

Are we all militants, ask Kashmir's pre-paid mobile subscribers

A wave of anger has swept through Jammu and Kashmir with the central government deciding to ban pre-paid mobile connections in the state from Sunday due to security concerns. Most angry are youths.

Even as the Kashmir government has promised to take up the issue with the centre, the 'walk and talk' generation in the state is furious that it has been clubbed with terrorists who misused pre-paid connections.

'Are we militants?' Shahid Khan, a student, asked in anger and frustration. 'Are millions of pre-paid connection subscribers terrorists?' he asked.

The decision to snap this service has resulted in total chaos among subscribers.

'It is strange that I should be punished because someone somewhere could be misusing the facility. This is unfortunate and condemnable,' said Muzaffar Ahmad, 23, a college student in Srinagar.

There are around 3.8 million pre-paid connections in the state. Most of them are from Airtel (one million), and new companies have come into the state, like Tata Indicom, Idea, Air Cel, Reliance. They have made huge investments, and they too are angry.

'This is a bad move,' an official of a leading mobile service provider told IANS.

Most people, especially youth who have to deal with limited pocket money and prefer pre-paid connections, are very angry. 'Until now we knew our limitations, how much to talk, if we go in for post-paid connections, that limit would be hard to know,' said Sunita Sharma, a young working woman.

What surprises them is that the move comes right after Prime Minister Manmohan Singh visited the state promising more opportunities.

Khurshid Ahmed, 28, a student of Kashmir University, said: 'On the one hand the government says we must become information savvy and use the latest technology to keep pace with competitors from other universities and now the same government is pushing us back by at least a decade.'

Union Home Minister P. Chidambaram, during his visit to Kashmir, had hinted at banning pre-paid connections.

The security concerns are rooted in the fact that the security forces were finding it difficult to trace the militants, who were passing on instructions to their cadres through mobile phones and also changing their SIM cards at will. Invariably, police found a number of SIM cards of various companies with the militants killed or captured during gunbattles.

'Pre-paid mobile connections had multiplied our challenges, and we were facing tough times in tracking the terror-guiding hands because they were having the power of mobile phones in their hands, besides guns,' a senior police official said. But he refused to comment on the home ministry's blanket ban on the prepaid SIM cards.

Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) president Mehbooba Mufti has termed the move as 'unfortunate' and sought the prime minister's intervention. 'Pre-paid services should be restored,' she said in a statement.

The decision has also not gone down well with hundreds of Kashmiris engaged in the business of selling pre-paid cell phone connections here.

'We take sufficient documents to establish the identity of the subscriber before issuing the pre-paid SIM card and now since morning I have closed down my shop for fear that frustrated subscribers might manhandle me,' said a cell phone SIM dealer in [Srinagar](#) who did not want to be named.

Asked Ramesh Chander, a businessman: 'If this is happening to mobile service providers, what sort of a message is being conveyed to industrialists and prospective investors across the country? That Kashmir is a state where terrorism is as high as before the services were launched in the state in 2003?'

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