in.

DISCUSSION

This study aimed to investigate the daily experiences of Kashmiri shawl vendors in mainland India, focusing specifically on the characteristics of violence, identification of offenders, and the influence of mediated narratives in shaping perceptions of insecurity. The results show that social reality is more complicated than the common idea that there is widespread hostility toward Kashmiri traders. Instead of enduring persistent or widespread violence, participants indicated that their social interactions were primarily routine, cooperative, and frequently established over time, with inconsistent instances of harassment.

These results correspond with the academic literature that warns against episodic conflict with structural consensus (Cohen, 1972; Ahmed, 2004). Prior research on nationalism and internal migration highlights the susceptibility of mobile and minority populations (Balibar, 2004; Yuval-Davis, 2011); however, the current study illustrates that this vulnerability is not uniformly experienced. Insecurity appears to be situational, relational, and influenced by local social networks. The presence of enduring trading relationships, credit-based transactions, and intergenerational familiarity indicates that economic and social interdependence frequently diminishes hostility rather than intensifying it.

A significant contribution of this study is its empirical differentiation between experienced and perceived or reported violence. Participants consistently distinguished isolated incidents, frequently ascribed to inebriated individuals, minor offenders, or socially marginalised actors, from the general host population. This finding contradicts media portrayals that often depict violence against Kashmiri

traders as indicative of pervasive societal hostility. In this regard, the study corroborates the prevailing criticisms of media amplification and moral panic, in which singular events are symbolically elevated to signify collective intent (Silverstone, 2007). These observations align with ethnographic research highlighting the ambivalence and fragmentation of nationalism in everyday life (Billig, 1995). The low frequent towards physical assaults does not diminish their impact, especially given the precarious circumstances under which informal traders function.

This study has a few limitations that need to be recognised. First, it is limited to three states and may not reflect the regional differences across India. Second, the use of qualitative methods and self-reported experiences may have failed to capture incidents that participants opted not to disclose. These limitations indicate prudence in extrapolating these findings beyond the study context. Despite these limitations, this study has significant implications. This necessitates a rethinking of the conceptualisation of violence against mobile minorities, shifting from monolithic narratives to more nuanced ones. Subsequent research may broaden the geographical focus, integrate longitudinal methodologies, or conduct systematic analyses of media representation. In summary, this research enhances discussions on nationalism, mobility, and mediated violence by illustrating that day-to-day social interactions frequently counteract the homogenising tendencies of national discourse, even in politically sensitive environments.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the everyday experiences of Kashmiri shawl vendors in mainland India, emphasising the lived, perceived, and articulated dimensions of violence, belonging, and social interactions. The results reveal a social reality that significantly diverges from dominant public and media representations. Shawl sellers do not have to deal with hostility. Most of the time, they have friendly, helpful conversations with people they have traded with for a long time and who are part of local social networks. Harassment and violence do happen, but they do not happen in the same way everywhere, and they do not show how most people feel. Participants consistently distinguished between isolated incidents, often attributed to socially marginalised individuals, and the customary behaviours of local communities, many of which offered reassurance and support during periods of vulnerability. This distinction underscores the analytical importance of distinguishing episodic harm from the general claims of collective hostility.

The principal contribution of this study is its focus on the divergence between real and mediated perceptions of violence. By prioritising traders' individual interpretations, this study challenges uniform narratives that simplify diverse social interactions into singular expressions of nationalist hostility. It stresses how economic interdependence, familiarity, and everyday solidarities often lessen the exclusionary discourse in daily life. Ultimately, this study calls for a more thorough investigation into the comprehension and representation of violence against mobile and minority groups. Recognising the uneven, situational, and socially embedded nature of insecurity enhances scholarly precision and fosters accountable public discourse. By documenting the ordinary alongside the exceptional, this study offers a grounded account of how belonging is negotiated subtly and pragmatically, even in politically charged contexts.

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