

Kashmir Conflict and its Impact on Trade: A Study of Post 2008 Scenario**Asif Ahmad Bhat****Ph.D Scholar, Jamia Millia Islamia****Bhatasif1122@gmail.com****Abstract:**

Kashmir conflict is not a byproduct of contemporary times, but had a long history. Conflict emerged soon after the establishment of two nation states, Pakistan and India, in 1947. Albeit, Colonial British divided the subcontinent into two separate independent nations, but at the same time left Kashmir as an unfinished agenda for future. From that time onwards Kashmir bleeds, both, physically and materially. Hundreds and thousands were killed, maimed, displaced by this conflict. In a similar fashion trade and commerce in Kashmir has had to face tough trails and tests of time. From 2008 onwards Kashmir witnessed many uprisings that accounts trade disruption often. In May 2008 government transfers huge tracts of land to Shri Amarnath-Ji shrine Board, which provided spark to the burning fire and resulted in protests and curfew. Within no time everything disrupted in Kashmir. Two more crucial years 2010 and 2016 witnessed mass protests in wider scale that took heavy tolls on trade. Particularly in 2016, after the death of Hizbul Mujhadeen Commander Burhan Wani protests and curfews continued for more than six months paralyzed the life and economy of Kashmir. Year 2019 witnessed the same fate as far as trade and commerce of the state is concerned. In this paper an attempt is being made to locate the wrath brought out to trade by the post 2008 uprisings.

Key words: *Kashmir, Conflict, Trade, Curfew, Mass Protest*

Introduction

Kashmir conflict has had a long history. Soon after the partition in 1947, two separate independent nations, Pakistan and India developed in the Asian subcontinent. Partition was done on religious grounds, Muslim being majority in Pakistan and Hindus in India. Apart from these two independent nations there were hundreds of princely states who, either joined Indian or Pakistan, peacefully or through force. Several among them preferred to be independent and one among such was Kashmir. In October 1947 Pakistani driven Muslim tribesmen invaded Kashmir and create fuss like situation. In a turbulent situation like this, Maharaja Hari Singh pleaded India for military assistance. Assistance came but at the cost of instrument of accession, signed by Maharaja on 26 October 1947[1]. Four major areas that would remain under the control of Indian union were defense, external affairs, and communication. Princely state of Jammu and Kashmir

enjoyed autonomy as far as internal matters of the state is concerned. However, with the passage of time, Indian union undermined the Kashmir's given autonomy. Simultaneously, public dissension with Indian union and entry of Pakistani backed militants in Kashmir changed the geography of peace in Kashmir. In 1990 militant movement reached its peak and resulted in the migration of Kashmiri Pandits. From 1990s onwards conflict continued till today and took heavy tolls on trade. Every time whatsoever may be the reason for turmoil trade in the state was first to suffer. Whether it was 2008, 2010, 2016, or 2019 uprising trade in the state was always at the receiving end.

Impact of 2008 Uprising on Trade

In a year 2008 both central as well as state government took the decision of transferring 98 acres of forestland to Shri Amarnatji Shrine Board (SASB), to facilitate shelter for pilgrims in valley [2]. This move by the government was unacceptable to the natives who rage in protest. Kashmiri Muslims saw transfer of land as “an act of majoritarian aggression by Hindu chauvinist”[3] writes Somini Sengupta. Land transfer was also seen as an initiative to change the demographic status of Kashmir, fear of which was always wandering in Kashmir. Violent Clashes echoed all over the valley and government was pressurized to step down the decision. However, the episode has wider repercussions as far as trade of the state is concerned.

Violent clashes and protests all over the state paralyzed communication and trade in Kashmir. Hindu nationalist, in favour of land transfer were also angry over the decision of state by reversing the decision. They went on rampage by disrupting transport and communication in Jammu. Further, blockade was imposed to keep “supplies from flowing in and out of the valley”[4]. Medicines and other basic amenities fell short due to this blockade in valley. Valley best known commercial crop, apples, decayed in tons during the turmoil of 2008. Valley resounded in anguish and threatened to transport apples to Pakistan via Muzaffarabad. Traders and fruit growers along with trucks laden with apples were in queue to cross the border. To stop those police resorted to tear gas shells and bullets that left as many as eight dead, including a senior Kashmiri separatist leader Sheikh Aziz [5]. And hundreds were wounded. A communal trade-war like situation was created in the state of Jammu and Kashmir, where Jammu Hindus were pitted against Kashmiri Muslims.

Meanwhile on the Pakistan side of the border violent protests were witnessed. In a bid to meet the traders of Kashmir, people of Azad Kashmir also marched towards the Line of control. Under

this chaotic situation police of Pakistan resorted to tear gas shells in order to stop the masses from crossing the border.

In the year 2008 economy of Kashmir had to suffer a lot. The target growth rate during 2008-2009 in the state was expected to be 7.5% but it was not achieved and remained 6.12% due to tumultuous situation in the state [6]. Counting the memories of horror Mohammad Yousuf, President of *Kashmir Fruit Growers Association* stated “we have suffered a loss of at least 20 million since this agitation began and if this blockade continues it will be a disaster for us” [7]. However, trade began to flourish and a sigh of relief was witnessed when government took the decision to open LoC for trade.

The uprising of 2010 and 2016: Its ramification on trade

Civilian killings in 2010 rocked the valley with protests and strikes. Communication, trade and commerce was once again paralyzed. Unrest continued for a long time and so does the cycle of violence. Protests, stone pelting, firing, pellet shelling and crowd control by using tear gas shells and rubber bullets became a recurring event. More than 200 civilians died in 2010 unrest and thousands got injured. Entire paradisiacal landscape turned into hell and people were mourning for loved ones. In a similar fashion year 2016 had some horrible and breathtaking memories for Kashmiri people.

Protests erupted across the valley soon after the killing of Mujahideen's commander Burhan Wani by Indian army in Anantnag district of South Kashmir. News of his death spread like wildfire and people went on rampage by damaging public property and government offices. Protests were unprecedented and had a wider reach this time. Presence of unrest was felt even in the remote areas of Kashmir. Police and army followed harsh policy to quell the uprising. But they failed in every manner and their actions instigated the violence further and resulted in the killing of many civilians. As per the reports 383 people were killed, including both civilians and forces[8]. And thousands were injured. Life was paralyzed in Kashmir for more than six months. And valleys suffered huge loss both, physically as well as materially.

Jammu Kashmir national highway is the only route that connects it with the rest of India. Kashmir is highly dependent on this highway for the supply of goods flowing in. This route is the vein of both the regions in matters of connectivity. If any untoward incident happens in the valley this vein is to be effected. Thus making the trade and commerce dysfunctional. Protests in

valley often pressurize government to block the road for security purposes, which in turn hit the trade most.

Due to constant protests and strikes; trade, commerce and communication were all severely hit. Tourism, for which Kashmir is known to the world, came to a halt. Hartals, curfews, civil unrest had a devastating influence on trade. Uprising brought havoc to Jammu and Kashmir's growth rate, tourism, and trade inflows. The damage "caused to the economy of the state due to hartals/curfews in the valley is estimated to about more than Rs. 16000.00 crore"[9]. According to Bashir Ahmad, the chairman of Kashmir valley Fruit Grower association "apple industry in Kashmir has suffered losses of around Rs 80-100 crore so far"[10].

Sopore area of North Kashmir, which is famous for apple trade, witnessed huge loss. People in Sopore didn't harvest fruit at the right time and couldn't transport them outside in the meantime. In many other districts of Kashmir situation was gruesome as far as apple trade is concerned. Simmering conflict had humongous impact on trade and traders. From decades traders in Kashmir are looking for new avenues. Some are even migrating to other states or other peaceful areas within Kashmir to revitalize their carrier.

Horrible memories of 2008, 2010 and 2016 were yet to vanish when state was struck with another jolt under the garb of abrogation of Article 370. The incident knocked the peace with one go. And hindered the normalcy in the state of Jammu and Kashmir. Again Valley witnessed blockade of social as well as material life.

Abrogation of Article 370 and fallout

Article 370 had always been on the platter of rightwing Hindutva forces of India. In their manifestos, during election campaigning, Article 370 was vehemently flaunted and widely discussed. Though, they did talk about it but could not get opportunity to revoke it. So, they were looking for an opportunity, which was provided by Lok Sabha election held in May 2014. In which BJP sweep the polls with absolute majority and attain full control over center with weak opposition. Despite having opportunity with strong center BJP did not abrogate Article 370 in their first term. And kept the Article 370 to mobilize votes for the upcoming Lok Sabha election of 2019. They won Lok Sabha elections of 2019 with huge margin. Soon after the victory they began to materialize their dream of abrogating the special status of Jammu and Kashmir.

The decision to abrogate Article 370 was taken in August 5, 2019. Prior to the decision Central government took certain measures to materialize the project. Clampdown, detaining the pro-Indian leaders, arresting separatist leaders, arresting famous religious leaders, lockdown of some important mosques, arresting youth considered as threat etc. were the measures taken. More than seventy days passed yet government is not ready to end the clampdown. Clampdown had severe impact on Kashmir, both materially and physically. Under these circumstances economic life in Kashmir has come to halt.

Trade is one among such economic activity, which received a severe blow after the abrogation Article 370. Trade body in Kashmir gave official statement claiming loss of 10,000 crore during three months of shutdown[11]. Transport remains off the road and markets remain silent. While counting the horror stories of clampdown Sheikh Ashiq, President of KCCI (Kashmir Chamber of Commerce and Industry) told PTI (Press Trust of India) “The running business losses for Kashmir region have crossed Rs 10, 000 crore and all sectors have been severely hit. It has been nearly three months now and yet the people are not doing business because of the prevailing situation. There has been some activity in the recent weeks, but the feedback that we are getting is that the business is dull”[12].

Suspension of Internet became a bottleneck in the smooth functioning of trade and commerce. Companies outside India used to put online order for locally made handicraft. Whatever business Kashmir had online came to a halt due to Internet blockade. Modern age is the age of technology, blocking of Internet means breaking the backbone of economy. Doing transactions, taking and giving order were all done through online? But blockade had put a full stop to all.

Apple traders are also under tense situation and had to suffer a lot. Apple trade is the central component to Kashmir economy with revenue generation capacity of around 1300 crore per annum. Due to continuous shutdown it received a jolting blow. This was the apple season where traders pack the apples and depart them to the rest of India. Due to blockade Sopora Mundi, biggest mundi in Kashmir valley, remained shut and took heavy tolls on apple trade. Recent killings of apple traders and wageworkers allegedly by militants brought havoc to the apple business. Traders and workers are under panic and are not willing to work and visit Kashmir for business. If the shutdown continues Kashmiris will have to suffer a lot both economically as well as physically.

Conclusion

Kashmir conflict traces back its origin from partition when the two separate independent nations Pakistan and India took birth. Conflict had paralyzed Kashmiris Both, economically and physically. Torture, killings, maiming and disappearance had become a recurring event. Damaging and destruction of public and government properties can also be witnessed during every uprising. Communication, trade and commerce were also at the receiving end. Trade in particular had received death-knell in each and every uprising. In 2008 transfer of land to Shri Amarnath Shrine Board was a disaster as far as trade of the state is concerned. Government on revoking the decision received backlash from Hindu community, residing in Jammu. Thus it turned out to be a communal trade war between valley's Muslims and Jammu Hindus. Year 2010 and 2016 were also not good for trading community of Jammu and Kashmir. Protests and hartals in Kashmir became bottleneck in the smooth functioning of trade. Year 2016 particularly was devastating for trade. Death of Burhan Wani resulted in the protests across valley. Business, communication, transport come to halt. Apple growers and trader suffered huge losses. In a similar fashion year 2019 was no less than a calamity for traders and business class in Kashmir. Abrogation of article 370 was followed by crackdown of pro Indian and separatist leaders of Kashmir. Youths in thousands were also arrested on the pretext of security reasons. And valley faced clampdown, which continues for a long time. Traders had a tough time. Trading class face huge loss of more than 10,000 crores during first three months. Trucks laden with apples were destroyed and burned down alleged by Militants. Militants allegedly killed traders and laborers from outside Kashmir. Conflict since beginning has been fretful to the trade and traders in Kashmir. If the conflict continues and government failed to pacify the situation Kashmir would suffer in the long run.

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