

A Study on Governance in Kashmir during the Covid-19 Pandemic – Effective or Manipulative? (An Explanatory Research)

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ABSTRACT

Jammu and Kashmir has been conflict-torn for decades but the abrogation of Article 370 completely changed the political scenario of the state as well as the narratives of dissent. This was followed by the spread of the COVID 19 pandemic and the state was put under another lockdown yet again just when it appeared it was coming out of the previous one. Further, given the decades-long political, social, and economic disturbance, the communication, healthcare, and administration remain abysmally shattered which has created unique challenges for its people, especially in the health sector of the region in dealing with the pandemic. But how has the Central Government reacted to this? What have been the policies of the government to deal with the pandemic in the region? Did the government prioritize the eradication of the disease or was the situation exploited for its political interests?

The study shows that the ongoing political crisis in Jammu and Kashmir continues to pose greater challenges to the people and healthcare workers in dealing with the virus. The administration struggled to control the spread of the disease and the policies of the government during the health emergency have been mostly manipulative and relatively ineffective. The study also suggests that the government milked the pandemic in the erstwhile state as an opportunity to implement its authoritative agendas while the healthcare and socio-economic development remained widely unaddressed.

KEYWORDS: Governance, COVID 19 pandemic, Jammu & Kashmir, Administration, Conflict zone,

INTRODUCTION

Once a princely state, Kashmir is one of the most perturbing or politically distressed regions of the world. The dispute regarding Kashmir has taken different shapes over the years and continues to get more and more complicated as time passes by. It also gave rise to insurgencies and the state became a breeding ground for unrestful activities starting in 1989 which continue to remain on a surge, leading to even greater loss of life and property, stalling any social development.[1] Mass uprisings and public protests have become the norm due to the extreme dissatisfaction of the people with their governments and their demand for autonomy as well as independence.

To tackle the insurgencies as well as the public protests, the government often imposes indiscriminate curfews, communication bans, and extended lockdowns in the valley which stifle all business and economic activity and halts social, academic, and administrative sectors in a state which has been struggling for several decades. Due to these frequently occurring political disturbances and lockdowns, Jammu & Kashmir struggles with the developmental process and hence, the level of socio-economic development remains far from the satisfactory level of the citizens. [2]. The frequent internet bans are yet another problem faced by the administrative bodies as well as the citizens which hinders the overall process of evolution of the various sectors in the state. Apart from that, even the social indicators like literacy rate, sex ratio, life expectancy, death rate are highly dissatisfactory. [2]. Therefore, all the essential sectors of the region remain in a bad shape due to persistent lockdowns,

civil uprisings, negligence, and lack of appropriate measures by the government.

Further, this conflict took a major turn on August 5th 2019 when the state's special status secured under Article 370 of the Indian Constitution was abrogated by the BJP- led Central government, and the whole region was put under yet another, indefinite lockdown. All means of communications including the internet and phones were suspended for about 7 months pushing the entire state into dark ages.

Sometime in February 2020, COVID 19 pandemic began affecting several Indian states and eventually made its way to Kashmir in the backdrop of darkness imposed by the long physical and communicational curfews. Due to the insufficient infrastructure of the state at virtually all levels, especially, transportation and communication, it was no brainer that this was going to pose tremendous challenges for the administration to contain the virus and manage the surging cases in the conflict zone, and hence special policies and programs were required to successfully tackle the spread of the virus in Kashmir.

NEED FOR STUDY

The effectiveness and the nature of the governance during the COVID 19 pandemic become important to assess as the pandemic has been a humongous challenge to the entire world. While the resource-rich, developed nations have been in a somewhat better position to deal with the challenges, for the developing and the underdeveloped countries it brought forth manifold encounters with a heightened need for better and higher governance standards as well as the show of stellar leadership in dealing with those challenges. Being a conflict-torn zone, the various significant segments of administration in Kashmir including economy, health, and education have remained relatively underdeveloped, leaving the infrastructure insubstantial to deal with any kind of emergencies. Hence, the outbreak of the corona virus in Kashmir has created exceptional challenges for the people and the administration to deal with the calamity.

Analyzing the governance in the region during the pandemic becomes specifically important due to the presence of these unique challenges in the state caused due to weak infrastructure and deficient governance in the previous years. The research has been conducted to understand how the government has dealt with the pandemic in Kashmir. Various policies of the government have been scrutinized to assess the ability of the current administration under the Central Government to efficiently contain the spread of the virus while managing the socio-economic activities in Kashmir at the same time. The paper also explores if the governance in Kashmir during the COVID 19 pandemic was authoritative and manipulative or did the government take effective steps to provide people adequate facilities to deal with the virus. It also helps to assess if the government prioritized and ensured the smooth functioning of the health sector during the health emergency or did it use the pandemic as a tool to implement the authoritative policies to extend its pre-existing plans to colonize the state as apprehended by the locals.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- What have been the policies of the government in J&K during the COVID 19 pandemic?
- Is the government implementing effective policies to contain the spread of the virus in the state?
- Is the government exploiting the lockdown to carry out its settler-colonial goals in the region?
- How far has the administration been successful in dealing with the health emergency?

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The major objectives of the study are as follows:

- To evaluate the administration in the conflict zone of Jammu and Kashmir during the spread of the COVID 19 virus.
- To evaluate the nature of various strategies and policies framed by the government to control the spread of the disease.

- To analyze whether the government was successful in managing the Covid crisis in J&K.
- To analyze if the COVID 19 situation was exploited by the central government to accomplish its agendas in the state of Jammu and Kashmir.

RESEARCH HYPOTHESIS

The spread of the Corona virus, which originated from Wuhan, China is currently the focal point of all the regimes around the world and has also transformed the socio-economic dynamics of all the countries. Even the politically and economically sound countries like the USA, UK, and Russia, etc. are now facing acute economic and healthcare crises and the same is true for the Third World nations like India, Brazil, and many parts of Africa. The virus has also posed greater challenges and changed the demographics in the contested and volatile zones on the earth including Kashmir, Syria, Lebanon, and Yemen [3]. These fragile states are at a greater risk since the conflict in these regions has not only resulted in weaker healthcare facilities and poor administration but has also caused the lack of citizen-leadership trust and conflict- led problems like forced displacements, desensitization of catastrophe, etc. [3]

As implied earlier, the weak foundation of the public administration, communication, and infrastructure of the J&K has made dealing with the virus particularly difficult for the people as well as the administrators. Apart from this, maintaining social distancing, generating awareness amongst the people, and maintaining other socio-economic activities during the pandemic becomes especially difficult due to the conflict. Hence, to successfully deal with the COVID 19 emergency, Kashmir needs special attention and unique policies. The ground reality however might be suggestive of a different approach. Further, the healthcare sector is not equipped enough to deal with the pandemic. The limited internet access in the region acts as an added impediment as well. Irrespective of all the above-mentioned difficulties the government has not come up with effective public policies to upgrade the systems and provide better infrastructure to prevent the spread of the disease in the conflict zone.

Also, certain political experiences suggest that such emergencies are often turned into opportunities by the authoritative governments worldwide to implement their policies and programs to help them strengthen their power while being inconsiderable to the plight of commons. For example, the Chinese Communist Party is misusing the COVID 19 tracking technology and data collection protocols to increase the surveillance of the Chinese citizens and making the pandemic an instrument to restrain dissent in Hong Kong as well. Similar such trends are visible in India, where several authoritative policies are being implemented as in the case of Kashmir and several other issues of social importance are being swept under the rug while using the pandemic as a tool.

Hence, it can be hypothesized that the governance in J&K during the COVID 19 pandemic is not up to the mark to restrict the spread of the virus. This suggests that the policies implemented have not been effective enough to cater to the unique needs of Kashmir as a conflict zone to prevent the spread of the disease. Furthermore, as the pandemic is being exploited by the authoritative regimes around the world, Kashmir being a conflict zone has become subject to greater exploitation and manipulation by the government during the crisis.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

To conduct the research, relevant material related to the policy implementation in Kashmir was collected from various secondary sources, and data available on the relatable topics have been analyzed to derive suitable conclusions. The data collected is from the initial phase of the pandemic in Kashmir starting from March 2020 to around July 2020.

In this study, along with many reports by various governmental and non-governmental organizations, articles in journals, periodicals, and additional information available in newspapers and on the internet were studied. The literature available on the subject and the interpretations of experts on the policies of the government were scrutinized as well to draw conclusions and accomplish the research.

Apart from this many formal and informal tools were employed to extract relevant information to conduct the study.

Limited access to data and biased study material are some limitations of the methodology that must be noted.

RESEARCH ANALYSIS

To analyze the nature of governance in Kashmir during the COVID-19 pandemic, familiarity with the concepts of ‘good governance’ and ‘efficient administration’ becomes a pre-requisite.

To “govern” in the broadest sense means to rule or exercise control. [4]The term ‘governance’ is a much broader term than ‘government’ as it includes the various ways in which human life is coordinated’ [4]

Governance can therefore be regarded satisfactory if all the decisions made by the authorities are taken in favour of the interests of citizens when public administration is effective, full participation of people in the decision-making process is ensured, and when human rights, democracy, power-sharing, accountability and the rule of law are safeguarded.

During the on-going health crisis, only a handful of countries throughout the world have set exceptional examples of good, timely, and effective governance. New Zealand, Fiji, Taiwan, and Ice-land being a few. Ironically, the greatest powers of the world including the USA, UK, and Russia struggled to achieve the same. India is no exception as well.

As discussed in the early parts of the paper, Kashmir requires special policies, more dexterous than the rest of the territories, to deal with the pandemic since the valley confronts unusual situations.

How far has the current administration under the Central Government managed to do so? What have been the policies of the government during this period? Has the administration managed to control the spread of the virus in the region? How has been the approach of the administration? These are some of the questions that will be discussed in this segment.

SSAn effort has been made to understand these questions with relation to the four pillars of Public Administration known as the 4E’s that are essential to label any governance or administration as ‘good’, while simultaneously examining the strategies of the government.

Effectiveness

In the context of the pandemic, the effectiveness of any administration can be judged based on its ability to contain the spread of the virus, reduce the mortality rate, follow and implement appropriate protection protocols, and its ability to ensure socio-economic justice at the same time. The following graphs show the rising number of cases and mortality rate in Kashmir. There has been a continuous rise in the graph from March 18th i.e., when the first COVID 19 case emerged in the valley. The graph also shows the increasing mortality rate due to the virus and shows no substantial flattening of the curve at any point. The rising numbers of the COVID-19 cases in Kashmir advocate the delinquency as the graphical description suggests the number of cases is on a constant rise, show no signs of flattening, and continue to rise at an increasing rate.

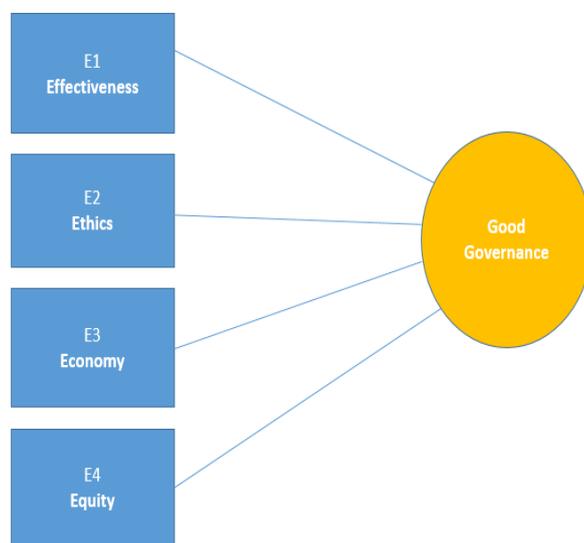


Fig.1 Source: Self-creation

Persistent rising figures of COVID-19 cases was a scenario true for the entire world, Kashmir however

had exclusive reasons for the same. The very first being the unscientific implementation of the lockdown, incompetent healthcare facilities, lack of awareness amongst people, internet and communication restrictions, inadequate testing, and quarantine facilities, etc. Hence, symptomatic of inept policy-making and implementation by the administrators.

technical guidelines on contact tracing, quarantine, isolation, hospitalization, infection prevention and control, and extensive capacity-building for all cadres of health and other interlinked departments played a critical role in managing the situation.[5]

- Kerala managed to implement strict and timely lockdown measures. The state's success story came about due to the state government's

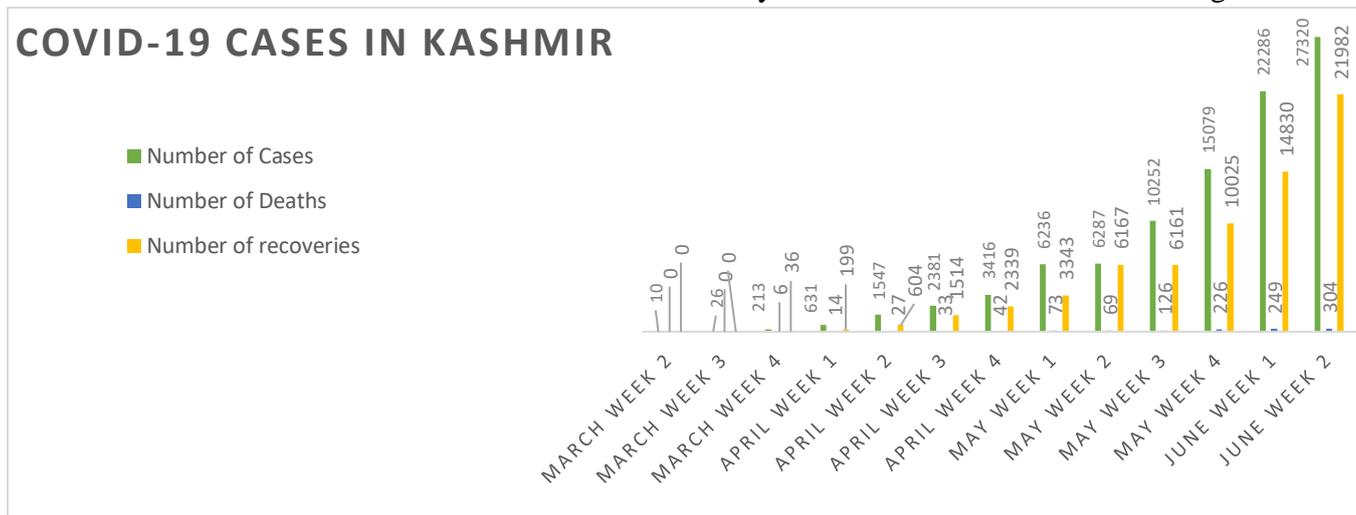


Fig. 2 Data Source; Department of Information and Public Relations; Department of Health and Medical Information

Following is an explanation of the aforementioned reasons understood by comparing a virus controlling failure with a successful state i.e., Kerala.

Kerala is one of the very few states which successfully managed to limit the corona virus cases and won the battle against the disease. The

recovery rate is also impressive in the state, despite the first few cases in the country being from Kerala only. The state used innovative approaches and its experience in disaster management planning came in handy to quickly deploy resources and put up a timely and comprehensive response in collaboration with key stakeholders. Active surveillance, setting up of district control rooms for monitoring, capacity-building of frontline health workers, risk communication and strong community engagement, and addressing the psychosocial needs of the vulnerable population are some of the key strategic interventions implemented by the state government that kept the disease in control. Early release of

prompt action even before the lockdown was announced, advising people to stay indoors and implement basic hygiene. As the virus reached Kerala, it started rigorous testing and quarantining the infected, putting the patients in touch with doctors from their homes through a special app.[6]

Contrasting to this, the lockdown implementation in J&K wasn't effective enough despite the deployment of a large number of military personnel to implement these measures. This way the administration was unable to break the chain of transmission of the virus that became the reason for the increasing numbers of corona virus cases in Kashmir with a mere population of 8 million. Being a well-knit society, Kashmir required strict and strategic lockdown measures to restrict social interactions and gatherings. Many cases were reported where potential virus carriers were not tested and quarantined and the incoherent lockdown measures enabled them to conduct the social operations spontaneously, hence elongating the chain of transmission. In May, the J&K government

claimed that Kashmir is the “number one in the country in testing”, with 8000 tests per day. [7] However, this step was taken much after the rapid transmission of the disease had already begun in the UT.

Secondly, demographics played an important role. As of Census 2011, around 70% of the population in Kashmir was recorded to be below the age of 35 years and the overall literacy rate was 67.2%. These figures indicate that Kashmir comprises mostly a young population and more than 30% of the population is illiterate. Hence, to make people aware of the novel Corona virus and its preventative measures, proper communication and better understanding are compulsory. But effective communication and campaigning were rarely experienced.

The high literacy rate in Kerala managed to create an enabling environment owing to the high-level political and administrative commitment and provided the much-needed impetus in the fight against this pandemic.[5]

- The Kerala government has been systematically investing in strengthening its health infrastructure. During the pandemic, the state government set-up at least two COVID-19 dedicated hospitals in each district to treat the positive cases with well-trained staff and a team from all specialties. State and District Medical Boards were constituted to bring out treatment and discharge protocols and assess each positive case.[5]

On the contrary, reports by Greater Kashmir, Economics times, and Jammu and Kashmir Civil Coalition Society suggest that there is just one ventilator for every 71000 people in Kashmir, one doctor for every 3900 people whereas the World Health Organisation recommends a minimum of 1:1000 doctor-patient ratio. Another set of statistics also suggest that there are only 97 ventilators in total in the whole valley. Therefore, irrespective of the pandemic, the health infrastructure is not up to the mark even to deal with general ailments. Further during the pandemic, no systematic restructuring of

health infrastructure was adopted. In July, the administration added 250 ventilators to hospitals across Kashmir. The Directorate of Health Services Kashmir (DHSK) claimed that the requisition came “late”. [8]

Further, there were reports of the frontline workers frequently complaining about the lack of proper PPE kits. According to these reports, The Doctors Association Kashmir (DAK) in March, wrote to the Lieutenant Governor of Kashmir demanding more protection equipment’s for doctors and paramedical staff as they are not abundantly present. While describing the poor condition of the hospitals, a doctor from north Kashmir Baramulla mentioned that they had no ICU or MRI facility in the health centre he was working in and the same is the condition with many such small health care centres in Kashmir where either proper equipment are not present at all or are in a non-workable condition or there is lack of workers to handle the equipment. [9]

Dr. Balwinder Singh, a medical worker was transferred to a different region when he demanded proper PPE kits and other important facilities like masks and sanitizers. Two days later after he expressed his concern over the same, he was transferred to the Batote region of Jammu.[10]

Pointing towards the lack of freedom of speech and expression along with the lack of proper medical assistance to the citizens.

The slow speed of the internet is yet another challenge that is faced by Kashmir during its war with the pandemic. Since the COVID 19 is a new kind of virus, its treatment and containment are purely based on the latest researches and studies carried out by experts. Information, therefore, becomes a major tool to help control the spread of the disease. Because of the low internet speed, the doctors in Kashmir struggle to join the online conferences and download the latest findings that are available in the form of pdf files.

Lastly, due to the communication restrictions, people are unable to reach out conveniently to the COVID-19 helpline services or seek on-call help from doctors, thereby making Tele-treatment

almost impossible. The restrictions on calling and the internet put the lives of millions in jeopardy and also violate their right to health and information. The information is given to the commons through print media, SMS, WhatsApp, and other social media sources play an important role to make people aware of the proper discipline to follow which is required to prevent the spread of the disease. All these practices have become unnecessarily difficult in Kashmir due to the ban on high-speed internet and other restrictions on communication in the valley. During the pandemic itself, the internet has been suspended 35 times in parts of Kashmir.[11]

One of the major reasons for the success of Kerala was providing psychological support and effective communication. Telemedicine portal e-sanjeevani for Tele-consultation was set up across the State. Psychosocial support is in place and 1143 mental health professionals, including psychiatrists, psychiatric social workers, clinical psychologists, and counsellors have been deployed to provide support to people in quarantine. Communication portals and risk communication programs were started to provide support and information to the locals [5]

The comparison presented above explains why the administration has not able to prevent the multiplying number of COVID-19 cases in Kashmir. Lack of efficiency in policy formulation and implementation is the key reason for the rising number of cases in the valley. Improper testing methods and health care systems, incorrect implementation of lockdown, and lack of proper communication facilities depict the disorganization of the administration.

Ethics

Governance is said to be ethical when it is value-based. A series of events commenced in Kashmir during the pandemic that implied the unprincipled character of the governance during the pandemic.

The first point of analysis following this narrative is the disposition of lockdown in Kashmir. The COVID 19 lockdown in Kashmir has been criticized for being highly militaristic. Parallel to all the other parts of

India, Jammu & Kashmir was also put under strict lockdown under Section 144 on 19th March after it recorded its first case of COVID 19 on 18th March 2020.[11]However, how the decision was implemented in Kashmir was much different than in the rest of the regions.

The already present military personnel were employed to implement the lockdown in the most contagious zones. The military completely sealed the 'Red Zones' by blocking the entrances with permanent iron barricades, making it impossible for the citizens living in those areas to move out or come in for basic and emergency needs. The residents criticized this method used by the administrators as it appeared less control measures them and more of controlling the behaviour of the citizens. The administrators justified the act under the reason of 'attempt to break the chains of transmission', yet faced outcry by masses. [12][11]

Also, numerous detentions were made for not adhering to the lockdown. According to the data present in the Bi-annual Report by the Jammu Kashmir Coalition of Civil Society and the APDP, hundreds of people were detained in the initial phase of the lockdown itself with over 1012 FIRs registered in Jammu and Kashmir against 2303 people defying the lockdown rules set by the administration. Of these, 1691 were arrested in Kashmir and booked in 568 FIRs. The arrest of at least 92 more people was reported after the statement by J&K Police on 16 April.[11]

Further, to track the potential virus carriers, strict surveillance protocol was used without any legal basis, which is often operated for counter-insurgency operations. Apart from using apps to conduct these surveys, "private eye", observation, information from travel agents, etc was also used to track the people. [12]UAVs Unmanned Ariel vehicles were utilized to ensure implementation of the lockdown, which conversely infringed the right to privacy of the citizens. These methods instead of proving to be effective infringed the freedom of movement, right to privacy of citizens and gave the protocols the impression of an insurgency operation.

During the same period, there was a significant increase in the number of Cordon and Search Operations that were conducted in Kashmir, seeing its initial peak in April. The door-to-door CASOs conducted by the military during the pandemic have been criticized for violating the safety protocols as it increases the possibilities of the spread of the virus.

The amplified number of forced displacements is another aspect that shows the lack of ethics of the military as well as the administration during a global pandemic. The most significant example is the Nawakadal Encounter during which 22 houses were completely burned and destroyed. This led to the displacement of all families who were later shifted to the overcrowded community halls, a violation of the safety protocols. Apart from the forced displacements, many other incidents of brutal destruction of property and vehicles by the security forces were reported from many parts of the valley. [11]

Despite the call for a global ceasefire by the UN Secretary-General, Antonio Guterres, the Line of Control remained as violent as it was before the pandemic, causing a loss of civilian life, destruction of property, and displacement of the villagers living near the LOC.

Numerous cases of harassment of the medical staff by the military have also emerged. One such case being reported on 23 May 2020 when Dr. Syed Maqbool, a senior Cardiologist from Srinagar, was brutally beaten up by the police. Likewise, Dr. Muzaffar Ahmad was beaten up by the CRPF in the Chadoora district. Several such cases of misbehaviour with the doctors and medical staff by the military forces have been recorded.

Quantifying the above-mentioned occurrences, from March to June, 27 civilian killings, 143 militant killings, 43 encounters, and 75 CASO have been reported, signifying no change of priorities and efforts to improve the socio-political situation of Kashmir during the pandemic.

The communication clampdown during a global pandemic is yet another paradigm. The pandemic

caused employment, education, and business to significantly shift online and the whole world continued with these practices with the help of the internet while staying at home. Apart from providing employment and education, the internet is also a major tool to provide online assistance to the citizens and also help the people stay connected while being under a lockdown. Despite the indispensable requirement of high-speed internet for education, occupation, mental and physical wellness, Kashmir faces an absence of high-speed internet. During the first few months of the lockdown itself, the internet was suspended 35 times in the valley and continued to operate at a slow speed thereafter.[11]

Multiple human rights organizations throughout the world called upon the Government of India to lift the restrictions on the internet in Kashmir, keeping in view the critical need for communication facilities during the crisis. The archaic 2G internet not only impedes the research and treatment process of the virus but also affects the mental health of youngsters in Kashmir as they lack access to a major source of coping mechanism during a global crisis. More importantly, millions of Kashmiri students are being devoid of their right to education as they are unable to access online education due to the paucity of high-speed internet.

The communication restrictions intrude upon the civil liberties of the people. Their right to access justice and occupation, the right to education, right to information, right to healthcare, and therefore the right to life and liberty, guaranteed under Article 12 International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, as well as in the Article 21 of the Indian Constitution. The administrators have not only been jeopardizing the health of the people of Kashmir but also the democracy as the people are being deprived of their guaranteed constitutional rights. The government yet continues to justify the restrictions on the internet citing security concerns as a major reason.

Economy

The economy is a major indicator used to degree the credibility, performance, and functioning of

governments and political institutions. Kashmir has been under prolonged lockdown since August 5th 2019. All the businesses, schools, government offices were shut for months together in 2019 and the situation remained similar in the year 2020, due to the outbreak of the novel corona virus. Hence, because of almost a yearlong lockdown, Kashmir is recording heavy economic losses.

As per the preliminary loss assessment report of Kashmir Chamber of Commerce and Industries (KCCI), Kashmir's economy has suffered Rupees 40,000 crore losses mainly due to extensive lockdowns which Kashmir has been facing since August 2019 when the central government in parliament revoked the special status of Jammu and Kashmir, taking away its exclusive domicile provisions.[13]The report also put forward that about one lakh people lost their jobs during the same time. While the whole nation's economy is suffering due to the enterprises being closed because of the lockdown, Jammu and Kashmir is an exception yet again as the state faced more economic fatalities in comparison to any other state.

During the first lockdown which lasted for about six months, Kashmir suffered losses of rupees 17,878 crores according to reports by KCCI and now according to a preliminary assessment by Kashmir Economic Alliance (KEA), the region's leading trade body, the Valley's economy suffered losses of rupees 8,416.2 crore in the first two months of lockdown due to the COVID-19 pandemic.[14]

The majority of the people in Kashmir depend upon tourism for their livelihood, this major industry being massively hit because of the two consecutive lockdowns. Meanwhile, the State's Taxes department too has forecasted a dip in revenue collection from the Union territory of J&K in this quarter[13]

Despite such drastic conditions of the economy in the valley, no special measures have been taken by the authorities to help the economic situation improve in Kashmir. Instead of formulating effective public policies to uplift the valley from an economic recession, the government has been making decisions of reopening the tourism sector amidst the pandemic

which has been taken as a "cruel joke" by the locals. [13]

The communication clampdown is yet another challenge for the exporters and others in the e-commerce industry that depends on high-speed internet for communication, particularly during the COVID times when almost all businesses around the world shifted online.

Despite such critical circumstances no data, official announcement, or reports suggest any 'major' plan for the revitalization of Kashmir's economy.

Equity

One of the main goals of an administration is to ensure equality as well as equity in society. Both the concepts of Equity and Equality promote the spirit of fairness however, while equality provides justice through distribution regardless of the needs, equity does the same through distribution according to the requirements, that is, depending on the discerning needs of individuals and societies.

Kashmir has been facing extreme political situations since the very existence of the state. The unrelenting political turmoil in the region has left both public and scarcely present private sector less developed in comparison to the rest of the country. Despite these challenges, some of the industries unique to the place like tourism, horticulture, adventure sports, and handicrafts managed to strive while the political turmoil experienced no decline. Further, the abrogation of the special status of J&K, the change of its status to that of a Union Territory, and the immediate outbreak of corona virus within a year has increased the privations amongst the stakeholders. The outbreak of the COVID 19 virus was especially ill-timed for Kashmir as the Union Territory was still struggling to rehabilitate from an 8-month long lockdown and the massive political changes, thereby making the pandemic more severe to deal with.

Hence, Kashmir certainly requires generous, distinctive, and extraordinary policies, more dynamic than the rest of the states to fully uplift the society as well as the economy from the disaster. Yet, the policy response of the Government of India

in Kashmir is not substantial. From the allocation of resources in terms of budgetary policies to the containment of the disease itself, the strategies during this time reflect the peripheral approach of the administrators. Even though a few programs have been implemented during the COVID 19 period, like the establishment of Mobile Designated Vans, Tele-classes for students and small monetary benefits to the workers and daily wagers but these are not sufficient enough given the great degree of complications and drawbacks faced by the erstwhile State. Much cannot be comprehended about the effects and influence of these few policies due to the paucity of data.

The exploitation of the Pandemic

During the pandemic, the leadership centred its focus on the implementation of various other laws and policies. For example, the New Domicile Laws, The New Media Policy, The Education Investment policy, Real Estate Policy, and so on. All these policies are being passed and implemented with urgency during the pandemic itself. Such laws have come under extensive condemnations by the local population as well as the experts for being highly exploitative. For many, the laws simply aim to change the demographic structure and status of J&K. For the government, they are being implemented at the pretext of initiating “robust development” of the region while most believe that the new policies aim to change the demography, choke the economy and open the pathway to allow non- Kashmiris to take over the economy and resources, eradicate Kashmir’s history through education policies and criminalize dissent.

For example, the Education investment Policy 2020 was implemented during the pandemic itself. According to New Education Policy 2020, ‘the government intends to give due preference to reputed players in the field of education willing to set up universities in J&K’. This policy aims to whitewash the local history and rewrite the textbooks to represent an obfuscated narrative suitable for the present Government of India. Moreover, this is going to put the survival of the educated youth of J&K at stake. The arrival of the private players (both of national and international

repute for setting up the educational institutes in various academic and professional streams) will reduce the chances of natives at availing the teaching posts in J&K. The course curriculum and syllabus will be designed by outsiders, thus changed completely. With the coming of the private players, many colleges will be affiliated with the universities that will be located outside Kashmir, and during the curfews and strikes when local schools and colleges are usually closed, the students of the centrally affiliated universities will be bound to go for examination under any circumstances and that will be sold to the outside world differently, thus there will be design to change the narrative and different picture of Kashmir will be presented. [11]

Similarly, the J&K administration approved the new Media Policy-2020 stating that it was meant for effective communication and public outreach. The Media Policy-2020 allows the Directorate of Information and Public Relations (DIPR) to “examine” the content of print, electronic, and various other forms of media for “fake news, plagiarism and unethical or anti-national activities.” The administration also stated that the policy attempts to “thwart misinformation, fake news and tries to develop a mechanism that will raise alarm against any attempt to use the media to vitiate public peace, sovereignty, and integrity of the country.” The new media policy has rendered J&K newspapers into government hand-outs. The new policy gives J&K administration powers to decide what is ‘fake’, ‘unethical’ or ‘anti-national’ news, and to take legal action against the journalist or media organization concerned, including stopping government advertisements and sharing information with security agencies. [11]

These measures by the government during a global pandemic are viewed as the “strategic take over” while ignoring the opposition by civilians. To many, it appeared that the government used the pandemic as an opportunity to execute its agendas since no strong political or international opposition exists. Further, the trajectories of the policy formulation process reflect the priorities of the government as more urgency is given to implement

the “new” laws while much less attention is being given to improving the infrastructure.

CONCLUSION

COVID-19 came as an unforeseen disaster that swamped the entire world. The containment of the disease and its preparedness was particularly difficult for all the nations as the disease was novel, with very little research available on it. The virus not only caused health problems but also became a cause of economic, social, and mental challenges. These challenges were especially elevated for conflict zones like Kashmir. Hence, the policy-making in conflict zones is expected to be especially well-planned because of the unique challenges faced by the population. However, even during the pandemic, very little effort was made by the administration to tackle such issues and provide better healthcare, education, socio-economic security to the people of Jammu & Kashmir. An analysis of the governance also reflects differential priorities of the administration where implemented revised policies were given preference over improving the infrastructure.

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