



Exploring the challenges on higher education during the covid-19 pandemic in Kashmir

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Abstract

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic has brought unprecedented disruptions to the education sector worldwide. In Kashmir, a region already grappling with socio-political complexities, the abrogation of Article 370 and Covid-19 pandemic further exacerbated the existing issues and added new obstacles to the higher education landscape. Thus, this study intended to comprehensively explore the challenges brought about by COVID-19 pandemic on higher education in Kashmir by reviewing the existing literature. Through a thorough review of secondary data, six key themes emerged. These themes revealed that higher education system in Kashmir faced several challenges, including a double lockdown, limited internet access, and insufficient resources. Despite these obstacles, virtual learning served as a supplementary approach to traditional methods, highlighting the resilience and adaptation of students in Kashmir. These factors emphasize the significance of addressing these obstacles to ensure equal education and well-being in the region.

Key Words: Covid-19, Higher Education, Online Learning, Conflict, Kashmir

Introduction

The COVID-19 global pandemic has had far-reaching effects on societies worldwide, including public health, food systems, and the labour market (Onyeaka et al., 2021). This crisis has also led to extended periods of temporary closure for schools and higher education institutions, affecting a staggering 1.5 billion learners globally (Jain, 2020). This closure has stopped formal education activities and quickly switched to online education with the help of virtual classroom platforms (Al Lily et al., 2020; Saxena, 2020). Zoom, Google Classroom and Google Meet platforms, most frequently used worldwide, provide free audio, video, screen sharing, recording, and messaging rights for students and learners in sessions up to hours (Soni, 2020). In higher education, the impact of the pandemic extended beyond teaching, affecting research practices, university operations, and governance, necessitating emergency decisions and flexibility in various areas. However, Zoom, Google Classroom and Google Meet platforms were adopted to sustain the academic culture. It is because higher education institutions play a pivotal role in meeting societal needs through teaching, research, knowledge exchange, and student activities (Farnell, 2020). They are also expected to contribute to achieving sustainable development goals outlined in the UN 2030 Agenda.

Additionally, numerous factors influenced the teaching and learning process via virtual platforms during the pandemic, such as inadequate internet connections, slow internet speeds, expenses related to reliable internet access, and a lack of necessary equipment. These challenges were faced by both educators and learners,

highlighting the limitations of online infrastructure in supporting teaching and learning across higher education institutions. A World Bank (2020a) report highlighted that not all teachers were prepared for the sudden transition to remote teaching due to insufficient skills and training in this area, as well as a lack of available online learning materials. Furthermore, online learning did not always facilitate advanced teaching methods, such as group work, discussions, or interactive projects, which could hinder the development of students' soft skills (World Bank, 2020b).

Additionally, there was a tendency to focus on delivering cognitive skills at the expense of socio-emotional skills. A significant number of students reported negative impacts on their academic performance. Numerous challenges were also observed in Jammu and Kashmir, where education from primary to higher level got disturbed and impacted students and teachers emotionally, psychologically and academically.

Review of Literature

Resch et al. (2023) examined the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the social integration and Academic integration of tertiary-level scholars, utilizing Tinto integration theory as a framework. Amidst the epoch of remote learning, a group of six hundred and forty scholars from a university in Austria were subjected to an online survey that centered on their academic and social integration. The results indicate a significant decrease in social and academic integration during the initial stage of the 2020 lockdown. It has been observed that there is a direct and positive correlation between the extent of perceived support that is encountered during the home-based learning process and the degree of social as well as academic integration that is achieved. The results of this study hold noteworthy ramifications for future periods of remote learning, highlighting how academic establishments can take proactive measures to prepare themselves for prolonged absences and leverage student integration.

Dar and Sakhtivel (2022) conducted a study focusing on the virtual learning environment among students at Kashmir University during the COVID-19 pandemic. The study found that virtual learning was extensively utilized by the students during this period. The implementation of virtual learning had both positive and negative impacts on the student community. The researchers noted that technological innovations in virtual learning proved beneficial for students during times of crisis. Most of the participants agreed that virtual learning served as a supplementary method to traditional learning, boosting their self-esteem and motivation. However, it is important to acknowledge that while virtual learning materials have the potential to transform the learning process, they cannot replace the role of a qualified instructor. To overcome these challenges, significant investments in education are necessary. It is crucial that decisive and effective actions are taken to address the issues raised in the study.

Pain et al. (2022) conducted a study that involved qualitative interviews with journalism graduate students and professors from Kashmir, India. The research revealed that, unlike other parts of the country, the region experienced a significant lack of internet connectivity, which led to a nearly complete halt in classes. Despite the challenges posed by limited access to technology and the disruptions caused by the pandemic, both students and educators in the area embraced the situation as an opportunity to engage in the form of journalism deeply connected to the local community. Through the establishment of "circles of trust," these individuals were able to overcome various technical barriers, including those related to the Internet. The study explored the implications of restricted connectivity and insufficient technological resources on journalism education.

Shah et al. (2022) explored the response of Open and Distance Learning (ODL) to the Covid-19 pandemic in Kashmir Valley, explicitly focusing on the experiences of students and teachers. The study involved 11 participants from the Directorate of Distance Education, University of Kashmir, and employed a qualitative approach. Data were collected through a semi-structured questionnaire and document analysis, and thematic analysis was used for data interpretation. The findings highlighted the significant role played by the Directorate of Distance Education in facilitating higher education in Kashmir through digital and online platforms, despite limited access to high-speed Internet. Participants predominantly utilized platforms such as Google Meet, Google Form, Zoom, and WhatsApp for virtual learning due to their ease of access and effectiveness. However, the study also revealed challenges such as participants' lack of seriousness, interest, and attention towards virtual teaching and learning during the Covid-19 pandemic, possibly due to their unfamiliarity with this mode of education.

Bashir (2021) conducted a study to examine college students' perceptions of online learning during the Covid-19 pandemic. The research involved an online survey administered to 200 students enrolled in a government degree college in Pulwama, Jammu and Kashmir. The findings revealed that while students expressed satisfaction with online learning and recognized its advantages during the pandemic, they still preferred traditional face-to-face instruction. The main obstacles identified in online learning were technical difficulties and inadequate communication between teachers and students. The study concluded that online learning can be beneficial as a supplementary approach to traditional methods; however, challenges arise from technical limitations and the absence of physical interaction.

Connah (2021) discusses the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the already fragile situation in Kashmir. This study provides a historical background of the Kashmir conflict and the revocation of Article 370, which granted special status to the region. The study involved through interviews with local Kashmiris revealing the challenges faced by Kashmiris, such as the lack of internet access, school closures, limited access to healthcare, and economic hardships due to the conflict situations. The pandemic has further exacerbated the situation for them, creating a "double lockdown" for Kashmiris.

Nadaf (2021) explored the challenges faced by students and teachers in Kashmir during the COVID-19 pandemic. The region's political instability and conflicts between India and Pakistan led to revoking its autonomous status in 2019. This resulted in a prolonged curfew, communication network suspensions, and a digital curfew that disconnected students and teachers. When a nationwide lockdown was implemented in March 2020, the education system shifted to online teaching. However, Kashmiri students already faced a six-month lockdown and communication blockade, compounded by limited 2G internet connectivity. This "digital redlining" deprived them of crucial resources due to discriminatory technical policies. Internet limitations significantly impacted higher education and research, impeding scholars' access to materials and peer communication. As a journalism teacher, the author encountered difficulties such as poor video quality and communication issues. Students also

faced disadvantages in national-level exams due to limited access to online resources. The absence of high-speed Internet in the region hindered e-learning, denying equal educational opportunities and violating human rights while disregarding net neutrality.

Bhat (2020) in his study, attempted to evaluate the education situation in the valley and the resulting effects of the violence there, particularly the position after the repeal of Article 370 and the COVID-19 scenario. The situation is unusual because, everywhere else, the public received a single blow from COVID-19, but the effects of the state closure on August 5, 2019, were unprecedented. Educational institutions remained closed and inactive for months. This study attempted to provide a thorough understanding of the impact of the 'double-lockdown' on education in Kashmir to assess the impact of the State's decision in 2019 and COVID-19 in 2020. The study concludes that educational deformations are antithetical to children's psycho-social, mental, and cognitive growth and learning and that finding ways to give children a healthy and stable educational experience is crucial, especially during times of tension.

Dar and Deb (2020) examined the psychological effects of armed conflict on Kashmiri youth. The qualitative study employed a semi-structured questionnaire that was completed by 680 undergraduate and graduate students. The questionnaire covered demographics, Kashmir conflict perception, and its effects on mental, physical, and educational health. 99.7% of individuals reported conflict exposure and 95.4% psychological suffering. 60.3% experienced physical illness, while 91.2% saw a detrimental influence on others' mental health. The Kashmir conflict significantly impacted 99.3% of participants' education. Given the possible adverse effects of conflict exposure, psychological support services for traumatised Kashmiris should be strengthened.

Gul and Bhat (2020), in their study, highlighted the efforts of the education sector and educators to address the challenges brought about by the pandemic in higher education. The study examined how students can continue their learning journey despite the shift to digital platforms in educational institutions. Additionally, the study explored the strategies required to overcome the obstacles encountered in the higher education sector due to the pandemic. Data for the study was collected from secondary sources and analysed using content analysis. The findings revealed that a mere 10% of college students possess the necessary technological resources, such as smartphones, laptops, and reliable high-speed Internet, to effectively utilize technology for their education.

Hajam et al. (2020), analyzed the challenges of digital education initiatives in Jammu & Kashmir, especially so in light of the Covid-19 lockdown, which resulted in the closure of educational institutions worldwide and necessitated the investigation of new learning methods. The study analyzed data from secondary sources viz research journals, published books, government websites, archives and newspapers. The study found various challenges of digital education initiatives in Jammu and Kashmir, such as inadequate ICT infrastructure, rampant illiteracy, poverty, Sub-optimal digital literacy, insufficient multilingual e-content, personal privacy issues, data/cyber security threats, inadequate internet services in J&K.

Hassan (2020), in her study, focused on the influence of the conflict situation on the education of young individuals in Kashmir, encompassing several degree colleges across six districts in the Kashmir province. The research employed questionnaire and interview methods to gather data from a sample size of 600 participants, selected through stratified random sampling. The study aimed to assess the extent of educational disruptions caused by the conflict. The findings indicated that due to frequent strikes and curfews, a significant 83% of respondents missed classes in their colleges, while 68% reported a decline in the quality and effectiveness of education. Furthermore, the study's statistics revealed that a substantial 82% of students expressed concern that their education may not contribute to their future job prospects.

Mukherjee (2020) discusses the impact of India's nationwide lockdown, implemented in March 2020, as a response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The study highlights the devastating economic consequences of the lockdown, particularly for vulnerable populations living at or below the poverty line, such as labourers, vendors, and daily wage earners. These individuals faced significant job losses, exacerbating their already precarious financial situations. In addition to the economic fallout, the lockdown also had detrimental effects on mental health. The study highlights increased anxiety, depression, substance use, and other psychological manifestations due to the pandemic and the ensuing restrictions. Furthermore, the pandemic has led to discrimination against religious minorities and lower castes, exacerbating existing social inequalities. This study emphasizes the importance of upholding diversity and plurality in society, calling for an unwavering commitment to empathy and kindness. The study also stresses the need for governments to provide low-cost mental health services and unconditional economic support to those in need. Such measures are crucial for mitigating the adverse effects of the pandemic and promoting the well-being of marginalized communities.

Wani (2020), in his study, examines the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent lockdown measures in the region of Kashmir. The study highlights that the people of Kashmir were already accustomed to prolonged periods of lockdown due to political reasons. However, the COVID-19 lockdown presented a unique situation as it was not politically motivated. The study notes that the lockdown in Kashmir was preceded by significant political changes. In August 2019, the Indian government revoked Article 370, which granted autonomy to the region, and divided the state of Jammu and Kashmir into two union territories. These political developments were followed by restrictions on movement and communication. When the first case of COVID-19 was detected in Kashmir, the government initially eased some of the restrictions. However, they swiftly re-imposed the lockdown with new regulations. The findings suggest that the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the challenges faced by Kashmir, particularly in terms of healthcare infrastructure and preparedness. The study emphasizes the need for enhanced medical resources, including personnel and equipment, to effectively manage the pandemic and mitigate the risk of community spread in the region.

Toquero and Mae (2020), in this study, presented an analysis of the impact of COVID-19 on higher education and proposed strategies for addressing future challenges. The present study advocated for educational institutions to undertake research endeavours aimed at

disseminating and recording the ramifications of the pandemic on the educational system. In the context of educational institutions in the Philippines, there exist formidable challenges in the areas of planning, implementation, and assessment. Furthermore, it is imperative for educational establishments to fortify their curriculum practices and enhance their responsiveness to the educational requirements of their pupils, extending beyond the traditional classroom setting.

Context and contribution of the study

The education system of Kashmir spans from primary to higher education. Primary education focuses on foundational skills, while secondary education offers diverse subjects. The region's universities and colleges provide undergraduate, postgraduate and doctoral programs across disciplines. The emphasis on quality education has led to a range of educational institutions, including vocational and technical programs. The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 brought unprecedented challenges to the global education sector, including higher education institutions. In Kashmir, a region already grappling with socio-political complexities, the abrogation of Article 370 and Covid-19 pandemic further exacerbated the existing issues and added new obstacles to the higher education landscape (Connah, 2021). Between December 2019 and February 2020, the region of Jammu and Kashmir had limited network connectivity at 2G speed, which only allowed access to a restricted list of websites excluding social media platforms. However, on March 4, 2020, access to social media applications was restored along with the 2G network. It was not until February 6, 2021, after a period of 17 months, that 4G services were finally reinstated in Jammu and Kashmir (Kotwal, et al., 2022). Kashmir faced a distinct situation due to the absence of internet connectivity, making online education very difficult for students. Upon reviewing the existing literature (e.g., Bashir, 2021; Dar & Sakhtivel, 2022; Dar & Deb, 2020; Nadaf, 2021; Pain et al., 2022; Resch et al., 2023; Shah et al., 2022) it was observed that no study has been conducted that presents a consolidated picture of challenges faced by higher education system in Kashmir during the COVID-19 pandemic. While some studies have examined the impact of conflict on education and the difficulties associated with online learning during the pandemic, there remains a lack of comprehensive research specifically investigating the compounded challenges of conflict, political circumstances, and the COVID-19 pandemic on higher education in Kashmir. Thus, this study intends to bridge this gap.

Objective of the study

- To analyze the challenges faced by higher education in Kashmir during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Methodology

The study is based on systematic review of literature. Literature reviews make up a distinct research design allowing the researcher to draw robust and broad conclusions by producing an unbiased summary of what the cumulative evidence says on a particular topic (Baumeister, 2013). There are two types of systematic review of literature: Narrative and Meta-synthesis (Siddaway et al., 2019). The type of literature review used by the researcher is Meta-synthesis. The aim of a meta-synthesis is to synthesize qualitative studies on a topic in or

to locate key themes, concepts, or theories that provide novel or more powerful explanations for the phenomenon under review (Thorne et al., 2004).

The researcher extensively searched four databases (Google Scholar, ProQuest, Scopus, and JSTOR) to fulfill the objective of this study. The searches focused only on studies relevant to online education in Kashmir during Covid-19. The search terms employed included Covid- 19, coronavirus, online learning, Kashmir, and higher education. Furthermore, the researcher used the reference lists of the selected papers to identify relevant studies. To ensure the selection of the most relevant articles for the final review, the researcher established criteria for inclusion. Studies were considered eligible for inclusion if they addressed higher education in Kashmir during the Covid-19 pandemic.

A total of 39 articles were gathered from the database. Among the 39 articles, only 15 were chosen for the final review. Only articles that were accessible in their entirety were considered for the final review.

Results of the study

The results of this study are based on the review of chosen studies. Hence, the results of this literature review are categorized into the following themes:

Double Lockdown:

The revocation of Jammu and Kashmir's special status on August 5, 2019, resulted in extensive security measures and communication restrictions that persisted for months. The combination of the COVID-19 pandemic and the corresponding containment measures effectively imposed a double lockdown on the residents of Jammu and Kashmir (The Week, 2020). Educational institutions remained closed and inactive for a very long period. The impact of the state closure in 2019 in Kashmir, followed by the educational disruptions caused by the pandemic, has had unparalleled consequences for students in the region (Bhat, 2020). The conflict situation in Kashmir has posed significant educational challenges for young students, characterized by frequent strikes and curfews (Hassan, 2020). The armed conflict has resulted in immense psychological suffering among Kashmiri youth, with their education being adversely affected as well (Dar & Deb, 2020). The limited internet access and the region's political instability have presented substantial challenges for both students and teachers (Nadaf, 2021).

Inaccessibility to Internet

The transition from traditional face-to-face learning to online teaching and learning requires a reliable and fast internet connection. This transition was particularly relevant during the challenging period caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, leading many higher education institutions to adopt online learning platforms as a replacement for traditional in-person teaching methods. This shift enabled them to ensure the uninterrupted continuation of education despite the difficult circumstances (Mseleku, 2020). However, in contrast to the rest of India, the region of Kashmir faced a notable deficiency in internet connectivity (Painet al., 2022). A digital curfew was put in the region post political changes in August, 2019 that disconnected students and teachers for 6 months. The absence of high- speed internet in the region hindered e-learning thus denying equal educational opportunities (Nadaf, 2021).

Psychological and Social Effects: The literature highlights the manifestation of mental health issues resulting from the Covid-19 pandemic and the sudden transition to online learning. Students experienced heightened levels of anxiety, depression, and substance use as a consequence of the pandemic and related restrictions (Mukherjee, 2020). The education of Kashmiri students was profoundly impacted by the on-going Kashmir conflict, which was further disrupted by the Covid-19 lockdown (Dar and Deb, 2020). Numerous studies underscored the psychological and social ramifications faced by students in Kashmir due to conflicts, violence, and the Covid-19 pandemic. These consequences encompassed psychological distress, diminished mental well-being, challenges in social integration, and apprehension regarding future job prospects (Dar & Deb, 2020; Mukherjee, 2020; Wani, 2020).

Need for Support and Resources: The insufficient availability of resources supporting the process of online teaching and learning posed a significant concern for both educators and students. The studies underscore the need for support and resources to overcome the challenges faced by students and educators in Kashmir. Given the potential detrimental consequences of conflict, it is crucial to enhance the provision of psychological support services for traumatized individuals from Kashmir (Dar and Deb, 2020). There is a need to find ways to give students a healthy and stable educational experience and significant investments in education are necessary to overcome these challenges (Bhat, 2020; Bashir, 2021). It is crucial to supply the essential technological resources required to fully leverage technology for the education of students in Kashmir (Gul and Bhat, 2020). Additionally, studies also emphasize the need for governments to provide low-cost mental health services and unrestricted financial assistance to those in need. Such measures are essential for mitigating the pandemic's negative effects and fostering the welfare of marginalized communities (Mukherjee, 2020).

Challenges to Online Learning: Transitioning from conventional to online learning, especially with limited 2G internet connectivity, presented the most significant obstacle for both educators and students in Kashmir (Nadaf, 2021). Difficulties arose in the form of participants' lack of commitment, engagement, and focus in virtual teaching and learning, as well as their unfamiliarity with the online mode of learning (Shah et al., 2022). Online learning had to face several challenges that included insufficient ICT infrastructure, poverty, limited digital literacy, inadequate availability of multilingual e-content, concerns regarding personal privacy, risks of data/cyber security breaches, and inadequate internet services in the region (Hajam et al., 2020).

Adaptation and Resilience: Despite the challenges, virtual learning was extensively utilised by the students during the lockdown as a supplementary method to traditional learning (Dar & Sakhtivel, 2022). In spite of the limitations posed by restricted access to high-speed internet, higher education in the region was successfully carried out through digital and online platforms. Participants primarily relied on platforms like Google Meet, Google Form, Zoom, and WhatsApp for virtual learning due to their convenience and effectiveness (Shah et al., 2022). While students acknowledged the advantages of online learning during the pandemic, they expressed satisfaction with it primarily as a supplementary approach to traditional methods (Bashir, 2021).

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic has profoundly impacted higher education in Kashmir, exacerbating existing challenges. The closure of educational institutions, limited technology access, and psychological effects on students have disrupted the learning process. Implementing digital education initiatives has been hindered by infrastructure limitations and privacy concerns. Support and resources, including technology and mental health services, are crucial to address these challenges. The socio-economic impact on marginalized communities underscores the need for government intervention. Despite the difficulties, students and educators have shown adaptability and resilience, utilizing alternative learning methods and digital platforms. This research contributes to understanding the unique

challenges faced by higher education system in Kashmir during the pandemic and emphasizes the importance of tailored interventions to support students and educators. Investment in technology, internet infrastructure, and mental health support is essential. Mitigating the adverse effects of the pandemic requires comprehensive measures, fostering resilience and inclusive educational practices.

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