



Situation Report: Jammu and Kashmir, India

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Blaming The Messenger: Media Under Pressure in Jammu and Kashmir

Since large-scale civil unrest began in the Kashmir valley – the largest of the three regions of the Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir – in June this year, the difficulties faced by journalists have rapidly escalated. Along with an easing in overall levels of violence, overt threats faced by journalists have probably declined since September 2010, but restraints on the media's daily functioning continue. Newspapers have been closed for an estimated total of 30 days since protests intensified in Kashmir in mid-June 2010, with local journalists confined to their homes and others assaulted.

Government advertising is allocated quite transparently to media that are compliant to the official diktat, while news gathering in Kashmir is impeded by restrictions on movement and disrupted communications. Text messaging (SMS) through the state's mobile telephone network was suspended in June, and television news broadcasts have been heavily restricted. Internet connectivity is frequently disrupted and those posting to social networking sites are subject to scrutiny and in some cases arrest.

To combat these threats, journalists in Kashmir have organised via their two main platforms – the Kashmir Press Guild and the Kashmir Press Association. Important gestures of solidarity have come from collectives in other parts of India, such as the Delhi Union of Journalists (DUJ). The Editors' Guild of India and the Press Club of India have also joined in the effort to ensure Kashmir's journalists a better deal in a time of unabated turmoil.

Following is a situation report on journalism in Kashmir based on a visit by IFJ South Asia staff to the region in the last week of October, undertaken as part of a fact-finding team involving other civil society organisations. This report will be used in part or whole in the broader process coming out of this civil society initiative.)

Junctures of civil unrest in Kashmir invariably call forth an official attitude of blaming the messenger, which results in various forms of restraint on the region's journalists, often stretching to active measures of repression that are regarded by authorities as a perfectly permissible stratagem for restoring order.

Since the upsurge in civil unrest in the Kashmir valley in June 2010, media practitioners claim that their situation, in terms of daily work routines, has deteriorated sharply. Accessing news sites has become an ordeal and gaining authentic information on the disturbances that break out with alarming regularity, virtually impossible.

There has been a lessening of the violence in Kashmir since a visit by an all-party parliamentary delegation in September 2010. Journalists may be more assured now that they can travel to work and back without serious hindrance. But they continue to suffer enormous restraints on daily functioning.

Newspapers have been shut for about 30 days in total since Kashmir's protests began to intensify from mid-June. The travails for journalists became particularly grim from about July 7 when, after several years, the Indian army was summoned out of its barracks and deployed on the streets of Kashmir, curfew restrictions were extended to cover the movement of all civilians



and an announcement made by the state's Home Department, that press passes would no longer be honoured.

Kashmir's media personnel were confined to their homes for several days following these actions. Photographers and news cameramen in Srinagar were assaulted that day as they sought to record the army deployment and other major events. Some had their professional equipment confiscated by security agencies.

These incidents followed similar occurrences a day earlier, when at least 12 photographers working for local, national and international media organisations were assaulted in Srinagar and suffered injuries of various degrees of seriousness. As the camera operators were attacked, senior police were heard remarking that without media attention the demonstrations would soon lose momentum.

On July 2, authorities in the region of Jammu sealed the premises of three publications on the grounds that they had allegedly carried false and misleading news reports that tended to aggravate tensions between religious communities. The following day, copies of *Greater Kashmir* and *Kashmir Uzma*, the leading newspapers in English and Urdu in the Kashmir valley, were seized as they were being readied for distribution.

A few days into these closures, the Kashmir Press Guild, a platform of the most senior journalists in the region, issued a statement deprecating the situation in which local journalists were confined to their homes by an unrelenting curfew, while media personnel flying in from Delhi were afforded armed protection and given considerable freedom of movement.

In the perception of the Guild, it was as if the story of Kashmir, if it were to be told at all, could only be entrusted to the narrative skills of journalists enjoying the stamp of approval that comes from working in the national capital.

On July 9, when curfew and closures were at their most oppressive in the Kashmir valley, the state government seemed to relent marginally after virtually locking all journalists in for days. Journalists in Srinagar were given a telephonic assurance that they would be provided fresh curfew passes to replace the ones invalidated after the army deployment of July 7. As senior journalist Riyaz Masroor set off from his home in the Alucha Bagh neighbourhood of Srinagar, to collect the fresh issue of his curfew pass, he was stopped at a police checkpoint on the main thoroughfare near his home. Personnel of the local police reportedly did not ask him why he was stepping out during the curfew, nor did they wait for an explanation. Few seemed to care that he was responding to a summons from the state government's Information Department. He was attacked with batons and forced to return home, with serious injuries to his hip and right wrist.

On August 14 and again on September 28, a senior journalist now working with India's largest news agency, the Press Trust of India, was stopped as he was going to work and his curfew pass confiscated by security forces. No reasons were given and it was made clear to him that he was not entitled to ask for any.

On October 1, Merajuddin and Umar Meraj of the Associated Press TV news service, and Mufti Islah and Shakeel-ur Rahman of the Indian news channel CNN-IBN, were assaulted by security forces while on their way to the state legislative assembly in Srinagar. The incident began with a heated argument over the police insistence that they would not allow the journalists to proceed, despite the curfew passes they carried. Merajuddin, whose documentation remains one of the richest visual records of Kashmir's years of insurgency, suffered a serious injury to his neck in the incident and spent days recovering in hospital.



Through 15 days in September, few newspapers were printed in Srinagar because journalists and print workers could not reach their places of work. Those who made the effort and succeeded on any one day often found themselves condemned to remain confined within their places of work indefinitely. Among the few newspapers that were published, most found distribution channels blocked, as delivery vehicles were detained at the Mirgund and Kotibagh checkpoints just outside Srinagar.

On September 30, all copies of *Greater Kashmir*, *Rising Kashmir*, *Kashmir Uzma* and *Buland Kashmir* were seized from their points of production in Srinagar city and taken to local police stations. The following day, the chief minister of Jammu and Kashmir, Omar Abdullah, informed the state assembly that he had not issued any order for the seizure of the newspapers, though the police were empowered to examine media content prior to publication.

Advertising Allocations Questioned

Journalists in Srinagar hesitate to use the term “discrimination”, but they have reason to believe that an increasing degree of arbitrariness has crept into the allocation of government advertising budgets among newspapers. The evidence available today, of selective allocations to newspapers that are seen to be amenable and severe cutbacks to those that are seen to be too independent, comes on the heels of longstanding grievances that government advertising budgets overwhelmingly favour newspapers in Jammu rather than Srinagar. Illustratively, the annual report of the central government’s Directorate of Advertising and Visual Publicity (DAVP), the nodal agency for the placement of official advertising, records a spending of INR 34,426,365 in the print media in Jammu city in 2008-09 and INR 10,017,660. (In US dollar terms, these figures would work out at current exchange rates, to just over USD 1.5 million and just over USD 450,000 respectively).

A cross-section of journalists with whom the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) met in Srinagar were convinced that even this relatively meagre allocation for the print media in their city is now distributed with intent to ensure compliance with the official *diktat*. Journalists from three leading newspapers published from Srinagar – *Rising Kashmir*, *Greater Kashmir* and *Kashmir Uzma* – believe that they have been unfairly deprived of advertising. As a result, they have had to enforce stringent curbs on staff salaries and in some cases, even limited retrenchments.

Communications Clampdown

News gathering processes in Kashmir have been severely impeded by restrictions on movement and the disruption of communications. The text messaging (SMS) service through the state’s mobile telephone network was suspended in June 2010. This final clampdown on a service that Kashmir’s journalists had begun to use as a vital news gathering facility came after a long prelude.

In June 2009, when the valley witnessed large-scale civil disturbances over the suspected rape and murder of two women in the southern orchard town of Shopian, bulk text messages were banned. Media organisations in the capital city of Srinagar had used text messages to tap into more remote districts where they had no presence on the ground. Banning this tool put out of work media workers in these districts, who had used the service to generate a modest, but not insignificant, revenue for themselves by providing news items and updates to Srinagar’s newspapers.

In April 2010, well before the Kashmir protests reached their most violent pitch, India’s central government ordered telecom companies in Jammu and Kashmir to suspend text messaging for



all subscribers of post-paid cellular telephone services. Subscribers using the pre-paid facility were to be allowed to send no more than 10 messages a day. This measure ostensibly was taken in response to a request from state security and intelligence agencies in Kashmir.

This rationale for banning a basic facility was soon enough rejected by the state government, establishing quite firmly that there had been a serious miscommunication on the matter. Far from calling for a ban on all text messaging services, the state government, it emerged, had only requested that bulk messages be proscribed, since these had been identified by security agencies as a source of destabilising and disruptive rumour. This was merely the reiteration of a ban that had been decreed during the Shopian disturbances, though over time, it had reportedly begun to be breached in some measure.

However, with protests registering a sharp upward spiral, the state government ordered a complete ban on text messaging services through the cellular telephone network in June 2010. This prohibition remains in place at the time of writing. Voice telephone services are subject to frequent and unexplained disruption, particularly in the northern Kashmir region.

These communication bans remain a serious impediment to legitimate news gathering activities in the Kashmir valley, especially since impositions of curfew and other forms of restrictions on physical movement have become common. These restrictions are often introduced in response to imagined security anxieties. Illustratively, on August 15, when India's independence day observances were being held in Srinagar's Bakshi stadium under a heavy security cordon, mobile telephone and internet services were suspended over the entire valley for at least six hours. Already constrained by closures and restrictions on movement of staff, Kashmir's news organisations were also unable to update their websites.

Television Constraints

Kashmir's numerous TV channels used to be a major source of local news, which had an especially vital role in days when civic security was badly disrupted and few could feel sure of what lay in store if they ventured outside their homes. This service effectively ceased in June 2009, in the wake of the Shopian disturbances, when the Directorate of Information in the state government ordered all local channels to suspend news broadcasts. This *diktat* was partly diluted a month later, when the channels were allowed to air the 15 minutes of news permitted under their rules of registration. All channels were directed to confine their news broadcasts to 15 minutes at the same time of day, 8pm.

As the editors and owners of the channels put it, they were summoned early in June 2009 and given a virtual ultimatum by the authorities that they needed to "behave properly". Several were told that their fiduciary relationship with secessionist political formations was well known, and that dossiers at state intelligence agencies provided ample grounds for their prosecution under the special security laws in force in Kashmir.

September 13, 2010 was the worst single day of bloodshed in Kashmir since the current protests began, with 20 killed and an estimated 200 injured. Protests that day acquired a new fury after the Iranian news channel Press TV telecast news of the alleged burning of the *Quran Sharief* in Gainesville, Florida, in the United States. The report was swiftly denied but anger had already erupted on the streets of Kashmir.

Immediately afterwards, the state administration decreed that Press TV would be taken off the menu of all local cable operators. Concurrently, in what seemed a panic reaction, local channels were told to suspend all news broadcasts until further notice. This has resulted in a situation that has been described with great aptness by one of the news channel representatives who met with



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JACQUELINE PARK
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this IFJ representative: “None of the local channels cover any news and the national channels do not cover Kashmir.”

Watch on Social Media

Despite frequent disruptions, the internet has become, ever since the current phase of troubles began, the principal mode for getting the word out in Kashmir. Transmission bandwidths are small and only allow for limited volumes of data transaction. But essential information gets around, such as the protest calendars and schedules periodically announced by the leadership of Kashmir’s Tehreek-e-Hurriyat (Movement for Freedom).

Social networking sites have become a means through which journalists and other citizens in Kashmir conduct the conversations that are denied them by heavy-handed restrictions. Unsurprisingly, users of the social networking site Facebook have begun to attract the hostile attention of the security agencies. One user, Faizan Samad, was arrested in August for allegedly posting material that brought the armed forces to disrepute. He was released shortly afterwards. Another Facebook user, Mufti Wajid Yaqoob, was arrested in the south Kashmir town of Shopian after being held responsible for organising protest demonstrations through his network of friends on the site.

National Solidarity Needed

Journalists in Kashmir have organised on their two main platforms of the Kashmir Press Guild and the Kashmir Press Association to deal with the multiple threats they face. Following complaints filed by three newspapers from Srinagar and the efforts of Kashmiri journalists working in Delhi, the Press Council of India (PCI) issued notice on August 4 asking the state government to explain the many formal and information restrictions imposed on the functioning of the press.

Journalists’ bodies based in Delhi have also stepped in with gestures of solidarity and support for the besieged press corps in Kashmir. The Delhi Union of Journalists (DUJ) has been particularly vocal, with a statement by its executive committee in September, sharply condemning the “undeclared ban on newspapers in Kashmir” and calling on the PCI to conduct its own independent inquiries to restore a semblance of normalcy for journalistic functioning in the valley.

The Editors’ Guild of India and Press Club of India have also at various times organised to show their solidarity with colleagues in Kashmir.

It has often been the case that journalists in the national capital and the main metropolitan centres of India remain relatively indifferent to the travails of colleagues in outlying parts of the country. Even if Kashmir has not suffered from this form of indifference in its most acute form, the enemy of press freedom here is the brevity of public memory and short attention spans in the rest of India to the incessant turmoil in the state.

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