**Death sentence for Kashmiris?**

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Life in Indian Occupied Kashmir has always been been difficult. Life in Indian Occupied Kashmir after the illegal abrogation of Article 370 and 35A is even worse.

The very widely debated Article 370 is a constitutional provision that affords special status or limited autonomy to Jammu and Kashmir. Similarly, Article 35A covers “permanent residents” and their special privileges, thereby safeguarding the ethnographic identity of the region.

The reality, however, is that Article 370 always failed to live up to its purpose and IOK never truly enjoyed the kind of autonomy it was promised. This failure can be attributed to the lack of intent demonstrated by the political actors concerned at the time, and it could also be said that they used Article 370 merely as a ‘tunnel in the wall’, to increase the union’s domain within the Kashmiri state by carefully eroding the Article of its contents, leaving nothing but an empty shell, bereft of the rights it had purported to give. When India abrogated Article 370 nearly two years ago, it did so unilaterally. The UN said quite vociferously that the restrictions imposed on Kashmir by India were deeply concerning and “will exacerbate the human rights situation”. A UN spokesperson highlighted a telecommunications ban, the arbitrary detention of leaders and a ban on political assembly, when Article 370 had initially been abrogated. The region had been put under lockdown well before anyone knew what Covid-19 lockdowns even meant, and all communication had been cut off.

India’s controversial decision to revoke Jammu and Kashmir’s special constitutional status came at the expense of human rights and an entire populations’ right to live freely and without the threat of persecution and violence. What is far worse is that this situation still prevails.

The health advisory issued for the Amarnath pilgrimage makes no mention of the virus, or how pilgrims should behave in view of the accelerating second wave of the pandemic. This is extremely problematic

Against the deadly backdrop of a raging pandemic, which India has well and truly suffered the catastrophic brunt of, we see their government continuing on a reckless and destructive path.

The local government in IOK was contemplating setting up makeshift shelters and facilities for 600,000 Hindu pilgrims back in April of this year, for the annual Amarnath pilgrimage which it intends to host this summer despite the ongoing Covid threat. The pilgrims will visit the Amarnath cave shrine, perched 3,880-meters (12,730 feet) above sea level in the Himalayas.

The authorities had temporarily suspended online registration for the pilgrimage in the wake of India’s spike in daily coronavirus cases. However, the site still says that the pilgrimage will take place as scheduled from June 28 through to August 22. Over the last few months, thousands of devotees, including nine top saints, tested positive for COVID-19 in the northern city of Haridwar, where hundreds of thousands of devotees gathered to participate in the Kumbh Mela festival. “The situation is bad across India. It would be better if the Amarnath pilgrimage was symbolic this year, and if just a few people were allowed to visit the shrine. Otherwise, it will be a catastrophe,” Tanvir Sadiq, a senior leader of Kashmir’s grand old political party, National Conference, went on record as saying. He also pointed out how the event could prove to be a “fatal super-spreader”, especially considering that the region’s healthcare system is ill-equipped to meet the challenge.

Kashmir has meagre healthcare facilities, with just 2,599 COVID beds, including 324 intensive care unit beds, for a population of 13 million. At least 1,220 of those beds are already occupied. India also seems to be weaponising Covid-19 to erase more Kashmiris by employing inexplicable strategies during this time. Since May 6, India has forbidden Kashmiri NGOs from accessing life-saving oxygen. Instead, this is only reserved for the Indian Army and specific hospitals. Since April 30, vaccination supplies have been halted in Kashmir. This blatant discrimination against the Kashmiris spells doom.

The health advisory issued for the Amarnath pilgrimage makes no mention of the virus, or how pilgrims should behave in view of the accelerating second wave of the pandemic. This is extremely problematic. “It can prove fatal both to pilgrims as well as locals, because oxygen levels are low at high altitudes, and this disease mainly targets our respiratory system. It can prove to be a super-spreading event and overwhelm our poor health care system. The government should behave responsibly and call off the pilgrimages,” Sheikh Ghulam Rasool, a prominent social activist, has said.

On June 3, the Indian Army chief General MM Naravane said: “We are ready for the Amarnath Yatra. We have taken all the necessary steps although the final decision to hold the Yatra lies with the civil administration.” Regarding COVID-19, he said the entire establishment was now better prepared to tackle a third wave which may or may not happen.

Critics have said the annual Amarnath pilgrimage could lead to a devastating wave of the coronavirus in India-Occupied Kashmir. Then again, critics have been saying a lot. The question is: does the government of India even care?

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