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Living in Conflict: Political Identity, Civic Participation, and Aspirations of Kashmiri Youth

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Abstract

The geopolitical region of Kashmir has been experiencing political conflict for decades, which has brought brutality and bloodshed along with widespread damage and disruptions to daily life. All of this has a profound effect on the youth and their lives. In addition to being victims, in several cases, the youth has also been active participants in resistance movements and activities in Kashmir. Understanding the situations of the youth in Kashmir is crucial for navigating the region's present and future. This paper aims to explore how its youth form their political beliefs and identities, and their social or material concerns at present, and explores patterns of youth participation in civic and community engagements and their motivations for the same. The study uses a mixed-methods approach involving a semi-structures survey, conducted among 120 young Kashmiris, from different regional and socioeconomic backgrounds. The findings of this paper illustrate the importance of identity development processes which are often disrupted in Kashmir, as conventional systems contributing towards them get torn apart, and posit as main influences on youth identity formation. The respondents of this study strongly emphasized their needs for basic facilities and fundamental rights while maintaining a strong connection to their Kashmiri roots and culture. Although findings showed that conflict increased the understanding of politics and political issues among youth; their external political efficacy was observed to be low, indicating significant distrust in formal political systems. Further, while their participation in civic society was found to be low, they nevertheless aspired for administrative careers and desired societal change and institutional reform.

Keywords: *Kashmir Conflict; Kashmiri Youth; Political Identity; Civic Engagement; Aspirations*

1. Introduction

Youth constitute a critical segment of society, representing the future decision-makers and agents of change. Examining their perceptions, beliefs, activities and identities offers a valuable insight into the prospective social, political and cultural trajectories for a society. Positioned at a formative stage of life, they actively construct their sense of self, negotiate their roles, and internalise broader societal norms and expectations (Naqshbandi and Amin, 2013).

Several factors together shape the sense of identity among the youth. The family, kinship, and social networks are the primary sources of influence which instill fundamental values in children (Berger and Luckman, 1967); this is followed by secondary influences such as the school, peers, and different social groups which together govern how young people form their beliefs and take part in the society. Their political beliefs, interests, knowledge along with participation in different activities define their political engagement and their broader view of civic engagement (Wray-Lake et al., 2016; Wray-Lake and Abrams, 2020). While forms of political engagement could be both positive or negative, their normative distinctions often vary across different cultural and political contexts (Lutz and Hoffmann, 2017; Wray-Lake 2019).

In regions seething with conflict, these crucial social mechanisms are often disrupted and consequently influence patterns of identity formation and civic participation. Youth, often being at the forefront of political unrest, witness and experience violence, disarrayed routines and constricted access to basic resources and facilities like healthcare, education and freedom for self-expression (Snoubar and Hawal, 2015). They are often forced to bear the brunt of different psychological, physical, social and economic issues (Wessells, 2009).

Kashmir is a multicultural, multireligious, and multilingual region known worldwide for its beautiful landscape. As a critical geopolitical region, it has been experiencing one of the longest running political conflicts, between the countries of India and Pakistan (Pandey and Maaz, 2015). While political conflict affects all social groups, Kashmiri youth have been particularly vulnerable to traumatic events. Growing up in a region marked by the presence of military, militant groups, and a hyperactive state apparatus, the youth are constantly exposed to a politically charged environment where every aspect of their social, political, religious and cultural identities are constantly under contention.

With heavy militarisation in the region, children in the region are habituated to the presence of military personnel, ammunition, state action, and violence from a young age. Political rallies, protests, and public demonstrations are a regular feature of everyday life, with young people often participating either as active participants or as part of the audience. Among the most visible forms of resistance is stone-pelting, a practice that many have either engaged in or witnessed firsthand. Such exposure to conflict, state surveillance, resistance and harsh state retaliation profoundly shapes their beliefs, attitudes, and patterns of behaviour, giving rise to a distinct socio-political consciousness among Kashmiri youth.

Most studies on youth living in conflict zones focus on their exposure to violence, often treating them as passive victims; their multi-faceted lived experiences are often overlooked or receive minimal attention. This paper seeks to focus on the gap in existing knowledge by exploring the perception, nature and patterns of political identity formation among the youth in Kashmir and explore how their sense of identity and modes of participation shape their responses to prolonged conflict and exposure to political conflict. Despite the region's long-standing history of unrest and youth involvement in socio-political events, this dimension remains underexplored. Through original, exploratory research, the paper aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of how young people in Kashmir navigate the intersections of conflict, identity, and civic engagement.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Theoretical Foundations of Identity

An individual's identity is a dynamic construct shaped by an evolving combination of different characteristics, values and roles that develop through constant negotiation individual traits like gender,

ethnicity, religion, class, along with structural influences like family, peers, schools, community organisations, political systems, the media and other societal structures (Open Society Foundations, 2011). As youth progresses through this process of identity formation, they develop their views about society and politics. Existing research highlights the central role of family, peers and schools as the primary factors shaping young people's sense of self, as these provide opportunities for discussions and other civic activities. (Youniss et al., 2002; Wray-Lake, 2019; Galliher et al., 2017; Branje, 2022; Hatemi and McDermott, 2012; Jennings et al., 2009; Barber, 2014). Additionally, significant life events, particularly those involving disruption or conflict, can profoundly influence and often accelerate the process of identity developments (Branje, 2022).

Identity extends beyond the individual to encompass broader social narratives that shape one's sense of belonging to groups like family, community, religious groups, national or ethnic groups (Haslam, 2004). These social contexts provide youth with the frameworks through which they comprehend the privileges and obligations associated with membership and participation in various spheres of society (Flanagan, 2013; Wray-Lake, 2019). Collective identities impact behaviour and cognition at different levels (David and Bar-Tal, 2009; Muldoon, 2013). The enactment of these identities and the influences they bring is context dependent; while they can promote constructive engagement and interactions in the society, they can also be tied to inter-group threat and violence. In a political setting, these collective or in-group identities are often considered to provide a sense of belonging, self-esteem, sustenance, social support along with promoting resilience (even during conflict), collective positive action to achieve group goals or social reform (Barber, 2014; Haslam et al., 2009; Haslam and Reicher, 2006; Sabatier, 2008; Hammack, 2010; Slone, 2009; Wexler et al., 2009; Merrilees et al., 2013; Massad et al., 2018). However, when in-group identity is very strong, any perceived danger or threats from other groups can cause prejudice or even violent and unruly behaviour towards the out-group, especially during conflict. (Nesdale et al., 2005; Nesdale et al., 2009; Struch and Schwartz, 1989; Branscombe and Wann, 1994; Merrilees et al., 2013).

Existing studies suggest that in the broader social or political context determines whether group identities act as risks or resources for political engagement. Individuals experiencing similar situations may interpret and respond to them differently based on their community contexts (Muldoon, 2013; Wray-Lake, 2019) thereby, forming distinct identities and belief systems.

2.2. Youth Civic and Political Engagement

It is often argued that interactions about political and social issues, which shape opinions, predict the behaviour of the youth in the society (Torney-Purta et al., 2001; Wray-Lake and Sloper, 2016; Mısırlı-Özsoy, 2010). Youth acquire knowledge, opportunities and avenues for reflection through different social experiences and institutions; however, they eventually turn them into meaningful beliefs and forms of civic engagement on their own (Youniss et al., 2002).

As Wray-Lake (2019) has explained in her study, young people participate politically in different ways that go beyond formal procedures like voting, and include activities like participation in different campaigns, staying updated with news, involvement in school or community activities, etc to address different issues through advocacy and activism. Nowadays, digital platforms like social media have become crucial arenas for civic engagement. Online participation often motivates offline action as social media has become a catalyst for widespread political action.

Other than supportive environments, barriers can also pave engagement trajectories. Experiences of alienation from politics or political systems often result in lower electoral participation, while simultaneously encouraging non-electoral political activism like protests, demonstrations and other grassroots activism (Diemer and Rapa, 2016). Youth participation in civic activities is further reduced by

factors like indifference towards politics, lack of trust in political institutions and inadequate civic education. As noted by (Bhat et al., 2025), this is especially true in regions with political conflict where the youth feel disillusioned from politics. When youth are confident and hopeful that they can positively change their lives and surroundings with the help of supportive policy systems, they are more likely to form solid political and civic aims (Aslam and Sudan, 2021).

2.3. Conflict and Youth Development

Research has observed that the lack of access to crucial resources like safe social networks, healthcare, housing along with problems like displacement, imprisonment, hunger, and exposure to violence impacts youth engagements severely (Barber, 2013; Naqshbandi and Amin, 2013; Dar and Deb, 2020; Snoubar and Hawal, 2015)

A large body of literature discusses the negative impacts of conflict and experiences like torture, harrasment, imprisonment, violation of human rights etc on health, which ranges from anxiety and depression, to physical harm, substance abuse and suicide, that particularly affect youth more than adults (Massad et al., 2018; Asima, 2011; Snoubar and Hawal, 2015; Naqshbandi and Amin, 2013;Dar and Deb, 2020) Such traumatic experiences leave significant imprints on their behaviour and political attitudes (Wray-Lake, 2019). Many authors have observed that conflict exposure has often been linked to violent and unlawful behaviours as well as reducing moral values among youth across diverse contexts (Muldoon, 2013; Merrilees et al., 2013)

The existing scholarship also argues that conflict does not compulsorily produce widespread social and political malfunction. Alongside delinquent behaviours, many young people often learn to adapt positively. Resilience is often described to be a distinct characteristic of life, and not just an exception in conflict zones, which manifest among groups as well. Institutions like family and community networks have often been reported to act as important agents in processing and perceiving trauma (Massad et al., 2018). The scholarship on conflict zones largely describes the population as exhibiting stable coping and psychosocial behaviour (Barber, 2013; Almedom and Glandon, 2007; Barenbaum et al, 2004; Bonanno, 2008; Cairns and Dawes, 1996; Daiute, 2006; Gilligan, 2009; Hoge et al., 2007; Layne et al., 2007; Miller and Rasmussen, 2010; Panter-Brick, 2010; Richardson, 2002; Westpahl and Bonanno, 2007; Fernando and Ferrari, 2013). It is important to note that stable coping does not necessarily indicate resilience; at times, it can also signal a form of denial or physiological dissociation where unusual behaviour and responses becomes the usual (Cairns, 1996; Muldoon, 2013).

Barber (2013, 2014) has also noted that conventional research on youth in conflict zones have viewed members of the youth as passive victims of violence, and have focussed on mental health and behavioral issues. Such framing risks normalising stereotypical stress responses and individualises the impact of conflict, thereby obscuring its collective and structural dimensions. The recognition of strength, adaptation, meaning-making and activism is better suited for a more balanced view in conflict studies. He has also implied that the impact of political conflict on youth cannot be fully understood without understanding the responses to conflict that not only includes trauma but also resilience and political activism as an important part. Such features have been recognised to not only help young people cope better but also provide empowerment, and allowing them to use conflict as a source of power and identity (Haslam et al., 2009; Muldoon, 2013; Barber and Olsen, 2009; Blattman, 2009; McAdam, 1988; Yates, 1999; Barber and Schluterman, 2009). In summary, more than conflict exposure, activism often predicts future performance or outcomes among the youth.

2.4. Situating the Study: Historical and Political Context of Kashmir

The Kashmir Conflict is one of the most long-lasting, dangerous and geopolitically relevant conflicts of modern times. Not surprisingly, American President Bill Clinton described Kashmir as "the most dangerous place in the world" in his official state speech in 2000. Although the conflict can be traced back to the 1947 partition between India and Pakistan, it remains one of the oldest unresolved disputes on the UN agenda till date (Ahmad and Balamurgan, 2021; Bin Shamsuddin, 2014).

Drawing on Anwar's (2024) account of the conflict, and supplemented by insights from other scholars, the trajectory of the conflict can be summarised: it originated in 1947, when Kashmir, a muslim-majority princely state ruled by a Hindu ruler Maharaja Hari Singh, became a contested territory between the newly separated rival countries India and Pakistan. As per the partition rules, Kashmir was supposed to eventually merge with Pakistan or remain independent (Snedden, 2001). However, before the ruler could make a decision, Pakistani tribal forces invaded Kashmir, which led Hari Singh to merge with India by signing the Instrument of Accession, in return for India's military assistance to eliminate the Pakistani intruders (Rashid, 2020; Sengupta, 2020). This triggered the first India–Pakistan war and entailed intervention from the United Nations. To solve the issue, the Security Council decided to let the people of Kashmir have the final say about their fate and called for a plebiscite on self-determination; this however remains unimplemented till date (Qadeer, 2017).

Since then, the people of Kashmir have suffered due to the India–Pakistan rivalry, with multiple wars fought over the region (Bhat, 2019; Anwar, 2024). The people of Kashmir have not just been victims to the conflict, they have also been active participants in different resistance movements. Armed insurgency erupted in 1989, after many members of the youth crossed the line of control and received militant training in Pakistan, to resist the elections of 1987 which was popularly viewed as being rigged from the start (Chowdhary and Rao, 2003).

As a response, India has pursued a repressive and aggressive strategy of heavy militarisation to maintain its control over the region. This in turn has created feelings of exclusion among Kashmiris, many of whom now seek to fight for independence from the Indian state. In 1990-01, the Indian government implemented the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) that allowed the military forces to search, arrest and use lethal force to maintain public order in 'areas of disturbance', such as Kashmir, even if they were in violation of human rights, and offered legal immunity for all such actions (Staniland, 2013; Ganie, 2019). Scholars like Dar and Deb (2020) and Bhat (2019) have illustrated that huge numbers of lives were lost, with rampant reporting of disappearances and unidentified bodies. Pandey and Maaz (2015) reported that between 1987 and 1995, over 76,00 people were arrested under TADA (Terrorism and Disruptive Activities Prevention Act) which diluted existing legal safeguards and allowed the police sweeping powers to arrest individuals suspected of involvement in terrorist activities. Due to such sweeping provisions. The conviction rate under TADA remained below 2%, highlighting concerns over misuse and the arbitrary detention of suspects. Such provisions also indicate the severity and harshness of the conflict. Other than the loss of life, socioeconomic systems also stagnated as a result of this conflict.

2.5. Kashmiri Youth: Identity, Mental Health, and Social Breakdown

Naqshbandi et al. (2012), Asima (2011) and Bhat (2019) have illustrated that conflict drives identity crises among the Kashmiri youth. Mental health issues are particularly prevalent among the youth and have escalated significantly since 1989, as they continue to be exposed to traumatic events (Dar and Deb, 2020). This was supported by Grove et al. (2005) who showed that members of youth living in conflict zones experience heightened vulnerability to psychological distress and related problems.

Studies suggest that because of trauma, humiliation, everyday exposure to violence and fears of erosion of their social identity, in terms of religion, culture, community or language, and the government's undermining of autonomy provisions and rights, Kashmiri youth are often fuelled with anger and resistance (Lalwani and Gayner, 2020). Along with such feelings, damages to societal systems have also resulted in poverty, hunger, financial struggle, and systemic failures like unemployment, orphanhood, antisocial behaviours, social breakdowns that have together compelled the youth to throw themselves into armed conflict which significantly impact their future (Naqshbandi and Amin, 2013; Ahmad Bhat, 2019; Snoubar and Hawal, 2015; Malla, 2019; Naqshbandi et al. , 2012; Pandey and Maaz, 2015)

2.6. Education, Civic Participation and Resistance in Kashmir

Education is central to the growth of young people. In Kashmir, it has been disrupted since decades due to the ongoing conflict. Not only have schools and colleges shut down due to curfews, many a times, they have become sites of direct targeting during clashes which has caused significant infrastructural damage. Many children have lost vision due to pellet injuries, while many others have faced other forms of physical and mental trauma (Bhat, 2019; Ahmad and Balamurgan, 2021). Internet bans have also been common in the region, even in today's digital age, which has adversely affected their access to education (Bhat, 2019; Dar and Deb, 2020; Ahmad and Balamurgan, 2021).

Kashmiri youth have been reported to participate politically in different ways, though their engagement is often inseparable from the ongoing struggle for self determination in the region. They have been involved in protests, demonstrations, militancy and stone pelting (Guroo and Naikoo, 2018, Pandit, 2019; Srinivasan, 2022). Further, electoral participation has been very low among young voters due to a lack of confidence in political parties, election processes, insufficient opportunities, restrictions on freedoms (Pandey and Maaz, 2015; Bhat et al., 2025).

The rise in the use of social media has presented a new aspect to Kashmiri youth engagement. Often, traditional media is censored, which causes the individuals to lose trust in it. In recent years, social media has become an important platform for story-telling and resistance. Members of the youth share their stories and narratives with a global audience and try to gather collective opinion and support for their initiatives. While the use of social media has not been free of risks, it has nevertheless played an important role in amplifying the voices of Kashmiri youth to a global audience which traditional activism had failed to achieve (Aslam et al., 2021).

The political strife in Kashmir has had a huge role in shaping the lives, identities and politics among members of the youth. Their experiences reflect both trauma and resilience, underscored by a prevailing belief that improved education, greater awareness and enhanced opportunities can guide Kashmiri youth towards a more hopeful and stable future.

3. Research Questions

This research aims to examine the follow research questions:

- How are political identities formed among the youth in the context of prolonged conflict in Kashmir?
- What is the nature of civic engagement among Kashmiri youth, and the factors that influence their involvement?
- What is the nature of aspirations among Kashmiri youth, especially in relation to conflict and political formations in the region?

4. Research Method

4.1. Research Design

This study employed a semi-structured survey to examine how Kashmiri youth form political identities amid prolonged conflict, and how such identities relate to civic engagement and aspirations for social and political change.

4.2. Participants

The responses were collected from 120 youth participants aged 14–25 years, all of whom were permanent residents of Kashmir. The sample included 43 males and 77 females. Participants belonged from diverse locations, including rural, semi-urban, and urban areas. A non-probability convenience sampling method was used to circulate the survey across personal networks and social media pages between September and October, 2025.

4.3. Survey Instrument

Data was collected using a semi-structured online questionnaire. The survey drew inspiration from verified identity scales, such as the Ethno-Cultural Identity Conflict (EIC) in the Acculturation Process Scale, the Political Efficacy Short Scale (PESS), the Partisan Identity Scale and the Civic Engagement Scale. The selection and design of the items for each scale was done keeping in mind the unique social, political, economic and cultural context of Kashmir. Additionally, the survey also asked participants to rate the influence of various factors on their political beliefs and to indicate which factors were most important to their political identity. Open-ended questions included questions on what being "politically active" meant for them, their desired social and political changes, and their aspirations. Reverse-coded items were applied wherever necessary to keep the consistency of scale direction. Cronbach's alpha and inter-item correlations showed acceptable to moderate data reliability.

4.4. Ethical Considerations

Informed consent was taken from the respondents who filled out the survey. Participation was voluntary and anonymous. No personally identifying or sensitive information was collected, and data was used solely for the purpose of this study.

5. Survey Findings

Table 1: Gender Distribution of the Sample

		Age Distribution			
		14-17 years (in %)	**18-21 years (in %)**	**22 - 25 years (in %)**	**Total (in %)**
Gender	**Female**	20	31.67	12.5	64.17
	Male	13.33	17.5	5	35.83
	Total	33.3	49.17	17.5	100

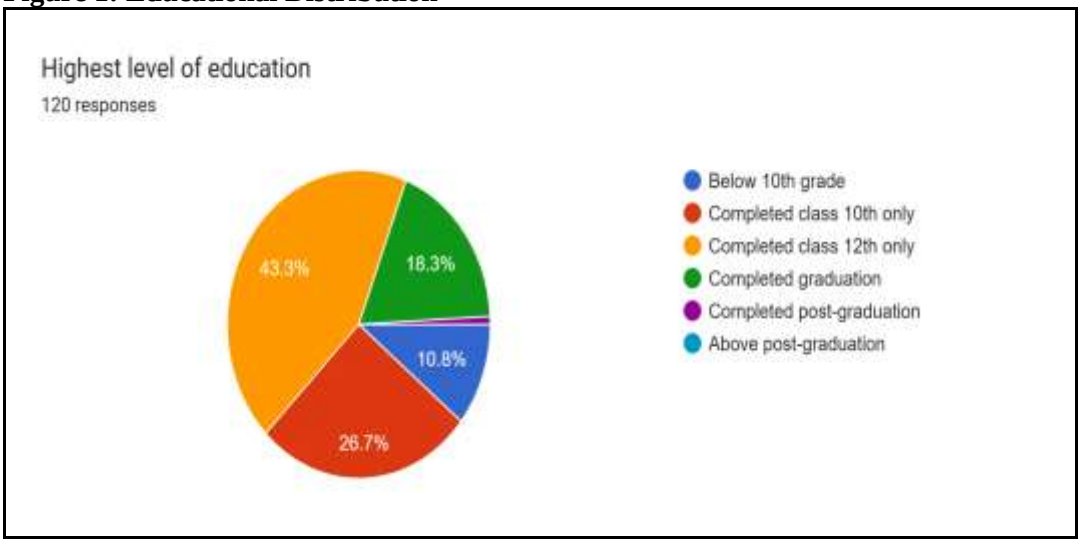
The above table illustrates the gender and age distribution for the sample. While the sample had a higher share of female respondents (64.17%), in terms of age, majority of participants (49.1%) were between 18 and 21 years old, followed by those in the 14–17 age group (33.3%) and 17.5% in the 22–25 age group. This distribution indicates that while one-third of the respondents were adolescents below the legal voting age, nearly two-thirds of the sample comprised youth eligible to vote, thereby allowing the study to capture both pre-voting and active voter perspectives among the youth.

Table 2: Economic and Residential Sample Distribution

		Area of residence			
		Urban (in %)	**Semi-Urban (in %)**	**Rural (in %)**	**Total (in %)**
Household economic situation	**Moderate economic security**	29.1	25	15.8	70
	High economic security	20	4.17	2.5	26.6
	Low economic security	2.5	0.83	0	3.3
	Total	51.6	30	18.3	100

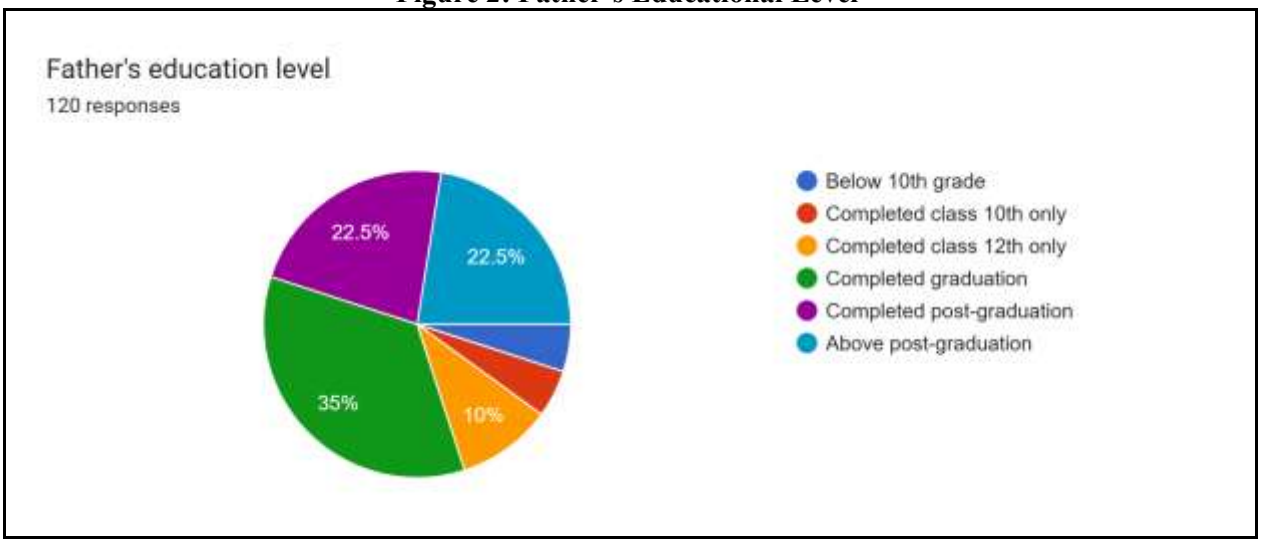
The above table illustrates the economic background and residential distribution of the sample. The sample was largely composed of individuals residing in urban (51.6%) and semi-urban areas (30%) with only 18.3% located in rural areas. Among them, majority of the respondents reported experiencing moderate economic security, and 26.6% reported experiencing high economic security, followed by only 3.3% respondents who declared themselves as having low economic security. The moderate-income group largely belonged to urban (29.1%) and semi-urban (25%) areas, while the high-income group was largely (20%) located in urban areas.

Figure 1: Educational Distribution



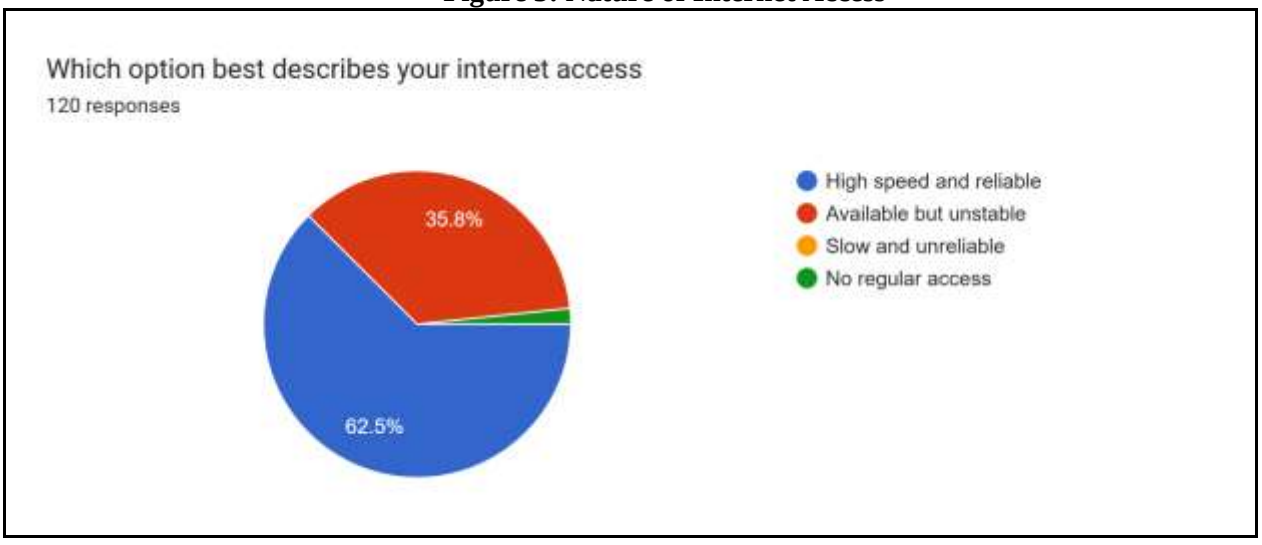
The above figure illustrates the highest level of education of the respondents. The majority of respondents reported completing Class 12 only (43.3%), while 26.7% reported having completed Class 10th only. Those holding graduate (18.3%) and postgraduate or higher degrees (10.8%) formed a smaller portion of the sample, indicating that most participants were at or just beyond the secondary education level.

Figure 2: Father's Educational Level



The above figure illustrates the level of the respondents' father's education level. A majority (35%) had completed graduation, while 22.5% held postgraduate or higher degrees. About 10% had completed Class 12, and the remaining respondents' fathers had education levels up to Class 10 or below.

Figure 3: Nature of Internet Access



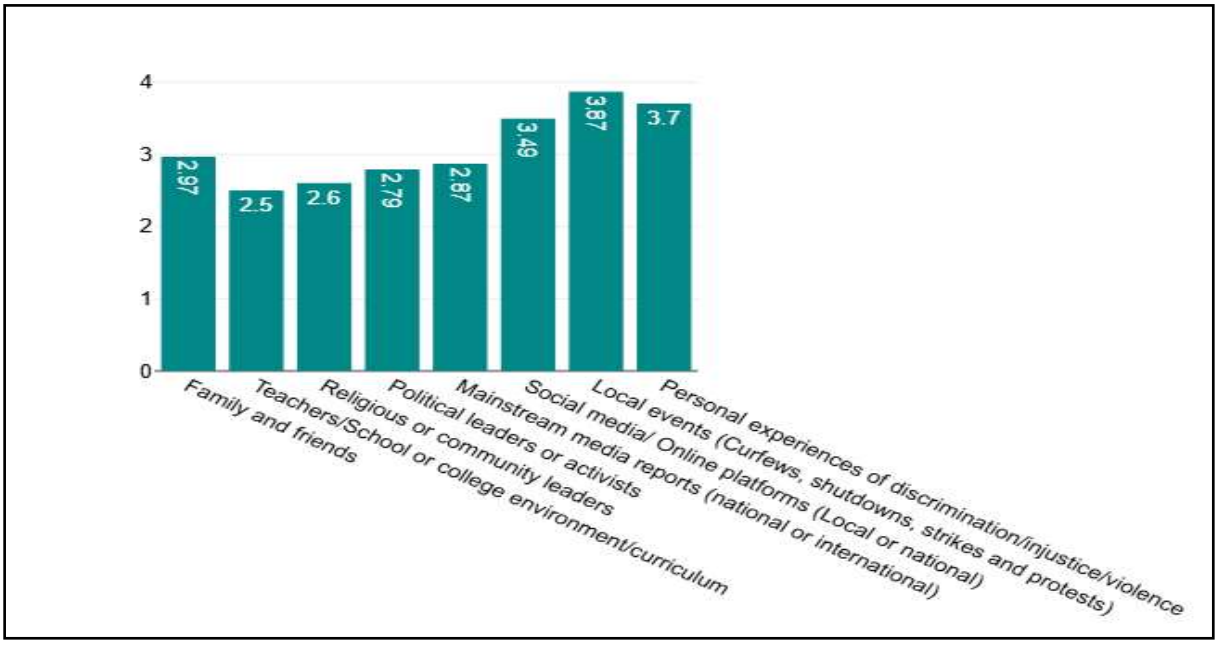
The above figure illustrates the nature of internet access for the respondents. Majority of the respondents reported having high speed and reliable internet (62.5%), while 35.8% reported having unstable internet; only about 1% respondents reported having no regular internet access.

Table 3: Descriptive Statistics of Key Survey Variables

Survey Variable	Mean	Mode	Std. Deviation
Conflict Exposure	3.84	4.6	0.81
Identity crisis	3.1	3	0.74
Social-Political identification	2.83	3	0.91
Internal Political Efficacy	3.97	5	0.94
External Political Efficacy	2.39	1	1.1
Civic Engagement	2.04	1.67	0.73
Aspirations for social and political change	2.87	2.29	0.68
Social boundary Openness	2.23	1	1.01

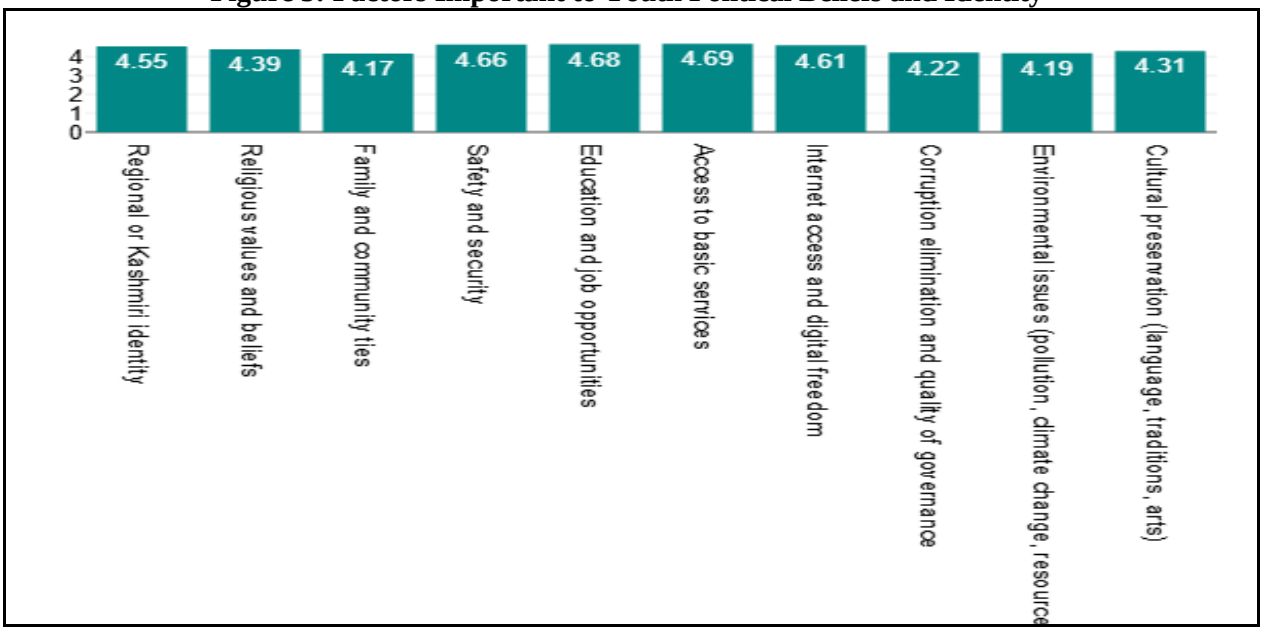
Descriptive statistics for all major composite variables are shown in the table above. The sample reported frequent experiences related to conflict exposure (mean = 3.84, SD = 0.81), as well as moderate levels of identity crisis (mean = 3.10, SD = 0.74). Scores for social-political identification (mean = 2.83, SD = 0.91) were in the moderate range. Respondents felt relatively high internal political efficacy (mean = 3.97, SD = 0.94), but external political efficacy was much lower (mean = 2.39, SD = 1.10). Civic engagement among participants was generally low (mean = 2.04, SD = 0.73). Aspirations for social and political change (mean = 2.87, SD = 0.68) and openness to social boundaries (mean = 2.65, SD = 0.87) were also in the low to moderate range.

Figure 4: Factors Shaping Political Beliefs and Identity among Kashmiri youth



Personal experiences of discrimination, injustice, or violence (mean = 3.7) and local events such as curfews, shutdowns, strikes, and protests (mean = 3.87) were rated as the most influential factors shaping political beliefs and identity among the youth. Social media and online platforms also had a relatively high influence (mean = 3.49), followed by mainstream media reports, family and friends, teachers and educational environments, and religious or community leaders; interestingly, political leaders or activists (mean = 2.79) were rated lower in terms of influence.

Figure 5: Factors Important to Youth Political Beliefs and Identity



Regional or Kashmiri identity (mean=4.55) and safety/security (mean=4.66) emerged as the most important aspects of self-concept among respondents. Access to basic services (mean=4.68), educational/job opportunities (mean= 4.68), internet access and digital freedom (mean=4.61) were also rated high, indicating the significance of social and infrastructural factors in youth identity. Religious values and beliefs (mean = 4.39) and cultural preservation (mean = 4.31) were next in priority, whereas family/community ties (mean = 4.17), corruption elimination and governance (mean = 4.22), and environmental issues (mean = 4.19) received relatively lower, yet notable levels of importance.

Table 4: Forms of Political Engagement

Form of Engagement	Mean	Std. Deviation
Volunteered or attended community or relief activities	2.03	1.05
Shared or produced informative content on public issues	2.17	1.2
Signed petitions/contacted representatives about community concerns	1.58	1
Participated in awareness campaigns (education, health, environment, human rights)	2.47	1.19
Participated in cultural preservation activities (language, arts, traditions)	2.43	1.23
Attended protests, demonstrations or strikes	1.56	0.98

The table above describes the frequency with which Kashmiri youth engage in the given forms of engagement. Respondents were asked to rate their likelihood of engaging in the specified activities on a likert scale of 1 to 5, where 1 denoted never, while 5 denoted very often. The most frequently performed activities included participation in awareness campaigns (Mean = 2.47), cultural preservation activities (Mean = 2.43) and sharing/producing informative content online (Mean = 2.17). Protests, demonstrations or strikes were reported to be rarely or the least performed.

Table 5: Voting Behaviour

Voted in elections (if 18+)	Frequency	Sample Share (%)
Not eligible (Under 18)	59	49.1
Eligible but never voted	49	40.8
Voted once	9	7.5
Voted in every election since eligible	2	1.6
Voted in some elections	1	0.8
Total	120	100

The above table illustrated the electoral engagement of Kashmiri youth. Although half the sample were eligible to vote, approximately 40.8% had never voted, indicating limited electoral engagement among the youth. Only 10% of the sample had exercised their right to vote, among which approximately 7.5% had voted just once, two respondents (1.6%) reported voting in every election since becoming eligible, and only one respondent stated voting in some elections. This reflects that electoral participation, especially in terms of voting in elections, is minimal among the youth in Kashmir.

6. Results and Analysis

The normality of each scale was examined using tests such as Kolmogorov-Smirnov, Lilliefors correction, Shapiro-Wilk, and Anderson-Darling to determine the appropriate statistical tests. All statistical tests were two-tailed with a significance threshold of $p < 0.05$.

Table 6: Correlation for Conflict Exposure and Identity Crisis

	r	p
Conflict Exposure and Identity Crisis	0.38	<.001

The correlation between Conflict Exposure and Identity Crisis was statistically significant, $r(118) = 0.38$, $p = <.001$, indicating a positive correlation between conflict exposure and identity crisis

Table 7: Correlation for Conflict Exposure and Social-Political Identification

	r	p
Conflict Exposure and Social-Political Identification	0.27	.003

The correlation between Conflict Exposure and Social-Political Identification was statistically significant, r (118) = 0.27, p = .003, indicating a positive correlation

Table 8: Correlation for Conflict Exposure and Internal Political Efficacy

	r	p
Conflict Exposure and Internal Political Efficacy	0.29	.001

The correlation between Conflict Exposure and Internal Political Efficacy was statistically significant, r(118) = 0.29, p = .001, indicating a positive correlation between both variables.

Table 9: Correlation for Social-Political Identification and Internal Political Efficacy

	r	p
Social-Political Identification and Internal Political Efficacy	0.2	.027

The correlation between Social-Political Identification and Internal Political Efficacy was statistically significant, r(118) = 0.2, p = .027, indicating a positive correlation.

Table 10: Correlation between Social-Political Identification and Civic Engagement

	r	p
Social-Political Identification and Civic Engagement	0.33	<.001

The correlation between Partisan/Social-Political identification and Civic Engagement was statistically significant, r(118) = 0.33, p = <.001, indicating a positive correlation between both variables.

Table 11: Correlation between Civic Engagement and Aspirations for Social and Political Change

	r	p
Civic Engagement and Aspirations for Social and Political change	0.25	.005

The result of the Spearman correlation between Civic Engagement and Aspirations for social and political change was statistically significant, r(118) = 0.25, p = .005, indicating that there was a positive correlation between both variables.

Table 12: Correlation between Social-Political Identification and Aspirations for Social and Political Change

	r	p
Social-Political Identification and Aspirations for Social and Political Change	0.33	<.001

The result of the Spearman correlation showed that there was a positive correlation between Partisan/Social-Political Identification and aspirations for social and political change with r(118) = 0.33, p = <.001.

Table 13: Correlation between External Political Efficacy and Aspirations for Social and Political Change

	r	p
External Political Efficacy and Aspirations for Social and Political Change	0.4	<.001

The result of the Spearman correlation showed that there was a positive correlation between External Political Efficacy and Aspirations for Social and Political Change with a statistically significant value of $r(118) = 0.4$, and $p = <.001$.

The open-ended qualitative responses illustrated that among Kashmiri youth, being politically active was largely related to being politically aware, addressing social issues, and using their voice to address concerns, while maintaining a strong tie to their Kashmiri roots. Social media was referred to as a "go-to platform". While some considered community service and voting as forms of political engagement, many also believed that youth in Kashmir did not feel fully free to engage politically, and often felt a need to suppress their views; there was also significant distrust reported in politics and political systems.

Discussing changes that they believed would improve the situation of the youth, majority of the participants specified better educational and job opportunities as the gateway for upliftment. They also emphasized freedom of speech, peace and security, mental health support, access to basic services, internet access, cultural preservation and infrastructural and private enterprise development. Keeping in mind such findings, most prominent career aspirations among respondents included careers in diplomacy, advocacy, civil services, law and health.

A Kruskal–Wallis test ($\chi^2 = 9.49$, df = 2, p = .009) revealed a significant difference in conflict exposure across age groups. Post-hoc Dunn–Bonferroni analysis further revealed that youth aged 22–25 reported significantly higher conflict exposure than those aged 14–17 (adjusted p = .006), while other group differences were not significant.

A one-way ANOVA showed that area of residence significantly impacted ethnocultural identity conflict ($F(2,117) = 3.81$, p = .025). Post-hoc Tukey tests indicated that urban youth reported higher identity conflict than semi-urban counterparts (p = .021), while there were insignificant differences with rural youth. Additionally, a one-way ANOVA showed a significant effect of age on ethnocultural identity conflict (p = .008), with Tukey's post-hoc test indicating higher conflict among 18–21-year-olds, compared to 14–17-year-olds (p = .007).

A Kruskal-Wallis test showed a significant effect of age on aspirations for social and political change,($\chi^2(2) = 7.07$, p = .029). Dunn-Bonferroni post-hoc tests indicated that 22–25-year-olds had higher aspirations than 14–17-year-olds (adjusted p = .027), with no other significant differences.

A Mann-Whitney U test indicated a significant gender difference in social boundary openness (U = 1180.5, z = -2.62, p = .009), with females showing lower openness than males (r = 0.24). Similarly, a Kruskal-Wallis test showed a significant effect of age on social boundary openness, ($\chi^2(2) = 7.52$, p = .023). Post-hoc Dunn-Bonferroni tests indicated that 14–17-year-olds were significantly more open than 18–21-year-olds (adjusted p = .041), while other age group differences were not significant.

7. Discussion

7.1 Formation of Political Identities among Youth

The above-mentioned analysis revealed certain distinct patterns for the formation of political identities among Kashmiri youth. In contrast to the existing scholarship that suggests factors like family, friends and different community institutions as the primary influences on identity (Youniss et al., 2002; Wray-Lake, 2019; Galliher et al., 2017; Branje, 2022; Hatemi and McDermott, 2012; Jennings et al., 2009; Barber, 2014); the findings of this paper indicates that factors like personal experiences of discrimination, injustice or violence, local events like curfews, shutdowns, strikes, protests, and social media served as important contributing factors. This can be explained by the fact that in a conflict setting, disruptions and breakdowns occur in social institutions, dismantling normal functioning (Barber, 2013; Naqshbandi and Amin, 2013). When existing political establishments begin losing their stability, everyday life gets politicized and direct exposure to conflict, or mediated experiences through social media become more dominant in shaping political beliefs and identities. Interestingly, the findings revealed that the influence of mainstream media was lower than that of social media, which is not surprising given that media is often subject to political censorship.

Respondents prioritized access to basic services, education, job opportunities, safety and security, internet access and digital freedom, which were often disrupted, as critical needs amidst conflict in the region. Regional or Kashmiri Identity and cultural preservation were also rated as critical components of their political identity indicating that their in-group identities continue to be a source of sustenance and belonging, alongside other material needs.

Naqshbandi and Amin (2013), Asima (2011), and Dar and Deb (2020) noted that conflict significantly contributes towards an identity crisis. The findings of this study indicate a moderate but positive correlation between identity and conflict. While increased exposure to conflict negatively impacted the sense of self among the respondents, it simultaneously increased their partisan and social identification, indicating an alignment towards certain political and social groups and ideologies. Conflict was therefore observed to increase the salience of group membership. A lower average for social boundary openness also reflects perceived out-group threat, which should be understood as a strategy for adaptive identity formation. Not surprisingly, exposure to conflict resulted in an increase in political awareness; a positive correlation was observed both between conflict and internal political efficacy and between partisan or social identification and internal political efficacy. This supports the notion put forward by Flanagan (2013), that a strong sense of belongingness to a group promotes a nuanced understanding of rights and responsibilities within the community and such lenses often help in forming meanings for different situations (Muldoon, 2013).

Interestingly, the study did not find any significant relation between conflict exposure and distrust in political systems (mean=2.39, SD 1.1). In their qualitative responses, respondents explained that their distrust was largely due to the failure of the government to provide proper facilities and safety, along with a widespread perception of suspicion and oppressiveness. In contrast to a low level of trust in formal political systems, the youth reported a high level of understanding for different political matters (mean for internal political efficacy= 3.97 , SD=0.94). Thus, it was observed that conflict exposure nudges youth toward greater political awareness and understanding even while they perceive institutional failure.

7.2 Civic Engagement among Kashmiri Youth

Civic engagement among the youth was found to be around an average of 2.04 suggesting a low level of participation. Only 10% of the youth eligible to vote had voted at least once, suggesting a high level of distrust in formal systems. These findings are consistent with the existing scholarship that notes a

decline in electoral and other forms of political participation among Kashmiris due to distrust in the political system and feelings of political alienation, especially due to the long-drawn conflict in the region (Diemer and Rapa, 2016; Bhat et al., 2025). Among a wide array of political engagements, protests, demonstrations, and strikes were observed to become less preferred in the last few years, suggesting a shift from previous decades which were marked by several violent student protests (Pandit, 2019), towards safer and more socially acceptable forms of activism. This transition can be attributed to various political changes in the region like the increased level of militarisation and state repression of political dissent. Awareness campaigns for education, health, human rights, environment, along with cultural preservation efforts, sharing or producing informative content on public issues were the most frequently reported forms of civic engagement. It is safe to speculate that such needs for basic services assumes more significance than the associated trauma from the violence – it is the deprivation of such crucial resources that were described as a bigger source of pain and frustration among the youth; This is consistent with scholarship from recent years that have also recorded such reactions from the Kashmiri youth (Barber, 2013). In this regard, scholars like Aslam et al. (2021) have argued that social media has emerged as an alternate platform for resistance and amplifying the voices among the Kashmiri youth.

While there was no directly significant correlation emerged between civic engagement and conflict exposure, an increase in political and social identification can be an indicator for an increase in civic engagement. Aspirations for social and political change also showed a positive correlation with civic engagement, suggesting that individuals with higher political awareness and motivation for change, were more likely to take part in civic activities. Civic engagements thus arise at the intersection of different factors like political consciousness and aspirations. This observation also supports the literature that highlights that group identities often motivate social participation and activism (Haslam and Reicher, 2006; Sabatier, 2008; Hammack, 2010; Slone, 2009; Wexler et al., 2009; Merrilees et al., 2013)

7.3 Political Aspirations among Kashmiri Youth

Conflict exposure as well as aspirations were found to increase with age, suggesting that exposure to conflict might not immediately result in motivation for change: as youth mature, experiences of conflict tend to be increasingly integrated into their political and social consciousness, enabling them to formulate and sustain aspirations for social and political change. This is also supported by resilience frameworks that suggest that youth channel such experiences and adapt to them positively; often activism and engagement, rather than exposure to violence that predicts factors like aspirations (Barber, 2013).

A moderate, positive correlation was observed between external political efficacy and aspirations for social change, suggesting that individuals who continue to maintain trust in formal political systems were more hopeful and motivated towards change. As suggested by Aslam and Sudan (2021), when young people have faith and belief in policy and effort, they are more likely to create strong political and social aims, which in turn leads to an improvement and reforming the legitimacy of different political institutions is needed to create better motivation amongst the youth. The qualitative data which was collected also strongly suggested this.

8. Conclusion

The study aimed to explore the complex process of political identity formation among Kashmiri youth and examine how they participate in their individual community and society, and the motivations for such engagement. Findings of this study highlight that in a conflict-affected region like Kashmir, conventional identity-shaping factors like family, peers, and community institutions are often overshadowed by factors that emerge out of conflict like exposure to violence and frequent shutdowns in

the access to basic amenities like education, health care, transport and internet, which result in the erosion of safe and stable environments necessary for socialisation and growth among the youth.

Respondents emphasised the importance of cultural preservation as central to their political beliefs and identity. While the conflict deepened individual identity crises, it simultaneously strengthened collective and group identities. This increasing social and political identification correlated positively with civic engagement and aspirations, suggesting that group belonging provides emotional sustenance and fosters constructive participation in community life. However, civic engagement was observed to remain quite low and the intensity of the aspirations for reform were moderate. The findings also indicate a noticeable shift away from violent protests and activism, toward peaceful and developmental forms of engagement, such as awareness campaigns, cultural preservation initiatives, and the production of informational content. This reflected a broader preference for stability, progress, security and sustainability over partisan political agendas among the Kashmiri youth.

The findings also showed greater political awareness and understanding of different political problems which existed alongside widespread distrust and lack of confidence in political systems. Such skepticism is not unsurprising in Kashmir's context, where prolonged violence, heavy militarisation, censorship and systematic inefficiencies have contributed to public disillusionment. Rebuilding trust in institutions through improved governance, efficient service delivery, and responsive policy measures is essential for fostering youth-driven and inclusive societal reforms in the region.

This study has some limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings. The sample was limited to 120 participants who were accessed primarily through social media and personal networks; this might have skewed the sample in favour of those with digital access and hence may not fully represent the diverse experiences of all Kashmiri youth. The cross-sectional and self-reported nature of the data limits causal inferences, though anonymity, neutral phrasing, and triangulation with open-ended responses were used to reduce potential response biases.

Despite such constraints, this research offers original, exploratory insights into a largely underexplored area. Future research should try to inculcate longitudinal designs, larger samples, and mixed methods to capture the multifaceted nature of youth identity, formation of political identities, and participation in conflict zones. Amplifying the voices of Kashmiri youth is crucial to envision a more inclusive, peaceful and democratic society.

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