

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

More envoys arrive

The government once again brought New Delhi-based foreign diplomats on a visit to Kashmir. This time it was a batch of 25 foreign envoys who were in J&K government-facilitated trip to get a first-hand assessment of the situation in the state turned union territory, This is second time in the last one month that the centre has brought diplomats to the region. The envoys were briefed about the security situation at Badami Bagh Cantonment here. The delegation later flew to Jammu for further engagements. From initial reports, several envoys have largely attested to the normalcy prevailing in the UT. However, some envoys like German Ambassador Walter Lindner and Ambassador of Denmark to India Freddy Svane have sought interaction with common people before they react.

Last year also, the government had organised a similar tour for far-right members of the European Parliament. All such visits have run into their share of controversies. The move of bringing diplomats has come under criticism for trying to portray normalcy in Kashmir where the internet was suspended for six months and has now only just been eased somewhat with the restoration of 2G mobile connectivity for common masses and broadband for a range of businesses.

But Kashmir's top political leadership, including three former chief ministers- Dr Farooq Abdullah, Omar Abdullah and Mehbooba Mufti – are still remain in detention. In fact, the government recently slapped Omar and Mehbooba and several other senior leaders with Public Safety Act. This will perpetuate their detention for another three months, if not more.

The government has been criticized for seeking approval for the normalcy in Kashmir from foreign countries, when it considers Kashmir an internal issue. And ironically while foreign diplomats are brought to Kashmir time and again, the leaders from the opposition parties are not allowed to visit.

The BJP has remained unfazed by such criticisms and defended the visit as a helpful effort to demonstrate to the world that Kashmir was normal following the revocation of Article 370 on August 5. The BJP has highlighted the absence of protests in Kashmir as a sign of normalcy in the UT.

The fact, however, remains that while the situation in Kashmir has remained largely calm, government hasn't been commensurate with relaxation of restrictions. High-speed internet continues to be shut which is causing immense hardships to people and has virtually wrecked the parts of economy. So, the situation can only be called normal if the government also keeps its side of the bargain by easing curbs in response to normalcy on the ground.

OTHER OPINON

Balance the needs

The terms of reference of the 15th Finance Commission have been a source of immense controversy. Southern states have in particular argued that using the 2011 Census data puts them at a disadvantage as they have fared better on family planning. The Commission has sought to assuage their concerns in its interim report by decreasing the population weight from 17.5 per cent to 15 per cent, and providing a counter-balance by assigning a weight of 12.5 per cent for their demographic performance. However, the interim report has left some uncomfortable issues unanswered, which will need to be resolved in its final report.

First, under the current arrangement, states were supposed to be compensated for any shortfall in their GST collections for a five-year period. While there is little clarity over the Centre's obligation to compensate states if collections from the compensation cess fall short of what is needed to compensate states for their shortfall in revenue, the five-year compensation period ends in 2022. With GST collections falling short of expectations, states have demanded that the compensation period be extended. However, there is no clear indication either on its continuation after 2022, or whether it will be distributed to states, and if so to what extent. This ambiguity poses a grave risk to state finances, impacting both stability and predictability of their budgets. It also makes the job of the commission to project states' revenue for the balance period difficult, affecting its ability to make a fair assessment of their requirements. Second, in its interim report, the Commission has proposed performance-based incentives for states in six areas, some of which such as agriculture and power distribution fall on the state list. While this is not a new proposal — the 13th Finance Commission had provided states incentives for reducing infant mortality — how will this be funded? Will the Commission, while keeping overall transfers to states at the existing level, reduce tax devolution to states, thereby creating fiscal space for providing these incentives?

Third, the creation of a separate mechanism for funding defence and internal security, if carved out of gross tax revenues, will further reduce the divisible tax pool that is shared with states. A cash-strapped Centre will undoubtedly welcome any proposal that provides it with greater fiscal space. But state finances are equally under pressure. As a constitutional body, the Finance Commission should impartially assess the fiscal position and expenditure requirements of both the Centre and states while finalising its report.

The Indian Express

Jamia Millia: A
Point Of Ignition?



SAEED NAQVI

Away from this
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"Haqeeqat-e-Abadi" or the eternal truth of the nationwide protests will only be energized by the "Police Zindabad" shouting country pistol shooter who fired into a protest outside Jamia Millia Islamia, not far from the peaceful Shaheen Bagh that I had left behind just an hour ago. A row of policemen, arms folded, or leaning on their lathis must have been disappointed by the pistol-mans poor marksmanship. He hit a student on his wrist. But expected TV channels went to town, which was the purpose.

Away from this nasty distraction (which only shows up the present regime for what is) a much bigger reality is unfolding, on an epic scale: the entire Indian opposition is being by-passed by the biggest protests since independence led by women, students and youth, ostensibly against the CAA, NRC and NPR but, as they gather momentum, the whole establishment.

History will record the Jamia Millia as the point of ignition for this avalanche which, in a sense, completes a circle. Three brilliant students, Dr Zakir Hussain, Dr Abid Hussain and Prof Mohammad Mujeeb, met in Germany and decided to join Jamia Millia to enlarge the reservoir of enlightened, progressive Muslims in the national movements. In today's BJP parlance they would be called the "tukde-tukde gang" or "urban naxals". It would have been difficult to foist "Pakistan" on them because that country had not been formed then. In fact, opposition to the two-nation theory was an article of faith with this batch.

In that enlightened stream were Anwar Jamal Kidwai and Shahid Mehdi. Prof Mushirul Hasan had seen the worst of Jamia as its Pro Vice Chancellor, when he was beaten up by university goons linked to a Congress leader who was riled over Mushir's stand on banning books. Rajiv Gandhi had banned Salman Rushdie's Satanic Verses. Mushir's position was that books should be challenged, ignored but not banned. There must be something good in the system that Arjun Singh, as HRD Minister gave Mushir (by now elevated as Vice Chancellor) more freedom than any

Vice Chancellor since has ever had. The result was a mushroom growth of centres named after unlikely figures: Noam Chomsky, Edward Said, Mir Anis Hall and Mir Taqi Mir hall, M.F. Hussain Art Gallery and so on. Who knows, the movement may put fresh life into all of this.

Mushir explained his Left trajectory in terms of Jamia's origins as an institution of the enlightened against colonialism and imperialism. Bringing about course corrections on that count (as has been attempted) ran the risk of being sucked into communal and identity politics. Peoples issue are overlooked. This is the dilemma of today's liberals' face: they cannot give up on capitalism (therefore imperialism) even in its post globalization, post 2008 avatar. They often find themselves standing with the powerful establishments which redirect popular resentment against inequality, for instance, towards issues of immigration, ethnic identities. So you have Viktor Orban in Hungary, Matteo Salvini in Italy, Marine Le Pen in France, Nigel Farage in the UK and kindred souls elsewhere including Jair Bolsonaro, the Pinochet copycat in Brazil. Since Narendra Modi hand picked him to be the Chief Guest at the Republic Day Parade, it must be assumed that Modi probably nurses him as a model. This lot is clearly what the protests are arrayed against.

The eager-beavers looking for a suitable and urgent outcome have not noticed that the movement has already altered the scene. A movement that can provoke stalwarts of the BJP into such glorious absurdities, deserves a trophy. Law Minister, Ravi Shankar Prasad, said, "Shaheen Bagh protest is offering a platform to tukde-tukde gang. Delhi should have no place for such people." Parvesh Sahib Singh Verma, BJP MP in Delhi, has gone one better. "What happened in Kashmir with Kashmiri Pandits could happen in Delhi also. Lakhs of people enter Shaheen Bagh. They will enter houses, rape and kill our sisters and daughters."

He sends a shiver down the spine with his threat. "If the BJP comes to power on February 11, you will not find a single protester with-

in an hour. And within a month we will not spare a single mosque built on government land..."

Anurag Thakur, Minister of State for Finance and Corporate Affairs, is even more inspiring: "Desh ke ghaddaron ko", he exhorts, the crowd. On cue comes the response, "goli maro sa***n ko" (shoot the bastards). This goes on for minutes. If a peaceful nationwide movement can drive the BJP to such reckless intemperance, it has clearly achieved a great deal. Above all, this shaky behaviour has been aggravated by the protests coming so soon after reversals in Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Maharashtra and, God forbid, Delhi too? Amit Shah will not give up on his incantation of "revenge" politics easily.

Another great achievement of the protests has been the secularization of the Muslim ghetto. The docile, homebound Muslim woman has for the first time being seen in her public avatar, articulate, dignified, involved. The hijab and the bindi are mingling – an elegant sight.

This is not a simple phenomena. It is not without a sociological readjustment within the family and community. Across communities, it has promoted a new bonhomie. Batla House, Jamia Nagar and Jama Masjid are that much more accessible because sheer exposure of different communities in a common cause has helped remove cobwebs of an uninstitutionalized apartheid.

The opposition will never be in a position to take advantage so long as its national parties hold onto their respective obsessions – the Congress urge to revive nationally and the Communist urge to revive in Bengal. These aspirations will remain road blocks. Yes, Sonia Gandhi may be able to sing a nicer swan song if she could somehow revive the spirit of 2004 when the Left was not an anathema. That plus a commitment to federalism will work. Soft Saffron has no future.

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Carvan Daily

Dialling Back Half A Century

M.R. ANAND

Now almost everyone of us, rich and poor, young and old, men and women, has a mobile phone. But 50 years ago or even less, a phone was a luxury, a rarity. If you had a phone, you were a VIP or rich. Even the school I went to, which had some 500 students, did not have a phone connection.

The street where we lived in the 1960s had some 50 houses. Only two of them had phone connections. While one belonged to an official of

the Telephones Department, the other was of a rich businessman. The rest of the inhabitants of our street used to go and stand at the gates of either of these privileged houses for permission to make a call.

The Telephones Department official who did not have to pay for the calls charged us 50 paise for one. But the businessman allowed free calls. But his Doberman was always waiting for an opportunity to charge at us. "Don't be scared of him. He won't bite you. I am here," he would say as he guided me to the corner of the hall where the black glistening instrument stood on a pedestal. The dog would now sit at arm's length



and watch the intruder with a suppressed fury.

At times, the businessman would leave the room leaving me alone with his Doberman. On such occasions, even if I noticed a small movement in the dog, my heart used to come to my mouth and I stopped talking. How on earth could one could talk in such a condition!

Having lived in both eras, I could not help comparing the old times with new. Then we had to beg and take risks just to make a phone call. Now every one of us is a phone booth in which of course, we voluntarily imprison ourselves.

The Hindu