

KASHMIR
OBSERVER

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K O V I E W

India's advantage

Soon after the Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdogan reiterated his opposition to New Delhi's revocation of J&K's autonomous status during his speech to a joint sitting of Pakistan's parliament on Friday, New Delhi termed Kashmir an internal matter. In a statement issued on Saturday morning, the spokesperson of the Ministry of External Affairs, Raveesh Kumar dismissed Erdogan's remarks on Kashmir stating that Turkey should "develop proper understanding of the facts" and stop interfering in internal affairs of other countries. India also summoned the Turkish envoy and lodged a strong protest with him.

New Delhi was also upset about the joint declaration of the Pakistan-Turkey high-level strategic cooperation council which made a specific reference to Kashmir, calling for "resolution of all outstanding disputes between Pakistan and India, including the core issue of Jammu and Kashmir through a sustained dialogue process and in accordance with the relevant UN Security Council resolutions".

However, New Delhi must have anticipated the prominent mention of Kashmir during Erdogan's Pakistan visit. Earlier in September, Erdogan had raised Kashmir in his UN speech. At the same time New Delhi will hardly need to worry as the major western powers have taken a more lenient view of the nullification of Kashmir's autonomy. Only criticism that New Delhi has faced in western capitals is over the communication blackout and the arrest of the political leadership. In fact, the four US senators who in a letter to US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo warned of "severe consequences" for New Delhi over the continuing information censorship in Kashmir and sought its review have steered clear of any demand for reversal of withdrawal of Article 370. Similarly the 25 envoys who came on a two-day visit to Kashmir last week have lavished some praise on New Delhi crediting it for taking positive steps to restore normalcy in Kashmir. Virginia Battu-Henriksson, EU spokesperson for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, termed the visit of envoys a "welcome opportunity". Her statement assumes importance in the light of the fact that a few weeks ago, European Union was about to pass a resolution against India on Kashmir.

Now India is looking forward to welcome US president Donald Trump in the last week of this month. And with the optics and the discourse about the visit centered on trade agreements and possibly defence purchases, Kashmir is unlikely to figure in the discussions -albeit, going by the tradition so far, one might expect a passing mention of Kashmir by the US president. But India will be happy to live with it, considering that Trump hasn't moved beyond statements on Kashmir. So, one can safely conclude that India has successfully managed and reigned in the global fallout of its constitutional action in Kashmir. And going forward, things will only become easier.

OTHER OPINION

Decoding the crisis in telecom

Friday's dramatic developments in court in the case involving dues by telecom companies (telcos) to the department of telecommunications are the latest legal twist in a sector which has evolved in fits and spurts, each caused by either by a radical change in policy regime, or legal intervention. This isn't about who is right and who is wrong. It's usually redundant to discuss right and wrong after the Supreme Court has ruled on a matter, but there are three far-reaching consequences of the judgment that insists that telcos pay the government around 1.47 lakh crore in past dues almost immediately.

One, it will probably result in India's first major duopoly in a large industry that serves around a billion. One of the three significant telcos in India, Vodafone Idea, will find it difficult to raise the money it needs to pay and could well choose to "shut shop" as its chairman said sometime ago. Much of the growth in the telecom business has happened because of competition, and the sudden drying up of the same could help the surviving telcos in terms of pricing power (simply put, they can take up prices sharply), and hurt consumers who will have less (or almost no) choices. The telecom regulator and the anti-trust body have to be at their best to ensure this doesn't happen.

Two, it reduces the incentive for the industry as a whole to innovate or to even worry about such things as 5G, the next generation of telecom technology. That may mean India gets left behind as the world moves on. If data is the new oil, then India definitely cannot afford to ignore 5G. For starters, there's unlikely to be much interest in the auction of 5G spectrum.

Three, over the past two decades, thanks to the telecom boom, India's teledensity has risen from single digit levels to almost 90%. This has been accompanied by economic opportunities, the creation of millions of jobs, and the emergence of mobile app-based companies across retail, education, travel, media, entertainment and just about anything else. A crisis such as the one the telecom industry faces could end up hurting every one of those industries. The government, especially the telecom ministry, has known about the case and its potential fallout for some time. It should have worked proactively to address the situation — even working to convince the court that it was open to a pay-out across 15-20 years (the window for most spectrum auction payments in telecom). Instead, it chose to do nothing, preferring to watch from the sidelines as the case played out in court.

Hindustan Times



Welcoming The Virus

ZARRAR KHUHHRO

Indeed, we may have to thank our little viral friends for the existence of life as we know it; while traditional scientific thought has it that viruses appeared fairly late in the evolutionary timeline, after the development of cells, the discovery in 2014 of a giant frozen virus in Siberia, dubbed the Pithovirus, is causing a rethink. So large and complex is this virus that some scientists now feel that this viral ancestor, as opposed to being reliant on cells for propagation, may well "have provided the raw material for the development of cellular life and helped drive its diversification" into the varied life forms we see today.

Viruses get a bad rap. Admittedly, much of that is deserved, what with the novel coronavirus (or COVID-19 if you prefer) which has much of China in a lockdown and the rest of the world in a panic. Highly infectious and showing no real signs of subsiding, this latest viral variant, according to the US Centres for Disease Control, will "probably be with us beyond this year". On a larger scale, it's not as bad as it is being made out to be as its fellow viruses (I'm thinking of smallpox) have in the not-so-distant past devastated entire civilisations.

But amidst all the panic and apocalyptic fear-mongering, we forget the debt that we owe viruses. After all, without these strange, mysterious entities (they can't exactly be classified as life forms) you and I would not be you and I, or at least not in any currently recognisable form. Because viruses, along with making us sick and occasionally killing us, have helped us evolve.

Over 65 million years ago a tiny shrew-like creature — an egg layer according to scientists — was infected by a particularly sneaky retrovirus that didn't just make its way into the host's genome but managed to get into its sperm or egg cells, ensuring that the mutation it caused would be passed on to every subsequent generation. Countless generations later, this infection led to the development of the placenta in this creature and others similarly infected, thus allowing for the development of a foetus inside the mother's body.

Without this ancient chance encounter humans may well have been egg layers. This sort of viral 'tough love' has been a constant feature of our evolution, forcing us to adapt or die. According to scholar David

Enard, "When you have a pandemic or an epidemic at some point in evolution, the population that is targeted by the virus either adapts, or goes extinct."

We may have to thank our viral friends for the existence of life.

Indeed, we may have to thank our little viral friends for the existence of life as we know it; while traditional scientific thought has it that viruses appeared fairly late in the evolutionary timeline, after the development of cells, the discovery in 2014 of a giant frozen virus in Siberia, dubbed the Pithovirus, is causing a rethink. So large and complex is this virus that some scientists now feel that this viral ancestor, as opposed to being reliant on cells for propagation, may well "have provided the raw material for the development of cellular life and helped drive its diversification" into the varied life forms we see today.

But the origin of viruses, and, indeed, viruses themselves, remain a mystery. Along with the Pithovirus, other giant viruses have also been discovered such as the Megavirus which contains 1,120 genes (the HIV virus only has nine) leading us to believe that these may be an entirely new 'domain' of life. Essentially, the viral 'chicken' may have come before the cellular 'egg'.

We know that viruses are gene stealers, acquiring and transplanting genetic material from and to a variety of hosts. Fair enough, but what should we think when we find a virus that has no recognisable genes whatsoever? Say hello to the Yarovirus, which contains genes that no scientist has ever seen before! Which begs the question: exactly where did these genes come from? Did they somehow mutate beyond recognition in the virus itself or are they the legacy of a hitherto undiscovered form of life?

While the eventual answer may be far more mundane, the fact remains that what we do not know about viruses dwarfs what we do know. And some answers may well be found in outer space, as the growing field of astrobiology includes those who believe that viruses may, in fact, have come from outer space. In fact, one controversial claim is that influenza itself was seeded by dust from comets passing near the earth, some perhaps even eons ago.

Others are scouring the heavens and heavenly bodies for extraterrestrial viruses which could, if discovered, provide proof of life on other planets.

Meanwhile, back on earth we are busy harnessing the strange abilities of viruses for our own ends. Given that these sneaky little packages of genetic material are very good at unlocking cells to deliver their payload, scientists are aiming to create treatments for diseases like Huntington's, which is caused by an error in the genetic code, by using redesigned viruses to deliver a 'corrective' dose exactly where it is required.

In practice, this is even cooler than it sounds: a young girl called Emma, who suffered from leukemia, was treated by having her blood cells 'infected' by a specially modified virus of the same family as the HIV virus (yes, that's right) and then re-injected into her bloodstream. Her cancer went into remission. Less spectacular, yet no less promising, is the research being done on Bacteriophage viruses, which infect and destroy specific bacteria, and the day perhaps isn't far that viruses, long reviled as scourges, may well be hailed as saviours.

The article first appeared in the Dawn

Bad, Bad Banks — Simply Terrible

SALLY DUGMAN

The banking industry is a giant racket to make money. Here is my experience of the wrong.

I had no credit rating at all. So I went off to Bank of Boston (which became Bank of America). With me was all of my verifiable paperwork that I had with me, I proved that I had 120 to 130 thousands of dollars to purchase a modest home.

That didn't matter. I had to take out a 5 thousand dollar loan and pay interest on it to get a bank credit rating.

So I did so. So I am paying a bank to get credit rating by paying the bank when my funds are on their own sufficient to prove a rating.

Then I went to a friend, who was a bank president in Pennsylvania. He knew my integrity and gave me a credit card so that I could get the damned rating.

Yet his bank sold all of their credit cards to Chase Manhattan



Yet his bank sold all of their credit cards to Chase Manhattan Bank and I made people at the Chase bank angry because the bank made no money in interest off of me. It was because I always put money in my account to pay bills that I would accrue on my card.

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money in my account to pay bills that I would accrue on my card.

So the bank people took bad care of me. They declared me dead

and I had a way out. I could go to my bank, Bank of America, to prove my existence and send my proof to Chase Manhattan Bank. So I went through this rigamarole at my bank and sent my paperwork to Chase.

It was to no avail, although I followed instructions devised by Chase. In short I was declared dead and the \$250 in my account at Chase was sent to the Massachusetts government by Chase. How dare they!?

I am now a nonperson in terms of credit and credit cards. So is a friend messed over whose house greatly devalued in the 2008 global financial crash. Her house was devalued, but she still had to pay mortgage payments at the former rate of worth for her home. Yup, the banks keep slopping up that money one way or another. And we, the people, are messed over on account. The banks, after all, have to keep getting their profits at all costs.

The article first appeared in Counter Currents