

Letter from Indian-held Kashmir:

Emergency amidst Emergency—Modi government denies Internet access imperiling lives

Muzamil Yaqoob, Nilanjana Bhattacharya
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This article was submitted for publication by Muzamil Yaqoob and Nilanjana Bhattacharya, researchers affiliated with Jawaharlal Nehru University in Delhi.

On March 24 Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi made a sudden reversal. After weeks of boasting that India was a model for the region and the world in combating the coronavirus, he announced a nationwide 21-day lockdown, saying that to stop the spread of the pandemic and a catastrophic loss of life it was necessary that the entire population self-isolate. Since then, the number of confirmed COVID-19 cases has risen dramatically from 564 to more than 4,600, and from 10 to at least 140 deaths.

The Indian government, like its counterparts in the United States and Latin America, has been criminally negligent towards the underprivileged working class who have been left by the unprecedented lockdown to face hardships and even death. Not only has the deaths of 22 migrant workers been underreported, the media and the BJP government have in recent days attempted to communalize the whole issue and demonize the minority Muslim community for the widespread health crisis in the country. Similarly, the Indian state has refused to comply with World Health Organization guidelines to lift the internet lockdown in Kashmir.

All information regarding the pandemic, including healthcare protocols, notices and orders are conveyed to the population through internet, news and social media platforms. Yet in Indian-held Kashmir the population, including healthcare professionals, continues to be denied unimpeded access to the internet. The internet was shut down at the beginning of August 2019 as part of the massive security lockdown imposed on the people of Kashmir, when the BJP government illegally abrogated Article 370 of the constitution, which gave the states of Jammu and Kashmir special autonomous status, and divided it into two Union territories: Jammu and Kashmir, and Ladakh.

After seven months, on March 5, internet services were partially restored. Broadband services remain unavailable, and mobile services are restricted to a 2G cap, thus making it difficult for people to utilize the service effectively.

During the recent wave of protests against the BJP government's communalist-motivated Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) and National Register of Citizens (NRC), many states, such as Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh, Manipur and Assam, imposed internet shutdowns, some of which lasted 24 to 72 hours.

According to the recent estimates, from January 2012 to March 15, 2020, there were 385 state-ordered internet shutdowns in India, of which 237 were said to have been "preventive," i.e., in anticipation of a "law and order" threat, and 148 were "reactive," i.e., to help contain a "breakdown" of law and order. However, in all this, Kashmir made headlines as having faced the brunt of the longest ever internet shutdown in history, 213 days.

The spate of crises COVID-19 has unleashed around the globe has further intensified the already chaotic situation in Kashmir, which has among the greatest per capita mobilization of security forces anywhere on the planet. In the absence of good internet connectivity, the Kashmir Valley faces several challenges, ranging from the low downloading speed of documents, making it difficult for doctors to follow medical guidelines, to the lack of dissemination of information regarding basic healthcare protocols and notices to the general public. With the cases of COVID-19 mounting every day, it is imperative the Indian government immediately restore full internet services in the Valley.

The Indian state's prolonged internet shutdown in

Kashmir

Kashmiris have not only been under a brutal security clampdown since last August. They have been further traumatized by a severe communication blockade or blackout and internet shutdown that partially continues even today. Even widespread international condemnation and a severe humanitarian crisis could not force the Indian government to end its inhumane state of siege or lift the sanctions on the internet in Kashmir.

In January this year, the Indian Supreme Court in response to many petitions challenging restrictions in Kashmir held that “Complete curbing of internet must be considered by the state only as an extraordinary measure.” While declaring that free access to the internet is a necessary part of freedom of speech and expression, the Court failed to review the situation on the ground in Jammu and Kashmir, which has become even more tragic and miserable.

With the widespread crises created by COVID-19, countries like Cuba have dispatched medical supplies to Italy to help resolve the pandemic through mutual cooperation and medical internationalism. However, the capitalist elites have not only sought to profit off the pandemic, the world powers like the US have been intensifying their imperialist offensives at this time, including Washington’s intensified sanctions on Iran. In Kashmir, not only has the Indian state been disinclined to improve the healthcare infrastructure while the COVID-19 cases continue to rise in the state, it has used the pandemic as an opportunity to push through changes in Kashmir’s domicile or resident-property law without any uproar.

The healthcare infrastructure in Kashmir has always been in shambles. Recent appeals by doctors reveal that there is a severe shortage of basic facilities throughout the state, now reduced to a mere Union Territory. With such a paucity of resources, the local healthcare system seems too fragile to deal with any serious pandemic outbreak. The situation is worsened by the nonavailability of information and the difficulty in interacting with the coordinated network of Indian and global medical specialists. Under such a situation, Kashmiris, who were already struggling with the months-long clampdown, are finding it extremely difficult to access information, so as to understand the pandemic and organize preventive measures.

Criminalization of Kashmiris amidst the pandemic

It is significant to note that the authorities have made the current pandemic a law-and-order situation to further criminalize the existence of an already vulnerable people. The brutality with which freedom of mobility has been curbed again reflects upon the government’s reluctance to resolve crises with dialogue and coordination. The pandemic has been used as a new opportunity to unleash a reign of terror throughout the Valley. In addition to this, the administrative directives to extend the blackout of the internet, which currently works at a 2G speed, speaks volumes about the criminal negligence of the Indian state and the authorities in Kashmir.

However, highlighting this gruesome situation in the backdrop of the healthcare emergency does not mean that the people of Jammu and Kashmir were not suffering greatly because of the internet shutdown even before the pandemic. Not only were students unable to go to school because of the lockdown, but they were and continue to be deprived of access to the reading materials necessary for their studies.

We are currently faced with a grave situation where thousands of students have not been able to forward their admission applications for higher studies. Researchers have been left with nothing. They can either move outside of Kashmir or keep waiting for the government to restore the internet, not to mention other necessary academic activities at universities and colleges. While students in many parts of world are currently continuing their studies through online classes and high-speed internet facilities, the neglect on the part of administration could cost Kashmiri students their careers and Kashmir a possibly bright future. The denial of internet access is perpetuating a sense of fear and discontinuity which has already created serious mental health problems and social schisms among the populace.

With cases of COVID-19 rising in Kashmir, fears of a human catastrophe loom large over the closed Valley, with minimum or no contact with the outside world. The state of siege which started with a complete blackout on cell phones, internet, landlines and television last year has not found any end yet. Even at this critical juncture, Kashmir finds itself secluded and relegated to struggle for the fundamental right to information. Unless the internet sanctions are completely lifted, Kashmir will continue to reel under fears of another devastation—a health emergency within an antidemocratic state-security emergency—that could have far-reaching consequences.



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