

THE PEOPLE'S ROAD

Relevant for: Indian Polity | Topic: Issues and Challenges Pertaining to the Federal Structure, Dispute Redressal Mechanisms, and the Centre-State Relations

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The full extent of what the government has done through its draconian closure of the Jammu-Kashmir highway to civilian movement for two days of the week until May 31 is clear, if it was not earlier, after it was implemented on Sunday. Civilian life was thrown out of gear, while the government added to its own work, including paperwork, by posting officials along the highway in order to allow exceptions, in a range of categories — VVIPs, VIPs, the sick, tourists, government vehicles and employees, students, and the like. The people are naturally filled with anxiety and dread about dealing with this. It is no surprise that Valley folk have already rechristened the road — a lifeline that connects villages and towns with one another and to Srinagar, to the airport, to schools and hospitals, and to Jammu — as the “highway of persecution”. Freedom of movement is guaranteed by the Constitution, so it is inexplicable why the Supreme Court has not yet taken note of these restrictions imposed on a section of the country's citizens, in blatant violation of this fundamental right under Article 19. It is unfortunate that even the Election Commission of India has appeared not to notice how it compromises the electoral process in the name of securing it — by disrupting campaigning, and the constricting the ability of political parties and candidates to mobilise workers, set up public meetings and meet voters.

Even in the name of security, this does not wash. The twice weekly closure is clearly unnecessary, as is visible in how it unfolded on the ground. During the 13-hour closure from 4 am to 5 pm, under 50 security vehicles passed through the 270 km while the movement of tens of thousands of civilians was affected, but on Monday, full fledged security convoys apparently had no problem sharing the road with civilian vehicles. The anomaly can be explained only in two ways — either those who made up the order had no idea of what they were doing; or, as the people in the Valley may fear, it has been imposed as a twice a week collective punishment on them. The movement of troops has been a constant in J&K over the last 30 years. Never before has such a measure been imposed, even in the 1990s, when militancy was far more entrenched and more widespread.

Security forces in the Valley are there to protect Kashmir from India's enemies. If their purpose has changed to protecting themselves from Indian citizens in Kashmir on two days of the week, it is as good as admitting that India has lost the plot. The government must withdraw the measure as soon as possible.

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