

Reverse the 32 yrs exile of KPs

Ashok Bhan

COVID strikes again, tourism affected

Tourism and tourism related activities are among the frontal areas getting adversely impacted by the scare of the COVID virus as witnessed during the last two waves of the dreaded virus which took the shape of a horrible pandemic. Tourism had started picking up and thus getting revived as after the second wave, the overall position improving a lot, all modes of travel operating almost with full capacity, Jammu and Kashmir regions were humming with tourism related activities. As many as over 2.80 lakh tourists mostly from Delhi, Mumbai, Chennai, Kolkata etc had visited Kashmir during the two months of November and December alone last year. Expectedly, the number would have gone much high during the current season had the third wave of COVID not struck Jammu and Kashmir like most parts of the country.

In other words, in Kashmir, tourist footfall had increased to a satisfactory level and even right at the advent of winter period hotels in famous resorts in Kashmir especially connected with winter sports activities were running full. However, they are now facing spate of cancellations. Though the peak of the current wave in the opinion of the experts is yet to occur, yet more than 30 percent hotel bookings in Kashmir are reported to have been cancelled.

Likewise in Jammu, though the pilgrimage to famous shrine of Mata Vaishno Devi is, as on date not adversely affected but the number of pilgrims is far from the usual expected number which again related to hotels and associate activities result in their getting adversely hit. Since the surge in daily caseload in respect of the third wave of COVID is led by Jammu and Srinagar respectively and Jammu being the connecting even halting station for tourists to Kashmir valley, Jammu Hotels and related business are expected to suffer more. It is hoped that the "duration" of the current third wave may be shorter than the first two waves so that tourism related business picks up again in Jammu and Kashmir.

Sports infrastructure in Pulwama

Most of the schemes and projects in respect of providing sports and related infrastructure in Pulwama district of south Kashmir are reported to be in a mess and promises, projections and plans listed in the vision document of the district are seen nowhere on the ground. As is fairly known and on account of maximum part of the year due to weather conditions, it is not possible to use open sports fields especially during harsh and prolonged winter months in Kashmir valley, facilities like indoor multipurpose sports hall, therefore, are much needed. Not only would such a sports hall cater to most of the sports activities throughout the year but also boost, in particular, the indoor games. Likewise, proposed open-air gym centre too appears to be more on paper and very less rather a zilch beyond that as during the last full year, no progress is seen to have been made in that respect. As regards the cost of raising of such an essential infrastructure for promoting sports and physical fitness, the open-air gym and the multipurpose sports hall would touch as per estimates Rs.5 lakh and Rs.50 lakh respectively only.

Table Tennis, snooker, basketball, badminton even carom etc like indoor sports and games which predominantly are played within an enclosed building for which the provision in the district vision document for an indoor sports hall is there and which by now would have been all complete, could have resulted in generating interest to a larger extent in the desirous people, usually the young, to take part in such sports activities. Likewise, open-air gym would have been not only a new experience for the people in respect of the related facilities and not required to spend avoidable money on visiting private gyms at non convenient hours but helping in promoting their physical activities and well being. Such a facility would benefit people of all ages resulting in addressing various physical ailments and life style related disorders especially helping in reducing obesity, controlling blood pressure and improving cardiovascular health, flexibility and endurance besides exposure to sufficient sunlight. The causes of delay in starting work on these small projects of sports infrastructure are not known but the people not only are surprised but their expectations too are not proved to have come right.

Sports hall is such a venue where not only sports can be played but using energies for excelling in them and thus channelizing energies in right direction and thus would result in discouraging wasting time in unproductive, wasteful and even undesirable activities besides not falling in the allurements trap of drugs laid by drug traffickers and criminals mostly in respect of the young. It is, therefore, necessary that sports infrastructure must be provided in each district of Jammu and Kashmir and people, especially those in the young age group, motivated to take part in sports activities as a routine. However, on discreet enquiries, we have learnt that the idea of construction of an open-air gym has been stalled though the project report is prepared and duly submitted but there is no formal approval for the actual work to be started. Likewise, in respect of multi-purpose sport hall too, nothing definite about its fate is known. We feel the concerned authorities need to look into the matter and initiate necessary steps in providing the required sports infrastructure in Pulwama district in south Kashmir.

If there is a consensus across all the national and regional political parties in the Country that is for safe and secured return of seven hundred thousand exiled Kashmiri Pandit Community back in the Valley-Their Homeland. Why the current union and LG government does not act to facilitate the return, rehabilitation and empowerment of these aborigines natives back to their roots in Kashmir Valley is a big question. This is the right time to Reverse their exile and restore their rights of life, liberty and spiritual heritage in their homeland. They urge the PM Act with large heartedness and with pride to respect the national consensus. Modi Government needs to plan a time bound return action plan and demonstrate statesmanship as the late Prime Minister -Inder K. Gujral who said: "If the nation's coffers have to be emptied for dignified return and rehabilitation of this illustrious community back in the Valley, still it would be a lesser price for their contribution towards modern Indian State."

It reflects badly on the current regime that Kashmir today is without Kashmiri Pandits. Realities are, at times harsh and strange. Kashmiri Pandits, the aborigines of Kashmir, are out in exile, in this modern age of reason and enlightenment. The forced exodus of the Kashmiri Pandits in 1990, designed to effect the motivated ethnic cleansing, will go down in the history of these aborigines of Kashmir as a continuation of the persecution and genocide facing for hundreds of years and the atrocities were peaked during despotic rule of Muslim tyrant kings.

Acute fear and scare had been created which gripped the Kashmiri Pandits from September 1989 onwards after killings of prominent members of the community.

The local government abdicated its constitutional duties and left the citizenry at the mercy of the terrorists who killed scores of Muslims and Pandits. Gun wielding terrorists had a free play. Killing one and scaring a thousand was the strategy of terrorists for selective Pandits. In 1989-90 an orchestrated campaign was unleashed on the loudspeakers of mosques around "O Kafiro Kashmir Chod Do." Pandits started feeling what they had felt when hounded by Afghans in the second half of the 18th century —The killers roamed around unchallenged that created fear and dread in the city. The aborigines native exodus was engineered under a concerted plan scripted and executed

by the local terrorists that created death, destruction and disorder dominant around.

The terrorists maimed, killed, lynched and looted a large number of Kashmiri Pandits. The terror-stricken Pandits ran for life, leaving their homes and hearths behind them.

They sought refuge in Jammu, Delhi and elsewhere in the country. The cleansing process was completed and now the Kashmir Valley has a very small number of Kashmiri Pandits

How will the present as well as future generations realise that Kashmir is the keystone of our heritage through millennia, finding mention even in our oldest scriptures?

Kashmiri Pandits have rich heritage and their roots are engraved in the soil of the Valley for more than five thousand years which can neither be destroyed nor obliterated by any power, more so by unleashing terror and vicious campaign. But the ground reality in today's free India and new age of enlightenment is —Aborigines Kashmiri Pandit Community is in exile for last thirty two years (32yrs)

Kashmir was considered the abode of Saraswati, the highest seat of learning in India, and was also referred to as Sharda Peeth. So much so that students on graduating from Kashi would take four symbolic steps towards Kashmir, denoting their aspiration for higher learning. Almost the entire body of Sanskrit literature has its origins in Kashmir.

Rajatarangini, an authoritative historical tome on the royal lineage of Kashmir, written by Kalhana in the 12th century, outlines the greatness of King Lalitaditya, possibly the most powerful Indian emperor of all times, whose kingdom in the 8th century extended from the Caspian Sea in the north to the Kaveri basin in the south, and included Assam in the east. How many Indians have even heard his name? How many of us know that Srinagar was established by Ashoka the Great?

Mahayana Buddhism was spread across mid Asia, China and Japan by Kashmiri monks. Patanjali gifted yog sutra to humanity his. Sarangadeva is considered the father of both Hindustani and Carnatic music. Acharya Abhinav Gupta, one of the greatest scholars of all times, wrote 46 literary classics, including the renowned Abhinav Bharti. His principles of ras are being taught in 80 universities around the world. But the irony is that they did not get any respite even in the bright days of the enlightened times, especially in the post-independent days of India.

Whatever be the vicissitudes of their history all pale into insignificance when we look at their present plight. The colossal crisis through which the exiled community or for that matter the entire Kashmiri society is passing through is in reality the crisis in the country's great values — the perversion in practise of its constitutional jurisprudence, the socio-political and moral norms.

The native Kashmiris have entered in the 32nd year of exile. Pandits are longing for return to their roots. They say bidding farewell to the soil they have sprung from is too traumatic as experience to be conveyed in words. They always say — "we love our homeland and every inch of its bounteous soil has nourished us all". The everyday resolve of these hapless Kashmiris is — strive, struggle and stop not till the exile is reversed and they return back to their homeland on their own terms.

The successive Central as well as state governments have done precious little for the return and rehabilitation of this community, which has contributed in a big way to the freedom struggle of India against the British imperialism, and also to the national reconstruction in the post-Independent era. It is a community whose history generates envy at their achievements as well as sorrow at their plight today. The long history of these exiled Kashmiris has been of triumphs and tragedies. The antiquity of the Kashmiri natives and its Aryan origin are well established. Human memory is short and so is, unfortunately, the memory of our leaders, especially of the current dispensation. It was I.K. Gujral as Prime Minister who said: "If the nation's coffers have to be emptied for dignified return and rehabilitation of this illustrious community back in the Valley, still it would be a lesser price for their contribution towards modern Indian State."

From 1989-90 till date the exiled Kashmiri Pandit groups across the globe are relentlessly striving as a mission for reversal of exile and restoration of their roots. There is no one at the political level, not even the PM and the home minister or at bureaucratic level, prepared to stick their neck out and assure and commit any actionable time bound plan to restore the homeland, dignity and honour to Kashmiri Pandits.

After the inoperability of Article 370 and bifurcation of JK State into two Union Territories, hopes and expectations that the Current government would pay serious attention to the plight and future of Pandits were sadly belied. The government has not ever consulted the representatives of the exiled

natives nor there is any governmental return module/plan in public domain.

The exiled Pandits have been waiting for 32years, hoping that the day of their return with honour, dignity and security to their homeland will come. It has not so far, despite claims of the considerable improvement in the ground situation.

In the meanwhile, the plight of Pandits has been slowly forgotten. Everybody sheds crocodile tears over their suffering, but there is nothing by way of action.

Rootlessness syndrome and despondency is fast gripping. The future of Pandits, as an important stakeholder and component of Kashmir is less and less talked about. However the hope is never lost. History is replete with instances when Pandits have always returned to homeland after every hounding out exodus by tyrant rulers.

There are attempts by various social groups and civil society activists to ensure that the promises made by the nation, to restore the honour and dignity of Pandits, are not forgotten. These groupings are interacting vigorously with leaders of the government, the Opposition political parties and the international public opinion leaders to ensure that this dimension of the Kashmir scenario is not forgotten. The socio-religious leadership of majority community and the groupings those who have for some reason have chosen not to be part of the mainstream are helpful factors towards the return of natives back home.

The return of Pandits to their homeland is achievable, there is a national consensus and the people of Kashmir are in unison craving/asking for return of natives. The Government of India and the LG administration have to plan out a common and comprehensive return module and enforce the same in time-bound framework. New Delhi has a constitutional and political responsibility to and demonstrate a strong political will. It has to create infrastructures, housing colonies, etc, provide adequate jobs to the educated youth and secure all the religious places, cultural centres and endowments. The greater obligation on the Central and LG governments is to create a conducive economic and socio-political environment for reversing their exile and facilitate their safe and dignified return to their homeland. — their roots and homeland.

If not now then when is what KPs are asking on their exile entering today the 32nd year.

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Is Sardar Patel's "Steel Frame of India" bending?

K B Jandial

The questionable role of Punjab's DGP Sidharth Chattopadhyaya and Chief Secretary Anirudh Tewari during 5th January aborted PM Modi's visit to National Martyrs Memorial at Hussainwala that snowballed into a huge controversy on his security breach, has once again brought to the focus the 'bending' of "Steel Frame of India". Conduct of civil servants has been the core of the frequent debates on their role in uniting India, giving responsive administration and ensuring socio economic development, which was the underlying objective of Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel while creating Indian Administrative Service for Independent India.

While addressing the first batch of IAS officers at Metcalf House, India's first Home Minister envisioned the civil services to be the 'steel frame' of good governance of the Republic. As a word of caution he had said, "Above all, I would advise you to maintain to the utmost the impartiality and incorruptibility of administration. A civil servant cannot afford to and must not take part in politics nor must he involve himself in communal wrangles. To depart from the path of rectitude in either of these respects is to debase public service and to lower its dignity."

As per Patel's vision, the civil services have to be the binding force expected to bridge many 'divides' that India has. His dream was that these officers, imbibing the principle of incorruptibility, must avoid all actions that would sully their image and also that of the country and the citizens must not feel that the much avowed 'steel frame' has got rusted or bent. In short, he wanted the IAS officers to be responsive, humane, pro-people, judicious, unbiased, development oriented having a uniform vision of a united, multicultural and multi-ethnic nation.

India has a three-tier governance structure—centre, state and Panchayati raj. The civil servants are required to coordinate these institutions properly without creating an impression of favouring one party or the other especially when different political parties are controlling these.

In the event of public demonstration of the frayed ties between the State and the Union governments, the senior IAS officers have to be extra cautious of their actions so that the prevailing divide, if any, doesn't widen and unnecessarily lead to institutional breakdown and anarchy. In fact, as per Sardar Patel's vision, the trained members of the "Steel Frame" have to act as a bridge between the Centre & States, more so when different political parties are running the Governments; and protect the interests of the country rather than the party in power. These

brilliant officers have to be loyal to the institutions and not the persons controlling these.

The IAS was created to protect the pluralistic India, a multicultural & multiethnic nation where leaders of the rival ruling political parties in the States and the Centre would have their own interests and egos, most of the times inflated. To avoid such vulnerabilities in our loosely structured federal Republic, the appointing and Cadre controlling authority for AIS (IAS, IPS&IFS) is the Centre even as their services are placed at the disposal of the States. It clearly means that they have to keep the interest of the State and the country alike. Bridging the 'gulf' between the Centre and the States especially on the sensitive issues of national security and governance is one of their major tasks and their failure would impede the progress of the States and the country and severely dent the designed 'Steel Frame of India'.

In this backdrop, the conduct of Punjab's two top civil servants, DGP & CS is seemingly devout, indiscipline, insulting and unethical during PM's visit to Hussainwala. The 'Blue Book' that governs the protocol & security drill with minutest details, for PM's visits to any State, mandates the concerned State's CM, CS and DGP to receive him. But intriguingly, all were missing. The CM excused himself for being under self-isolation following detection of his two staff members as Covid positive but in the same evening addressed a presser without mask to present a 'cover up' on the PM's security lapse and next day, mingled up with a group of protestors. However, the CS & the DGP didn't give any excuse publicly but their empty official cars were in the PM's cavalcade. Obviously, the import was that like West Bengal CS, they opted to follow their CM's footsteps to give PM a miss. It can be attributed to 'sate their benefactors' (Sidhu & Channi).

Successfully deflecting the seriousness of PM's security lapse and brazen violation of Blue Book, the Punjab Govt and opposition parties found fault with the "sudden decision" of going by road and made a joke of avoiding planned helicopter sortie. Either they tend to forget the recent Gen Rawat's helicopter tragedy in similar weather conditions or perhaps wishing for a similar disaster again.

Those who continue to ridicule the "sudden decision" to use road travel are pretending ignorance of Blue Book mandated requirements of DGP's clearance and local police's sensitisation of alternate routes. The DGP gave clearance of the route even though the track was found to be blocked by some farm protestors hinting police connivance. After all, the DGP was handpicked by

Sidhu who gave clearance of the route but he didn't care to sanitize with sufficient police presence as per the Blue Book. Was it deliberate to 'embarrass Modi' or sheer incompetence? It would be authoritatively known after the SC constituted 5-member Enquiry Committee completes its probe. But the under-cover (investigating team) of India Today has already exposed Punjab Govt's complicity on PM security breach by quoting Punjab Police officers on the ground as to how senior officers remained unresponsive to their timely alerts and sharing PM's route with locals, grossly compromising Modi's security.

Another low in Indian politics, the unprecedented security lapse is used to demean the PM with all sorts of stupid justifications and disparaging comments to sidetrack it? How funny was CM's claim of non-existence of threat to PM as "a Punjab will prefer to die rather than attack a guest" and another petty comment on PM return of "700 people on 70,000 chairs at the rally". Leave aside PM falling in the range of the fire from across the border, the Channi Govt tried to overlook the threat from the Khalistani elements despite SFJ Chief Pannu's call in his viral video to teach Modi a lesson, perhaps it wanted the Khalistani elements to execute its sinister plan. Nobody is so insane as to impute Khalistani's threat and own the road blockade by Pannu, to Punjab, Punjabis or Sikhs.

The PM Indira Gandhi was not killed by Sikhs but two brainwashed bodyguards who happened to belong to the community. Similarly, Mahatma Gandhi was not assassinated by Hindus and Rajiv Gandhi by Tamils but by some individuals under sinister conspiracy. Yes, threat to PM is not from Punjabis even though Khalistani elements are trying to revive their movement by attributing three farm laws against Punjab (portraying Modi as anti-Sikhs) against which the ousted CM Capt. Amarinder Singh had warned repeatedly but the PM didn't find it worth consideration well in time.

Earlier, the security for the President, the Vice President, the Prime Minister, former Prime Ministers and their immediate family members were regulated by the Special Protection Group (SPG) Act, 1988 which was amended in 2019 now and it is only available to the PM. Besides, there is a Blue Book reportedly authored by B N Mullik, first IB Chief during Pt Nehru's time and updated from time to time as per the new security challenges. Treating it as a Bible on security of VVIPs after the brutal assassination of PM Indira Gandhi and her son & former PM Rajiv Gandhi, it is religiously followed. The security guidelines for other pro-

tections are laid down in the 'Yellow Book', primarily on the basis of the comprehensive assessment of threat carried out by the security agencies. State Governments too have their own mechanism of providing categorized security.

The bizarre role of Punjab DGP and CS in PM's security fiasco cannot be overlooked amidst unending political slugfest between the BJP and the Congress and other opposition leaders. Had Sardar Patel ever dreamt of such top All India Service officers who for loyalty to their benefactors (Sidhu & Channi) preferred to bend India's "Steel Frame" which he launched purposefully 75 years ago? The sad part is that they are not alone in 'rusting' the Steel Frame as most of the civil servants in different states are bending the "Steel Frame" to please their political benefactors. More regretful is that such painful spectacle of our "Steel Frame" bureaucracy takes place during the "Azadi ka Amrit Mahotsav".

Last year, the nation saw how West Bengal Chief Secretary, Alapan Bandyopadhyay, on verge of retirement, preferred to keep PM Modi waiting by arriving late in his meeting and left in a haste accompanying the CM without giving the scheduled presentation to the PM. He was promptly made the Principal Advisor to CM Mamta Banerjee.

While it is a fact that civil services constitute the backbone of the administration at the Centre and the States and they have contributed immensely towards reconstruction and development but degradation and arrogance of the bureaucracy with lack of public interface too is a reality. Two years ago, Punjab Chief Secretary Karan Avtar Singh had been sacked after he took on two Ministers including the present CM Channi, at a pre-cabinet meeting on the excise policy and the face-off led to ministers storming out of the meeting insisting that they would not sit in the cabinet meeting if the CS was present. The CS had to be sent on half day leave paving way for the Cabinet to transact the agenda with another senior officer officiating him.

Such misconduct, disregard to the basic tenets of public servants and unresponsiveness to the people are seen everywhere. Some of them including top brass opt to behave as "personal staff" of the political masters or conveniently become 'cage' civil servants to please their political masters. They cannot be the proud inheritors of the "Steel Frame of India" which is bound to bend or rusted. Unjustified supersession for top slots, disregard to the seniority and tenure posting, search for politically aligned bureaucrats or favourites for sensitive postings, increasing corruptibility and politicization are some of the factors that are making the Steel Frame to bend.

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The battle with the third wave of Covid has started. And this time we have to acknowledge that we are prepared a lot mentally in comparison to the past two years. But until we avoid the past errors the crisis and threat remains the same because the Omicron variant is highly transmissible and is causing infections even among vaccinated people. Moreover, people who have gotten infected previously are catching the infection again. In the next few weeks, it is anticipated by the experts that we can have big infection numbers as transmission of this variant is very high. This wave has thrown a lot of new challenges for the healthcare professionals who by now are exhausted, frustrated and stressed. Adding to this is the surge of infections due to Omicron among the healthcare workers who now infact are fighting two Covid battles.

Again avoiding close contact with people and following all the Covid guidelines is needed. Although the booster dose for a high risk group of people has started yet there are many around us who are still unvaccinated. They are the real threat and are infact in the danger zone. Many people have not taken a second dose after getting the first shot of the vaccine due to continuing mental inhi-

Third wave battle

tion. With Omicron spreading rapidly, it's important that all such people are made to get themselves vaccinated. It's even frustrating to see that there is



complete lack of understanding among some people even after 2 years of this pandemic. With the third wave around us it is being said that individ-

uals who are fully vaccinated (2 doses) will need not be rushed to hospitals and only treatment at home along with oxygen monitoring will be needed. By now it is clear that vaccines have a life saving role. So the fear for vaccination should end at the earliest in our society. Too much delay or too long wait for getting vaccinated can prove harmful.

This time doctors are also prepared as during the second wave there was a lot of confusion among them which forced them to go for extra investigation and medications. Prevailing conditions at that time made doctors go for over medications which are believed to have

caused black fungus in many patients. Although the hospitals after the second wave have built their capacities vis a vis ICU beds and oxygen, the worry remains to treat children who might get affected this time. Once again it will be a testing phase for our healthcare system. When the second wave ended, we hoped that this would be the last wave but little did we realize that we would lose our schedules again in a couple of months. Such new infection in the shape of Omicron has given the virus a chance to mutate and there is also possibility of a more virulent variant in the future.

We should not forget the lessons from the last wave. Since most of us have some protection in the shape of vaccination or past infection but that won't keep us safe for long. Even if treatment is available and is emerging, it doesn't mean it will benefit all people, especially those with more than 60 years of age, cancer, kidney disease, pulmonary issues, obesity and heart problems. And in the context of India, the number of such people is really high and falls in the highest risk zone. It is premature to say when these tides of Covid waves will end. Presently, the only way to save ourselves from facing catastrophic situations again in the weeks to come and handle the third wave is by curtailing the hunger to go out in markets, attend gatherings and political rallies.