

A Mood Study on Perceptions of People Kashmir Valley

Peoples Pulse

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People's Pulse, a Hyderabad-based research organization was assigned the task of evaluating the popular mood in Jammu & Kashmir involving an extensive, in-depth and diligent survey with regard to people's perceptions on governance, problems of daily life and politics. The People's Pulse team had visited Jammu region during the second week of June and filed its report. As a follow-up, the team visited Kashmir Valley during the last week of October and the first week of November for one week and spoke to a large number of people spread over more than 85 villages and towns covering all the ten districts (Srinagar, Budgam, Baramulla, Kupwara, Bandipora, Ganderbal, Anantnag, Kulgam, Pulwama, Shopian).

The study was based on an unstructured free-wheeling conversation with respondents to elicit their views on a host of issues interspersed with the questions related to the specific study. During the survey, the team met almost all sections of the population – peasants, agricultural labor, apple growers, pickers, and traders, shawl makers, walnut kernel traders, saffron growers and traders, transporters, employees, unemployed youth, tourism sector workers, teachers, doctors, village level people's representatives, tailors, petty traders, drivers, restaurant workers, etc.

During the long interactions with respondents, several economic indicators like roads and communications, levels of poverty, employment and livelihood, power supply, drinking water availability, price rise, Public Distribution System, welfare measures and compensation for acquired lands have come up for discussion and the views are summed up hereunder. The major observations and findings of the team are:

Perceptions on governance:

1. Public Distribution System

There was a general appreciation of Public Distribution System and most respondents said fair price shops are functioning properly and the people are able to get their rations suitably. However, a few respondents complained about inadequate supply of essential commodities, benefitting the undeserved at the cost of the needy, favouritism towards rich and powerful, etc. Some alleged that the rations and particularly BPL rice are being given to party workers.



2. Healthcare

Though it appears that there is very good infrastructure for healthcare with good buildings and equipment, the healthcare sector is suffering from a number of problems. While sufficient medical staff is not posted in some hospitals, adequate facilities are lacking in some other hospitals. It appeared that there is a mismatch between the people's needs, available infrastructure and proper utilization of the available resources. In one of the hospitals we visited, a post graduate dentist posted six months ago is sitting without any work since the most essential dentist's couch is not available there. In the same hospital the X-Ray machine is not working for the last four months and the technician is sitting idle. "Even a weighing machine is not there in our hospital," said a respondent from another village. An unemployed youth complained that a number of government doctors have gone to foreign countries with unauthorized leaves and the state exchequer is paying them still. While the team was on its visit recording these complaints, it was reported that the Chief Minister received an award from India Today, for the best healthcare services in the state. The hospitals are there for only namesake and they are not coming to the rescue of the needy. Though the hospitals have ambulances to help the needy poor, they are never used for the poor. They are cornered by rich and powerful.

3. Education

Most of the respondents expressed satisfaction about educational facilities, mid-day meal scheme, scholarships and other amenities to the students. Of course in some of the schools sanctioned staff is not posted and required infrastructure is absent. Some respondents also expressed that there were loopholes in mid-day meals scheme. But on the whole the education sector seems to be providing to the satisfaction of people. But people complain that the government schools do not impart quality education due to lack of sufficient faculty strength, disinterest among teachers, delayed distribution of textbooks, etc. Educating children up to high school level is going on somewhat smoothly but post-matriculation education is out of reach to many rural poor families.



4. Transport

While the roads on the main routes and tourism routes are near perfect, the team found very bad and rough roads to approach villages. Public transport vehicles also were not visible except on the main roads. Most of the rural population is dependent on private vehicles on awful road network.

5. Pensions, housing and other schemes

Many people do not know that there is a scheme of old-age and widow pensions. Some respondents who know about the scheme said the pensions are not given to the needy and deserving. In some villages people said they knew about the housing scheme and a few got benefits out of it. But in many villages the scheme is non-functional. One Sarpanch complained that he got sanctions for 3 houses under Indira Awas Yojana. "My village has 10 wards and 70 per cent poor population. Whom should I allocate these three houses," he asked. Similarly, there is a government scheme of digging wells but people said that every year the same well is shown on the paper and the funds are swindled.

6. Employment

The team met with a number of qualified uneducated youth across all the districts. Most of them went outside the state to have higher education and came back. They want to serve their own society and state, but complain lack of employment opportunities either in government or in private sector. There were some apprehensions in some quarters that Kashmiri youth were more interested in government sector jobs because of low work and high pay. However, the team found that it was not the case and most of the respondents were interested in joining private industry or business. "Militancy has become a false alibi for not setting up industrial or business units either in government or private. But have they tried and failed? Let the government show the way with setting up a high-employment creating industry and private sector will follow. Without even trying the government is using this false propaganda," said the respondents. There have been some efforts to have vocational education in the state, but since there was no industry to recruit them, those who studied vocational courses also are unemployed and working as daily wage labourers. "There are educated people who have been working for daily wage for the last 15 years," one of the respondents said. The team was told that there are 30 postgraduate unemployed youth in one mohalla alone. Many respondents want industrialization

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and employment creation in the state. "Development is the major issue. Thousands of youth are unemployed," said the principal of an educational institution in Warpora. A female environmental scientist who studied in Pune and working as a lecturer in a local college said there are a number of unemployed post graduates, M Phils and PhDs in the valley. Unless IT sector and industrialization takes place and provides jobs to them, the frustration among these youth will be explosive, she said. There are a number of unemployed B Eds who can be recruited as teachers and two objectives of employment creation as well as improving educational facilities can be achieved.

7. Power supply

Power situation in the valley is pathetic to say the least. As a village elder in Janbajpora said, "we have to light the candle to see the power bulb." In almost all the villages people said they get power for less than five to six hours a day and that too in unpredictable and unscheduled way. Some respondents said that though the state had a high potential of hydro electricity, the governments have entered into unequal and unjust agreements with Northern Grid to give 90 per cent power to the Grid keeping only 10 per cent to the state. "It is our water, our power, but we do not even get 50 per cent share," said a respondent.

8. LPG cylinders

People in the valley require more number of gas cylinders in order to fight the chilling atmosphere beginning from October end till May. But unfortunately just before the season began, the central government had announced its policy of reducing LPG cylinder supply to residential households. Even when one accepts the government's compulsions in having the policy, Kashmir valley and other cold places should have been accorded protective discrimination and due to lack of such a consideration, people started facing unbearable burden. The team witnessed long queues of people waiting for gas cylinders for hours together in cold weather, whether it was early in the morning or late evening. Since the LPG outlets were not delivering the required cylinders, people had to wait on the main road to catch the cylinder-carrying vehicle to come and deliver. Around 7 in the morning (temperatures might be in the range of 2 degrees or less) there were a hundred people on the main road in Baramulla and some of them said they were waiting since 5 am and some others waited the day before also. "There is no guarantee that the vehicle comes and delivers today. One has to wait and wait, that's all. Some of us waited for six or seven hours yesterday and



came back today. Sometimes one has to wait for three days or seven days in vain," the respondents said. Due to this high demand and low supply there is a huge black market and some respondents said the price for a cylinder might go up to Rs 1,000 or Rs 1,500. Some respondents said they came from villages 20-30 kms away also. There are no fixed timings and places for delivery and the people are left in lurch. Given this experience, the people suspect that all this is being done just to encourage malpractices and black market only.

9. Accessibility of government officials

There is no proper arrangement for expressing people's grievances and mechanism for redress. Almost all villagers spoke about the complaints being lodged with the officials without any consequent action. Though there is a novel program of having cabinet meetings in villages and all the officials come to villages in those days, people think that it led to more TA/DA for the leaders and officials but not any complaint-resolution. In one of the villages, villagers said they are not allowed inside the offices to pour out their grievances. "Even our sarpanch was shooed out from DC's office. Even if the DC is willing to listen to us, the security guards do not allow into the premises. Who will represent us and who will listen to our problems," said villagers. Problems of a village primary school like inadequate staff, delayed supply of mid-day meal, etc were brought to the notice of the DEO, other officers up to the directorate level, but nothing positive came about.

10. NREGA

Though there is satisfaction that the national rural employment guarantee scheme (popularly Narega) is a good program, most respondents said while the daily wage laborers in the Valley get a minimum of Rs 300, the Narega wage is much less at Rs 120 and hence there was a lukewarm response to the scheme. "Narega kabhi nahin karega," said a respondent. Some respondents said that the Narega works are given to party functionaries locally and they use machinery to get the work done, though it is not admissible.



11. Model Villages

The team happened to visit two model villages in two districts (Kupwara and Bandipora) and except an arch on the main road announcing that it is a model village, no other visible development activity was there in the villages. One of the model villages, Drugmulla was declared as such three years ago. "It's only the sign board on the main road. If you venture inside there is nothing. Bad, muddy roads, stinking, open drainages, lack of drinking water facilities, erratic power, you see for yourselves," said at least a 50-strong villagers team who gathered when the team began talking to a lone tailor. The people were very eager to express their grievances. A road on the bank of the canal is caved and it is not being repaired for a long time. "Two years ago, it was launched with a lot of fanfare and said the village would get a lot of development for twenty years. But within two years, nothing is there except a foot path and a community hall, which is never used." Solar power systems were given to the village as part of the model village scheme, but they are not functioning. People also complained that the solar lamps are being used at the party workers' houses. Ultimately the "model" tag for their village has become a cause for great ridicule. The other model village also presented similar scenario, except that there is a computer room, where the computers do not work, and a community hall, along with stinking open drainages and bad roads.

12. Regional discrimination

While the survey team witnessed and recorded the grievances of regional discrimination in Jammu area, there was an echo in the valley. Jammu people said it was a Srinagar-centric government and 80 per cent of funds are allocated in the Valley, and in contrast, the people in the Valley said that it was Jammu which was getting more and being developed. "Valley does not get anything, whatever remains after spending in Jammu goes into the pockets of politicians and officials. Go and see Jammu what kind of buildings, roads, fly-overs have come up there. Compare that with what was there twenty-thirty years ago," they said. Even when equal allocation is done, funds allocated to the Valley are not spent and schemes are not implemented. Jammu could not have seen the current development if it was not a part of the state, some opined.



13. Procedural problems

There are problems of delays in implementation, procedural complexities and official indifference.

A village was declared part of a nearby town in 1979 but till 2011 it didn't get any urban amenities and thanks to the declaration it lost its village status. The village on the outskirts of the town is neither here nor there. These three decades the villagers have been representing the case to the officials but nothing was done to correct the problem.

One sarpanch said that he got less than Rs 5 lakh for spending on development projects in the village when just double the amount Rs 10 lakh was sanctioned on paper. "We thought we would be negotiators between the government and the people, but there is nobody to listen to us, either here or there," he said.

Devolution of powers announced by NC government was criticized by some Sarpanches respondents saying that they are neither full-fledged nor sincere. While the local self government in J&K is in four tiers, the recently announced devolution did not take all these tiers into consideration. While it called devolution of powers and functions, some respondents think it is only devolution of functions but not powers. A sarpanch of a village even described the devolution as a fraud. There is a conflict of interests in devolution of powers between MLAs and village PRIs.

The problem of procedural lacuna is also visible in the case of apple marketing. Though apple growing and trade is a major economic activity of the state, there are no proper arrangements for warehousing, transport or marketing. "Government's initiatives in apple marketing are only on paper and it is the traders and commission agents from Delhi and Mumbai that decide the price and Kashmiri grower and trader are the ultimate losers," said an apple trader. Apple growers do not get any support from the government whether in better seeds, water, fertilizers, warehousing, and marketing. When the government organizes sheds for bulk sales, even the shed cost is also borne by the growers. While direct export is a solution, government is not permitting it. "All the other commodities have their own pricing mechanism, but for the apple growers price is decided by the traders from outside the state," they said.

Saffron growers complain that there is no marketing support from the government. "We don't think there is any government," they said.



14. Corruption

All the respondents complained about the corruption in the governance and none of the officials and politicians was left out. "Kashmir's DNA is corruption. Santri se mantri tak, sweeper to minister, everybody is corrupt," said most people. A number of people, though separated by a distance of more than 200 kms were expressing the same opinion that "Kashmir is number one state in corruption in all over India. Earlier it was Bihar and now we beat them." When specifically asked which department was the most corrupt, most respondents said all the departments were competing with each other. Giving an explanation of the incidence of corruption one respondent said that there is more corruption where more fund allocation is there. "Omer sends money but middlemen eat it away," said a respondent. People have given a number of specific examples of official and political corruption. It would be suffice to cite one example of seeking a bribe of Rs 3 lakh for a forest guard job.

15. Security

In general security situation seemed to be satisfactory. The team never encountered any hostile behavior from people. In its conversations with more than 400 people the team never faced "you Indians" syndrome. Even the threat to panchayat sarpanchs seemed exaggerated as the team found only one sarpanch talking about that threat. He belonged to a noble family and his elder brother is a senior police official. Even he accused the government for not providing powers to help people and take up development activities, which would have made him secure. "We have been elected for killing. We thought we will also get all powers that other sarpanchs in India get," he said.

However, there is disgruntlement against the ubiquitous army movement and police high-handedness. "Law and order is managed through lathi. Only solution for everything is lathi," said a teacher.

16. Militancy

"Everybody feels insecure and it is the government that is responsible for insecurity. The issue to be settled is that of development. Militancy has come down, but did not die completely. There are two parts of militancy – the physical part is now removed, but the mental part cannot be erased until development takes place. Army can control the physical part but the mental part can go away with prosperity only," said a village



elder. Another respondent said that "militancy is not the problem, development is the problem." A cement shop dealer in Sopore said his brother was taken away by security forces twelve years ago and he has been running to pillar to post all these years in vain. "I never vote. Where is the need for voting? This is not our government." A nearby teashop owner said "every house has a martyr in Sopore. Then what do you expect here other than anger against the government?" Repression from police and army is the root cause of people's anger, he said. Incidentally he is not a Kashmiri but settled here after migrating from UP. "Whether they openly tell you or not, people everywhere need azadi," said a teacher. "There is no enquiry into disappearances and killings of our children, numbering thousands. Then why should we support this government?" said an elder.

17. General perceptions

Most of the respondents, in fact except two persons out of about 400 (99.99 per cent) the team met expressed their dissatisfaction at the state of affairs. "Everything is a problem. Life here itself is a problem. Nobody is there to help us," was a common refrain. A lot of people expressed their anger against price rise and criticized the government's failure to control the prices. Poverty was both visible in many places and it was also expressed as a major concern by those suffers from it as well as the middle class people who sympathized with the poor. Most of the people's grievances were against the state government and very little against the Centre. Even when they said the state is a puppet in the hands of the Centre, they were sounding matter of fact but not in a complaining tone. At least half of the respondents even complimented the Centre for allocating a large chunk of funds, but said the state government is swindling all those funds. "Even one per cent out of Central funds reaches the needy people. All that money goes into the pockets of politicians and security forces," some said. Some respondents pointed out that the lack of political stability was the main reason for the backwardness of the Valley. "Unless stability is achieved, peace and prosperity will not be there in the Valley. Private investments don't enter the Valley due to the Indian media's misrepresentation of the situation here. Government is corrupt and more interested in votes but nothing else," said an elderly farmer in a remote village. Being a post graduate with an additional qualification in education, he could not get a government job due to corruption and settled in agriculture. "All governments are the same, people in the Valley never got a good pro-people government" was the opinion shared by many. Most of the respondents reeled out figures and historical accounts to show that there was no popular government in the



state. "Till 1977 there was no election. In 1987 there was mass rigging and a secret deal between Farooq Abdulla and Rajiv Gandhi. Then there was the people's struggle and heavy repression. Shaik and his family betrayed the aspirations of the people here. All governments are the same with small difference in color. Whether it is PDP or NC or Congress it does the same. Kashmir is very rich and resourceful state and it could have developed on its own, said some citing potential of hydel power, apples, saffron, shawls, walnuts, timber products and tourism. Since the state government is not sincere, the Centre should directly take charge and implement development projects, said one respondent. "Our ears tired hearing the promises on the radio," said a respondent. The entire administration in Kashmir Valley is seen as malfunctioning by some respondents. There is no worth mentioning performance of the government.

Perceptions of political parties

Since the major thrust of the study was on political perceptions of the respondents, the conversations veered round politics and the respondents participated enthusiastically.

In general, people's participation in politics is satisfactory, in the sense that everybody knows about politics and blames politicians for their problems. All the people have been casting their votes regularly. Almost all the respondents were vocal and categorical in their views on politics.

1. On the Ruling party

Both the parties in the ruling coalition the National Conference and Congress have come in for a lot of criticism from the respondents. Doing nothing for the development of the state, indulging in their own self-interest, corruption, unemployment, price rise, negligence in solving people's problems like power, gas supply, etc, repression by the security forces were the major complaints. It is generally complained that the politicians come to people only for votes and once elected they do not show up for the next six years. The MLAs and MPs belonging to the ruling parties are criticized heavily for not coming to the rescue of people. Even if all the people's grievances may not be settled, the government in people's perception doesn't even show its inclination to listen to people's problems. It was almost unanimous feeling in all the segments, including the CM's own Ganderbal, that the ruling party will be voted out if there was an election in the immediate future.



2. On the Opposition

Even though the opposition PDP got its share of criticism, there were a couple of positive responses. Many respondents said that PDP rule was better since it did away with the special task force that was most dreaded in lifting youngsters and killing them. Some people said the rural development schemes, monitoring of government departments and power supply were good under the PDP government. Corruption under the PDP government was lesser than now, some said. Some of the respondents said the PDP may win if there was an election now. Some respondents had good words about Azad's government but felt he was not allowed to function for a full term.

3. General opinions on political parties

No political party, whether it is National Conference or Indian National Congress or Bharatiya Janata Party or People's Democratic Party, would be able to work independently in the state. Whatever Centre thinks will happen in the state. It would be the Centre that runs the show in the state - this is the general impression of the people. Political leaders come to people only for votes and the next six years one cannot see them. In none of the constituencies people spoke well about their respective MLAs. That they have not visited their constituencies and helped people over there was a common theme everybody expressed. People know that the constituency development fund allotted to MLAs is raised from Rs 1 crore to Rs 1.5 crore, but they are unanimous in saying that the MLAs never spend the amounts for public purposes and use it in their own vote bank development. This complaint was common to all the MLAs whether from Congress, NC, PDP or even CPI (M). It appeared that no MLA spent his/her Constituency Development Fund (Rs 1.5 crore) for development works in the constituency. People think that the CDF money goes into the pockets of party workers only and does not come to people. "Political leaders are not at all concerned about people with whose votes they gained power," was also a common refrain. In many respondents the team observed a kind of resignation to fate and they were saying nothing will change. "Even if we ourselves become MLAs, the situation will be the same and nothing is going to change." Some respondents were nostalgic and said Shaik Abdullah's Kashmir is different and today's Kashmir is different. Some respondents blamed God for the state of affairs and said "God is dumb, blind and deaf" in Kashmir. "Sab ke sab, poora MLAs, MPs chor hain. Hamam eki hain, sab nange hain," said many respondents. "Everything is in the hands of



Delhi. Whoever it wants get elected will be elected. The powers that be in Srinagar are only puppets," said many respondents. 'No political leader has public interest, its only self-interest.' 'Ruling party and opposition are the two sides of the same coin. Even if the opposition comes to power, it will be the same rule.' 'Election manifestos were good but nothing implemented. When they are not even approachable whom to ask?' 'One light for each house was the promise, but each house got a beating, not the light' – these were some of the opinions expressed by the respondents.

4. On Chief Minister

Though the chief minister is regarded as young and dynamic, people do not see that dynamism in governance. The common image about him is a flamboyant, high flying person seeking international and national image without helping his own people and state. Despite the popularity and acceptability of Omar Abdullah as a young and enthusiastic politician, the respondents think that he does not have required political maturity and many a time he is turning to be a puppet in the hands of Congress. Across all locations people were angry with the chief minister. Most of them said he is a non-performer, non-deliverer. Some gave him benefit of doubt and said the people around him are not allowing him to implement his ideas. The idea of his phone number available to everybody all the time was pooh-poohed. "We never get the line. Nobody ever lifts the phone," they said. The chief minister listens from one ear and leaves it from the other, said one respondent. Chief Minister's own constituency has not seen any development, leave alone special treatment. "Though CM looks young and dynamic, he just acts on the Centre's pressures," said a young villager in Ganderbal constituency. "There is nothing to take pride in being from CM's constituency," said a youngster. "London banaatoon bole, khandar banaye." "When we are in front of him and the problems of underdevelopment stare in his face, what is need for face book?" asked a villager. "CM sits in five-star hotels, what he knows about our fate?" asked another villager.



Conclusion and Suggestions

To sum up, an independent observation on the political scenario in Kashmir Valley could only be that of bad omen for the present dispensation. Elections may be too far, but even if the current discontent, frustration and anger sustain, if not grow; it will be a doom for the incumbent government. It is not only anti-incumbency, but also a general distrust in the ability of the political class in offering solutions to people's problems and implementing them. The people's problems are complex, historical, economic, social and political. People expect the governments show their willingness to address those problems.

The singular cause for the failure of those in power is to be carried away by the smooth surface not realising that the ground below is slippery. Being active on twitter, shaking hands with the likes of Barack Obama and thereby hogging headlines in the national media space Canberra truly misleading. What matters is what the man on the ground feels and says, everything else is secondary. Unfortunately, there aren't many people who have something good to say about this government. "How is your government," was what we asked to a 65-year-old haj returned man sitting in front of his small shawl store on the way to pahalgam. His reply was: "it is good for those wielding power."

Given the negative and critical feelings and all-pervasive disgruntlement amongst the people the ruling party may not come back to power, if it doesn't take up major fire-fighting operations in the next two years. However, even if the opposition wins at the polls, it would not be because people's confidence in it, but due to lack of any other alternative. If this kind of a political vacuum and all round opposition to political parties exists for a long time it would be a breeding ground for militancy again and the situation might turn explosive. But, it may not be too late to take mid-course correction measures and gain people's confidence.

The sense of disgust is not difficult to read and it's almost all pervasive, across the capital, towns and villages. Only the deaf cannot hear the warning bells. Prognosis: buck up forget winning any of the four Lok Sabha seats whenever elections are held. If the political and administrative atmosphere continues to be same, NC-Congress will have to face the wrath of people in 2014 parliament elections and in 2015 Assembly elections PDP's victory will be assured.



Based on the people's opinions, the team feels the following short-term and medium-term measures can be implemented:

1. Employment - IT

The government should take it as its first priority to set up agro-based, hydelpower based industries and businesses to create high employment potential. A special drive to invite IT sector companies, showcasing the European/US weather, so that unemployed youth could come out of their frustration. If the government takes up these pro-active measures, private sector will also be willing to follow and a major problem of the Valley can be solved to some extent.

2. Gas and power supply

The state government should negotiate with the centre to make a special provision for the Valley, at least for the winter months, to supply more LPG cylinders. The state also should make use of its high potential for hydro electricity and should not enter into agreements of disproportionate allocation.

3. Transport

The government should address the problem of bad interior roads and public transport system according it top priority. All the roads connecting major town and villages should be immediately repaired, tarred and maintained properly.

4. Apple marketing

Since apple growing and marketing is the major economic activity in the state, the government should give it due importance and encourage the activity with providing all possible help.

5. Corruption

Since the people's perceptions about corruption have reached the explosive levels, the government should immediately initiate anti-corruption drives and demonstrate its seriousness in fighting the menace. Stringent actions, including suspensions and legal proceedings against corrupt officials and politicians will go a long way in regaining people's confidence.



6. Role of army and police

Army and paramilitary security forces have been taking up more powers and one sarpanch said his authority over the village is neither recognized nor respected by the security forces. The separation between the political, civil and military authorities should be strictly observed. The security forces should be restrained to the duties assigned to them. As a respondent said, "army does not know our language. Why not they use Kashmir armed police forces?" the army should be restricted not to deal with people, whose language they may not know.

7. Communal harmony, fundamentalism, militancy, etc..

In most of the places the team did not see any fundamental practices like burqaclad women or any open demonstrations of religious fervor. The team was in Sopore when the city was observing bandh call given by All Party Hurriyat Conference against the arrest of one of its leaders. Though the bandh appeared complete, the team did not see any violent incidents. At the same time the team met a small eatery owner who migrated to Kashmir from Uttar Pradesh. He set up his business in the Valley ten years ago and came to Sopore three years ago. In the last three years he developed his business from a single small shop to four establishments today. This shows that even in a emotionally charged place like Sopore there is a communal harmony and peace and the government should take these examples as basis to develop a peaceful atmosphere all over the Valley.

If the government does not reach grassroots with its development activities, employment, power, and gas, the situation will again gets worsened. Militancy will rise again. Frustration is leading to militancy.