

## EDITORIAL

# Blackout: On Kashmir lockdown

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**Dissent does not have to invite measures aimed at throttling information flow**

Jammu and Kashmir remains entirely cut off, ironically, as part of the efforts at effecting its “complete integration” with the rest of the country. Rightly or wrongly, the BJP government at the Centre in its wisdom thought that annulling the special status accorded to J&K in the Constitution and demoting and dividing it into two Union Territories were essential steps towards national integration. Information flow to and from J&K has been restricted to almost nil, and media platforms reported on the momentous changes abruptly announced by the Centre without any independent account of the situation on the ground. That the world’s largest democracy could clampdown on information to the public in such a cavalier manner may appear incomprehensible under ordinary circumstances. But then, muzzling voices from J&K was only a corollary to a far more consequential directing of discourse. People in J&K even missed the Prime Minister’s tweet on how the new scheme of things would be helpful for them, as they were, and continue to be, snapped off the Internet. Reporting from conflict zones is not new to Indian media. Journalists have covered riots, insurgencies and wars for decades in the country, and governments have allowed them to do so. By and large, state agencies have even enabled reporting from conflict zones and sites of natural disasters with curfew passes and special communication facilities, though there have been exceptions. Accurate information is always the best counter to misinformation and treacherous rumours.

Information coming out of the State is sparse, costly and hard to gather. The announcement on the withdrawal of the special status of J&K was preceded by a flurry of reporting sourced to government officials that terror threats were the reason for additional troop deployment. The Amarnath yatra was discontinued and the Valley was emptied of tourists owing to these threats. Quite likely, irrespective of the nature of the threat alerts, these measures were linked to the Centre’s decision on removal of the special status. Even before the clampdown on communication facilities, the government had been tight-fisted with information. The same attitude was evident subsequent to other critical decisions it made in recent years: official communication with the public has been strictly a one-way process, through press releases, radio monologues, and social media posts. Parliament, which ended a highly productive session in terms of business transacted, has been reduced to endorsing executive decisions with little meaningful discussions. While these are concerns that the government must address at the earliest, it must start with the

immediate removal of all restrictions on movement of people and communication in J&K. Only security concerns under exceptional circumstances, and not aversion to democratic dissent in the normal course, can justify choking the information flow.

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