INTERNET SHUTDOWN STORIES

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Contents

Foreword

Aside from the waves of innovation that the digital revolution brought with it, the ever increasing pervasiveness of the internet has had a tremendous impact on empowerment and freedoms in society. We are seeing unprecedented levels of access to information, along with a democratization of the means of creation, production and dissemination of information to anyone with an internet connection. This in turn has greatly amplified, and in many cases even created the ability, particularly for those traditionally left in the margins, to more meaningfully participate in their global as well as local societies. Recognising the significance of the internet to the freedom of expression as well as for the development and exercising of human rights more broadly, the United Nations Human Rights Council unanimously passed a resolution confirming internet access being a fundamental human right.

Simultaneously however, we are seeing Indian states discover and experiment with their power to clamp down on these new modes of communication for a variety of reasons, ranging from the ill-intentioned to the ill-informed. An internet shutdown tracker maintained by the Software Freedom Law Centre, shows that the number of shutdowns in India is increasing every year, with 70 shutdowns reported in 2017, and 45 shutdowns already reported from 1st Jan, 2018 to 4th May, 2018[1]. These shutdowns also come at a significant economic cost. A 2016 Brookings report[2] estimates that India faced a loss of about $968 million due to internet shutdowns. However, the democratic harms we have been accruing are more difficult to quantify and demonstrate.

This book seeks to give a glimpse into the lives of those directly affected by these internet shutdown experiments. From Jammu and Kashmir to Telangana, from Gujarat to Nagaland, we have collected 30 stories

from across the country for an up-close look at how the everyday lives of common citizens have been impacted by internet shutdowns and website blocks. From CRPF members posted in Srinagar who use the internet to connect with their family, to students who have been cut off from education resources for competitive exams; from the disruptions in day to day life brought about by non-functional bank services in Darjeeling, to stock brokers in Ahmedabad who faced costly slowdowns; the idea of a Digital India is facing severe setbacks with these continuously increasing internet shutdowns.

When seen in a larger context, we hope that the stories in this book also demonstrate that access to the internet and freedom of speech is not just about an individual's rights, but are also required for the collective good. The diversity of perspectives and activities that a healthy democracy demands is not met by the versioning of dominant narratives, but by allowing for, if not directly encouraging, the voices and activities of the unheard, oppressed and marginalised. We hope that in the telling of these personal stories of the day-to-day of people affected by such internet shutdowns, this book joins in the effort to position the dehumanized internet kill switches more aptly as dangers to democracy.

SUNIL ABRAHAM
Executive Director
The Centre for Internet and Society

1. SFLC.In, **Internet Shutdowns**, available at *www.internetshutdowns.in*

2. West, Darrell, **Internet shutdowns cost countries $2.4 billion last year**, October 2016, available at *www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/intenet-shutdowns-v-3.pdf*

01

Digital banking dreams: Interrupted

Internet shutdowns drag banks in J&K far behind

By **SAFEENA WANI** @safeena_wani

J&K bank which has been shutdown due to protest in Srinagar
Picture Courtesy: Mohammad Abu Bakar

SRINAGAR, J&K

Inside a buzzing branch of the Jammu & Kashmir Bank in Srinagar, 27-year-old Falak Akhtar is busy processing routine transactions. A member of the technical team, this young banker says that almost half of the branch's customers have registered their accounts with the M-Pay mobile app. However, the application built for convenience is not always dependable. As she attends to the rush of customers inside the branch, Falak reminds us that whenever there is an internet shutdown, the app is of no use. "The customers have to resort to traditional banking," she says.

Everyday, Falak's branch executes 53% of its transactions online. "If the customers do online transactions, the cost per transaction for the bank is only Rs 7. But every time an internet ban is enforced in Kashmir, the cost of each transaction goes up to Rs 54," she says.

Given that internet shutdowns in Kashmir are usually accompanied by an imposition of a physical curfew, simply going to the bank can be impossible. Ironically, it is during political tensions that Kashmiris, stuck indoors due to curfew or avoiding the streets to keep safe, need internet banking the most.

Zahid Maqbool, an information officer with the J&K government, uses the J&K Bank's mobile app regularly to transfer money or do transactions. "But last year, when my brother studying outside the state needed money, I couldn't use the app because of the internet ban," he says. "During the tense situation and curfew, I took a huge risk to reach to the branch in Tral, where only two employees were present." It took him around three hours to transfer Rs 12,000 ($185) to his brother's account "because the bank's internet line was also running very slow".

Showkat (name changed), manager of an ICICI Bank branch in Srinagar, says they use internet facilities of BSNL and Airtel during normal days. "Our branch has 20,000 customers, and around 40% of them use digital banking through an app called I-Mobile," he says. The bank was not able to do online transactions throughout the summer, in the wake of the

shutdown following Burhan Wani's death. "And whenever there was a relaxation in curfew or strike, there used to be a huge rush of customers in the branch," Showkat says.

"Whenever an internet ban is on in Kashmir, we suffer huge losses because we don't manage to get new account holders," says Showkat. "Since we run most of our operations online, the ban blocks the account holder from accessing the net and uploading scanned ID proofs."

On an average, his branch opens 100 accounts per month. "But last year, amid the internet ban, we managed to open only 40 accounts in six months," he says. For processing these account opening applications, the bank had to courier the forms to Chandigarh, the bank's nerve centre in North India. Account openings take 24 hours online, but here, the forms took six days to reach Chandigarh, after which it took another 8 days to process it.

To overcome hurdles faced during last year's internet gag, the bank used the Indian Army's VSAT network on lease. Showkat says such a line can be used for commercial purposes after clearance from the Army and a payment of Rs 15,000 per month. "Our ATMs were connected through that lease line," he says. "But the problem was that the gag had slowed down the VSAT as well."

The slow-speed internet hampered cash withdrawals from ATMs, which created quite a furore. "The already frustrated customers started shouting that the bank employees were cheats, that we were irresponsible. It is very difficult to make them understand the technical aspects of it," he says.

Although banks suffer during frequent internet gags, their plight is often overshadowed by the bigger political crisis in Kashmir. What's clear is that disrupted banking, fee payments, purchases and withdrawals, all severely cripple the everyday life of Kashmiris.

In 2016, angry customers, barred from e-banking due to internet clampdown, thronged banks after months, demanding they be given some respite on EMIs (monthly loan repayments) and other banking schemes. An official from the branch of a nationalised bank outside

People standing in queue in front of J&K bank ATM to withdraw cash
Picture Courtesy: Mohammad Abu Bakar

Srinagar says that when they refused to entertain such requests on procedural grounds, the customers entered into heated exchanges.

Showkat says that customers who had taken loans were neither able to repay the installments online, nor were they able to visit the branch because of unrest. "These customers then end up having to bear the high interest rate, and some of them had to face penalties."

Mudasir Ahmad, the owner of a Kashmir Art Emporium in Central Kashmir's Budgam, says that he had borrowed a loan of Rs 40 lakh ($62,400) from J&K Bank as capital for his handicraft business, but he had missed seven loan installments last summer due to the internet clampdown. "I usually pay my loan installments through e-banking. Last year, when the internet was not working, I had to visit the bank to repay it. There are such long queues. It took me a whole day last year to pay one installment, which I otherwise pay within minutes through e-banking."

Digital banking was introduced in Kashmir few years ago in an effort to reduce footfall in banks and increase online transactions. Online banking done through cards and apps was hailed as a step towards a cashless economy. Abdul Rashid, a relationship executive of a State Bank of India branch in Srinagar, says, "But because of the internet gag at most times, we are not able to be a part of it."

Safeena Wani is a Srinagar-based freelance writer and a member of 101Reporters.com, a pan-India network of grassroots reporters.

Amid unrest in the Valley, students see a dark wall

Frequent, prolonged restrictions on internet have kept many from using the learning resource

By **AAKASH HASSAN** @Aakashhassan

Students in Srinagar's SPS Library
Picture Courtesy: Aakash Hassan

SRINAGAR, J&K

On November 18, Srinagar lost 3G and 4G connectivity after a militant and a sub-inspector of the Jammu & Kashmir police force were killed, and one militant caught alive in a brief encounter[1] on the outskirts of the city, near Zakoora crossing. District authorities said data connectivity was snapped to "maintain law and order".

But to Jasif Ayoub, an aspiring chartered accountant, it seemed like an obstruction to his exam preparations. Not being able to access lectures and texts online, Ayoub was perturbed. He had moved from Anantnag in south Kashmir, to Srinagar, only to have an easy access to the vast pool of information on the world wide web. "My hometown witnesses internet shutdowns very frequently. That is why I moved to live with relatives in Srinagar to prepare for my exams. But the internet speed here too is getting worse by the day," says Ayoub.

The internet is usually the first administrative casualty when any law & order situation arises in the Kashmir Valley, which has been restive and agitated over the last two decades. Despite the frequency of shutdowns, the state still does not issue a prior warning, or offer emergency connectivity measures. Residents know the pattern now: the mobile internet and SMS are the first to go down, and then broadband and other lease-line service providers follow.

J&K tops the list of Indian states that have witnessed most number of internet shutdowns, with 27 being the count from 2012 to 2017, according to internetshutdowns.in, run by Software Freedom Law Centre. There has been a sharp rise in the curbs on internet imposed this year, with over 30 shutdowns until November 22, bringing the total to 57 shutdowns. Government authorities who issue and implement these bans say it is the only way to undercut the strength of social media in organising movements and resistance. The prime example is Burhan Wani[2], the 21-year-old Hizb-ul-Mujahideen commander who had used his Facebook account to popularise[3] and justify militant resistance. Wani's death saw protests erupting across the Valley, which made the state

1. UNI, **SI, militant killed; 1 ultra arrested alive in Srinagar**, Nov 17, 2017, available at *www.uniindia. com/news/states/ si-militant-killed-1-ultra-arrested-alive-in-sri-nagar/1050461.html*

2. Wani, Ieshan, **11 Burhan funeral pictures which you missed due to internet clampdown**, July 24, 2016, available at *kashmirdispatch. com/2016/07/24/11-burhan-funeral-pictures-which-you-missed-due-to-internet-clamp-down/144891/*

3. Yasir, Sameer, **Hizb-ul-Mujahideen's Burhan Wani takes to social media to influence youth in Kashmir**, May 23, 2016, available at *www. firstpost.com/india/ the-virtual-world-hizb-ul-mujahideens-burhan-wani-innovates-to-in-fluence-youth-in-kash-mir-2794392.html*

snap internet services for about six months[4] on prepaid mobile networks. For four months, there was no internet access on postpaid mobile networks too. These have been the longest intervals of shutdowns. However, day-long, hour-long and even week-long periods of non-connectivity are alarmingly common.

The incessant disruption of internet services prevents students from accessing online education resources. Class IX student Haiba Jaan in Srinagar depends on lectures from Khan Academy, an online coaching centre, to clarify a lot of concepts. A resident of Hyderpora in Srinagar, Haiba points to the i-Pad in her hand. "This is the best way of learning," she says. "I was not satisfied with my teachers in school or tuition classes. I found studying on the internet quite useful. But, the problem with that is the regular internet shutdowns." Her parents got a postpaid broadband connection the previous year to help Haiba. "But even that gives up many times during total internet shutdowns," says Haiba.

In May this year, the government suspended the use of 22 social media and messaging platforms in Kashmir for a month. Skype was one of the messaging services banned. This put Mehraj Din through great trouble. Shortlisted for a summer programme at Istanbul, Turkey, this scholar of Islamic Studies at Kashmir University, had to appear for the final interview via Skype. "The ban could have ended all my chances to get selected had the organisers not agreed to an audio interview considering the ground situation here," says Mehraj, who is currently compiling his dissertation for the university. "I have a deadline to meet, but repeated shutdowns have affected my work," he says. "This a punishment from the State."

Full libraries, half studies

When home and mobile internet connections are snapped, the state government's e-learning initiative in public libraries provides some respite. Mehrosha Rasool wants to secure an MBBS seat through the NEET competitive exam. She visits the SPS library in Srinagar religiously to access the study material that has been downloaded and made available on computers. The 17-year-old resident of Nishat in Srinagar

Students in Srinagar's SPS Library
Picture Courtesy: Aakash Hassan

4. Scroll.in, **Prepaid mobile internet services restored in Kashmir after six months**, Jan 28, 2017, available at *scroll.in/latest/827906/prepaid-mobile-internet-services-restored-in-kashmir-after-six-months*

says libraries are useful since one never knows how long the internet services at home will stay stable. Irshad Ahmad, another student utilising the facilities at SPS library, says he moved to Srinagar from Pattan town of north Kashmir because "this facility of accessing education material is not available at the library in my tehsil."

Most prominent libraries in Srinagar have computers and tablets for students' access, "But the rooms often become overcrowded as hundreds of students have registered at the libraries for internet facilities," says Mehrosha.

Schools in the Valley, meanwhile, rely on traditional means in the absence of the e-learning systems. Javaid Ahmad Wani, a political science teacher from south Kashmir's Anantnag, believes that with

little time in the year to even complete the basic syllabus thanks to frequent and sudden school closures during periods of unrest, supplementary e-learning is a distant possibility. Even when teachers and students do have access to these resources to stay updated, internet shutdowns make them unreliable. Therefore, teachers and schools stick to conventional means. Javaid admits that he has himself lost opportunities to an internet shutdown. "I could not submit the form for the main exam of the J&K public service last year because there was no Internet," he says.

Curbs pinch civil service aspirants

Many among the civil service aspirants are dependent on the internet for preparations. Anees Malik, a resident of Shopian, is preparing for the civil service exams. "I cannot afford coaching, so I rely on the internet," he says, especially for mock exams and previous question papers. "In such a situation, losing connectivity almost every other week is the worst thing to happen."

Sakib Wani, a Kupwara resident who is currently studying chemistry in Uttarakhand, notices a marked indifference in Kashmir to using online resources. "Those applying for scholarships and pursuing higher education may be using it but not to the extent that students in other states of India do it," Sakib says. He believes that the repeated internet ban could be a possible reason for students to not opt for online educational resources. With colleges and schools shut for weeks during conflict periods, the internet could have been a great way to continue education formally and personally, but the repeated shutdowns have closed that door of opportunity too.

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Students in Srinagar's SPS Library
Picture Courtesy: Aakash Hassan

It hurts them too

Internet shutdown robs security forces' social media lifeline in J&K

By **MIR FARHAT** @mirfarhat9

CRPF Jawans on duty in Kashmir valley
Picture Courtesy: Mohammad Abu Bakar

For Mahender*, a member of the Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) posted in Srinagar for the last two years, the internet has been a way to feel virtually close to his children and wife in Bihar, nearly 1,900 km away. After duty every day, he finds a quiet corner to start video-calling his wife. At the other end, she ensures their two children are beside her. "We discuss how our day went. Most of our conversations revolve around the kids, their schooling and food, and about my parents who live near our house," says Mahender, who identified himself only with his first name.

However, Mahender and thousands of security personnel like him posted in the Kashmir Valley haven't found this easy connectivity always reliable, courtesy the government's frequent internet shutdowns, phone data connectivity cuts, and social media bans.

The administration justifies this crackdown by citing "law-and-order situations" that occur during encounters of security forces with militants and, later, when protests and marches are carried out by civilians during militants' funerals.

Security forces and police are not untouched by the internet shutdowns either. There are 47 CRPF battalions posted in the Kashmir region. "Our jawans experience difficulties during internet bans as they do not remain able to communicate with their families and friends as frequently as they do when internet is working," says Srinagar-based CRPF Public Relations Officer Rajesh Yadav.

The J&K police, who are at the forefront of quelling protests and maintaining law & order in the Valley with a strength of nearly 100,000, also suffer. There have been growing instances of clashes between the Kashmiri police and protesters who believe their home force is being brutal during crowd control. The policemen have had to hide or operate in plain clothes. A senior police officer in Srinagar, who does not want to be named, says, "Our families are worried about our well-being when we are dealing with frequent agitations. In such a situation, when there is a ban, we find it difficult to stay in touch with our families."

More dangerously, internet bans also hit the official communication of cops in action. Their offices are equipped with BSNL landline connections, which are rarely shut down, and they usually communicate through wireless; but for mobile internet most of them depend on private internet service providers, owing to better connectivity, as the rest of the state. A senior police officer who deals with counter-insurgency in Kashmir speaks of the impact of cutting off phone data connectivity. "We have our own WhatsApp groups for quick official communication. We use broadband in offices only and can't take it to sites of counter-insurgency operations."

Yadav of the CRPF says, "While we have several effective means of communication for official purposes, social media is one that has accentuated our communication network. During internet bans, our work is not entirely hampered, but there is a little bit of pinch, since that speed and ease of working is not there." Nevertheless, he defends the ban, insisting that Facebook and WhatsApp are handy tools for people to "flare up" the situation and "mobilise youths" during protests. "So, it becomes a compulsion for the administration to impose the ban."

Counter-insurgency forces have in the last few years created social media monitoring and surveillance cells. They say it is to match the extremists, including those in Pakistan, who use social media services like Telegram, Facebook and WhatsApp now, instead of their phones which can be tapped. It is also to keep an eye on suspected rumour-mongers and propagandists. For instance, 22-year-old Burhan Wani had gained the attention of security forces precisely because of the way he used his huge following, amassed through Facebook posts and gun-toting pictures, to inspire young Kashmiris to militancy.

"There is always monitoring and surveillance. If militants are using it, then they are within the loop," says Yadav.

There is widespread public outrage against the state government and agencies who impose frequent net bans in Kashmir, but the CRPF official says it hampers their attempts to build an image and do public relations in Kashmir too. "We promote and highlight programmes like Civic Action and Sadhbhavana online, and that's not possible when there's no social media."

CRPF Jawans guarding a chowk during curfew in Kashmir valley
Picture Courtesy: Mohammad Abu Bakar

"The public's criticism of the ban is justified," the counter-insurgency official says. But they are compelled to use it in situations like the recent scare around braid chopping, which was caused due to "rumour-mongering by persons with vested interests". Kashmiri civil society had suggested that the police keep the internet up to issue online clarifications trashing the rumours, but it was not to be.

"The internet has made it possible to identify culprits while sitting in an office. But we have to shut it down in case of communal tensions which have the tendency to engulf the whole state," says the senior cop. "When we have no option left, we go back to traditional human intelligence."

Name changed to protect identity.

Mir Farhat is a Srinagar-based freelance writer and a member of 101Reporters.com, a pan-India network of grassroots reporters.

Rising stars in music loath losing their only platform

The music from Kashmir wants to find a way out, but shutting internet down only adds to the bitterness

By **UMAR SHAH** & **MIR FARHAT**

Mehmeet Syed's popularity on social media has taken her to countries like US, UK, Australia and Abu Dhabi
Picture Courtesy: Mehmeet Syed Facebook page

1. Abdal, Yawar, **Tamanna**, June 2, 2017, available at *www.youtube.com/watch?v=u4jchTQ4EeA*

2. Brighter Kashmir, **JK-CCS Releases Human Right Review of 2016**, December 31, 2016, available at *brighter-kashmir.com/jkccs-releases-human-right-review-of-2016/*

SRINAGAR, J&K

Amid the gaudy Old City area of Srinagar, where the air is heavy with the pungent smell of teargas shells, 25-year-old Ali Saifuddin has been busy working on compositions that he will perform at a prominent indie music festival in Pune in December 2017. Pune may be discovering Saifuddin's music only now, but he has performed in Dubai and London too, owing to the fanbase he has garnered on social media.

It was in 2014 when the budding musician bought recording gear and created a Facebook page. Hours after uploading his first video, Saifuddin became an internet sensation. "I was stunned to see thousands of views on Facebook. People who I had never met with hailed my tunes and encouraged me to produce more," Saifuddin says.

With 9,000 followers on Instagram and more than 6,000 'likes' on his Facebook page, Saifuddin often gets offers to perform outside Kashmir.

"(As an artist) you need a platform, and in Kashmir, it is the internet that sides with you," says Yawar Abdal, another popular Youtuber, whose song *Tamanna*[1] has garnered over 400,000 views since June. "I uploaded a minute-long video on Facebook in April last year. It became viral and made me famous," Abdal says.

The 23-year-old Pune University student has more than 13,000 followers on Instagram and above 10,000 likes on Facebook. "There are no shows organised in Kashmir. Internet is the only platform where people can broadcast what they posses," he says.

Frequent curfews, even online, are like a curse for Kashmiris. Internet services are being clamped down in the Valley quite often, particularly after the killing of militant leader Burhan Wani on July 8. Wani's killing sparked violent protests resulting in the deaths of 15 civilians the very next day. The clashes killed 383 people - including 145 civilians, 138 militants and 100 state and Central security personnel - and around 15,000 others were injured. While many were also put under illegal detention[2] following the outbreak of deadly violence, the government suspended internet for more than six months in 2016.

In such a scenario, where shutdowns are stretching from streets to the social media, it is not surprising to see Kashmiris voice their dissent through art whenever they find a window open. In 2017, internet services were blocked 27 times[3] across various districts of the Valley, either on mobile, or on both mobile and broadband, in the hope that it would prevent rumour mongering and instigation of violence.

"This is unnatural and tantamount to choking a person's right to free speech," says Saifuddin, who has been criticising the human rights violations in Kashmir with songs that carry a political undertone. Son of medical doctors based in UK, Saifuddin got initiated to rock music through Jimi Hendrix and Led Zeppelin during school days, before heading to Delhi University for a BA degree in 2011. "There I found the treasure of music. I finally had a computer and an internet connection. Youtube became my first, and so far, the only teacher," recalls Saifuddin. His songs on Youtube include *Aye Raah-e-Haq Ke Shaheedon*[4], *Phir Se Hum Ubharaygay*[5], and *Manzoor Nahi*[6] - a song he posted to protest against Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Kashmir in November 2015.

For Mehmeet Syed, whose music was limited to CDs since 2004, internet opened new avenues. Her popularity on social media has taken her to countries like US, UK, Australia and Abu Dhabi among others. "Being on social media is very important as it lets people stay updated about my work. My popularity touched new heights after I took to the internet," says Syed, who owns a verified Facebook page with more than 1.20 lakh followers. On Instagram, she is a novice. But an internet ban means "heartbreak" to her. "Internet is not shut down in other places witnessing violence and conflict...We are very unfortunate to face internet bans," says Syed.

"As singers, we have to record songs, mail them for editing, or receive content from studios. Without internet, we are stuck, paralysed," she says.

Explaining how internet is more than a means of free expression, Mehmeet says, "Times have changed. This is the era of iTunes and

3. SFLC.In, **Internet Shutdowns**, available at *www.internetshut-downs.in*

4. Saffudin, Ali, **Aye Rah E Haq Ke Shaheedo (Tribute to Kashmir Freedom Struggle)**, August 20, 2016, available at *www.youtube.com/watch?v=U_kh_YKoELM*

5. Saffudin, Ali, **Phir Se Hum Ubhraygay**, July 28, 2016, available at *www.youtube.com/watch?v=0IO2gNtVb0E*

6. Saffudin, Ali, **Manzoor Nahi**, November 12, 2015, available at *www.youtube.com/watch?v=_1CSL-1OzKw*

Umar Majeed shot to fame with his rendition of Pakistan's national anthem on the Santoor
Picture Courtesy: Mehmeet Syed Facebook page

YouTube. The songs we release in Kashmir are watched online across the globe. And this is how you earn today."

The freedom to share content has empowered even the marginalised who were only known locally for their talent. Abdul Rashid, a transgender wedding singer popular as 'Reshma' in Srinagar's Old City, became an online sensation after one of her wedding songs was widely viewed on Facebook, and media followed up with stories around her.

"Nobody knew me outside my locality. But today, I get calls from across Kashmir to sing on weddings. This became possible through Facebook. It gave me wide publicity," Reshma says.

Umar Majeed, a Class 12 student from Zainakoot in Srinagar, is keeping the folk tradition of Kashmir alive with the help of the internet. While the 19-year-old inherited skills on Santoor from his father, Abdul Majeed, it was social media that propelled him to fame. Umar played the national anthem of Pakistan on Santoor, accompanied by two other musicians on Rabaab. "The instrumental composition was viewed 450,000 times in two days," says Umar, adding that they are working on a musical theme of the Indian national anthem as well.

With 5,000 friends on Facebook and 2,500 followers on Instagram, Umar has a quite wide network for a schoolkid. "We get a lot of encouragement and confidence when people comment on and appreciate our work online," he says. But repeated internet ban keeps the young musician away from much needed feedback.

"When I get an idea, I instantly compose it on Santoor and upload it on Facebook to get viewers' response... But when there is internet ban, I have no mood to play even when I get an idea, and soon I forget it," he says.

Mehmeet points out that internet not only promises freedom of expression but also provides monetary support to indie artists through platforms like iTunes, Google Play, Pandora, Amazon and Saavn. She has been generating revenue to support her music through 21 tracks uploaded on these platforms, Mehmeet says.

The repeated shutdown of internet during Republic Day and Independence Day also sends a wrong message to Kashmiris, says Mehmeet. "We realise that such attitude is step-motherly, which is unacceptable. And we as Kashmiris have not yet reached the stage where we think we have got independence." Saifuddin seconds her sentiments. "If it is a democracy, then
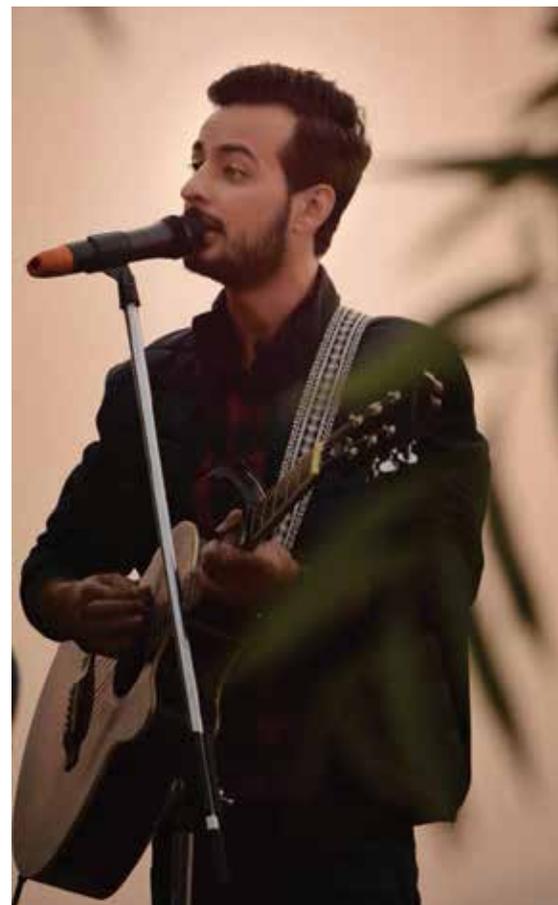
Yawar Abdal, a Kashmiri singer, says he doesn't see the logic behind keeping the internet shut for months

Picture Courtesy: Yawar Abdal Facebook Page

I have a right to speak my heart out. Why would the government choke my voice?" he asks.

When asked if the clamping down of internet service affects his music and earning, Saifuddin retorts poetically: "If not for the internet, I wouldn't be around. So yes, it pains to see Kashmir being sealed on streets and on the cyberspace as well.

"It makes you angry at times to see things that happen nowhere but in Kashmir."

Abdal, on the contrary, wants his music to be apolitical. "I sing the songs of Sufi saints and strive to rejuvenate dying Kashmiri music," he says.

But the ban on internet services leaves him perturbed. "Without listeners, you begin losing interest. I hope one day the government understands that there is no logic in keeping the internet shut for weeks and months," says Abdal, adding that he also observes a drop in demand for live gigs in the absence of the internet.

"When you have a lot to share, but the medium through which you could take it to people is blocked, discomfort is what you're left with."
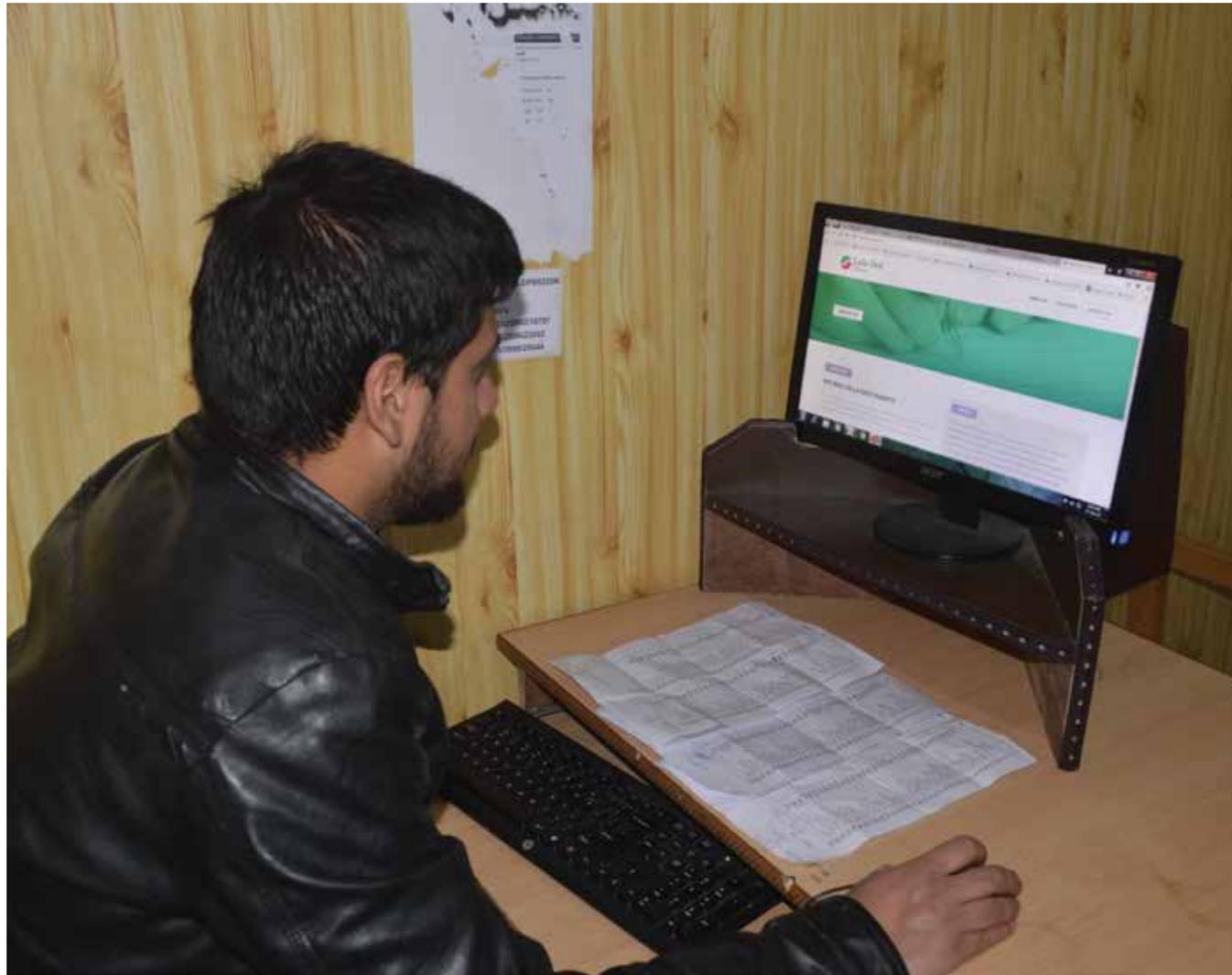
Umar Shah and Mir Farhat are Srinagar-based freelance writers and members of 101Reporters.com, a pan-India network of grassroots reporters.

05

ISPs in Kashmir grappling with mounting losses amid recurrent shutdowns

Internet savvy youth taking to alternative routes to access the world wide web

By **SAFEENA WANI** @safeena_wani

A college student in Srinagar browsing internet using VPN
Picture Courtesy: Mir Farhat

SRINAGAR, J&K

CNS Infotel Services, once a buzzing cybercafé in Srinagar's Lal Chowk, is now a prominent internet service provider (ISP) for the town. It is popular for providing uninterrupted, fast internet connections, but that reputation has been tough to maintain as the Kashmir Valley has witnessed 56 internet shutdowns[1] since 2012, 38 over the last two years alone. This has pushed the economy downhill and discouraged new enterprises from emerging.

Once the internet is blocked, executives at ISPs either skip calls to avoid public ire, or express their helplessness over the sudden disruption of internet ordered by authorities in the wake of some security situation.

An executive at CNS, Imran says how a sudden 'police directive' often forces them to apply the internet 'kill switch'. "In May this year," says Imran, "we received a circular stating that authorities want us to block 22 social media and messaging sites, including Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter, Skype, Telegram and Viber, with immediate effect." That day, CNS executives were only repeating a prohibition procedure that has become a norm in the Valley. In the post-2008 Kashmir, as street protests became the popular mode of dissent, the state's observation has been that resistance is being "fuelled by social media."

"There's a perpetual struggle for us to grapple between police orders and annoyed customers," says Owais Mir, an executive of G Technologies, another ISP in Srinagar. "The frequent internet gags hamper our operations… annoyed customers often threaten to either switch over to another service provider or to deactivate their connections."

Mobile data and broadband services in Kashmir were banned 10 times between April 8 and July 13 in 2017. "By then," Imran says, "we were running into huge losses."

While Imran does not have an actual figure to quote about the loss he faced, mobile ISPs were decrying daily losses to the tune of Rs 2 crore between April and July 2017.

1. SFLC.In, **Internet Shutdowns**, available at *www.internetshutdowns.in*

According to Cellular Operators Association of India (COAI), mobile service providers in Kashmir suffered losses worth Rs 180 crore[2] during that period. When such orders are passed, usually, except the state-run BSNL, other service providers — Airtel, Aircel, Vodafone and Reliance (Jio) — promptly shut down their operations. The postpaid BSNL numbers, which are mainly with police, army and government officials, continue running.

Raouf Athar, a project manager and director with Yarikul Software Solutions in Srinagar, which provides software development and support solutions to clients in India and Europe, says he has complete dependence on the internet for his business. Yarikul has a staff strength of less than 10 at present.

"In an event of an outage/ban on internet services, we are unable to work properly. In order to tackle these situations, we had to opt for more expensive alternatives like lease lines and BSNL broadband connections, which are not affected by the ban," says Athar. "But these connections do not allow our tiny staff to be flexible and work from home as per the need. Many a times we find it difficult to communicate with clients who are not in our time zone," he adds.

Alternative Access

The repeated loss of communication in the Valley has prompted Kashmiri netizens to explore solutions. Many of them have learnt to access the Virtual Private Networks (VPNs), mostly through broadband internet and state-owned BSNL, in order to continue using messaging services and social media.

A VPN[3] uses proxy servers to securely access a private network while allowing users to change location and share data remotely through public networks. It secures a connection through encryption and security protocols, and enables access to content that is otherwise blocked. VPN keeps the ISP from placing restrictions on access.

"VPNs help us to overcome the irrational social media blockade," says Shagufta Mir, a college student from Srinagar. "More than a political statement, using VPN sends out a positive message that Kashmiris have

2. Malik, Saqib, **In 3 months, internet banned 10 times in Kashmir,** July 14, 2017, available at *www.greaterkashmir. com/news/business/ in-3-months-internet-banned-10-times-in-kashmir/254706.html*

3. Tarantola, Andrew, **VPNs: What They Do, How They Work, and Why You're Dumb for Not Using One,** March 26, 2013, available at *gizmodo. com/5990192/vpns-what-they-do-how-they-work-and-why-youre-dumb-for-not-using-one*

4. Irfan, Hakeem, **Behind the information curtain: Kashmir has learnt to work around social media bans,** April 30, 2017, available at *economictimes. indiatimes.com/news/ politics-and-nation/ behind-the-info-curtain-kashmir-has-learnt-to-work-around-social-media-bans/ articleshow/58438207. cms*

5. West, Darrell M., **Internet shutdowns cost countries $2.4 billion last year,** October 2016, available at *www.brookings.edu/wp-content/ uploads/2016/10/inten-et-shutdowns-v-3.pdf*

6. Maqbool, Majid, **Frequent Internet Bans Are Slowly Choking Kashmir's Online Businesses,** July 18, 2017, available at *thewire.in/158719/internet-shutdowns-kashmir-business-start-up/*

7. Akmali, Mukeet, **Online business faces onslaught of internet ban, restrictions,** September 18, 2016, available at http:// *www.greaterkashmir. com/news/front-page/ online-business-faces-onslaught-of-internet-ban-restrictions/228618.html*

evolved to tackle repeated restrictions imposed on them." Most users have learnt about VPNs from their tech-savvy peers.

"When the government banned social media earlier this year," says Shafat Hamid, a trader, "my friend taught me how to access a VPN. I felt empowered to be able to overcome the frequent gag on online activities."

'India worse than Iraq'

Jammu & Kashmir has higher internet penetration[4] than the all-India average with 28.62 internet subscribers per 100 people compared to the national figure of 25.37.

Although broadband was functioning, the suspended mobile internet for over five months from July 9 to Nov 19, 2016 (data services on pre-paid mobiles remained suspended until January 27, 2017) saw many operators winding up. During that period, internetshutdowns.in, a website run by Delhi-based non-profit Software Freedom Law Centre (SFLC) to track incidents of internet shutdowns across India, recorded that Kashmir had no internet access for "over 2,920 hours". This made India worse than Iraq and Pakistan in terms of number of days without internet, according to a report[5] by the Brookings Institution.

According to a report[6], out of the 14,000 local youth employed in the IT sector in the Valley, an estimated 7,000 people lost their jobs due to the frequent internet shutdowns imposed last year. Online businesses incurred losses worth Rs 40-50 lakh[7] on a daily basis during that period.

During the internet shutdown last year, COAI had written to the department of telecommunications that such communication bans have an adverse impact on the subscribers and result in losses to telecom operators. "Kashmir lost around 4.5 lakh active subscribers during the 2016 unrest," says Sameer Parray, an area manager for Vodafone.

But service providers say they have to comply with the orders, lest their licenses be cancelled.

Safeena Wani is a Srinagar-based freelance writer and a member of 101Reporters.com, a pan-India network of grassroots reporters.

06

Online or offline, protest goes on

Kashmiris say internet blockades have no effect on uprisings

By **JUNAID NABI BAZAZ** @junaidnabibazaz

Faizan, a 12-year-old schoolboy, was killed in the Dalwan shooting
Picture Courtesy: Junaid Nabi Bazaz

SRINAGAR, J&K

Ahead of the Srinagar parliamentary by-polls held on 9 April 2017, the Jammu & Kashmir state government suspended mobile data services to prevent protests around the election. The constituency went to polls with strict restrictions on movement, and with no access to mobile internet. As soon as the electoral staff reached their respective polling booths, however, there were protests. People at dozens of locations in central Kashmir's Budgam district began to gather to demonstrate against the central and state governments, which they believed had not safeguarded Kashmiri interests.

In Dalwan village, a picture-postcard village atop a hill 35 kms from Budgam town, no votes were cast: the officers fled the polling station, and the paramilitary forces and police shot at protesters. Two people – a 21-year-old son of a policeman and a 12-year-old schoolboy – died on the spot.

People of Dalwan have been voting in droves in every parliamentary, legislative and local body election, even on occasions where much of Kashmir boycotted polls. But in April, residents said they were fed up with legislators not working to ensure uninterrupted power, water supply, concrete roads, or even a permanent doctor at its only dispensary. So, a village that has never demonstrated or produced any militants in the last 30 years of uprisings in the Kashmir Valley erupted in protest that election day. Now, the cemetery in which the two killed civilians are buried has been renamed as Martyr's Graveyard.

Bazil Ahmad, a resident of Dalwan, says that nothing could have prevented the protests that day. "We protested against state, it was a spontaneous response," says 22-year-old Ahmad who threw his first stones that day. "If the government believes that an internet blockade could prevent protests, they're living in a fool's paradise." He sees the internet only as a free platform to express his anger and disappointment. "The actual trigger for the anger comes from the denial of rights and state aggression, not because of the internet," says Ahmad.

As the news about the killings spread to neighbouring villages word-of-mouth, residents there too protested. Journalists in these villages updated their newsrooms. In a few days, all newspapers in Kashmir carried the news of eight deaths, scores of injuries, and the appalling 6.5% voter turnout in Budgam and Ganderbal districts.

After the ban was lifted, videos captured on polling day were posted on Facebook, Twitter and WhatsApp. One of them was a video of Farooq Dar, a voter returning from the polling booth, tied to the front bumper of a military vehicle as it patrolled villages. A paper with his name was tied to his chest, and a soldier announced on the loudspeaker, "Look at the fate of the stonepelter." The video created an uproar internationally. The armed forces were accused of using a civilian as "a human shield", pushing it to hold an inquiry, and the police to lodge an FIR.

After these videos emerged, the government on April 26 officially banned 22 social media sites and apps, including Facebook, WhatsApp and Twitter, for over a month. Once again, it seemed to have little effect on the protestors.

Sajad, who has been throwing stones for the past eight years at the armed forces, says, "The government is miscalculating the use of internet and the occurrence of protests." The 28-year-old refers to the protests using the Kashmiri phrase *kani jung*, loosely translated as 'stone battle', which to him conveys a revolutionary zeal. Youths like Sajad who participate in the protests insist that they are provoked each time by an instance of human rights violation that exacerbates the long experience of militarisation, aspiration for "azadi", and conflict in Kashmir. Internet shutdowns do nothing to erase this trigger, he says, and sometimes heighten their anger.

In just 2017, there have been 27 internet or social media bans in J&K, according to internetshutdowns.in. It is unclear if these blockades curb the spread of misinformation at all, or prevent the mobilisation of people for protests. For instance, on 15 April 2017, students from Degree College in south Kashmir's Pulwama district protested against the armed forces for shelling teargas and beating them. Though there was an

Left: Abbas, 21, was one of the victims of the shooting in Dalwan
Above: Abbas' home in Dalwan
Picture Courtesy: Junaid Nabi Bazaz

The school in Dalwan where the shooting occurred
Picture Courtesy: Junaid Nabi Bazaz

internet ban in place, the incident went live on Facebook. It led to more student protests across the state. Schools, colleges and universities had to be closed for weeks.

Due to the frequency of blockades, several Kashmiris, including ministers, bureaucrats, civilians, protesters and police officers, have found a way out: they have turned to VPNs (Virtual Private Networks).

A VPN allows users to remain secure online and also enables them to access content or websites that are otherwise blocked. Sajad says, "A selective ban on the internet does not help, because we use VPNs. A person gains access to a network, and everyone in the area finds out

how. Let the government block everything, it won't stop protests." To illustrate his point, Sajad gives the example of uprisings in the summer of 2016, during which internet, pre-paid and post-paid connections were shut for months. "Were there not protests?" he asks. "Kashmir was resisting Indian forces even before the internet existed, so why would it be difficult for us to use the same means now?"

Gulzar, a 30-year-old who has joined protests since he was 15, says the internet is more often used to disseminate information about injustices, and not to organise protests. "A guy from Srinagar will only protest in Srinagar, and not go to other places. So, it is not too difficult to find out where protests are going on," says Gulzar.

A DSP-rank police officer in the cyber crime cell of the J&K Police, on the condition of anonymity, says that bans have not yielded absolute results, but have been useful in preventing small-scale protests. He cited the example of district-level territorial internet blockades, done during gunfights between militants and the armed forces, to prevent immediate information sharing that may lead to the operation being compromised. "Say some militants are caught during an encounter in a village in Pulwama district. We block the internet as a precautionary measure in that area," he says. "In case the district is violence-free, we reduce the bandwidth. That has now become the standard operating procedure."

The police officer adds that accustomed to the bans, people now record the protests and later post videos on social media once the ban is lifted. "So, in effect, what the internet ban achieved is neutralised as soon as the internet is back on," he says.

Names changed to protect identity.

Junaid Nabi Bazaz is a Srinagar-based journalist and a member of 101Reporters.com, a pan-India network of grassroots reporters.

Internet and the police: Tool to some, trash to others

Disconnection with colleagues discomforts one part of the administration, but the other quips, what's the big deal?

By **MANOJ KUMAR**

Special forces on duty at Sirsa, headquarter of Dera Sacha Sauda, just before the court verdict on DSS Chief Gurmeet Ram Rahim Singh case
Picture Courtesy: **Manoj Dhaka**

PANCHKULA, HARYANA

Suspension of internet facilities to "prevent mishaps" has been a frequent exercise in Haryana during various agitations, but probing its effect on those responsible to maintain the law & order in the state shows a gap in acceptance of the information tool. There are some who understand its importance in bridging human interaction, and then, there are others who consider it nothing but an easy way to watch porn.

The tricity of Chandigarh, Panchkula and Mohali witnessed chaos and violence when Dera Sacha Sauda (DSS) chief Gurmeet Ram Rahim Singh was convicted in two rape cases on August 25. Mobile internet services were shut down across Punjab, Haryana and Chandigarh for 72 hours as over one lakh followers of the much-revered "godman" started pouring into Panchkula, camping around the district court complex where the special CBI court was hearing the case. The ban was later extended[1] for another 48 hours to last till August 29.

Reports claimed that 38 people died[2] in the interim violence between August 25 and 29. The internet shutdown, evidently, didn't serve the purpose. But it did affect the efficiency of the mechanism put in place to control the law and order situation.

Shutdowns obstruct us too: Cops

Panchkula police commissioner Arshinder Singh Chawla said they faced challenges in ascertaining size of the crowd gathering at various locations after the mobile internet communication was temporarily killed. "We were until then sharing information and photos on WhatsApp to figure out the number of people pouring in the city from various points as it helped identify problem areas. DSS followers had started gathering August 22 onwards," said Chawla, who was heading the operations when DSS followers went on a rampage in Panchkula.

Unavailability of internet had hindered police operations during the Jat agitation in 2016 as well. Jagdish Sharma, a retired DSP who was part

1. The Hindu Business Line, **Mobile internet services to remain suspended in Haryana, Punjab**, August 27, 2017, available at *www.thehindubusinessline.com/news/national/mobile-internet-services-to-remain-suspended-in-haryana-punjab/article9832262.ece*

2. Times of India, **Rape convict Gurmeet Ram Rahim sentenced to 20 years in jail**, August 28, 2017, available at *timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/rape-convict-gurmeet-ram-rahim-sentenced-to-10-years-in-jail/articleshow/60257535.cms*

of the team countering agitators at the Munak canal when they targeted the chief source of Delhi's water supply, said his team faced challenges in gathering strength due to the absence of mobile communication. "The protesters had a much larger count than our personnel at the canal, but they weren't aware of this. We were fearful that our wireless messages asking for reinforcements may be tapped into by them. We could have easily conveyed the message if WhatsApp was working then," said Sharma. The cops retained control over Munak canal by remaining at their position for two days, until the reinforcements arrived, while posing as if they were prepared to take on the Jat agitators, Sharma added.

The Panchkula police commissioner said that the drone they were using to take photographs and videos during the DSS violence also fell out of use once mobile internet was curtailed. With drones in operation, their tasks would have been much easier, Chawla said.

Panchkula deputy commissioner Gauri Parashar Joshi faced the brunt when her security staff could not communicate with the security personnel at the district court complex. SP Krishan Murari, who was heading a commando squad on the day, said they had to help Joshi scale a wall to escape the court complex as they could not ascertain a safe escape route. The DSS supporters had surrounded the entrances to the complex and were ready to clash with police authorities, he said. Joshi said she could not reach out to her colleagues in the administration to share important messages and orders as the mobile internet services didn't work.

'Ban can't always be boon'

Ram Singh Bishnoi, who was cyber security in-charge with the Haryana police until January 2017, believes a medium like the internet should not be broken down. "I agree that rumours spread like wildfire, but the government should devise other ways to counter the problem than imposing a ban on net services," he said.

IG (Telecommunication) Paramjit Singh Ahlawat, however, said there is not much use of the internet when the situation turns volatile in the

region. Things like internet don't matter to people when their lives and property are in danger; these services are enjoyed when law and order is under control, he said.

The cops in Haryana, where internet has been shut down over 11 times in the past two years, may learn from the former Mumbai police commissioner Rakesh Maria, who avoided a scuffle from turning into a communal riot. Maria was lauded[3] for using WhatsApp and SMS service to convince people not to believe rumours being circulated on their phones when clashes broke out between two communities in Lalbaug during Eid celebrations in early 2015.

Former Haryana DGP Mahender Singh Malik does not believe a ban on internet prevents any untoward incident. The government authorities take such a step in the name of maintaining law and order, but the real reason behind clamping internet is to avoid the masses from being aware of the blunders committed by the same authorities, alleged Malik, terming the decision to ban the internet as "unwise" and "against the digital India" initiative of the Centre.

Malik also suggested that people should get compensation when internet shutdown is forced on them.

'Internet is for the jobless'

However, not all officials in the police department seem to agree with the benefits of having access to the internet.

SP (Telecommunication) Vinod Kumar of Haryana Police said: "How does it (internet) matter to a common man? Internet is for those who have no serious job. It is for those who have time to kill on mobile phones, laptops and at cyber cafes."

In nearby Uttar Pradesh as well, some cops were of the view that internet shutdown did not have much of an impact on their job or general administration. Sub-inspector Vijay Singh was posted in Saharanpur when the internet was banned from May 24 for 10 days following caste

3. Mid-day, **Putting Lid on Rumours Helped Control Situation in Lalbaug: Rakesh Maria,** January 06, 2015, available at *www.ndtv. com/mumbai-news/ putting-lid-on-rumours-helped-control-situation-in-lalbaug-rakesh-maria-723212*

clashes. "*Internet band hone se farak sirf un logon ko pada jinhe din bhar keval mobile hee chalana hota hai. Kaam karne wala aadmi mobile aur internet par samay nahi bitata* (Only those who have no work suffer because of internet ban. Those who have work in hand do not spend time on mobile and internet)," said Singh, who is now posted in Lucknow.

"*Internet matlab kya - video, Facebook, blue film... aur kya? Agar itne bade gyani hai jinhe internet band hone se farak pada to wo yaha kya kar rahe hai, kahe nahi jakar ke IIT me admission le liye?* (What does internet mean - videos, Facebook, porn films... what else? If you are so affected with internet being banned, why not go and study at IITs," said Kaushlendra Pandey, another SI-rank policeman from Azamgarh district in UP.

The government of India, on the other hand, is campaigning to promote digital inclusion and accessibility across the country.

Manoj Kumar is a Chandigarh based freelance writer and a member of 101Reporters.com, a pan-India network of grassroots reporters. With additional inputs from Sat Singh and Saurabh Sharma, both members of 101Reporters.com

Haryana police patrolling on horse at Sirsa just before the court verdict on DSS Chief Gurmeet Ram Rahim Singh
Picture Courtesy: **Manoj Dhaka**

Silence on the Dera front

How DSS followers, accused of violent protests after their leader was sentenced, manage without the internet

By **SAT SINGH** @satsingh15

Supporters of DSS Chief Gurmeet Ram Rahim Singh in Sirsa protesting police's decision to take him to court
Picture Courtesy: Manoj Dhaka

SIRSA, HARYANA

Raj Rani's two expensive smartphones are her whole world. But the 32-year-old entrepreneur from Haryana's Hisar district found them entirely useless when she needed them most – on August 25, during the violent protests by members of the spiritual group Dera Sacha Sauda[1] (DSS) after their leader Gurmeet Ram Rahim was convicted of rape.

"My family follows DSS, and had gone to attend the monthly congregation on August 15 (which also happened to be Ram Rahim's birthday), when were told that 'Pitaji' asked us to stay back in the premises, in case of an adverse verdict by the court in rape cases against him," she says. This is understood to have been done as a show of support that could put pressure on the judiciary and state for a favourable verdict.

Along with lakhs of other followers, Rani was present in Dera's Sirsa headquarters with her two children. She stayed in constant touch with her husband Sunny Kumar, a businessman based in New Delhi. "Every day, I showed him the Dera premises and religious activities through WhatsApp video calls," she says.

She recalls "the nightmarish moment" on the night of August 24 when the Haryana police and the Indian army surrounded the Dera. They imposed a curfew in the town, and restricted people from coming in and going outside the premises spread over 700 acres.

Rani says that the government blocked the internet on August 24 – a day before the self-styled godman appeared in the Panchkula court. Service providers of different companies, including mobile phone and landline services, were also barred at the Dera Sacha Sauda headquarters. As a result, Rani lost all contact with her husband. "I was confident until I was connected with my family over WhatsApp call and video chat, but as soon as this went away, I started losing faith, and felt afraid," she says.

After the curfew was imposed and internet was shut down, Rani says the devotees started to panic. They demanded that the DSS management

1. Batchelor, Tom, **Gurmeet Ram Rahim Singh: 29 killed as protests erupt in India after spiritual leader convicted of raping two women**, August 25 2017, available at *www.independent.co.uk/news/world/asia/gurmeet-ram-rahim-singh-rape-latest-convicted-3-dead-violent-protests-followers-india-spiritual-a7912341.html*

permit them to go to their respective homes after Gurmeet's arrest on August 25. After his conviction for rape, Rani says the politically influential and funds-flushed DSS fell like a house of cards. "There was chaos all around," she says.

Fearing that Dera followers would vandalise public property to protest their leader's conviction, the police had restricted public transport. Private vehicles were being allowed to move only after multiple security checks. On the morning of August 27, hundreds of devotees started to leave the Dera premises by foot. Rani walked about 50 kms along the national highway 10 (Hisar-Sirsa) up to Fatehabad district.

It was a coordination committee of police, legislators, and bureaucrats from Haryana, Punjab and Chandigarh, under the chairmanship of Punjab governor and union territory administrator VP Singh Badnore, that took the decision to ban the internet. After the order on August 24, all the SMSes, dongle, and data services provided on mobile network were suspended. The government only allowed phone calls during the internet shutdown in affected districts in these states.

Dissing the police's claims that Dera followers started the violence first, provoking the cops to fire, 32-year-old shopkeeper Gaurav Soni, an ardent DSS follower for seven years, insists that things went out of control because the internet connection was snapped. He says that senior members in the Dera's internal WhatsApp groups couldn't send messages to calm angry followers. "Whatever happened was a result of a communication gap," says Soni, who joined the protests. "No one asked the followers to get violent, and followers never attempt such things without proper instructions. But since there was a leadership gap, thanks to the break in communication, all this occurred."

Vikas Kumar, an IT expert of the Dera Sacha Sauda agrees, "As soon as we came to know about the conviction, we tried to send a message from Dera chairperson Vipasana Insan, requesting followers to maintain peace, and keep faith in the judicial process. But we couldn't upload this message because mobile internet and broadband services were banned."

Supporters of DSS Chief Gurmeet Ram Rahim Singh in Sirsa protesting police's decision to take him to court
Picture Courtesy: **Manoj Dhaka**

They also tried to call key Dera leaders. "But it was too late by then, and followers clashed with law enforcement agencies," Vikas adds.

The Dera's protests, and the related internet and transport shutdown seemed to have impacted the group's own followers too.

Those outside Haryana received misleading or panic-inducing forwards and videos, worrying them, but also worsening the anger against the state administration. Rajat Singh, a 65-year-old Dera follower from Mansa district, Punjab, says his son Rishipal Singh, had gone with several followers to the court in Panchkula, Haryana, where Gurmeet's case was being heard. Rajat Singh says that since the internet was not banned at Punjab's Mansa, he continuously received photographs of bullet-ridden bodies, charred cars, massive fires, and vandalism on WhatsApp. It's unclear how Dera members from Haryana were able to send these pictures, overriding the blocked internet. "I was so disturbed," he says. "As soon as we came to know that the Haryana police had opened fire on the followers, I started calling my son," he says. But phone networks were constantly busy or spotty. "My son's phone was not reachable. I asked relatives to send him text messages, or messages on WhatsApp, but the internet was not working." It was much later, when Rishipal made a rushed call, that they were assured of his well-being.

Unaware of the violence at the Dera, 37-year-old Rakesh Kumar, a DSS follower from Ghaziabad, Uttar Pradesh, was visiting Sirsa on August 24. "I booked a hotel in Sirsa district through an app, and chose to pay at the hotel. When I reached Sirsa, the internet was off." Kumar went to the Dera taking lifts from a few vehicles plying on the sly, but soon returned to his hotel after followers went on a rampage. He wanted to leave Sirsa, but "got stuck" because the hotel didn't allow him to leave without paying. ATMs were closed, vandalised, or not working, and it was generally unsafe to go out. "I had some balance on PayTM, but that was also not working as there was no internet connection," he says.

Without Facebook or Twitter accounts, the Sirsa police had no way to counter rumours, discourage violence, or call for peace, says additional deputy commissioner (ADC) Sirsa, Munish Nagpal. A ban, he says, was the only way for them to nip crowd mobilisation in the bud, and curb rumours from spreading to Dera followers in other states of north India.

"The ban controlled the situation to a certain extent, but it handicapped us, and slowed the process of our communication with seniors in Chandigarh," admitted Ashwin Shenvi, the superintendent of police (SP).

The Haryana police, chief minister and health minister are usually active on social media, and the government too prides itself on being digitally savvy, but during the ban, every account was inactive. This despite the state offices having broadband.

It is worth pointing out that DSS is credited for the Bharatiya Janata Party's first ever win in Haryana in the 2014 state elections. Gurmeet Ram Rahim and CM Manohar Lal Khattar have even shared stages multiple times for photo-ops. Many believe this to be the reason behind the state government not being very vocal, online or offline, in condemning the violence by Gurmeet's followers. It could have ticked off DSS's over 50 million followers, a large votebank. Political dynamics, hence, were also responsible for internet users becoming a victim of the violence unleashed.

Sat Singh is a Rohtak-based journalist and a member of 101Reporters. com, a pan-India network of grassroots reporters.

09

E-administration efforts are lame ducks without internet

How Haryana engages with the Digital India dream when one act of vandalism can invite a net ban

By **AMIT KUMAR** & **SAT SINGH**

Mahender Singh in-charge of Common Service Center attending customers at his shop in Fatehabad district's Badopal village

Picture Courtesy: Sat Singh

FATEHABAD, HARYANA

It took Mahender Kumar a week to brush up his DJ-ing skills and understand what songs to play for crowds at different events. It wasn't done out of some special love for music.

When he had to stop operations of his Common Service Center in Fatehabad district's Badopal village for the third time in 18 months because of an internet shutdown "caused" by violence in his state, Mahender had to revisit his teenage hobby. He was more cautious about running a centre that depended on the internet. After all, the 31-year-old had to do something to feed a family of five. "*Kuch to kaam karna tha. Parivar ko bhukhe to rakh nahi sakte.*"

Launched in 2015 as part of the central government's ambitious Digital India programme[1], Common Service Centers or Atal Sewa Kendras[2] (ASKs) are the "access points for delivery of various e-governance and business services to citizens in rural and remote areas of the country". Sikander Kumar, in-charge of the Fatehabad District Informatics Center, informs that there are 14 such centers in urban areas and a whopping 223 in rural areas in his district alone.

These Kendras deal with banking, insurance, pension, health, and even railway ticketing, Aadhaar services, and electricity bill payment. The Haryana government claims to have integrated "around 170+ state government services of varied departments" with this scheme. More are in the pipeline.

Mahender, who undertook operations of the Kendra in December 2015, earns commissions ranging from Rs 10 to Rs 100 from his customers. A Rs 10 for paying electricity bills, another Rs 10 for correcting every mistake in Aadhaar cards. He even fills up job applications and pension forms using the internet. His daily earning ranges from Rs 1000 to Rs 1200, and he provides food and pays Rs 1500 each to the two persons who assist him occasionally.

1. Digital India, **Common Service Centres Scheme (CSC)**, available at *csc.gov.in/ scheme*

2. Electronics & Information Technology Department, Government of Haryana, **Atal Seva Kendras in Haryana**, available at *http:// haryanait.gov.in/en/ about-us/atal-seva-kendras-in-haryana*

Mahender Singh in-charge of Common Service Center in
Fatehabad district's Badopal village at his shop
Picture Courtesy: Sat Singh

"Things were running in perfect order until February 2016. I had to incur losses after losses due to multiple internet bans since then," says Mahender. The Jat reservation stir of February 2016 had led to an internet ban when protests turned violent in various parts of Haryana. Internet service were suspended as a preventive measure a year later in March[3] when the protests were brewing again. When Dera Sacha Sauda Chief Gurmeet Ram Rahim was convicted for rape in August 2017, Fatehabad faced internet shutdown for a week[4].

3. The Tribune, **Jat protesters clash with police near Fatehabad**, March 19, 2017, available at *www.tribuneindia.com/news/haryana/community/jat-protesters-clash-with-police-near-fatehabad/379203.html*

Mahender Singh standing in front of his shop in
Fatehabad district's Badopal village
Picture Courtesy: Sat Singh

4. The Pioneer, **Mobile internet services to remain suspended in sensitive areas,** August 30, 2017, available at *www.dailypioneer.com/state-editions/chandigarh/mobile-internet-services-to-remain-suspended-in-sensitive-areas.html*

Mahender lost his bread and butter on these occasions, and being a part-time DJ was his way of minimising the risk. He continues to run the center though.

Rajesh Kumar too makes a living by running an ASK in Dhangar in Fatehabad. A graduate in arts from the National College in Sirsa, he started the Kendra in October 2015. Though he has reservations about the crawling pace of internet in his village, it doesn't stop him from fulfilling the needs of customers who can be found "flooding the Kendra on any working day".

He places great importance on the role of the center he runs. After the demonetisation of Rs 500 and Rs 1000 notes in November 2016, Rajesh says his Kendra "reduced the inconveniences caused to common people by the move". When the cash lying around became of no use, the e-banking services his centre offered came to the rescue. This is why he doesn't approve of the internet shutdowns. "Rural areas suffer the most. My friends in cities do not have to go through this."

Even updating panchayat records on time is a hassle during shutdowns. Rajesh Koth, Fatehabad district development and panchayat officer, does not directly face the brunt of internet shutdowns since his office functions out of the mini-secretariat, which continues using internet through a lease line meant for such situations. But shutdowns do affect his department's work as the 200 something panchayats with which emails are to be exchanged do not have the same luxury. "Village panchayats have been equipped with a computer and an internet connection, which are used to update the department on development works passed by the panchayat," Rajesh says.

With villages losing access to whatever internet they had, panchayats have to send physical records to the Fatehabad district headquarters, thereby increasing the office's burden.

Internet lost, grains lost

The impact of internet shutdowns on the administration's e-governance schemes was felt even by fair price shops. Subhash Singh has been running a ration depot in the same village as Mahender's, Badopal, for a decade now. It wasn't just Subhash's loss when he couldn't disburse ration because of the internet shutdown in August 2017.

He says he was bound by authorities to not distribute ration without an Aadhaar-enabled authentication using a thumbprint. "Several people came, but they had to return empty-handed due to failing biometric verification. I must've lost about Rs 2500 in that time."

Fatehabad district food and supply controller Ashok Bansal confirmed that his department had indeed "issued clear instructions as mandated by the government to distribute ration only after Aadhar-enabled verification". Strict action is taken on complaints for not complying this order, he says.

Being his only source of income, Subhash eventually "spent a lot of time and energy to persuade people to return" to his shop again. But he clearly remembers how he was accused of finding an excuse to not give people their lot of ration.

Amit Kumar and Sat Singh are Haryana-based members of 101Reporters. com, a pan-India network of grassroots reporters.

10

'Hurt sentiments' cost Udaipur internet access for four days

Authorities suggest it was more than a Facebook post that led to shutdown

By **SHRUTI JAIN** @Astute_Shruti

A view of the urban landscape in Udaipur
Picture Courtesy: Volker Glätsch, Pixabay

UDAIPUR, RAJASTHAN

In April 2017, a Facebook post led to 21-year-old Ibrahim* getting arrested and Rajasthan's Udaipur city losing its mobile internet for four days (broadband was banned only on the first day of the ban). The authorities say the hateful content proliferating after Ibrahim's social media post in praise of neighbouring nation Pakistan could be tackled only by curtailing internet service. Ibrahim's family has since left the Fatehnagar locality where they were residing.

"On April 19, an FIR was filed by Fatehnagar resident Rahul Chawda" stating that Ibrahim "is a Muslim and has commented on Facebook '*Pakistan zindabad tha, Pakistan zindabad hai aur Pakistan zindabad rahega*', which had hurt their religious sentiments. People from Vishwa Hindu Parishad and Shiv Sena had also come along with Rahul to press that a case of sedition be filed," Subhash Chand, head constable of Fatehnagar police station, told 101reporters.

A case under section 153A (promoting enmity on grounds of religion, race, place of birth, etc.) of the Indian Penal Code (IPC) and section 67 of the Information Technology Act (punishment for publishing or transmitting obscene material in electronic form) was registered. "However, sedition charges were not registered as their report did not have sufficient basis for it," Chand says.

Ibrahim, an undergraduate, lived in a slum in Fatehnagar and did odd jobs to earn money. His father works as a taxi driver to support a family of four children. "Ibrahim had no past criminal record. His family left the locality after the incident. Their house is locked since past few months. He was arrested the same day when FIR was registered, but is presently out on bail," says Gopal Lal Sharma, station house officer, Fatehnagar police station.

In his locality though, Ibrahim's reputation was that of a "notorious" boy. "His family was fed up with him. He used to post useless content

on Facebook. The atmosphere in the city was tensed between the communities at that time. So, his post triggered the religious sentiments," says Nadir Khan, 40, a neighbour.

Udaipur police say the content posted by Ibrahim on social media was hateful and could've lead to clashes between communities. "Isn't it enough to say the post was inflammatory?" replied Anand Shrivastava, inspector general of police (IG), Udaipur, when questioned about the content of Ibrahim's post. "Such messages get easily viral on social media. Some people use Facebook and WhatsApp to spread hatred, but there is no particular site, or content that is blocked during internet shutdown. Accessibility to the internet is completely restricted," he added.

"Messages that could outrage the religious sentiments of the Hindu community were circulated, and we had to shut down internet in the district for four days," Shrivastava says. When asked what happens if such inflammatory content finds its way back on internet once it is restored, the IG says, "We review the situation. If it is still in circulation, we can continue with the shutdown."

'More than an FB post'

Then Udaipur district magistrate Rohit Gupta, however, doesn't attribute the shutdown to the post by Ibrahim. "It was not because of a particular kid. There were other reasons. Some incidents had happened in the city which led to a lot of improper posts being circulated on social media," says Rohit Gupta, who is now the district magistrate for Kota.

Explaining the administrative procedure behind an internet shutdown, Gupta says, "Based on a report from the police, many agencies, including intelligence and the affected party, are consulted about the decision to implement internet shutdown. Curtailing internet doesn't allow the situation to aggravate further. Its fallout affects the general masses, too, but that happens even in the case of a curfew when we restrict people's movement."

Gupta says internet shutdown is a preventive action to keep the situation from escalating into a full blown law and order problem. "People will then question why the administration didn't act in time to prevent it."

While the administration ensured that banking and lease-line providers were not affected during the internet ban, several other businesses dependent on internet were affected.

"Why all of us?"

"If four people post hateful content on social media, why should 20 lakh others be punished? When police are unable to control a situation, the easiest way they have is to curtail the internet. I couldn't work for four days. Many others, who depend on internet for work like me, were affected. They should ban only the social media," says Chhatrapati Sarupria, an online graphic designer who petitioned[1] the sessions and district court against the arbitrary suspension of internet services in Udaipur.

Cyber experts feel there can be other ways to keep social and business activities out of the purview of ban during such law and order situation, but authorities fail to make any attempts in this direction.

"Internet shutdown is not the only solution. Since there is no procedure to stop only the hateful content on social media, the only option left is to turn off the internet completely. Facebook has a 'report abuse' mechanism, which allows review and removal of any post that goes against Facebook community standards. We need to work on better alternatives to control inflammatory content on social media. Only if such alternative ways are initiated now, they can be regulated as we progress," says Mukesh Choudhary, a cyber expert.

*Name changed to protect identity.

Shruti Jain is a Jaipur-based journalist and a member of 101Reporters. com, a pan-India network of grassroots reporters.

1. Times of India, **Plea to quash order on net ban in Udaipur**, April 21, 2017, available at *timesofindia.indiatimes. com/city/jaipur/plea- to-quash-order-on-net- ban-in-udaipur/article- show/58287646.cms*

Mobile net ban during peaceful protest leaves farmers confused

Administration says it was done to prevent rumours from spreading, protesters insist they needed internet to fight it

By **SHRUTI JAIN** @Astute_Shruti

Thousands of farmers held a protest at Krishi Upaj Mandi, Sikar in September this year
Picture Courtesy: Shruti Jain

SIKAR, RAJASTHAN

In Sikar district, about 15,000 farmers had staged a protest at Krishi Upaj Mandi on 1 September 2017 under the banner of All India Kisan Sabha. Their major demands were farm loan waiver, pension for farmers and implementation of the recommendations of the Swaminathan Commission. The protest had the support of students, traders' associations, anganwadi workers, transport unions and a few other organisations. About 100,000 people joined farmers in a solidarity march during the next 13 days.

The demonstrations continued and when talks with the government failed, thousands of farmers set out to lay siege to the district collector's office and block highways on September 11. Accordingly, the district administration clamped prohibitory orders under Section 144 of Criminal Procedure Code, restricting assembly of five or more people, and blocked mobile internet in the district.

Kishan Pareek, district secretary of Communist Party of India (Marxist) which took part in the protest, contended that though the government says the ban was enforced to check the spread of violence, the actual motive was something else. He says the administration was vying to stifle their movement but couldn't use force as the protesters were peaceful.

"So, they resorted to spreading rumours to provoke us to commit any violent activity. If internet was working that time, we could have easily denied those [rumours]," he says.

According to Pareek, the rumours that circulated that day included: the protest has turned violent at some location, police have fired bullets/charged baton at the protesters, additional force has been called in from Jaipur etc. As broadband was operational, the organisers managed to counter falsehood with facts and the misinformation didn't spread outside Sikar. Pareek says whichever protest-spot the rumours portrayed as violence-ridden, their social media team shared videos from there on Facebook to counter them.

Nevertheless, in the absence of mobile internet, farmers' teams that had gathered at various highways to block roads had difficulty processing the false information that was trickling in. Though it created much confusion among them, it failed to instigate them.

Rajpal Singh, a Sikar-based member of CPI(M)'s social media wing, informed that the mainstream media didn't give much attention to the protest. He says it were local websites and newspapers that covered the event, which is why the administration banned internet, hoping restriction on the flow of information would throw a spanner in the works. Apart

Apart from local news websites, local Facebook pages - Sikar Aapno, Sikar Sandesh, We love CPIM- Dhod and CPIM Sikar, etc. - were giving minute-by-minute updates of the farmers' protest

Picture Courtesy: Shruti Jain

from local news websites, local Facebook pages -- Sikar Aapno, Sikar Sandesh, We love CPIM- Dhod and CPIM Sikar, etc. -- were giving minute-by-minute updates of the farmers' protest.

The internet services were resumed in Sikar a day later as the protest did not get violent and the protesters were not found circulating any provocative content.

A former CPI(M) MLA, president of All India Kisan Sabha and leader of the farmers' agitation, Amara Ram, told 101Reporters that one of the very reasons their movement enjoyed humongous public support was its peaceful nature. He says as their movement unfolded, people from Sikar and outside realised this protest would not turn violent and it's a cause that needed support.

As cautious as the government might have been about the September 11 protest, police presence indicated that the law-enforcement agency did not perceive it as a threat. One of the protesters, Nemichand, says only 50-odd policemen had been deputed for the protest march of 15,000+ farmers to the district collectorate. He claimed that the number of men in khaki dwindled to 20 by the afternoon.

He alleged that the real reason for internet shutdown was stopping the dissemination of news about their protest as it exposes the Modi government's inconsiderate approach towards farmers.

"Everybody in Sikar was talking about the internet ban. Since there was no legitimate reason for the ban, the government couldn't continue with it, fearing how they will justify," he says.

The administration confirmed that the ban was imposed fearing threat to law and order in the district due to the gathering of thousands. "Though they were protesting peacefully the initial ten days at the *mahapadav*, they had planned to block the district collectorate on September 11 in thousands. To restrict their movement, internet was suspended in Sikar. During such situations, no one writes anything positive about the administration. We didn't want to provide them a platform for spreading rumours that could have made the protestors violent. If there had been no internet ban that day, something big would have happened," Jai Prakash Narayan, additional district collector and additional district magistrate, told 101reporters.

"Broadband was made working during the internet ban so that private and government offices were not affected. While giving the order for internet ban, it is made sure that normal call and broadband facilities are not debarred. General masses are affected but internet shutdown is the only option we have," he added. "While their blockade continued for three days, we restricted internet services only for first 24 hours as the protest had gained stability till then."

Apart from local news websites, local Facebook pages - Sikar Aapno, Sikar Sandesh, We love CPIM- Dhod and CPIM Sikar, etc. - were giving minute-by-minute updates of the farmers' protest
Picture Courtesy: Shruti Jain

Even three months after the high-powered ministerial committee was formed to look into the farmers' demands, nothing has been done. Now, they plan to stage a protest in February 2018 when the state assembly will be in function.

Former CPI(M) MLA Pema Ram says, "Preparation for the protest in February has already begun. Kisan Sansads are being organised in Sikar, where active farmers from each village participate to raise demands regarding implementation of the recommendations of the Swaminathan Commission report, a solution to the menace of stray cattle, complete farm loan waiver and pension for farmers. They then discuss it with other farmers in their villages."

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12

Stock brokers don't love an internet shutdown

For a trade that rides on price volatility and fast reactions, an internet shutdown is a costly slowdown

By **BINITA PARIKH**

File image: A stock broker checking sensex on mobile
Picture Courtesy: 101Reporters

AHMEDABAD, GUJARAT

An internet shutdown means breaking contact with the lifeline of the stock market: information about share price movement. "The entire momentum for trading and investing comes from the control the trader feels he has on information about share prices," says Minesh Modi, a trader based in Ahmedabad. "The internet puts information on our fingertips, so the trader could play on the stock exchange. It gives you a sense of control on the data, and is also mechanism to trade."

So, when the Gujarat government shut the internet down for a week during the Patel agitation in September 2015, and for four hours to prevent cheating on phones during a Revenue Accountants Recruitment Exam in February 2016, Modi says, "That intense feeling of connect goes away, and the faith is shaken."

An obvious fallout of mobile internet shutdown is that terminals connected via phone internet stop working, and mobile trade is not possible. However, many Gujarati investors say that while they check price variations and movements online, they still trade through brokerage houses. Playing the stock market is usually a part-time business activity for most Gujaratis. "I don't trade online directly. I place actual orders of purchase/sell through my broker," says YK Gupta, an investor in the city. Still, he did struggle during the internet shutdown. "I couldn't keep a tab on the price movement, and had to call up my broker for updates. How many times can I take updates on the phone? The television gives prices of only a few stocks, and there is a delay of three to five minutes of prices on the television. Stock prices being as volatile as they are, that time gap can be life-changing in the stock market." Not willing to risk a huge mistake, Gupta chose to stay away from making any stock transactions during internet shut down.

The stock market rides on people's aspirations and individual deductions about trends and data, which in turn impacts business valuations. Since internet penetration has increased, traders say there is a premium on speedy reaction as well. Anil Shah, a former director with the Bombay

Stock Exchange (2011-14) and a member of the National Stock Exchange, believes that an internet shutdown, however partial, will paralyse the ecosystem that sustains the share market. "Most of our work is on the terminals and when they stop, the smooth flow gets disrupted. The information that is the base in the stock market, the actual trading and fund flow work, all this will stop. When the internet stops, data stops, and the flow of work stops. It's as simple as that," he says.

Recalling the impact of the internet and how it has evolved and woven itself into the stock market ecosystem, Shah adds, "Earlier, when the telephone number was the basis of trading, we could establish connectivity via phones. But since 2006-7, we have slowly moved to the internet to establish interconnectivity. The more reliable, faster and cheaper the internet services got, the more it integrated itself into our trading patterns. More people shifted to it as a connecting platform. About 95% connections are now established online."

He says that NSE/BSE members now have a dedicated lease line so that they don't lose contact with the stock market. "Many brokerage firms are connected via VSAT linkages, so that we, as Gujarat state, don't get disconnected fully with the rest of India. The loss due to internet shutdown is not quantifiable. It will have to be measured as the cost of a missed opportunity."

It is not just the stocks, but also banking transactions that stop or decrease drastically in volume when the internet stops, Shah says. "During the Patidar agitation, mobile internet services in most areas were shut down. However, broadband services were not stopped, so the brokers managed to keep the ball rolling. But brokers will lose in volumes. It is difficult to put a figure to it, but the movement and momentum of trade goes down."

Echoing a similar sentiment, VK Sharma, head of Public Consulting Group and Capital Market Strategy at HDFC Securities, says that large companies have the facility to call their other branch offices and get the transactions through. So only customers and traders who don't have a landline fallback option will be affected. However, those who wish to

Anil Shah at his office in Ahmadabad
Picture Courtesy: Binita Parekh

File Image: A stock broker checking Bombay Stock Exchange's site
Picture Courtesy: 101Reporters

transact on the stock market with help of mobiles will not be able to do so. "This way, the volume of transactions is not stopped completely, but definitely curtailed," Sharma says. "The decrease can be roughly estimated to be around 3%, but the state-wise breakdown of transactions and impact is not available from the exchange. Moreover, internet slowdown or shutdown results in a lot of disputes among traders and brokers - about the price entered into for transaction and the price that the deal is finalised on."

Sarit Choksi, an investor who trades regularly, lamented the absence of a recovery mechanism for the losses that the people incurred. "When the net shuts off, we have to call the broker, who does not have dedicated phone lines to handle the huge hike in calls, so getting through to him is itself a challenge," he says. "Then, as we don't have the information at our fingertips, we cannot adjust the mutual funds choice, 'stop loss' and set 'buy or sell' limits in tune with the market movement. By the time I see it on TV, and get through to the broker to execute the deal, the price has changed. Who is going to compensate for this loss?"

It's impractical to tell the Stock Exchange Bureau of India or the traders that the transactions could not go through due to internet shutdown, or ask them to forgive the price difference due to the long waiting time on the telephone. If brokerage houses makes a mistake, Choksi explains, arbitration is available, but there is no platform to claim or address the kind of losses one incurs due to external limitations like an internet ban.

"If internet connectivity is put on ransom due to political ambitions, it is very disruptive," Choksi says. "In a society deliberately being pushed to go digital, the impact of such a shutdown is felt in financial and social sectors. When such political decisions are taken without considering the other impacts, our bread and butter is affected, and we are left high and dry, with no recourse or means to compensate the loss."

Binita Parikh is a Ahmedabad - based freelance writer and a member of 101Reporters.com, a pan-India network of grassroots reporters.

Sorry, business closed until internet is back on

Exporters say they lose face with international clients when internet shutdowns block deliveries

By **NALANDA TAMBE** @Nalanda3

Jagdish Farshan shop in Vadodara which has been famous for Gujarati snacks like Leelo Chevdo and Bakarwadi since 1938
Picture Courtesy: Nalanda Tambe

A household name in Vadodara, Jagdish Farshan has been famous for Gujarati snacks like *Leelo Chevdo* and *Bakarwadi* since 1938. Since the year 2000, they started exporting their snacks to the millions of Gujaratis settled across the globe, especially in Africa, USA, Australia, Canada and New Zealand. It is one of the many indigenous businesses that helps Gujarat contribute 25% of the total exports from India. But the outfit synonymous with both tradition and modernity for 79 years, was also one of the many exporters to receive an unexpected jolt in August 2015, during the week-long internet shutdown during the Patidar protests for reservations across the state.

Kalpesh Kandoi, the chairman of Jagdish Farshan Pvt Ltd says, "Gujaratis in various countries buy our snacks online through our website, or through email. During the internet ban, we suffered quite a lot due to the blockage of orders and failure of deliveries." Since nearly 50% of their annual revenue comes from exports, the shutdown threw a significant spanner in the works. Although the government claims it banned only mobile data, many businesses admit to their broadband and WiFi also being hit, or seeing debilitating delays.

"Of course, if there is an emergency from the importers' side, they can call us directly," says Kandoi. "But then again, a kind of inconvenience is created to them from our side, which is very shameful. It destroys our trustworthiness and credibility." Many of their production centres in Gujarat, especially Vadodara, fell back on meeting orders when bank payments were stuck, or orders weren't accessible. Thankfully for the company, its manufacturing unit in Australia was able to meet at least some of the international orders when most districts of Gujarat couldn't access the internet.

The ban seems to have had a domino effect outside India too. Preeti Shah, who imports snacks and sweets from Jagdish Farshan through her small home-based business in the USA, couldn't meet orders there during the internet ban in Gujarat. She told *101reporters* on the phone

from Philadelphia that when she started her business of selling Gujarati snacks 3 years ago, she marketed her service by calling her neighbours, friends and acquaintances personally. "I found that in return they emailed me their snack orders," says Shah. "During the internet blockages in India, I had to apologise for not delivering the snacks to my clients because my orders were not fulfilled by the Gujarat-based exporters." She lost 12 to 15 clients, most of them regulars. "The government has to realise the impact of the ban. What if I had lost all my clients just because of the internet ban?" she asks.

Gujarat is a major hub for several industries like dairy, automobile, precious gems, and pharmaceuticals, but its biggest exports are of cotton yarn, oilseeds, and seafood. With its highly advanced and well-equipped marine fish production techniques, it is able to export fish to UAE, Australia, USA, Japan, China, Canada, Brazil, Thailand, and Germany. Precious gems and jewellery too, though exported from Mumbai, are processed in Surat, Gujarat, one of the largest diamond hubs in the world. Already severely hit by demonetisation in November 2016, with large-scale closures, layoffs and losses, the diamond industry nearly buckled under the internet ban.

Most of all, it is the unpredictable, ad hoc, and unannounced nature of internet shutdowns that frustrates exporters, who liken it to annoying roadblocks traffic policemen install to allow VIP movement. For instance, in February 2016, the state suspended mobile internet services suddenly for four hours to prevent cheating during a revenue service exam[1].

Chandresh Shah, president of the Exporters and Importers (Exim) Club and the founder of Madhav Agro Foods, says that the entire export industry relies on the internet for over 95% of its business. "It is absurd on the part of government to ban internet for any reason especially when they know that it will hamper exporters to a great extent. They have to provide alternatives, or announce beforehand. People who are importing our products consider us unprofessional and we look foolish in the international markets. So such policies need to be revamped and rationalised properly." He adds that the rising economic cost of such shutdowns must be factored in. A 2016 study by Brookings Institution[2]

1. **Gujarat shuts down Internet during exam**, February 29, 2016, available at *http://www.thehindu.com/todays-paper/tp-miscellaneous/tp-others/gujarat-shuts-down-internet-during-exam/article8294672.ece*

2. West, Darrell, **Internet shutdowns cost countries $2.4 billion last year**, October 2016, available at *www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/intenet-shutdowns-v-3.pdf*

Customers at Jagdish Farshan shop in Vadodara which has been famous for Gujarati snacks like Leelo Chevdo and Bakarwadi since 1938
Picture Courtesy: Nalanda Tambe

that looked at 81 instances of internet shutdowns across 19 countries between July 2015 and June 2016 found that they had cost the world economy a total of $2.4 billion. India, at a conservative estimate of $968 million due to 22 shutdowns (as much as Iraq), was one of the biggest losers[3].

As the digital economy grows, the cost of frequent internet shutdowns will only accelerate. As the central government pushed the 'Make in India' initiative, Surat-based Falguni Patel (name changed) was inspired to start an online boutique in late 2014. A textiles student and first-time entrepreneur, she invested nearly Rs 10 lakhs ($15,600) through loans and savings. Unfortunately, a few months into her business, an internet ban was put in place. "It was a sheer coincidence that I received an order from Madhya Pradesh, along with an advance payment, just two days before the week-long internet ban. After that they mailed me four times – first with some requirements, then two follow-up emails and a final one demanding a refund of the advance –but I didn't receive any of these due to the ban. Meanwhile, I used the advance to purchase raw materials needed." After the ban was lifted, Patel realised what had happened. "When I called them personally and explained the situation, they called me unprofessional. When I said I would repay their money in 3-4 installments, they filed a police complaint against me for theft." Only a single order had turned bad, but it delivered a strong enough blow. Discouraged by the experience, and pressured by her parents who didn't want her to invest in the business anymore, Patel shut her website, and shelved her e-commerce dreams.

Some companies, like Dinesh Mills, one of Vadodara's oldest textile companies, prevented losses by invoking their brand value and stepping up customer relations during the ban. Uday Shitole, General Manager – Sales, at Dinesh Mills, says the internet is a boon for the export industry due to its speed, web orders, low cost, and proper documentation. But he admits that in India, it's mandatory to have traditional back-up systems, even if this is much costlier, because political realities make even something as advanced as the internet unpredictable. Sudhir Purohit, Vice President (Exports), Dinesh Mills Ltd, says their decade-long

3. Mathur, Nandita, **How much does internet cost India? Brookings says $968 million**, October 14, 2016, available at *https://www.livemint.com/Industry/HBa7uL-VF6xO7mKbAIN9X5L/How-much-does-internet-shutdown-cost-India-Brookings-says-.html*

relationships with suppliers and purchasers, initiated in the pre-internet days, stood the company in good stead. "We export the materials through digital orders too, but in our system, the negotiation of contracts has to be handled in person and non-negotiable ones can be done wholly through the internet. Without this, we will be vulnerable to any disruption, like internet ban, or accidents, that will definitely lead to delays and losses."

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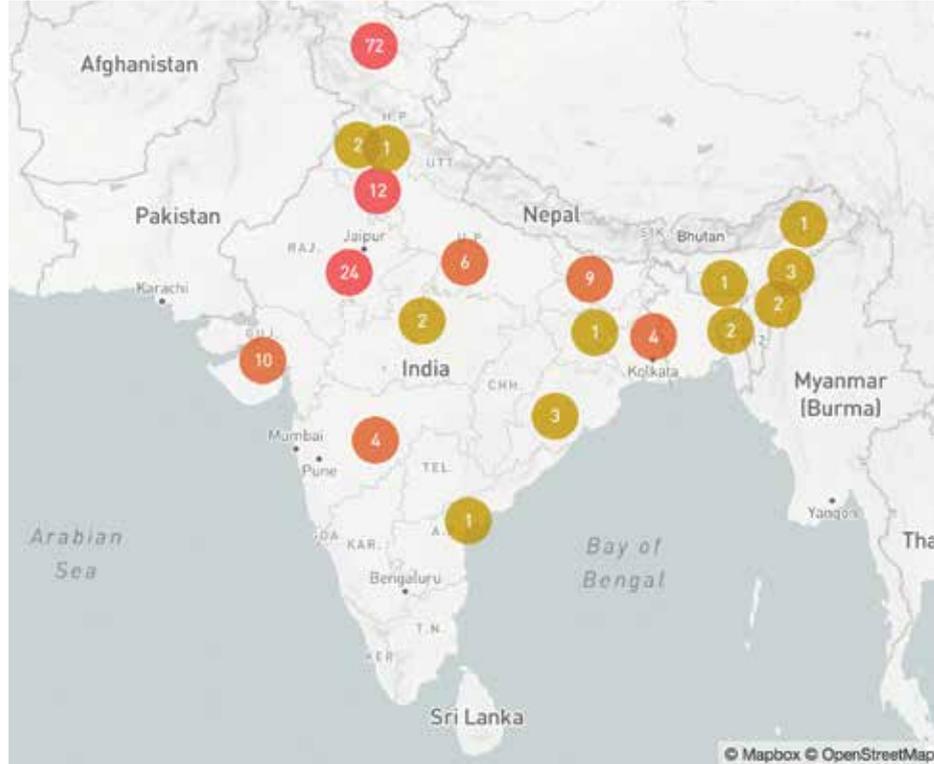
EXPERTS SPEAK:

Why does the north-south divide extend to internet shutdowns?

By **AYSWARYA MURTHY**

Number of Internet Shutdowns in the northern and southern states of the country
Picture Courtesy: internetshutdowns.in

ARKALGUD, KARNATAKA

1. Business Standard, **Internet shutdowns on the rise in India: What govt's new rule-book says**, August 29, 2017, available at *http://www.business-standard.com/article/current-affairs/internet-shutdowns-on-the-rise-in-india-what-govt-s-new-rule-book-says-117082900178_1.html*

2. SFLC.In, **Internet Shutdowns**, available at *www.internetshutdowns.in*

3. SFLC.In, **Internet Shutdowns**, available at *www.internetshutdowns.in*

4. Ministry of Communications, **Lok Sabha Starred Question No. 83**, February 2017, available at *http://164.100.47.190/loksabhaquestions/annex/11/AS83.pdf*

5. **The Gazette of India**, Part II, Section 3, Sub-section (i), August 8, 2017, available at *http://www.dot.gov.in/sites/default/files/Suspension%20Rules.pdf*

Internet shutdowns have become quite the norm in India. Whenever there are any incidents of violence or protests being fuelled by inflammatory social media posts, the authorities suspend mobile internet and broadband services, sometimes for days on end. In fact, the communication ministry has issued rules[1] that allow the government to temporarily shut down phone and internet services during a "public emergency" or for "public safety". In a democracy, internet shutdowns[2] are an infringement of the fundamental rights to freedom and expression, apart from inconveniencing people.

As ubiquitous as these shutdowns have become, your average citizen in southern India — comprising five states and a sole Union territory — may not have heard of them. Until December 2017, there was only one reported internet shutdown[3] in south India. Compare that with 69 instances of disruption of the internet in the rest of India last year. Of all the statistics that reinforce the north-south divide, this is one of the more stark ones. An attempt to correlate the occurences of shutdowns to internet penetration levels was inconclusive[4].

At this point, the reasons for this divide are purely speculative, says the legal director of the Software Freedom Law Centre, Prasanth Sugathan. "Legally speaking, there are no specific state-wise laws that are applied in such cases to explain the disparity," he said. "If you look at laws that are used to impose internet shutdowns — the commonly used CrPC Section 144 or the Telegraph Act that's been used in some cases — they are applicable uniformly across the country." The same is true of the Temporary Suspension of Telecom Services Rules that were announced last August[5] by the Centre.

We spoke to Rakshit Tandon, who works in an advisory capacity with various police cyber cells, notably UP and Gurgaon, and whose his advice was sought during some of the internet shutdowns on the laws and implementation structures and processes. When asked whether there was a difference in policing and the attitude of police to such shutdowns

in the north and the south, he said it depends on the situation and the attitude of the people.

Delving into the sole internet shutdown in south India

It is worth looking more closely at the sole internet shutdown in south India — in Adilabad district of Telangana on December 16, 2017. Internet services were reportedly suspended[6] by the state government as a precautionary measure in the wake of clashes between two tribal communities. There was disruption of mobile call services as well for some time in the Agency areas in old Adilabad district, according to news reports. The government deployed a large number of police personnel and the Rapid Action Force in the area following the clashes; Section 144 was enforced in Utnoor.

Internet services were disrupted for about 40 days in the district, according to Adilabad superintendent of police Vishnu S Warrier. "The ban was lifted only after we were sure that there won't be any more trouble," he said. And people didn't complain, because they too wanted peace, he explained. "There were some long-standing tensions between the two tribal communities that came to a boil on December 15. A lot of rumours were being circulated on social media — like a person was killed and a village was attacked by another community. Provoked by these fake reports, some people actually tried to set fire to a village. To maintain law and order and prevent rioting, we had to shut the source of these rumours, which were spreading rapidly on social media according to reports from our intelligence units," he said.

But what was about this particular law and order situation warranted a shutdown of the internet? Warrier believed the shutdown helped avoid "hundreds of rioting incidents" and was "necessary and effective". Despite being a sparsely populated area, internet penetration is high in the area and almost everyone, especially young people, have smartphones with mobile internet, he said. That's why the rumour-mongering was successful, explained Warrier. He added that villages here are far-flung — certain places are only accessible only by foot — which made mobilisation and deployment of polices forces from the

district headquarters tough. "In the face of such limitations, we decided to shut down the internet. And it worked. If it hadn't been effective, the ban wouldn't have stayed for so long. The government would have reconsidered it after one or two days. But based on our feedback about the local situation, it was deemed necessary and effective," he said.

Tandon too mentioned instances when the police were successfully able to use internet shutdowns to squelch rumours and maintain calm, but these strategies are only effective during the initial stages of unrest, he said. "It's not an easy decision to make, but the moment a law and order problem arises, a curfew comes into effect, or people are harming each other and public/private property, an internet shutdown is the only option we have," he said.

But police must ensure they use internet shutdowns sparingly and as the last resort when nothing else works. To enable effective decision-making in this regard, they need to build open-source intelligence labs or social media intelligence units which supplement the traditional methods of intelligence gathering. "The Haryana police started one a lab to enable proactive policing during the Jat agitation[7]. The lab employs systems that are able to analyse a large number of tweets/posts based on keywords, views, location, etc, and sends off alerts about malicious content so they can be nipped in the bud."

Additional district commissioner of police, cybercrime, Hyderabad, Raghu Vir said social media monitoring cells functioning out of the commissioner's office comb through social media posts, alert to certain keywords. Offensive posts are flagged and sent to the cybercrime cell, which then alerts the networks to remove such content. "Facebook responds immediately, they understand the situation on the ground. I don't know how fast they are in other countries, but in india they are very quick." Each day, his team takes down at least 10-15 inflammatory posts. It's an ongoing battle and the first line of defense against government-mandated internet shutdowns.

Ayswarya Murthy is a Chennai-based freelance writer and a member of 101Reporters.com, a pan-India network of grassroots reporters.

6. Deccan Chronicle, Telangana: Internet cut in areas hit by clashes, December 17, 2017, available at *https://www.deccanchronicle.com/nation/current-af-fairs/171217/telanga-na-internet-cut-in-ar-eas-hit-by-clashes.html*

7. The Hindu, **Jat quota protests: What is it all about?**, September 23, 2017, available at *http://www.thehindu.com/specials/jat-quota-protests-what-is-it-all-about/article14091994.ece1*

How media beat the shutdown in Darjeeling

Journalists did what the state was expected to do: fight rumours

By **MANISH ADHIKARY** @scribeling

Reporters sitting idle at Darjeeling Press Guild in Darjeeling
Picture Courtesy: **Syeda Ambia Zahan**

DARJEELING, WEST BENGAL

The West Bengal government banned internet in the hills of north Bengal on June 18. The ban was lifted on September 25[1], one hundred days later. The precautionary "law and order measure", introduced in the wake of violence following the breakout of a fresh stir for a separate Gorkhaland state, was used as a virtual tool by the administration to bargain for peace with protesters in subsequent weeks. Quite naturally, it caused severe hardships to over one million people. Journalists covering the agitation were among the most severely affected.

"It was a first for me — reporting breaking stories from the ground and having to dictate the development on the phone to my office back in Delhi," says Amrita Madhukalya, a senior reporter with the DNA newspaper. "The first story I broke after reaching Darjeeling was how the agitation had caused losses in excess of Rs 100 crore ($15.6 million) for the tea industry. I sent that story via a string of five SMSes to office before reading it out to one of our subeditors to ensure no discrepancies crept in."

Sometimes even phone networks were down. "I have a friend who owns a shop in a small market complex near Chowk Bazaar," says another senior print journalist from New Delhi. "On this one occasion when even SMSes were not going through, this friend helped me access data from a location that only he knew of. There were at least five to ten journalists from national newspapers looking for internet in Darjeeling in mid-July. He clearly didn't want to attract their or the district magistrate's attention."

The clampdown on internet connectivity began a day after three people[2] died of bullet injuries following clashes between pro-Gorkhaland protesters and the police in the heart of Darjeeling town on June 17. One policeman was feared killed. It later came to light that, having braved a near fatal blow from a *khukuri*, a traditional Gorkha blade, he was severely injured but alive.

1. PTI, **Darjeeling's internet suspension extended,** September 26, available at *www.thehindu.com/todays-paper/tp-national/darjeelings-internet-suspension-extended/article19754745.ece*

2. Bhattacharya, Ravik, Roy, Esha, **Darjeeling on boil: 3 dead, police officer critical as Mamata Banerjee sees foreign hand,** June 18, 2017, available at *indianexpress.com/article/india/darjeeling-unrest-one-police-officer-critically-injured-gjm-claims-death-of-2-supporters-gorkhaland-protests-4708737/*

By the evening, several videos of an underprepared but infuriated police force thrashing protesters began to circulate on social media. The state intelligence informed Kolkata that the protesters were planning to march around town with the bodies[3] of the three victims the next afternoon and that the social media outcry against the use of force by police was turning increasingly vitriolic. Internet services were clamped early next morning.

As the Gorkhaland movement lingered on and the intensity of violence waned, data services continued to remain a casualty. Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee said the service would be resumed once normality was restored. As the cycle of news shifted to more compelling narratives and senior journalists from big cities returned from Darjeeling, the vacuum was filled by Facebook news pages run by young social media activists, like With You Darjeeling, Chautari24, North Bengal Today, North Bengal Express, etc.

"A blanket ban on internet since June 17th, 2017 was the biggest challenge we faced," says Rinchu D Dukpa, who edits the very popular Darjeeling Chronicle, a Facebook news page with over 140,000 subscribers. "Imagine over two months of no internet. Getting word out on important news events from the region was such a challenge those days. In addition, countering distorted, biased and unverified news and narratives spewed by mainstream media and even social media platforms paid for by the state was almost impossible due to lack of internet."

On several occasions, especially after clashes between locals and the police, rumours quoting death toll would surface. During one such clash in Sukna near Siliguri, one news channel claimed three people had died. It later turned[4] out that there was no casualty. One more interesting rumour[5] that did the rounds was the imposition of President's rule in Darjeeling. Much of it was fuelled by a lack of healthy flow of information. That there was an internet ban did not help.

The administration of another popular Facebook page run from Darjeeling, which has over 35,000 likes, was taken over by the

3. The Asian Age, **Hills still on edge, GJM takes out rally with body of activist**, June 19, 2017, available at *www.asianage.com/metros/mumbai/190617/hills-still-on-edge-gjm-takes-out-rally-with-body-of-activist.html*

4. Mukhia, Annabelle, **A journey into the heart of rage and fear: Travelling to Darjeeling and back**, September 4, 2017, available at *dilipsimeon.blogspot.in/2017/09/a-journey-into-heart-of-rage-and-fear.html*

5. Giri, Pramod, **President's rule after 90 days of shutdown: Wild rumours doing the rounds in Darjeeling**, September 7, 2017, available at *www.hindustantimes.com/kolkata/president-s-rule-after-90-days-of-shutdown-wild-rumours-doing-the-rounds-in-darjeeling/story-CFzWpYlCwHMsX-nMHif7r9L.html*

administrator's friends in the US. Requesting that his and his page's name be kept secret, the administrator says he requested his friends in the US to scour content from website reports and e-paper versions of relevant newspapers.

The ban was eventually lifted on September 25, just five days after the Mamata Banerjee government succeeded in weaning away rebel leader Binay Tamang from the Gorkha Janmukti Morcha, the party leading the agitation. Binay went on to be appointed as the chairman of a new board of administrators for Darjeeling hills.

"The ban may have been very severe but Darjeeling's geography did offer respite at certain locations," says Biswa Yonzon, a freelance journalist. "Those area that face the hills of neighbouring Sikkim, would receive internet signals. The connectivity wasn't always great but it did the job for most local journalists reporting for papers such as The Statesman, The Telegraph and The Times of India."

In fact the area just behind Darjeeling's town square Chowrasta, which faces the towns of Jorethang and Namchi in South Sikkim, is now known as the Jio hill, after the Reliance 4G network. In Kalimpong, the misty Carmichael hill too is called by the same name.

Manish Adhikary is a Siliguri-based freelance writer and a member of 101Reporters.com, a pan-India network of grassroots reporters.

Internet and banking: A trust broken

Some cut down their daily meals and some lost their jobs as the banking sector took a major hit during internet shutdowns

By **ROSHAN GUPTA**

Women security forces on duty during the protest in
June last year for Gorkhaland in Darjeeling
Picture Courtesy: Syeda Ambia Zahan

DARJEELING, WEST BENGAL

As the Internet shutdown in Darjeeling touched the notorious mark of 100 days in late September, its impact was felt by members of Gorkha Janmukti Morcha (GJM) — the party agitating for a separate state of Gorkhaland. The state government's move had managed to impair the communication and coordination among the agitators.

However, for most residents, lack of access to the internet meant months of crippled bank transactions and mounting financial strain. The impact of the move was felt by all sections of society and most services experienced a slowdown or complete paralysis.

Students from the town were among the worst hit as the internet ban cut off a steady flow of money from home for academic purposes.

"I had to cut down my daily meals to once a day to save whatever little currency notes I had, especially since it was not clear when the ban would be lifted," said Shradha Subba, a resident of Darjeeling who is pursuing her Bachelors degree in Kolkata.

Her parents were not able to send her money due to the ban and arranging cash from another state was also not an option. "I had no option but to borrow money and even that was difficult as all my friends were from the hills and faced the same problem," said Subba.

The parents of many students also felt hard done by the shutdown and said they often found it difficult to communicate with their children. Transferring money for their monthly educational needs was also impossible. "We were able to make phone-calls to our children once in a while, but we could not see them as video-calling was out of the question. We also could not send the money for their semester fees on time and had to ask our relatives in Sikkim to arrange cash for them," said a concerned mother whose daughter was studying in Delhi.

The ban on mobile internet was imposed on June 18, 2017. Two days later, broadband service was also restricted. The initial shutdown was

meant to last for only a week but it had since seen several extensions owing to incessant agitations. Banks were left helpless especially in the face of uncertainty regarding when the restrictions would be lifted.

"None of the banking services were functional and no transactions were done during the period of the internet shutdown. Even the ATMs were closed and people could not be provided normal services," said Jagabandhu Mondal, district branch manager, State Bank of India.

People routinely missed bill payments and no online transactions were done during the course of the ban. Reports emerged of people travelling over 80 kilometres, either to Siliguri or to Sikkim, just to withdraw some money.

Those who had purchased new vehicles found themselves struggling to pay their monthly installments despite having cash in their accounts. Travelling to Siliguri to pay the installment was also daunting as the road transportation was restricted by agitating political parties and supporters picketing on the streets.

Santosh Rai, a resident who had purchased a car just before the internet ban, said: "I could not go to Siliguri or even pay online. Now I'm facing claims for penalty. It was very hard for the vehicle owners to pay the EMI for three months along with a penalty. I asked for help from my friends but how long will they pay."

He claimed that several people were forced to default on payments due to the blanket ban imposed by the government. "We could have deposited the EMI but the banks were closed, and that is not our fault," said Rai.

Another victim, Mukesh Rai, also echoed Santosh's sentiments while describing how he had to default on EMI payments towards his new car. "I used to walk towards Melli, Rangpo, or Singtam (all small towns in Sikkim) to withdraw money as my family and I were in need of liquid cash. Even that became difficult mid-monsoon," he said.

Experts also pointed out that the ban was enforced even as the rest of the country discussed Digital India and a push towards cashless economy.

Another resident, Pema Namgyal, said he had lost a job because of the ban on internet services. He had opted to work from home for an advertising agency based out of Bangalore. "I had taken up an editing and copywriting job with an advertising agency. I had an issue with my spine and since long leaves are not possible in creative agencies, I opted to work from home. Five days after I reached here, an indefinite strike was called and the internet was shut down. I couldn't work as per my client's schedule and when I could not coordinate with him, he looked for another copywriter and asked me to refund an advance payment he had made," said Namgyal.

The manager of an HDFC bank branch, Paul Tshring Lepcha, said, "We use BSNL connections usually for banking work and once the network was down we had a hard time updating our system... there are alternative portals like Airtel and Vodafone but even that was of no use at the time," recalls Lepcha.

Book size of private banks too saw a drop in these 100 days and the regulation regarding monthly maintenance of ₹5,000 in their customers' accounts could not be continued. Officials from Indusland Bank said that people even started preferring government banks as they have a lower maintenance requirement. "During the ban period, no new account holders were registered and the mutual funds market also experienced a lull," said an official from a private bank.

Roshan Gupta is a Siliguri-based journalist and a member of 101Reporters.com, a pan-India network of grassroots reporters.

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Darjeeling's e-commerce crumbles after 100 days sans internet

The shutdown on ground and that of the internet have together hurt the economy critically

By **AVIJIT SARKAR**

People of
Darjeeling taking
out protesting
demanding
separate
Gorkhaland
Picture Courtesy:
Syeda Ambia Zahan

A private enterprise
office that was
shut down due to
protests by civilians
for separate
Gorkhaland in
Darjeeling last year
Picture Courtesy:
Syeda Ambia Zahan

1. PTI, **Darjeeling's
internet suspension
extended**, September
26, 2017, available at
*www.thehindu.com/to-
days-paper/tp-national/
darjeelings-internet-sus-
pension-extended/arti-
cle19754745.ece*

DARJEELING, WEST BENGAL

Chitra Dutta, 80, owner of a courier service in Darjeeling called Turant, says the 108 days of bandh (strike), including the 100-day ban on internet, had almost paralyzed her business. The shutdown on ground and that of the internet led to courier packages being undistributed for three months. Despite suffering severe loss of revenue, Dutta says she had to pay her employees' salaries during the bandh, and "it won't be before March next year" that she will be able to make up for the losses.

When Darjeeling suffered 108 days of bandh called by the Gorkha Janmukti Morcha (GJM), the worst hit were businesses in the hills. What made it even more difficult for traders to cope up with the loss was the complete absence of internet services, as several of them depended on the medium to run their operations.

GJM's movement for Gorkhaland picked up momentum when Mamata Banerjee's Trinamool Congress (TMC) government tried to impose Bengali as a compulsory subject for all schools in West Bengal in early 2017. GJM party chief Bimal Gurung called for an indefinite bandh of all activities in the hills from June 15. It led to several incidents of arson, violence and deaths in retaliatory police action. From June 18, internet services were banned in Darjeeling and Kalimpong. The ban was lifted on September 25[1].

Dutta's Turant, a third-party firm, has a tie-up with major courier service providers Bluedart and Ecospeed to distribute their consignments in Darjeeling and around. Another major player in the delivery business, Amazon, had finalized Turant as its service provider in the hills just before the internet ban, but the deal remained in a dicey state after the situation worsened and Darjeeling was cut off from rest of the state, she says. Her business largely depends on a software to track the goods and communicate with business providers and customers, but the prolonged breakdown of internet has brought it to a halt. Dutta says they used to deliver around 40 parcels per day before the shutdown, but no business materialized during the bandh.

Bitter days for tea trade

Girish Sarda, a third generation owner of Nathmulls Tea and Sunset Lounge, an online-cum-retail business outlet that exports Darjeeling tea, says he is disappointed with the state of affairs in the hills.

"Ninety per cent of my business is internet-based. In international trading if you stop supplies to your client for three months, they will source tea from elsewhere to run their business. Clients from Japan started asking me how I was surviving," says Sarda.

Explaining the losses he faced due to the internet shutdown, he says, "Only 5% of my business is operational at present. I have six months of tea produce and I don't know how I am going to sell that. It will take months for me to get back on my feet. I'm gone. Things are still hazy here and god only knows when the situation will return to normal."

The harvest season's second plucking (of tea leaves), called the second flush, is considered to provide high quality premium tea, and draws the best price. The shutdown in Darjeeling overlapped with the second and the third flush, which occur between the months of June and August, and October and November, respectively. Sarda says, "The bandh ensured there was no second flush and a poor third flush. The entire tea industry has seen the worst phase ever. It may take three years to get back to normalcy."

Darjeeling produces around 8.9 million kg of tea per annum[2]. Of this, around 20 lakh kg is premium tea and sold at high price, according to S K Saria, owner of Rohini and Gopaldhara Tea Estates. While 80% of the tea produce is sold through auction in Siliguri and Kolkata, the rest is sold directly by traders in Kolkata and Darjeeling, including the 45-60kg tea per day sold online.

Hotel business too saw a downfall in the Darjeeling hills. Vijay Khanna, secretary of Gorkha Hotel Owners Association, says, "Most of the hotel bookings are done online, and we need the internet to check these. The sudden shutdown has left the hotel industry in a bad shape. Clients from abroad could not be informed of the sudden closure of all establishments and few even failed to understand what a bandh is."

"It was and still is a very difficult time for the industry. Neither the state nor the central government is interested in our plight. There are just a handful of tourists here. Darjeeling hills are out of business," Khanna says.

Restraining GJM's 'message'

Bimal Gurung, the GJM chief[3] who floated the party in 2007 to capitalize on the growing public disenchantment with Subhash Ghisingh's way of leading Gorkha National Liberation Front (GNLF), realised the power of internet and social media early on, and utilized the medium to push the propaganda[4] for Gorkhaland statehood through his party.

Several audio and video messages, where Gurung alleges[5] the present TMC government and the chief minister of dividing the hill people by creating separate bodies for each tribe and taking them for a ride, had been going around on WhatsApp and other platforms before his call for an indefinite strike in Darjeeling. West Bengal government responded to the GJM's call for strike with a heavy hand, initiating police action against protesters and raiding Gurung's home and offices. However, the Gorkha community residing in the Dooars and Terai region kept on getting his messages throughout the shutdown period as internet was on in these regions.

The movement only kept the Gorkhas away from critical resources like internet that fortify their market, and has not led to any productive dialogue towards statehood yet. The combined effect of internet ban and indefinite strike has hurt the economy of the hills so bad that it will take months to recover.

Avijit Sarkar is a Siliguri-based journalist and a member of 101Reporters. com, a pan-India network of grassroots reporters.

3. Giri, Pramod, **The GJM leader who took on Mamata Banerjee: Who is Bimal Gurung?**, June 16, available at *www.hindustantimes. com/india-news/ bimal-gurung-gjm-lead- er-who-took-on-ma- mata-banerjee-in-the- fight-for-gorkhaland/ story-07ghJDYEKflBHx- cpoNtCrI.html*

4. **Gorkhaland: Ground Zero**, available at *www.facebook. com/GORKHALAND- GROUNDZERO/*

5. ABP Ananda, **Another audio message of Bimal Gurung, accuses state government of conspiracy**, October 19, 2017, available at *www.youtube.com/ watch?v=Qp-IzFfjeO8*

2. India Brand and Equity Foundation, **Tea Statistics**, available at *www.teacoffeespiceof- india.com/tea/tea-sta- tistics*

Education and employment opportunities tossed out of the window

Schools, students and teachers remember how they survived 100 days of internet shutdown

By **ROSHAN GUPTA**

St Joseph North Point school that was closed due to protest by civilian demanding Gorkhaland in Darjeeling town

Picture Courtesy: Syeda Ambia Zahan

DARJEELING, WEST BENGAL

When a shutdown was placed on internet services in Darjeeling on June 18, it was unclear how long it would last or what it would mean to the schools, colleges and the academic community at large.

However, as time progressed under the state of shutdown, the education system that had moved a majority of its activities online was completely caught off guard. Missed school payments and lack of clarity on admissions and important dates became commonplace. Students were forced to find new ways to share notes and study without search engines.

The shutdown was first announced for a week but it eventually lasted 100 days, with several extensions in between. This meant that the restrictions came at a particularly bad time with many important academic dates falling within this period.

The online registrations for schools following the Indian Certificate of Secondary Education (ICSE) syllabus were set to start mid-July but did not take place as planned. The ICSE council heads had to later give an assurance to extend the dates for registration till late August.

The ban was lifted only in late September and this extension eventually proved inadequate. Representatives of many schools said they had to travel to Siliguri to complete the online registration of students who would be appearing for their board exams next year.

"Most of the schools had to go to Siliguri to access fast internet for the registrations. Schools like St. Augustine and St. Joseph's Convent could also not post results of their term examinations online," said a source.

Saptashri Gyanpeeth, a school in Kalimpong, had designed a new website to post their results and other activities, but they had to wait until the shutdown was lifted to get it up and running. "We could not update our website, we could not post about the school openings and activities for the alumni," said a teacher at the school.

Schools in the area also use the web to make available notes and study materials, and authorities said they were hard pressed to work around the restrictions that had been enforced. Other routine activities like independent

research by the students or a basic Google search for unclear concepts quickly became a thing of the past.

"Most students study the material provided in the textbooks and guide books. But there are a few who are creative and look for new information and ideas, and they found it very difficult during the internet shutdown," said Milan Chettri, a teacher in St. Mary School.

Teachers from several schools often had to take classes without adequate preparation. "Sometimes teachers also need the internet to cover all the angles of the topics we teach in class, our homework so to speak," said Chettri.

Many parents claimed that paying school fees on time was cumbersome and inconvenient. Many schools were also unable to offer the parents time to make the payments as salaries for their staff was also due. "We used to pay fees online but not having internet for three months meant that we were put in a position where we had to pay a late fee," said Dawa Tamang, whose daughter is set to take her board exam next year.

The clampdown on services also threw a spanner in the works of online admissions in several colleges. Late June to August-end is when these admissions take place and the new batch of students hit a major roadblock in securing entry to good colleges.

Many students also complained of not getting admissions in cities of their choice due to delayed applications. Some who didn't want to wait another year had no choice but to take admissions in local colleges.

Some colleges tried to ease the hassle by extending admissions but had a limited effect as it was not clear when services would be restored. The heads of all 46 colleges affiliated to North Bengal University (NBU) based in the Hills had negotiated with the varsity officials, seeking to extend the dates for the admission process. "We had received letters from the colleges, mostly from the Dooars, asking if the admission procedures could be extended," confirmed Dr Nupur Das, Secretary of the Undergraduate Council, NBU.

Principal of Parimal Mitra Smriti College in Malbazar, Uma Maji Mukhrjee, said, "The suspension of internet services had cut down the opportunities

Ramakrishna Siksha Parishad Boys Higher Secondary Scool that was closed due to protest by civilian demanding Gorkhaland in Darjeeling
Picture Courtesy: Syeda Ambia Zahan

for the students to apply. They had to visit the campus and take admissions manually."

Colleges also had little way of letting the students know if they had been admitted. Principal of St. Joseph's College, Darjeeling, Fr Dr Donatus Kujur SJ, said, "Our admission procedures run from June 5-15. We could not publish the merit list as we had no network."

However, in late July, a few pockets — including areas like Mall road, adjoining areas of Bhanu Bhakta in Darjeeling Carmichael Road, Delo, Durpin and Chiso-pani in Kalimpong — did get data signal from Sikkim. As word spread, internet connections at these places, however slow or unreliable, proved to be a great relief for people.

"My sister had just graduated from college and she had come home for a few days. We often climbed up to the hotspots where we could receive internet signals, but the speed was so slow that pages couldn't be loaded. She had a lot of trouble applying for jobs. Eventually, she was somehow able to apply, only to later find that she could not check any call letters or responses to those applications," said Manisha Tamang, who was at the time on the lookout for jobs herself.

Months after the restrictions were lifted in late September, the registrations have now been completed and most schools in the Hills have adjusted their winter breaks to compensate for the 100-day paralysis. The final exams have also been rescheduled for January.

Roshan Gupta is a Siliguri-based journalist and a member of 101Reporters.com, a pan-India network of grassroots reporters.

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Every town had its Jio Dara

In the hills of Darjeeling, residents facing an indefinite internet shutdown were thrown an unexpected lifeline in the form of 'Jio dara', a feeble signal from Sikkim towers that nevertheless kept a small line of communication open between the besieged towns in the region and the rest of the world.

By **AYSWARYA MURTHY**

View from Carmichael Ground, a Jio Dara spot
Picture Courtesy: Nisha Chettri, Caffeine and Copies

DARJEELING, WEST BENGAL

Alvin Lama writes rock music is his downtime, and these days his songs are rather politically charged. The 100-day internet shutdown in Darjeeling during the Gorkhaland agitation in 2017 inspired his latest single, titled Jio Dara[1]. In Lama's song, he tells his listeners, "Come let's go to Jio Dara" where they can be free from the prison of internet shutdown to send and receive messages from the outside world. "I am using that window of access to tell people about our struggle. It has a bit of an anti-administration message," he says.

Jio Dara ('dara' meaning 'hillock'), also alternatively called 'Reliance gully', was not always a specific place but a small window of opportunity during which a weak 2G signal could be accessed in the hills. Towns like Darjeeling and Kalimpong lie very close to the border of West Bengal, separated from their northern neighbour Sikkim by the river Rangeet; and often in the hills along the river bank, phones pick faint signals from the mobile phone towers in Sikkim. For a population that was completely shut off from the outside world, even this thin, fragile lifeline was precious. "I was not here during the agitation but somehow would get information about what was happening in the hills from my family and friends through the Jio Dara," Alvin says.

Alvin, also founder director & CEO of the Good Shepard Institute of Hospitality Management, is not the only musician to immortalise Jio Dara in song. Young student Saif Ali Khan and his friends also wrote and composed their own ode to this happy accident. "It was really born out of boredom," he says. "My brother, my friends and I were sitting around the campus and chatting. Classes were cancelled due to the strike and our education was on hold. And we overhead a couple talking about where they were going to go for their date. Of course, we should go to Jio Dara, the girl said, and that led to an argument."

This sparked off their Jio Dara song[2] which was written, composed and recorded by Khan and his friends under their Firfiray Productions. A satirical take on the internet shutdown and how it has affected the lives

1. *www.facebook. com/Gsihm/videos/ vb.1835066709/ 10207932050739205/ ?type=2&theater*

2. Firfiray Productions, **Jio Dara**, October 15, 2017, available at *www.youtube.com/ watch?v=ybewgPw_Ack*

of the students in Darjeeling, the song plays out like a dialogue between two lovers and serves as a light-hearted look at a situation that was anything but.

For three months between June and September, the administration had shut down internet access in Darjeeling and in its surrounding hills. This prevented the outside world from hearing the voices of the Gorkhaland protesters but information still trickled out, as it is wont to do, through various sources, one of these being the Jio Dara.

How did this work? Reliance Jio had not long ago made a big splash in India's telecom market with cheap unlimited data packs and lifetime validity deals, and many had switched to Jio to take advantage of this. This was what eventually gave Jio users the edge, helping them tap into the signal from the towers across the border. While it isn't clear whether signals from other networks were also available in these spots (information varies from they were no other networks at all to there were some but they were even weaker than Jio), what's certain is that without the free internet that Jio subscribers enjoyed, access to the internet through other networks was not feasible after a point because recharging your number at the local mobile shop wasn't an option anymore.

These hotspots used to vary, according to Lama. "The signal would be strong today, but next day one might have to move a few hundred metres up or down till they connected with the network. So, you would go searching in the hills till you get a signal and then the word would spread," he says. People in Darjeeling were lucky in that their Jio Dara was inside town near the mall in Chowrasta, but it was not as convenient in Kalimpong. One had to travel a couple of kilometres from the city centre to Carmichael grounds, sometimes go even further up the hill towards areas that were facing Sikkim. "People would get to know through word-of-mouth and the number of people there would snowball," Lama tells us. People, young and old, would come to log in, even though the connection was patchy and slow, to talk about the events of the day, upload pictures, connect with family and friends and basically tell the world what really was happening in Darjeeling.

It became an unofficial symbol of resistance. Each town had its very own Jio Dara and it transcended merely a physical location to become an idea. "Our habits changed after June 18, when the government undemocratically blocked the internet service in the hills," writes Nisha Chettri, a journalist with the Statesman, in her blog 'Caffeine and Copies'. Carmichael Ground in Kalimpong invariably became a meeting spot for all sorts of occasions – birthdays, dates, get-togethers. She says that some Jio users even shared their mobile hotspot with others so that everyone could use the internet.

Local journalists would file their stories and upload their pictures side by side with ordinary citizens updating their social media statuses. It helped journalists like the Telegraph's Passan Yolmo to maintain a line of communication with his publishers. Most evenings he would connect to the Jio Dara to send across photographs from the day, as many as the feeble 2G connection would allow.

"I don't know who first found this spot behind Chowrasta," says Khan. Perched in the centre of the city and at a higher elevation than the rest, Chowrasta is a popular tourist destination in Darjeeling; so it couldn't have been long before people stumbled onto this secret. "I accidentally discovered it one day when I walked past it and suddenly my phone started pinging and I received a bunch of texts on WhatsApp. I checked my phone and realised I was connected to Sikkim's Jio network."

Ayswarya Murthy is a Bangalore-based journalist and a member of 101Reporters.com, a pan-India network of grassroots reporters.

Taxes in the time of internet shutdown

Darjeeling businesses buckle under a bandh, network ban, and GST

By **AVIJIT SARKAR**

A van in Darjeeling town burnt by angry protestor last year
Picture Courtesy: Syeda Ambia Zahan

DARJEELING, WEST BENGAL

In mid-June, SC Sharma, a tax lawyer in Darjeeling, was in a fix. Thanks to street protests, he had not left his house for a week. There was an internet shutdown across the district. As a third assault, the finance minister was announcing a new tax regime that confused him. A combination of these factors made Sharma anxious: many of his clients were going to miss the tax deadline and be saddled with a huge fine.

Spurred by the West Bengal government's new language policy that sidelined minority interests, the Gorkha Janmukti Morcha, had called for a bandh[1] from June 12 across the northern hills. The state administration shut the internet down in the Darjeeling hills on June 18. A fortnight later, with the lockdown still in place, the central government rolled out the implementation of the Goods and Services Tax (GST), a pan-India single tax to replace several state-level indirect taxes.

"My clients were jittery because of the penalty issues," Sharma says. "There was no way I could study the GST, as there was no internet. We were crippled from all sides." He had also heard reports of GST filing website crashing repeatedly even in regions with regular network services. "Everything was already a mess, and then GST is launched with all the fanfare."

Since the GST was a new concept, it had to be studied before returns were filed. With no internet, most businessmen were in the dark. Even advisors like tax lawyers and chartered accountants were in a soup as they were unable to use the internet or go down to the plains in Siliguri to address the issue.

Girish Sharda, owner of Nathmulls Tea, an online-cum-retail business of high value tea, felt lost when the GST was introduced. "We tried to solve the GST issues but we could not go online and find a solution. So we just sat around as all shops were shut too, and waited for the bandh to be declared open. It has been a terrible time for all of us in business."

1. The Hindu Net Desk, **Darjeeling unrest - what you need to know,** June 27, 2017, available at *www.thehindu.com/news/national/other-states/darjeeling-unrest-what-you-need-to-know/article18959968.ece*

The June-July season was one for second flush tea, the darker, stronger variety that constitutes 21% of Darjeeling tea exports, and 41% of its revenue. Losses of Rs 250 crores ($39 million) in the season from the triple attack trickled down to the 55,000 permanent and 15,000 temporary workers in the 87 tea gardens in the region.

Ranjeev Pradhan, who runs a construction company in Darjeeling, says those weeks were nightmarish, "The bandh, the internet shutdown, the voice call drops, the sudden introduction of the GST – all this has really taken a toll on me and several others who run small businesses in Darjeeling. Things are still not right. All we need is some peace of mind which is missing right now."

Only businessmen like Jeevan Sharma, who had dual offices in Darjeeling and Siliguri, managed to file GST. "If I did not have my chartered accountant based in Siliguri, it would have been impossible to file returns. Siliguri was open and the net was available, so the CA didn't have a problem. Although the process was very slow because of technical snags in the servers."

Businessman Gyanendra, who runs Krishna Service Apartments, was not so lucky. "I was held up in Darjeeling because of the bandh. We had practically zero business for the 108 days of forceful bandh, and yet I had to think about filing GST first. This magnitude of shutdown was unthinkable for us."

Anjan Kumar Kahali, a prominent lawyer who deals with income tax and GST, had a harrowing time during the initial launch. "The system was not stable at all and the GST site kept on hanging after a short duration of use. Entries were taking forever to upload and results were not shown on time and taking really long to verify. The delay was hampering all my other work. Even today, the servers are still far from fast. I have heard that it is not before the end of this financial year that matters will be sorted out."

In September, the GST council headed by the finance minister Arun Jaitley provided some relief for GST defaulters by extending the July

People of Darjeeling taking out protesting demanding separate Gorkhaland
Picture Courtesy: Syeda Ambia Zahan

deadline to October first, and then again to November. "I am relieved that I will be getting some extra time to file the returns without paying heavy fines," says Kahali.

The tea and tourism industries, on which Darjeeling depends most, were severely hit by the bandh. In a politically sensitive time, the double whammy of the internet ban and GST seems to have deepened anger against the state. "The people of the hills feel betrayed, both by the centre and the state," says Sharma. "They feel they have been taken for a ride once again like they have been several times before."

Avijit Sarkar is a Siliguri-based journalist and a member of 101Reporters. com, a pan-India network of grassroots reporters.

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Will Darjeeling regain the trust of tourists?

An agitation coupled with an internet ban that left tourists stranded,
it looks like a tough time ahead for tourism in the Hills

By **ROSHAN GUPTA**

Visitors and tourists in Darjeeling reading messages
pasted by protestors demanding Gorkhaland
Picture Courtesy: Syeda Ambia Zahan

DARJEELING, WEST BENGAL

The tourism industry in Darjeeling proved to be as crippled as most businesses operating from the town due to the agitation for a separate state of Gorkhaland. With the scenic beauty of the hills and the spectacular views it affords, Darjeeling has always been a major tourist attraction. A substantial part of the town's employment is attributed to the tourism industry, which took a bloody blow with the ban on internet services that eventually lasted a hundred days.

"The bookings for Darjeeling generally commence four months prior to the annual Hindu festival Durga Puja (usually in September or October), but this time most of the enquiries were for Sikkim. The Hills usually see huge footfall during Puja, but the unrest hit tourism badly and we incurred huge losses," says Samrat Sanyal, a tour operator.

The tourist season generally starts around April and continues till late October. That the internet shutdown came right in the middle of this period — it was first announced on June 18 and lasted till late September — did not help matters. Sanyal says that in 2016 around 85% of the tourist footfall took place around the time of Durga Puja, but in 2017 it had fallen to around 5-10%. Though things have relatively calmed down, Sanyal believes the flow of international tourists will remain low for a while. Other tour operators this reporter spoke to also echoed Sanyal's sentiments and said that the aftermath has left tourists with little confidence in the Hills.

Sources in the tourism department say that apart from the internet shutdown, a general response to the strikes and the violence attributed to the agitation played a major role in "maginalising tourist flow". The tourists who came to the Hills around the time the agitation intensified could not even get in touch with their families as the mobile reception was poor for days, besides no web connectivity. Many who had already arrived at Darjeeling had to cut short their vacation.

One of them was Kartik Lodha. A tourist from Rajasthan, Lodha was caught unawares by the strike that came just as he prepared to go paragliding in Delo. He had no choice but to return to his hotel midway. With no internet to assist him in looking for a way out, Lodha left Kalimpong the next morning in a state bus with police escort. "It's the locals who suffer the most during such situations. They are the ones who will have to deal with these problems and difficulties in the long run. Barring a missed vacation, we will be fine," said Lodha.

Blaming the state for imposing the shutdown and creating "unwanted problems" in the Hills, Tapash Mitra, a tourist from Kolkata, said that "the West Bengal government is hindering its own tourism industry". He had planned a three-day trip with his family, but had to return on the day of his arrival. "I just want the people to have peace in the Hills."

Homestays were also badly hit and saw a spate of booking cancellations in the wake of the agitation and the subsequent network shutdown. Nimlamhu, the owner of Green-Hills homestay at Sangsay, said that more than the owners of hotels or homestays, tourists suffered as they were left stranded, unsure of what they would have to do. "Nothing works when the internet is banned. Even refunds cannot be processed."

When asked about the arrangements that were eventually made to refund the tourists' money, he said, "The amount was refunded because we were left with no option, and for those guests who were our regular customers, we adjusted the balance with their future bookings."

He said, however, that it was difficult to contact those who booked stays in advance but were hit with the news of the strike before they arrived there. "There was no way we could contact the guests as the internet was banned. About 50-60% of our bookings are done online and we couldn't even refund their money through netbanking. We had to personally call them up and apologise for the unforeseen circumstance, and request hem to bear with us, not knowing that the strike would last as long as it did," said Nimlamhu.

Visitors and tourists in Darjeeling reading messages pasted by protestors demanding Gorkhaland
Picture Courtesy: Syeda Ambia Zahan

Sweta Neriah, who is in charge of Palighar, a homestay in Ecchay, was preparing their promotions when the town was hit with the blanket-ban on internet. "For international guests we have a system where payment is done only during checkout. We did incur heavy losses this season and I'm sure we will feel the impact of this slump for some years. Incidentally, this happened just when the international tourist flow started to pick up in this part of the world."

Complaining that the internet ban cost them a year's business, Kabir Pradhan, the owner of the homestay, said, "Internet is the only way to really promote a business these days. We need to keep updating out official pages on every social networking site to market it. Only then can we attract clients and agents." He now looks forward to the spring season.

Meanwhile, many tour guides say they suffered huge losses with the internet ban and dip in the number of tourists. Manisha Sharma, who used to work as a tour guide, says she regrets being in the hills as the ban robbed her of three months' income. "Had I not been here, I could have travelled to some other places with tourists, but the movement of vehicles was also restricted during the agitation, leaving me broke and with few options," says Sharma.

Roshan Gupta is a Siliguri-based journalist and a member of 101Reporters.com, a pan-India network of grassroots reporters.

Special security forces deployed at Chowk Bazaar in Darjeeling town during the protest for separate Gorkhaland
Picture Courtesy: Syeda Ambia Zahan

Through no fault of his own

Tax men penalise a textile merchant in Agartala after internet shutdown
By **SYED SAJJAD ALI**

Ujjyanta Palace is a landmark in Agartala City and a seat of power for erstwhile royals for 400 years. Mandwai, a tribal locality just 25 km east of the Palace, is where tensions between Indigenous Peoples Front of Tripura (IPFT) and CPI(M) led to violent clashes resulting in death of a young television journalist Santanu Bhowmik on September 20, 2017.

Picture Courtesy: **Santanu Biswas**

With the incident happening just ahead of Durga puja, the largest social and religious festival in the region, authorities responded with some emergency measures including indefinite suspension of internet services to cope with the situation.

Picture Courtesy: **Abhisek Saha**

The stoppage of internet services adversely affected normal life. It caused havoc in the business community which largely depends on the internet for its operations. Milap Jain, who has been running one such textile business in Agartala for more than three decades, not only had to contend with disruptions to his business during this time, but was served a tax notice to boot.

Picture Courtesy: Santanu Biswas

Jain has a steady business and can count on numerous customers coming to his shop each day. Though he is always at hand to attend to his customers, most of his time is occupied on his computer, through which he communicates with textile companies, marketing managers and new brands, apart from discharging tax matters.

Picture Courtesy: Santanu Biswas

The internet changed the way business is carried out. And the week-long internet stoppage caused serious operational troubles for Jain.

Picture Courtesy: Santanu Biswas

Meanwhile, tribal supporters of the IPFT kept the tensions alive with protests against indiscriminate arrests of their cadre, blaming them for the murder of the journalist. It smacked of a conspiracy to frame party for a crime which it did not commit, they said.

Picture Courtesy: Abhisek Saha

At an IPFT meeting at Khumulwng, headquarters of the tribal autonomous district council near Agartala, protestors condemned the killing and demanded probe by the CBI into the incident.

Picture Courtesy: **Abhisek Saha**

Meanwhile, Jain struggled to keep track of his every day operations, including responding to queries from customers about brands and patterns or checking on his inventory, tasks for which he had come to rely very heavily on the internet.

Picture Courtesy: **Santanu Biswas**

The suspension of internet for a week meant that he had couldn't complete a tax related transaction resulting in him being slapped with a fine of Rs 500 by the tax authorities.

Picture Courtesy: **Santanu Biswas**

Syed Sajjad Ali is a Agartala based freelance writer who has been reporting on political and social issue for more than a decade.

ACTIVIST SPEAK:

Misinformation in Manipur

In Manipur, a blanket Internet ban shut down any chance of fighting rumours with facts

By **ARMSTRONG CHANAMBAM**

Manipuri women don't shy away from leading from the front. For close to five centuries they have held sway at Ema Keithel, a market operated and controlled exclusively by women. Every day thousands of people throng the bustling streets leading up to the two market complexes to shop for their daily essentials.

Picture Courtesy: Taapaash Chanambam

In this photo from December 2016, women take out a torch rally in Imphal to protest against the 'three controversial bills', so dubbed after the massive protests that their drafting and introduction in the Manipur Legislative Assembly kicked up. The three bills sought to regulate the entry of non-tribals into tribal lands.

Picture Courtesy: Siddharth DH

The ensuing protests turned violent and paralysed the state. Here, a group of women from Churachandpur district sing hymns to pay homage to nine people killed during one such protest.

Picture Courtesy: Deepak Shijagurumayum

On December 18, the government shut down the Internet. Pictured here tending to his backyard, human rights activist Babloo Loitongbam said, the 12-day long information blackout was a waste of precious time and opportunity to fight the rumours and inflammatory statements with facts and logical arguments. The shutdown only aggravated the situation as all attempts to mitigate the tension created by passing the three controversial bills by uploading their exact contents failed.

Picture Courtesy: **Taapaash Chanambam**

Loitongbam, a Fulbright scholar and now the founder and executive director of Human Rights Alert (HRA), says the internet shutdown prevented saner voices from explaining that the bills didn't, in fact, impinge on the rights of the tribal communities who were so vehemently protesting it. The panicked reaction from the government only added into the confusion, he says. Seen here over a road near the base of a two-lane flyover bridge in Imphal, where a woman protester stands guard as a pyre burns in the background.

Picture Courtesy: **Siddharth DH**

The internet is only a medium of exercising one's freedom of expression and people must have the right to decide the truth for themselves, he says. A long-time associate of Iron Sharmila, here he is seen in 2015 taking part in a sit-in to express solidarity with her as she entered the 15th year of her indefinite hunger strike.

Picture Courtesy: HRA office from Babloo Loitongbam
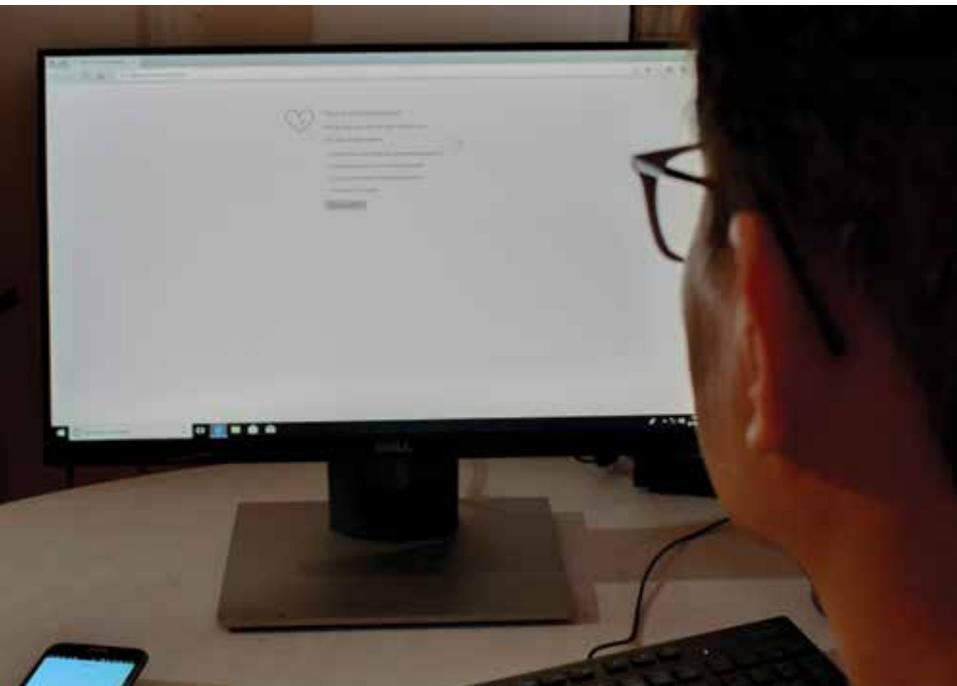
Loitomgbam knows what it is like to live under a perpetual internet shutdown. Despite switching internet service providers, his troubles with poor connectivity at work and home persist; repeated complaints to the regional office of the Shillong-based service providers didn't seem to solve the issue.

Picture Courtesy: Taapaash Chanambam

The inside joke among his associates at the HRA is that there is a bug installed somewhere in the office that is sabotaging their Internet. It has sinister implications. After all, Loitomgbam, through HRA, has been documenting human rights violations, organising victims and striving to provide them with redressal mechanisms.

Picture Courtesy: Taapaash Chanambam
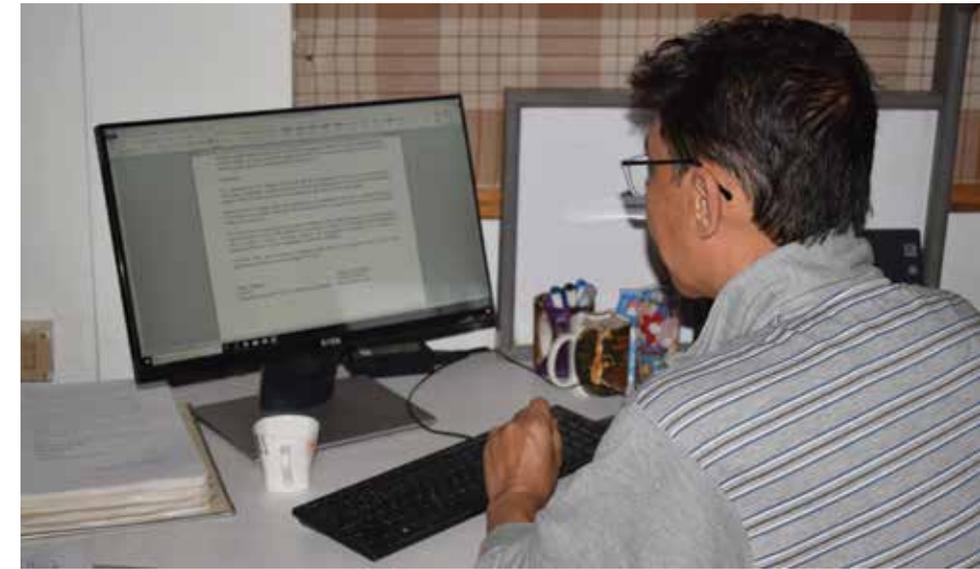
Whenever the patchy internet disrupts his emails to and from other human rights organisations across the country and rest of the world, he visits Venus Net, one of the most popular cyber cafes in Kwakeithal Bazaar. But that December, there was nothing. All cyber cafes were shut, which gave those spreading misinformation a free rein for more than 10 days and disallowing those trying to diffuse the situation by presenting the ground reality, says Loitomgbam.

Picture Courtesy: Taapaash Chanambam

Armstrong Chanambam is a Imphal based freelance writer and a member of 101Reporters, a pan-India network of grassroots reporters.

Internet shutdowns cripple fledgling IT industry in Manipur

By **ARMSTRONG CHANAMBAM**

Manipur IT Park in Imphal
Picture Courtesy: Armstrong Chanambam

IMPHAL, MANIPUR

Opinions are divided among IT companies in Manipur on the impact of the 12-day internet shutdown in end December 2016 on their business and revenue. With their internet-service provider (ISP) vehemently denying there was an internet shutdown some IT companies even retracted their earlier statement of the net ban affecting their operations.

In mid-December, mobile internet services were suspended[1] in Imphal west and Imphal east on the orders of district magistrates after weeks of unrest led to series of attacks on a prominent church and the police.

Rohsnikumar Yambem, CEO of Globizs Web Solutions Company, claims that even broadband-network connections received through optical fibre cables were not spared from the third day of the net ban, leaving a dent in his annual turnover. He says his company lost around Rs.6 lakhs during the net shutdown as more than half his 22-member production team were rendered unproductive.

"We manage around 600 websites in Manipur and provide live web support to at least 200 clients. During the internet shutdown any kind of updates for our clients, including government tender notifications, was impossible. Our main server is maintained in the cloud. Quick Books, the accounting software we use, is accessed online and we were not able to update our accounts for ten days. Neither were we able to create invoices or receipts," he says.

"As a purely IT company, we encourage our clients to become totally IT-enabled," he adds. "We lead by example and demonstrate how a product or system works before selling it to them. We also use HR software and marketing software. The sales teams we dispatch in hill districts like Ukhrul and Senapati send marketing reports in real time online through mobile apps. Everything went for a toss during the shutdown."

Each of Globizs' 50 employees generates revenues of nearly Rs. 50,000 per month, which after deducting salaries and expenses, earns the company a net profit of roughly Rs.10,000. Yambem insists that more than half of his web-design staff were rendered idle by the net ban.

1. Sarkar, Asmita, **Why mobile internet services were shutdown in Manipur,** December 18, 2017 available at *https://www.ibtimes.co.in/mobile-internet-services-banned-manipur-after-unrest-imphal-708921*

"We focused more on bill collection during that period and some of our staff from the production team worked on data already stored in our internal system," he recounts. "The shutdown came when we were reeling under the impact of demonetization. Our annual turnover in 2016 was a little over Rs 90 lakhs," he says against the normal Rs. 2 to 3 crores.

But Yambem later retracted all these statements and directed this reporter to meet the CEO of Skay Broadband Service, the private ISP providing high-speed internet connections to over 600 clients in Imphal.

Arun Kumar Soibam, CEO of Skay, brushed aside any suggestions of an internet shutdown in December 2016 affecting web solutions companies such as Globizs, asserting that the ban was confined only to mobile data services.

Says Wahenbam Priyananda, managing director of Cobigent Technology and Solutions, "As far I remember, the Internet was totally inaccessible for three days when even browsing was not possible. No work whatsoever could be conducted during these three days as we were running a call centre back then," he recalls.

Talking over the phone from Guwahati, Priyananda said he could not be able to place an exact figure on his financial losses without consulting the records, but the shutdown certainly affected Cobigent's revenue.

Sangai Technology, that along with Cobigent and two others IT companies share office space at the Manipur IT Park in Mantripukhi, saw its annual turnover decline by 35 % due to the shutdown, dropping from around Rs.1.3 crore to a little over Rs.72 lakh in 2016.

Loukrakpam Rishidev Singh, Sangai's IT-operation manager, recalls that following the net ban, his company spent nearly 50,000 dispatching staff to provide solutions to his biggest client, a multinational company in Noida. He says they earn a net profit of around Rs.80,000 per month from this client but, in the absence of an agreement to cover such a contingency, Sangai had to absorb these expenses.

Office of Cobigent Technology & Solutions at Manipur IT park
Picture Courtesy: **Armstrong Chanambam**

Inside the office of Sangai Technology
Picture Courtesy: **Armstrong Chanambam**

Sangai provides live web support and day-to-day maintenance to 10 of its clients of whom six are from within the state. "We earned around Rs. 3.5 lakh per day from these clients and incurred losses of at least Rs. 35 lakhs during the shutdown," he says.

Singh says that Sangai, which was launched in November 2015, has found it extremely difficult to find clients and the net shutdown only compounded the problem. "Even if the Internet shutdown was officially limited to cellular-data services, there was no steady data package from the second day of the net ban and we could not serve our clients," he says.

Singh narrates how his team painstakingly instructed the system administrators over the phone on what needed to be done whenever a bug appeared in the web applications or pages they had created.

"We receive an immediate bug report in our server whenever a bug appears in our web applications or pages that we have created. We provide web support to our clients by offering solutions from our end. During the shutdown, we could not receive any such report nor can examine or access the situation as we don't have any visuals of our clients' web pages," he explains.

Armstrong Chanambam is a Imphal-based freelance writer and a member of 101Reporters.com, a pan-India network of grassroots reporters

Loukrakpam Rishidev Singh, IT operations manager of Sangai Technology
Picture Courtesy: Armstrong Chanambam

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Tale of two students in two cities

By **SARAH KONYAK** & **GANESH PRASSAD**

At the beginning of last year, internet services in the entire state of Nagaland were suspended for 20 days to curb the violent reaction to the state government's decision to apply reservation in civic body elections. The internet had been shut down on January 30 but the violence continued in the state capital till February 2 between the police and the rampaging mobs.

Picture Courtesy: **Sarah Konyak**

Over a thousand tribesmen armed with spears and machetes took to the streets and set afire the old secretariat building which housed the offices of Kohima Municipal Council, Regional Transport Office and Nagaland State Disaster Management Authority, and also damaged several government vehicles.

Picture Courtesy: **Sarah Konyak**

24-year- old Khriesavizo Metha and Bendangnungsang Longkumer died in a police firing in the commercial city of Dimapur on January 31.

Picture Courtesy: **Sarah Konyak**

Coming at a time when the annual exams were around the corner, the internet shutdown probably had the most severe effect on students who largely depend on cellular data networks and SMSes for their revisions.

Picture Courtesy: **Sarah Konyak**

More than a year later and several thousand miles away, students in a small town in Bihar find themselves in similar circumstances.

Picture Courtesy: **Ganesh Prassad**

After communal clashes in Aurangabad district, the government shutdown internet multiple times in March, often for more than 24 hours at a time.

Picture Courtesy: Ganesh Prassad

Manisha and Nidhi, twin sisters appearing for their CBSE class X examination were one of the thousands of students were badly affected due to an internet shutdown a day before their Maths exam.

Picture Courtesy: Ganesh Prassad

The abrupt shutdowns impacted the last-minute exam preparation of many students who found themselves unable to revise their syllabi.

Picture Courtesy: Ganesh Prassad

In many under-developed districts like these where public education is found wanting, students across schools and colleges rely on the internet to supplement classroom learning.

Picture Courtesy: Ganesh Prassad

Sarah Konyak is based out of Kohima and is currently working with Northeast Live News Channel.

Ganesh is a Aurangabad based reporter who has been in the business for more than 15 years. He is a member of 101Reporters, a pan-India network of grassroots reporters.

Business woes from Saharanpur's internet ban

Three businessmen reveal the price they paid

By **MAHESH KUMAR SHIVA**

Shailendra Bhushan Gupta at his shop in Saharanpur
Picture Courtesy: 101Reporters

1. Sahu, Manish, **Saharanpur: After 10 days, Internet services return violence-hit district**, June 4, 2017 available at *http://indianexpress.com/article/india/saharanpur-after-10-days-internet-services-return-violence-hit-district-4687939/*

SAHARANPUR, UTTAR PRADESH

The violence between groups of Thakurs and Dalits that engulfed Saharanpur district in Uttar Pradesh between April and June 2017 continues to haunt its residents. The UP administration had ordered an internet shutdown for 10 days[1], reportedly to prevent the spread of rumours that had erupted after another caste clash on May 23 in Shabbirpur.

Those running businesses in Saharanpur say they were affected in unexpected ways. They struggled to make regular transactions and incurred losses they haven't yet recovered from.

Forty-eight-year-old Rajkumar Jatav has been manufacturing ladies' shoes for 25 years in Saharanpur town. Helped by his sons Sushant and Rajkkumar, he runs a small-scale factory which employs 15 workers who make flat slippers, sandals, heeled shoes and *joothis* for the local market. Jatav says he suffered a loss of about Rs 1.25 lakh ($2000) during the 10-day internet shutdown.

"I did not get raw materials like paste solutions, synthetic leather, heels and sequins from my suppliers based in Kanpur and Agra when I failed to pay them the 50% advance through online transfer," says Jatav. "The situation outside the town was also tense. So there was no chance I could go or send someone to the banks either."

Jatav had started using the digital payment system only after demonetisation. "I started doing online payments after November 8, 2016, after I faced a lot of problems with cash availability during that time. Internet payments came as a boon for me and also for my suppliers," he says. But within six months of getting used to online transactions, Jatav faced this new hurdle: an internet shutdown. "To complete the shoe order, we have to invest from our pocket first, but when I couldn't, my suppliers refused to send me the material, which meant I could not complete a big order," he says. He calculates that the cancelled order cost him Rs 2 lakhs. In addition, a few of Jatav's reliable and talented shoe workers quit because he was unable to pay their wages on time.

Jatav's annual business turnover is around Rs 24 lakh (Rs 200,000 a month), and he gets his raw material from the markets of New Delhi, Bareilly and Agra. "I even tried to give my suppliers an account payee cheque but they declined it saying that it will take a lot of time to clear. I requested them again and again but it was of no use. For a supplier there are thousands of Rajkumar Jatavs. I am no special client to get the raw materials on credit," he says. Jatav admits that he is not prepared for another shutdown, and he would not be able to run his business if it happened again.

Many traders in Saharanpur city say narrate similar experiences. In May, a family business of trading edible oil wholesale saw its most unfamiliar financial challenge yet. It had been only three years since Shailendra Bhushan Gupta had taken over his elder brother's 26-year-old store. Gupta started to expand and diversify too, by launching an agency to trade the Fortune brand of oils. He employs five people, and his monthly turnover ranges between Rs 30-40 lakhs ($46,600-62,200). The 40-year-old also modernised some of the business practices, shifting much of the payments to suppliers online, for speed and ease of use.

During the internet shutdown in Saharanpur, Gupta did not expect to be affected, given the stability of his store and the large sale volume of his agency. But unexpectedly, his supplying company cancelled his order of 1000 litres of oil when he could not make the payment. "As per the agreement, I have to deposit at least 50% of the order amount in advance, and the rest of the payment is made when the oil is delivered to us. But during those 10 days, I could not make payment through any means, and my order was declined by the supplying company," he says. Gupta also tried to make the payment through RTGS but couldn't do that. The oil trader says that he ended up suffering a jolt of Rs 18 lakhs ($28,000).

Gupta is slowly trying to make up for the monetary loss and credit worthiness with his suppliers. "How can an internet shutdown be a solution for anything?" he asks. "I seriously don't know what to do if it happens again."

A property dealer in same central market faced a direct hit during the internet ban. Ashok Pundeer, who has been selling and renting

Staff handling stocks at Shailendra Bhushan Gupta's shop in Saharanpur
Picture Courtesy: 101Reporters

commercial and residential properties for the past five years, estimates that he suffered a loss of Rs 22 lakhs ($34,200) during the internet shutdown as he could not get many properties registered in that period. "I had to return the token money to many buyers because there was no internet," he says. "All of us know that registry (property) and documentation is now done online in Uttar Pradesh. The clients were new and they refused to take the deal forward."

A property dealer is not easily trusted, admits Pundeer. This means he is paid only after the deal is done, and a lot of word-of-mouth business depends on his image and credibility. Every lost client is a potential loss of more. "It's not just me, but many dealers have incurred huge losses due to the shutdown," says Pundeer. "*Koi ration ki dukaan to hai nahi property dealing. Jo kuch hona hai online hi hona hai. Ab kya batayein, dekha jayega jo hona hoga*," he throws his hand up in frustration, saying the real estate business is no grocery shop, and if there's no access to online transactions, then very little can be done.

Trying to keep an optimistic outlook, Pundeer says, "*Jitna kuan khodo, utna paani milega*". For his business to recover, he will have to double down with more focus and effort.

with inputs from Saurabh Sharma

Mahesh Kumar Shiva is a Saharanpur-based journalist and a member of 101Reporters.com, a pan-India network of grassroots reporters.

Was there an unofficial internet shutdown in BHU & NTPC?

In Varanasi and Raebareli, residents allege internet bans, while govt denies it all

By **SAURABH SHARMA** @saurabhsherry

NTPC North zone headquarters in Lucknow
Picture Courtesy: Saurabh Sharma

VARANASI/ RAE BARELI, UTTAR PRADESH

During the student-led protests at Banaras Hindu University in September, anger over how the university handled a sexual harassment complaint was exacerbated by the police brutality that rained down on the female students involved in the protest. Amidst this chaos, many students inexplicably found that they were unable to communicate with their parents and peers because they couldn't connect online.

Shraddha Singh, a second-year fine arts student at BHU, had to walk three kilometres to reserve her train ticket home and couldn't call her mother to talk about the injuries she sustained during the lathi-charge on September 23. The 21-year-old student said, "First, the police came into the hostel to beat us up. Then the internet was blocked. Neither was the hostel WiFi working, nor mobile internet. Forget about booking tickets, we weren't even able to make calls." She felt this was a deliberate attempt to disrupt the protest by those who were "afraid" of where it would lead.

Worse still, the hostel warden had asked the girls to vacate their dorms immediately, and the students were cast into the streets without access to the Internet. Tanjim Haroom, a Bangladeshi political science student at the university, found herself stranded in Varanasi like many of her classmates. "I go home only once in a year but this time, I was forced to vacate the hostel and I could not get in touch with any of my relatives or family due to this sudden shutdown of internet and phone services. I was helpless in this city and just had some Rs 700 ($11) with me. I finally got shelter at the Mumukshu Ashram and was able to contact my family from their landline phone."

Predictably, officials from the university insisted that there wasn't any clampdown on the internet. The then vice-chancellor, Professor Girish Chandra Tripathi, when asked about this unofficial shutdown, said that there was none. "There could have been a network issue because the internet was working fine in our office. I cannot say what the students have alleged. Making allegations is very easy," he said over the phone

to *101reporters*. Varanasi district magistrate Yogeshwar Ram Mishra also denied that internet or phone services were suspended during the protests.

But a worrying number of first-person accounts prove otherwise. According to Avinash Ojha, a first-year post-graduate student at the university, internet and phone services were restricted in the varsity campus soon after the lathi-charge on the students. They weren't able to get online from the night of September 23 to 25.

The students had to go to Assi Ghat or other far-flung places to talk to their families and make travel arrangements out of the city. Ojha also alleged the involvement of the university's vice-chancellor behind this move.

Another case of suspected unofficial shutdown might have occurred on November 1, when a boiler explosion occurred at the National Thermal Power Corporation plant in Rae Bareli, that has since killed 34 people.

A senior officer of NTPC, on the condition of anonymity, told *101reporters* that Reliance Jio was asked to cap their services in the area until things settled down. "I had heard my seniors discussing the need for this in order to avoid panic. There are a large number of Jio users here, so that specific service was asked to restrict its internet speed and calling facility for a while."

Here too, there is evidence that the outage affected several people in the area. Amresh Singh, a property dealer hailing from Baiswara area of Rae Bareli was in Unchahar when the explosion occurred. He discovered that his phone network was not working. "There was no internet on my mobile phone after 4pm. I was able to access internet only after reaching Jagatpur, which is around 10 kilometres away from Unchahar," said Singh. "It felt like the phone lines were deliberately disrupted. I initially thought something was wrong with my phone, but the people with me were also not able to use their phones. Maybe the government quietly shut down the network to prevent panic."

Police deployment after boiler blast at NTPC Unchahar unit in Raebareli district of Uttar Pradesh
Picture Courtesy: Saurabh Sharma

Mantu Baruah, a labourer from Jharkhand working at the NTPC, had a near-identical experience. His Jio network stopped working after 4pm that day, and he was unable to contact his family on WhatsApp to tell them that he was safe. "I tried many times, maybe over a hundred times, to send an image but it didn't work. Jio network was down. Neither video calls nor phone calls were working. The authorities had made this happen so people outside wouldn't know what was going on here."

But Ruchi Ratna, AGM (HR) at NTPC's North Zone office in Lucknow, tells us that there was a network congestion that day, not a shutdown. "Even we were unable to talk to our officers and were getting our information through the media," she said. Sanjay Kumar Khatri, Rae Bareily's district magistrate said over the phone, "There is no question of an 'unofficial shutdown'. I myself faced issues in sending messages on WhatsApp but my BSNL mobile was working fine and even journalists here were sending images and videos real time."

However, a senior communication manager at Reliance Jio's Vibhuti Khand office in Lucknow revealed to this reporter that the internet was indeed restricted in both these instances for 12 hours each. "This was only done on the order of the government. I do not hold any written information, but it must be with the head office," the communication manager said. At the time of publishing, our requests for comments from the official spokespeople of Jio had not received a response.

Arvind Kumar, principal secretary (Home), Uttar Pradesh government, said that there were no restrictions or shutdowns during either incident. "There could have been network issues. The government did not ask any service provider to restrict its services. I will look into the matter, about where the orders to restrict Jio were issued from, but it did not come from the Uttar Pradesh government," he said.

While activists have roundly criticised the Temporary Suspension of Telecom Services (Public Emergency of Public Safety) Rules[1], notified in August without public consultation, there is now a better-defined (albeit still vague) protocol for implementation of internet blackouts. For instance, only the central or state home secretary can issue orders

to implement shutdowns. Prior to this, internet restrictions were issued by various authorities, along with section 144 of the Criminal Procedure Code, aimed at preventing "obstruction, annoyance or injury". This wide berth allowed the administration to quietly get away with short-term internet bans without providing proper explanation. In fact, those monitoring these shutdowns are only able to maintain such records by tracking media reports; no official records are available to the public. Without official transparency, often, if there is no news story, it is like there was no internet ban.

Saurabh Sharma is a Lucknow-based freelance writer and a member of 101Reporters.com, a pan-India network of grassroots reporters.

1. *www.dot.gov.in/gazette-notification*

Days to derail work of two generations?

How an internet shutdown hurt a family woodwork business

By **MAHESH KUMAR SHIVA**

Craftsmen at Furqan Handicrafts in Saharanpur
Picture Courtesy: **Mahesh Kumar Sharma**

SAHARANPUR, UTTAR PRADESH

It was reportedly Bahlul (Bahlol) Lodi, the founder of Lodi dynasty, who in the 15th century first settled some Afghani craftsmen and their families on the outskirts of the old town in Saharanpur. Today, this area houses the *Lakdi Market*, home to world-famous wood art and handicrafts. From large fretwork screens and doors to trays, bowls and trinket boxes, these intricately carved wooden objects are called for from as far as Europe, the Middle East and Australia. The woodworking industry is the mainstay of thousands of artists, workers and entrepreneurs here, many of whom are part of small scale operations.

Mohammad Aarif, 28, heads one such business which has been in the family since two generations. Founded by his father four decades ago, Furqan Handicrafts has survived several challenges[1], such as rising prices of the fast exhausting raw material and middlemen, but the losses caused by a 10-day-long internet shutdown jolted him. He lost around Rs 7 lakh ($10,900) during this time. Six months on, he is still dealing with the repercussions, uncertain if he would ever recover the money.

Dalits and Thakurs in Shabbirpur village of Saharanpur district had their daggers drawn since violence first broke out in the village on May 5[2]. The increasing friction led to a cycle of violence, and subsequently to indefinite suspension[3] of internet services on May 24, which went on till June 2, under the orders of the district magistrate to avoid rumour-mongering and hate messages being circulated on social media and messaging apps. The suspension of services in this west Uttar Pradesh city brought life to a standstill and Aarif's business is just one of those which suffered dramatic losses during this one week.

Furqan Handicrafts is famous for its handicraft items and furniture, both in the country and abroad. Their products go as far as Malaysia, Finland and China. Aarif uses his mobile to make payments for the raw materials as he travels a lot, and this helps him conduct his business on the go.

1. Down to Earth, **The wood femine**, available at *http://www.downtoearth.org.in/indepth/the-wood-femine-29933*

2. PTI, **UP: 1 killed, houses torched as Thakurs, Dalits clash in Saharanpur, May 5, 2017**, *http://indianexpress.com/article/india/up-1-killedhouses-torched-asthakurs-dalits-clash-insaharanpur-4642544/*

3. News18Hindi, डीएम-एसएसपी पर गाज गिराने के बाद सहारनपुर में इंटरनेट सेवा बंद, May 24, 2017, available at *https://hindi.news18.com/uttar-pradesh/lucknow-news-internet-services-closed-in-saharanpur-due-to-violence-998319.html*

Craftsmen at Furqan Handicrafts in Saharanpur
Picture Courtesy: Mahesh Kumar Sharma

"We have employed around 20 workers," says Aarif. When the shutdown came into effect without warning on May 24, he had only around Rs 20,000-30,000 ($310-470) cash in hand. "Can you imagine running a business of this size, with a weekly turnover of Rs 10 lakhs, with so little cash in hand and having the liability of over 20 families on your head?" Aarif asks. "I ran out of cash on May 26 and then the real problems began. The banks were closed and the internet was shut down. We were left with no options. The situation was so tense outside that we could not even think of going to other districts to transact or to even our own banks when they eventually opened after two days," the businessman says.

Moreover, Furqan Handicrafts has been accepting a good chunk of their orders online - either through their website or on WhatsApp. So the shutdown also affected the demand side of the business adversely. All the little consolatory lies he told himself to steel against the mounting

panic didn't help for long with the shutdown stretching on indefinitely. "I told my workers that the media said the situation would return to normal soon, and that helped us keep calm initially. We were hopeful that we would be able to conduct transactions in the next two days, but the situation worsened when the shutdown continued for over a week," Aarif says.

"Our suppliers refused to sell us the raw materials without being paid first. Sometimes we may get some materials on loan, but most times only money does the talking. The chemicals that we get from Delhi have

Craftsmen at Furqan Handicrafts in Saharanpur
Picture Courtesy: Mahesh Kumar Sharma

to be paid for fully in advance. We had more difficulties when we weren't able to move our finished product. They were just lying there, collecting dust, and we incurred further losses in re-polishing them. And we were not able to pay our workers for the hours they had put in," Aarif recalls.

It was not just his business that suffered, his employees felt the sting of the shutdown as well. Najeer Ahmad, a woodworker at Furqan Handicrafts, says that everything was normal in the beginning but situation started worsening after two days. "After the second day, work started slowing down and eventually, stopped completely. Our boss told us that we couldn't get any raw materials because we weren't able to pay the suppliers. Whatever little materials we had in the workshop, we used up, but then when there was none left, there was no work… since there was no work, there was no money. The boss usually settles our wages at the end of every week and gives us walking-around money every day. Without either of these, it became quite difficult to manage."

Another of his employees, Rashid, was able to weather the shutdown because he had some cash lying around at home. "*Aise to jumme ke jumme hisaab ho jaata hai* (Usually, we get paid every Friday)." So, even though he wasn't paid that Friday like

Craftsmen at Furqan Handicrafts in Saharanpur
Picture Courtesy: Mahesh Kumar Sharma

he usually is, he made do. But he still lost wages because of the lack of work during that week.

"We have lost money in lakhs already. If something like this were to happen again it would ruin us," says Aarif. But he still manages to see the silver lining in this suffering, and is glad that he did not lose his clients. "*Allah ka shukar tha ki hamara koi bhi client toota nahi. Nuksaan ki bharpaayi to ab tak nahi ho paayi hai, lekin Allah chahega to jald hi ho jayegi* (Thank god that we didn't lose any of our clients. We haven't been able to recover the losses yet, but god willing, we will be able to make up)."

Mahesh Kumar Shiva is a Lucknow - based freelance writer and a member of 101Reporters.com, a pan-India network of grassroots reporters. With inputs from Saurabh Sharma, a Lucknow-based reporter.

REPORTER'S ACCOUNT:

How internet ban in Kasganj affected press and police

By **SAURABH SHARMA** @saurabhsherry

Rapid Action Force People with police during flag march in the Nadari Gate area in Kasganj
Picture Courtesy: Saurabh Sharma

KASGANJ, UTTAR PRADESH

Reporting live from a conflict zone earlier this year, a reporter observed first-hand how suspension of the internet to check rumour-mongering restricts government servants as well as media from going about their job.

Kasganj town in Uttar Pradesh's Aligarh division was in grip of violence and rioting after a Republic Day rally went wrong. A motorcycle rally of Hindu youth had ventured into a Muslim residential area and provocative slogans were raised. In the chaos that ensued, a bullet was fired and a Hindu youth was killed. This had sparked arson and loot in the hitherto-unknown town.

When this Lucknow-based reporter reached Kasganj to report from there, messages fomenting communal trouble had already started floating on social media and messaging apps. As a precautionary measure, the district magistrate (DM) had snapped internet services in the region on the night of January 27 so that no provocative messages were circulated to aggravate communal tension. Police vans patrolling the town's streets had announced as much a few times.

The same night, at a media briefing at his office, the DM Rakesh Singh appealed that people don't heed rumours that are circulating on social media and maintain peace and harmony.

Internet remained suspended in Kasganj for three days, starting from 10 pm on January 27. Even as the clampdown was enforced, incidents of vehicles and shops being set afire did not abate. In the absence of WhatsApp, reporters' preferred communication tool, they had to rely on SMSes and phone calls to connect with each other to gather news.

To send their news report to their bureau, journalists in the trouble-torn town were frantically searching for households with broadband connection, since the internet ban was applicable only on cellular networks and not on broadband. Kasganj being a small town with its population barely exceeding a lakh, finding a broadband connection proved tough.

This reporter himself had to cross the district border a few times to get access to internet so that he could send inputs to his newsroom. Since vehicles were not plying owing to violence, finding a ride was a task in itself. This reporter had to request police, anti-riot forces and a local leader to help with travel for the sake of work.

BBC correspondent Sameeratmaj Mishra was one of the many journalists in Kasganj who found themselves high and dry owing to the internet ban.

"I was like a fish without water," he said as he recalled how he had to keep travelling to the adjoining district of Etah and back regularly to send inputs to his bureau. He recounted how this travel, necessitated by the internet ban, cost him on the reporting front. He said he couldn't cover some major developments because he was in Etah at that time, sending inputs.

Considering all the vandalism that unfolded in Kasganj after the Republic Day clash, including in the days following internet ban, Mishra opined that internet ban did not work.

'Ban was needed'
The DM disagrees with this verdict. He told this reporter snapping internet was necessary to control the situation. He claimed that the move helped them defuse tension and check violence from spiralling out of control.

"Every time the relaxation [on internet ban] was given, we got to know that someone torched a small shop, vehicles or whatever these anti-social, notorious elements found, which not just increased tension in the area but also hate among both the communities. The hate messages circulating on social media added fuel to the fire and controlling this was very necessary," he said, conceding that the ban affected the officers too.

Circle offices BS Veer Kumar, who was escorting the DM in Kasganj during the riots, was one of those who suffered the most owing to internet suspension as he had to bring the printed copy of orders that were coming from the Lucknow state headquarters.

"You have seen how I was bringing the printed copies of the order after travelling to Mirhachi in Etah district, which is almost 40 kms from the

Security forces interrogating a boy at the Shivala intersection near railway station in Kasganj
Picture Courtesy: Saurabh Sharma

city headquarters. The broadband connection available at the district magistrate office was of no use and such a travel was real pain. I was getting phone calls from people, seniors, sub-ordinates and whom not! But I was assigned for this duty so I had to do," he said.

"*Ye sab toh theek tha lekin doosri taraf parivaar se bhi* phone *aa rahe thhe. Unhe bhi meri chinta sata rahi thi jiska ham us samay kuch nahi kar sakte thhe. Aise to* WhatsApp *par* photo *bhej do toh kaam chal jaata tha lekin un dino toh baar-baar* phone *aata tha aur* pick *karna padta tha*," he added.

(Everything else was fine but then the family members were also worried for me and they were calling me regularly. Usually, I send my pictures on WhatsApp but on that day I had to answer their calls every single time they called me.)

Snapping mobile internet affected not only journalists and policemen on duty, but also the students and young professionals in the town, who rely on internet for many daily activities.
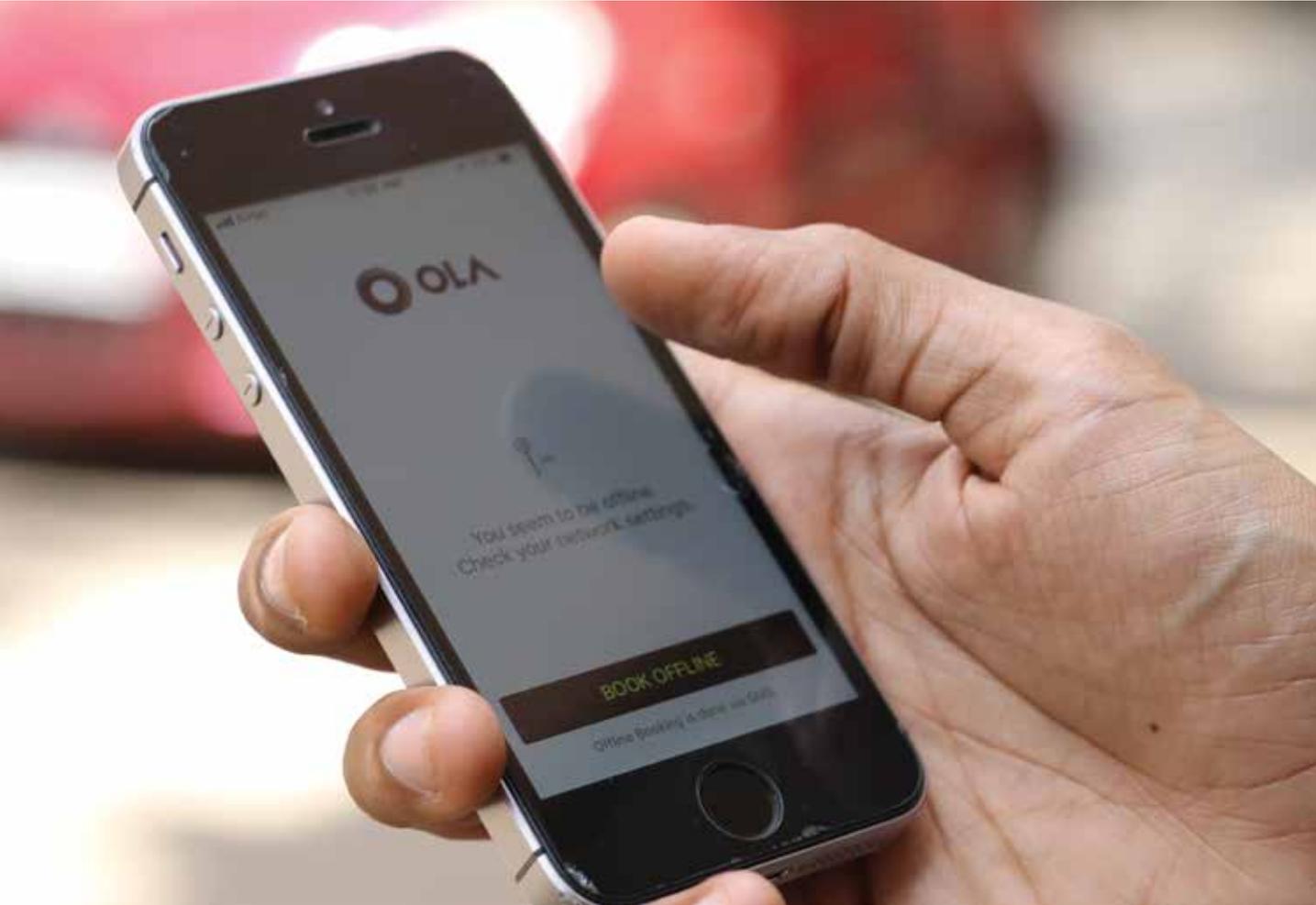
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Internet shutdowns: A modern-day siege

Technology activists, lawyers, politicians and NGOs weigh in on the spate of internet shutdowns in India in 2017

By **AYSWARYA MURTHY**

File Image: A user trying to book OLA offline
Picture Courtesy: 101Reporters

BENGALURU, KARNATAKA

For thousands of years, military sieges have been an effective means of depriving a population into submission. Attackers would surround the fort or city and simply wait for the food to run out. In today's connected age, you can mount a successful siege remotely with a single signed order that can shut down the internet and practically bring life to a standstill.

So, it's not surprising that inter-governmental organisations and NGOs around the world are starting to promote the idea that access to internet is a fundamental right, and watchdogs declare any deliberate interference to this access to be a violation of human rights. "In today's modern digital world, shutting down mobile and internet networks is a drastic action that infringes on everyone's rights and is inherently disproportionate. Internet shutdowns cut off everyone's ability to speak and access information, regardless of whether they have done anything wrong. Considering the broad harm to rights that shutdowns can cause, government officials should certainly take them more seriously as a human rights violation," says Cynthia Wong, senior internet researcher at Human Rights Watch.

But in India, there is no legal recourse yet against such decisions. In 2015, a Public Interest Litigation filed in the Gujarat High Court against a week-long internet shutdown was dismissed (as was a Special Leave Petition filed in the Supreme Court in 2016 challenging this decision). In fact, tech entrepreneur and Rajya Sabha MP Rajeev Chandrasekar attributes the dramatic increase in the number of internet blocks in 2017, which has doubled since last year, to this ruling. "This dramatic increase in the number of internet blocks can be attributed to the Supreme Court ruling in February 2016 which upheld the right of districts and states to ban mobile internet services for maintaining law and order."

Typically, mobile internet bans were enforced under Section 144 of the Code of Criminal Procedure which can prohibit assembly of more than four people and is usually invoked by a district magistrate. "Indeed, mobs

come together due to the spread of misinformation over internet services such as Facebook and WhatsApp," says Chandrasekar. "However, internet shutdowns also disabled authentic news organisations who can dispel such misinformation. I have argued that governments and administrations do have the right to shut down internet or take down content consistent with the Constitution's Article 19 guarantee of fundamental right to free speech being subject to reasonable restrictions. So, the debate is not whether the government has a right to temporarily shut down the internet or not, but does the government or administration use this right reasonably and with clear guidelines," he warns.

Enter the Temporary Suspension of Telecom Services (Public Emergency of Public Safety) Rules[1] that were released in August. The primary concern of tech activists is that these 'Suspension Rules' set a dangerous precedent because they legalise internet shutdowns where ideally there should be none. But these rules also received a wary welcome.

"Use of an archaic law like Section 144 of CrPC for shutting down the internet is not justified. The new rules seem to have been hastily put together without much forethought," according to Prasanth Sugathan, legal director at Software Freedom Law Center (SFLC). "There is no transparency on how these rules were drafted as there was no consultation with the stakeholders. These rules are not conducive to ensuring the right to internet access of citizens which is essential for the success of initiatives like Digital India. As regulations go, these aren't particularly robust, giving central and state governments the power to shut down telecom services, without having to cite further reasoning than "public safety" and "national security". In fact, the rules don't even specify a maximum duration after which services must be restored."

Calling the whole deal shoddy, Sugathan says it seems like they were put out just to subvert the illegality of Internet shutdowns.

Chandrasekar also feels the process should have been more consultation-driven. "The rules can and must be improved to remove

1. *www.dot.gov.in/ sites/default/files/Sus- pension%20Rules.pdf*

A stall by Internet Service Provider ACT fibernet in Bangalore
Picture Courtesy: 101Reporters

adhocism and arbitrary use. As I say repeatedly, these kinds of government policies run the real risk of straying from the reasonable restrictions acceptable to our Constitution to an infringement of the Right to Expression. Governments, especially political leadership, should be careful that bureaucratic lack of imagination or paranoia or simply laziness doesn't cause that crossover from right to wrong."

According to SFLC, which has been tracking internet shutdowns in the country over the past five years, authorities in India have shut down networks 60 times just in 2017, spelling a staggering cost to the economy beyond the incalculable harm to human rights. Brookings estimated that the 22 network shutdowns in India from 2015-2016 cost the country's economy $968 million. It's baffling that while the government is pushing citizens to embrace 'Digital India' on one hand, they are concurrently pulling the rug from underneath these same users with these total and partial internet shutdowns. "From the perspective of promoting India's digital economy, if people learn they cannot rely on their mobile phone service because of arbitrary disruptions, they are less likely to adopt digital technologies. If the Indian government truly wants to be a global leader in the digital age, it should cease all arbitrary and overbroad restrictions on internet access," says Wong.

Osama Manzer, founder of Digital Empowerment Foundation (DEF), has an ever-expanding roster of people who were keenly affected by the shutdowns in their regions, irrespective of whether it last three days or three months. "One of the biggest impacts is that residents must live with is that their access to basic services becomes very limited. In Darjeeling, many state government employees were not paid their salaries because the banking system is online and centralised. The livelihood of sim card sellers and recharge shop owners, internet cafes and small scale shops that offer printing, scanning, online form filling services took a huge hit. It is especially detrimental to them since they rely on daily sales for their income," he says.

While the economic impact of internet shutdowns has been documented, the social and psychological impact is just as crucial to investigate, says Manzer, especially in cases where these shutdowns are frequent and

long term. DEF is in the final stages of releasing a report based on such a research. "We've found through our research that when shutdowns are ordered for a few days, residents can reason it out and some even find justifications for it. They may say the security and safety circumstances warranted it. But prolonged shutdowns have an acute negative impact on residents psychologically. Residents of Darjeeling, Kalimpong and J&K feel the impact of internet shutdowns acutely. They feel doubly isolated from the rest of the country and their faith in the government erodes. People we've interviewed have said they feel helpless and panicked. Some interviewees in Kashmir went so far as to question the democratic process and their right to it."

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About CIS

The Centre for Internet and Society (CIS) is a non-profit organisation that undertakes interdisciplinary research on internet and digital technologies from policy and academic perspectives. The areas of focus include digital accessibility for persons with disabilities, access to knowledge, intellectual property rights, openness (including open data, free and open source software, open standards, open access, open educational resources, and open video), internet governance, telecommunication reform, digital privacy, and cyber-security. The academic research at CIS seeks to understand the reconfiguration of social processes and structures through the internet and digital media technologies, and vice versa.

Through its diverse initiatives, CIS explores, intervenes in, and advances contemporary discourse and practices around internet, technology and society in India, and elsewhere.

cis-india.org

About 101Reporters

101Reporters (established in October 2015) is India's first and largest network of grassroots reporters which sources original stories from grassroots reporters, edits, customizes and markets them to national and international mainstream media. It has networked nearly 600 reporters in 300 odd districts which is almost half of India. Our vision is to build an ecosystem for independent journalism by networking and enabling grassroots reporters to tell untold stories.

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