



# PIDE

## COVID-19 BLOG

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### LOCKDOWN WITHIN A LOCKDOWN *COVID-19 in the Indian Occupied Jammu and Kashmir*

Kashmir conflict is stated as one of the most 'under-reported, misunderstood and longest' conflicts in South Asia<sup>1</sup>. In 1947, when the British India and the princely states were partitioned, Kashmir, a predominantly Muslim majority territory, was reined by the Hindu Maharaja Hari Singh. At the time of partition, the majority wanted an independent status in the form of a sovereign democratic state. The partition plan, however, deemed they join either India or Pakistan. While fleeing from the territory the Maharaja acceded to India. This accession was temporary until an UN-mandated plebiscite was held. In the subsequent years, despite multiple proposals of UN-mandated plebiscites, nothing significant could be achieved out of these due to the contending claims of both India and Pakistan on the disputed territory.

#### Abrogation of Article 370

The subsequent monarch of Kashmir was successful in the formation of a constituent assembly which paved the way for elections and institutionalization of Article 370. Article 370 allowed special status to Kashmir, giving it an autonomous status in all matters except currency, foreign affairs and defense- the matters which were singularly to be taken care of by the central government. As a quasi-sovereign state, Kashmir retained its own constitution and a separate flag.

In late July and early August 2019, the central government moved 45,000 troops to the contested territory before the announcement was made to repeal the Article 370. On August 2, 2019 the Jammu and Kashmir government announced cancellation of an annual religious pilgrimage and asked tourists to leave the region at the earliest. Over the next two days, senior Kashmiri political leaders were house-arrested, schools, hotels, restaurants and tourist sites were shut down, and all forms of communication including landline and internet services were cut. The abrogation of Article 370 was announced by the Indian home minister.

The decision to abrogate Article 370 was taken on the pretext that the article was discriminatory to the other states and accentuating religious, caste-based, cultural, spatial and gender inequalities. The proponents also claimed that its repealment will bring in more investments and employment opportunities in the region. The opponents view it as a nationalistic attempt of stripping the Muslim dominated population of Kashmir of its identity, nationhood, and freedom.

## **Lockdown: Pre-COVID-19 Situation**

Since August 2019, the territory has undergone full-scale militarization and complete lockdown. The complete lockdown has adversely impacted all the sectors of the economy. The industries such as tourism and horticulture are the most severe casualties. Restrictions on mobility in the wake of human security have declined tourism by 86%<sup>2</sup>. This decline has happened during a peak time period (August-October 2019) which in situation of normalcy would have resulted in inflow of cash through tourism industry. With this decline, loss of employment has also occurred considering that 2 million people in Jammu and Kashmir are employed in the tourism industry. Another sector which has been affected is the apple economy, given the fact that Jammu and Kashmir is the largest producer of apples in India with 3.5 million people employed therein.

Because of the post-Article 370 abrogation lockdown, the orchards have remained unpicked and fruits rotten on trees and grounds. Roadblocks have restricted their movement in and out of Srinagar resulting in the limited transportation of goods to the market. The closure of all forms of communication means that farmers and traders cannot get in touch with each other regarding transportation, trade and processing of payments. The lockdown has caused an economic loss of USD 1.5 billion with 500,000 jobs being lost along the way whereas the sales of indigenous goods has also sharply declined, for instance, the sales of walnuts have nosedived by 60 % in 2020<sup>3</sup>. Similarly, the saffron farmers have struggled harvesting and trading saffron since the imposition of the lockdown<sup>4</sup>.

The lockdown has resulted in the decline of regular surgeries by 40-60% in August 2019<sup>5</sup>. Mental health is also reported to be significantly affected by the lockdown. The lack of communication between doctors, nurses, and paramedical staff, the shortage of medicine supplies, inaccessibility of medical infrastructure to the rural population, delays in treatments and surgeries, and Post Traumatic Stress Disorders, anxiety and depression are some of the issues identified in the health sector as a response to the lockdown situation in Jammu and Kashmir<sup>6</sup>.

Similarly, the lockdown has resulted in 1.5 million students without education<sup>7</sup>. Towards the end of September 2019, public schools were re-opened but parents were reticent to send their children to schools due to widespread militarization, paucity of communication mechanisms, and pervasive protests. This resulted in only 3 percent attendance rates in the public schools. Reports also assert that 25 schools have been burned during August 2019 and November 2019. Many school buildings have been confiscated and occupied by the Indian forces and militants<sup>8</sup>. A few volunteers who initiated informal learning classes had to succumb to the protests and violence which caused disruptions in students' learning.

## **Lockdown: Post-COVID-19 Situation**

Changoiwala (2020)<sup>9</sup> calls COVID-19 as 'doubly frightening' in the midst of already lockdowned conflicted region of Jammu and Kashmir. By the time the Indian government decided to lift the seven months of lockdown ban on communication, the pandemic hit the globe hard. 2-G internet facility has been restored in the region, which is not sufficient for acquiring information and downloading journal articles, WHO guidelines, and videos related

to the pandemic. Without the provision of fast internet facility, it becomes very difficult for the medical staff to stay updated.

There are 494 confirmed cases in the region and most of those being infected have not been provided with proper healthcare facilities. The vacuum of information also exists for the residents of the region as they cannot access government-launched coronavirus tracking app due to limited internet access. Indian authorities have claimed to have designated 11 hospitals for COVID-19 cases. The Kashmiri doctors, on the other hand, have highlighted the dearth of medical infrastructure which is critical to treat the impacted cases. There are also reports in circulation about the ways Indian forces are reprimanding the Kashmiri doctors who slammed central government's inadequacy in combating COVID-19 in Jammu and Kashmir.

The post-COVID-19 situation is precarious as it seems to prolong the existing lockdown situation causing more fatalities, unrest, despair and economic instability in the region. The COVID-19 has brought in more layered existential vulnerabilities to the lives of Kashmiri people who have been suffering in the name of universalizing Hindu nationalism for over 7 decades.

#### **References**

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- <sup>9</sup> <https://www.bmj.com/content/bmj/369/bmj.m1417.full.pdf>

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