

KASHMIR OBSERVER

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KO VIEW

Where Are Tourists?

This winter has so far turned out to be very harsh in Kashmir. The Valley has experienced successive heavy snowfall since beginning of November, throwing life out of gear: electricity has been erratic, traffic movement has been affected, more so along Jammu-Srinagar highway and the flights have recurrently been grounded. For seven days since December 6, no flights operated from Srinagar Airport, leaving thousands of people stranded.

The new J&K administration under Lieutenant Governor Girish ChanderMurmu has struggled to deal with the successive snow fury. During first snowfall on November 6, the administration took days to clear roads of snows and electricity also took several days to restore.

But for all the hardships it creates for the people, the snowfall in Kashmir is a boon for tourism. It is expected to bring holidaymakers back to the Valley. But this hasn't happened so far. At 8,960 feet, Gulmarg, Kashmir's wonderland of snow, has fewer tourists to serve. According to the tourism department, the occupancy of hotels in the famous hill resort has steeply fallen, a rarity in this season.

The absence of tourists in the winter is put down to the still unfolding fallout of the revocation on August 5 of Article 370 which granted J&K an autonomous status under Indian constitution. Kashmir has since been largely under a security lockdown and a communication blockade which is only now being lifted.

The hoteliers display a mixed sentiment: only some are upbeat. The tourism department, more so. They hope to receive more tourists as the exorbitant cost of air tickets to Valley comes down.

Tourism players fondly reminisce the pre-August 5 period when hotels in Kashmir had 60 to 70 percent occupancy. Similarly, houseboats in Dal lake were booked to the gunwales, despite the Pulwama attack in February last which killed more than forty CRPF personnel.

But this winter has so far turned out to be the worst in years. Compared to last year's records, the occupancy in hotels has halved. Lifting of advisory in October hasn't thus made much of a difference.

Tourism forms 6.8 percent of Kashmir's GDP and employs 2 million people. Now the industry stares at an uncertain future. A significant number of people associated with it have either been laid off or are in the process of losing their jobs.

Now Kashmir's beleaguered tourism industry is banking on snow to resuscitate it. According to hoteliers, a trickle of visitors has started arriving. Some local news channels have also shown tourists playing with snow at Gulmarg and Pahalgam, Kashmir's prominent scenic resorts. Will this trickle grow into a steady stream of visitors which is needed to give a leg up to the Valley's economy? Only time will tell.

OTHER OPINION

Trump's Deal of the Century could go up in smoke

Bad timing bedevils US President Donald Trump's Deal of the Century for Palestinian-Israeli peace that is expected to be released this week. It could be a smoke-screen, a diversion from the president's impeachment trial for alleged abuse of power. The proposed 'deal' that is shrouded in secrecy and piloted by his son-in-law Jared Kushner looks doomed from the start because the Palestinians, the affected side, are not party to the deal. They were not involved in negotiations, and had already made their displeasure known to Washington when Trump decided to recognise occupied Jerusalem as the capital of Israel and move the US embassy there. The US, with its open show of support for Israel, had distanced itself from the ground reality that have made the Palestinians strangers in their own land. The US cannot be an honest peacemaker when it has already made up its mind by throwing in its lot with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. This 'fake' deal does not involve the Palestinians.

The government of President Mahmoud Abbas in the West Bank has distanced itself from its contents which cannot be path-breaking. The fact that the Palestinians did not sit at the table should have made the US reconsider and change course, but Trump had decided that Kushner was the man for the job despite his lack of experience or expertise in diplomacy. "If Jared cannot do it, no one can," thundered the president two years ago.

The president's son-in-law is a real estate builder and the plan could further promote Israel's aggressive building on Palestinian land and vitiate the atmosphere. Trump needs a diplomatic win at this juncture. However, the seven-decade-old Palestine-Israel issue cannot be solved through Kushner's simplistic real estate solutions. It's not just another piece of land but is about people who have been driven away by an occupier who now rules over them. This is about justice and dignity and the right to live in peace. Trump is reading the situation wrong; he has from the start and his efforts to force the Palestinians into an agreement will backfire with this sham of a deal. Israeli PM Netanyahu is struggling with his own corruption scandal and faces a third election against rival Benny Gantz and this so-called pact is a mere face-saver for both the US president and Netanyahu who are desperate for some diplomatic success. A political solution in Palestine must have the Palestinians on board. As for the Deal of the Century, this one wasn't worth striking at all.

Khaleej Times

When Prime Minister Narendra Modi first came to power in 2014, international media platforms published long articles where they acknowledged his controversial past but expressed the hope that he would prioritise growth and be wise enough not to be distracted by the Hindu nationalist agenda (see here, here and here). In his first term, as Modi went on long global tours to meet world leaders, western liberal media outlets such as Time and The Economist were generally optimistic that the "global political star" would put the 2002 Gujarat riots and the BJP's divisive politics behind him.

A lot has changed since then—currently in his second term with an even bigger majority, Modi is grappling with an economic crisis that experts say originated from policies such as demonetisation; protests against his government's attempts to threaten the citizenship of Muslims; as well as foreign media's disenchantment with his rule.

While Time called him "India's Divider In Chief" ahead of the Lok Sabha elections last year, The Economist's latest cover story says Modi is stoking "divisions in the world's biggest democracy".

The Economist tweeted the story on Thursday with the caption, "How India's prime minister and his party are endangering the world's biggest democracy". Discussing the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), whose passage in the Parliament has triggered widespread protests, the story said "the scheme looks like the most ambitious step yet in a decades-long project of incitement".

The story (The Economist's articles do not have bylines) pointed out how the unrest may actually politically benefit Modi and the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP).

"The sad truth is that Mr Modi and the BJP are likely to benefit politically by creating divisions over religion and national identity. Such subjects keep the party's activists and their allies in Hindu-nationalist groups energised—always a boon, given India's relentless sequence of state elections."

Such subjects, it went on to say, also distract attention from awkward topics such as the economy. The economy is in a dire state with signs of a slowdown apparent.

After the Supreme Court ruling on Ayodhya, the BJP seems deprived of its favourite cause. The Economist said, adding that "citizenship ruckus appeals to the party for the very same reasons that it has prompted widespread alarm".

The Economist's article is only the latest in a series of dispatches

from international media that have largely been critical of the Modi government's intolerance, its shock decision to abrogate Article 370 and the communication blockade in Jammu and Kashmir. The Washington Post's coverage of these events and the anti-CAA protests, in fact, annoyed the Modi government so much that union ministers snubbed the paper's owner Jeff Bezos on his recent visit to India.

When Modi came to power in 2014, several commentators (see here and here) in international media pointed to his roots in the RSS and remarked that there's some unease that he may pursue the Hindutva agenda (even before Modi's landslide victory, The Economist had told its readers it would not be backing him). They, however, remained hopeful that the Prime Minister would take the chance to revitalise the economy. The New York Times' editorial in 2014 said:

"Mr. Modi has set very high expectations for economic revival and his government, but he can't achieve those goals if he exacerbates sectarian divisions, for example, by using divisive rhetoric against Muslims."

The recent coverage, however, reflects international media's exasperation with Modi and his government's policies, as well as the state of the economy. The New York Times, The New Yorker and The Washington Post have all carried articles that have been extremely critical of the Modi government's push on Kashmir and the CAA. They have extensively covered the lockdown in Kashmir and how security forces have arrested thousands of people.

On October 1, 2019, two months after Article 370 was abrogated, The New York Times published a photo on its front page of people crying in Kashmir and captioned it "Misery Grows in Kashmir". The 1 October story by Jeffrey Gettleman (with photographs by AtulLoke) documented how the arrests and the lockdown in Kashmir had paralysed the lives of people.

On 9 December, The New Yorker published a long article by Dexter Filkins on the Modi government's divisive, anti-Muslim policies, calling

End Of The Love Affair

AKSHITA JAIN | HUFFPOST

it "Blood and Soil in Narendra Modi's India".

The Washington Post's editorial on 24 December criticised the government's response to the protests against the discriminatory citizenship law. "Rather than respond with force and epithets, as he has so far, Mr. Modi would do well to abandon this misguided project of Hindu nationalism, long sought by the prime minister's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)," the editorial said. It also advised Modi and the BJP to "admit the discriminatory citizenship law was a mistake and junk it."

The change in the tone of coverage began even before the decision on Article 370. Soon after Modi won for the second time, The Washington Post's editorial called the victory "India's dangerous landslide."

"Having campaigned five years ago as an economic modernizer, the charismatic prime minister this year offered a platform of nationalism and sectarianism." The editorial said that the government pursued an "anti-liberal agenda" and that some journalists critical of the regime were subject to intimidation. It also pointed out that attacks by Hindu extremists on Muslims rose significantly.

Time's cover story of May 9, 2019, written by Aatish Taseer during the 2019 general election termed Modi "India's Divider in Chief". Taseer said that Modi's economic miracle has failed to materialise and he had also helped "create an atmosphere of poisonous religious nationalism in India".

In the same issue, Time also published a more optimistic article by Ian Bremmer, calling Modi India's "best hope for economic reform", which Modi supporters held up as a badge of honour. A few months later, however, Bremmer admitted that he had changed his opinion.

Writing in December 2019, Bremmer said the Prime Minister was falling back on identity politics to capture political momentum.

"And after securing reelection, Modi continued leaning his shoulder into Hindu nationalism, while neglecting issues like land reform or reducing trade barriers. As that nationalism has taken a more promi-

nent role in government policy, it has begun directly threatening the country's constitutionally mandated secular democracy," he wrote.

Senior journalist Ammu Joseph pointed out that the change in the Western liberal media's coverage trajectory is not dissimilar to that of many mainstream Indian media outlets or "even some liberals".

"The economic reforms and development mantra and the launch of various high profile programmes in the early years were obviously seen as positive, and the few lynchings and his silence about them were clearly seen as unfortunate aberrations," she said in reply to emailed queries.

However, she said, it was the government's insistence on muzzling Kashmir and threatening Muslim citizenship at a time when crises such as unemployment and inflation stare them in the face that seem to have forced some to finally speak out.

"It is hardly surprising that the government's focus on these drastic, divisive measures while the economic crisis, unemployment and the rising prices of essential commodities that are adversely affecting people's lives appeared to be getting no attention has forced at least some to question and even criticise the PM as a leader. There's a limit to how far charisma and oratory can obscure reality. And I guess the scales have dropped from at least some eyes," she added.

How has the BJP responded?
The BJP slammed the editorial position of Jeff Bezos-owned The Washington Post, with the party's foreign affairs in-charge Vijay Chauthaiwala terming it "one-sided, biased, agenda-driven anti-Modi". During his recent visit to India, Bezos was snubbed by the government, with Union Minister Piyush Goyal saying Amazon hadn't done India any big favours by announcing an investment of \$1 billion.

In November, six months after the Time cover story, the Indian government revoked Taseer's Overseas Citizenship of India (OCI), which allows NRIs a permanent visa to enter and stay in the country. In Time, Taseer wrote that "it is hard not to feel, given the timing, that I was being punished for what I had written".

Last year, on Gandhi Jayanti, Modi wrote an op-ed in The New York Times to mark Gandhi's 150th birth anniversary. The paper's decision to give space to Modi while Kashmir was still under lockdown had annoyed Twitter users. Several pointed out the biggest irony: the NYT's front page just a day before that had pointed out the misery faced by Kashmiris.

Kashmir's White-List of 301 Govt-Approved Websites Raises Net Neutrality Concerns

PALLAVISAREEN | THE WIRE

Kashmir's restrictions on online connectivity have raised concerns over whether they constitute a violation of India's net neutrality norms, the principles of which ban any form of differential access to the Internet.

The country's net neutrality rules came into effect in July 2018, when telecom licence rules were amended to incorporate guidelines that have been described as the 'world's strongest'. These rules barred any form of data discrimination including "blocking, degrading, slowing down, or granting preferential speeds or treatment to any content." ISPs that violated the rules could have their licenses cancelled.

In Jammu and Kashmir, however, as per an order by ShaleenKabra, the Principal Secretary in the home department of the government of J&K, ISPs were directed to install "necessary firewalls and carry out 'white-listing' of sites that would enable access to government websites, and websites dealing with essential services, e-banking, etc, excluding, however, access to all social media sites".

In an order issued on January 24, instructions were given for the restoration of broadband and 2G internet service in Kashmir for accessing 301 white-listed websites. The list of whitelisted sites was expanded from a previous list of 153 websites to include news websites.

In the modified list, nearly 60 news websites were included. These include websites of prominent newspapers of Jammu and Kashmir such as Kashmir Times, Daily Excelsior, State Times, Early Times, Kashmir Observer, Greater Kashmir, Kashmir Uzma, Kashmiri Images, Kashmir Age, and Rising Kashmir as well as national and international mainstream news websites.

Even online news portals such as The Wire were whitelisted.

However, many local portals of Jammu and Kashmir – such as Kashmir Life, U4U voice, Jammu Links, and Straight Line News – were excluded. This is in addition to the absence of other mainstream national news organisations such as Indian Express, IndiaToday and Firstpost, besides thousands of other news organisations that exist across the country.

Since YouTube remains off the white-list, there is no access to video

news channels either.

While the order does mention that the process of whitelisting would be a continuous one and that the list would be modified, it does not explicitly mention what the parameters for judging whether a website should be white-listed are.

This has created a chaotic atmosphere in the media industry where local portals had already taken a hit due to the six-month long internet shutdown in Jammu and Kashmir. Now the news websites that do not find a mention in the white-list are at a disadvantage to no fault of their own.

"White-listing of certain news websites while not allowing others does have an impact. You are not able to reach the audience and the audience does not get open access to all content. Even when there is a major crisis, mostly black-listing is done wherein a list of websites is barred from being accessed. Here, the opposite path has been taken. The wisdom of audience must be respected. There are more than 1.5 billion websites in existence. How can their existence be compared with the 302 websites which have been white-listed," said Zafar Choudhary, a senior journalist working with The News Now.

Masood Hussain, editor of Kashmiri Life, agrees.

"It is a problem that we are missing from the scene but we are trying to ascertain the facts as to how the white-listing has been done," Hussain told The Wire.

Owners of Universal News Timeline and Jammu Links, two prominent portals of Jammu while talking to The Wire said that they were still talking to the home department regarding what criteria they have adopted for white-listing news websites.

When contacted, J&K's home department said that they are informally adding websites that they have missed out on the white-list, even if they haven't issued a formal order to that effect.

"After it was brought to our attention that some news websites were missing from the list, like Indian Express, we white-listed all the news portals. Even the local news portals of Jammu and Kashmir, despite them not being on the list in the official order can be accessed on 2G internet," ShaleenKabra, Principal Secretary to the government home department said.

When attempts were made to access the news portals which despite not being on the official order were white-listed, it was found that some were

opening on select telecom networks while others were not. Also, it still raises a question as to how, without any official announcement, a common man would find out that all the news portals and not just the ones mentioned in the order have been white-listed.

On January 10, calling for a review of the continued internet shutdown in the Valley, the Supreme Court had stated that "freedom of speech and expression through the Internet is an integral part of Article 19(1)(a) and any restriction on it must be in compliance with Article 19(2) of the Constitution."

However, it had also legitimised the filtration of Internet access by stating, "In any case, the state/concerned authorities are directed to consider forthwith allowing government websites, localised/limited e-banking facilities, hospitals services and other essential services, in those regions, wherein the Internet services are not likely to be restored immediately."

Net neutrality in India
In India, the Telecom Regulatory Authority of India has advocated for net neutrality. It has passed orders ensuring that online access is unrestricted and non-discriminatory.

In the TRAI's order of banning differential pricing, it had stated:

"...allowing service providers to define the nature of access would be equivalent of letting TSPs shape the users' internet experience. This can prove to be risky in the medium to long term as the knowledge and outlook of those users would be shaped only by the information made available through those select offerings."

While a total Internet shutdown is legal under current telecom suspension regulations, a white-list, in which the government consciously picks and chooses different services, opens up a whole new can of worms.

For instance, the telecom regulator's order also notes:

"Several stakeholders have highlighted the potential anti-competitive effects of allowing differential pricing. It is argued that this will create an uneven playing field among content providers and service providers – large, well-established content providers and service providers or those that have the benefit of large networks will find themselves in a much stronger bargaining position as compared to new or smaller businesses."

This "uneven playing field" is wholly present in Kashmir's whitelist.

While major online shopping websites like Myntra, Flipkart, Amazon are white-listed under the category of "utilities", no local e-commerce website has been white-listed. This lays the ground for unfair competition and an uneven market for local businesses of J&K that have an online presence. What national security justification could there be for allowing Amazon, but not a Kashmiri e-commerce company?

Technology journalist Nikhil Pawha, who edits Medianama, believes that the white-list is a net neutrality violation.

"As the founder of the World Wide Web, Tim Berners-lee says, there should be access to 'all of the Internet, for all of the people, all the time'.... How is allowing the Government of India to define the nature of access any different? Enabling differential access to the Internet is a Net Neutrality violation," Pawha wrote recently.

When The Wire reached out to R.S Sharma, chairman of the Telecom Regulatory Authority of India, he said, "I am not the right person to talk to."

White-listed and blacklisted websites
The websites that have been whitelisted include around 85 sites categorised as "utilities", 60 news websites, over 45 education sites, 14 banking sites, 12 search engine websites, 19 travel sites, 18 entertainment websites and four mail websites – Yahoo, Outlook, Gmail and Rediff.

Websites of all political parties including the Bharatiya Janata Party, National Conference, Peoples Democratic Party and the Congress also remain blacklisted. Websites of non-governmental organisations – Amnesty International, HelpAge India, Save the Children and Smile Foundation – are also whitelisted. Among other websites that have been whitelisted are automobile websites, employment sites, travel and official sites of airlines and government websites, including the J&K police, UIDAI, GST department, passport offices and other essential official sites.

Video-streaming websites such as Netflix, Amazon and Hotstar, which are classified as entertainment, have also been whitelisted. But according to the order, social media websites/applications and virtual private network application shall remain barred at least until January 31 after which the restrictions will be reviewed.

PallaviSareen is a journalist based in Jammu and Kashmir.