

**Impact of Covid-19 on
Religious Festivals of
Kashmiri Pandits : A
Qualitative Study of District
Srinagar, J&K**

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Abstract

This work is an attempt to study the impact of Covid 19 pandemic on the celebration of religious festivals of the Kashmiri Pandit community. Some commonsense observations on the celebration of festivals during Covid and the dominant discourse are questioned in terms sociology of religion of their appropriateness for the particular community. Observations about the Kashmiri Pandit celebrations, impact due to Covid on these religious celebrations and the uniqueness of these festivals encouraged this study to focus on such a problem and subject. It has been considered that there has been a structural and moral impact on the celebration of these festivals due to the disruptions caused by Covid 19 pandemic. After entertaining these aspects, it was decided to conduct a qualitative inquiry that might respond to this observation in a detailed way. The data for this research was collected from Kashmiri pandits both males and females by applying the face to face structured interview method. After that, the data was analyzed under main themes emphasizing "significance of these festivals", "social gathering and social distance", "religious sentiment and festival spirit and "ritual art". After the analysis, the most influential sociological theories such as the functionalism and lived religion (phenomenology) where introduced in order to understand, the themes from a participant perspective. At the end of the study, it will be concluded that, Corona virus has impacted both the large and small scale festivals and had both individual and group impacts. Lastly, this study shall suggest that future studies should evaluate the impact of Covid 19 on the future of events and celebrations and policy strategy should be adopted, so that the economic losses can be minimized and it may help to create jobs.

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Keywords

Crisis, Covid-19, Festival, Pandits, Srinagar

Introduction

Festivals have occupied an essential place in the event-related literature, but have not earlier been assessed separately. Recently, social scientists within and outside the traditional disciplines have been probing festivals with regard to an increasing variety of issues: their roles in establishing place and group identity; the social and cultural impacts of festivals and festival tourism; creation of social and cultural capital through festival production, fostering the arts and preserving traditions; and a variety of personal outcomes from participation in festivals, including learning, acquired social and cultural capital, and healthfulness. The importance and significance of festivals to society and culture has been addressed, as well as the imputed need for festivity, but research on these important issues has been slim. The recent crises of corona virus which hit the world around January 2020 impacted the festivals industry very hard, with that religious and other cultural festivals have also not being celebrated like the normal years. It had a significant impact on the festivals celebration of both individuals and groups. The group has been the enemy in the crises, and celebrating anything happened only with families. In this crises how most large celebrations where muted becomes the important research area and how communities adapted to this new normal for celebration of small scale festivals will also be investigated. Festivals have been defined by Falassi (1987, p.2), in the classical cultural anthropological perspective as “a sacred or profane time of celebration, marked by special observances.” Festivals celebrate community values, ideologies, identity and continuity. Since the last century, scholars from disciplines such as comparative religion, anthropology, sociology, and folklore have concerned themselves with the description, the analysis, and, more recently, the interpretation of festivities. Yet little explicit theoretical effort has been devoted to the nomenclature of festive events or to the definition of the term festival. As a result, the meaning of festival in the social sciences is simply taken from common language, where the term covers a constellation of very different events, sacred and profane, private and public, sanctioning tradition and introducing innovation, proposing nostalgic revivals, providing the expressive means for the survival of the most archaic folk customs, and celebrating the highly speculative and experimental avant-gardes of the elite fine arts (Falass 1987). Getz (2005 p.21), defined them as “themed, public celebrations”. Pieper (1965) believed only religious rituals and celebrations could be called festivals. Festival according to the accepted usage of the term may be defined as an

aggregate of rituals observed mostly in an' astronomically or ordinarily fixed date and time and celebrated with rejoice, splendour and grandeur by on an ethnic group or a social group or a community as a whole. Festivals play an important role in the social life of the people, because it is through these occasions, that the people express their joy and happiness and also gratitude to their creator (Asim).

Religious festivals are a very essential aspect of life and in this work I have chosen the Kashmiri Pandit community as the subject of my research based on the variety of festivals this community celebrates and the complexity of rituals associated. The impact of Corona Virus on these festivals can be understood by the essence of their religious festivals and highlighting the trends that are emerging due to the crises of Covid. This current study proposes to understand the impact of Covid 19 on festivals of Kashmiri Pandit community. In relation to this, social impact both at level of individual and at group level with respect to celebration of religious festivals will be questioned in terms of the sociology of religion.

Rationale

The main rationale behind this study is some of the observations that I have made during the first six months of Covid 19 pandemic vis-a-vis on religious celebrations of various communities especially on Kashmiri Pandit community. Majority of Kashmiri Pandits live outside Kashmir and come to Kashmir especially for the celebration of religious festivals and become a support system of those Kashmiri Pandits which reside in Kashmir and both these groups actively participate in the celebration of these festivals. Any disruption due to an act, human or natural disrupts the celebration of festivals and Covid 19 pandemic was such an act which immensely affected almost every aspect of social life and celebration of religious festivals is one the important aspect which got affected. There are a number of studies which tried to analyse the impact of Covid 19 on religious practices, beliefs, celebrations and religious participation, but none of these have been specifically studying a particular community as generalisations were being made at global level or at nation-state level. There are various festivals in India which are unique to a particular region or regions and there is a need of specific studies which can bring out real time affect of any disruption or specific evolutionary changes which take place in the celebration of the festivals.

Conducting Qualitative Study

In accordance with the motivation given above, this study tends to scrutinize social phenomena with a qualitative understanding. A qualitative inquiry will be maintained in order to get in-depth information regarding experiences of Kashmiri Pandit community in

celebration of their festivals in Covid 19 Pandemic and understand essence of these celebrations in their social and religious life. Face to face interviews which allow the researcher to get in-depth information was used followed by a Questionnaire. To clarify, there are two reasons that have encouraged me to choose more of male participants than female participants for the research sample. Firstly, Kashmiri Pandit population is very small and scattered throughout Kashmir and very few females work outside home like in offices and one to one interaction is hardly possible which could have constituted a difficulty in the interviewing process and might cause female participants to feel discomfort in a one-on-one interaction. It may negatively affect the neutrality of the research. Secondly, majority of the Kashmiri Pandit families particularly women seasonally (November-March) migrate from Kashmir and it becomes difficult to find a large sample of women.

Material and methodology

Kashmiri Pandits comprise approximately less than one percent of the population of Kashmir, making this a very small population (less than 5000 individuals as per 2011 census and in that, district Srinagar has a total population of 1,236,829 out of which Kashmiri Pandits comprise approximately less than one percent). In this qualitative study, snowball sampling technique was employed. Respondents included general population, priests, shopkeepers and people from management bodies, which take care of Mandirs (place of worship of Hindus) were interviewed. The total of 50 people was interviewed and among them 19 were women and 31 were men. All of them were from different areas of Srinagar district. In terms of age, there was a marked split: 12 of the respondents were under the age of 30, and other 38 respondents from 31 to 70 years of age. Most of the respondents were married except five unmarried. Respondents mostly were from middle class background claiming to have a good source of income and also having a good education or well settled businesses. Almost all of respondents said they follow religion closely and it is a source of their identity. These interviews were face to face and structured. Each interviewee was asked the same 15 questions in the same way to allow for comparisons of their responses. The answers were recorded by means of android phone. After concluding the interviews, the audio files were transcribed verbatim (Atkinson & Delamont 2005). The questions that were proposed attempted to analyse a) the validity or significance of religious in the life of Kashmiri pandits through participants point of view. (b) the uniqueness of these festivals and (c) the impact of Corona Virus(Covid 19) pandemic on the celebration of these festivals. After completing interviews and coding the

data, some themes, such as social gathering and social distance, religious and community sentiment, spirit of celebration in Covid times and economic impact of Covid on local populations engaged with this festival industry, the emotional bond, identity etc were considered when coding participants' responses. This attempt was expected to provide a systematic analysis into the participant's responses.

Result and Discussion

This study was divided into four themes

a. Understanding significance of religious festivals during a crises

The first theme in this qualitative inquiry is based on the "significance of religious festivals" from participants' perspectives. It was expected to allow us to get the insights into the significance of religious festivals from the Kashmiri Pandits point-of-view. The question 'What is the importance or significance of festivals?' was proposed to prepare an uncomplicated, sketch-like understanding of festivals among the participants. 39 out of 50 participants answered this question by referring to the importance of rituals associated with these festivals and the kind of unique identity it give to the Kashmiri Pandit community. The festivals link our past with the present and give meaning to the life, along with other religious practices, festivals act as the agents of socialization, nurturing the arts and preserving customs and traditions; and a variety of special outcomes from participation in festivals, including erudition, acquired social and cultural capital, and healthfulness. The others referred to the role of festivals essential for the preservation of religious faith and contended on the fact that festivals help to bridge the gap between families and also within families and act as a force which help to revive the family tradition of act together, serve together and grow together, essential for the stability, unity and common awareness among the followers of this tradition. Indeed these responses refer to the same sentiment of relating the past with the present as mentioned in the various studies conducted on Kashmiri pandits. Thus, it was possible to know about the significance of these festivals from the participant point of view. All festivals apart from their religious and communal connotations have one more thought behind them. That is to unite the people with a thread of oneness and bind the people morally and spiritually, in an attempt to transfer the ethos of a community from one generation to another (Munshi). Celebration of religious festivals among the Kashmiri pandits has to been seen with respect to not only religion, but also as a form of identity celebration post migration. Identity is formed by the interaction between self, others, and society, and builds a bridge between the inside and the outside, the personal and the public worlds (Karlsen, 2007). Due to Covid

19 pandemic, both collective and expressive identity of an individual got troubled. And as these festivals are having both religious and social significance, when any adversity disrupts the celebration of these festivals it disrupts the normal life course along with health and well being of individuals. Carrying forward the traditions of festival celebration is an answer to a great extent, to present day problems of stress, strain and other similar problems. Festivals may contribute to the development of individual and collective identities, strengthen a sense of cohesiveness and belonging to a place, and also make places more visible, thereby increasing their capacity to attract people.

b. Social interaction, Social gathering and Social distance: Understanding the transition

The second aim of this study was to investigate the arguments that social gatherings and social interaction are very essential to celebrate various festivals, but due to Covid 19 pandemic, social distancing was introduced into the all public places. When asked respondents about the importance of social gathering in festivals, 40 out of 50 respondents argued that religious gathering are very essential and in major festivals like the Kheer Bawani Mela, Shivratri, Deepawali, Navratra etc a lot of people gather at one place and not just celebrate the festival with rituals but becomes a means to meet and greet people and do a lot of activities together. And people among themselves share the feelings; share food and other items, express what has happened in their life and a sentiment of Community can be seen. It was observed that due to the social distancing measures, banning of mass gatherings and closing of religious places limited the physical interaction and various community functions which are usually held before or during the festival time could not be held. It limited even the interaction with the immediate neighbours and led to what I call as social siege. But the technology played a very positive role and various activities shifted from physical mode to online mode and virtual communities took birth. These remind one of Dewiyanti and Kusuma's (2012) work, as they pointed out, specific places for worship develop the religious awareness and information about the religion by facilitating believers' being able to gather. In addition to coming together, spiritual satisfaction is another consequence and/or reason for experiencing religion within a group rather than individual practicing. And the aspect of religious celebrations certainly requires the enthusiasm of gathering without them celebrations looked lacking a life as per the participant's point of view.

c. The religious sentiment and the spirit of festival celebration during Covid.

The third important theme that was taken into consideration in this study was the religious sentiment and the spirit of religious celebrations in crises like Covid. Like the rest of India, Kashmir also has diversity of faiths and every religion has religious sentiments associated with it. When the Covid 19 lockdown was imposed, religious worship places where closed and people were asked to pray at home. On being asked about their reaction on closure of religious places and its resultant impact on the religious sentiment, they responded being a well educated community and respecting the law. They were of the opinion that they don't usually pray outside home so it don't made a much impact. Kashmiri pandits don't usually visit Mandirs, they have setup them in their homes itself, and so in this aspect there was not much of an impact. But they also maintained that if we consider its impact from a community perspective, yes it impacted a community sentiment from religious point of view. There were various incidents were religious gathering became the main source of spread of this virus in many places of the world and incidents of religions being targeted for the spread of virus. Religious festivals give a unique identity to the Kashmiri Pandit community because of the uniqueness of these festivals from the rest of India. Some festivals are celebrated a day before from rest of Hindus and some other festivals are celebrated only in Kashmir. Celebrating the festivals brings joy and cheer both at the individual level and at the group level and in a crises like Covid when the whole world is in crises, the spirit of festival celebration has dampen. Also religious festivals are a source of emotional bonding between families and within families. Families and family members get together on these special occasions and these occasions act as glue which bind them together and act as a source for the revival of ties. Celebrating these festivals in crises usually binds community members, but Covid 19 was such crises which has deeply impacted the emotional bonding and restricted the social interaction only to technology. These festivals are the source of collective identity and they bridge the gap between the individual and the large society. For an individual festivals are the occasions which bring joy, relieve stress and strain. They may have other personal outcomes like the subjective well being, positive attitudinal change, education, linking ones present with the past and this way they act as the source of social control and bring stability into the society.

d. Analyzing the impact on ritual art through socio economic perspective

Art finds a crucial place in the celebration of a religious festival. It may be found associated with various forms of art-drawing, painting, modelling, sculpturing (out of stone and or wood) and decoration, floral and otherwise. Artists may be specialists as well as non-specialists. In most of the Kashmiri Pandit celebrations different kinds of items are required to celebrate different festivals and in major festivals like Deepawali, Shivratri , Navratra etc homes are decorated with lights, paintings and flowers etc which create an atmosphere of festival celebration. All these requirements could not be fulfilled to Covid 19 pandemic. When looking for items required either to celebrate or some other social religious functions Kashmiri pandits have to struggle as the stores selling products related to them are hardly found in District Srinagar. In line with this argument when respondents were asked which festivals were most affected due to this pandemic; 17 out of 50 respondents answered this question by saying that we at all did not celebrated the festivals, 13 out of 50 replied that they celebrated all festivals but with a compromise and could not enjoy at all like the normal years. And the camp of other 20 respondents said that though they could not celebrate the festivals but every ritual was followed.

Festivals in India are a source of income for various people involved in different occupations. When these festivals got impacted various people lost their jobs as per various studies conducted. In Kashmir, though a very small number of people are involved with Hindu festival industry, but they are a significant part because without them various kinds of activities are not possible. Among them are the Priests of various Hindu temples. These priests are dependent on the community through a contribution that becomes the salary of these priests. But when lockdown was imposed, salary of these priests reduced considerably and they faced a lot of problems. Along with that when the Mela Kheer Bawani is celebrated a lot of locals set up stalls with flowers and other necessary items especial for different rituals and they earn their income with that. But Covid 19 became a disturbance and these people lost their source of income. It impacted the festival tourism which brings with itself the income for a number of people in Kashmir.

Conclusion

In this study, we tried to analyse the impact of corona Virus (Covid 19) pandemic on the religious festivals of Kashmiri pandits through participant's point of view. The social significance of religious festivals in terms of religious sentiments, social and emotional security, Adjustment between Man, Nature and Society and Identity, Solidarity and belongingness were also analysed through a functional perspective.

Comparing the celebrations before and during Covid through in-depth interviews with the Kashmiri Pandit community both males and females became the central point of interest and it was analysed through a qualitative study. After finishing the interviews, the data was analysed in terms of 4 main themes. Firstly the argument of lived religion in terms of significance of religious celebrations was focused on. As the main finding of this theme, it has been seen that religious festivals are a very important aspect of participant's life. It gives them the sense of a distinct community, helps them to link with their past, give them a sense of belonging to a particular place and have relevance even today. Secondly by using the functional perspective, the concept of social interaction, social gathering and social distance has been analysed. It was found that social interaction with a large number of people gives a sense of commonness among the interacting groups or individuals especially among those societies which are a minority. It was found that as the interaction of Kashmiri pandits is very less but is still significant and due to Covid 19 this interaction shifted from physical mode to online mode, which affected their emotional setting. Festivals are the means which bring people and communities together. In this case social gatherings have been assessed in terms of latent and manifest functions and it was observed that the gathering in festivals not only help the communities to pray at one place but are also a source of solidarity and cohesion of the group. It bridges the gap between the communities, families and among individuals themselves. Linking this to the religious festivals of Kashmiri pandits, it was found they value the religious community gatherings. In this case Mela Kheer Bawani Festival can be cited as an example, which is the source of both religious and communal brotherhood. Our analysis showed that it not only brings various pandits from different parts of India to celebrate at a particular place in Kashmir, but also is a source of communal harmony because Muslims in the neighbourhood make all the arrangements for the festival celebration. On analysing impact due to Covid pandemic we have found that many of the festivals which used to be pride of the group could not take place with gatherings and except essential rituals these festivals were either not celebrated or celebrated at home only. Thirdly we focused on the religious sentiments and spirit of festival celebration in crises like Covid to get first-hand information about participant experiences. Referencing participant views, Covid dampen the spirit of festival celebration, because when on the one hand people are dying and world is in crises, celebrations change their role from being leisure driven, to becoming a helping hand or it created a kind of stagnation in their lives. It was found that majority of the people did not celebrated the festivals and those who celebrated mentioned that

enthusiasm in the celebrations was very low. On the economic front we found that those people who are mostly associated with the festival industry lost their jobs and income. The role of various institutions like the governments, media and management bodies has been found encouraging. It has been found that people were informed about the risks associated and have been told to pray or celebrate at home only. The people were also been encouraged to follow social distancing norms properly in following the procedure for necessary rituals. The role of technology has been found bringing the gap at the time of social distance. The corona virus has impacted all aspects of one's life and religious festivals are one of them.

Corona virus pandemic is the first pandemic of post secular age. Though various studies have indicated that today's generation have various alternative mechanisms other than religious festivals to celebrate. But the essential character of these still remains dominant one. From ages there has been changes taking place in these festivals, but they remained the main source of spiritual growth and now when Covid 19 has changed the way people used to celebrate, it have created a void, which needs to be fulfilled with post Covid reunions. And indeed it seems true that there will be long term affects of the current disruption and how people will adapt to these changes needs further study.

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