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*An account of the experiences and observations during the Covid lockdown in the valley of  
Kashmir*

**By**

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Early March 2020 ...

Spring had just been around. The snow had softened and the sunshine was brighter. The announcement of the pandemic from China, followed by Italy and the United States, was heart-breaking. From the small living room, warmed by a ‘Hamam’ and layered with wooden panelling, our family watched this news on TV. We saw how people in Wuhan were dying and how China was combating in a spirited manner. ‘Only China can build a hospital in a fortnight’, father exclaimed. ‘Had the pandemic hit our country, it would have been a disaster’, grandfather laughed and added. At this juncture, we had not imagined that the pandemic would one day invade us too. ‘May Allah keep the plague away from our land’ mother raised her hands. The world’s most developed nations like the U.S and Italy—whose healthcare systems are considered the best—were affected by Covid 19 brutally. Back home, in the blood-soaked streets of the Valley of Kashmir, the pandemic received a mixed response. While some were serious, others were callous. ‘Ours is a land of Saints; it won’t come here’, people concluded any discourse on the virus with these hopes. But, soon, trends took a turn!

In the third week of March, a lady with a recent travel history, was declared positive! So, the first case was reported from ‘Pir Waer’ (Land of Saints). The administration ordered a complete

shutdown. The First Covid 19 death took place in the following week. The experiences during the lockdown were one of a kind for everyone.

In the initial days of the lockdown, bankers were left high and dry. As per the official orders, banking was included in the list of essential services. Their ID cards were supposed to be considered as 'Movement Passes'. But, on the road, a banker was left to the mood and mercy of the policeman on duty. The first such incident flashes across my memory. When the authorities imposed restrictions over the inter-district movement of people, long lines of halted four-wheelers at a crossroad on the outskirts of the city hinted towards the beginning of a clampdown. After a hour-long harrowing drive, I finally reached the scene. The police had raised drums and barricades. A cop approached and asked, 'Where are you going?' I humbly replied, 'Home.' The cop turned away his face and said, 'You are not allowed.' I got down from my car to make a request: 'I am a banker. This is my ID card.' He turned a deaf ear. 'I was on duty' I continued 'and now I am going home.' Upon this, the cop pointed towards his superior. I made the same request to the officer, showed him the ID card and explained that I was on duty and had to go home. In the meanwhile, a few other people joined in begging the Inspector to let them move. Another banker, a couple of doctors and a few people employed in essential services. Finally, the Inspector shouted to his subordinates, 'Let all doctors and bankers move. Check ID cards.'

After a few days, another official order was out: 'Only minimal staff to attend the duties; others to work from home.' But, once again, if any category was still confused, it was banking. One day, a colleague was stopped by the police in the outskirts of the city. Before he could explain, a policeman snatched his car keys and ran away in a Police Sumo. The banker was left in a problematic situation that was hard to explain. By the time we could contact our Regional

Office and take up the matter with the Police Department, it was already 10:30 am. Finally, the banker left his car unlocked and unattended in the middle of the highway and began his journey towards the office, on foot. It was not before the afternoon that the official communication from the bank to the government and from the government to the police reached the concerned police station and the colleague's car keys were released.

Attending office, a bank, was another nightmare. While every non-essential office was shut, banks were open. Bankers were exposed to grave threats. People were advised by the government to visit banks in extreme urgency. Some facilities like loaning and passbook printing were stopped temporarily. People, however, still visited the bank in large numbers. Our colleagues dealing with cash and those attending the front desks were at risk. I recall one of my colleague, Faheem's precautionary measures. He was dealing with cash—notes of all sorts: clean, soiled, mutilated, dirty, dusty, and deformed. He got a PPE kit to protect himself. While entering and leaving the office, he used to walk in such a way that he did not touch anything in the approach corridor. The whole thing was laughable. We were given a thousand rupees to buy sanitisers and masks and were also given some monetary incentive for working during the pandemic. Well, money is always welcome. Nevertheless, no money can compensate for the risk and the mental threat that the plague had caused.

Back home, my mother was tense. my brother and I had to go to toil every day. While mother—whom we call Jaji—was so worried that she used to say, 'Traeywu yi nokri ti bihiu gharri; zuv khoat chun kihin' [Resign and sit back; nothing is above life]. She has eternally been concerned about us. She could neglect the whole world for her sons. She has faced tremendous sufferings for us. This has made her extremely possessive. On the other hand, father encouraged us. 'Duty takes precedence,' he said firmly every day. 'Just be careful' he continued, '...and follow the

Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs).’ This personified the truth of life. A mother is the quintessence of unwavering and irrevocable love and care. A father is a figure that teaches how to exist and how to confront the complications out there. When I used to leave in the morning, Jaji would gaze at me with moist eyes and a wrinkled face. Fear and panic were evident on her old face which I have watched grow and wrinkle over the years. While I walked away, she would raise her shaky hands and pray ‘Allah, protect my son from every plague; keep him in your watch wherever he walks; keep him away from the germ.’ I owe myself and whoever I am today, to my mother. After some days another episode struck our family.

Since childhood, I was deeply connected with my maternal grandmother. For more than ten years, I had lived with her. She was a chaste, pious person. She would wake up early and spend her day worshipping and chanting the verses of the Holy Quran. She was beautiful and fair. Her eyes were brown and her skin was glowing even in her 90s. During the peak pandemic time, she took her last breath. It was a non-covid death. The day she passed away, I saw a dream which foreshadowed her death. I wonder who puts this in dreams! That day hurt! She was one of the dearest ladies in my life. That morning, while having breakfast, the phone rang. It was my brother. ‘Granny has passed away’, he spoke in sorrow. At that moment, I broke down. That food fell out of my mouth. Later on, I kissed her on the forehead and bade her my last goodbye.

Outside, I witnessed a mixed response. My neighbourhood is a semi-typical-rural cluster. It is a short drive from the city. In my neighbourhood, there is a shop on the other side of a small stream. A group of people of different ages, casting the standards of containment to wind, sat and talked together in this shop. This shop-cabinet comprised two old men wearing white cone-shaped caps—typical to elderly Kashmiri villagers—a young cricket commentator, a retired

officer and the shopkeeper. They seemed like the happiest folks on Earth. Whenever I drove around the corner, they were found chuckling and cackling. They enjoyed every moment. One day, I overheard one of them, ‘Yi chun kihin; yi che chaal’ [There is no virus; it is a game plan]. At this time, millions of people had lost their lives to the pandemic and trillions of positive cases were confirmed across the globe. The cabinet members did not have a blink of worry on their faces.

In the second half of the year 2020, gradually, the first wave of the pestilence eased. Consequently, life came near to normal towards the end of the year. Phased unlocks were announced. Businesses and educational institutes opened. Transfers took place. The year 2021 was welcomed with new hopes, as a new beginning. However, human hopes didn't last long. The germ knocked at the door again. And this time deadlier. Since March 2021, we have been facing this second wave of the pandemic.

In the second week of April this year, I travelled to Srinagar from Amritsar due to a non-covid medical emergency at home. I spent a couple of days at a hospital in Srinagar. The next day, on 14<sup>th</sup> of April, I felt squeamish; I was down with cough, body ache, throat infection and weakness. Two days later, when the overall treatment failed, I went to the hospital where I was screened for Covid-19. As soon as my nasal swab was cultured, the testing apparatus, it showed that I was positive. The next week was harrowing, although I not severely affected as per the medical categorisation

On the rainy morning of 17<sup>th</sup> of April, I tested positive. Hastily, the doctors prescribed a few pills viz Paracetamol, Azithromycin, Vitamin C, and Zinc. Cough syrup for the cough and a multi-vitamin for the weakness were also specified. Additionally, I was advised to go for strict

seclusion of 14 days. The physician also said, ‘Take a nutritious diet. Eat well. Drink plenty of warm fluids and, above all, do not panic.’ I reached home, shut myself up in my room and began doing as told. Although I was sick with symptoms and maladies, yet it was fairly comfortable until now. However, shortly, my condition exacerbated.

On the second day of the quarantine—which was the fourth day of my illness—I experienced unusual health circumstances. First of all, I underwent sudden vertigo. My head was spinning. Dizziness that lingered for over an hour was frightening and repeated itself in a matter of hours. It made me anxious. I called my family members and some friends from the medical fraternity. Although my family members couldn’t come physically near me, they encouraged me through this. On the other hand, the doctors said, ‘These are moderate symptoms being observed in Covid patients and there is no need to worry.’ The doctors insisted upon monitoring some vitals: body temperature, oxygen saturation, pulse and blood pressure. ‘As long as your oxygen levels are above 92, you need not worry’ the doctors added. I used to inspect my oxygen saturation repeatedly. I thank God that it remained well above 92 throughout. ‘Don't think about it too much and keep your head up’ physicians and family members continued to encourage. It is worth mentioning here that this virus takes a heavy toll on your mental well being. Moreover, if one is affected with indications like the ones I had, it becomes very arduous to be mentally strong. Any trivial condition leads to the belief that it may be caused by the virus. I was psychologically depressed.

The following three days were dreadful. In addition to the frequent and repeating vertigoes, new complaints developed. Those days were marked with the occurrence of on and off floods of fever, sweating, loss of the capability to focus and extreme perturbation. During those troubling moments, based on the suggestions I received, I tried to read books, and write. But

all this was for nothing. I couldn't focus. I tried watching the famous Turkish series 'Ertugrul', but I couldn't focus and relax. I couldn't enjoy reading, writing or screen-time.

There is no end to the story. In addition to these symptoms, in another couple of days, the virus affected my taste, smell and oral normality. Although my taste and smell did not completely vanish, now I could sense that it had weakened to a substantial level. I had no appetite. All the tasty delicacies seemed like grass. I would keep on chewing a mouthful of rice and meat. I was not able to detect the taste. I couldn't figure out when to swallow the chewed food. Sometimes I threw the chewed-up morsel of food in confusion. Likewise, my mouth dried up. There was a strange sensation of lifelessness in the frontal area of the tongue. Meanwhile, I tried every air freshener and chamber vaporizer to inspect my olfactory strength. It was also badly affected. Drastic body weakness combined with shivering hands, knees and feet were the order of the day. I could not cut my fingernails with a clipper.

The ailment was uncommon. It was for the first time that I had experienced such sickness. I have never in my life felt so disturbingly ill. It was terrible. It was distinct from any common disorder. Based on this experience, I am now certain that this viral pandemic is not fake. It is not a conspiracy. It exists. Until one contracts the condition, this can look like a plot. However, once it happens, it is offensive, emotionally scandalous and sinister.

With this in mind, I would like to suggest that the pandemic be treated seriously. The denial squad needs to be informed of its existence. The SOPs must be followed in letter and spirit. That is the only way this can be deterred. My illness entirely altered my perspective towards this pestilence. Now I am confident in suggesting measures. We must ensure that our information is verified. Whatever you know about the disease, you must convey it to others.



Helpline numbers, emergency supply of oxygen and medicine, telephonic support, etc. must be made available in case of any emergency. I would also emphasise the importance of mental and psychological support that a sufferer requires. It matters as much as medicine and maintenance. There is nothing more harmful to the general well-being of a Covid-19 patient than mental fatigue. Support such patients psychologically. Encourage them. Pacify them. Tell them that they are well and that they are going to recover. Console them. Give them courage and confidence that they would battle and triumph over. This is of paramount importance. At the same time, we should avoid over-information about the pandemic. Do not just read everything about it. Do not watch so many newscasts that nothing except the fear of the scourge is what persists in one's psyche. Take some time away from corona and WhatsApp. Avoid Covid screen time. This is for the healthy readers in general and Covid patients in particular. During my days of the ailment, I ceased watching news and as soon as I read the word Covid on my phone, I pressed the retreat button. Watch out and do not be pernickety.

The struggle is on. Countless people are struggling between life and death. Many have recovered. Someday, in future, when man reads history, these years are likely to be remembered as the years of the Covid 19. It affected all. No country was spared. Businesses were shut. Economies slumped. Education ceased. Jobs were clipped. Although some people have been indirectly affected by the plague, others have experienced the trauma of being positive. Others succumbed to the germ. Positive has been the most dreadful word. Man has seen a lot: floods, pandemics, scourges and what not, and yet, man has always fought. These are tough times. Hopefully, the days of happiness will return.

When all is said and done, life is a journey and we must keep moving onwards!

**About the author:**

Abrar Ul Mustafa is Manager Scale II in the Middle Management Grade of Canara Bank, a Public Sector Undertaking. He has an experience of over seven years in the fields of Banking Operations and Writing. He is an MBA in Marketing and Human Resources from Baba Ghulam Shah Badshah University, Jammu and Kashmir. Mustafa was awarded ‘Power of One’ during ‘Uthaaan 2017’, a personality development workshop conducted by Canara Bank. Mustafa has been writing on social issues, career and education, banking and economics for the last eight years. His articles and feature stories have appeared in various newspapers and magazines of the country including Greater Kashmir, Daily Excelsior, Times of India (Jammu Edition), Shreyas and so on. He has been a forerunner during the times of covid and lockdown, and has gotten first-hand experiences of the same.

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