

OUR TAKE | MARCH | 2021

Developing Siachen glacier for adventure tourism

It was heartening to see a Ladakh delegation pleading for opening up some areas of Siachen glacier for tourists the other day. Ladakh MP J T Namgyal took the lead in this connection in his discussions with Union Defence Minister Rajnath Singh. Accompanied by political leaders drawn from both Kargil and Leh districts, Namgyal made a strong pitch for granting access to tourists to some areas of the glacier. The glacier is just called so and lots of people prefer to call it the highest battlefield in the world. Here, Indian and Pakistani armies are engaged in a tough fight to hold their respective positions. The tourism potential of this area is believed to be high and the Ladakhis believe that a good number of high spending foreign tourists may visit Siachen once it is thrown open. The pandemic has affected the influx of the tourists to Ladakh and this area may help bolster the numbers. In fact, many areas of Ladakh are out of bounds for the ordinary tourists, even Indians, as they are considered too sensitive by the security establishment. Several of these villages and inhabitation clusters are located close to Line of Control (LoC) with Pakistan, or on Line of Actual Control (LAC) with China. That has so far been the prime reason for denial of access to outsiders, including Indians from outside Ladakh. The times are changing, so have certain other things, foremost among them being the grant of Union Territory (UT) status to Ladakh. Earlier, whatever plans Ladakhis proposed were nipped in the bud by Kashmir-based politicians who dominated the state of Jammu and Kashmir. The route to Delhi, for the Ladakhis, used to pass from Srinagar which was the seat of power then. It is expected that the whole of Ladakh, both its districts, Kargil and Leh, will see rapid development in the coming days. Even proposals like opening up of Siachen, too remote even for Army personnel who defend it, are likely to be accepted. Incidentally, Chadar trek, which entails walking for days on frozen river stream, during winters is one of the best known tourist destinations in Ladakh, much sought after. It is believed that the opening of Siachen sector and some well known places like Turtuk can become just as popular as the trek mentioned earlier. For those who love adventure tourism, which can mean some element of risk, or difficulty, Siachen may be one of the best tourist destinations. Even trained Army personnel are allowed in many areas of Siachen only after acclimatisation of over a fortnight for some tough forward posts. Of course, these posts may remain out of bounds for the tourists who may need to spend some days preparing for the glacier trip. The longer the time the tourists spend in Ladakh, the more money they will have to spend there and that can only boost the local economy. Another novel demand made by the Ladakhi delegation was for the construction of a small airport at the pristine Nubra valley. Nowadays, the only way to reach Nubra from Leh is via Khardungla pass which is a breathtaking sight to behold for those who are lucky to visit the area. It may take some years for the government to sanction the required funds, develop the necessary infrastructure and get this plan going. However, with emphasis on development of infrastructure in forward areas given top priority now, the days of backwardness of remote areas of Ladakh may soon be over.

No policy exists for tourism promotion

The Jammu region has been witnessing continuous lack of a well defined tourism policy. A comprehensive would have helped in the institutionalization of this vital sector, leading to multiplier effect in the economy. The success story of tourism in any destination depends on investment by the tourism players in one area and then its effects in another allied area. All the segments that define tourism sector should be integrated and have phased development. This is not visible here. Mismatch between destinations and the tourists is profound as the infrastructural development has not taken off. Moreover, a sense of tourism is not infused among decision makers and various stakeholders. Shree Mata Vaishno Devi in the Trikuta Hills is the best known tourist destination. It has been the upholder of all the tourist activity and acted as the natural point of convergence for all the people from entire India and abroad. Nearly one crore tourists converge in Katra annually to pay obeisance at this the goddess here. These numbers have been possible only due to its religious significance and immense faith of devotees in the presiding deity here. It could have given the tourism policy makers and marketeers an easy tool to devise the strategies to innovate integrated tourism mechanism. The rural landscape in Jaffer Chak is another interesting, though little known place. Here Sui and Burj Temples depict the pan-Indian representation of the religious and civilizational moorings of the rulers. Travelling a bit further down on that road westwards, Akhnour town located on the banks of Chenab river reveals another facet of the region, its antiquity. The fort here and its linkage with the Pandavas based on ancient anecdotes. Nearby is the Buddhist site of Ambaran. Kathua and Samba districts have the distinction of being witness to many historical upheavals that would have kept the Dogra rulers on the tenterhooks. The forts in these districts need to be researched, documented and tours to these forts will help showcase them. The forts of Hiranagar, Jasrota, Lakhnampur and Samba can be developed into vibrant tourist circuit. It is clear that the ailment of Jammu tourism lies in non-professional approach in sensitizing the stakeholders. It is a highly sophisticated sector that needs the expertise of the well trained and qualified tourism professionals. Having qualification of being heritage managers when they have to work in a rich cultural landscape of Jammu. It needs the services of conservation architects, historians and many more. Tourism development is not a hit and trial business.

By Sant Kumar Sharma

Pakistan's Commissioner for Indus Waters Syed Muhammad Meher Ali Shah will lead a delegation from his country which will be in Delhi on March 23-24 for two days to discuss various water related issues. The Indian delegation will be led by India's Indus Commissioner P K Saxena, who will be assisted by his advisors drawn from the National Hydroelectric Power Corporation (NHPC), the Central Water Commission and Central Electricity Authority. The Indus Commissioners of the two countries together constitute what is called the Permanent Indus Commission (PIC) to discuss Indus basin related issues. The commission was set up as part of the Indus Waters Treaty (IWT) signed between India and Pakistan in Karachi on September 19, 1960.

The meeting between the two sides under the Treaty is to be held annually, alternatively in India and Pakistan. However, no meeting was held in 2020 though it was India's turn to host the Pakistan Indus Commissioner last year. India had offered to hold the meeting virtually in view of the pandemic but Pakistan had insisted on holding it at Attari check post. The differences could not be resolved and consequently no meeting was held last year. Before that, the two Indus Commissioners had met at Lahore in August 2018 and perhaps less said about 2019 the better it would be. It will be 116th meeting of the Permanent Indus Commission since 1960 which means that the two Indus Commissioners have many times met more than once in a year also. The reason for more than one meeting in a year was usually Pakistan's objections to some hydropower project India wanted to build on one of the Western Rivers. It is mostly projects on the fast flowing Chenab river that raise heckles in Pakistan and till date, there has not been a single project to which it has not objected. Not that any works on Jhelum or Indus in the Ladakh region have been spared by Pakistan.

For Pakistan, it is a win-win situation on most occasions when it raises objections to Indian projects on the Western Rivers.



Its gain is the cost escalation and project delays it inflicts on India by these objections as this slows down works. So far, none of its objections to any of the hydropower projects has led to the project being abandoned by India. It is worth mentioning here that Pakistan does not have any water sharing agreement with any of its neighbour Afghanistan through which Kabul river flows which contributes significant quantities to the Indus system. India is helping Afghanistan in harnessing of the Kabul river to provide drinking water to lakhs of Afghans, besides generating some hydropower. The Indian help to Afghanistan on the Kabul river is a cause of much heartburn in Pakistan as it doesn't want that. If it had a choice in the issue, it will do everything it can to derail and damage the India-Afghanistan bonhomie on this count. It is well known that through Afghan Taliban, Pakistan wields considerable influence in that country, and hopes to stall all construction

work on dams. Afghanistan has planned several dams with Indian help on the Kabul river but these dams are being projected as Afghan gains but Pakistani losses in its media.

Pakistan Foreign Office spokesman Zahid Hafeez Choudhary briefed journalists in Islamabad about the impending visit of the Pakistani delegation on Friday (March 19). Among the issues under the Treaty that Pakistan delegation will take up with their Indian counterparts is the objections to the designs of Pakal Dul and Lower Kalnai hydropower plants, he told the journalists. There was no mention of 850 MW Ratle project at Drabshala in Kishtwar district. This project is being fast-tracked by the government of Union Territory (UT) of Jammu and Kashmir with the help of the Central government.

Under the IWT, India can construct hydropower projects on the Western Rivers, including their tributaries, on broadly designs which conform to

definition of "Run of River" projects. As far as the Western Rivers are concerned, India is permitted (under treaty) storage of 3.61 million acres feet (MAF) of water. So far, it has not utilised even a single drop of storage. In case of the Pakal Dul hydroelectric project, the total storage of water will be only 0.1 MAF. This is only a fraction of the 3.61 MAF permitted and on hydropower account, India has utilised barely one-sixth of the hydropower to it. Several hydropower projects India has cleared for the Ladakh region, both in Kargil and Leh districts, are also likely to come up for discussions between the delegates of two sides. The Indian government has cleared many projects since the abrogation of Article 35-A on August 5, 2019, and conveyed their broad details to Pakistan, as mandated under the IWT.

Supply of flood data to Pakistan was an act of goodwill carried on by the Indian side for several decades. However, during the past few years, India has stopped sharing this data which finds no mention in the IWT anywhere. This may be vital from Pakistan's point of view but there is no legal requirement that mandates it anywhere. It will be interesting to watch out how India responds to Pakistan raising this issue during talks relating to the IWT. Supply of this flood data by India was mentioned by the Pakistan Foreign Office spokesman during his briefing in Islamabad.

Recent comments by Pakistan Prime Minister Imran Khan and its Army chief General Qamar Bajwa expressing a desire for peace with India are interesting in the backdrop of the Pakistani delegation's visit. Nobody in India seems to be taking them seriously though as both Imran and Bajwa also said that any possible peace is linked to the resolution of the Jammu and Kashmir issue. So far, the Indian leadership, as also diplomats, have not said anything much on the peace offer going by track record of Pakistan on the issue in the past. Incidentally, such offers are monotonously regular and have been made by General Pervez Musharraf, General Jehangir Karamat and General Raheel Sharif, besides some others in the past.

West Bengal assembly elections 2021, a reality check

By Pratap Bhanu Mehta

The current election in West Bengal might be Bengal's first full confrontation with its own reality. Bengali politics has operated under ideological shadows and myth-making, carefully nurtured and controlled to avoid confronting its own social contradictions. First, it was Bengal as the creator of a unique, enlightened urbanity and humanism, betrayed by the braying herds of Indian nationalism. This narrative was enough to provide a century's worth of nostalgia and repetition. Then came the progressive self-image: The revolutionary vanguard of a society dedicated to redistribution. This redistribution could be allied with anti-communalism and a gesture at high humanism. When this progressive self-image ran out of steam, there was poriborton. In all other states, change is routine. In Bengal, it had to be made a task. This self-image was quite charming. It did create and sustain a beguiling culture that converted us all to Bengalophilia. Land reform was a real achievement, but not as spectacular as some have claimed. But this sequence papered over the 4 Cs of politics — caste, communalism, corruption and coercion — hidden in plain sight by some spectacular self-images. In this election, these four Cs have come into the open, all at once. To the extent that this is the terrain on which Bengal politics is being conducted, the BJP has won, even if it loses the election.



The claim that caste was absent in Bengal politics was always problematic. The concentration of upper castes in urban Bengal and their secession from rural power structures allowed them to live the fiction of a casteless politics. As Sekhar Bandyopadhyay long pointed out, Partition shifted the discourse of caste to a discourse of migration and rehabilitation which could be subsumed by a politics of social justice without eradicating it. But the power structures were always suffused with caste, something captured much earlier in literature than in social science. It is striking how the discussion of marginalised groups like the Matuas is so much more visible in this election.

Both Dalit and Muslim politics in Bengal had been contained within an edifice that denied them independent political space and economic

empowerment. Dalits are seeking more assertive political space through the BJP; and Muslim politics is looking to experiment with different possibilities. As Rahul Varma pointed out, the BJP used Dalit politics for Hindutva consolidation in Bengal. This is ideal terrain for the BJP. It could use Dalits as a wedge to throw open the caste character of the dominant Bengali order. It could play on a terrain where it is strong: The tapping of repressed memories. It has positioned Hindutva as the vehicle of Dalit empowerment. The undercurrent of a communalised politics, charges of minority appeasement, were always lurking under the surface. The BJP forced Mamata Banerjee to play on their terrain. Like the Congress of old she has to now try to run a Muslim consolidation of votes, along with Hindu nationalism.

Her granting of allowances and housing for sanatan Brahmin priests was that kind of symbolic act. But the very fact that she had to declare her Hindu allegiances as a political performance is an indication of the communalisation of politics. It has exposed her to the charge the BJP has always made, that all secularism is electoral secularism, a façade that can crack quite easily.

The third confrontation with reality is over corruption. The CPM ran a party state, in which corruption is knit into a hierarchical organisational order, and therefore was not called corruption. Mamata's governance model is different. She relies, in line with the national trend, on the deepening of private individualised transfers through a variety of social schemes, from Kanyashree to Swasthya Sathi. Some of these are done quite well. But this delivery is done through empowered bureaucrats more than party structures or community coalitions. The second shift is displacing older structures of party corruption which were embedded in the community with an alternative network of brokers and rent extractors; this is a system at once both centralised and more extractive. There is the potential of both popular worry about corruption, and potentially more competition and dissatisfaction if the spoils are not distributed well. Taken together, centralised corruption and bureaucratic empowerment weaken party organisational structures.

Covid-19: The PM Modi issues a warning

The Prime Minister Narendra Modi held a virtual meeting with chief ministers to urgently deal what he called the "emerging second peak" of Covid-19 in the country. He discussed a worrying spike in infections in several states and said that "quick and decisive steps" are needed to combat another pan-Indian outbreak. A few hours later, when the day's new Covid-19 cases were tallied from all states, the total came to 35,836 new infections — the highest number of single-day cases in the country in more than 100 days. In India's worst-hit state, Maharashtra, Wednesday's case toll (23,179) was the highest single-day rise since September 17, 2020 — that was a time when the country's first Covid-19 wave was raging at its peak. Like in the first wave, the western state is again the first major hot spot region, and if things don't change soon, it will be the first of many. Coaxed into a sense of false security due to six months of declining cases, and a high degree of fatigue (for both people as well as governments) against the disease, there is an alarming degree of laxity at all levels. Testing numbers have been steadily dropping; the concept of contact-tracing has been reduced to just getting immediate family members of positive cases tested; and mask etiquette, as well as enforcement of social distancing norms, are near non-existent even in metros, leave alone smaller cities or rural areas.

Bhagavad Gita: Chapter 10, Verse 36

दयुतं छलयातामसि तेजस्तेजसिनामहम् ।
जयोस्मि व्यवसायोऽस्मि सत्ते सत्त्वतामहम् ॥ 36॥

Translation

I am the gambling of the cheats and the splendor of the splendid. I am the victory of the victorious, the resolve of the resolute, and the virtue of the virtuous.

Commentary

Shree Krishna mentions not only virtue but also vice as his opulence. Gambling is a dangerous vice that ruins families, businesses, and lives. This was Yudhishtir's weakness for gambling that led to the Mahabharat war. But if gambling is also God's glory, then is there no harm in it, and why is it forbidden?

The answer is that God grants his power to the soul, and along with it, he gives the freedom of choice. If we choose to forget him, he gives us the power to forget. This is just as electric power can be used both to heat and cool a house. The user is free to choose how to utilize the power. However, the powerhouse that supplies the energy is not responsible for either the use or misuse of the power. Similarly, a gambler too possesses intellect and ability that is supplied by God. But if he decides to misuse these God-given gifts, then God is not responsible for the sinful deeds.

Everyone likes victory; it reveals the glory of the Lord. Also, Shree Krishna has laid great

यदा यदा हि धर्मस्य
वत्तानिः भवति भारत,
अग्नि-उत्थानम् अधर्मस्य
तदा आत्मानं सृजामि अहम् ।

परित्राणाय साधूनां
विनाशाय च दुस्-कृताम्,
धर्म-संस्थापन-अर्थाय
सम्भवामि युगे युगे ।

emphasis on the quality of determination. It was

previously mentioned in verse 2.41, 2.44, and 9.30

as well. The goodness of the virtuous is also a manifestation of God's power. All virtues, achievements, glory, victory, and firm resolve originate from God. Instead of considering these as our own, we should see them as coming from him.

vasudeva sutam devam
kamsa chaanuura
mardanam ।
devaki paramaa nandam
krishnam vande jagat
gurum ॥

I salute Lord Krishna, the son of Vasudeva, the one who gives great delight to Devaki, the destroyer of Kamsa and Chaanuura and the teacher of the world.

Let us live as the Gita teaches us to Live.

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