
Hartals in Jammu & Kashmir; cause for social, political and economic instability

Introduction

History bears witness to the fact that whenever any dispute occurs, and wherever a disturbed political exercise, complemented by violence is found, it's the common man who has to pay the cost of conflict. The absence of sustainable peace, and presence of subsequent shutdowns, curfews and a civil strife that follows, does not only result in the loss of human lives, but also makes the society economically weak. Over the last twenty-five years, protracted cycles of unrest, terrorism, proxy war and heightened animosity between India and Pakistan, have propelled the decline of sustainable development in the region of South Asia. In the Valley of Kashmir, *Hartals*, (shutdowns/*bandhs*) have been advertised as a form of 'resistance', yet thirty years down the line, no alternate course has been developed by Separatists, in order to politically and peacefully pursue their, debatable, ideologies. On the contrary, Hartals have been made a much clichéd response to each situation irrespective of the contemplation of the magnitude of the damage it brings in the social and economic life of the people of Jammu & Kashmir.

In the Kashmir Valley, shutdowns have played a frequent role in the society over the last three decades. Because of fear for social and violent repercussions, people unwillingly and forcibly seem to have accepted this response without having the space to question whether it is a path that leads them to propagated objectives or a disaster that is taking them far away from attaining peace and sustainable development. This paper will provide a perspective of how Hartals (shutdowns) cause an immense degradation in the social and political life of the people of Jammu & Kashmir and how it has a vast impact on the downfall of the economy of the State.

Origins

Hartal, according to its definition and translated, involves shutdowns of workplaces, offices, shops, courts of law and other institutions as a form of civil disobedience. It also involves voluntary closing of schools and businesses. The idea of shutdowns comes from the labor strikes that played a vital role in the communist wave in Europe and parts of Asia in the 19th century. During this era, the labor class felt exploited by the industries which were largely a State affair. As a result, the laborers wanted to inflict losses to the economy of the State by boycotting work and shutting down factory units. The idea behind this strategy, being the halt in the production which would affect the State and the owners and eventually compel them to negotiate.

In the Kashmir Valley, however, this idea of prolonged Hartals started to become a common response to every situation ever since 1990. Any issue, whether a human rights violation by

the Security Forces, the death of a Terrorist, the response of Israel against Palestinians in Gaza-which is totally unrelated to the dynamics of affairs in Jammu & Kashmir, the killing of Osama bin Laden or a tweet of a political leader interpreted differently by people, is likely to generate the same response, which would mean a Hartal. What misses the point of comprehension though, is that the post-Soviet world works on a different model; the dynamics of business and politics have changed and so have the methods of response.

[Hartals in J&K; a brief history](#)

Hartals in the Kashmir Valley date back to more than over a century and since then it has been a historical glitch. The first organized protest originated and was organized by the shawl weavers in 1865 followed by the Silk Factory labor unrest in 1924. The mobilization against the Dogra ruler Maharaja Hari Singh in 1931, demands for plebiscite during the 1950's, and afterwards during the armed militancy which started in the late eighties, beginning of the nineties, are some of the important events that saw an active role of Hartals in the Valley of Kashmir. Pakistan's policy to wage a proxy war in Jammu & Kashmir on communal lines, fueled the (religious) fire and eventually led to the exodus of the Kashmiri Pandits (Kashmiri Hindus) from the Kashmir Valley. The culture of Hartals saw no halt even during the Governor's rule from 1990-1996. After a prolonged period of violence supported by the military establishment of Pakistan, the political scenario in the Valley of Kashmir seemed to improve when National Conference won the elections and came to power in 1996, which was again followed by a period of relative peace from 2002 to 2008. But ever since 2008 the prolonged cycles of Hartals, again dominated the lives of the people Jammu and Kashmir; 2008, 2009, and 2010 was a consecutive period of three years in which the Kashmir Valley experienced prolonged Hartals over different issues.

After the death of Burhan Wani, the Commander of Hizb-ul-Mujahideen, a terrorist organization operating in the Kashmir Valley under the patronage of the Pakistani Military establishment, in 2016, the Kashmir Valley witnessed Hartals imposed by Separatists for months. Violent clashes between terrorists, stone-pelters and security forces caused a lot of bloodshed, including injuries and death of civilians, burning of government property, burning of schools and private property, and huge economic losses to businesses.

[The idea of Hartal; reason for chaos](#)

A lot of narrations have been sketched out on the issue of Jammu & Kashmir, the conflict and ongoing violence in the Valley, but very less has been written on the impact it has on the social, political and economic lives of common people and the difficulties they face in coping with this constant and never-ending vicious circle of terrorism, event-based Separatism and economic malaise.

Over the years, Hartals have created a severe dent in the development of the Kashmiri society. Separatists in the Kashmir Valley are willfully oblivious to the impact of these shutdowns and these Hartals eventually turn out to be the closure of some shops and stone-pelting in the by-lanes of certain neighborhoods which keep whole cities hostage by sheer hooliganism, threats and violent reprisals. Over the course of time, Kashmiris have punished

none but themselves by following this utterly flawed concept of Hartal and boycotting their own economic activities and work, especially because of the fact that Jammu & Kashmir is a total consumer State.

Impact of Hartals on social life

Medicine Sans Frontier's (MSF's) first comprehensive mental health survey report suggests that out of every five adults living in the Valley of Kashmir, one suffers from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). It further states that nearly 1.8 million adults equaling 45% of the adult population suffers from conflict-related traumas.

"The most reported problems of the daily life faced by the adults living in the Valley are financial issues, poor health and unemployment"

One of the major reason for this PTSD is the regular stretch of Hartals under which a common man is made to suffer by paralyzing his economic and social growth. Hartals have not only taken a clang on the mental health of the people but have also led them into a spiral of emotional instability. As a result of this, loss in the rational thinking process of the youth, many youngsters are prone to exploitation by violent elements under the pretext of religion, with the aim of luring them into terrorism. Disillusion along with the lack of exposure has at times proven to be the womb of radicalization and while being in this state of mind, the Kashmiri youth have continuously been exploited by various forces for political interests.

Recently, Separatists in the Valley have started issuing months-long Hartal Calendars; Over a period of 28 years, Separatists in the Valley of Kashmir have imposed Hartals for more than 1900 days. Kashmir Chamber of Commerce and Industry's (KCCI) figures suggest that the State loses around ₹130 Crore (USD \$20 Million) worth of business during each day of Hartal (USD \$1 = ₹65). In the year 2016, the State suffered losses to the tune of over ₹16,000 Crore (USD \$2,5 Billion). The mental trauma that follows due to financial losses on a daily basis has caused a great deal of distress among the people of the State, where education, tourism, and medical services frequently get disrupted. Chronic patients end up getting in worse conditions and in some cases, resulting in loss of lives, due to the immobilization and lack of proper medical care.

Halt in education

One of the biggest sufferers from these regular shutdowns in the State of Jammu & Kashmir is, education. Over a period of the last 28 years, the education sector has been badly hit in the State and has caused irreversible loss to students.

An Economic Survey done by the J&K Government in 2017, stated: *".....The main contributors to the lessening of the attainment of the quantity of education include destruction of infrastructure, fear of sending children to school, incorporation of the youth into armed groups, negative economic shocks to the households and the forced displacement".*

The report further states that, *".....Due to the closure of schools, the academic section got badly hit to the extent that it caused irreversible loss of study and tuitions to the students. The*

exams conducted by the JK Board of Secondary Education (JKBOSE) for 10th and 12th standard covered only half, i.e. 50 percent of the total syllabus.....”.

Following the death of Hizbul Mujahideen Commander, Burhan Wani, approximately 31 school buildings were gutted by Kashmiris on the behest of Separatists. Out of these, 17 were fully burned down while 14 were partially eviscerated. Around 15 school buildings were saved from the same torment by courageous employees of the education department and local communities.

Because of Hartals, mass promotions have become a common phenomenon in the State of Jammu & Kashmir, resulting into poor quality education and so-called 'half-graduates'. In the year 2016, schooling was conducted for just a brief period of about four months. The 10th and 12th class exams conducted immediately in the month of November covered only 40% of the curriculum in schools, whereas the students in class 1st to class 9th were given mass promotions.

Moreover, the implementation of technical education programs also suffered obvious damage due to Hartals. Students were not able to complete their academic and practical work within the prescribed period of time as these technical courses require no interruption in the process of learning to guarantee easy transmission of skill. However, this skill-imparting process as well as the development of the imparted skills have become prime victims of these regular Hartals in the Valley. The Economic Survey of the State's Government further states about this, *“...This may consequently affect the formation of the generation's next workforce”.*

Due to the prevailing shutdowns, upgrading of already available facilities and the supply of equipment used in education also tends to get delayed; Expenditure for the development of the education sector during the first two quarters of 2016, marred by continuous Hartals, was said to be an approximate of ₹26,7 Crore (USD \$4 Million), while the expenditure in the first two quarters of 2017 amounted to ₹48,4 Crore (USD \$7.4 Million).

Prolonged periods of Hartals and exposure to violence has reduced both the quality and quantity of the education attained by children in the State of Jammu & Kashmir. This also explains the disturbance in the rational thinking process of the youth and mushrooming of non-secular educational establishments, like Madrassas. This scenario makes the youth prone to exploitation by religious extremist groups, resulting in glorification, and even joining, militant groups due to the lack of proper decision-making capabilities.

[Hartals and economic suffering](#)

The peace in the State of Jammu & Kashmir is highly fragile due to Pakistan's sponsored proxy war and Hartals being the new norm in the State have not only disrupted the social and educational life of the people, as another affected area that these elongated periods of shutdowns have disturbed down to the spine, is the Economy of the State of Jammu & Kashmir. Regular cycles of unrest have hit the economy hard and these prolonged periods of

shutdowns have made the State's economic policy fall under the phenomena of the 'uncertainty effect'.

Every other day a Hartal is imposed in the State which has taken a toll on the economic stability of the people of Jammu & Kashmir. From the arrest of a militant or a law and order ordinance issued by the Government, each event is responded and backed up by a series of Hartals for days or months at a stretch.

A recent survey conducted by Media agencies suggested that the Economy of Jammu & Kashmir has suffered a loss of ₹60,000 Crore (USD \$9,2 Billion) and has lost an approximate of around 3 years' time of work and development. The State has been considered a bad place for business and almost no companies take it up to their interest to invest their time and money in the State, resulting in a high degree of unemployment in the State. Hartals have not only acted as a barrier in the development scenario in the State but also as a barricade to private investments. The media report further states that, "...Each individual in the Kashmir Valley has suffered an average loss of ₹20 Lakh (USD \$30,000)". In addition, according to the World Bank, Jammu & Kashmir is considered the worst State in India to do business.

Cost of Hartals

Jammu and Kashmir is a mountainous area and its net area administered by India is 101,387 sq km. Census 2011 reported a population of 1.25 Crore (12,5 Million). Around 20% of its total geographical area falls under forest cover and its density is 124 people per sq km.

Its Gross State Domestic Product (GSDP), at constant prices 2011-12, for the year 2015-16 was ₹87,451 Crore (+/- USD \$13,5 Billion), and the per capita income (NSDP 2015-16) was ₹72,958 (USD \$1,100). The composition of GSDP (2015-16) is as under:

Primary Sector (Agriculture) - 15.89% of the GSDP

Secondary Sector (Industries) - 27.11% of the GSDP

Tertiary Sector (Services) - 57 % of the GSDP

Jammu & Kashmir's weakest contributor is, agriculture. More than 60% of employment is based on this Primary Sector. The imbalance shows in the disparity ratio between average incomes of agriculturists and non-agriculturists, which in essence means that 60% people of Jammu & Kashmir is becoming poorer. Moreover, Jammu & Kashmir has received 10% of all Central Government grants given to States over the 2000-2016 period, despite having only one percent of India's population. In contrast, Uttar Pradesh makes up about 13% of the country's population but received only 8.2% of Central grants in 2000-16. Central grants accounted for 54% of Jammu & Kashmir's total revenue and 44% of its expenditure in Financial Year 2016.

Comparison J&K - Himachal Pradesh

The total geographic area of the State of Himachal Pradesh is 55,673 sq km, with a population of about 6,864,602 as per census report 2011. The density of the State is 123 people per sq km and just like Jammu & Kashmir, 20% of its total geographical area is covered with forests.

The GSDP of Himachal Pradesh for the year 2015-16 at constant prices 2011-12 for the year 2015-16 was ₹95,929 Crore (USD \$14,7 Billion) and the per capita income (NSDP 2015-16) was ₹1,30,067 (USD \$2,000). Composition of the GSDP of the State of Himachal Pradesh is as under:

Primary Sector (Agriculture) - 15.43% of the GSDP

Secondary Sector (Industries) - 39.69% of the GSDP

Tertiary Sector (Services) - 44.88% of the GSDP

This comparison between the State of Jammu & Kashmir and Himachal Pradesh gives the following findings: 'With just about 55% of the geographical area and a 55% population as compared to the State of Jammu & Kashmir, the GSDP of Himachal Pradesh at constant prices is 9.7% more than that of Jammu & Kashmir. Per capita income (NSDP 2015-16) is 95% more than that of the per capita income of the State of Jammu & Kashmir. The GSDP is also much more equally distributed over the three sectors, with the Industries Sector showing a 12% difference. Comparing the economic progress of the State of Jammu & Kashmir to that of Himachal Pradesh, one gets a picture of the economical downfall that has been caused in the State of Jammu & Kashmir due to the ongoing violence and the many Hartals it faces'.

Tourism

Tourism in Jammu & Kashmir provides livelihood to a great population. Tourism season in the Kashmir Valley starts from April and lasts up to September/October each year. During a period of the last 9 years, this sector has seen a considerable decline. In the year 2016 the number of tourists who visited the Kashmir Valley stood at 623,923 including 220,490 Amarnath Yatris. The Economic Survey tabled in the Legislative Assembly reported that during 2016, only 403,443 tourists, including foreign as well as domestic, visited the Kashmir Valley as a tourist destination. The unrest in 2016 caused a dip in tourist arrivals by over 55% and registered closure of all the activities due to prolonged Hartals resulting in loss of business to hoteliers, restaurant owners, houseboats owners, the handicrafts industry, and transporters.

Industry

The prolonged cycles of unrest caused a major standstill to the industrial sector in the State and caused a major loss to production. The estimated loss suffered by industry sector due to Hartals in year 2016-17 is of the order of ₹13,291 Crore (USD \$2,1 Billion), comprising ₹6,548 Crore (USD \$1 Billion) of the private sector and ₹6,713 Crore (USD \$1,1 Billion) of the Government sector.

Transport sector

Each time a Hartal Calendar is issued, the transport sector is badly hit. It is estimated that in Jammu & Kashmir, there are 4,500 passenger buses, 3,853 taxis, 24,223 trucks, 186,477 private cars and 210,236 two wheelers. The impact of stone-pelting falls upon all these types of vehicles causing a great deal of damage to the owners. Sizeable number of vehicles are damaged due to stone-pelting by the youth during Hartals, in bids to impose shutdowns on those who do not heed to the prolonged Hartal calls.

Halt in transport means a halt in mobility and non-earnings of these transporters during the Hartals resulted in the non-payment of loans to banks. Mechanical workshops, petrol pumps and service stations also got affected due to the halt in public transportation. The Jammu & Kashmir State Road Transport Corporation (JKSRTC) lost at least ₹5,25 Crore (USD \$800,000) of revenue in the year 2016 alone. Around 182 vehicles of the Corporation were damaged by stone-pelting which included 76 trucks.

Power

In a statement issued by the Power Development Department (PDD) the losses suffered by the Maintenance & Rural Electrification Wing (M&RE) Department due to the ongoing shutdowns in the last two years is of the order of ₹1,07 Crores (USD \$160,000) mainly on account of damage caused to transformers by stone-pelting.

Under Transmission and Distribution (T&D) sector, the physical achievements for the first six months of the financial year 2016-17 are said to be of the order of 28.15% as against 37.19% during the said period of 2015-16, while the financial achievements were only 33.21% during (first six months) year 2016-17 as against 40.65% during the said period of the year 2015-16. According to officials, the decline in physical and financial achievements were direct results from ongoing Hartals in the Valley.

Labor and employment

The Hartals also lead to the forced closure of shops and many other commercial establishments. In case shopkeepers defy Hartals, they face stone-pelting, threats and eventually forcible closure of their establishments. In such scenario, employees of these shops remain deprived of their wages. An estimated loss of ₹168 Crore (USD \$25,9 Million) on account of wages to the employees, worked out as per minimum wage schedule, was incurred in the year 2016 alone by these employees. ₹276 Crore (USD \$42,2 Million) loss was incurred by self-employed wage earners working in construction and building works. Apart from these sectors, other sectors in which heavy losses were incurred include Infrastructure, Construction activities, Health sector, Online mode of businesses, Sheep and Animal Husbandry, Banking, Forest and Housing and Urban Development Sector, which altogether make up for the estimated loss of over ₹16,000 Crore (USD \$2,5 Billion) in the year 2016.

Conclusion

The State of Jammu & Kashmir continues to face disruption because of Terrorism, growing radicalization and Hartals. Cross-border terrorism has been rampant in the Kashmir Valley since 1989, leading to a massive socio-economic downswing. Human resource, which is one of the biggest assets of any society, has also suffered enormously. Terrorism has been the main reason for the displacement of several non-Muslim communities like Kashmiri Pandits, Sikhs, Buddhists and other minorities and because of a growing radicalized society, many Kashmiri Muslims have also started migrating to mainland India and other parts of the world for better job prospects and peaceful environment, depriving the State of its valuable human resource.

The violence has affected all important sources of livelihood of local populace such as agriculture, horticulture, tourism and handicraft industry, with many traders having to shift their trading centers from the Valley of Kashmir to other parts of the country and others forced to look for alternative sources of income to survive the economic crisis.

Freedom of expression is a basic human right, however freedom of expression does not only entail free speech but also constitutes freedom of choosing and practicing a religion of one's own choice, exercising one's free political, economic and educational rights, free access to information and freedom from being subjected to coercion, intimidation, threats and violent reprisals. Hartals in the Kashmir Valley, while invoking freedom of expression and the right to protest, more than often are anything but peaceful. Stone-pelting, threats, damage to public property and coercion are used in order to compel people to adhere to these Hartals. This has had grave consequences for the economic, social and psychological well-being of the State and its people.

These Hartals have put the lives of people under unnecessary strain and are not observed voluntarily by the common people. In such a situation, it is for the people of Jammu & Kashmir to exercise their right of expression, which by definition also constitutes the right, not to observe Hartals, without fear to one's life, property or threats of social isolation. Economic development is an important stimulus to peace and there is no reason, why basic fundamental human rights like education, healthcare, employment and the pursuit of happiness should be kept hostage to any political- or violent radical ideology in the State of Jammu & Kashmir.



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