**The Impact of the Covid-19 Pandemic on the Conflict in Kashmir.**

Covid-19 also known as the Coronavirus pandemic has spread around the world, killing hundreds of thousands of people. The virus is an indiscriminate threat to all nations, targeting populations regardless of their race, religion, sexuality, gender, age or ethnicity. As countries are experiencing lockdowns for the first time, little attention has been paid to states who were already in a state of emergency, including Kashmir. Since August 2019, there has been a communications blockade in Kashmir, limited public movement, curfews, detention of local politicians and other harsh restrictions imposed by India’s BJP Government. Therefore, this article explores the impact Covid-19 has had on the already fraught situation in Kashmir. There is a pervasive aura of fear that has spread throughout Kashmir. This fear is twofold as individuals are afraid of the virus and have concerns for their own health, but they are also afraid of the unknown and uncertainty that surrounds them. It is important to note that this pandemic impacts some states more than others and there are clear inconsistencies in terms of who suffers the most during the crisis and this is not necessarily reflected in death toll figures. As this paper will argue, the pandemic has acted almost as a smokescreen for India to; extend its executive power in Kashmir, quell protestors, enhance its influence, censor stories on the ground, detain the opposition, implement curfews and securitise the situation by using the threat of terrorism to further their own interests.

Methodologically, this paper takes a bottom-up approach, detailing interviews with local Kashmiris to try to understand the impact the pandemic has had on them. Structurally, a brief history of Kashmir will be provided, before exploring the consequences the pandemic has had on Kashmir, and finally, considering what the future holds for the disputed territory.

According to Alastair Lamb, Kashmir has been disputed since 1947, when India was partitioned, and the state of Pakistan was born. At the time of partition, a rebellion broke out in Poonch. Maharajah Hari Singh who was a Hindu ruling over the Muslim majority state, sought help from India as he feared invasion. As Victoria Schofield explains, in return, India requested Hari Singh to sign the Instrument of Accession with the possibility of a future plebiscite. This gave India control over defence, foreign affairs, and communications. The Karachi Agreement (1949) stated that the future of Kashmir would be decided according to the wishes of the people. In 1954, Article 370 was adopted into the Indian Constitution, highlighting Kashmir’s special status and allowing the state to have more autonomy, its own constitution, and its own flag. The second war for Kashmir broke out in 1965 when Pakistan launched Operation Gibraltar. This resulted in the Tashkent Agreement being signed in 1966. Peace did not last and in 1971, the Bangladesh Liberation War took place, which ultimately resulted in the Simla Agreement and the creation of the Line of Control. The insurgency took grip in Kashmir in 1989 and within 10 years, Sumit Ganguly writes, India and Pakistan were pushed to the brink of nuclear war in the Kargil episode. Seemingly, despite wars taking place between India and Pakistan in 1947, 1965, 1971, and 1999, the plebiscite that was promised at partition is yet to take place.

As I have explained in another article, in August 2019, Kashmir’s special status that it had held since 1947 was revoked as the BJP government in India abrogated Article 370. The ‘Reorganisation Bill’ that was announced divided Jammu and Kashmir into two union territories under the control of India. To control dissent and the subsequent rising tensions, local politicians were detained and put under house arrest, there were increased reports of Cordon and Search Operations (CASOs), torture, enforced disappearances, additional Indian forces were deployed to Kashmir, and there were extra roadblocks put into place. Draconian laws including the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA), Public Safety Act (PSA), and Unlawful Activities Prevention Act (UAPA) have all been used to legitimise such measures. Since then, Kashmir has remained in a de-facto state of emergency and repressive measures have continued. As a result of the abrogation of Article 370, Kashmir was already in a state of lockdown when the global pandemic broke out. Athar Parvaiz reports, there was a complete communications blockade as the internet and phone lines were cut off. This has improved, albeit not massively, and locals continue to struggle to communicate with anyone using 2G services. Also, all schools and educational facilities were shut down, meaning the Kashmiri youth have been uneducated for the past 12 months. Some schools, colleges and universities have provided online lessons, but due to the poor internet connectivity, pupils have been unable to access it. Similarly, Archana Chaudhary explains how the employment sector has taken a massive hit as a result of the lockdown because almost all businesses and shops have had to close. Further, locals have been unable to access medical facilities due to the curfew in place, nor have they been able to attend scheduled medical appointments and operations.

Although lockdown restrictions are beginning to be lifted in some parts of the world, Covid-19 still remains a grave threat to global health. Worldwide, at the time of writing and according to the World Health Organisation there are over 30 million confirmed cases and over 950,000 deaths. India is reported to have over 5 million confirmed cases and over 86,000 deaths, and Kashmir has over 65,000 confirmed cases and over 1,000 deaths. Coronavirus indiscriminately targets all people, regardless of where they live, their age, race, gender, sexuality, or ethnicity. However, the pandemic poses a more serious threat to Kashmiris because they were already living in a lockdown before the outbreak.

At the beginning of the outbreak, Modi’s government declared a countrywide lockdown. This was in-keeping with the measures taken by most countries around the world. Initially, Adam Withnall details, Modi announced a $22 billion economic relief package to help the people of India “survive through a national lockdown”. According to Jeffrey Gettleman, by May, Modi announced a relief package of over $260 billion to try to alleviate the nationwide concerns of the declining economy. These seem like positive steps taken towards handling a global health emergency, however, studies show that poor and minority communities have been more affected by the pandemic. Those who are unable to socially distance, or self-isolate because they have no other way of providing for their families, will undoubtedly contribute to spreading the virus. Also, it remains to be seen if the minority Muslim community that live in Kashmir, will receive any of the funds that were set out in Modi’s relief package.

Concerns were also arising that the government were going to allow the Amarnath Yatra Hindu pilgrimage to go ahead, despite Covid-19 statistics. The purpose of the annual pilgrimage, according to Barbara Aziz, is to have “direct communion with the divine manifestation of Shiva”. According to the BBC, hundreds of thousands of *yátri’s* usually attend the Himalayan shrine over a period of two months. Fortunately, The Times of India announced on 22nd July that this was cancelled amidst Covid-19 fears. If it was allowed to go ahead, not only would this have caused an increase in transmission and a huge spike in cases, but this would have caused significant tensions in Kashmir, especially between the Hindu and Muslim communities. This is due to the recent BJP decision to redefine domicile law in Kashmir. This decision was made during the middle of the global health crisis and this prevented local Kashmiris from protesting against the new law due to the restrictions in place. This is an additional worry that Kashmiris now face on top of last year’s events and Covid-19.

As part of my fieldwork for the PhD, I have been fortunate to talk to Kashmiris about their experience during lockdown. Multiple participants have described the situation as a lockdown within a lockdown, or a “double lockdown” due to the fact that they were already living under curfew prior to the pandemic outbreak. This curfew has impacted the day-to-day lives of Kashmiris, as one participant explained they “cannot visit religious places” and another said, “people are forced to stay inside”. It could be argued that this is no different to the rest of the world at the moment with government restrictions being enforced in most countries. However, the difference with the rest of the world is that if you ignore the government restrictions and break the law in the UK for example, you could get a small fine. Ignoring government guidelines and breaking the law in Kashmir could result in you being arrested, detained and even tortured.

The lockdown restrictions have also had a detrimental effect on the youth being able to sit their examinations and to get into further education. This in turn, will impact their employability and the employment sector is already struggling as one participant explained how he had lost his job “because of Coronavirus”. This has left a huge portion of the population idle, with no way of paying their bills or purchasing basic supplies such as food and medicine. Those who have been lucky enough to retain their jobs have struggled to continue ‘business as usual’. For example, one interviewee expressed his grave concerns about people being treated for illnesses and injuries as doctors have been “beaten down” to prevent them from helping patients. Doctors are frequently targeted as security forces accuse them of treating militants and supporting terrorist activities. Whether it’s education, employment, or the health sector, the consequences of Covid-19 will also impact the mental health of Kashmiris, whom many already suffer from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), depression, and other mental health issues.

To summarise, numerous participants believe Covid-19 is a distraction for the world and is diverting attention away from Kashmir. One participant even went as far as saying that the pandemic has been used “to crush the Kashmiri sentiment”. Another said, Covid-19 has acted as a “cloud cover” for the Indian government to do what they want in Kashmir. This is in relation to the decision to change domicile law and it seems, participants find it difficult to see how such decisions are aligned with the democratic principles of a secular society.

It could be argued that Kashmir already being under curfew was beneficial to stop the spread of the virus and locals were accustomed to the measures put in place by the government. However, the measures that were already in place were not there for the health and safety of local Kashmiris, rather, they were repressive measures used to crush any sort of dissent against the Indian government. Human rights abuses have been going on for decades, so it is hardly a new phenomenon to discuss such things as rape, torture, and violence. But the difference is Kashmir has never been in this situation before, where they have been stripped of their autonomy, put under curfew and faced a threat to global health. Covid-19 has exacerbated an already dire situation in Kashmir and even if cases are reduced and the lockdown restrictions are lifted, Kashmiris could face further hostilities with the security forces. Returning to a state of normalcy does not seem to be in Kashmir’s near future, due to the fact that they were already in a state of lockdown prior to Covid-19. All countries that have struggled to tackle the pandemic have faced uncertain futures, but Kashmir’s future in particular is fraught with insecurity. Perhaps, the international community will now sympathise with Kashmir as the world now understands what it is like to live under government-imposed curfews and will attempt to address the situation. Otherwise, one fears that the human rights of Kashmiris will continue to be abused and the violent conflict will not be resolved.

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