

COVID-19: EXPERIENCES FROM KASHMIR BY SHAZANA ANDRABI

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When I was a kid, my grandmother would tell me a story where a hunchback was granted one wish by an angel. I would naturally think that he would wish a straight back for himself, but he wished a hunched back for all people of the world. As most of the world reels under an unprecedented lockdown, it reminds me of this story. Of course we did not wish for the world to be like us (under different levels of lockdown, that is), but I could not help but remember this story. For the last thirty years, we have been under different forms of curfews, both 'civil' and government-imposed, one in the name of resistance and the other in the name of security.

For us in Kashmir, this lockdown is a continuation of what started on 5th August, 2019. We lived under a total communication blockade (including the telephone and internet) for several months, after which internet was restored at a speed of 2G. I find it essential to share this background to elucidate that this lockdown under which the whole world has been caught unaware, has not riled us the way it has other countries and individuals. Of course this is not a common 'law and order curfew', but as a society that has been in conflict for around three decades, we have evolved emergency mechanisms and a communitarian perspective of readiness for such eventualities. While some people in other parts of the world were fighting over toilet paper, we knew what it meant to 'stock essentials'. Food items that would last longer were stocked (not hoarded), and there were very few or no empty shelves in departmental stores. The government swung into action to ensure that essential commodities including food and medicine were not in short supply, as did the NGOs that went from door to door offering deliveries of food. Many NGOs have started manufacturing masks and PPEs on small scales to meet local demands. Restrictions have turned stricter and people can no longer venture out of their houses. Again, some semblance of order has been brought by departmental stores that have demarcated zones within 3 kms where they deliver orders (thankfully, whatsapp works on a bandwidth of 2G).

Schools and offices have been closed in Kashmir as in other parts of the world. However, in Kashmir we suffer differently. Where educational institutions all over the world are busy organising and delivering online classes, our kids are denied this 'luxury'. They cannot access online lectures or any educational resources without full access to the internet. Nor can they play online interactive video games with their friends to pass their time and create mental diversions for themselves. That which is a necessity in normal times and a lifeline in these circumstances is denied to millions of Kashmiri youth stuck inside their homes. Still, these are problems that can be lived with, of course with major long term mental and physical repercussions. There are some problems that come with the lockdown that are existential crises in the most extreme forms. A spike in cases of domestic violence and women being stuck with their abusers can lead to major problems and mental breakdowns. In my earlier research related to extended periods of lockdown and its effects on gender-based violence in Kashmir, I had found that there was a steep spike in the reported cases of domestic violence during such times in Kashmir. Since there is no way of getting data on this during the current lockdown, the patterns of behaviour strongly suggest that this could be the case even now. More physical violence and subsequent long-term or permanent psychological damage can prove fatal when coupled with the stresses of ordinary life in a conflict zone.

Then there is the economically marginalised population who are most vulnerable to ill health, low immunity and starvation even during normal times. Such people fall between the cracks of government subsidies and other benefits of regularised labour. Many of them, who earn during the day and have no savings whatsoever, face starvation. May labourers have complained that if coronavirus didn't kill them, hunger definitely would. They are forced to move out of their homes to find work or sell their wares. As they move out, they get beaten up by the police due to the curfew in force. If they stay at home, they and their families face certain starvation. Many migrant workers who come to Kashmir during spring and summer months are