Internet Shutdowns in Kashmir Valley

An internet shutdown is always a government-imposed restriction where internet service providers are ordered by a government agency to cut off internet services. An internet shutdown always imposes a blanket ban on internet access, where access to the internet as a whole is paralysed. It is not a selective ban, where access to particular content/services is disabled while leaving access to other content/services unaffected. Kashmir is known as the hub of internet shutdowns with the internet being banned frequently. Due to unrest in the Kashmir Valley, there have been a large number of internet shutdowns. As per the data shared by Software Freedom Law Centre (SFLC), the Kashmir Valley has been experiencing internet shutdowns since 2012. In 2012, the internet was banned three times. The number has been increasing year by year. In 2013, it was banned five times. In 2014, 2015, 2016 and 2017, the internet was banned six, 14, 31 and 79 times, respectively. However, in 2018, the extent of internet shutdowns increased and the number of shutdowns reached 133. There are many instances where telecom companies were directed by the government to throttle mobile internet speed from 4G to 2G. The scope of these restrictions has a significantly disproportionate impact on the fundamental rights of everyone in Kashmir, undermining the government's stated aim of preventing dissemination of information that could lead to violence.

While the rest of the states have developed tremendously in the last couple of years, from 2G to 3G to 4G high-speed internet, the people of Kashmir Valley are deprived of even basic internet facilities. The internet in Kashmir works according to the will and whims of the government. It is strange that the government authorities at times allow internet access in one area and block it in other areas. It has also been observed that sometimes the internet is banned in one district and other districts are allowed to have internet access. The internet becomes the first casualty whenever the situation in the Valley turns from restive to volatile. The mobile internet ban has become the most unpredictable phenomenon in Kashmir. During the protests that followed the killing of Burhan Wani on 8 July 2016, mobile internet was suspended for 133 days straight. Later, mobile internet services were restored on post-paid numbers in mid-November, while for pre-paid numbers it returned on 30 January 2017. In 2016, a right to information report was filed by the Srinagar-based Jammu Kashmir Coalition of Civil Society (JKCCS) to know who ordered the clampdown on internet service in the Valley. In response, a public information officer of the divisional commissioner's office wrote that no such order was issued by their office regarding the shutdown.

The government and police sources in Kashmir maintain that mobile internet restrictions help check the mobilisation of protesters and prevent the spread of rumours. The authorities in the Valley on 17 April 2017 banned 22 social media sites and applications, including Facebook, WhatsApp and Twitter for a month in an attempt to curb the street protests. The social media ban enforced to quell rumours and violent protests became more of a joke with almost everyone turning to the virtual private network (VPN) technique to access blocked sites. The popularity of these tactics compelled the government to block access to the android Play Store among other services for some time in a bid to prevent citizens from getting access to these services.

South Kashmir has been hit the worst by internet shutdowns. The internet is banned more frequently here than in other parts of the Valley. Disconnecting the internet in south Kashmir districts has paralysed life there. Students and aspirants of different competitive examinations who apply for government jobs are subjected to hardships when authorities impose curbs on the internet. The students are often seen requesting the authorities to restore the facility. But, most of the time when the service is restored, the internet speed is throttled to 2G to prevent uploading of content on social media websites.

Considering the internet shutdowns in the Valley since the past seven years, it is clear that social media websites are the main reason behind the internet shutdowns. As per the government officials, it becomes necessary to ban the facility for public safety because social media platforms are being "misused by anti-national and anti-social elements" to fuel unrest. There should be an alternative measure rather than banning all internet services. Therefore, it is high time that the government rethinks and reconsiders its unsustainable policy of recurrent internet bans, and lets us breathe in this knowledge-based interconnected world.

Ishfaq Majid
School of Education,
Central University of Gujarat

Erratum

In the letter "In Solidarity with BEST Workers" (12 January 2019; p 4), the phrase "Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh (BMS) employees" in the fourth paragraph should have read as "BMC employees."

The error has been corrected on the EPW website.

The error is regretted. –Ed

EPW Engage

The following article has been published in the past week in the *EPW* Engage section (www.epw.in/engage).

(1) How Equitable Will Ayushman Bharat Be?— *Manasee Mishra, Arnab Mandal*