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Paradise under siege: Healthcare elusive under Kashmir lockdown

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"I will never allow patriotism to triumph over humanity for as long as I live."

--Rabindranath Tagore, in a letter to AM Bose, 1908

The famous poet, Amir Khusro, said of Kashmir: "If there is heaven on earth, it is here, it is here, it is here"(1). That heaven and crown of India has been under siege now for over four months (2). Due to the war-mongering of our neighbour, and terrorists playing their gory games for several decades, as also as our incumbent "strong" Government of India—with its brute majority—wanting to rapidly control the situation there, is subduing its own citizens for want of a better war-room strategy to selectively target organised terrorists.

These punitive measures by our elected government don't distinguish between trained criminals and their handlers; and an average citizen, eg a woman in labour (3) or a terminal patient of chronic kidney disease—needing regular dialysis just to see another sunrise (4). By deploying the blunt weapon of severance of connectivity, it wants to isolate everybody regardless of their needs and position. One does not need to be an expert to understand the plight of a snake-bite victim, if he does not reach hospital in time and succumbs to an easily preventable death, due the blockade erected to achieve illusory goals.

Patients and their attendants are reportedly forced to go to Delhi as the public hospitals are running out of stocks of essential drugs. A urologist was arrested when he tried to raise concerns about the plight of his patients (5). A senior

cardiologist, a former Professor at AIIMS New Delhi, was summoned by the investigative agencies, merely on the basis of a text message which they misunderstood, from a patient belonging to a banned organisation (6). The investigative agencies withdrew only when the cardiologist explained the correct meaning of the text message and that he was merely doing what he was supposed to do. An average Kashmiri may not be lucky enough to be cleared so quickly, and may face prolonged harassment.

The authors of the *IJME* editorial on the lack of access to healthcare in Kashmir in the current situation (2) point out that a team of doctors which wants to visit the valley is still waiting for the approval of the Union Home Ministry. Hence, we believe that our Government needs to either rapidly grant that approval or explain to its citizens what stops it from allowing the visit by health professionals offering medical care. The Hippocratic Oath obliges us to save lives regardless of the status or other characteristics of a patient. And when scores of our patients are suffering, how can we ignore their collective plight? All of us want enduring peace, harmony, coexistence, inside and even outside our borders, but in the process no innocent should suffer.

This land of Buddha, Ashok and Akbar has been a continuous source for teaching the philosophy of non-violence and unity-in-diversity to the world for centuries. Today, we need to follow the path shown by them to walk through the present mist. For Mahatma Gandhi, the purity of means was as important as the ends sought to be achieved. On the occasion of his 150th birth anniversary, when our popular Prime Minister has written an editorial in his memory in *The New York Times* (7), we need to remember his message and follow his teachings, not only in our intentions but also in our actions.

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