

KASHMIR OBSERVER

Printed & Published by Sajjad Haider on behalf of the Kashmir Observer LLP
Published from: # 5- Boulevard, Srinagar-190001
Printed at: KT Press Pvt. Ltd, Rangreth Ind Area, Srinagar.
RNI Registration No: 69503/98
Postal Registration No-L/159/KO/SK/2014-16
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K O V I E W

Ease political vacuum in J&K

By slapping Public Safety Act against also former against chief ministers Omar Abdullah and Mehbooba Mufti and the other senior leaders of their parties, central and state governments have ensured there is limited political activity in Kashmir in the months to come. This has also made the release of these leaders uncertain in near future and left the field open for a few political players. But even they have not been active on the ground as frequently as would have been enough to generate a perception of political activity.

There are so far two main actors of this politics: Altaf Bukhari and Muzaffar Hussain Beigh. Bukhari, a prominent industrialist of the Valley, was a finance minister in the PDP-BJP coalition that ruled J&K until June 2018 when the BJP withdrew its support.

Beigh, on the other hand, is the PDP patron and its founding member. Though still a member of the PDP, Beigh in recent past has moved his political outlook closer to New Delhi. He has even gone against the president of his party, the former J&K Chief Minister Mehbooba Mufti, criticising her for her old statement that nobody would raise Indian flag in Kashmir if Article 370 were to be withdrawn.

So far as the politics of these leaders is concerned, it is apparent that the staidness and the domicile status are emerging as the main demands for a small group of politicians willing to do business with New Delhi following the revocation of Article 370.

However, they are certain to face resistance from the main regional political forces like National Conference and the PDP who are still holding their ground on the issue of J&K's autonomy. It is still unclear what form the politics of the two parties takes once their leaders are released. Once released, these politicians could decide to unite and launch a mass movement for the reversal of the revocation of Article 370. Considering the mood in the Valley, such a movement is likely to witness an overwhelming public participation.

This is why seized of the potential implications of the release of the mainstream politicians, New Delhi seems unwilling to take any such step anytime soon. Other than three former chief ministers — Dr Farooq Abdullah, Omar Abdullah and Mehbooba Mufti — centre's sweep in Kashmir encompasses many major politicians and civil society actors. In all this, Dr Abdullah's arrest is seen as an act of overreach. He is not only the tallest mainstream leader in J&K but also one of the senior most leaders in the country. He has always stood for the country's cause in Kashmir and for which he has always been abhorred by separatist groups.

Meanwhile, first signs of some political activity are in evidence with Bukhari and Beigh indicating their willingness to reconcile to J&K's post-August 5 status. But it will formally restart only when the top leaders like Dr Abdullah, Omar and Mehbooba are released and allowed to hold political meetings and talk to people. And as long as that doesn't happen anything that centre does in Kashmir may turn out to be a house of cards.

O T H E R O P I N I O N

No Normalcy

The Centre has acted unconscionably in extending the custody of two former chief ministers of Jammu & Kashmir and two other politicians of the former state under the Public Safety Act, as their continued detention under CrPC 107/151 was becoming untenable after the passage of six months. The draconian Jammu & Kashmir Public Safety Act, 1978 is a preventive detention law, used against those from whom the authorities fear a threat to "the security of the state or the maintenance of the public order".

Those arrested under this law can be held for up to two years, need not be produced before a magistrate within 24 hours, cannot apply for bail in a criminal court, and cannot engage a lawyer to challenge the arrest. The government has not said what threat mainstream Kashmiri politicians, including former chief ministers Omar Abdullah and Mehbooba Mufti, pose to national security. Certainly, no such threat was perceived when Abdullah and his father, Farooq Abdullah, also a former chief minister and serving Lok Sabha member — he has now spent four months as a PSA prisoner — called on Prime Minister Narendra Modi on August 1, just two days before the government stripped J&K of its special status and bifurcated it into two UTs. What is becoming increasingly clear, though, is that for all their claims that the August 5 decision is popular in J&K, Prime Minister Modi and his government are afraid to put this to a democratic test.

The Modi government's "new Kashmir" does not appear to have space for established J&K politicians who could challenge its plans. With each passing day, the government lowers the bar of democratic conduct further by acting with impunity. Its actions in Kashmir belie the claim of "normalcy restored in the Valley" that ministers routinely parrot. Indeed, no place can be normal when its elected leaders are imprisoned only for opposing the government's policies, and when its people do not have the means to access or disseminate information because of a communications blockade which has been relaxed in name only.

How long can the government continue with this? And what are the consequences of these actions? Whatever the PM may say about them now, mainstream political parties like Abdullah's National Conference and Mufti's People's Democratic Party were the Centre's allies in the difficult terrain that Kashmir continues to be. The government may have served narrow political considerations by removing them from the scene, but it is not serving India's interests. Such actions erode the foundations of a federal democracy, and will leave long-lasting damage — if they have not done so already — that will be hard to repair. It is disquieting that there is no concerted voice of protest from other political parties for the unconditional release of all politicians who remain in detention in Kashmir.

The Indian Express

We Made The Coronavirus Epidemic

It may have started with a bat in a cave, but human activity set it loose

DAVID QUAMMEN

The latest scary new virus that has captured the world's horrified attention, caused a lockdown of 56 million people in China, disrupted travel plans around the globe and sparked a run on medical masks from Wuhan, Hubei province, to Bryan, Texas, is known provisionally as "nCoV-2019". It's a clunky moniker for a lurid threat.

The name, picked by the team of Chinese scientists who isolated and identified the virus, is short for "novel coronavirus of 2019". It reflects the fact that the virus was first recognised to have infected humans late last year — in a seafood and live-animal market in Wuhan — and that it belongs to the coronavirus family, a notorious group. The Sars epidemic of 2002-3, which infected 8,098 people worldwide, killing 774 of them, was caused by a coronavirus, and so was the Mers outbreak that began on the Arabian Peninsula in 2012 and still lingers (2,494 people infected and 858 deaths as of November).

nCoV-2019 isn't novel

Despite the new virus' name, though, and as the people who christened it well know, nCoV-2019 isn't as novel as you might think.

Something very much like it was found several years ago in a cave in Yunnan, a province roughly a thousand miles southwest of Wuhan, by a team of perspicacious researchers, who noted its existence with concern. The fast spread of nCoV-2019 — more than 17,000 confirmed cases, including at least 350 deaths, as of Tuesday morning, and the figures will have risen by the time you read this — is startling but not unforeseeable. That the virus emerged from a non-human animal, probably a bat, and possibly after passing through another creature, may seem spooky, yet it is utterly unsurprising to scientists who study these things.

We disrupt ecosystems, and we shake viruses loose from their natural hosts. When that happens, they need a new host. Often, we are it.

- David Quammen, author and journalist

One such scientist is Shi Zhengli, of the Wuhan Institute of Virology, a senior author of the draft paper (not yet peer reviewed and so far available only in preprint) that gave nCoV-2019 its identity and name. It was Shi and her collaborators who, back in 2005, showed that the Sars pathogen was a bat virus that had spilled over into people. Shi and colleagues have been tracing coronaviruses in bats since then, warning that some of them are uniquely suited to cause human pandemics.

Why Wuhan virus is the most dangerous coronavirus

In a 2017 paper, they set out how, after nearly five years of collecting faecal samples from bats in the Yunnan cave, they had found coronaviruses in multiple individuals of four different species of bats, including one called the intermediate horseshoe bat, because of the half-oval flap of skin protruding like a saucer around its nostrils. The genome of that virus, Shi and her colleagues have now announced, is 96 per cent identical to the Wuhan virus that has recently been found in humans. And those two constitute a pair distinct from all other known coronaviruses, including the one that causes Sars. In this sense, nCoV-2019 is novel — and possibly even more dangerous to humans than the other coronaviruses.

I say "possibly" because so far, not only do we not know how dangerous it is, we can't know. Outbreaks of new viral diseases are like the steel balls in a pinball machine: You can slap your flippers at them, rock the machine on its legs and bonk the balls to the jittery rings, but where they end up dropping depends on 11 levels of chance as well as on anything you do. This is true with coronaviruses in particular: They mutate often while they replicate, and can evolve as quickly as a nightmare ghoul.

The virus trail from the past will stretch to the future

Peter Daszak, the president of EcoHealth Alliance, a private research organisation based in New York that focuses on the connections be-



tween human and wildlife health, is one of Shi's longtime partners. "We've been raising the flag on these viruses for 15 years," he told me with calm frustration. "Ever since Sars." He was a co-author of the 2005 bats-and-Sars study, and again of the 2017 paper about the multiple Sars-like coronaviruses in the Yunnan cave.

Daszak told me that, during that second study, the field team took blood samples from a couple of thousand Yunnanese people, about 400 of whom lived near the cave. Roughly 3 per cent of them carried antibodies against Sars-related coronaviruses.

When the dust settles, that nCoV-2019 was not a novel event or a misfortune that befell us. It was — it is — part of a pattern of choices that we humans are making.

- David Quammen, author and journalist

"We don't know if they got sick. We don't know if they were exposed as children or adults," Daszak said. "But what it tells you is that these viruses are making the jump, repeatedly, from bats to humans." In other words, this Wuhan emergency is no novel event. It's part of a sequence of related contingencies that stretches back into the past and will stretch forward into the future, as long as current circumstances persist.

So when you're done worrying about this outbreak, worry about the next one. Or do something about the current circumstances.

Perilous trade in wildlife for food

Current circumstances include a perilous trade in wildlife for food, with supply chains stretching through Asia, Africa and to a lesser extent, the United States and elsewhere. That trade has now been outlawed in China, on a temporary basis; but it was outlawed also during Sars, then allowed to resume — with bats, civets, porcupines, turtles, bamboo rats, many kinds of birds and other animals piled together in markets such as the one in Wuhan.

Current circumstances also include 7.6 billion hungry humans: some of them impoverished and desperate for protein; some affluent and wasteful and empowered to travel every which way by aeroplane. These factors are unprecedented on planet Earth: We know from the fossil record, by absence of evidence, that no large-bodied animal has ever been nearly so abundant as humans are now, let alone so effective at arrogating resources. And one consequence of that abundance, that power, and the consequent ecological disturbances is increasing viral exchanges — first from animal to human, then from human to human, sometimes on a pandemic scale.

How humans are responsible for unleashing viruses

We invade tropical forests and other wild landscapes, which harbour so many species of animals and plants — and within those creatures, so many unknown viruses. We cut the trees; we kill the animals or cage them and send them to markets. We disrupt ecosystems, and we shake viruses loose from their natural hosts.

When that happens, they need a new host. Often, we are it.

The list of such viruses emerging into humans sounds like a grim drumbeat: Machupo, Bolivia, 1961; Marburg, Germany, 1967; Ebola, Zaire and Sudan, 1976; HIV, recognised in New York and California, 1981; a form of Hanta (now known as Sin Nombre), southwestern United States, 1993; Hendra, Australia, 1994; bird flu, Hong Kong, 1997; Nipah, Malaysia, 1998; West Nile, New York, 1999; Sars, China, 2002-3; Mers, Saudi Arabia, 2012; Ebola again, West Africa, 2014. And that's just a selection. Now we have nCoV-2019, the latest thump on the drum.

Current circumstances also include bureaucrats who lie and conceal bad news, and elected officials who brag to the crowd about cutting forests to create jobs in the timber industry and agriculture or about cutting budgets for public health and research. The distance from Wuhan or the Amazon to Paris, Toronto or Washington is short for some viruses, measured in hours, given how well they can ride within aeroplane passengers. And if you think funding pandemic preparedness is expensive, wait until you see the final cost of nCoV-2019.

Fortunately, current circumstances also include brilliant, dedicated scientists and outbreak-response medical people — such as many at the Wuhan Institute of Virology, EcoHealth Alliance, the United States Centres for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the Chinese CDC and numerous other institutions. These are the people who go into bat caves, swamps and high-security containment laboratories, often risking their lives, to bring out bat faeces and blood and other precious evidence to study genomic sequences and answer the key questions.

The two mortal challenges facing us

As the number of nCoV-2019 cases has increased, and the death toll along with it, one metric, the case fatality rate, has remained rather steady so far: at about or below 3 per cent. As of Tuesday, less than three out of 100 confirmed cases had died. That's relatively good luck — worse than for most strains of influenza, better than for Sars.

This good luck may not last. Nobody knows where the pinball will go. Four days from today, the number of cases may be in the tens of thousands. Six months from today, Wuhan pneumonia may be receding into memory. Or not.

We are faced with two mortal challenges, in the short term and the long term. Short term: We must do everything we can, with intelligence, calm and a full commitment of resources, to contain and extinguish this nCoV-2019 outbreak before it becomes, as it could, a devastating global pandemic. Long term: We must remember, when the dust settles, that nCoV-2019 was not a novel event or a misfortune that befell us. It was — it is — part of a pattern of choices that we humans are making.

New York Times

Dark Skin Screams For Fairness

SHARMISTHA KHOBRAGADE

The Indian government is proposing a ban on advertisements promoting fairness products. My first off-the-cuff reaction on this was positive. As a dark-skinned woman I've suffered from the negative attitude Indian society has towards the dark skin colour. One starts absorbing the negativity towards dark skin right from childhood. But to be fair, it's not just the advertisements that are responsible.

The signals emanate from everywhere. You absorb the message from well-meaning mothers and grandmothers who bring you homemade concoctions, urging you to use them to brighten the skin complexion. The lyrics of popular Bollywood songs such as 'dhoop main nikla na karo roop ki rani, gora rang kaala na pad jaaye' (Don't go out in the sun, beautiful one, what if you become dark?) sends subtle messages that being dark isn't the

most desirable state of affairs.

For whichever beauty treatment a dark girl enters a salon, the first thing she'll be offered is a bleaching of her face. The make-up artists hired for wedding make-up will turn a deaf ear to the dark bride's protests, and make her up to look like a ghost.

The pain of feeling unwanted just because of your skin colour, even though your features may be far more chiselled than those of your sought-after fair-skinned friends, can be quite searing in the sensitive teenage years. I felt it all through my teenage years. It made me more painfully shy and awkward than my nature had predisposed me to be.

I used a skin lightening cream when I was a foolish kid, but as I grew older I realised how unfair this obsession with skin colour was. I grew to dislike fairness products and stopped buying anything that had a 'fairness' tag on it. Several multinational beauty companies have flooded the Indian market with products

that pander to this obsession.

I believe the advertisements of fairness products showing a girl tripping after using a fairness product are misleading. These are in poor taste and judgement and can cause psychological harm to dark-skinned girls. But banning such advertisements is not going to address the issue.

The products will still be there on the shelves. And so will all the cues in the society that signal a fair-skin preference.

Real change would come when women stop buying such products, when society will change and stops considering skin colour as important as other attributes of physical and mental well-being.

The cultural change in society required for women to stop wanting fairness products needs to be quite profound. I think the way forward is to celebrate more dark-skinned women.

One Nandita Das alone can not be the torch-bearer of 'dark is beautiful'

movement. We need to see more dark-skinned women being feted on covers of magazines, on silver screen and television, and for achievements like sports and STEM activities. We need to shift the discourse from 'light skin' to 'healthy skin'. Men also need to put their foot down, as the fairness products peddled to them, but also as the demeaning 'fair bride wanted' adverts placed by their families.

Everyone wants to look beautiful and be acknowledged as beautiful. Let's broaden our definition of beauty to include all shades of skin colour. So the next time your salon lady offers to bleach your face, have the confidence to tell her that it is not a tan but your natural hair colour and you love it as it is. Banning advertising is a top-down approach that will resolve nothing. The real change will come when we're comfortable in our skins that fairness products become redundant.

Khaleej Times