

Censorship for Counter-insurgency Dilemmas for Citizenship in Kashmir

CHITRALEKHA

The logic backing surveillance of the media and internet on grounds of their potential to cause unrest and violence is flawed. India's preference for an authoritarian policy in Kashmir with regard to media and more recently social media surveillance and control is counterproductive to its own long-term goals of integrating Kashmiris as willing partners in a democracy premised on the promise of discursive participation and equal citizenship.

The popular agitations in Tunisia in December 2010 that subsequently spread across the Arab world brought to the fore many contested discussions on the role of social media in inspiring change, channelising discontent and dissent, organising “revolutions” or “riots” (depending on who is commenting), and, in the process, creating ground for freer political spaces. Countries like Tunisia and Libya, for instance, witnessed an upsurge in internet freedoms as the result of a political opening that was itself credited in some measure to mobilisation over new media.

Around the same time, however, India was listed by Freedom on the Net 2012 (FOTN) (Kelly et al 2012), a study conducted by a US-based think tank and research group, in a group of 20 countries marked out for regressive changes in internet legislation and usage. Of the 47 countries examined by FOTN, 20 experienced negative changes in internet laws and usage in the period under study (January 2011-May 2012).¹ Only four of these 20 offending countries are electoral democracies and, unhappily, India was among them.²

India's membership in this group (including Bahrain, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Syria, Uzbekistan, etc) is fairly recent. The state is not an old veteran in the art of media censorship, and nowhere in the league of countries such as Saudi Arabia, China, Bahrain, Iran, Syria, Ethiopia, etc. Instances of its central government and state officials seeking to control communication technologies and censor undesirable content have been relatively rare and sporadic. This ostensible (ideological and policy) shift, therefore, raises worrying questions. Why now? Towards what purpose is this being

done, and how will it help India alter the ground realities she seeks to address or redress?

Kashmir: Censored and Surveilled

India's falling rank in media and new media freedom has its genesis in the November 2008 terrorist attacks in Mumbai, which killed 171 people, leading to a perceived need for the Indian government to monitor, censor, and control the communication sector. Given the range of security threats facing the country, many Indians felt that the government should be allowed to monitor personal communications such as telephone calls, email messages, and financial transactions. It is in this context that the Indian Parliament successfully passed amendments to the Information Technology Act (ITA) in 2008, expanding the state's censorship and monitoring capabilities. This trend continued in 2011 with the adoption of regulations increasing surveillance in cybercafes, government and non-state actors intensifying pressure on intermediaries, including social media applications, to remove upon request a wide range of content vaguely defined as “offensive”.³

The trajectory of censorship in Kashmir, however, has been quite different than elsewhere in India. Without revisiting the complex political history of this troubled border state (see Bose et al 1990; Kumar 2002; Navlakha et al 1996; Navlakha 2008; Ray 2001; Schofield 2000; Widmalm 1997), it would suffice to recall that as way back as in 1989, the National Conference-Congress combine brought almost full press censorship to Kashmir by passing the Jammu and Kashmir Special Powers (Press) Bill in the legislative assembly (Widmalm 1997: 1023). The years in-between have seen a continuing imposition of (varying degrees of) state surveillance, censorship and often complete bans – on not just local print and television media, but of mobile messaging services, mobile connectivity, and, in more recent years, access to social media forums. As it stands now, in its protracted struggle to contain

Chitralkha (d.chitralkha@gmail.com) teaches at the Centre for Media Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi.

separatist or militant communication, the Indian state has also unfortunately imposed what has often amounted to a near complete closure of all channels of “civil” discourse or communication.

What is taken for granted in the rest of India as an inalienable, fundamental right of citizenship, has been in Kashmir under constant threat of being withdrawn abruptly for both short-term (on periodic intelligence reports of security threats, as, for instance, on every other Republic Day) as well as protracted periods (as in the case of prepaid mobile messaging services) – significantly, with no regret ever having been expressed to ordinary, non-combatant citizens for the inconvenience. In effect, Kashmir faces a clampdown on communications of the kind that young people elsewhere in India may not be able to live with, with ease, for even a day.

The Indian state’s position is that the media (local newspapers, for instance) and, particularly, social media are used much more quickly to spread rumours by parties and individuals interested in fomenting unrest and violence, than the state can possibly come out with the “truth”. The justification offered, then, for wide-ranging censorship in Kashmir is that all of these channels of communication (newspapers, television channels, Facebook, mobile messaging services) can be, and have been, used to spread hate messages, and even violence. The recent impassioned defence on national television by Omar Abdullah, chief minister of Jammu and Kashmir, of his government’s clampdown on access to virtual media after Afzal Guru’s hanging, brought forth what seems like a powerful rationale: that not having access to social media for some periods of time is better than people dying on account of violence triggered by that media in that period (NDTV, April 2013).⁴ The argument, in short, is that sometimes (or often) banning social media is important to maintain peace.

Violence and Social Media

The trouble with such discourses, and policies based on the discourses, is severalfold.

Firstly, they tend to rely on a view that amounts to little more than technological determinism: an impression that riots or uprisings have technological causes, and therefore, that the riots, uprisings, or mob violence of whatever kind can, thus, be controlled by surveillance of mobile phones, internet connectivity, messaging services, and banning use of social media forums. In an interesting article that analyses mass media claims about the role of social media in the 2011 UK riots and the Arab Spring, Christian Fuchs writes that social media panics are but a new element in an old history of moral panics⁵ – ideology that abstracts from the societal causes of problems, and inscribes these problems onto technology. Therefore, difficult discussions about the structural changes in society that need to be taken to overcome social problems can be avoided, and easier solutions like surveillance, censorship, policing, law and order, which overlook or underestimate the complexity of what is actually a social problem, are advanced (Fuchs 2012: 385). Fuchs argues that such technological determinism ignores the fact that technology is embedded into society, that it is humans living under and rebelling against power relations – not technology – who cause unrest and revolution. Plainly, it ignores the political economy of events (ibid: 387).⁶

Secondly, while social media forums have indeed often been appropriated in Kashmir by parties with a stake in rumormongering intended to incite anger and violence, there is at the same time very little available evidence to substantiate claims that social media (mis)use can actually “trigger” mobilisation, or violence. It might help again to hark back to available discussions on whether new media caused the recent political mobilisation in west Asia, or whether it was preceded by a fair degree of prior political mobilisation. The Arab uprisings in fact began in countries where people already had experience of group mobilisation or street mobilisation – ironically in those countries where despotic leaders used to organise state-sponsored public demonstrations to affirm support for their regimes. Tunisia, Egypt and Syria

are all in this category (Ahmad 2013: 122). Significant studies of the Arab Spring indicate that, chronologically, politics comes first – “rise in the number of extensive protests is more likely to precede [italics mine] changes in the use of social media than to follow it” (Wolfsfeld et al 2013).

There are in fact some noteworthy similarities between the Arab uprisings that the world took note of over 2011 and 2012 – which saw an unprecedented mobilisation of young people across different countries in the region, mostly unarmed, organised mostly virtually, asking for democracy, political participation, political voice, and a better life – and (recent) protests in Kashmir over the last four to five years. In Tunisia, there was deep frustration among young people, including many well-educated and qualified, about their persistent unemployment or under-employment, and the exclusion and humiliation they therefore endured. The sense of exclusion and marginalisation was made more acute when contrasted with the corruption and self-indulgence of the (mainstream) political leadership around them (Ahmad 2013: 121).

While there are clearly differences between the political history of Kashmir, and countries such as Tunisia or Egypt, it is not difficult to also see the evident similarities between the structural neglect that possibly contributed in significant measure to the participation of aspiring young people in political struggles across both these contexts.

Thirdly, and most critical perhaps, this (dominant) discourse completely underestimates the implications of these additionally imposed silences on the lives, ideas and practices of an already virtually imprisoned populace.

People living in conditions that deprive them of economic, political and cultural opportunities are likely to express their discontent in various forms. There is, today, a generation in Kashmir that has grown up with the use of these technologies. These communication technologies do not “cause” riots or revolutions. Discontented young people everywhere simply make use of all options available to them – including communication

technologies – to express rebellion or attempt to achieve goals. The revolution in Egypt was not a “Twitter revolution”, but related to the context of a highly stratified society, where real wages had been decreasing over 20 years but strikes were forbidden, where state repression was rising and poverty increasing. Within this context, it was, in fact, access to social media that possibly allowed these revolutions to be in a sense “revolutions of the word”, which allowed people to express and be heard “without” physical violence. Now people did not have to storm citadels and guillotine the ruling classes to be acknowledged: the power and sheer reach of social media meant there was hope of winning the war by peaceful means. By cutting people off from that alternative, as we are sadly doing in Kashmir, we are actually pushing young people over to the other side.

In the course of my own anthropological fieldwork in Kashmir over 2011-12,⁷ I repeatedly encountered narratives of rage, helplessness, and frustration amongst the young – as much at the objective physical conditions of a militarised existence, as at the perceived denial of the right to expression and (virtual) freedom. Ahmed, who is enrolled in the postgraduate BEd degree course at the Government College of Education in Srinagar, for instance, writes:⁸

I just hate India... psycho country. People in Kashmir are not even allowed to share their views on networking websites. This is completely crazy.

Qazi, another young student wrote:

We in Kashmir cannot even express our anger... we here do not even have the right to speech. If there is no right to freedom, then I would like to be with Pakistan.

A young girl, studying in class nine in Presentation Convent, says quietly,

Please tell Mr Chidambaram [then union home minister, India] to monitor Facebook in Kashmir, but not ban it. We are teenagers too.

Hawking Nationalism

For those living within an already legitimated state of exclusion, perceived denial of freedom of expression (something that is ordinary and non-negotiable for citizens in other states of

“mainland” India), or denial of access to real or virtual connectivity is seen as no temporary inconvenience in the interests of security, but as reinforcement of imposed governance. In an insightful paper in the *Anthropological Quarterly*, Haley Duschinski examined how the indefinite militarisation of everyday life, in effect, legalises an entire population to be identified as “threats to national order” and incarcerated, literally and figuratively, as prisoners of the state. These processes of exclusion cast Kashmiris as enemies, existing simultaneously inside and outside of the national political community with questionable loyalties and inclinations. The suspension of rights to this marked category of “citizens” is legitimised – not just legally, but culturally – through a totalising logic of indefinite warfare built upon fear of infiltration and terrorism (Duschinski 2009: 692).

A quick viewing of programming content on Kashmir on most news channels in India would amply buttress Duschinski’s arguments. A particularly telling case in point may be the standpoint/coverage aired by a currently leading television news channel, Times Now, and its overtly “nationalistic” position on Kashmir (or, similarly, for that matter on regions grappling with left insurgency in India).⁹ While it is becoming increasingly urgent to revisit the larger implications of the ill-informed (or callous) misuse of a medium that not just constructs and perpetuates “realities” on political issues (Kashmir, for instance), but channelises discourse and, in some sense, actually shapes the national imagination on these issues (Kashmir as an integral part of India, for instance), my concern here in this paper is more with the very real and dangerous implications of how these strident messages are then read in Kashmir.

Unlike the routine surveillance and censorship imposed on local newspapers, television channels, and web portals, the Indian government has certainly ensured that these “national” messages (via excellent direct-to-home (DTH) connectivity) do reach and are watched in Kashmir. It is ironic, but perhaps not surprising, that Times Now is now the most-watched channel in Kashmir.

Conclusions

Finally, then, the question that must be addressed and answered has to be: how is this kind of authoritarian censorship that asks no questions, makes no explanations, and offers no apologies, germane to the counter-insurgency (in whose name the bans and censorship are justified in the first place in Kashmir)? What exactly does the state hope to achieve by cutting ordinary Kashmiri citizens off from essential channels of everyday communication like mobile messaging services, or youth forums like Facebook? There are uneasy similarities between the crackdown on protestors in many troubled, yet surviving regimes in west Asia, and our own handling of Kashmir in India. As things are today, we are in fact treating Kashmir worse than how China, Pakistan, or Syria treats its citizens – because it is, more than all else, a patently unequal treatment, symptomatic and exhibitiv of what is turning out to be an unequal democracy.

Amongst the most problematic issues is that the position justifying surveillance and censorship in the interests of “maintaining peace” overlooks or denies the simple fact that there is no peace in Kashmir to be maintained. If there is no peace, it cannot be maintained; it has to be “constructed”. If all our policy efforts have to be geared towards constructing this extremely difficult entity called peace in a much troubled region – and amongst an already alienated people – the sweeping, imperious, and if I may put it as such, fairly careless diktat of the state with regard to not just the media or new media, but, indeed, what amounts to a communication ban in Kashmir is obviously not intended to win the hearts and minds, leave aside nationalisms, of a marginalised people.

As we formulate media policy, it is important, then, to move away from defensive reactions to violent events or imminent trouble, as the resultant effects of state-imposed censorship – worse still, arbitrary and selective bans – are likely to be counterproductive to the original objective of peace building and integration. While we take the easy way out of submerging the standpoint of locally situated Kashmiri media, or not

allowing free speech on “sensitive” pages, let us at the least acknowledge, and factor into our “strategic calculations” the long-term implications of cutting off access to social media apparatuses, and other means of listening and communicating in “troubled regions”, or for whom the state sees, in effect, as potentially troublesome populations.

Let us be wary that such denial distances an already war-weary, hostile population even further from faith in – or fulfilment of – the democratic promise of universal and inviolable rights of an Indian citizenship. Such blatant and unapologetic violation of rights that Indian citizens in other states enjoy, makes even more remote the hope of growing in Kashmir an “Indian” identity, which may well have crept in along with other existing perceptions of self/belonging that could have coexisted without dismantling the older, perhaps more sentimentally cherished Kashmiri nationalism.¹⁰

And, therein stands the sheer futility, irony, and counterproductive wastefulness of media blocking, or overreaching censorship as counter-insurgency strategy. As it virtually imprisons and destroys the lives of millions of young people, it does not even work to the state’s own purpose. While entirely counterproductive to the alleged purposes of censorship – maintenance of law and order – it fails, in fact foils, the state objective or national dream of “integrating” Kashmir with India, as it distances Kashmiris even further from the outside chance at “growing” an Indian citizenship. As Rainer puts it, the “glue that can maintain federal cohesion in multinational democracies is not a shared national identity, but a shared conception of federal citizenship.”¹¹

Nationalisms in any case, as we know too well, cannot be imposed, but must be imagined. In the current scenario of restrictive force and coercion, what palette of memories are we leaving Kashmiris to imagine India with?

NOTES

- 1 Bahrain, Pakistan, and Ethiopia registered the greatest declines. In Bahrain, Egypt, and Jordan, the downgrades reflected intensified censorship, arrests, and violence against bloggers as

the authorities sought to quell public calls for political and economic reform.

2 India was among countries that passed a new law in 2011-12 that negatively affects internet freedom, rubbing shoulders with China, Bahrain, Argentina, Belarus, Burma, China, Iran, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Pakistan, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Sri Lanka, Syria, Thailand, Vietnam, etc.

3 The Act has since enabled censorship on a wide-ranging if subjective spectrum of issues, including, for instance, the ban imposed on cartoonist Aseem Trivedi’s allegedly seditious caricatures of the Indian Parliament in 2011, to an unprecedented virtual clampdown in the wake of escalation of ethnic violence riots in Assam in 2012. At the time, the state administration instructed internet companies, including Facebook and Google, to block more than 300 web pages and more than a dozen Twitter accounts, which it claimed were inflaming communal tensions.

4 Recent studies on how discussions develop in online political communities indicate that in fact an inequality in the formation of opinion could take shape as a larger amount of discussions may revolve around the content provided by the same authors – those that show more expertise – in effect, thereby, also hindering the formation of an ideal public sphere (Velasquez 2012: 1299-300).

5 In 1972 – more than four decades ago – in his path-breaking book *Folk Devils and Moral Panics*, Stanley Cohen showed how popular discourse tends to blame the media and popular culture for triggering or causing violence – creating what Cohen called “moral panics” about the alleged harmful effects of exposure to media. Social media panics, as Fuchs puts it, are a new element in the history of panics (Fuchs 2012: 385).

6 Fuchs’ alternative is one based on dialectical reasoning, based on the recognition that technology is conditioned, not determined by society, and vice versa (ibid: 387).

7 Over this period, I extensively documented narratives of young people – schoolgoing children, college students, other young adults (including school and college dropouts), as well as teachers in both government and privately funded educational institutions in Srinagar, Baramullah, Kupwara, and later, a few villages in Budgam district. Findings yet unpublished.

8 Respondents were encouraged to write down their findings if they wished to. This facilitated freer responses as respondents often were hesitant to articulate what was perceived as “too harsh” for the ears of an Indian researcher.

9 Refer, for instance, the content on a prime-time news programme, where Times Now managing editor and chief, Arnab Goswami, spoke passionately (and almost exclusively) on behalf of his Pakistani guests on an hour-long talk show where the hapless guests had been invited ostensibly to express their views. The show I am referring to was aired soon after the attacks on Indian CRPF personnel by the Pakistani military earlier this year, but Goswami’s standpoint (of Kashmir as always an integral part of India, discussions on its disputed political history as hurtful to national sentiments, etc) followed a fairly predictable pattern consistently on display in prior and later prime-time shows hosted by him.

10 The possibility of an “Indian nationalism” in the Kashmir that exists today is so remote that I do not think it worthwhile to expand on such a theoretical possibility.

- 11 See Rainer Bauboeck, “United in Misunderstanding? Asymmetry in Multinational Federations”, ICE Working Paper Series 26, 2003, cited in Tillin (2007:50). Citizenship is always premised on equal rights.

REFERENCES

- Ahmad, Talmiz (2013): “The Arab Spring and Its Implications for India”, *Strategic Analysis*, 37(1): 119-27.
- Bose, Tapan, Dinesh Mohan, Gautam Navlakha and Sumanta Banerjee (1990): “India’s Kashmir War”, *Economic & Political Weekly*, 25(13): 650-62.
- Cohen, Stanley (1972): *Folk Devils and Moral Panics* (Oxon: Routledge).
- Duschinski, Haley (2009): “Destiny Effects: Militarization, State Power, and Punitive Containment in Kashmir Valley”, *Anthropological Quarterly*, 82(3): 691-717.
- Kelly, Sanja, Sarah Cook and Mai Truong, ed. (2012): “Freedom on the Net 2012: A Global Assessment of Internet and Digital Media”, Freedom House, Washington, DC and New York, viewed on 1 October 2013, http://www.freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/resources/FOTN%202012%20-%20Full%20Report_o.pdf
- Fuchs, Christian (2012): “Social Media, Riots and Revolutions”, *Capital & Class*, 36(3): 383-91.
- Kumar, Radha (2002): “Untying the Kashmir Knot”, *World Policy Journal*, 19(1): 11-24.
- Navlakha, Gautam, Rita Manchanda and Tapan K Bose (1996): “Political Situation in Kashmir: Duped by Media and Government”, *Economic & Political Weekly*, 31(29): 1927-31.
- Navlakha, Gautam (2008): “Jammu and Kashmir: Winning a Battle Only to Lose the War?”, *Economic & Political Weekly*, 43(45): 43-49.
- Ray, Aswini K (2001): “From Autonomy to Self-Determination: The Politics of East Pakistan and Kashmir”, *Economic & Political Weekly*, 36(49): 4538-43.
- Schofield, Victoria (2000): *Kashmir in Conflict: India, Pakistan and the Unfinished War* (London: IB Tauris).
- Tillin, Louise (2007): “United in Diversity? Asymmetry in Indian Federalism”, *Publius*, 37(1): 45-67.
- Velasquez, Alcides (2012): “Social Media and Online Political Discussion: The Effect of Cues and Informational Cascades on Participation in Online Political Communities”, *New Media & Society*, 14(8): 1286-303.
- Widmalm, Sten (1997): “The Rise and Fall of Democracy in Jammu and Kashmir”, *Asian Survey*, 37(11): 1005-30.
- Wolfsfeld, Gadi, Elad Segev and Tamir Sheafer (2013): “Social Media and the Arab Spring: Politics Comes First”, *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, 18(2), published online on 16 January.

Style Sheet for Authors

While preparing their articles for submission, contributors are requested to follow EPW’s style sheet.

The style sheet is posted on EPW’s web site at <http://www.epw.in/terms-policy/style-sheet.html>

It will help immensely for faster processing and error-free editing if writers follow the guidelines in the style sheet, especially with regard to citation and preparation of references.