

**Attendance of devotees at religious places amid Covid-19: A qualitative study in district Srinagar**

**Journal of Society in Kashmir**

**12(1) 157 - 176**

**ISSN: 2249-667X**

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<http://sociology.uok.edu.in/Files/c2d3b278-4cf7-49a5-9525-af5e352f2900/Journal/79a105ee-618b-45a5-9645-45ed72a228db.pdf>

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**Abstract**

*Covid-19 has affected every aspect of people's daily lives and religion being part of daily life has not remained immune to the impact of Covid-19. With excessive social distancing norms, Covid-19 has restricted the functioning of religious life as well. It has reshaped and restructured the routine religious practices which have affected the emotional and psychological well-being of people, who feel disconnected spiritually due to these changes. This study has tried to explore the impact of Covid-19 on the attendance of devotees at religious places in the district of Srinagar of Kashmir valley. Using a qualitative approach, in-depth case studies have been carried out at religious places of district Srinagar, representative of all major religious faiths present in Srinagar district. The study has tried to gain insight into the impact Covid-19 is having on the religious lives of people and the coping strategies people of different religions are following to overcome this impact. The study found that Covid-19 has drastically impacted the regular attendance of devotees at all religious places of Srinagar and it has impacted people emotionally and psychologically, but people are also making certain coping strategies like increasing charity, praying at homes, online prayer meetings, etc. to overcome and minimize the impact of Covid-19 on their religious life.*

**Keywords**

Covid-19, religion, Kashmir, rituals, impact, prayers, shrines

**Introduction**

Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) is defined as an illness caused by a novel coronavirus now called severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2; formerly called 2019-nCoV), which was first identified amid an outbreak of respiratory illness cases in Wuhan City, Hubei Province, China. It was initially reported to the WHO on

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December 31, 2019. On January 30, 2020, the WHO declared the COVID-19 outbreak a global health emergency. On March 11, 2020, the WHO declared COVID-19 a global pandemic, its first such designation since declaring H1N1 influenza a pandemic in 2009. Illness caused by SARS-CoV-2 was termed COVID-19 by the WHO, the acronym derived from "coronavirus disease 2019." The name was chosen to avoid stigmatizing the virus's origins in terms of populations, geography, or animal associations.

The impact of Covid-19 has been immense. It affected every aspect of human life and society. It disrupted the total social life and these disruptions in turn lead to certain practices which were unheard of ever before. The COVID-19 pandemic has brought sizeable costs for societies across the globe. A pandemic of this size potentially changes our societies for years to come, especially if it impacts our ingrained values and beliefs. This research asks how the COVID-19 crisis impacts one of the deepest roots of human behaviors: Religion. Since the outbreak of the novel Coronavirus (COVID-19) in December 2019, governments have begun implementing various public health interventions to control the spread of the illness. These interventions have impacted billions of people worldwide and often involve large public programs, restrictions on freedom of movement, and government management of critical resources. The coronavirus pandemic developed very rapidly on a global scale. Understandably, it has a very significant impact on the whole social life, including religious life. Religious practices, which have, by their very nature, a community dimension in almost all religions are also changing under the influence of the pandemic. One of the fundamental methods of limiting the spreading out of COVID-19 is social distancing. This means quarantine and a radical change in contacts between people, which goes towards virtualization and online contacts. In most religious communities it is obligatory to attend a religious gathering or religious place like Mosque, Church, Temple, Gurudwara, and so on. Religious attendance is considered fundamental to following one's religion. However, due to the pandemic, this fundamental practice got affected as well. This study revolves around this particular topic of religious attendance during the pandemic and its consequences for society as a whole. Although humanity has lived through the emergence of new diseases and pandemics before, Covid-19 is proving to be different from previous outbreaks of newly identified viral illnesses such as SARS, MERS, or HIV/AIDS. These differences have biological and social consequences. In the initial stages, as with the recently evolved viruses just listed, we had neither immunity nor medications proven to be effective against it. However, COVID-19 differs in several respects, including that it is highly

contagious with almost everyone at risk of infection; in a few months, it has spread to every corner of the globe. None of us can truly see ourselves as outside its biological frame of influence, with the possible exception, though still unproven, of those who have succumbed to infection (whether or not they know this) and survived and those with natural immunity. Its mechanisms of action, at least initially, were poorly understood, and despite massive international efforts and research, many biological unknowns will remain for a considerable period. This is a cause of fear that has prompted huge changes in the way in which societies operate, and with these, great changes to religious practices. It seems very possible that the unknowns regarding COVID-19 will leave a legacy that is likely to persist long after we have (hopefully) found effective means for combating the disease itself, with a new approach to human-embodied life becoming normative.

In India, as the established COVID-19 cases had also been huge, various communities had taken different approaches to control the spread of the virus. Most mosques and temples had restricted entry and cleaning of the mosques with disinfectants being done along with providing information about the transmission of this disease. Community members had been advised to stop congregational prayers at the mosques and temples and pray at home to reduce the person-to-person transmission, the head religious body of Muslims, Muslim Waqf Board announced a suspension of congregational as well as regular prayers in shrines and mosques affiliated to it. The prayers and congregational gatherings on the occasion of *Ramadhaan* were also stopped. Similarly, other temples and churches across the country had been closed. In the places where temples have restricted entry of people, live streaming of rituals was done to allow worshippers to take part in *Puja* prayer rituals and see deities from home. The study of religious behaviors and religious places should be a topic of interest for controlling an outbreak like COVID-19. By sharing scientific information about COVID-19, religious and faith-based leaders can endorse that information, prevent and reduce fear and stigma about the disease, and provide reassurance to people in their communities including promoting healthy practices. Religious leaders can under their influence convince the masses by using religious idioms regarding what must be done in dealing with any outbreak from a religious perspective and hence be more effective than civil servants in delivering messages to the community. This outbreak like any highly transmissible disease extends beyond the control of the respective governments, so it requires all members of society to fight it together.

## Literature Review

Covid-19 has been a new phenomenon so the amount of social research done on it is limited although a huge amount of scientific research is continuously done to get human society rid of it. The disruptions caused by Covid-19 in the organization of human social life have been immense so social scientists have started researching it, although by now a little amount of research has been carried out to comprehend the changes this worldwide pandemic has brought in human social life. The changes brought by this pandemic, particularly the social distancing and quarantine have affected the daily functioning of human life to a very large extent. These changes have affected every aspect of human life economic, social, religious, spiritual, etc. Social scientists have started to research these changes and their consequences on human society. Religion being part of human social life has been no exception to the disruptions due to Covid-19. Being a community affair, the religious practices have got affected most and thus affected the followers of different religious faiths, though at varied rates. The religions most affected are those that require the assembly of followers for making the religious practices or those religions where the attendance of followers is considered obligatory like Islam, Christianity, etc. Given that the viral pandemic has existed only for 11 months or so, there is a dearth of empirical research, and currently, there is little information available on this topic. According to Dein Lewis & Pargament (2020), we are currently facing a worldwide pandemic of Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) for which there is yet no effective treatment or vaccination. This has resulted in the world being turned "upside-down" where many of our "normal" social behavior has undergone dramatic changes. First identified in Wuhan, China in December 2019, the virus has spread to most parts of the world. At the time of writing, the United States, the United Kingdom, Italy, and Spain have been the four countries worse affected by the pandemic. At present, there is an almost global lockdown, and social distancing appears to be having some effect on reducing the prevalence of infection. One aspect of the lockdown is that places of worship have been temporarily closed and the internet has become the primary locus of religious activity. The pandemic has affected religious practice in significant ways, including the cancellation of live religious services, the closing of religious schools, canceling pilgrimages, and prohibiting group interactions during festivals and celebrations. Some religious organizations have been involved in the process of providing disinfectants with ventilators, face shields, gloves, and food to affected areas while others have offered COVID-19 tests to the general public. As an alternative, churches, mosques, and synagogues have provided creative ways of providing services online through live streaming, radio,

and television. This lacks the communal dimensions of live face-to-face interactions and Christians do not provide the opportunity to partake in the Eucharist. Some Christian denominations have started up drive-in church services in church parking lots. In other instances, Christians deploy online apps for prayer and daily devotionals. This suggests that many forms of religious activity have changed in response to the demands of the pandemic. In particular, collective worship has become difficult, online worship is increasing, and private worship/prayer appears to have been considered on the increase.

According to Kumar & Sharma (2020), the COVID-19 pandemic has had a devastating impact on religious festivals, requiring the attendance of devotees across the world. However, as religious events are celebrated only on a fixed date of the year, postponement or cancellation was mostly no option for policymakers. While many religious events were celebrated with minimum devotees, others were celebrated in a secluded environment. The COVID-19 crisis has adversely impacted Hajj pilgrims this year. As per the guidelines set by WHO, restrictions are imposed on event gatherings. In consideration of the COVID-19 impact, Umrah and the Ministry of Hajj announced strict precautionary measures for Hajj Pilgrimage 2020. The Ministry of Hajj and Umrah had also imposed limits on the pilgrim allowed on the premises. The Holy week event is a blend of mourning and joy, which is mostly celebrated by Christians worldwide.

Due to the outburst of COVID-19 and imposed restrictions on the mass gathering, Holy week was celebrated without attendees. Similarly, after the permit of the Supreme Court, the *Jagannath Rath Yatra* among the followers of Hinduism commenced amidst COVID-19. The holy festival is connected with the beliefs and faith of thousands of people across the world. The *Rath Yatra* was allowed by Supreme Court with strict guidelines and measure as only 500 people were allowed to pull the gigantic chariot of Lord *Jagannatha*, *Balbhadra*, and *Subhadra*. For more than 1000 years, Holy Fire is celebrated in Jerusalem and symbolizes Jesus' resurrecting. Every year approx 10000 Christian pilgrims assemble and celebrate Holy Fire in Jerusalem. This year the Holy fire was celebrated in an unprecedented way due to the enforced strict restrictions. Virtual platforms like Facebook Live and other websites were used for sermons and Seders to the pilgrims.

According to Bentzen (2021), In March 2020, the share of Google searches for prayer surged to the highest level ever recorded, surpassing all other major events that otherwise call for prayer, such as Christmas, (Easter), and Muslims (Ramadan). The World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a pandemic on March 11, 2020. The level of prayer search

shares in March 2020 was more than 50% higher than the average during February 2020 using daily data on Google searches for prayer for 95 countries across the globe, this research documents that the rise is not driven by a few countries, but instead is a global phenomenon. Google searches for prayer surged after March 11 for most countries, and even more so after their populations had been infected. Prayer searches were raised more for religious countries, especially the country having a population of Christians and Muslims. Searches for topics related to God, Allah, Muhammad, Quran, Bible, and Jesus, and a lesser extent Buddha, Vishnu, and Shiva, also rose. Last, prayer search shares rose more in poorer, more insecure, and more unequal countries, but this impact is exclusively due to these countries being more religious. Using the results and the Pew (2020b) survey, a back-of-the-envelope calculation shows that more than half of the global population has prayed to end the coronavirus. The main reason for the rising interest in prayer on the internet is religious coping: People use their religion to cope with adversity. They pray for relief, understanding, and comfort. Research has documented that people struggling with cancer, death in a close family, or severe illness are more religious, and also that adversity in the form of natural disasters causes people to use their religion more intensely. People may Google prayer for a reason unrelated to religious coping. They may be searching for online forums to replace their physical churches that closed down in an attempt to enforce social distancing. Theoretically, we would not expect this to be the main explanation for the rising search shares for prayer. People tend to use mainly their intrinsic religiosity (such as private prayer) rather than their extrinsic religiosity (such as churchgoing) to cope with adversity. This means that prayer shares rose in all countries, independent of their economic status, whether or not they are unequal, fragile, or mortal. Religion is not used more for coping in poor and uncertain societies may be because these populations do not feel more emotional distress when faced with COVID-19 compared to richer countries. One observation speaks for this explanation: COVID-19 arrived earlier in Western societies and thus the initial fear may have been larger in these societies. Alternatively, the availability of religion as a coping tool may be more important than the need for such a tool. Either way, the finding is consistent with previous research documenting that people use religion to cope with natural disasters at all levels of income and education (Bentzen, 2019). On a more technical note, studies documenting differential effects of religious coping for poor and insecure societies should be aware that these differential effects could be simply a result of higher religiosity levels in these societies. Alzahrani et al. (2020), in their Autoregressive Integrated

Moving Average (ARIMA) model, had forecast the expected daily number of COVID-19 cases in Saudi Arabia over the ensuing weeks before the 2020 Hajj. They forecasted that the number of COVID-19 cases in Saudi Arabia would continue growing and could reach up to 7,668 new cases per day, with over 127,129 cumulative daily cases in a matter of weeks if stringent precautionary and control measures were not implemented to limit the spread of COVID-19. They suggested that the Saudi authorities faced very difficult decisions regarding the 2020 Hajj Pilgrimage which was scheduled for the last week of July 2020 and they had two options: cancellation of the Hajj or implementation of extreme preventive and control measures in the cities of Mecca and Madinah required to avoid a COVID-19 catastrophe of widespread national and international spread. With the global spread of COVID-19 showing no signs of abating, the national and global public health impact, the risk to livelihoods and economic costs, religious rulings and sensitivities, and the pros and cons of holding the Hajj were discussed and debated leading to the final prudent decision by the Saudi government to hold a scaled-down 2020 Hajj (Ebrahim & Memish, 2020; McCloskey et al., 2020; Memish et al., 2020a). Introducing and maintaining social distancing measures and a safe public health environment for the Hajj rites to be completed by all pilgrims had become a major public health challenge and seemed near impossible. All Muslim religious leaders across the board were unified in concluding that the preservation of life during pandemics needs to prioritize over practicing religious rituals like Hajj. The 2020 Hajj was scaled down considerably, and participation in Hajj rituals was restricted to only 1000 people with a negative COVID-19 test, residing within the Kingdom of which 'foreign' residents would comprise two-thirds of all selected pilgrims from a pool of local workers, health care workers, and security personnel, - especially those who had recovered from COVID-19. Those aged 65 years and over and those with comorbid conditions would be barred. While all holy sites would remain open, adequate physical distancing and disinfection measures were put in place with oversight and assistance at regular intervals during the pilgrim's journey. Wearing masks was mandatory, and pilgrims would be subject to temperature checks and placed in quarantine if required. All pilgrims were given well-thought-out kits that include disinfectants, masks, a prayer rug, the *ihram* (a seamless white garment required to be worn by pilgrims), and sterilized pebbles for the stoning ritual at *Jamaraat*. Throughout the Hajj, the pilgrims would have to keep a social distance of one and a half meters and were guided by well-laid-out markers and Hajj coordinators. No pilgrims would be allowed to touch

the Kaaba or kiss the black stone at its corner-both of which are regular customs during the Hajj.

Snoib et al., (2020) concludes that from ancient times, whenever mankind faces any kind of adversity or crisis, they tend to invoke/cite and mix religion and the current pandemic is no exception. As the COVID-19 pandemic progresses, the intensity of the demand for the involvement of religion will increase because of the tendency to drift towards religion in times of crisis and because of financial hardships (Bentzen 2019). Ever since the onset of this pandemic, the religiosity of people has increased as political and religious leaders across the world came out with advice and suggestions for their respective countrymen and communities to pray (Bentzen 2020). Myths and misconceptions have deep-seated origins in culture, and religion and are frequently substantiated by religious leaders or rulers. Myths are usually linked to an old tradition in society and represent the true descriptions of their past. They often lead to taboos and different customs and rituals in society and are frequently very complex (Bascom 1965 & Dundes 1984). There are different myths and misconceptions across the world associated with the spread of COVID-19. These religious beliefs and practices can have serious implications for the spread of the COVID-19 disease. As learned from previous pandemics like Ebola pandemics, religion, traditions, and culture had a wide range of influences on the transmission of pandemics (Ebrahim et al. 2020). Some groups of Hindus believe COVID-19 occurred due to the consumption of non-vegetarian foods by the Chinese people and that is responsible for the spread of the disease. Some people in India also proclaimed that drinking cow urine (*gaumutra*) will cure or prevent COVID-19, although scientific evidence for that is lacking. Even one group of people jointly hosted a cow urine drinking party to 'neutralize' the effects of coronavirus in India. While the people belonging to the Islamic faith attribute COVID-19 to the wrath of God upon Chinese people for mistreating Muslims in China. It is also a common ritual in some religions to kiss the walls of shrines and burial places of their religious figures. Religious gatherings can be the breeding places for the COVID-19 virus and this can be amplified because of the practice of kissing as a greeting at such gatherings. Mass gatherings commonly happen during pilgrimages and other religious rituals and not all the devotees have the required knowledge about the prevention of the spread of COVID-19 (Huremovic 2019). In some places where there was a failure to restrain mass gatherings, the recent example being the congregation in Delhi's Nizamuddin area in March of this year. Recently Saudi Arabia's suspension of the Umrah pilgrimage has shielded against the massive spread of COVID-19 considering the millions of people that would have



otherwise attended, whereas Iran's pronouncement to allow mass gatherings in Mashhad and Qom has been disadvantageous for the containment of the virus. Having said that some religious rituals like a hand, face, and foot washing as a part of the Muslim practice of wudu (five times a day) are very advantageous to halt the spread of COVID-19, but still, the mass gathering may overshadow any such benefit (Ebrahim& Mehmish 2020). Coyle and Holt (2020) examine religious practices, beliefs, and traditions that are related to the epidemic and its operational response in different ways. Religion is a broad and multi-faceted subject to discuss concerning COVID-19. There are many impacts to consider from changes to communal praying in mosques, to burial practices that might change in the event of mass fatalities, or to the engagement of religious leaders in COVID-19 awareness and response programming.

### **Methodological stance**

The collection of data depends upon the nature of the problem and the socio-economic settings in which the researcher is collecting his data. Thus the data collection must be linked to the problem which is under the consideration and also the social situation in which a researcher is carrying out his research. The primary, as well as secondary data relevant to the study, has been collected. This study utilized a multiple-case study design. Case studies are an exploration of a 'bounded system of a case or multiple cases over time through detail, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information rich in context (Creswell, 1998, p. 61). Stake (1995) explains that case studies are investigated because we are interested in the case studies for both their uniqueness and commonality. We would like to hear their stories. We may have reservations about some things the people tell us, just as they will question some of the things we will tell about them. But we enter the scene with a sincere interest in learning how they function in their ordinary pursuits and milieus and with a willingness to put aside many presumptions while we learn. The multiple case study design or collective case studies investigate several cases to gain insight into a central phenomenon (Creswell, 2002; Stake, 2006; Yin, 2003). Besides the above-mentioned data, qualitative and quantitative methods were used for the present study. The study is empirically based on the primary data collected with the help of an interview schedule. The respondents under study were both literate and illiterate thus the interview schedule was the most suitable technique for the collection of data. The questions in the interview schedule were both open and closed-ended questions. Open-ended questions were used to collect opinion-based information from the

respondents and closed-ended questions were used to collect fact-based information from the respondents. As the study was empirical non-participating observation was also used to obtain information. After collecting the information from the field, the data was edited and rechecked to put all the information in suitable and proper order. The data aggregation was done based on themes and sub-themes and the themes-based tables in the findings. The data were analyzed systematically with logic and in the light of the facts. The discussion of the findings was presented according to the themes identified from the data provided in response to each question. Thereafter the findings were related to the theoretical framework for this study. The information collected through semi-structured interviews was consolidated and was used to substantiate the findings in the shape of narratives and case studies. Tentative official data was also put in use which was presented according to the themes collected from the Jammu and Kashmir Wakf Board office to supplement the already collected data from different shrines of Srinagar. Anjuman-1-Auqaf Jamia Masjid Srinagar was also contacted to get an overview of the impact of Covid-19 on Jamia Masjid Srinagar as it doesn't come under the jurisdiction of the Jammu and Kashmir Wakf Board. Data regarding other religious places about non-Muslim faiths were collected unofficially from their respective managements. All the data has been collected in an objective way keeping all the necessary research ethics in mind.

### **Limitations**

Though full care has been taken for the efficiency and objectivity of the problem undertaken, it would not be rational to assert that the present work is utterly perfect. The challenge of conducting a study of this nature lies in identifying the sample and securing their consent for an interview. Like any research or field investigation, this was also accompanied by a lot of challenges that ranged from identifying the affected persons to developing rapport with them. It was quite difficult to motivate the respondents to talk on such an issue which is having both religious and social sanctity. The most challenging task for any researcher is to get the consent of the respondents in the collection of data. In the present study, most of the respondents were working under the supervision of the management. The management was often reluctant to give access to the information. Even if access was granted in rare cases the researcher had to wait for free time, lunch, or a while to elicit the maximum possible information which indeed was a challenging job. The investigator had to fix the appointment for the convenience of the workers because they were already burdened with their work. Even after getting an appointment, the

workers were unavailable sometimes. In some cases, the management put some restrictions in areas within the religious areas thus becoming difficult to understand the objective settings. Access to the official records was generally not facilitated thus it became difficult to understand the genesis of the religious place concerned. Formal permission for the study is next impossible to get and no management can give access to the official record. The investigator tried to solve the above limitations by employing the technique of non-participant observation. Whenever the researcher found that the respondents were reluctant to express their responses, such responses were observed during the administering of the interview schedule wherever it was possible.

### **Data analysis and Interpretation**

The relevance of the case study method relies on the fact that it comprehends all the relevant aspects of a case and to achieve the objective eight case studies involving eight major religious places were carried out. Each case study provided an in-depth understanding of the challenges faced due to Covid-19 and the impact it had on the religious places as well as devotees, irrespective of the religious affiliation of the devotees. At the same time, these case studies provided the much-required detailed analysis of the objective conditions in these religious places and thus helped in determining the loopholes and shortcomings which could be overcome by taking certain corrective measures. These case studies complement the empirical study by providing an opportunity to move closer to the social reality and have added an important element of validity to the current study by using observation and detailed interviews of the devotees and workers working in these places.

### **Case Study 1: Dargah (Hazratbal)**

Dargah is located at Hazratbal on the western side of Srinagar city on the banks of world famous Dal Lake. It is the largest Muslim shrine in Kashmir valley. More than thirty thousand people attended the shrine every Friday and three to five thousand devotees attended the shrine on daily basis before Covid-19. After the imposition of the lockdown, all the attendance of devotees stopped at once. All the government orders were followed in letter and spirit. As per the management of the shrine, all the religious activities at the shrine were stopped on the orders of the government. Even *Adhaan* (call for prayer) was not allowed inside the shrine. The *Jammat* (praying in groups five times a day) was also not conducted in the shrine. During the lockdown due to Covid-19 only, the security guards present inside the shrine offered prayers five times a day

inside the shrine premises and that too followed all the necessary protocols in place. The situation had remained the same for about eight months as nobody was allowed inside the shrine premises. All the gates were closed denying entry to everyone except a few employees who look after the cleanliness and watch and ward inside the shrine. During this period police security was also increased to counter the chances of devotees breaching the standard operational procedures (SOPs) in place due to the imposition of lockdown due to Covid-19. *Imam Sahab* was also asked not to come to the shrine during this period. Every kind of prayer was stopped but according to the gatekeeper present there, during this lockdown period still about two hundred to four hundred (approx) devotees came to the shrine regularly, but as per protocol they were denied entry inside the shrine and these devotees returned from the gates of the shrine. During the annual Urs (festival), held every year during the Islamic month of Rabi-ul-Awal for about 12 days, no major prayers were organized as used to be done before Covid. *Ziyarat* (a holy relic of the Prophet-saw) was also not displayed inside the shrine, however, on the insistence of devotees the *Ziyarat* was displayed outside the shrine keeping social distancing norms in mind. The charity counters inside the shrine were also closed for about four months. Only one counter at the main entrance of the shrine was open. However, as per employees working here, it didn't affect the amount of charity people offered as devotees continued to offer *nazr-0-niyaz* (charity) in the donation boxes and present it to the shrine. So the salary of employees working here did not get affected, but the construction was stopped in the shrine based on government orders that were in place during the lockdown to contain Covid-19. An employee Syed Shafiq (name changed) narrated:

*'I belong to a village in Pulwama district which is more than 45 kilometers far from here. I came to the shrine twice a week during Covid-19 lockdown even though I Was not supposed to come as only six employees belonging to nearby areas were asked to come and look after the shrine, I still came as I am emotionally and spiritually attached to this shrine. I came to this shrine when I was eighteen years old and even during Covid-19, I couldn't resist coming here at least twice a week. I came in a milk van from my home to Dalgate and then caught some lift or even came walking from there to the shrine every Friday and Monday.'*

As per information provided by management, no employee working in the shrine has got affected by Covid-19 and the lockdown restrictions are also eased now but the government has not kept any testing facilities for the employees or devotees coming to the shrine. The wearing of masks is not followed in letter and spirit inside the shrine premises which makes the employees as well as devotees coming here prone to Covid infection.

### Case study 2: Dastgeer Sahab (Khanyar)

The shrine of *Dastgeer Sahab* is one of the oldest shrines of Kashmir valley located in the Old Town area of Khanyar, Srinagar. It is one of the major shrines of Kashmir and people come to this shrine in huge numbers. Due to Covid, the shrine was closed for eight months and every kind of prayer was stopped inside the shrine premises. The *Adhaan* (call for prayer), as well as five times prayer (*Namaz*), was also stopped at once as soon as the government ordered a lockdown in Kashmir. No one was allowed to pray inside the shrine premises as per the shrine as per protocol to contain Covid-19. During this period only two chowkidars from Jammu and Kashmir Wakf board were allowed inside the shrine. No police security increased for the shrine during Covid-19 which even lead to theft inside the shrine and some cash was stolen from the cash locker present inside the shrine. During the Covid-19 lockdown period although no prayers were allowed in the shrine but as per the local eye witnesses women still came to the shrine in large numbers and entered the shrine lawns by trespassing the gate from the side of the shrine building, however, the main building of the shrine was kept locked and nobody was allowed to enter inside. One of the employees Sarhan Shah (name changed) working in the shrine narrated:

*People particularly women folk are very much attached to this shrine. Before Covid-19 about four thousand people came to the shrine on daily basis. More than two thousand devotees prayed Namaz five times a day inside the shrine. Besides this devotees from every part of Kashmir came here for paying obeisance at the shrine and for certain rituals like Zar kasin (cutting a child's first hair), after the imposition of the lockdown due to Covid all these practices were stopped half of about 40 employees working here are directly dependent on the Nazr-ouniyaz (charity funding) for their salary. Due to Covid, their livelihood got affected, however, other employees about 22 in number are Jammu and Kashmir Wakf Board employees and hence it didn't have any impact on them as they were fully paid their salary during this period.*

As per the information provided by the management of the shrine the annual *Urs* was held as per past precedence although the *Shab* (night-long prayers) was not allowed by the administration of the district Srinagar as per Covid-19 protocol. *Ziyarat* (the holy relic) was displayed both inside and outside the shrine as used to be done before Covid-19 and social distancing protocols were violated to a large extent during the *Urs* period. The attendance of devotees during *Urs* had dropped by about 40 percent. The charity counters were closed during the lockdown period however it didn't affect the volume of charity as people continued to offer in cash and kind through the cash lockers kept at the main gate of the

shrine. No employee working in the shrine has any Covid history so far and the health authorities conduct Covid tests occasionally at the shrine.

### **Case Study 3: Jamia Masjid (Nowhatta)**

Jamia Masjid is located in the heart of the old town of Srinagar city at. It is the largest mosque in Kashmir. It is located in a busy market hub and the footfall of people here is enormous. Before Covid-19 more than two thousand people offered *Namaz* five times a day daily here and on Fridays the number of devotees offering congregational prayers has been about ten to fifteen thousand. After the imposition of lockdown due to Covid the *Masjid* (Mosque) was closed fully. Nobody was allowed entry into the Mosque. Any kind of prayer was not allowed, *Adhaan* (call for prayer) and *Namaz* were also halted as per the orders of the government. Besides the daily prayers, before Covid, many congregational prayers like *Eid Namaz*, *Jumat-u-Vida*, *Shab-e-Qadar*, etc. used to be held here but during Covid, all these congregational prayers were stopped. Asif Ahmed (name changed) narrated:

*The Masjid was fully closed as soon as the government ordered lockdown in march. All the construction activities in the Masjid were stopped, even the wudhu khana (bathrooms for ablution) was closed and no one even the local employees were allowed entry inside the premises of the Masjid to offer prayers of any kind here. We are thirty employees working here and our salary expenses come from Anjuman-i-Augaf headed by Imam sahib of the Masjid. All the charity counters were shut down however all of us got our salaries on time. Masjid has no online system for getting donations and many people insist to start the same.*

The Masjid remained closed for about six months, now management has opened the mosque and devotees have started to come here but keeping all safety measures in mind and every social distancing norm is followed while prayers are offered here though only about twenty percent of devotees come to pray as compared to before Covid-19 period. Now only two to three thousand people offer congregational prayers on Fridays as compared to ten to fifteen thousand before Covid-19.

### **Case Study 4: Makhdoom Sahab (Kathidarwaza)**

The shrine of Makhdoom Sahab is located on *Koh-i-Maran* hillock in the old town of Srinagar. It is one of the revered shrines of Kashmir valley. Devotees from every corner of Kashmir come here. The daily attendance of devotees before Covid-19 here has been around five to six thousand persons per day. During the lockdown imposed due to Covid-19 the shrine premises were closed which affected the rate of attendance of devotees drastically. The shrine has been a hub of many rituals usually

carried out at religious places like *Zar kasin*. Mohammad Azam (name changed) narrated;

*I and my brother have been carrying out the practice of Zar kasin for the last fifteen years here. Every day we jointly carried this practice for about twenty children per day, due to Covid all this stopped, and nobody comes here now and it affected our livelihood very badly as we have no other means of income. During Covid, I and my brother usually remained idle or worked as laborers in paddy fields. Before Covid-19 we earned two to three thousand per day but now hardly anyone comes here with exception of two or three children per week as compared to twenty children per day before Covid-19. Thus Covid affected us and people like me economically and emotionally as well as we hardly fit in any other profession.*

The charity counters were closed for about four months and were opened on the insistence of the devotees. As per the management of the shrine, Covid-19 did not affect the annual *Urs* celebrations at the shrine and all necessary preventive measures were taken for the safety of devotees as well as workers working in the shrine. However, the *langar* (community kitchen) which used to be organized on every *Urs* was not organized this year due to Covid. Despite Covid, a large number of people attended the *Urs* celebrations though the participation has been thin as compared to the previous year. One of the devotees Abrar Ahmed (name changed) who had come from far off village of Budgam district narrated:

*I and my family waited for five long months as my mother wished to come here for shaving head of my son she did not budge and did not allow it to be done at home and I was forced to violate the Covid-19 guidelines and come here all along from more than 45 kilometers away far off village of Budgam. It has been a legacy in our family to come here for shaving the head of the newborn child and we usually come here or Chrar-i-Sharif for carrying this practice.*

### **Case Study 5: Naqashband Sahab (Khwaja Bazar)**

This more than-century-old shrine of Khwaja Naqashband Sahib is located in the old city area of Khwaja Bazar, Nowhatta Srinagar. The shrine remained closed for about three months due to Covid, which affected the attendance of devotees coming here drastically. Before the lockdown imposed due to Covid, more than two thousand devotees attended the shrine on average per day including women. The shrine also houses a big mosque in which more than three thousand persons offered *Namaz* five times a day. Due to Covid, all this stopped as both the masjid and shrine building were locked down. No *Adhaan* (call for prayer) or *Jammat* was allowed at the shrine and no employee was allowed to stay at the shrine except one security guard who was the only person present there during these three months. The main entrance gate was closed and

hence nobody had access to the shrine or even the lawns in the front part of the shrine. No employee working in the shrine had any Covid history and government health authorities come for Covid testing occasionally to the shrine. Necessary Covid-19 preventive measures are followed inside the shrine premises. The annual *Urs* known as *Khali Digar* was conducted and it saw very huge participation of devotees as the lockdown was eased those days, however, before and even now, the shrine is seeing a very thin attendance of devotees and particularly women are attending more as compared to men as the Mosque inside the shrine premises remains still closed and is opened only on Fridays for offering congregational prayers in which the participation is less than sixty percent as compared to pre-Covid-19 period. The charity counters existing in the shrine were also closed during the lockdown and the only means of getting donations was the cash locker available outside the main entrance gate of the shrine. Among the six employees working here, three are dependent on the *Nazr-o-niyaz* offered by devotees and due to Covid, their livelihood got affected to a large extent, the other three employees working under Jammu and Kashmir Wakf board got their salary on time as per the information provided by the management of the shrine.

#### **Case Study 6: Gurudwara Chati Padshshah (Kathi Darwaza)**

Gurudwara Chati Padshshah is the largest gurudwara of Kashmir. It is located in the Kathi Darwaza area of the old city of Srinagar. It is a revered place of worship for the Sikh community seeing the attendance of Sikh devotees from every part of Kashmir. The average attendance of devotees here has been one thousand persons per day, however, due to Covid-19 it has dropped to less than fifty persons per day. The gurudwara remained open during the lockdown period and only the Langer (community kitchen) has been closed for a few days and then resumed again. The charity counters have not been closed however the volume of charity has suffered some loss as the attendance of devotees had dropped. The gurudwara also has an online system of charity available and the funding is also carried out by 'Sikh Sangathan'. The Babaji present in the shrine has remained present inside the gurudwara during the Covid lockdown as well and *Kirtan* (singing the praises) was continued without break. All the necessary Covid preventive measures have been followed inside the gurudwara premises. The construction activities have also been carried out smoothly during the lockdown period as well. One of the devotees Veera (name changed) narrated:

*I am from the uptown area of Jawahar Nagar area of Srinagar city. I come with my family every week here but due to Covid restrictions, it has become difficult to attend here every week we still try to attend once or twice every month. We come*



*here following necessary preventive measures to contain Covid-19. Most of our practices like death rituals, birth rituals, marriages, name taking, etc. are conducted in the gurudwara only so we necessarily have to attend here as these practices can't be conducted at home and have no alternative available.*

According to the management of the gurudwara, the gurudwara has remained open throughout the lockdown period, however, the number of marriages and name shakings taking place in the gurudwara has seen a tremendous drop. The death rituals are unavoidable so these are also conducted however with close relatives only with the participation of a very less number of people as compared to the pre-Covid period. The other religious festivals are also celebrated but with the participation of a very less number of devotees attending these festivals.

#### **Case Study 7: Hanuman Mandir (Amira Kadal)**

The temple of Panch Mukti Hanuman mandir is located in the Amira Kadal area in the heart of Srinagar city. It is one of the oldest temples of Srinagar city. Being centrally located the temple saw a good attendance of devotees from every area of Kashmir as also Hindu tourists and travelers. However, due to Covid-19 the attendance of devotees has fallen drastically. The temple has been fully closed for the devotees during the lockdown period. The attendance which has been ranging from one to two hundred persons per day during summers has reduced to just ten or fifteen devotees per day. During the lockdown period, only *Arti* has been conducted by *Pujari* only. The source of charity which has been the offerings and donations from devotees has also been affected tremendously as very few devotees attended the temple during Covid. All the standard operating procedures (SOPs) have been followed inside the temple. All the construction activities have also been halted at the time keeping the Covid-related restrictions in mind.

#### **Case Study 8: Holy Family Catholic Church (MA Road, Srinagar)**

The Holy Family Catholic Church is located in the heart of Srinagar city on the busy MA Road near the city center Lal Chowk. It is one of the oldest churches in Kashmir valley. The attendance of devotees at the church has been affected badly due to the lockdown imposed due to Covid-19. The usual attendance of devotees at the church has been one hundred and fifty on average per day before Covid, but due to the Covid-19 lockdown imposition, the attendance has seen a downward trend. It has come down to the level of forty to fifty on average per day. The church has been fully closed for about eight months, during which certain alternate measures were adopted to cope with this change. The regular group prayers have been suspended and devotees were advised to pray

at home. Devotees were advised to perform the rosary at home every day from 7.30 pm to 8.30 pm instead of attending church. It was made as a substitute for the practice of Divine mercy, conducted inside the church. During the Covid lockdown, no marriage or Baptism was conducted at the church. Proper arrangements and preventive measures are in place in the church to avoid the spread of Covid-19. The devotees below ten years and above sixty years of age are not allowed inside the church. Only devotees with necessary masks and following other social distancing norms are allowed inside the premises of the church and only two people are allowed to sit per seat. The charity has also been affected as all the charity boxes were closed and no online system of charity is available. The construction activities have also got affected and no construction activity has been carried out till now. The religious festivals celebrated at the church have also been affected. No Easter was celebrated this year, Christmas prayers were held in two shifts to avoid large gatherings of devotees and social distancing norms were maintained.

### **Jammu and Kashmir Waqf Board Data**

As per Secretary Jammu and Kashmir Waqf Board, Muhammad Saleem Beigh all the shrines of district Srinagar under the jurisdiction of Jammu and Kashmir Waqf Board were closed during the lockdown period as per the orders of the district administration Srinagar. Thus it has affected attendance at these religious places to a very large extent; however, the amount of revenue generated from these shrines has seen an increase of five to ten percent (approx) as compared to the previous year. No online system of charity collection is present in these shrines however to counter the closing down of counters, the number of donation boxes has been increased at the shrines, which has led to an increased revenue generation from these shrines. The salary of the employees working under the board has seen no impact as the revenue of the board has increased instead of decreased as was feared due to the closure of charity collection counters at the shrines of district Srinagar.

### **Conclusion**

Every aspect of social life has been negatively impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic, which has altered daily life, transformed and reorganized social and religious customs, including how people pray, and hindered the widespread practice of religion. According to the current study, Covid-19 has had an impact on devotees' regular attendance at the sacred sites of all significant religions present in the Srinagar district. Covid-19 is emerging as a new challenge that is changing the traditional ways of carrying out religious practices and rituals all over the world and so is the

case with Kashmir. The results of our study suggest that the Covid-19 pandemic is proving to be very damaging to the way how people pray and attend to their religious duties. It is proving disastrous to death, marriage, and other rituals and religious practices and has turned upside down the traditional ways of carrying out these religious practices. Due to Covid-19 restrictions and social distancing measures, people are unable to offer their obligatory prayers and this in turn is affecting the people emotionally and psychologically. The normal procedures of prayer are being altered and thus adding to the already psychological and emotional strain present due to Covid-19. People, being unable to perform their religious practices in traditional ways, feel isolated and lonely which affected the overall well-being of people. Summing up, this study is quite modest concerning offering certain insights into the changes in the attendance level of devotees at religious places due to Covid-19 pandemic and its resultant consequences. I consider, however, that it can offer several guidelines for more systematic and rigorous research on the above question. The religious interpretations of the Covid-19 pandemic could be studied, as its ways and channels of reproduction and its relationship with daily practices and with political treatments of the problem. In addition to this, possible contrasts can be drawn between different religious groups to check if their response to this pandemic is similar or varied. The views on the pandemic could be correlated with the level of education and it will also be interesting to analyze the role of religious leaders and how they respond to this pandemic.

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