

Covid-19 and its Impact on Mental Health in Kashmir

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(Abstract)

The Corona virus (Covid-19) brought social and economic life to a standstill. This global health emergency resulted into governments enforcing shutdowns, travel restrictions and quarantines. The pandemic not only led to global economic catastrophe but also has deleterious impact on the mental health of people as well. Restrictive measures as quarantine, isolation and social distancing have an impact on psychological wellbeing of people as well as emotive reactions to pandemic itself. The problem becomes much graver when it comes to the case of Kashmir, a valley in northern most part of India. In a situation of enduring conflict, the pandemic has added to the already deteriorating mental health scenario in this part of the world. It is, therefore, intriguing to examine the impact of the Covid-19 outbreak on the mental health of the people in this valley. The study further analyses the policy responses from the administration to combat the COVID related issues.

Keywords: Covid-19, Health Emergency, Economic Catastrophe, Policy Responses.

Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic has shaken the entire world. This outbreak triggered in December 2019 in the city of Wuhan, China. Since then, it continues to spread across the world both vertically as well as horizontally. Lockdowns and social distancing as precautionary measures to decrease the spread of the virus have undoubtedly done wonders but at the same time have severely affected health in general and mental health in particular. As it is known that disasters are always accompanied by mental health issues like child abuse, drug abuse, domestic violence, depression, anxiety, etc., Covid-19 pandemic also proved itself not to be an exception. Lockdowns around the world led to an increase in case of domestic violence where women and children who live with domestic violence have no escape from their abusers during quarantine (Chandra, 2020; Graham et al., 2020). Indian Psychiatry Society in its recent survey has shown a sharp twenty percent increase in mental illness in India (Loiwal, 2020). Lockdowns and disease containment events might also be deleterious to the mental health of people experiencing starvation and homelessness, many of whom have fears around involuntary hospitalisation and incarceration (Schutt, 2011).

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Literature Review

In response to the rapid increase in COVID-19 cases, countries all over the world had to adopt various preventive measures, social distancing being one of them (Fong et al., 2020). The motive of such measures is to flatten the curve of increasing case of COVID-19 (John Hopkins University, 2020). However, such measures though aimed at reducing the spread of the disease result in the creation of new problems such as development of emotional and psychological distress (Usher et al., 2020). Less social contact as a result of physical distancing affect the mental health of all especially the adolescents (Jiao et al., 2020). Both lives as well as connections were lost during the lockdown period due to various restrictions. The stress about the pandemic has a bearing on the increase in substance use which is reported to be a means of coping with the problem (Rehm et al., 2020; Rodriguez et al., 2020). A child's school life, his connections with others and the whole school environment affect his likelihood of becoming a substance user (Bond et al., 2007). There has been a tremendous increase in online sale and purchase of cannabis products during the first three months of 2020 lockdown. (Groshkove, et al., 2020). COVID-19 patients who have been already substance users are at a high risk for severe negative outcomes. Its impact can get more worse by the use of opioids, tobacco, and abuse of other such drugs thus, resulting in more complications and can eventually lead to death as cautioned by some scholars (Volkow ,2020; Baillargeon, ,2020). The survey of literature throws an ample light on the fact that Coronavirus pandemic has badly hit the mental health of people. In this direction, the present paper attempts as an analytical study on the mental health scenario of Kashmir using secondary data from various research papers, research articles, newspaper reports and articles, interviews, WHO reports, CMIE, etc.

The Pandemic of Covid-19 and Kashmir- An Overview

India reported its first case of Corona virus on 30 January 2020. The pandemic, however, did not restrict itself to one state or region but soon spread to all the states and Union Territories. Kashmir being no exception reported its first case on 18 March 2020 near Khanyar area of Srinagar. As the lockdown was imposed nationwide, Kashmir also remained under complete restrictions until the incremental unlock of the UT began which extended into December 2020.

Covid-19 Statistics in India

<u>Active</u>	<u>Discharged</u>	<u>Deaths</u>
289,240	9,663,382	146,444

Source: MOHFW, 23/12/2020

Covid-19 Stastics in J&K

<u>Active</u>	<u>Discharged</u>	<u>Deaths</u>
3157	115261	1875

Source: MOHFW, 28/12/2020

Mental Health in Kashmir post Covid-19 pandemic

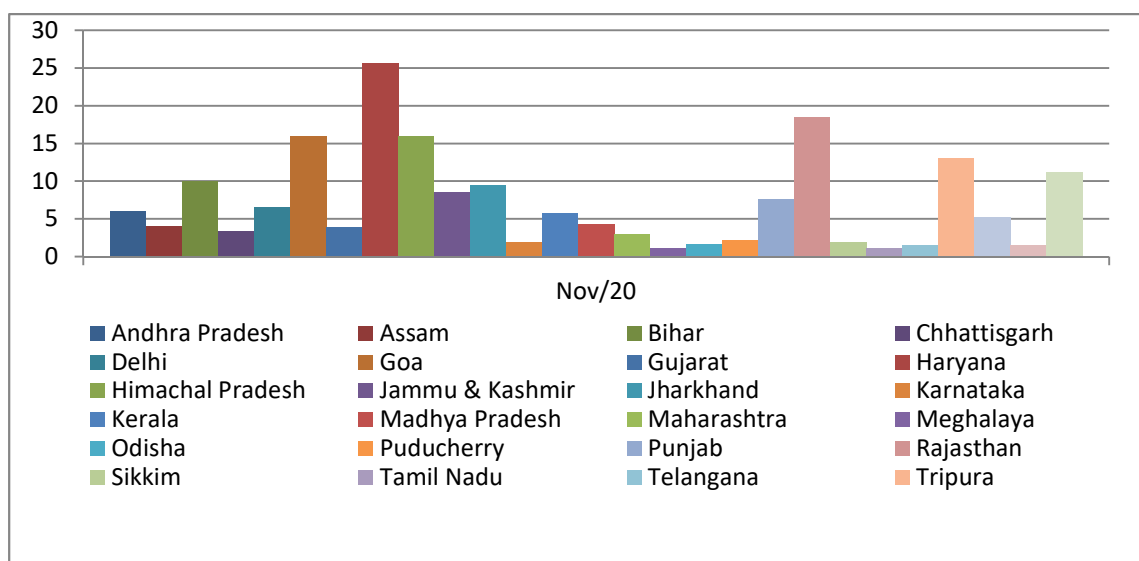
Kashmir facing an already communication lockdown following the abrogation of Article 370, that instilled distress among most of the residents, has been pushed to the darkest phase of its mental health crisis. This was due to one more lockdown imposed owing to the Covid-19 pandemic which was definitely an inevitable one. The emergence of Coronavirus pandemic poses a threat to economic and social aspects of life. It also poses a great challenge to the psychological health of people and also lockdown is not a permanent solution (Bhat et al., 2020). Nearly half of the adult population in Kashmir is believed to experience symptoms of mental distress. Dr. Junaid Nabi, a consultant psychiatrist is of the opinion that ‘due to the back to back lockdowns, anxiety and distress increased massively. For more than thirty years, the state of mental health has been bad in Kashmir’. The situation has now worsened as is evident from the enormous increase in the cases of domestic violence, crimes, child abuse, poverty, unemployment, etc. COVID-19 management has to focus on mental health also as it is found to bring changes in mental health of adolescents (Octavius et al., 2020).

Preventing suicide in the context of the COVID-19-related unemployment and financial insecurity is a critical public health priority (McIntyre et al., 2020). One among the various factors affecting mental health is the rising unemployment. There has been a very sharp increase in unemployment in Jammu and Kashmir. During the last two years, it witnessed a massive increase in unemployment rate from 9.1% in December 2018 to 16.6% in December 2020(CMIE). It is obvious from the figures that Jammu and Kashmir has much higher rate of unemployment than the national unemployment rate of 9.1% for the same month as pegged by CMIE. By the governments own figures, there are more than three lakh unemployed educated youth in the UT. Besides other factors, the regions fast growing unemployment problem is seen largely due to the repeated lockdowns since August 2019. This resulted in a loss of more than 50,000 crores, causing business units to shut down or squeeze their business activity leading to layoffs. More than five lakh jobs were lost in Kashmir only due to shutdowns since 2019 (KCCI).

Unemployment Rate in India (Sep-Dec 2020)

Urban 6.53%

Rural 9.76%



Source: CMIE

As is evident from the figures, Jammu and Kashmir stands at ninth position among the states and UT's in terms of unemployment rates. The mounting unemployment rates have triggered the mental health issues in Kashmir. The educated unemployed youth become more vulnerable to drug abuse, anxiety, depression, crimes, attempting suicides, and much more psychological issues. One of the worst forms of mental crisis in Kashmir has been the unfortunate surge of drug abuse that has very deteriorating impact on the society.

Problem of Drug Abuse in Kashmir

Drug/Substance abuse refers to the harmful or hazardous use of psychoactive substances, including alcohol and illicit drugs (WHO). Substance abuse has many negative physiological and psychological health effects. Drug abuse continues to be a strategy among youth to cope with various socio-economic and psychological problems (UN). "Someone can use substances and not be addicted or even have a substance disorder" (McLellan, 2017). Concern related to the menace in Kashmir can be found in early 1990's also. This reduction in the number of persons seeking psychiatric help at the outpatient department should not be misinterpreted as an indication of decreasing incidence of drug abuse in Kashmir, drug addicts have not been reporting as frequently and openly as in the past but the daily reports of big seizures of substances in the local press and related arrests are a clear indication that the menace is touching new heights and can eventually become explosive. Urgent steps must be taken to curb it before it is too late (Margoob & Dutta, 1993). The circumstances from last three decades have contributed to various kinds of social and political issues including drug addiction in the valley

(Bhat and Imtiaz, 2017). Almost 4.6% of the total population of the erstwhile state of Jammu and Kashmir used opioid drugs, 80% of drug addicts in Kashmir use heroin and

morphine as per survey conducted by the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment in February 2019.

Around 70,000 people including 4000 women in Kashmir are addicted to drugs according to the report of United Nation Drug Control Program of 2020. From January to May 2020, i.e. for seven months the psychiatry inpatient department of a tertiary care hospital in Srinagar reported that tobacco (nicotine) was the most commonly used by those admitted to the psychiatry ward (62.96%) followed by cannabis (11.11%) and opioids (11.11%). The most comorbidity associated with substance abuse was psychiatric disorders (38.84%) followed by neurological disorders (21.05%) and gastrointestinal disorders (7.8%) (Maqbool et al., 2020).

At the two centres for treatment of patients having substance abuse problem, Institute of Mental Health and Neurosciences Rainawari and the Community General Hospital SMHS Hospital, from January-November 2021, 13500 OPD registrations were done as per hospital records. So far as 2020 is concerned, it was just 7403 and 5113 for 2019. In the two districts of Kashmir, Srinagar and Anantnag, the most commonly used substance is opioid- one of the costliest drugs.

On daily basis, Rs. 3,74,90,329 are spend on the consumption of Opioids in these two districts only. As per J&K police data, 36.08 kgs of pure heroin and 49.7 kgs of brown sugar were recovered from various parts of Kashmir in 2020. Concerned over the drug menace, Chief Secretary Arun Kumar Mehta called for formulation of an action plan for formulation of an action plan for achieving tangible results on the drug menace front. 'It is informed that Jammu and Kashmir lies in close vicinity to the golden crescent which produces 80% of the world opium and is considered as the prime source of illicit drug trade. The UT has six lakh people affected by drug related issues who constitute 4.6% of its population of which 90% users are from 17-33 age group'. From 139 patients between 2012 and 2015, around 309 patients were registered for the Opioid Substitution Therapy (OST) at the Drug De-addiction Centre of Institute of Mental Health and Neurosciences (IMHANS), Srinagar from 2016-2019. Around 495 patients sought OST treatment in 2020.

Suggestions

Markedly, there has been an elevated prevalence of adverse mental health condition during the COVID-19 pandemic. The impact needs to be prevented by identification of those who are at high risk such as substance abusers. To mitigate the mental health consequences, there should be periodic assessment of mental health and a proper support system needs to be prepared. The growing drug menace in Kashmir is pushing its youth towards the death trap. To stop this catastrophe, the role of society becomes very crucial. Under this alarming situation, governmental and administrative efforts are of immense importance. Sports, cultural and other recreational activities are to be organised to curb this fast growing problem. To reduce the financial strain, employment opportunities need

to be provided. Counselling programmes and workshops need to be conducted to create awareness. Parents need to be cautious regarding the behaviour of their wards however, the parental behaviour also needs to be scrutinized. This is high time for the communication barrier to be broken down between them. The continuous supply of substitute therapies and other essential drugs has to be ensured. Definitely, NGO's, police, narcotics department, society, psychiatrists as well as administrators should join hands to fight this growing menace to assure a better and bright future for the young generation of Kashmir.

Conclusion

No doubt the COVID-19 issue/virus still remains with us, but the normal life has been restored to a great extent. However, the socio-economic problems will continue to impact the health of people particularly the mental health. In a conflict zone like Jammu and Kashmir, the prevalence of post-traumatic stress disorder is high. People here have an easy tendency to fall prey to substance abuse. It requires a collective effort, therefore, to combat the problem and secure the future of coming generations in Kashmir.

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