

Education under Surveillance in Kashmir in the Era of COVID-19

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Summary

This article focuses on how the COVID-19 lockdown intersects with academic freedom in the disputed Himalayan territory of Jammu and Kashmir. The Bhartiya Janata Party, the ruling right-wing party of India, has used COVID-19 to actively isolate Kashmir curtailing educational rights and opportunities. Punitive internet blockades and the state's surveillance technologies associated with prolonged military occupation affect educational access.

Keywords

Kashmir
Academic Freedom
Education in India
COVID-19
Kashmiri Muslims.

*Tormented by tyranny I chant, my beloved land!
I shed tears consumed, I chant, my beloved land!*
- Madhosh Balhami

The COVID-19 pandemic has paved the way for a global rise in state surveillance, which curbs domestic political challenges, blocks reports of abuse and restricts collective action (Eck & Hatz, 2020). In what follows, we explore how India has used the pandemic to broaden powers of surveillance in Kashmir and how this affects educational access and academic freedom. Although India's battle with academic freedom is longstanding, there has been an alarming change in the educational landscape since 2014, when the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) came to power. Since that date, according to the "Academic Freedom in India: A Status Report, 2020" (Sunder & Fazili, 2020), the freedom to pursue research, teach, speak and publish without interference or reprisal by the state and non-state actors have [increasingly come under pressure](#). Instances have multiplied of subjugation of students and academics for voicing dissent at state policies or societal norms. This repression affects their right to education, freedom of opinion and expression, freedom of association, and freedom of movement. There has been a sharp rise in the incarceration of students and young researchers, and heavy-handed suppression of academic activities critical of the ruling party (Amnesty International, 2020).

The issue of academic freedom is more pronounced in the state of Jammu and Kashmir than in the rest of India. Here COVID-19 has intersected with prolonged military occupation, punitive internet blockades and the lockdown, affecting the lives of thousands of Kashmiri students.

Militarisation, education and surveillance

The pandemic in Kashmir is being treated as [a law and order problem, rather than a public health concern](#) (Saraf & Sharma, 2020; Sharma, 2020). Tariq Mir (2020), a freelance journalist based in Kashmir, notes that in the pandemic lockdown "India

has spotted an opportunity for another round of repression against the population of Kashmir, which had already been reeling from the harsh aftereffects of last year's six-month long military lockdown." The government has dug arterial roads, raised barricades, sealed shops, increased troops, and has violated civilians and essential service providers, which has amplified a feeling of confinement. In this sense, the heavy military presence in Kashmir serves as an "all-seeing" panopticon (Foucault, 1995).

Following the abrogation of the constitutional provision for Kashmir in [August 2019](#), the Indian state deployed a large contingent of troops to suppress dissent and political representations from the people. The government has incarcerated many students and academics under anti-terror legislation for protesting draconian citizenship laws and extractive land acquisition statutes. The state had ordered a prolonged closure of schools and colleges and an internet blockade weeks before the COVID-19 lockdown in March 2020.

Education in Kashmir has long been a site of state-led violence as military and paramilitary troops frequently occupy campuses to curb demands for autonomy (Nooranani, 2007). Young people in Kashmir have found themselves the prime suspects and targets of the Indian state's policy of "[catch and kill](#)" for decades, leading to arbitrary detentions, torture and life-threatening injuries (Sunder & Fazili, 2020). Students and staff regularly face physical intimidation and violence from the military. Students are frisked, harassed and questioned at military checkpoints daily. Sometimes it takes hours for students and staff to pass through these checkpoints.

The military interferes in the academic and intellectual processes of the university. Since 1990, army and police personnel have served as governors of the universities in Kashmir. Those in power have shown more interest in imposing an "intelligence wing" on the campus "[to spy on 'erring' teachers, scholars and students](#)" rather than ensuring academic freedom (Nooranani, 2007). University teachers and students have been warned against speaking to the press. Students and staff have been subject to harsh discipline for organising film screenings, debates and public lectures on Kashmir as these are decried as "anti-national" activities by the state. In Hannah Arendt's (1968, p. 239) words, the government is "at war with truth in all its forms", wherein a commitment even to telling the truth is considered an anti-national attitude. Students are forced [to celebrate Indian Republic Day and perform gestures of loyalty to the nation](#) (Junaid, 2021). Dhillion (2017) argues education is posited by settler-colonial states as the key to social mobility for Indigenous peoples. In the case of Kashmir, participation in education renders them as colonial subjects.

Under the rhetoric of the "special circumstances" of Kashmir, many rights to academic freedom have been denied: the rights of students and teachers to freedom of speech; freedom of association; the right to have a campus newspaper or journal; the right to invite speakers from outside; the right to speak to the media; the right of access to university authorities and the right of protest; the right to hold meetings on campus; and the right to hold elections for student bodies or union of teachers (Anonymous, 2021a). All these rights are denied citing concerns associated with national security.

The consequences of surveillance are multi-layered, which turns education into an [occupied space](#) controlled by state apparatuses. It results in epistemic violence as students and staff self-censor. This depoliticises their teaching and learning. The curriculum, thus, may not have relevance to issues that student experience in their everyday lives regarding, law, politics, media, social science, geography and history. Thus, what is taught may not speak to their perspectives and needs. The curriculum may also not provide resources that enable students to develop capacity and skills to make policies that address their economic, political, environmental and social predicament in Kashmir.

The military control of educational spaces goes together with a broader expansionist grabbing of the land (Anonymous, 2021b). For instance, the expansion of *Sainik* colonies (soldiers' residential estate) has taken place at the expense of Indigenous peoples who have found themselves displaced from their lands. People are forced to stay inside their homes, often with reasons of the pandemic cited, while hundreds of houses have been demolished under the pretext of counter-insurgency operations. Activists have raised the fears of ethnic cleansing in the region. A project of a colonial-settler state has continued unabashedly under the conditions of the pandemic.

The internet shutdown and education

While more privileged parts of the world continued to ensure educational delivery via online technologies under the COVID-19 lockdown, Kashmir experienced punitive internet blockades. The internet was the only viable avenue for thousands of Kashmir students and academics to ensure academic exchange during the COVID-19 lockdown. However, since August 2019, communication has been disrupted to prevent Kashmir students and staff from expressing dissent on social media. Under the pretext of [combating "terror" and "external threats,"](#) the state has frequently blocked access to TV, radio, postal services, press, telephone and mobile and internet services.

The pandemic allowed the Indian state to cloak the abuses of power associated with internet censorship (Mir, 2020). This

was an exercise ensuring that Kashmiris cannot communicate the struggle for autonomy and democracy to a larger global audience. Social media platforms have been **complicit** in censoring the voices of Kashmiris (Zia, 2019). Eventually, a court recognised in a judgement delivered on 1 October 2020 that this was a violation of rights. But implementation of actions to restore internet access was given to the very actors responsible for closing it down in Kashmir. When the internet was restored after months of protests and petitions, Kashmir received only 2G internet speeds and people were only permitted to view a limited number of state-approved websites.

During the pandemic, the Ministry of Higher Education in India issued a **circular** (now withdrawn) directing that all online/virtual international events organised by Indian public universities which relate to India's "national security" must acquire prior approval from the Ministry of External Affairs. This circular explicitly prohibited an international discussion of Jammu and Kashmir as an "internal matter" to further stifle international attention on the issue of Kashmir.

In Kashmir the internet remains heavily disrupted, with severe economic, emotional and academic consequences for Kashmiri scholars and students (Yousouf et al., 2020). This situation has hurt researchers, PhD students and academics who cannot access research publications, submit admission applications, meet publication deadlines or participate in intellectual exchanges. It makes it difficult for students registered in various universities across India, who have returned to Kashmir during the pandemic, to continue their education online, maintain contact with faculty and access online resources.

Conclusion

The example of Kashmir raises the issue of academic freedom during the pandemic. The Indian state has used the pandemic lockdown to incarcerate students and academics critical of the ruling regime, displace people with counter-insurgency operations and shut down access to the internet. Schools, university spaces and colleges remain suspended. Those who resist the army forces are booked under the Public Safety Act.

Habib (this issue) notes the need to rethink global higher education partnerships. Universities based in relatively safer and colonially enriched contexts of the West have privileges that can be used to work with students and academics facing persecution. Kashmiri students and staff do not need international actors to "save" them but to join them in their struggle to live with dignity. Western elite higher educational institutions can assist in many ways: they may amplify voices from Kashmir, galvanise international pressure and educate people in histories of injustices and colonisation, building understanding how these processes continue and are sustained. Global higher education can be innovative in creating new ways to uphold academic life and knowledge threatened by anti-life, anti-democratic and authoritarian regimes.

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