

Violence a throwback to the troubles 90s: Omar Abdullah

The four days of continued violence in the Kashmir Valley, pitched battles between civilians and the police and the paralysis of the administration are a throwback to the turbulent 1990s, says National Conference president Omar Abdullah.

'The violence I see played out for the last four days reminds me of how the situation was close to what it was in the early 1990s when armed conflict broke out. Spontaneous protests, shops shut, roads empty of traffic, it is all too disturbing and familiar,' Abdullah told IANS over the phone from Srinagar.

In his reckoning, the Shri Amarnath Shrine Board (SASB) - the organisation coordinating the annual Hindu pilgrimage to a cave shrine in south Kashmir - should voluntarily surrender its claim to the 40 hectares of forest land if peace is to return to the valley.

'Seeing all this, the SASB should surrender the land graciously. After all money has not changed hands and the pilgrimage has always been a symbol of Kashmiriyat. Let's not destroy that.'

Kashmiriyat is the word largely used to define the ethno-national and social consciousness and cultural values of the Kashmiri people - both Hindus and Muslims.

The valley has been gripped by protests after Chief Minister Ghulam Nabi Azad's government transferred 40 hectares of forestland to the SASB on the plea that the land was needed for the construction of prefabricated huts and toilets for the pilgrims.

But Kashmiri Muslims are opposed to the deal saying the SASB would use the land to construct permanent structures.

At least four people have been shot dead by the police and scores injured as the police battle to control the pockets of violence that have erupted in major and minor towns in the valley which is predominantly Muslim.

'These are not orchestrated protests. There is spontaneity and it is breaking out all over.'

Kashmiris have been historically sensitive about transfers of land in the state.

Many of them feel that the only way to preserve their identity is by retaining control of the land.

'The controversy started when the former governor of the state, S.K. Sinha, sidelined the descendants of Buta Malik, the Muslim shepherd to whose credit goes the discovery of the Amarntah cave,' said Abdullah.

'Land is an emotional issue in Kashmir and that too forest land. I simply can't believe that it was lost on this administration when they did the switch,' said Abdullah, who stoutly maintained that the rival Peoples Democratic Party (PDP), the ruling coalition partner, was party to the decision.

'Both the PDP's law and forest ministers were very much part of the decision making process. The file came back to them at least four times. And now to say they were ignorant of the decision simply

does not wash,' said Abdullah.

Every year, thousands of devotees flock to the Amarnath cave, considered one of the holiest shrines of the Hindu faith. The cave shrine houses a stalagmite structure, which is seen as an icon of Lord Shiva, one of the Hindu Trinity.

'Political groupings across the state are trying to make capital of the situation. The BJP and the Congress have their own agenda and the PDP knows that it has no constituency outside the valley,' said Abdullah, hinting that the decision could be a major issue in assembly elections due less than four months away.

Insiders in the National Conference also point out that should Azad's government rescind its decision in the face of violent protests it would still give a major boost to separatists.

'Then, you might have a bigger problem to deal with. Remember what happened after PDP chief, Mufti Mohammed Sayeed's daughter, Rubaiya was abducted in 1989 and then released after the then government relented. It gave militancy a shot in the arm,' warned Abdullah.

'The only way out from this mess is for the SASB to see sense and act on their own.

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