

A Year under Forcible 'Lockdown': Women in Kashmir -

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On the 5th of August, 2019, the BJP Govt. dealt a tremendous blow to democracy in our country. It used its brute majority in the Parliament to strike at the rights of the citizens of Jammu & Kashmir by doing away with Article 370 and dividing the State into two Union territories – Jammu and Kashmir and Ladakh.

No attempt was made to give the people of the region an opportunity to voice their opinion on these vital issues.

On the contrary, not only were they subjected to the most humiliating and violent attacks on their fundamental rights, but they were gagged by the imposition of Sec. 144 and curfew, by their phone and internet connections being cut off, gagged by barbed wire, guns and tanks that blocked their efforts to raise their voices in protest.

All the important political leaders of the State were arrested and, in a few days, more than 4,000 people were in jail. The jails in the State were overflowing and arrested persons were sent to jails in far-off Uttar Pradesh and other States.

A year has passed.

The Modi Government has had time enough to fulfil the promises it made to the people of J&K and the rest of the country on the 5th of August to justify the authoritarian and communal attacks that were carried out on that day.

A promise was made that gender justice and social equality would now be ensured; that economic development would take place at a tremendous speed; that terrorism and militancy would be completely wiped out and peace restored in this land of natural beauty and cultural diversity; that once Article 370, the root cause of alienation and separatism had been done away with, the region would become part of the national mainstream.

It had been proclaimed that women would no longer have to forego their property rights if they married outside the state. Even apart from the fact that this last right was won by Kashmiri women years ago quite contrary to BJP propaganda, the promise of gender justice in general has proved to be the most hollow of all.

Moreover, nothing has been done to resettle Kashmiri Pandits in the Valley and their families too, including women and children, are still living in camps. Kashmiri women have suffered untold misery during the decades of conflict and violence.

Hunger, deprivation and the never-ending loss of loved ones have robbed them of both health and happiness. After the 5th of August new troubles were added to the festering old ones

One of the first steps taken by the new dispensation was to abolish the State Women's Commission on the plea that it had been constituted under a legal framework that no longer existed.

In that case, why did the new legal framework that replaced the old one – the legal framework that exists in the whole country now – not constitute a new Commission?

Advocate Vasundhara Masudi Pathak, the erstwhile Chairperson of the Commission, has said that after the abolition of the State Women's Commission, she is being approached night and day by women in distress.

This was not the case when the Commission was functioning. According to her, not only are women threatened, harassed and subjected to abuse outside their homes where they have to confront security forces at every step, but they are at the complete mercy of violent members of their own families being largely confined to their homes.

There is only one Women's police station in the Valley. Police personnel are not trained to deal with their problems and react only if women have been badly injured.

Going to the hospital was extremely difficult during the earlier lockdown and, during the Corona Pandemic most OPDs have been closed down.

There is not a single shelter home available to them and courts are completely inaccessible. Apart from the violence that they themselves endure, they have to bear witness to the brutality and violence that the State unleashes on their children and their family members.

It has been accepted before the Supreme Court that children have been arrested in Kashmir.

It is horrifying that the response of the judges 9 hearing the matter was that this was not something to worry about because they were only being kept confined for a few hours and that this was being done to help them because of the insecurity of the situation.

Many of the sons and family members of the women have been sent to jails in other States. These are poor women having to struggle to find money for travel.

Often, on reaching those far off jails they are told to speak in Hindi to their loved one, but being poor and poorly educated, knowing no language other than Kashmiri, they have to return without having exchanged a word.

Many are even less fortunate and are compelled to witness the deaths of their family members in 'encounters' or in crossfire. As a result, women, even more than men in similar situations, are succumbing in increasing numbers to stress and depression.

As doctors point out 'Conflict can add to all three factors [poverty, gender inequality and domestic violence] which in turn can add to depression'.

'Even men vent the stress generated through conflict situations on women back home.

It takes a further mental toll on women.' While from 5th August, telephone lines and internet connections were cut off in the Valley so that no screams of help could be heard, in Jammu and Ladakh too, communication systems were highly erratic.

After sometime, landline phone connections were partially restored, but internet connections remained largely unavailable to the public for the next six months.

The nearest internet connectivity was in Ladakh, 500 kms away. There are instances of people who made more than one trip to send and receive an urgent message.

After 11th 10 November, the train to Banihal, the nearest point in Jammu, 70 miles away, was re-started.

It left Srinagar every morning at 8.15 when it was bitterly cold and dark with mist and fog. Crowds surged at the platform every morning and the compartments were packed with many left standing.

The same thing occurred when the train returned to Srinagar late in the evening.

There is a report about a young woman who travelled twice in two days just to register for her medical entrance examination. When her form was finally accepted by the computer, she broke down, weeping.

*** After six long months, internet connection was restored but only with 2G.

The Government claims that 4G will encourage conversations between terrorists and their handlers abroad. The absurdity of the argument makes the harsh reality even more difficult to accept.

Businesses have come to an end because connections with buyers have snapped; certificates cannot be accessed in time; doctors cannot consult with specialists and are forced to watch their patients die;

successful performers, consultants, musicians have been forced into bankruptcy. Immediately after 5th August, schools and educational institutions were closed down. After weeks, when they re-opened, neither students nor teachers could reach them.

There was no transport available, the streets were dangerous. In the absence of the internet, no digital classes could be held or accessed.

Even after restoration, internet connection is so disturbed that even those fortunate enough to own smartphones and laptops are still not able to attend classes and the teachers who are supposed to upload lessons and videos are unable to do this.

As a result, not only are there no classes but there is no hope either, only rage and despair. Lack of access to education is creating severe psychological problems for many young students who are becoming prone to both aggression and depression.

The likelihood of drop-outs is high, especially among girls. With economic loss of more than 40,000 crore rupees, business and industry are floundering, the fruit industry has suffered terribly and tourism is at a standstill.

As a result, unemployment has increased. With the passage of the Domicile Laws which give access to citizenship to different categories of people from outside and

with the ending of the special citizenship rights which gave the people of the area exclusive rights to ownership of property and Government jobs, there is a growing fear that poverty and unemployment among the local population will increase by leaps and bounds.

Recruitment procedures to banks and Government jobs that had almost been completed before 5th August, 2019 have been stalled.

It seems likely that those recruited next time around will include many from outside the region. The experience of the last year has proved that it was not the existence of Article 370 that had spawned militancy and separatism.

After removal of the Article, 11 militant activity and militant attacks have increased. 'A fact sheet from the Home Ministry shows that in the first seven months of this year, 90 locals have joined various terror groups...

What is causing further concern is that the numbers might be more than expected'. Earlier, security forces were informed by the family or neighbours or even social media posts if a young man went missing and joined the terrorists. '

*** But now no posts are going online nor are families coming forward,' said a senior officer in charge of operations. More than 90% of those who are being killed in encounter as terrorists are Kashmiri locals.

Officials have said... 'Anger is palpable in Kashmir Valley. That is why no matter how many terrorists are killed, their number doesn't come down'.

A North Block official said. 'Youth related activities have come to a halt due to Covid. Schools and colleges are closed'.

***'Destroyed internet connectivity and lack of recreation have led to lot of bitterness,' said another officer, adding that scarce employment opportunities are adding to the resentment.

A year of betrayal has gone by, a year of broken promises has passed, bringing many of us this realization that democracy and citizenship rights are indivisible.

*** An attack on some will, sooner or later, develop into an attack on all.